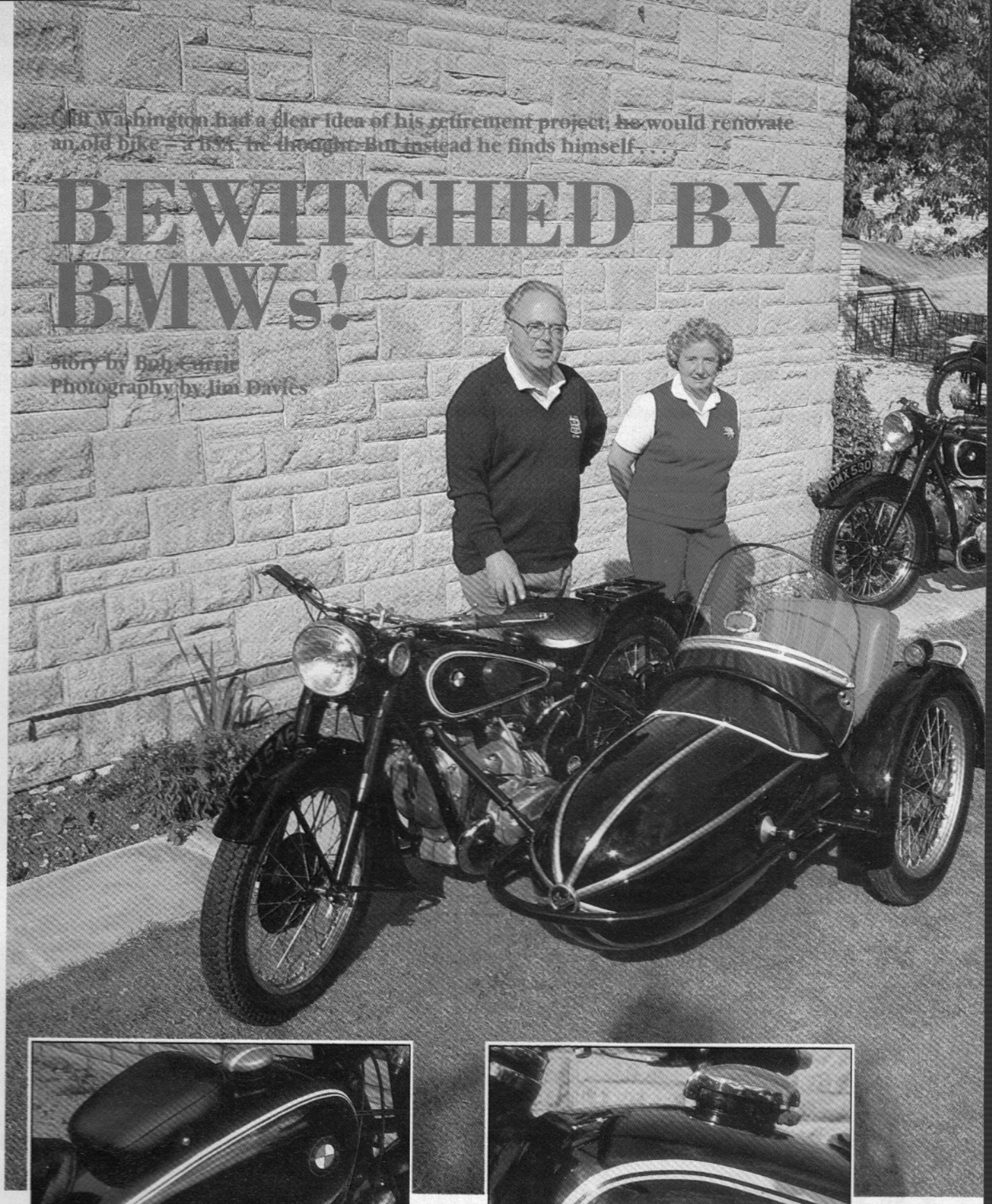
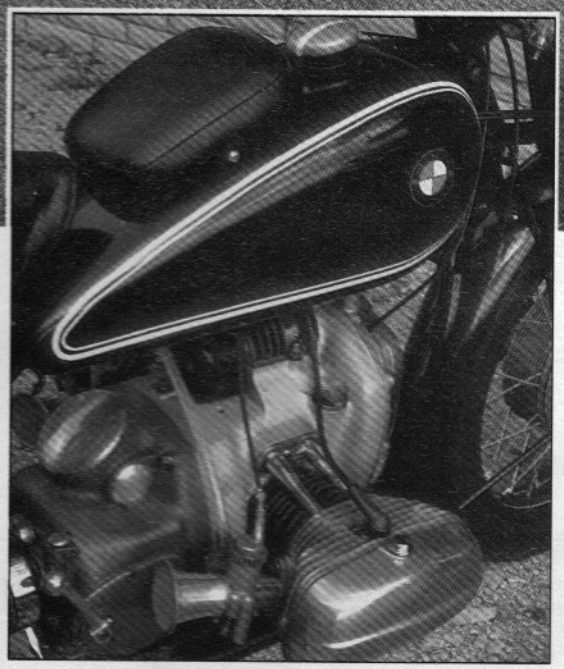
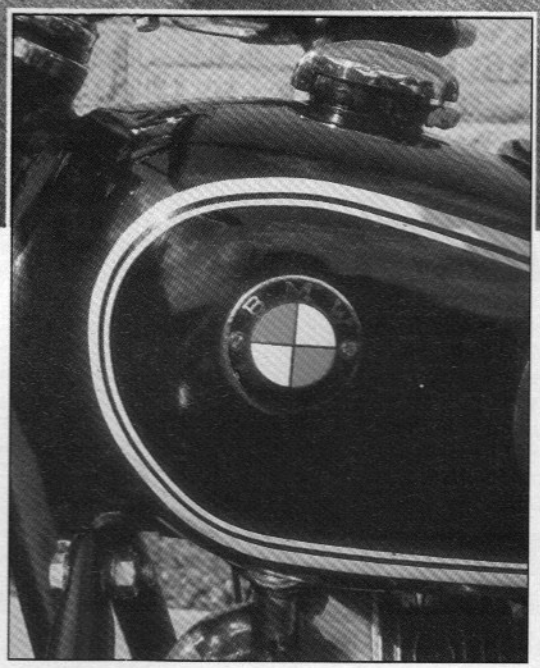
Cliff Washington had a clear idea of his retirement project; he would renovate an old bike – a BSA, he thought. But instead he finds himself . . .

