

# The British bike brand that refused to die

## ON TWO WHEELS

*Andrew English tries*

*Royal Enfield's latest product and explains the company's legacy*

**K**rispy Kreme, Pika-chu and H&M wouldn't have been in business when Royal Enfield started making quadricycles in 1901, although the famed British motorcycle manufacturer's pop-up shop in the Redditch Kingfisher Shopping Centre nestles alongside all three.

Back in the day a stone lobbed from the store – which exists to promote the new Bullet Trials Works Replica – might have clattered off the roof of the Enfield factory, which employed thousands of skilled engineers and assembly workers building machines for the Army and civilian markets. These days you'd need a nuclear-charged howitzer to fire a stone the 5,200 miles into the Enfield works in Chennai, India.

But India has provided a major part of the success of the Royal Enfield name, which is the world's oldest motorcycle manufacturer in continuous production. In the Fifties, the Indian army initially purchased 800 Royal Enfield 350cc Bullets to ride the border in Kashmir. When these machines proved robust and reliable, they set up Enfield India in 1955 and built a factory in Chennai, which opened in 1956 to assemble about 20,000 Bullets, which were manufactured in the Redditch factory and arrived in completely

Knocked Down (CKD) form.

The death of the British motorcycle industry is a well-researched and documented phenomenon, though it's interesting that Stephen Scott, a former Royal Enfield apprentice who joined the company in Redditch in 1960 and was made redundant a year before it closed in 1967, says that Enfield was still in demand.

"There were 1,000 working there when I joined," he says, "and just 350 when I left, but the bikes we were making were selling and we were working on a new production racing machine that [road racing legend] Geoff Duke was consulting on. But the Enfield name survived because of the Indian army. When they realised it was closing down, they bit the bullet and bought the company. No pun intended of course."

Though Enfield continued production of its twin-cylinder Interceptor from its underground Bradford-on-Avon plant (built during the war to hide the factory from German bombers), that too closed in 1970 and British Enfield production was over.

The Indians, however, stayed at it. At a presentation during the launch of the pop-up shop, Rachel Maclean, the local Conservative MP, asked a question about the company's commitment to its spiritual home of Redditch. Had she not been born in Chennai, you might

have thought this was a bit of know-nothing local grandstanding. But she might have a point. Enfield has set up a

technical department at a disused airfield in Leicestershire employing about 350 engineers and designers. It's a long way from the old days of British bike making but an interesting bellwether of where the company sees itself now.

It was sold to the Eicher automotive group in the Nineties and experienced a few hiccups with the closure of the Jaipur factory in 2002, but it opened a new Chennai plant in 2013, hired Pierre Terblanche, the former Ducati and Norton designer (though he only stayed for 20 months), and purchased British specialist Harris Performance Products in 2015, as well as setting up a new sales organisation in the US.

It's not all been plain sailing for the company, but it's moving ahead now and it's difficult to see how things can go wrong if it can supply such good-looking machines at such keen prices.

Unlike the Interceptor (see below), the £4,699 Bullet Trials Works Replica is a definite throwback to the old days of Enfield's dominance of trials riding with such riders as Johnny Brittain.

This remarkably talented rider died in March and the topic is a bit raw for Gordon May, who as well as being Brittain's friend is also Royal Enfield's official historian.

"He was from a generation of men who just got on and did it," he says.

How true. Brittain won a gold medal in the International Six Day Trial (ISDT) at the age of 18 on a works Royal Enfield Bullet. He competed in 15 consecutive ISDTs, winning 13 gold



medals as well as being victorious in countless equally tough trials events.

Yet when May visited his house after his death, his daughter was sorting through myriad cardboard boxes of Brittain's trophies and medals, which had been stored in the attic. "All he

ever displayed were the trophies won by his father [Vic]," says May.

The Bullet's 499cc, single-cylinder engine might only squeeze out 27bhp and 30.4lb ft of torque, but the Trials Works Replica has disc brakes with anti-lock, along with digital electronic ignition – and it looks fantastic even with its frame painted in the rather weird pale green of the old works machines. Other colours are available.

Besides, as Brittain might have said: it's not what you've got, it's what you do with it that counts...

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**NEW BIKES,  
OLD STYLE**

Royal Enfield historian Gordon May with the new Royal Enfield Trials Bike in Redditch, the manufacturer's original home