

The cult of the Matchless motorbikes of Plumstead



Mary Mills



John's Matchless (kind permission John Kane)

plaque on a Plumstead wall. It was unveiled in a ceremony by Cllr. Peter Brooks, then Deputy Leader of the Council – so I asked him what he remembered about it.

Peter said: “When I was asked would I unveil a plaque on the 40 years since Matchless closed I was over the moon. On the 9th September 2007 we arranged for as many vintage bikes as possible to be displayed in the Woolwich Arsenal and a drive past. Then I revealed the plaque, which all went well.”

But all was not well, in an incident which illustrates only too well the value that many place on any memorabilia from the factory. Peter continued: “Unfortunately someone prised it off of the wall then tried to sell it on eBay, we never saw it again, I, and the museum, had one so we were able to get a copy made and by doing this were able to correct a mistake – on the original one it stated it was in Woolwich but it's the other side of Burrage Road which makes it in Plumstead, so the new one proudly says it's in Plumstead”.

Like so many other young men and boys who grew up locally Peter had his own memories of the factory. Matchless AMC Nortons were some of the names used for this fantastic Motor Bike Factory. I feel I know it so well, but I had never been inside the building. I grew up within 100yds of it, I would walk past it nearly every day. You also had the spare part shop on the other side of the road. I remember the roar of the bikes being tested, the smell of the oil in the engines, the bikes being displayed on the roof – all nice memories.

So many memories of this factory are positive. So, perhaps I shouldn't recall a meeting in an institution west of Greenwich where nice young lady academics had asked some of us local historians to tell us about all the Greenwich industries – sailing ships, fire engines, maybe telecoms cables – things like that. But we also talked about the big guns, the major engineering firms and they looked more and more worried. When we got to Matchless and the big bikes you could see a look of horror on their faces. They never asked us back.

Another story I was told is that the police directing traffic at Woolwich Market used to stop everything and close the road to let through batches of new bikes out on a test run. Give them some respect, tell people about them – we might get even more Czechs riding all through the night to see what remains.

Over the past few weeks I have been looking at road – well non-rail – vehicles made in Greenwich Borough. I think next week will be the last one of these and it will feature what was probably the most successful such vehicle(s) made here and in the greatest numbers.

I'll set up a site on the Greenwich Industrial History Facebook page where you can leave your guesses!

I'm not sure of the exact date – sometime in November 1989 – the Iron Curtain lifted just a fraction so that Czech citizens were allowed to leave. The very next day a party of Czech bikers arrived at Woolwich Town Hall having driven through the night. It was their first opportunity to come to find hallowed grounds. They had come to find what remained of the Matchless factory in Plumstead. Of course, the grim truth is that there was nothing left at all. These days there is – hopefully – a plaque. But otherwise it's just houses and flats with nothing to mark the sacred spot. Look in the information the Borough gives out officially about our history and places which might interest visitors – what is there about Matchless? Well, nothing.

So, I've been writing these last few weeks about transport and the manufacture of road vehicle and sites connected with that in Greenwich Borough. I have now got round to what some would regard as the absolute pinnacle of local manufacturers – or, probably, anywhere. They were large, powerful, noisy – motorcycles.

The real motorcycle enthusiast is likely to take it a bit amiss that I'm daring to write about them at all. After all I'm not someone that ever would have gone near any such machines. My late husband, while very much admiring them, was much too wary to ride one. We did many, many miles on a Honda, but I had better keep quiet about that. We knew about Johnno's up near the Portobello on the A20 – but now, even Death Hill has resumed its original name and Johnson's is reduced to a Facebook page. My Dad, obviously from an earlier generation, always said he could remember Brands when it was just a field.

The world has moved on and the lists on the internet of 'best bikes ever in the world' even include the Japanese. Matchless sometimes seems to have been forgotten in these lists – but occasionally The Porcupine appears. This bike was made in Plumstead in 1954 and a current website says that one was sold in the US a couple

of years ago for £564,104. Bill Cakebread, historian of Matchless, describes how as an apprentice he was sent to work one afternoon on destroying parts of a discontinued motorcycle. This turned out to be a Porcupine and by lunchtime many workers from other departments – some in tears – were trying to retrieve some of the parts from the debris to keep as mementos of this particular machine.

Bill Cakebread's 'The Matchless Colliers' is an excellent history of the company, which I can barely summarise in a couple of paragraphs. It had begun as a family firm in much the same way as many other small workshops locally. What became Associated Motorcycles was founded by Henry Herbert Collier. He began in 1878 by making bicycles, which he called Matchless, at his home and in some stables in Herbert Road. He was joined by his sons and petrol engines were added to the pedal cycles they made. By 1912 they needed new and larger premises.

The Collier brothers became prominent in motorcycle racing. Riding his Matchless, at the famous Isle of Man TT races, Charlie Collier won the first single-cylinder Tourist Trophy in 1907. Harry went on to win the race in 1909 and 1910. This racing prowess was a powerful form of advertising for the firm.

A factory was built in Burrage Grove at the junction with Maxey Road. There were also offices with a showroom fronting Plumstead Road backing onto the new factory. This was to remain the Collier's works until 1969 – although in the Great War munitions and aircraft parts were made here.

A wide range of models were produced under the Matchless name, ranging from small two-strokes to 750 cc four-stroke twins. During the Second World War, Matchless manufactured 80,000 G3 and G3L models for the armed forces. Matchless was the first motorcycle company to consider rider safety, and clothing designed to protect the motorcyclist, in particular using leather for clothing.

Following Henry Herbert Collier's death in 1926 the company became Matchless Motor Cycles (Colliers), Ltd. In the early 1930s they took over AJS and models previously made in Wolverhampton were produced in Plumstead. Later they acquired Sunbeam, James, Norton, and Francis Barnett and thus became Associated Motor Cycles.

The last Collier brother died in the 1950s and by 1966 AMC were bankrupt and were taken over by Manganese Bronze Holdings as Norton-Villiers Ltd. of which 'Norton

Matchless Ltd' was a sub division. In 1968 the Plumstead works were subject to a compulsory purchase order from the Greater London Council in order to widen Plumstead Road and thus the factory closed in 1969.

Clearly Matchless have a very, very considerable cult status. There have been several attempts to relaunch the brand. The old, Plumstead based, Greenwich Borough Museum ran several events in Woolwich in the 1980s and 1990s and later – in 2007 – many organisations participated in a major event on the Arsenal site.

Another book by Bill Cakebread, Motorcycle Apprentice, gives a description of the factory and its work in the sort of detail which it is rare to find. Bill describes his life as an apprentice at Matchless in the late 1950s which involved moving from department to department as part of his training. He describes what it was like working in each one along with their processes and the practices undertaken in some detail. It is illustrated with stunning pictures, including one of the elusive Porcupines. He also describes going to college and visits to local factories like Stone's and Harvey's and amazingly to the Arsenal itself. The book also includes a reproduction of an article with a detailed description of the factory from Machine Tool Review in 1958 and a works plan.

A factory like this would have many workers who were highly skilled and proud of the high standards of their work. We shouldn't forget that it was the training – part in college and part on the shop floor – which young men received in apprenticeships in big successful firms that gave many of them the confidence to set up their own back street engineering workshops. Today, as old men, they can only remember the aura around the manufacture of the big bikes – and that once they were made in Plumstead.

All we have to remember them is one tiny