Bicycles to Bullets:

THE HISTORY OF ROYAL ENFIELD

Words: Dan Evon  Photos: Mark Brosius and Royal Enfield

There aren’t too many motorcycle manufacturers around that deserve to be considered royalty. But with more than a century under its belt and still moving strong, Royal Enfield is a unique motorcycle company.
PRE-MOTORCYCLES

The Royal Enfield Company can trace its origins back to 1851 when an Englishman, George Townsend set up a needle making shop in Hunt End, Redditch. During this time, the bicycle was still being developed and Townsend’s nascent company began tinkering with some of the earliest pedal-cycle machines.

After experiencing financial trouble, Townsend sold his company to the Eadie Manufacturing Company, which released the first “Enfield” bicycle in 1892. The following year, the Royal Enfield trademark slogan “Built Like a Gun” appeared.

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THE FIRST MOTORCYCLE, THE FIRST WORLD WAR

At the very end of the 19th century, Royal Enfield began producing motorized vehicles. But these machines had one too many wheels on them. Trycicles, quadricycles, and even cars were built by Royal Enfield, but in 1909, the company found its true calling with motorcycles.

In the early 1900s, motorcycling was believed to be a passing fad because the crude machines took hours of preparation before they could be ridden. But at the start of World War I, the demand for smaller vehicles skyrocketed. Royal Enfield was commissioned by the British War Department and the Imperial Russian Government to supply motorcycles throughout the war.

The English company developed two motorcycles specifically for the war. The first was a bike designed to carry machine guns. The second had a special stretcher attached to the side. Royal Enfield’s involvement in World War I cemented its bikes reputation of being “built like a gun,” and allowed the company to develop more proficient and technologically advanced motorcycles.

It was during this time that Royal Enfield started developing the modern motorcycle by producing its own engines, a 225cc two-stroke single and a 425cc V-Twin. The company perfected features like a hand-operated oil pump, a two-speed counter-shaft gearbox, and a chain final drive.

After the war, Enfield continued to improve their motorcycles and in 1922, they produced a 976cc V-Twin, which was massive for its time. Enfield also developed a three cylinder two-stroke motorcycle during this period, the first of its kind. Enfield was also the first company to adopt saddle tanks and center-spring girder front forks.

This was a time of innovation for the company. By 1930, Enfield had a lineup of 13 motorcycles, everything from a two-stroke 146cc Cycar to an 1140cc V-Twin. The company’s products started to look more like modern motorcycles. It wasn’t until the introduction of the Bullet that the Enfield Company solidified itself as a premier motorcycle manufacturer.
BUILT LIKE A GUN, GOES LIKE A BULLET

If there is one motorcycle from the Royal Enfield lineup that you’ve probably heard of, it’s the Bullet. The four-valve, single-cylinder motorcycle was introduced in 1931. Like many of Enfield’s motorcycles, the Bullet was developed and perfected for war. But even though the Bullet is undoubtedly the most famous Enfield motorcycle, the most lauded during World War II was a 125cc motorcycle known as the Flying Flea.

The Flying Flea, or the Airborne, was designed by Enfield so that it could be dropped out of a plane. It was placed inside a steel cage, attached to a parachute, then launched out of planes and onto the battle field.

The Bullet wouldn’t see its heyday until the 1950s, when the Bullet was launched in India. The Bullet had already gone through significant changes during the 40s. It used two rocker boxes, a telescopic front fork, a swinging arm rear suspension system and hydraulic damper units. When the Indian government needed motorcycles to patrol the Pakistani border, they chose the Bullet.

Enfield began initially shipping parts to India, but in 1956, Enfield India was established. This was the beginning of one of the most iconic motorcycles in history. The 1955 Bullet design has remained nearly unchanged for more than 40 years.

ROYAL ENFIELD’S REINVENTION

The longevity of the Bullet shows just how great the motorcycle is, but it also symbolizes a stagnant period in the company’s history. With an influx of Japanese motorcycles in the 70s and 80s, customers were given many more options instead of the reliable Bullets.

“Royal Enfield brought its motorcycles back to the top of the motorcycle world.”

Royal Enfield nearly went bankrupt in the 1990s, but now the company is stronger than ever. After the Eicher Group purchased the company in 1994, Royal Enfield brought its motorcycles back to the top of the motorcycle world.

Today, Royal Enfield bikes may come equipped with fancy modern devices like electronic ignition systems, but the company has never deviated too far from its classic motorcycles from the 1940s and 50s. The Bullet G5 Classic, a “completely modern, fuel-injected, low-maintenance motorcycle built in the image of the world-famous 1955 Bullet Classic,” is one of the hottest motorcycles on the market today.

If you want to get your hands on a new Bullet G5 Classic, you could be waiting for more than a year. But many people are gladly standing in line, as owning a Royal Enfield today is like owning a piece of history.