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**A**t least once in a lifetime, you have to fly to New York, be it to attend a wedding and then proceed to have a good look at the BIG APPLE. It would be a shame, though to miss out on what else is on the way to get there, like the Barber Museum in Birmingham, Alabama.

At the 11th annual Barber Vintage Festival in 2015, this museum celebrated 9 of the 10 built Britten motorcycles, along with their respective owners, which must have been quite a feat to accomplish. In addition, the Guinness Book of World Records has named the Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum as the world's largest motorcycle museum in 2014. It took a 14 hours Air New Zealand flight from Auckland in August on a wintry 15-degrees day across the Pacific Ocean to Houston, Texas to reach the "Land of the Free." A two-hour connecting flight reached Birmingham's Shuttlesworth Airport, where a temperature of 35 degrees celsius greeted the weary traveller (alternatively you could fly via Atlanta in the

state of Georgia). People outside of the US have heard of Birmingham most likely from the song "Sweet Home Alabama" by rock group Lynyrd Skynyrd. A rental car from the airport terminal is the only way to get to the museum, about a 15-minute drive from the city centre. It's very simple, as long as you remind yourself constantly to drive on the right side of the road, once you get there.

### MUSEUM MAGIC

To say it in advance, the museum is fantastic. Anyone who has even an ounce of motorcycle enthusiasm in his body feels like a child in a toy shop. George Barber had earned his fortune in the dairy trade and started collecting motorcycles in 1991, which has led to more than 1700 bikes in the collection. Barber also came in contact with English motorcycle world champion John Surtees, among others, when he was looking for MV Agusta motorcycles for his collection. An ex Surtees Seeley Matchless is also part of the collection in Birmingham. ➤



BARBER MUSEUM

# A PLACE LIKE NO OTHER

Words & Photos: Uli Cloesen

With a trip to the USA scheduled, Uli thought it would be a wasted opportunity if he didn't make a pitstop at a rather special museum.



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The very well-maintained gigantic facility is set on a property of 880 acres and represents 216 different motorcycle manufacturers from 20 different countries over a production span of 100 years. An extension of the museum was opened in 2017 and resulted in 50 per cent more space to accommodate more machines such as off-road bikes, drag racers and a Buell collection. The museum is laid out over five floors in a spiral layout with a central elevator and also contains a collection of 65 Lotus racing cars. The nice thing about the collection is that the motorcycles are not shown in tight rows, but in a stand-alone fashion to view them much better. In addition, the collection is designed so that you can compare different machines of the same era grouped together. Presentations and events are spread throughout the year, with the Vintage Festival in early October being one of the biggest events in the US. Of all the motorcycles on display in the museum, 99 per cent are mechanically ready to run, with the remainder still awaiting the procurement of some parts.

#### SPECIAL ACCESS

As a motorbike book author known to the museum, the offer to visit the restoration workshop and the in-house library in the basement was gladly accepted, as both areas are otherwise not accessible to the public.

One of the aspirations of the museum owner Mr. Barber was that he always wanted to exhibit an example of all the Yamaha racing machines ever produced. The museum came very close to this desire, but they found that one model, namely the so-called Yellow Tanker was still missing. The official name for this machine was the RR250. It was the first production factory bike you and I could buy. Yamaha had made only 10 of them, which only came to the US. This Yamaha came out after the YDS1R and before the 3TD1 and before the 3DS7.

Race workshop restorer Chuck told of getting to hear about two brothers in Ohio a couple of years ago, who are not among us anymore, each in possession of a Yellow Tanker Yamaha. The museum eventually tracked down their phone number and knew that it was a live number because they always landed on an answering machine, but no one ever answered the call. ➤

**"The nice thing about the collection is that the motorcycles are not shown in tight rows, but in a stand-alone fashion."**



Restoration work is incredible



Yamaha Yellow Tanker racer in the museum's race workshop



Surtees Matchless

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Barber's library not for the public, has 1100 books

Then Chuck was in contact with someone else regarding another bike, and it turned out that this guy knew the two brothers. Said chap raced in the past with these guys and offered to call by at their place to see if they still lived there. About a

one of them came to the door upon arrival, he unexpectedly said he did not think they had those bikes anymore, but they could visit a mate of his to see what he could do for the museum. Subsequently, they drove to the people he

it was a Yellow Tanker Yamaha. These people lived in the middle of nowhere, with a barn and several houses on the property, some with run-down roofs and raccoons on the grounds, but somewhere in the dirt, they spotted a frame that at second glance was belonging to the second yellow Tanker Yamaha.

Some of the parts like the chassis were in trash can condition, but for what it was, it was saved, and that's what's being restored in the museum as we speak. Some of the parts were TD1 parts that were replaced with forks that had to be made in-house to maintain authenticity. The race workshop also went through the trouble of newly manufacturing the correct hand levers for reasons of period accuracy, since the original levers were not obtainable anymore. In a box in a corner were also some parts to be seen, which came straight from the barn find from Ohio, as they were found. Looking at their condition, the Barber racing workshop has its work

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week later, a man named Paul called back and asked if the museum wanted to reach him, which was answered in the affirmative.