BEWITCHED BY BMWs!

Story by Bob Currie
Photography by Jim Davies









Cliff and Kath Washington relax in an Oxfordshire garden – with BMWs as far as the eye can see! Kath is secretary of the Vintage MCC's Oxford Section.

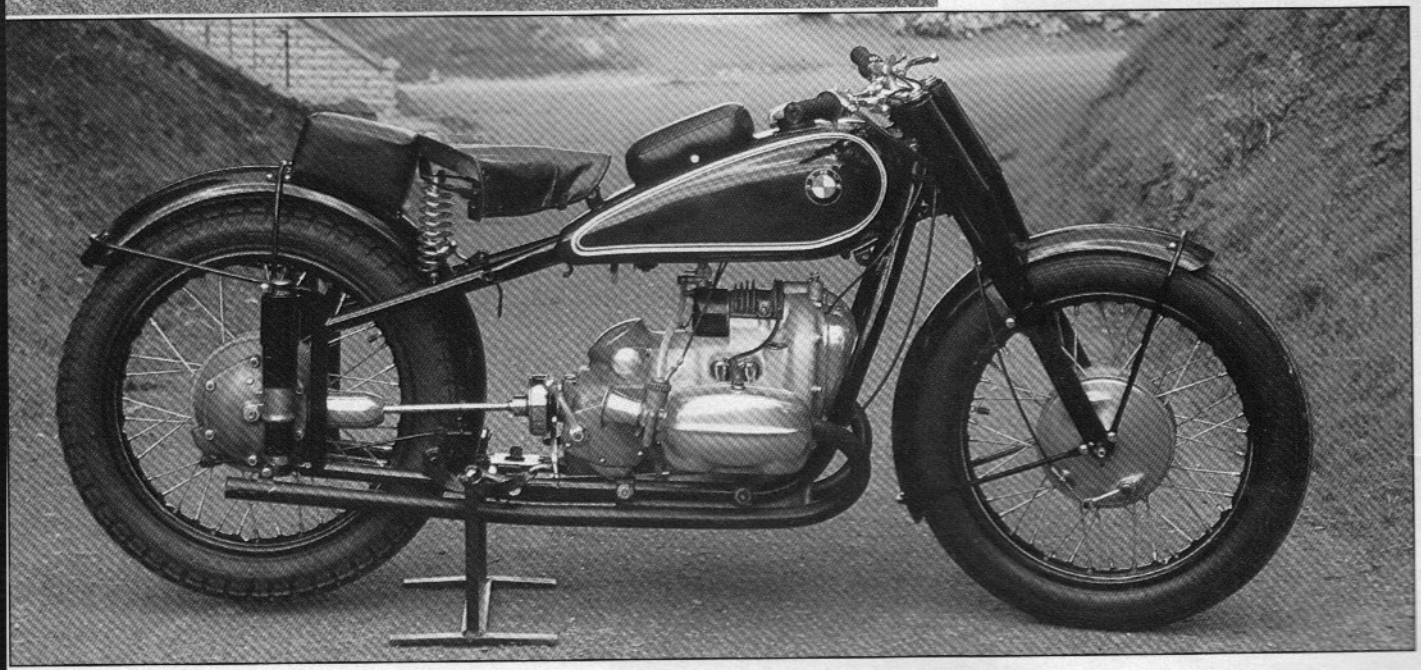
Round about 1983, it would be, when Cliff Washington – a civil engineer engaged on building work in Germany for the British forces – realised that he had to start thinking of how he would occupy his time now that retirement was getting closer. Well, he had always been interested in motor cycles (between 1947 and 1957 he had competed in trials and scrambles at local Oxfordshire level) so yes, there would be a shed behind the house, and in the shed would be an old bike ripe for restoration. It would be a BSA, probably, and he had a very vivid mental image of himself rubbing down the frame to the bare metal.

