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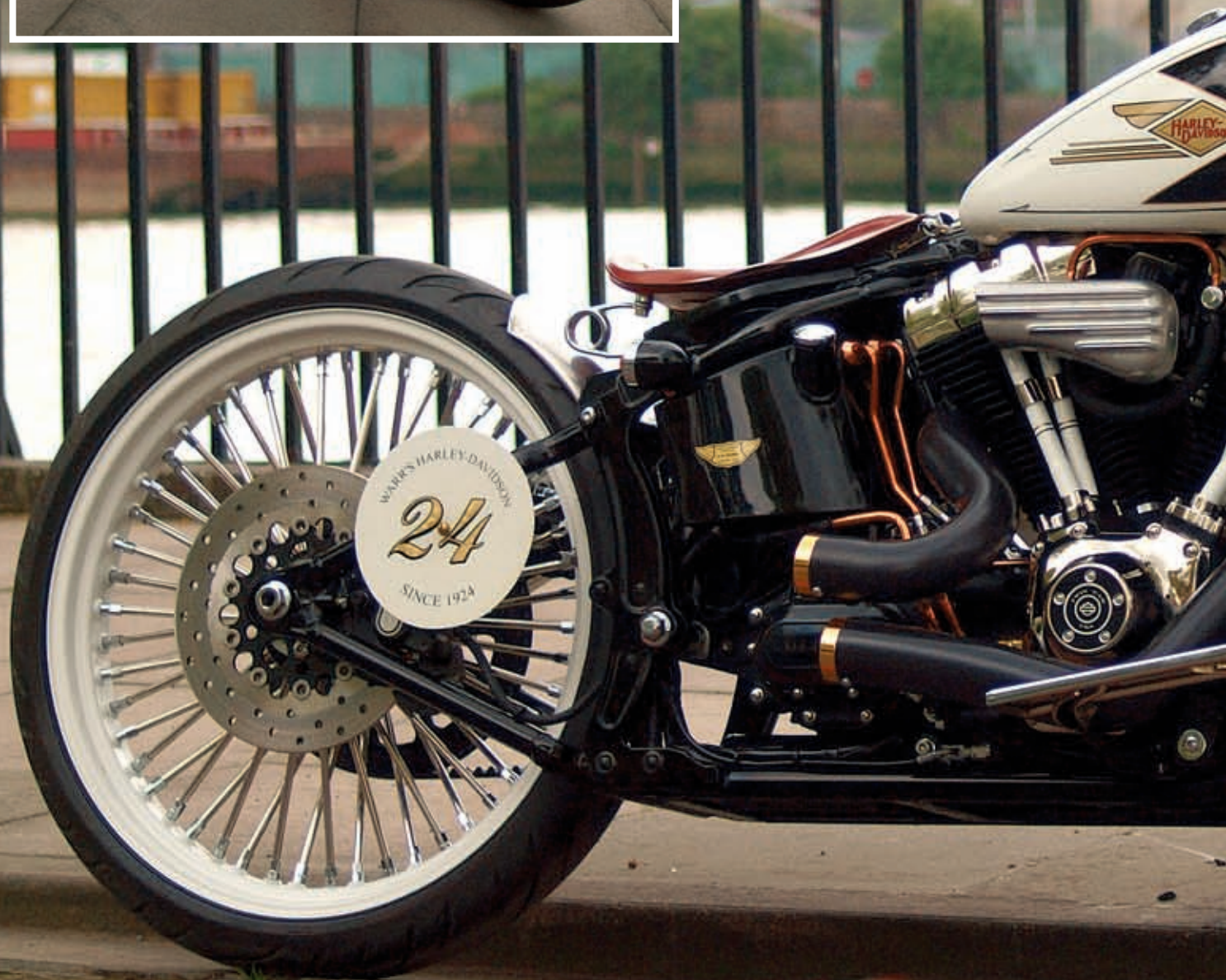
WHAT PART OF 'SILENT GREY FELLOW' DIDN'T YOU UNDERSTAND?



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SILENT GREY FELLOW? **LOUD WHITE BLOKE!**

It was a landmark year, was 1924. Ramsey MacDonald became the UK's first Labour Prime Minister, Lenin was officially declared dead, a young Adolf Hitler was locked up for his part in the Beer Hall Putsch, Mercedes-Benz was formed, MGM was founded, and Captain Frederick James Warr opened a motorcycle shop on King's Road, becoming an agent for the Harley-Davidson Motor Company in the same year.



Custom: "Silent Grey Fellow"

They would have been exciting times: pioneering days when tyres were still measured by their external diameter rather than their rim size, front brakes were non-existent and those on the back weren't much to write home about, and when Harley-Davidson produced a range of six motorcycles, based around two versions of their F-head, inlet-over-exhaust, 45-degree V-twin, which was by then in its thirteenth year of production.

