

JAMES DRIVER-FISHER



MEMORABLE
ISLE OF MAN
TT RACES

A Century of Battles on the
World's Toughest
Circuit

FOREWORD BY MICHAEL RUTTER



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TT 1907

Rem Fowler becomes the TT's first winner

The Isle of Man government had already started closing the public roads before the TT for cars, but soon the motorbikes followed suit.

The year was 1907 and it would mark the first Tourist Trophy (TT).

It gave manufacturers and racers the chance to put their skills and machines through the ultimate test – one for racers which still cannot be topped today.

The birth of the TT also brought in big business as tourists would flock to the island to catch the races, leaving with postcards and souvenirs of their heroes.

Most of the fan base could usually be found in and around the paddock and start line, hunting for autographs and the occasional photograph.

But as technology developed, soon the first TT stars were being snapped regularly as they hurtled around the track.

The rise of the TT also coincided with the popularity of production motorcycles growing.

Basic bicycles powered by small engines were soon replaced with much more powerful, fully fledged, racing machines in a very short space of time.

And it did not take long for the island to start attracting the best in the business, with the best manufacturers and racers all vying for TT glory.

Practice sessions were originally held early in the morning, and throughout the day eager autograph hunters would be scouring the paddock in search of the stars of the day.

During the early years, the Norton was simply unstoppable and that included claiming the first win at the TT, although it was not then the marathon course we all know and love today.

Back when the bravest motorcyclists first took on the challenge of the TT, they raced around the 15-mile St John's Short Course, which consisted of ten laps.

It wasn't until 1911 the Mountain Course was used and a further eight years before the full 37.73-mile course was introduced.

Norton's story began in a Birmingham factory, which was run by James Norton in 1898 during the height of the Victorian bicycle craze.

It did not take long, however, for the factory to start adding engines with the aim of producing motorbikes, which happened just four years later, in 1902.

Powered by a French engine, the first Norton motorcycle had a maximum speed of 33mph but it was soon being raced during the start of the amateur race scene, which had begun springing up at the turn of the century.

Owner James Norton himself was a keen racer and just as keen to promote his own bikes and brand at the meetings.

In 1907, Rem Fowler entered the first Isle of Man TT on a Peugeot-powered Norton. It became the first bike to win a TT.

Fowler had almost given up on making history because, following a lot of bad luck, he had been left with a flat tyre.

He was ready to throw in the towel until a spectator revealed he still had a half-an-hour advantage over his nearest rival.

It took him 22 minutes to change the front tyre but he still won the race.

The Norton engine, ultimately, was reliable and it was that that helped Fowler create TT history but fast-forward a year and, in 1908, Norton developed their own engine to go in their motorcycle. The Model 9 had been born.

TT 1908

Marshall stars for Triumph

Norton developed the Model 9 in 1908 and 1909, when it was officially released.

There was no clutch with the bike, which used direct power, but the basic engine design remained with Norton for the next 50 years – which coincided with English manufacturers' domination of the TT for the following five decades, until the Italian and later Japanese machines took control of the island.

The bike cost £12,000 in today's money, which made it a lot more expensive than rivals Triumph and BSA, but TT had spurred Norton on to create bigger, better and faster bikes.

Triumph was also on the scene during the early stages of bike manufacturing and, although it was not anywhere near as dominant as the Norton machines, it remains the oldest motorbike brand, having been in continuous production for more than 120 years, producing some of the world's most iconic bikes.

The newest factory opened in Hinckley, in 2006, and now produces more than 65,000 each year.

The Speed Twin, the Thunderbird and the Bonneville set the early standards when it came to motorbike manufacturing.

In 1883, it was a young German entrepreneur called Siegfried Bettmann who moved to Coventry to seek his fortune. Starting out as a translator, he later began importing bicycles and three years later changed the name of his new company to Triumph, to try and make it look and sound more like a global brand.

While bicycles were becoming more and more popular in Britain, across Europe in Germany the motorbike was really beginning to take off.

In 1894, the world's first commercial motorcycle was produced, and when engineer Maurice Schulte came over to join Bettmann at Triumph, they decided it was the right time to start producing their own motorbikes.

Fast-forward eight years and, in 1902, the first Triumph motorcycle was produced. The early Triumph riders called their machines 'trumpets' due to the design of the manufacturer's first logo.

The company still did not have the capacity at the time to build their own engines, so instead they were shipping in from Belgium – the engine size at the time was around two-and-a-quarter horsepower, which meant when travelling uphill the rider would still have to pedal.