So what happened? How come there is no BSA in the shed and, instead Cliff and wife Kath (secretary of the VMCC Oxford Section, incidentally) are up to the eyeballs in pre-war BMWs?

Well, Cliff had been working in Germany for seventeen years, on various spells of duty, but towards the end of his 1979 to 1983 assignment, he was asked to carry on for a further year. "My only real concern," he reflects, "was that it would mean putting off the planned acquisition of a bike for restoration. But wait a minute. If I was going to spend another year in Germany, why not get an old German bike and restore it out there?"

His first step was to join the Veteran BMW Owners Club (he is still a member), but it slowly dawned on him that there were virtually no pre-war BMWs left in Germany, for the very good reason that on the outbreak of war just about everything capable of movement was commandeered for military use.

"Fed by war movies," he points out, "the public gets the impression that the whole German Army roared about on sidecar-wheel-drive R75 outfits, but that wasn't so. The majority of wartime outfits used the R12 model, supplemented by requisitioned ex-civilian machines, and because the fighting was so widespread most of them



BEWITCHED BY BMWs!

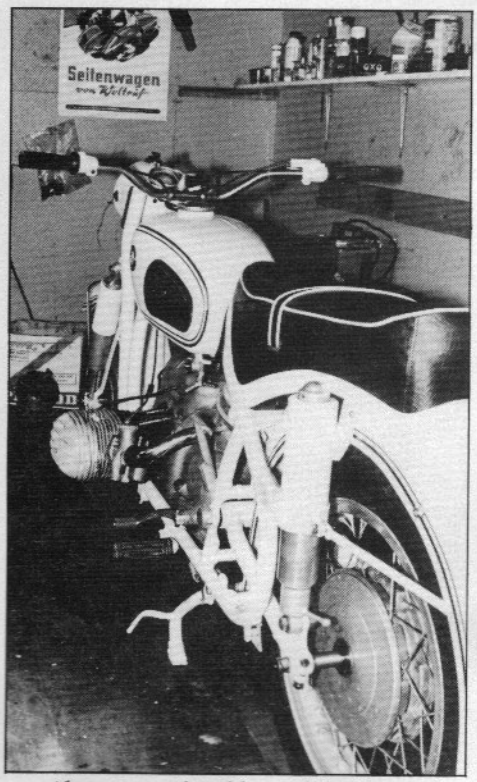
were abandoned or captured in far-flung places. For example, there seems to be quite a number of old BMWs in Greece.

"But one night, I was reading *Motor Cycle News* – I had it sent out to me – and I spotted a small advert for a 1936 BMW. Having worked myself up into an 'I must have it' state, I put in a phone call to what turned out to be a Reigate number, spoke to Wally Lambert's son and said 'Right, I'll have it!'; mind you, I wasn't quite sure what a 1936 Model R5 looked like, but I went to see a German enthusiast who had a picture of one.