Despite the large distance of over 1100km between Alabama and Ohio, a meeting was scheduled to meet up with the brothers. When

mentioned, and since the museum had been looking for these bikes for several years, they knew all the serial numbers off by heart. This guy had a beefed-up Yamaha, fitted with TD1 forks, gas tank and wheels, where it initially looked like it was a TD1, but according to the serial number



Off-road section



Hildebrand and Wolfmüller



Barber's Race Workshop - not open for visitors



Left: MV 125 racer  
Below: Barber's Britten





**"One of the aspirations of the museum owner Mr. Barber was that he always wanted to exhibit an example of all the Yamaha racing machines ever produced."**

cut out. What complicates the restoration of the Yellow Tankers is that most of the people formerly riding these bikes are no longer with us, so no one really knows what is correct when dealing with it. Yamaha USA did not seem to know it either since they had no record of it, which could be seen as unusual because the Japanese have a reputation for being meticulous. I was told in the museum that they are meticulous now, but back then, Yamaha did not care. In the past, they only looked forward. The young US Yamaha employees reportedly had not even heard of these Yellow Tanker motorcycles, which is pretty amazing.

This reminded me of an interview with former AJS factory rider Rod Coleman in which we also talked about the meticulous Japanese work ethic. His family business was formerly the Suzuki importer to New Zealand, where Rod one day in the 70s took some representatives of Suzuki to Invercargill to visit Burt Munro. The Suzuki employees were apparently stunned at

how rudimentary he did all his mechanical work for his Indian record machine and how he lived in his garage. As a result, they could not wait to get away fast enough from his place again.

### RACING RESTORATIONS

Back to the Barber topic, the room next to the racing workshop holds some of the racing bikes spare parts, including some factory kits for 250cc and 500cc Yamaha racers, parts for a Koenig and so on. The racing shop also had an engine of a 1933 compressor DKW Split Single 2-stroke with two pistons and one combustion chamber and interesting looking water-cooling innards sitting around. The bike was in a terrible condition when it arrived, which therefore had to be rebuilt. You have to admire the DKW engineers from back then; how they had invented such motorcycle components out of their sleeves without the help of computers.

Next door was a blasting and polishing room, depending on what should be

achieved with vintage bikes for restorations and last but not least, there was also a room with a waterjet cutting machine that can be used to replicate parts such as hand levers for the Yellow Tanker. Finally, next to it was the museum's bike storage space, where several hundred motorcycles were still waiting to be restored.

A corridor full of framed motorcycle event posters led to the in-house reference library, where one member of the museum manages a collection of 1100 motorcycle books, with one-piece racing suits of various racing greats flanking its hallway. Directly opposite is a multimedia theatre with 74 seats for meetings and educational courses. Behind the museum complex is also a purpose-built 2.38-mile (3.8-km) 16 turn racetrack, where John Surtees was involved in the planning of this track. How long does it take to get to view the Barber Museum? I spent 1 ½ days in it, but it can possibly be done in 2 hours. As they say, each to their own.

Of all the countless pictures taken, the picture taken in the library encapsulates the most what the Barber museum is all about, an impossibly cool collection of motorcycles, put together by a former dairy man with all his passion for the subject. 5 star + ratings from me. ■■■

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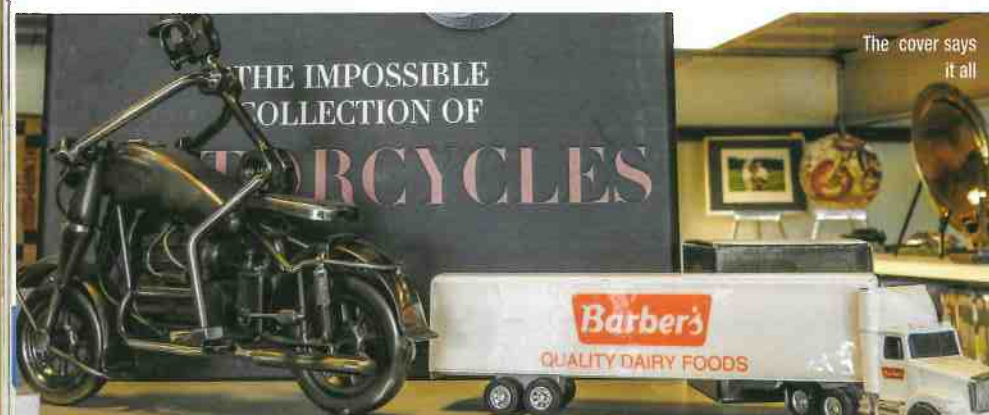
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PERFORMING BOOTS



## BHAM BHAM

Bham is the word locals use to abbreviate Birmingham, which sounds almost like out of a Marvel comic. The city in the so-called Deep South of the United States is known for its Southern Hospitality. Among the sights of downtown Bham is the Civil Rights Institute museum, which documents a civil rights campaign organised in early 1963 by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). This had the goal to draw attention to the integration efforts of African Americans in the South.

In April 1963, Martin Luther King visited Birmingham, where at that time public institutions for blacks and whites were still separate. Alice Short of the Los Angeles Times once wrote, "Anyone interested in US history should plan a trip here." There's also the Alabama Jazz Hall of Fame, located in the historic Carver Theatre. Last but not least, the Indy Grand Prix of Alabama shares the in-house track of the Barber Motorsports Park with Superbike and sports car Grand-Am races.

