

STANDING THE TEST OF TIME!

The life and times of a motor cycle test pilot. Bob Rowley talks to Brian Tarbox



WATCHES are Wrecker Rowley's hobby. Tinkering with timepieces is how Norton's chief tester unwinds his own coiled springs after a hard day in the saddle. And it explains why he still hasn't given up hope of finding the Swiss chronograph torn from his wrist when he bit the dust and turned a test bike into a Henry Moore sculpture.

Bob "Wrecker" Rowley admits that the high speed crash was the result of over-exuberance through a series of switch-back bends. "The worse part of it is that I was riding a police bike that was due to be collected the next day," he said. "I just got a bit carried away. I touched the fairing down going into the first bend and kept it down too long. I still got round but it meant I was off-line for the next one." If there had been only two bends he would have got away with it. Unfortunately there were three.

"I hadn't got a chance," he said. "It was sky-grass, sky-grass, sky-grass. I cart-wheeled down the roadside verge until I came to rest against a telegraph pole." Bob escaped with bruises but the bike was a write-off, worst of all, his precious wrist watch was missing. He still returns to search the grass verge for it, last time with a friend and metal detector.

The mine-sweeping operation attracted the interest of a passing police patrolman who joined in the search after being told the story of the missing watch. "When did you lose it?" the cop asked as he started kicking about in the overgrown grass. "1970," Bob said. The look on the cop's face made it clear that he thought the man from Norton should be testing straight-jackets not motor cycles.

Bob's wrist watch disappeared on August 3, 1970. The date is etched on his brain and in the log that records his 19 years as a test pilot for Britain's bike makers. In those years he has clocked up more than 1/2 million miles — a journey that would have taken him to the moon and back and twice round the earth.

In clocking up those miles he has collected one speeding endorsement — 98mph in a 70mph limit — and enough anecdotes to split a thousand sides with laughter.



▲ Bob Rowley (right) and Norton's race development engineer Brian Crighton with the new RC002 factory racer. Bob piloted a lashed together prototype through MIRA's timing lights at 170mph in a test session that led to the go-ahead for the company's return to the circuits.

Seventeen years without a scratch on the old carapace makes nonsense of the "Wrecker" nickname he was given after joining the band of eight or nine BSA testers at the company's Umberslade centre. Now, at 39 years of age — married with two children — he is one of the most experienced and respected test and development men in the business.

Doug Hele, Norton's head of development and the man who led the all conquering BSA-Triumph triple race team, puts it even more succinctly. "He is the best there is," he said. He describes his input into the development of the Norton rotary as invaluable and credits him with having diagnosed and found cures for many of the early teething problems which plagued the unique Wankel engined superbike.

"Bob is the most mechanically analytical of all the riders I have ever worked with. He will come in off a bike and give a list of what's required. He has never raced himself but he is so fast there is no need to call in a racer to do any of the high speed work that is a necessary part of development. Bob will do it all.

"Percy Tait was both a racer and a tester, and his reputation was well deserved, but Bob has an even greater all-round knowledge which takes in everything from handling to performance."

Bob has been the 69-year-old engineer's righthand man since Hele rejoined Norton five years ago. They work together as a team and the respect is mutual. The relationship between development engineers and testers hasn't always been so sweet. Bob almost spits when recalling some of the back-room boffins he rode for in his early days at BSA. "Testers were the lowest of the low," he said. "At Umberslade we were stationed in a stable which was kept 'warm' in winter by just one heater. They thought we were animals."

And he claims testers' reports of major faults and problems were more often than not ignored by those at the top. "It was a case of 'don't bring me bad news.' You were only popular if you told them what they wanted to hear. In those days the industry's idea was to bring out new bikes regardless. Faults that

should not have been there in the first place were put right on subsequent models and then they would charge more for them because they were better!"