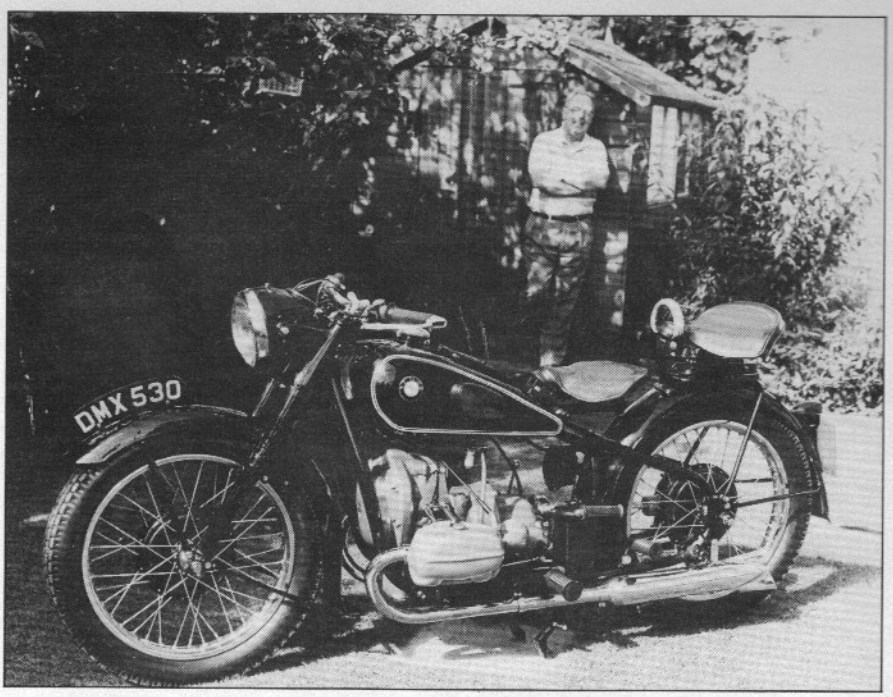
"The next thing was to get the machine to me, so I asked Wally to take it to Dover and put it on the ferry. Meanwhile, Kath and I borrowed a trailer, and set off for Zeebrugge to meet the 6pm boat. It arrived – but there was no bike on board. As Wally explained later, Townsend Thoresen had refused to take an unaccompanied vehicle, so we had to think again.

"I knew that lots of soldiers serving in Germany, when going back to Britain on leave, used hired small vans in which to carry some pieces of furniture. I knew also that the British Forces Broadcasting Service had a buy-sell-or-exchange programme on the radio, so I rang the BFBS studio and found myself on the air, explaining what I wanted.

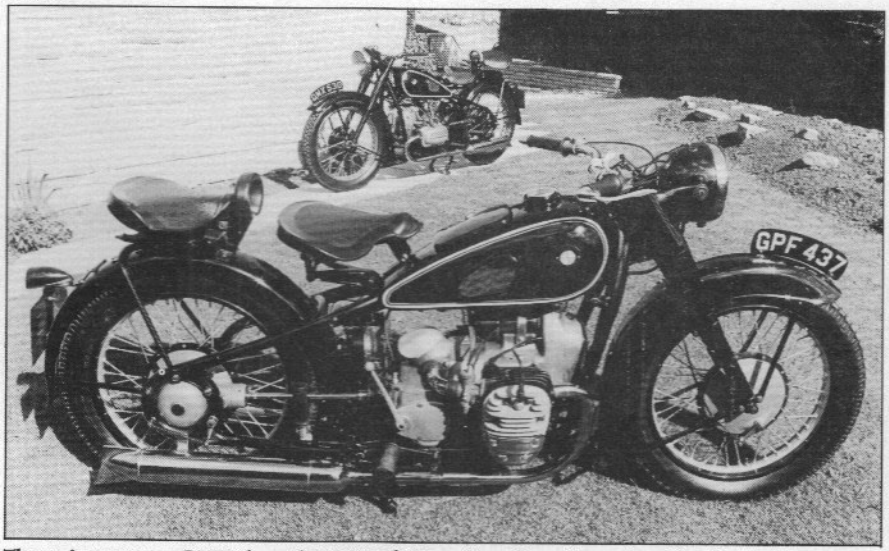
"No sooner had I put the phone down than it rang; it was a soldier who would



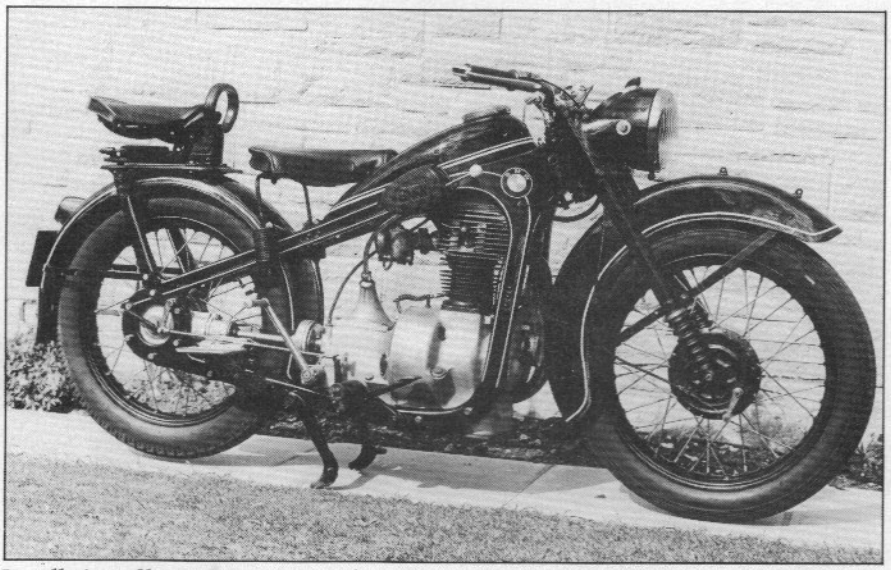
Almost completed but still lacking a touch or two is the most modern of Cliff's BMWs – a 1960 Model R60 in white, with Earles front forks and swinging-arm rear suspension.



