

BEAMING 44 YEARS

The ageless 500 BMW featured here continues to provide first class service. Such a pity that the owner cannot similarly cheat time. He's hanging up his boots and the BMW is going on display

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY: **JOHN MCGOVREN**

Seven times world champion John Surtees once told me that BMW don't make them like they used to. He wasn't just referring to his exclusive model 507 car, but to the range of machines produced in the Fifties.

Surtees' words came to mind on first seeing George Forster's 1958 R50 motorcycle. They apply equally to George, an enthusiast since the age of

seven when he first rode pillion on his uncle's BSA V-twin combination.

George has always been a believer in quality, which was why in 1958 he put his wallet where his mouth was and, carrying helmet, waterproofs and a new tank cover, took the train from Cheshire to collect his R50 from importer AFN in west London.

After parting with £400, the cover was put on the black and white pin-

striped tank for the long ride home. The cover has stayed on for 44 years and so the paint is now two shades 'blackier' than the rest of the BMW.

The ride home convinced George the R50 was something special. It was so smooth and "all together" that even the cantankerous front brake – "it was either full or not working" – didn't worry him. It took 30,000 miles for the brake to bed in. ►

*Trouble-free riding:
George Forster on
his 1958 R50 which
has needed very
little maintenance*

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◁ In all those years, apart from addressing standard wear and tear, the R50 has needed no more than the replacement of the work hardened rubber collars at the base of the pushrod tubes where they pass through into the crankcase, and a new thrust-release bearing for the clutch. This wasn't the source of a noise that bothered George but, with the gearbox off, he decided to renew the bearings anyway.

A firm believer in solving problems in his garage rather than on the road, George has remade every nut and bolt in stainless steel in the tiny, lathe-equipped workshop in his garden. Incidentally, this attention to detail is not confined to the BMW. George has a 30-year-old Webb lawn mower that he strips and overhauls every winter.

His background on two wheels goes back to 1945 when he rode a Triumph Tiger 70 passed on by his brother-in-law. The Tiger was followed by a series of BSAs - A10s and C11s - and a long time favourite, a 350 Douglas Mk4.

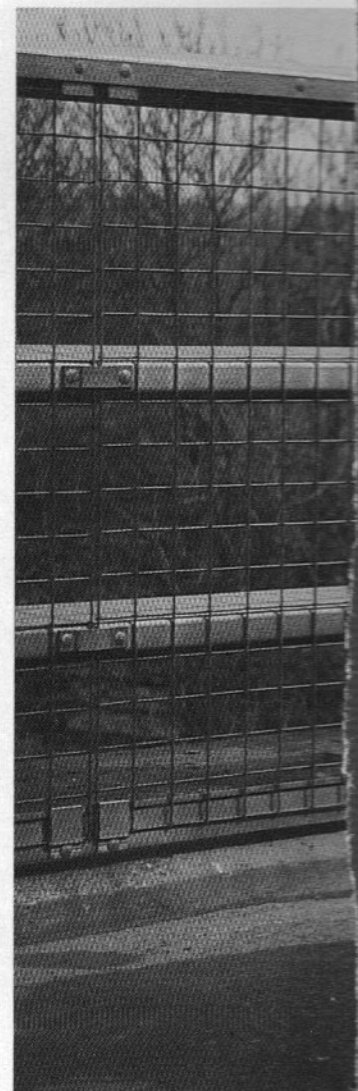
This kindled his love for flat-twins, but it took his annual pilgrimage to the TT to be converted to BMWs. In 1957 George met a Scotsman who owned an R50. "After a fast lap of the TT circuit the bike showed no signs of hard usage," George recalls. "Unlike some British machinery it didn't drip oil or appear hot and bothered. The owner let me ride it and I was sold on owning one. It took a year of hard saving and I've never regretted it."

