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WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE... STEVE McQUEEN?

McQueen's ride in the 1964 International Six Days Trial has become part of motorcycling folklore. This replica of his modified Triumph Trophy TR6 is a chance to step into Harvey Mushman's* shoes and blast some trails

*McQUEEN'S COMPETITION ALIAS



► Ace Classics' attention to detail is thorough



► Just like Steve's fix-it-quick kit (minus axe)

Steve McQueen once said he didn't know if he was an actor who raced, or a racer who acted. Whichever was closer to the truth, his passion for motors and speed was definitely seated deep in his psyche. And off-road riding became one of his greatest loves after he bought a 500cc Triumph from veteran scrambler and enduro expert Bud Ekins. McQueen threw himself into the Californian desert racing scene, which appealed to his lust for adventure.

It was Ekins who encouraged McQueen to compete in the 1964 International Six Days Trial. A seasoned 'desert fox', Ekins had raced in UK scrambles and European motocross in the early Fifties, pioneering US involvement in the European-based 'Olympics of Motorcycling'. In his first ISDT in 1961, he won a Silver Medal – then went one better in '62 with his first Gold, in West Germany.

In that year, McQueen was on location in Germany shooting *The Great Escape*. Spectacular motorcycling scenes – including the iconic leap of a barbed wire fence by McQueen's character Captain Virgil Hilt – were included at his suggestion. Ekins, who had become a close friend and mentor, was called in as a consultant and his jump over the wire was used in the final cut.

After winning another ISDT Gold Medal in Czechoslovakia in '63, Ekins organised the first national entry for an American team in the Silver Vase (the secondary team competition to the event's top accolade, the World Trophy) at the '64 ISDT, hosted by East Germany. The US team consisted of Ekins, his brother Dave, Hollywood production man Cliff Coleman and McQueen himself, who helped finance the venture. Off-road parts specialist John Steen was team reserve. The challenge of the 1000-mile marathon, with its tight schedules and demanding special tests, appealed to McQueen's intrepid spirit – as did visiting a communist country two years after the Cuban missile crisis.

Ekins put his strong links with Triumph to good effect by arranging for West Coast distributor Johnson Motors to buy suitable machines from the Meriden factory. As teams had to ride in more than one capacity class, the order was for two 650cc TR6 Trophy (for McQueen and Coleman) plus three 500cc T100SC Sports Tigers for the others. The Trophy was a natural choice. McQueen was



"I RODE AGAINST MCQUEEN IN THE 1964 ISDT"

John Giles (pictured above on a 500 Triumph in '63) was Britain's top performer in the 1964 ISDT, winning the 750cc class: "McQueen would play to the gallery and bugger about," John says. "He'd come alongside and shout: 'Hey John!' But I couldn't muck about – we were there to win for Britain."

With a shared language and in some cases similar machinery, the Brits and Americans hung out together when not riding: "The East German facilities were good, with first aid posts every couple of miles, and eye specialists checked you each day. But police were everywhere and locals could get into trouble if you mixed with them. We gave the fruit we were issued with to kids, who didn't know to peel it."

In the premier Trophy contest, Great Britain finished second to East Germany. Both teams lost no marks. "We heard years later that fiddles went on," John adds. "We had suspicions when an East German bike that was rattling really badly at the end of one day came out of the parc fermé next morning running like a dream..."

familiar with the 650cc twin, which was named in celebration of Triumph's ISDT successes and had been America's favourite desert sled since the mid-Fifties. His 1964 model – basically built to East Coast TR6C spec, with wide-ratio gears, battery-less ignition, silencing and lights – was registered in the UK as BNX 822B. The bike has become part of McQueen iconography and survives in private hands in America.

But now there is another BNX 822B. To promote the latest armoured version of its traditional thorn-proof suit, clothing company Barbour commissioned Triumph twin specialist Ace Classics to build a replica of McQueen's Trophy. The Hi-fi Scarlet and Silver Sheen beauty was built with many new components around a 1964 Trophy frame. It carries numerous special ISDT fitments – and to get them correct, reference was made to photographs in *40 Summers Ago*, the 2004 pictorial book by Rin Tanaka and Sean Kelly that documents McQueen and the US team's East German venture.