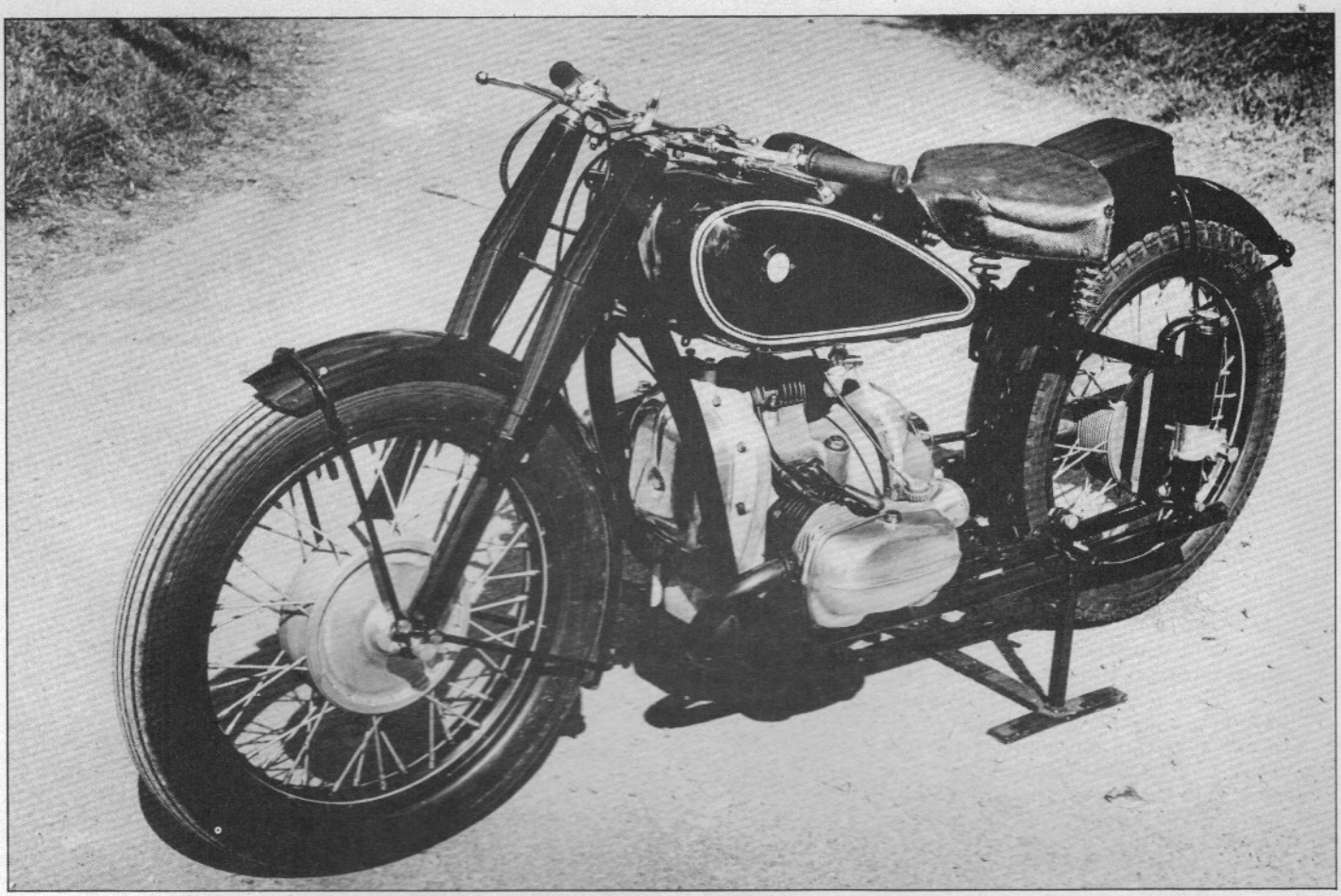
Start of it all – the 1936 494cc BMW R5 which set Cliff Washington on the road to Bee-Em beatitude. In the background, Cliff lounges by the shed which *should* have contained a BSA!