But they proved to be very popular and after starting out building a few for those with a bit of cash, suddenly they were being transported all over the world.

During the same time, BSA, Ariel and Norton were also producing but BSA decided to raise the bar by opening a new factory in Coventry.

Immediately, it could produce around 1,000 bikes a year and by 1908 they were building their own motorbikes fitted with their own Triumph engines. Such was the development the bikes were now powered by a three-and-a-half brake-horsepower engine and had a top speed of 45mph.

Within two years, the company was producing more than a thousand motorbikes a year, a figure that tripled three years later.

Jack Marshall, from Coventry, a man of few words, was one of the earliest TT greats and set the motorbike world alight with his cool and calm demeanour, which some of his rivals mistook for being nervous.

He was always in control and constantly performed under pressure. Marshall helped Triumph on the map during the

early years of the TT taking a win over the old St John's Short Course in 1908.

He had signalled his intent the previous year, finishing behind Fowler during what was an incredible ten-lap race, which covered just under 160 miles around the shorter course.

Marshall, ironically, had also suffered a puncture during the race, which had cost enough time to lose the win.

However, undeterred, he went on to claim two seconds and a win during the first three TTs, which really helped put Triumph on the map.

The brand was quickly becoming one of the most renowned motorcycle makers despite having only started to produce bikes, using Belgian Minerva engines, at its factory in 1902.

Marshall's win boosted sales and Triumph, eager to build on their Isle of Man credentials, added the stripped-down, single-speed, sports model TT Roadster to the range.

Senior TT 1911

Godfrey crowned the inaugural Senior TT winner

It was in 1911 that the Snaefell Mountain Course on closed public roads was first used – and, more importantly, it was the year the Senior TT was first born. Organisation of the races was also handed over to the Auto-Cycle Union (ACU), which announced the use of the longer Mountain Course.

The changes included the addition of a four-lap, 150-mile Junior race and a five-lap, 189 mile Senior race.

It is quite staggering how very little would change with those particular races over the years and the only real difference to hit the Isle of Man TT would be the addition of extra races and classes, the shorter Clype Course and the introduction of sidecars over the years.

As technology had increased, the decision was made to move the races to the mountain circuit for the first time.

More than 100 racers lined up on the start line for the first laps around the iconic TT course as it is known and loved today – albeit a quarter of a mile shorter than the 37.73-mile track it would eventually become. That was because, in 1911, the riders turned right at Cronk-ny-Mona, rejoining at the top of Bray Hill.

Oliver Godfrey, riding an Indian, became the first winner of a TT on the new course. Tragically, he would later be killed in the First World War but his name would forever be etched in TT history.

He did it in a time of three hours and 56 minutes, averaging 47.63 mph for the entire race. Second place went to Charles Franklin, who achieved his career-best finish in 1911, with Arthur Moorhouse in third. The entire top three were mounted on India bikes.

Frank Phillip also rewrote the record books by becoming the first riders to break the 50mph barrier around the new-look TT course. He rode his 500cc Scott in the Senior at an average lap speed of 50.11mph.

Victor Surrige became the first rider to be killed racing on the island when he crashed at Glen Helen.

Percy Evans claimed victory in the Junior TT, finishing in three hours and 37 minutes at an average race speed of 41.45mph, on a Humber, followed home by Harry Collier and Harold Cox.

In just five years the TT organisers had realised the benefits of bringing in grandstands for the races, which were built by the Douglas Corporation.

However, even back then, the introduction of stands did not always go down well with the race-watching public as one particular stand, in Douglas, restricted

what had been popular viewing for the TT's ever-growing legion of fans.

The course also meant the teams and manufacturers would have to try and get more power to climb the mountain, and to get from the Ramsey section to Brandywell.

Norton's Model 9 would soon develop into the 16H, which was introduced to the world in 1911. Unbelievably, it stayed in production for the next 43 years.

The 16H had the same engine as the Model 9 but by now Norton had introduced a gearbox and clutch.

The 16H could be used for commuting and everyday, family life but they would also be stripped down and raced at the Isle of Man TT, doing really well.

Junior TT 1913

Mason's bravery knows no bounds

The record stood for two years until it was broken by another Scott rider, Tim Wood, during the 1913 Senior, when he completed the race in 43 minutes and ten seconds, at an average lap speed of 51.12mph.

The year also saw the races increased in length, which saw the Junior take place over six laps, 226 miles, and riders battle for the Senior over seven laps, or 265 miles. Nearly 150 riders were on the start line, such was the growing popularity of the race even during those very early days.