On the original bike, some fittings – including the essential QD rear wheel option, tommy bars for the wheel spindles and wide



► Helping make waxed cotton cooler than it has any right to be – McQueen between stages

'McQueen was familiar with Meriden's 650cc twin, which had been America's favourite desert sled since the mid-Fifties'



► If you go down to the woods today... you'll kick this into life and have a blast



► Silencer's pragmatic modification is historically accurate



► 'Left at the Little Chef roundabout, on past Waitrose...'

engine protector plates – were put on at Meriden, while other modifications were carried out at Comerfords, the competition specialist dealer in Surrey. After collecting the bikes from the Midlands, the Americans set up camp at the shop to tailor the machines to their requirements, with Ekins enlisting help from his friend and off-road machine expert Eric Cheney. The team also practiced changing a tyre in under four minutes.

Ace Classics have replicated the ex-Comerfords condition, with registration plates moved from the front mudguard to the forks and tools strapped to McQueen's preferred cross-braced handlebars as well as the frame downtube. Also faithfully reproduced are a zip-fastener for storage in the rear of the dual seat and a tank-top route map holder, both originally crafted by Cheney's wife Judy. Regulation ISDT numberplates copy those obtained from accessory king Ted Wassell, the US team's manager.

"Some parts were tricky to find," says Cliff Rushworth of Ace Classics. "But the hardest part of a job like this is finding a good donor bike."

Whilst in England the American team, plus a few friends and McQueen's stand-in double, had the run of a big house in west London. American photographer Richard Avedon shot a feature for *Vogue* with McQueen, which included the famous photo of the star riding his Trophy on the street helmet-less, with one hand behind his back. On Ekins' recommendation, McQueen bought a Barbour trials suit.

The team and their bikes travelled to the event's base at Erfurt in a van provided by Stroud Triumph dealer H&L, followed by Wassell in his Jaguar. On arrival he found he'd also be in charge of a US Vase B team of expatriate Americans on various two-strokes.

The ISDT provided a free spectacle in early September for local inhabitants and no doubt some younger residents would be aware of the Hollywood star in their midst. Dusty conditions were expected after a hot summer, but it began to rain on the eve of the Monday start. McQueen had few incidents on his first day's ride, which took place on damp, hilly trails

not unlike the fire roads that he was familiar with in the forests back home. His A team still had good prospects for Gold Medals the next day, which was not so wet, although the B team was no longer complete and out of the running for a Vase award.

The sun came out on the third day, drying much of the course. McQueen, who thrilled onlookers with his spirited riding, was brought off the bike when he hit a large rock which flattened his exhaust pipe. In true frontiersman style, he borrowed a woodsman's axe and gashed a hole in the pipe. Valuable minutes had been lost, so he pressed on hard. Carrying one of the highest numbers, he was now the last rider on the course and was tearing along a narrow track when he saw a young moped rider coming towards him. To avoid collision, he veered off the path and hit a tree, breaking a goggle lens and cutting his cheek. The Trophy's fork stanchions were badly bent. A dejected McQueen managed to make it back to base but his trial was over.

Meanwhile, on the same day, Ekins caught his leg on a wall after missing a gear. He struggled to finish the day with no marks lost, but had to pull out of day four due to a broken bone. The Vase team award was now out of reach, but Cliff Coleman and Dave Ekins kept going for the remaining three days to collect individual Gold Medals, with John Steen winning Silver.

The boys at Ace Classics deserve some kind of medal for their BNX 822B replica, too. Just like the original, it's a robust, purely functional motorcycle – there are no tank knee-grips and the footrests are bare steel with turned-up ends. The Siamese exhaust system's short, tipped-up silencer has been brutally recessed to clear the kickstart lever – no points were given for prettiness or polish in the ISDT. It's a bike that begs to be ridden.