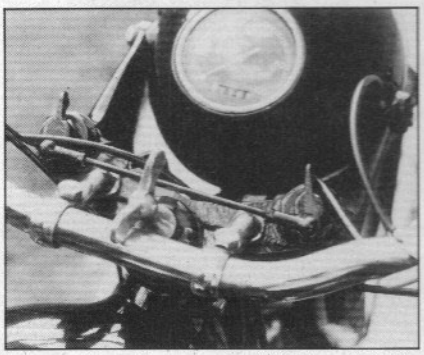
There is no rarer BMW than this 1937 600cc side-valve; the only other known survivor is in California.



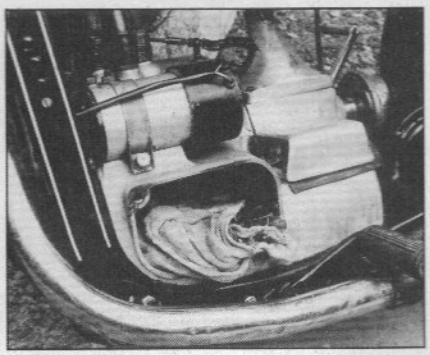
Installation of heavy presses to produce the Dixi (a licence-built Austin Seven) left the BMW works with spare capacity – hence the pressed-steel frame on this 1937 350cc ohv R35 single.



BMW's Model R51SS of 1939 was a Clubman Racer – Germany's equivalent of the BSA Gold Star. A similar machine was raced by Tim Reid in the 1939 Senior TT as a "stand-in" member of the works team.



Featured on the telescopic forks of 1936 and 1937 models only is a linked system by which the degree of damping could be set instantly to the rider's taste.



On the 350cc single, a handy toolbox is cast into the left-hand side of the crankcase, and the battery sits in a pocket alongside the gearbox.

be going back to Folkestone with a van the very next week, and he would be glad to collect the bike for me. The scheme worked perfectly, and for the first time I was able to see what I had bought. It was an R5, in very nice condition except that it had the wrong mudguards and one or two other details – but the spares situation in Germany at that time was much the same as for bikes, just about non-existent. So we left the machine pretty well as it was, and in the couple of years remaining of my contract we went all over Germany on it, and attended rallies in Holland especially, and in Belgium and Germany itself.

"Incidentally, the Veteran BMW Club have now started a spares scheme much like those of some of our own owners' clubs; they send round a circular with the club magazine, and if the response is sufficient they get reproduction parts made.

"One night, when I had had the R5 for about a year, I spotted another advertisement – in *The Classic Motor Cycle,* this time – for an auction at Salisbury, where a pre-war BMW would be coming up for sale. I rang up the auctioneers and discovered it was a 1937 600cc side-valve R6. I came back to England, went to the Salisbury auction and bought the bike – there is no way I wouldn't have done! Luckily, I was able to contact a furniture removals firm who were sending a van to Germany, and they took it for me. I totally restored the R6 in the cellar of the house where we were living, and at the same time I was still working on the R5, having heard of somebody in England who had a good pair of forks for the model. Gradually, I got both machines up a standard near to what they had been originally.

"Also, I bought a Peugeot estate car, because it was able to carry the bikes (with front wheels and mudguards removed) inside, and also tow our caravan. We went thousands of miles to German and Dutch rallies like that, and its a funny thing but when we paraded them at a German event we could hear spectators whispering 'Made in the old days – the Hitler days' which, of course, they were."

As can be seen from Jim Davies' pictures, the R5 and R6 are identical apart from the engine unit, and each features an unusual adjustable-damping system for the telescopic front forks. First registered (in England) on March 10th, 1936, the R5 is a very early one, carrying engine number 259. For a long time, Cliff's R6 was thought to be the sole survivor of its type – indeed, it was borrowed by the BMW factory for an anniversary display – but quite recently another has surfaced in California, having been rescued from Spain where it was taken during the Spanish Civil War.

The remaining models in Cliff's collection have been acquired since his return to England, and a particularly ▶

BEWITCHED BY BMWs!