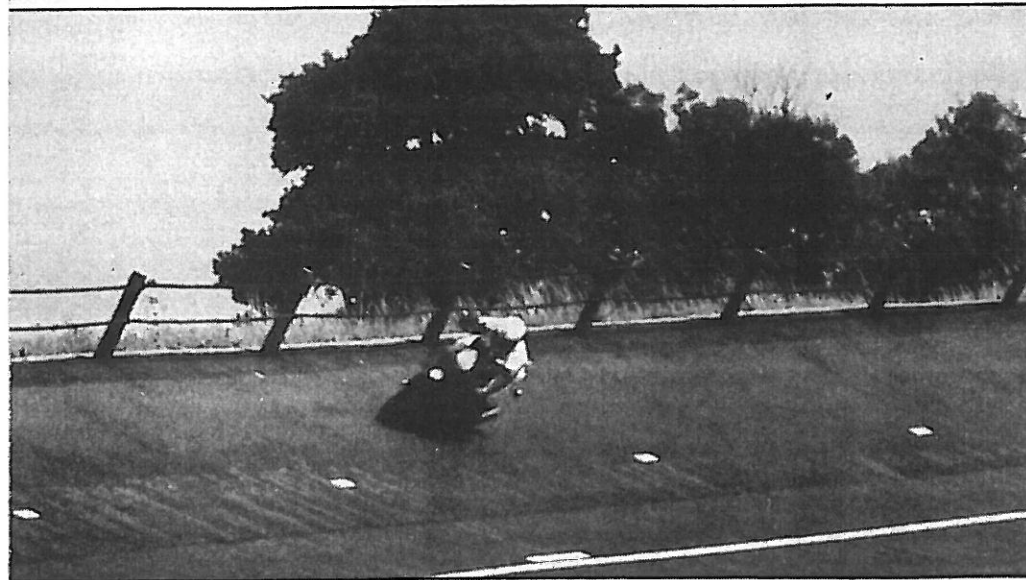
Bob can recite a million and one horror stories to illustrate the point. Project 39 is one. That was the development code for the bike that was to become the oil-in-the-frame BSA A65. Testing quickly revealed that the new frame was prone to break under very little stress. But it still went into production. "My reports about it ended up with one of the frame engineers saying I was being too rough on the bike. He said, 'I want to change the test rider, but the fitters backed me up. They said BSA should keep the test rider and

get rid of the engineer."

The story is similar with the infamous Ariel shopping trike. Bob has no hesitation in nominating it as the world's worst motor cycle. The three-wheeler that was supposed to be motor cycling's gift to women was a complete disaster from beginning to end. "We all said it was no good," he said. "It wasn't even as stable as it should have been. The man who sold it to BSA fell off himself while demonstrating it to them. During the testing we discovered numerous problems but by that time it was too late. The factory were already committed. They had brought in the engines, or something, so that was that." ▶



▲ On the road on the Interpol 2 Police bike. Bob is credited with having diagnosed and found cures for many of the machine's early teething problems.



▲ Flat out on the MIRA banking. A head-on collision with a suicidal bird at 125mph nearly saw Bob sprouting wings of his own and taking up the harp.

Test reports of recurring problems on other models were so often ignored that Bob eventually hit on a cheeky way of escaping writer's cramp. "Each time we went out on a bike we had to fill in a report," he said. "As nothing was being done to correct the faults, I found myself writing the same thing over and over again. In the end I went out and bought a John Bull printing set from Woolworth's and set it up so once I had reported a fault I could stamp all subsequent report with the same thing until something was done."

Although test reports were often dismissed, the powers-that-be at BSA-Triumph seemed to go out of their way to make life difficult for their riders. The brief Bob and other testers were given for the evaluation of two Triumph Adventurers was to clock up 3,500 miles in three weeks. The trail bike test was to take in both dirt and tarmac roads on a set route in Wales. Then they were given 50lbs back-packs of useless equipment and told they must carry them at all times.

"With that weight on your back it was impossible to stand on the footrests. It was nonsense. They had no idea," he said.

And then there was the occasion when a novice rider among the BSA hierarchy frightened himself to death on a test bike in the factory yard. Clumsy clutch control saw the bike leap forward. The executive was thrown back and his right hand involuntarily wound open the throttle. After regaining his composure he authorised a new line of research. It would, he decided, be safer for inexperienced riders if throttles worked the other way round so winding the grip anti-clockwise closed the carbs. "I don't know who this guy was but he was high enough up the ladder for it to be tried for a week or two with me as the guinea-pig," said Bob.

BRAKE **F**ACED with such tasks, a sense of humour was vital if a tester was to retain his sanity. And they kept it well honed on each other. Swapping over clutch and throttle cables was a common practical joke. Others were more ingenious. Bob returned from one test outing to discover he has been riding all day with a dead mouse concealed in his helmet.

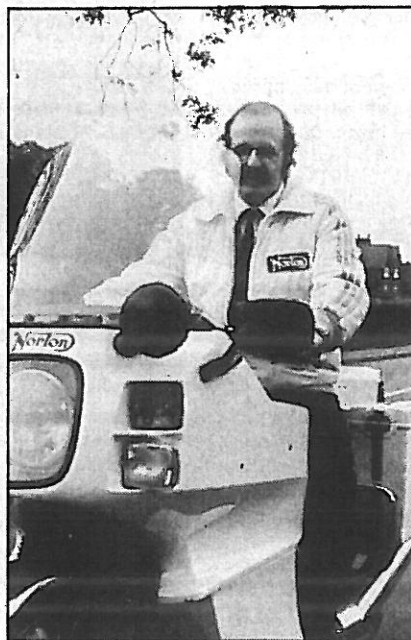
But not all the funny incidents were planned that way. One tester riding a set route had a bucket of water thrown over him by an irate housewife who couldn't stand the noise of bikes repeatedly passing her house

any longer.

A stubborn gate was the problem on a dirt bike session in Wales. Bob and fellow tester Neil Coombes were riding together and worked a simple system to help keep up their speeds. The leading rider opened any gate across their path, waited for the other rider to charge through, and then closed it before setting off in pursuit.

