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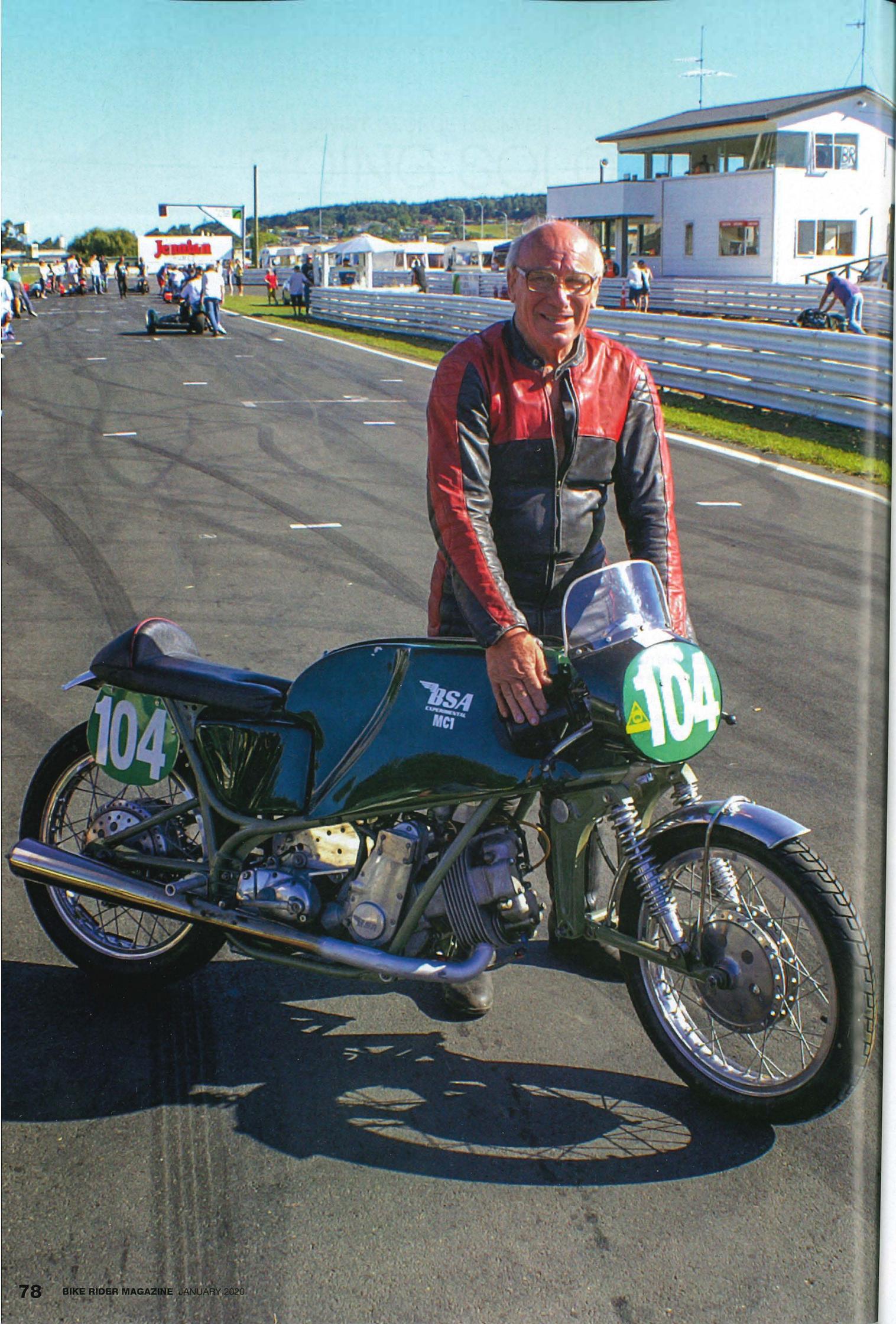
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DON LOWE

# THE BSA LOW(E) FLYER

Words: Uli Cloesen | Photos: Steve Green, Kevin Eagle Archive, Uli Cloesen, Sammy Miller Museum

A belated tribute to Kiwi home builder Don Lowe and BSA motorcycle development.

**B**SA was tasking Bert Hopwood in the fifties to develop new, visually and technically innovative motorcycle concepts. Said engineer doesn't really need any introduction in classic motorcycle circles. Any Norton buff will know, that Hopwood penned the firm's legendary Dominator parallel-twin post World War II.