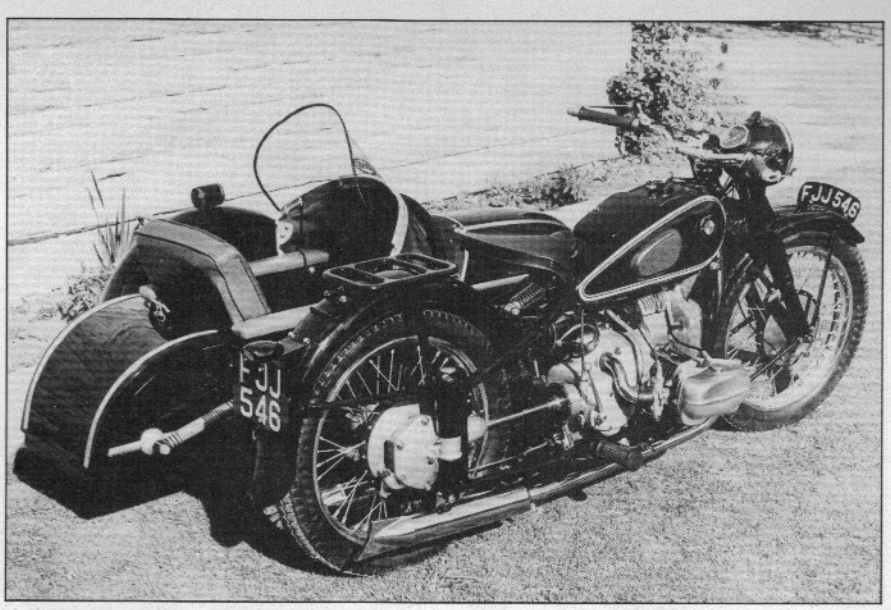
intriguing one is the 1937 R25 350cc single, the four-speed gearbox of which has a car-type hand change. Other BMWs of the period use Fischer-Amal carburettors, but this one has a SUM instrument. The pressed-steel frame had its origin in BMW's 1928 acquisition of a licence to manufacture the Austin Seven in Germany – their first venture into four-wheel production. The factory had to be equipped with heavy presses to stamp out the Austin (BMW called it the Dixi) chassis and other components, so it made sense to use spare press capacity by producing pressed-steel motor cycle frames.

A pressed-steel frame was used on the R12 flat twin, too; Cliff owns one of these, though it is at present stripped to the bare metal and awaiting restoration. A 750cc side-valve, it was taken to Norway by the German Army in 1940, used throughout the war, and was then "liberated" by a Norwegian civilian, who rode it for another 25 years before discarding it. The remains were brought back to Britain via Newcastle, but getting it up to Cliff Washington's standard will take a considerable time for at present the machine comprises frame, tank, a couple of wheels and the remains of the engine.

Bought in Peterborough as the traditional "box of bits" some two or three years ago is another high-spot of the collection. It wasn't until he sorted out what was in the box, that Cliff realised he had acquired a 1939 Model R51SS – a clubman racer, and very tasty, too! Although BMW fitted German-made accessories to their road models, for racing machines – not only works jobs, but also clubman-racing mounts – they used British saddles, twistgrips, control levers, and so on. After the death of Karl Gall during 1939 Senior TT practice BMW drafted Tim Reid (a private entry, on an R51SS) into the works team – and the trio of Reid, Georg Meier and Jock West were well on schedule for the team award until a collision with a stray dog brought Tim off.

The clubman model used the same full-width hubs, with straight-pull spokes, as did the works models. To conform with ACU regulations, Cliff has fitted his machine with ball-ended levers so that he can use it in British meetings, but one item that has so far eluded him is the correct rev-counter (he does have the rev-counter drive unit – a fortuitous find at a recent autojumble!).

The R51SS had a somewhat flexible specification. "The customer got what he was prepared to pay for," explains Cliff, "in just the same way that BSA would offer alternative specifications for the Gold Star. This one has the optional close-ratio gear cluster, for example. We know it was imported into England in 1939, but I have no idea of who might have used it. It's even possible that it was the Tim Reid Senior TT machine."



Bought from Chesterfield "sight unseen", Cliff's 1938 494cc R51 had been fitted with a Triumph dualseat and semi-upswept exhaust. The matching 1938 Steib sidecar came from a Rudge.

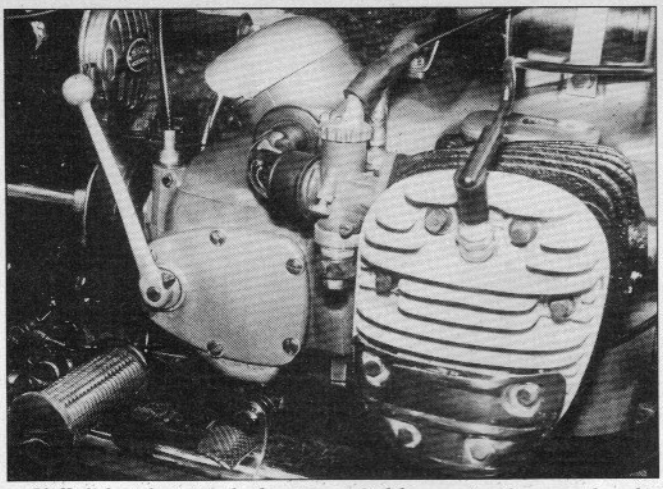


There are three more here, in various stages of assembly and restoration, among them a pressed-steel-frame 750cc side-valve R12 brought back from Norway, where it had been abandoned by the German Army.