However, the real drama of the 1913 TT would unfold in the Junior 350cc race, which was won by Hugh Mason, on a NUT, with average lap speed of 43.75mph over the six laps.

Mason was a small, tenacious, confident rider – and he was forced to use all those qualities to claim victory on the island that year. During a practice lap in fog prior to his win, earlier in the fortnight, he had come off his machine so badly it had left him unconscious, lying in the road.

He was eventually taken to Douglas Hospital and slept pretty much for two straight days until racing on the following Wednesday.

Far from taking it easy, he was still feeling the effects of the crash and fell off again early in the Junior TT race, but despite being overtaken by 11 riders, rather than seeing it as a sign to pull over and watch, he instead ploughed on while throwing up, promptly finished the race and then returned to hospital.

When Friday race day rolled around, Mason was still feeling the effects of his two previous spills and continued to throw up and suffer from headaches even during the race itself.

On discovering a rider in front of him was only a minute in front, he angrily questioned why he had not been told. The response was as expected – it was because no one wanted him to push too hard and fall off again hurting himself, or, even worse.

Mason then embarked on a truly stunning comeback, made up the deficit, and eventually won in just over five hours. Speaking afterwards, Mason explained how he knew he had the fastest machine and, as such, knew he was more than capable of taking the win, despite all his issues leading up to the Junior TT.

Amazingly, Mason had suffered a similar fate the year before when he suffered an accident just before the 1912 Junior TT, only that time he had not been able to carry on.

It would appear that was another major factor in why Mason had been so determined to win. Or, perhaps, it was simply because he was a TT rider.

The 1913 TT would also be tinged with sadness as it would claim its first life, when Frank Bateman, riding a Rudge, was killed in a high-speed crash on the mountain.

Senior TT 1914

First dead heat declared during monster battle

The 1914 Isle of Man Tourist Trophy was the last held before the outbreak of the First World War – and it gave the AJS factory team a chance to truly shine before war would wreak havoc on all of Europe and beyond.

Bad weather overshadowed the Junior race, but Eric and Cyril Williams gained first and second place for AJS having passed Irish newcomer Frank Walker who had been leading on the second lap before suffering an accident.

Walker bravely remounted on his Royal Enfield, followed after the two men, but crashed twice more during his furious chase for glory.

Eric's lap speed of 45.58mph over the five circuits would be enough to take the win, with Cyril second.

Amazingly, Williams had somehow done enough to fill the final podium spot despite his previous misdemeanours but his efforts would ultimately end in tragedy as, crossing the finish line for the final time, he misjudged Bray Hill and crashed into the barrier, tragically losing his life in the process four days later.

Howard R. Davies, who raced for both AJS and Sunbeam, had been deprived of victory in the Junior due to a puncture.

However, he would go to make history in the Senior that same year, after an incredibly closely fought race that had raged on for more than four hours, just over six minutes had separated the top three.

And after Cyril Pullin, on a Rudge, had been declared the winner, nothing could separate Sunbeam-mounted Davies and Oliver Godfrey, who was riding an Indian.

It meant for the first time in TT history a dead heat had been declared. Godfrey had also claimed victory in the 1911 Senior, which had seen the US manufacturer claim the top

three spots. Godfrey was later killed while fighting in the First World War.

Tim Wood had broken the lap record once again, with a lap of 53.50mph, which was 42 minutes and 16 seconds around the course.

The start-finish line was moved from Quarterbridge Road to Bray Hill in 1914; the huge scoreboard fans know and love first went up in 1926 but the first evening practice sessions would not take place until 1937.

It showed how different the track, setting and layout of the meeting was in those very early days compared with today.

What would not see much change, however, would be the classes, as the 350cc and 500cc races remained in place right up until the 1980s.

The first Senior TT, in 1913, was run over seven laps, reduced to six the following year and then put back up to seven.

Behind the scenes, the First World War broke out in 1914, making Britain and Germany sworn enemies.

Although entrepreneur Siegfried Bettmann was now a British citizen and mayor of Coventry, the Triumph factory was commandeered by the government to help with the war effort.

During this time, Triumph produced their first proper motorbike, which had no need for pedals and needed a kick-start to get it going.

The Model H was eventually given the nickname 'the trusted Triumph' – 30,000 were made during the war alone because it worked so well, particularly in the trenches.

Norton's 16H was also used during the First World War by the military and Norton also built 17 bikes for the Russian army. However, the war ended before they could be delivered overseas so instead they became the first bikes the company ever sold to the British public.