Kicking it into life yields a full-throated roar that promises grunt, and the freshly-rebuilt engine duly delivers over the bumps, hollows and tree roots of our test ride area – Dave Thomas' trials practice grounds near Dorking (www.theoldquarry.co.uk). On rough and sometimes slithery going, the available power is more than adequate, with loads of low-rpm torque for



'Kicking the twin into life yields a full-throated roar that promises grunt, and the freshly-rebuilt engine duly delivers'

TEN STAGES OF THE McQUEEN REPLICA'S CREATION



The top end comes together in Ace Classics' workshop. Standard 7.5:1 pistons went into the motor



Knobbles are key to the ISDT look. These Continental TCK80s are good on tarmac and dirt



The centrestand arm on McQueen's bike was lost to improve cornering clearance. The replica retains it



Frame went largely unmodified. Primary drive is by chain – none of your fancy belt conversions here



Number brackets were welded onto the lifting handle. Cut-down chainguard gives mud clearance



Compressed air tank allowed for fast tyre changes – it's accurately reproduced on the Ace bike



Tank and mudguards are standard items, as fitted to the TR6 Trophy McQueen's bike was based on



Unusual shocks on McQueen's machine went without the lower covers and featured black springs



Reference shots were key: "Every time I looked, I spotted something new," says Kev from Ace Classics



The bike nears completion in the spring of 2013. Here it awaits tank, seat and exhausts

tackling obstructions and sharp climbs. Riding in nadgery woodland is exhilarating even in bottom gear, which puts me in awe of men like McQueen who would storm forest tracks at 70mph, frequently lofting the front wheel. Even with a single carburettor, the Trophy has plenty of steam – in final-day speed tests on an East German airfield runway, British rider John Giles hit 100mph.

Weighing 370lb (168kg) wet and running on dual-purpose tyres as knobbly as those used by McQueen, the Trophy feels stable and well planted. Heavy use of the rear brake to pull up inevitably locks the rear wheel, but doesn't unsettle the bike.

By 1964, big, heavy four-strokes were becoming a minority choice for ISDTs. Those guys who fearlessly belted them along gravelly tracks, over rocks and through mud were heroes.

Although McQueen did not contest another ISDT, BNX 822B was campaigned at the difficult '65 event held on the Isle of Man, ridden by Ed Kretz Jnr. It was also one of four Triumphs on a 1966 record run along Mexico's Baja peninsula, organised by Bud Ekins.

Like most American off-roaders, McQueen switched to two-strokes – he's seen riding a Husqvarna in the 1971 movie *On Any Sunday*. But thanks to his bold ISDT venture, his name will forever be synonymous with Triumph.



► The look of a man in his element. McQueen was never more content than when competing

SPECIFICATIONS

'64 ISDT TRIUMPH TROPHY

ENGINE/TRANSMISSION

Type	air-cooled, overhead valve parallel twin
Capacity	649cc
Bore x stroke	71 x 82mm
Compression ratio	7.5:1
Fuel system	Amal Monobloc
Clutch/primary drive	wet multiplate/chain
Gearbox/final drive	four-speed/chain

CHASSIS

Frame	tubular, single downtube
Front suspension	telescopic forks
Rear suspension	twin shocks
Brakes front/rear	8in (203mm) sls drum front, 7in (178mm) sls drum rear
Tyres front/rear	100/90 x 19 / 4.00 x 18

DIMENSIONS

Kerb weight	370lb (168kg)
Wheelbase	55.5in (1409mm)
Seat height	31in (787mm)
Fuel capacity	3 gallons (13.6 litres)

PERFORMANCE

Top speed	100mph
Peak power	40bhp at 6500rpm
Fuel consumption	60mpg

COSTS

Cost then	£310 (basic 1964 TR6)
Value now	£15,000

Huge thanks to Chris Cotton (www.grandprixlegends.com), Ace Classics (www.aceclassics.co.uk) and Dave Thomas at www.theoldquarry.co.uk

'The guys who fearlessly belted bikes like this along forest tracks at 70mph were heroes'