Still to be restored are two more R51s, of 1938 and 1939 (the R51 is the plunger-sprung version of the R5) but it is with yet another R51 that we complete the survey; this time it is a sidecar outfit, with a matching Steib chair, and is the machine which Cliff and Kath Washington have been campaigning in rallies up and down Britain during the 1987 summer season.

A 1938 model – all Cliff's 10 BMWs, bar one, are pre-war – it was also bought "sight unseen" from an advertisement, and was collected from Chesterfield in a rather non-standard state which included a Triumph dual seat and home-made semi-upswept exhaust pipes. It was only in 1987 that the Steib (also a 1938 job) and the bike were married, the sidecar body having been completely repanelled by Cliff himself, and re-upholstered. The Steib was originally coupled to a Rudge, but in the present pairing it and the R51 look made for each other.

However, it wasn't so simple as all that. Certainly the BMW was provided with sidecar lugs – but, naturally, for a right-hand chair. Cliff had to duplicate all the sidecar fittings from the bike and secure them on the left. Incidentally, the lower rear mounting is a 30mm ball, and fortunately, Cliff was able to obtain the exact fitment ... from Neval Motor Cycles, for the identical item is featured on the BMW-copy Cossack flat twin. Then there was the matter of attaining sidecar-ratio gearing. On a chain-driven bike, this would be done by fitting a larger rear wheel sprocket, but on a shaft-driven model it can only be achieved by fitting a special crown wheel and pinion.



Purpose of the short lever on the BMW gearbox is greatly misunderstood. Not a gear-change, it is in fact a neutral-finder.

Cliff did at last track down a suitable sidecar crown wheel, in the USA; but to get it to Oxford meant paying £42 in customs duty! An unexpected snag was that the position of the upper rear sidecar attachment tube made operation of the standard outward-swinging kickstart pedal very awkward. Cliff got round that one by making a special kickstart, with a footplate instead of a pedal; problem solved. Lastly, there is the sidecar windscreen and apron – a modern replica of the original, obtained through the Veteran BMW Owners Club.

In closing, may we deal with the myth that the shortish light-alloy lever on the right-hand side of the flat-twin gearbox is some kind of hand change? Not so, says Cliff; it is a neutral finder, intended to be used when the bike is at a standstill, when all you do is bend down and give it a flick with the right hand. "If this gives the impression that the foot control was less than perfect," he says, "that only confirms my experience. The problem stemmed from the fact that the 1936 gear change mechanism operated forward by lever to a cam arrangement below the nearside cylinder, and from there back by linkage to the gear selector shaft. Slight maladjustment of the linkage, any wear in the linkage or cam, and perhaps more important the fact that the clutch runs at three times the speed of a conventional motor cycle clutch, made it sometimes difficult to select neutral.

"BMW's answer was to put the little hand control on an extension of the selector shaft, and this they continued to do even after 1938, when the introduction of a more positive and directly operated foot change made it largely unnecessary. The need for such a hand control was perhaps an admission of failure, and in their contemporary literature BMW themselves first referred to it as a 'hand assistance lever', or 'neutral seeking device', subsequently dropping these descriptions and referring to the gearbox as having 'combined foot and hand control'. What they conveniently forgot to explain was how the hand control was used when in motion.

"Tim Holmes's article (*CMC*, October 1987) about Bob Porecha's 1937 R5 highlights once again what a high quality and modern machine BMW introduced in 1936. It does, however, perpetuate the myth that the excellence of the products was in some indefinable way due to the superiority of BMW designers and engineers. What isn't taken into account is the relative cost of a BMW when compared with a contemporary British offering. In the immediate pre-war years Germany needed to gain foreign currency, and the government subsidised the sale of all their vehicles sold abroad. This amounted to £10 on each BMW bike, but even allowing for that the retail price of an R5 in Britian was £120 – at a time when British machines of comparable performance cost half that figure, and £120 would buy a good quality car. Don't lety us forget that." ■

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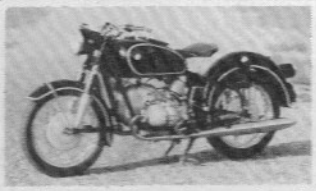
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