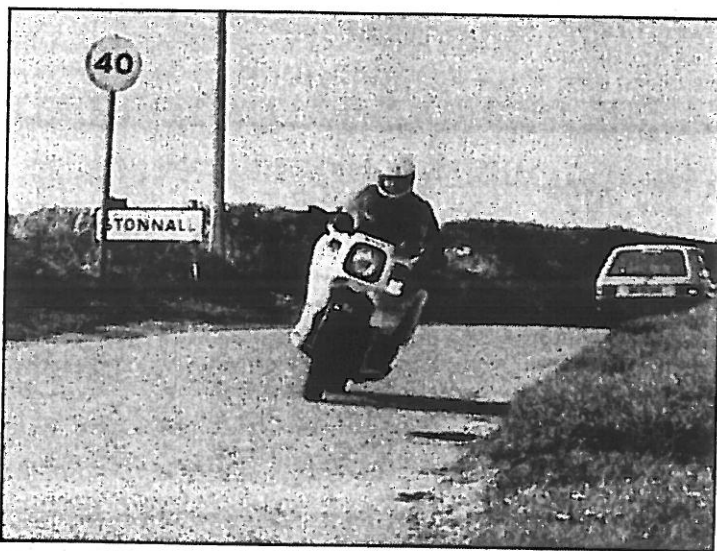
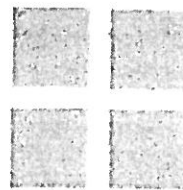
After a few "laps" they were getting to know the course and its obstacles pretty well and speeds were rising. Unfortunately Bob then found himself unable to open one of the gates! "I could hear Neil getting closer and closer as I struggled with it. Then he came storming over the brow of a hill and crashed straight through it!"

Bob's days with BSA-Triumph ended suddenly one Friday in 1971 when he found himself jobless, the victim of company cut-backs. The following Monday he started work with Norton. From the word go he found there to be a much better working relationship between machine testers and developers. Still, he feels the first day would have gone a little better if he hadn't had a Comando crank snap under him. Blame was later traced to a machine fault. ▶ 51



▲ Bob Rowley — 19 years and 500,000 miles down the road.

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▲ Somewhere in that grass verge is a Swiss chronograph watch.

Since his wrist watch went missing, Bob has had to cope with gearbox seizures, front wheel slides, brake failures and shredding tyres. Many have happened at ton-plus speeds. None have had him off but there is one incident that still brings sweat to his brow. It happened when he was riding a Commando flat-out at about 125mph around the Motor Industry Research Association's banked test circuit. Halfway round the high banking, a bird committed suicide by flying head-on into the bike. It smashed through the headlight and sent the bike twisting up the banking which is topped by metal railings.

"I caught a glimpse of the railings looming up and lifted my right leg clear just in time," Bob recalls. "The railings smashed against the silencer and tore off the rear foot rest but I was able to regain control and ride the bike back to the control tower. I went out on the circuit again a little later but I have to admit my voice was squeaky for an hour or two."

DESPITE such nightmare experiences, the ginger-haired biker from Tamworth, Staffs retains a genuine enthusiasm for motor cycling that goes way

beyond the pay cheque. It was a passion born in the school yard. While other kids were playing football, the young Rob Rowley was tinkering with motor cycles. At the age of 12 he and a mate went halves on a £30, worn-out old Ariel Square four which they rode on waste ground near their homes.

His first job was working for his father who ran his own company producing scientific instruments. It was there that he began picking up valuable engineering skills and knowledge.

He went to work on the BSA production line at Small Heath in 1967. It wasn't long before he got himself noticed by constantly suggesting ways of improving both products and the way they were being produced. His career as a test jockey began the following year. A passion for trials riding and the fact that he would ride to work every day on his 500 Velocette, regardless of the weather, helped land him the job.

Half a million miles later and he is still as keen as ever. An old trials bike sits in his garage and he still chalks up at least 20,000 miles a year even though his responsibilities at Norton include being the company's chief quality control inspector.

Routine mileage work he now delegates to others, but on the development side he is still Norton's number one rider.

'Wrecker' may have stuck as a nomenclature but he denies the title was ever deserved. "Even in those early days I didn't crash more bikes than anyone else, nor was I harder on them," he said. "What it really all boiled down to is that I would do the miles I was supposed to do. Some, who had better remain nameless, would just doctor the clock. Their bikes would look in better condition than the ones I rode but mine would have done the miles the test reports said."

In fact 'Wrecker' would have been a more appropriate nickname for his father. When he was 15 Bob was stopped by the police as he made his way through Birmingham on an old BSA Dandy. He was too young to have a licence and the bike wasn't taxed, insured or MOT'd. The policeman let him off with a warning but also had a word with Bob's father despite the teenager's pleas that it would make him an accessory to murder.

As it was Mr Harry Rowley decided to spare his son and kill the bike. "He came home from work with a mallet and smashed it up," said 'Wrecker' Junior.