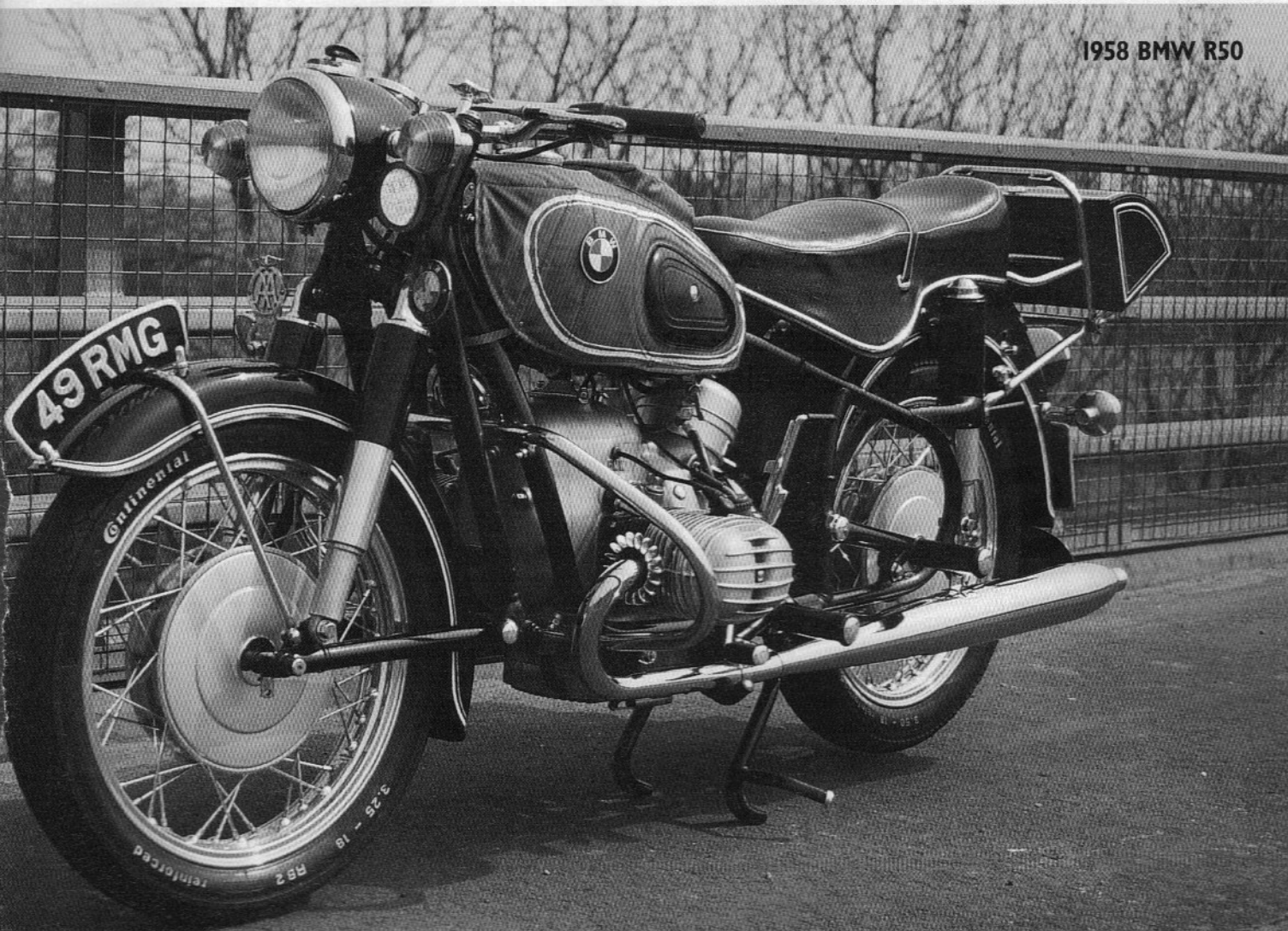
George has toured Britain and Europe. In Munich the R50 was greatly admired. He visited the BMW works where bikes were built. "The amount of handwork and precise inspection that went on matched John Surtees' words," he says.

In addition to the indicators and meticulously fitted windscreen, an alloy larger capacity sump has been fit-

Note special large capacity finned alloy sump. Made from 1955 to 1969 the four-speed 68 x 68mm 494cc R50 gives 26bhp at 5800rpm. Carbs are 24mm Bings. It runs on 18in rims. Brakes are 200mm drums. Magneto ignition, dynamo lights, 430lb (195kg) dry weight

Shining example: indicators and a detachable screen have been added and every nut and screw remade





ted. It replaced the cheap looking pressed steel sump that offended George's quality criterion.

Not wanting to pay the excessive cost of an alloy unit from MLG Ltd., the London BMW specialists, George was considering making one until he had a chat with a friend who worked for the English Electric Aircraft company. A few weeks later the friend turned up with a beautifully made alloy sump which had been carved out of a solid block of aircraft quality alloy, complete with cooling fins and an enlarged oil capacity of about 20 per cent. "It's as good as the sump fitted to the factory Rennsport racers and looks wonderful," says George.

Next hiccup was with the seat cover which, in nearly 100,000 miles of use, had several unsightly cracks. This time, I was able to help as I had spoken to P&P Seating of Kitts Green, Birmingham, at a motorcycle show last year and, suitably impressed, had arranged to visit their works in December.

George and I loaded our seats – my Honda and his BMW – into my car and went to Kitts Green. P&P covered mine immediately. The BMW seat was left with them because the cover mate-

rial had to be imported from Germany. It has now been fitted to the R50 and, as with my Honda, it really finishes off the bike.

At 74 years young George is finally easing back on his riding and looking for a suitable retirement home for his BMW. After reading about the M&C Collection in Bakewell, Derbyshire, in *Classic Bike* (March 2000) he thought that displaying the R50 in a museum, with occasional use on the road, would be the best of both worlds.

This George has done although he admits it had always been his intention to keep the R50 in his living room next to the TV set once he gives up riding.

Why? "So I can look at it and remember the good times I had on it," he explains. "But this kind of quality machinery needs to be put to regular use. I considered that Bakewell would cover these points and I can always go over to check all is well."

I'm told that Peter Mather and Phil Crosby, who run M&C, are itching to get their hands on the R50 but they will have to wait a little longer. George had planned to retire last year but he is enjoying an Indian summer and aims to carry on riding into the autumn.

He simply cannot bring himself to give up after all these years. Having ridden the R50 I can understand his feeling. Knowing the gearchange to be a slow and noisy operation I took care to see how George does it.

He believes in the old adage "change up early and change down late, and at all times take it easy and match the revs to road speed." He effects silent changes using this method but is no slowcoach. He gets on with it, easily staying with main road traffic and cornering with élan.

I eased off and made an early change into second without a 'clonk'. I did make one or two clumsy changes in the next few miles but soon learnt to change reasonably quietly.

I didn't have to say too much – the look on my face said it all. It reminded me of the early Fifties model Rolls-Royce Silver Wraith I drove across the USA in 1979. Beautiful ride and road holding, good brakes and steering and a quality of construction to die for.

It is just a shame that George's R50 is going to the Bakewell museum and not into my garage. The museum, run by Peter Mather and Phil Crosby, can be contacted on 01629 812056. ■