He joined BSA in May 1948, then the world's largest motorcycle manufacturer, to take on the role of its chief engineer. Eager to pump new blood into BSA's product range, Hopwood sketched in 1949 a 250cc horizontal cylinder single with short overhead camshafts, simply coded the MC1. The same year, Doug Hele also transferred from Norton to BSA and was subsequently given free rein by Hopwood in 1950, to turn the MC1 concept into reality as the template for a possible range of new sports roadsters. But Hele had other ideas and developed the prototype more in line with a racer, with the view of restoring British glory on the racetrack, such as hunting Moto Guzzi's dominant singles in events like the Lightweight TT on the Isle of Man.

The 248.5cc air-cooled DOHC horizontal single-cylinder bike had a claimed power output of 34hp @ 10.250rpm, bevel-gear camshaft drive, four radial valves and external flywheel, 70mm x 64.5mm bore and stroke, 10.1:1 compression

ratio, a dry weight of 113kg and a fuel capacity of 26.5 litres.

After the prototype clocked 104mph on MIRA's banked test track, reigning 500cc champion Geoff Duke was invited in the winter of 1954, to take the MC1 prototype through its paces, which left the racing legend very impressed after his run on it. This led to speculation that BSA was considering to enter the international racing arena, but Bert Hopwood vetoed against a road racing venture, since he felt, that the bike was not sufficiently developed enough, to guarantee the BSA bosses an Isle of Man TT victory. In the end, Hopwood moved on to Norton again in 1955, followed by Doug Hele, which in turn left the MC1 project abandoned. The sole surviving complete test machine is now living in Sammy Miller's Motorcycle Museum in New Milton, England.

## KIWI CAN DO

But, in a small village in Armorica (present-day Brittany), whose inhabitants are made invincible by a magic potion created periodically by the Druid Getafix...

No, no, Asterix and Obelix lore aside, fast forward to 1997, where in rural Bunnythorpe (population 600) in the Manawatu, NSU bike lover and garage owner Don Lowe somehow took his magic potion. He was intrigued when he came across a picture of above-mentioned BSA

and exclaimed to his mates: "I am going to build myself a MC1".

This statement had to be taken seriously, since motorcycles are in the Lowe family's veins, with Don's brother David having won NZ's Cust Lightweight GP five times between 1951 and 1963 on a 250cc Triumph Special. Various other commitments prevented Don for two more years to get into this project, but an introduction to Classic Motorcycle Racing in Pukekohe provided finally enough impetus to get him underway.

Terry Lowe: "All dad initially had to go on was a picture of the MC1, which he enlarged to life-size, in order to get the dimensions of the wheels and frame right so he could get started. While I was running the garage, he was tinkering away, every so often coming and asking me for something to weld for him and then disappearing back in his shed again".

As a power plant, Don chose a dry-sump Gold Star based engine, which he built in 1961, with help from Brian Thomas, an engineer from the neighbouring town of Feilding, who did the machining of the flywheel, crankshaft, inlet port and drive side crankcase for him. Don then built a frame, in which he laid the engine at a 22-degree angle, which required the oil pick up to be altered due to its new setup. The carburettor and inlet manifold also needed alterations to suit.

Don's friend Kevin Eagle: "Don's bike went ➤

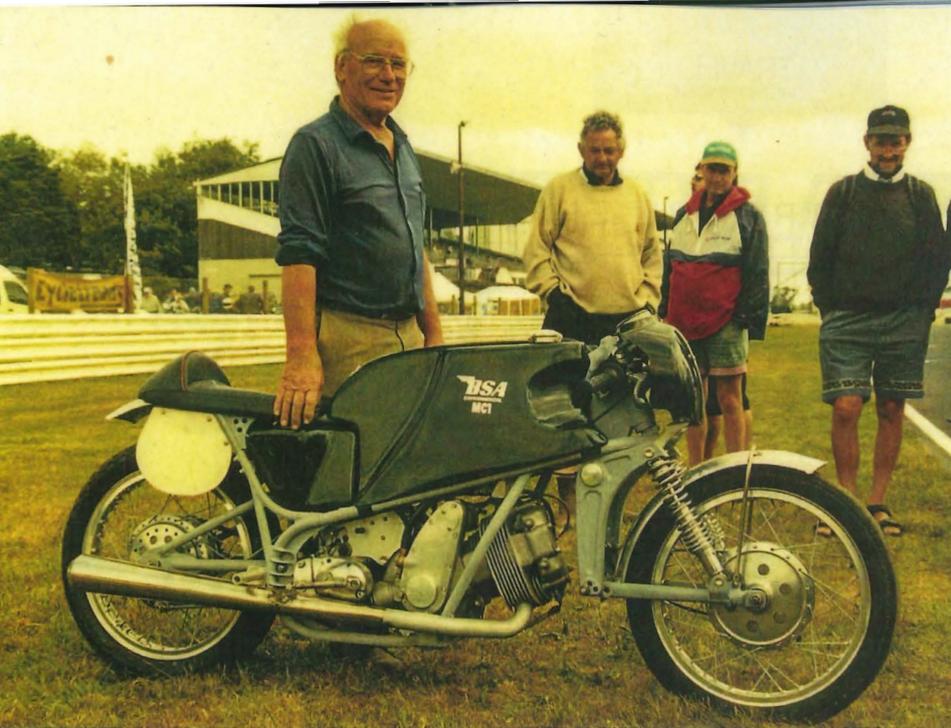
very well, but he was not a competitive rider, and the bike also didn't have very high compression. But he was going to put a Kawasaki piston in it to bring it up to 12 or 14 to 1. He also made two different carburettors to experiment with the mixture, but in the end, he didn't get enough time to finish it all. Don had the opportunity to get parts from the original motor from the UK, but it would have cost him huge money. Hence he made this bike based on a photo".

