

BURT MUNRO

Indian

LEGEND OF SPEED

MUNRO
Special

Indian

1920 Scout

BY GEORGE BEGG

All the driving to and from Christchurch almost non stop, plus the long hours working on the Indian or the Velocette motor, would have taxed a far younger man let alone a 73 year old. The upgrading of his living arrangements at this time was a further drain on his time.

Burt now decided, as there was to be no more trips to Bonneville, he had better make some improvements to his living conditions. It was all very well living and working in the old shed, ideal for convenience, but the time had come when some comfort in his later years was preferable. He was also getting some strong prompting from the City Council as they had reluctantly reached the conclusion that enough was enough, and they were not prepared to turn a blind eye to Burt's living arrangements any longer.

Burt walked along to North Road, Waikiwi, and called on his old friend of many years, George Barnes, who specialised in building small cottages. George and Burt agreed on the design of a small house with every comfort. Barnes Homes built the house next to the workshop shed in 1972 with George keeping the costs to a minimum. He wondered at times just how he would get paid as Burt had never given any indication of his financial affairs except that he only had his pension and never spent a penny unless he absolutely had to. When George presented a bill for a progress payment Burt just went down to the Southland Savings Bank and came back with a cheque. No one was more surprised than George.

When finished, Burt was very proud of his nice new home, and then he found out that he could get good money from renting it out to a tenant. Burt deduced that if he rented the house he would have enough money to travel and so he went right on living in the shed until 1975, after he had his last trip to America. History has not recorded just what the Council thought of this. Perhaps they never knew.

Burt concentrated mostly on the Velocette and kept on competing at every sprint or speed event, that is, if he wasn't rebuilding the motor from a blow up. It was during this period where he went to compete at a sprint in March 1975 when the long suffering crankcases cried enough and did not just crack - they broke off just above the drive side crankshaft bearing. There is an excellent photo of Burt leaning over the bike and pointing to the break and he has written "104th blow up" on a copy of the photo. Burt's cure was to make a 3/8" (10mm) thick plate which surrounded the main bearing and went well up towards the cylinder barrel. This he welded into place to give a much stronger crankcase. A typical Munro approach was to keep increasing the stress on the various parts till they broke, and then beef them up and wait for the next weakest bit to give way. That poor Velocette motor, like the Indian Scout, was asked to perform deeds away beyond what the designer back in 1936 had intended, or ever imagined anyone would ask of it.

Burt had a quantity of Velocette engine parts that he had acquired over the years, when bikes other than late model ones were junked. In the 60s and 70s, before the classic movement got going, they were often just given away and Burt's shed became the home of anything Indian or Velocette. He now built up a Velocette motor with a capacity of 650 cc and with the original head off the one he had purchased in 1956. This he sold to Ashley Bell who fitted it into a frame ready to race in the

100 mile beach race for the Burt Munro Trophy. Burt said to Ashley, "Gear it low as it should run at 8,000 revs". Well Ashley did as Burt advised, and very shortly there was the usual almighty bang as the piston broke up and the con rod wrecked the barrel. Burt took the engine back to the shed and rebuilt it ready for the next year's race. This time Ashley did not take Burt's advice and geared it so as to keep the revs down. The starter dropped the flag and Ashley took off and shortly had a mighty lead in the first mile only to have another almighty bang and another wrecked motor. The crankcases had broken in the same place as on Burt's machine and got the same cure. Ashley eventually sold this engine to Peter Ramage in Invercargill.

Burt built up a MAC Velocette motor on which he increased the bore size to give a capacity of around 500cc on what had been originally a 350 cc motor. This he called his short stroke motor. He may have used it at times but he eventually sold it to his friend Cyril McRae.

Burt would hitch the Velocette behind the Vauxhall car and head off to Canterbury to compete at a sprint meeting. This was a round trip of about 1,300 km (800 miles). Ashley Bell tells the story of being in a restaurant at Oamaru, 320 km north of Invercargill, with his father as they had been salmon fishing in the local rivers. They were just about to leave when in came Burt.

Well now, anyone who has ever been in a restaurant with Burt knows what an embarrassing experience it can be. He certainly let the staff and everyone else know he is there, as his hearing impairment meant that he shouted, especially a demand for service, if the waitress was a pretty young thing. Burt had been to a sprint meeting up by Christchurch and the Velocette had broken a piston, a common occurrence. The con rod had then punched a hole in the back of the crankcase then into the gearbox where it had gone through the casing and had bent the mainshaft. Now most of us faced with a wrecked motor and gearbox would have been far from a bundle of good humour, but not Burt. He chivvied up the waitress for some service and then gave everyone in the restaurant a detailed description of what it was like to be at speed and have the heart of his motorcycle wreck itself underneath him. There would have been enough entertainment in Burt's story for all of the town of Oamaru.

Ashley and his father escaped to continue their journey homeward as soon as they could.

Ashley went with Burt out to the Longbush area to test the Velocette one Sunday, ready for a flying 1/4 mile event in Canterbury the next Saturday. Burt had machined the piston skirt too small in diameter and so to overcome this he went into an engine reconditioner and had them micropeen the skirt. This is a process where a machine with a small hammer working at high speed hammers away inside the skirt and squeezes the alloy to increase the diameter. It was used where pistons were loose in the bore giving noisy piston slap. It puts a lot of stress on the piston skirt and is seldom used in modern motors.

It put a lot of stress on the piston alright, and Burt was well wound up to speed when the usual bang followed by silence signalled another piston had broken up. Burt had a spare barrel and piston but no con rod. Monday morning he was at Johnsons Foundry with a short length of his