Next, Don produced fork blades, all complimented with a set of NSU Super Max wheels. Further, he made up his ignition system, consisting of a distributor with coil and battery and went on to adapt a Triumph gearbox, then equipped the bike with a modified clutch to take his 21mm wide 8mm pitch belt. Wanganui man Steve Roberts was tasked in producing the superb alloy oil and fuel tanks.

The stainless-steel exhaust was another item Don was working to improve upon. He called his bike an MC1 Experimental, rather than a Replica. Don competed from the year 2000 onwards on tracks such as Manfield, Taupo and Pukekohe, despite two heart attacks and a couple of strokes along the way. In one of his last races in February 2014 at Hampton Downs, he ran the MC1 Experimental in the Classic 250 category amidst a flock of Bultaco TSS250s, Italian racers such as Aermacchis and Benellis and the obligatory Velocette and upright cylinder BSAs. Don passed away in June 2016, aged 85, which put a halt on his ten years of development to his creation. Long may his "can do" Kiwi attitude rub off on others in pursuit of their dream projects.

As it happens, Indian company Mahindra, one of the biggest automotive firms in the world, recently bought the BSA brand, with the intention of developing 500 – 750cc displacement models. Mahindra's subsidiary Classic Legends is tasked to pen new models for the premium and niche segments of the motorcycle market. Imagine seeing a modern reiteration of the legendary BSA Rocket or Gold Star or even down the line some modern smaller capacity bikes coming out of their new venture, to let the BSA brand fly once again. Interesting times ahead.





# KIWI INVENTOR

Photos: Maureen Bull



Don was always a bit of a tinkerer and fabricator over the years, well before his MC1 project. One of three memorable examples of this would be his motorised monowheel, which he built for the 1974 Feilding Centenary Parade, inspired by an article in a 1937 Popular Mechanics magazine. The main wheel of this particular project was sourced from a Massey Harris side rake. Both sides of this wheel have two rims, with each rim running three rubber jockey wheels, whereby the bottom set hung chain was powered by a 50cc displacement Suzuki engine. The driver sat behind the engine and steered the vehicle with welded on handlebars onto the side

rims. His contrivance lasted well for its intended purpose and appeared in several more parades, he even had a good go on it around NZ's Manfeild Raceway.

In 1981, Don decided to go big in creating a type of monster sidecar, again built for participation in a Feilding Parade. This project started on New Year's Day and was already completed by the third week of February. Don anticipated the life expectancy of it to last the 1.5 miles of the parade, but it stood the test of time. It was even durable enough to last one of the Taupo to Napier Mail Run events, which amounted to a journey of 140km, not something to be sneered at. The three-wheeler was powered

by a 1200cc VW motor with hand gear change, fitted into an oversized Norton Manx style frame and equipped with 36-inch Massey Harris side rake wheels and a tow bar. The dual headlights were formerly car spotlights. The side chair consisted initially of a Lazyboy rocking chair, later replaced by a humble park bench. Don's lofty vehicle amounted to a length of 3.6m, a height of 2.1m and a width of 1.8m.

Don also built an E49 Chrysler engine and later a 265 block for the powerboat of his mate Kevin Eagle, which subsequently achieved the 1979 NZ speed record of 61mph in the B class of up to 500cc with it. ■■■