The differences between the 61-inch FE and JE models, and the two 74-inch FD and two JD models pivoted on technical innovations that were breaking at the time, with the J-models having full electrical equipment and lighting while the older Fs ran Magneto ignitions with an aftermarket acetylene lighting option, and a choice of aluminium or cast iron pistons in the bigger motors.

Gearboxes were still in their infancy – indeed the F-series had been fitted with Harley's first just ten year earlier, adding a two speed hub to the chain-driven, freewheeling E, itself a development and contemporary of the belt-drive D. The "step-starter" had replaced pedals the following year with the introduction of a proper three-speed gearbox, and the bikes – although still renowned as 'Silent Grey Fellows', in memory of the original colour scheme – would have been resplendent in the olive green that so wrong-footed Indian at the close of WW1, lifted from the anonymity of military service by a maroon stripe.

An early Harley rider would have perched upon a Mesinger Air Cushion saddle, changed gear by hand, aided by a foot clutch, and they too would have been mesmerised by the bobbing tops of the early Springer forks, but ahead of a narrow, square-section fuel tank, that also contained the lubricant for the total loss oil system.

It was a long time ago, alright?

In fact it was the year before the Government decided that an electric power grid in public ownership would be a good idea: a decision that led to the proposal, in 1927, to build Battersea Power Station. God's dog was a puppy, and gay meant happy.

That's how long the Warrs have worked with Harley-Davidson.

So when it was announced that Harley-Davidson UK were sponsoring the 'Modified Harley-Davidson' class at the Ace Café / Ally Pally show, and tickets to Sturgis were in the offing, it was

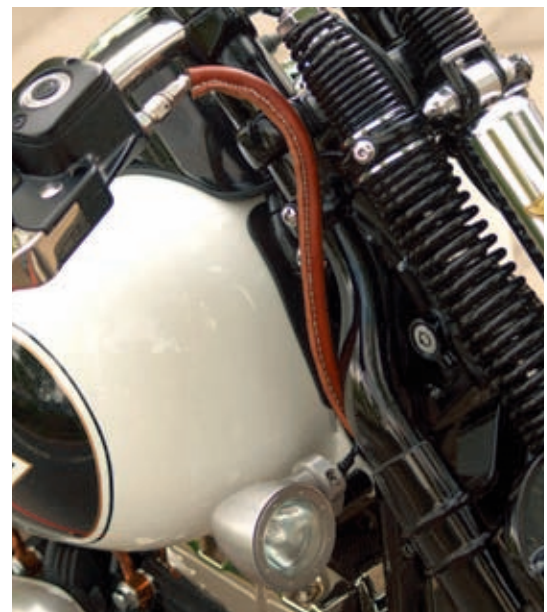


inevitable that Europe's oldest Harley-Davidson Dealership would put themselves centre stage, and how better to do that, than to celebrate their heritage with an homage to the original company, and the evolution of the Harley-Davidson across the years.

The main premise of the Modified Harley-Davidson class within AMD's rules, means the bike is going to be a modified Harley, which is usually taken as being an oem frame and engine, but that proved no barrier to Charlie Stockwell, of Warr's in-house 'King's Road Custom Shop' because Charlie has been modifying Harleys for years. So with a Cross Bones as the perfect starting point – for its Softail frame and blacked-out Springer forks – he rolled up his sleeves and headed for the extensive archive that is unique among British dealerships, to seek inspiration from decades of sales brochures, parts and iconography.

You'd be right, if you're thinking this isn't a reproduction of any specific bike, but that was never the intention. The plan was to create something that conjures up eighty-six years of history in the context of the current state of the custom world, and it's astonishing just how much synergy there is between ancient and modern.

A huge amount of custom building is using the right part in the right place, and much of the art involved is being able to see past a part's original application: it's Coleridge's 'willing suspension of disbelief', cited by but popularised by Lieutenant George in Blackadder Goes





Forth, that takes you to familiar places in unfamiliar ways.

It's amazing what those 130/60x23 Avon Cobras on their white-rimmed Ride Wright wheels conjure up, not least because we've not seen a tyre that tall and skinny on the back of a bike since the days when it would have been called a 29-incher ... okay, so there have been a number of show bikes based on the board racer style that have used a pair of 21-inch front tyres, but the still relatively new Avon is a true universal tyre for front and rear fitment.

Coupled with the black mechanical finish of the Springers – which wouldn't have seen a factory chrome bath until their reintroduction in 1988 – and especially having been stripped of its headlamp, you'd struggle to place it in the twenty-first century at first sight, and the art deco tank transfer that was used for the 1934/35 season, and the air 'horn', hiding a modern filter serves to underline a sense of heritage.

Not that any of those items coexisted, but it's a powerful feeling that serves to draw a veil over the chrome-plated modern damper in front of the blacked-out Springers' springs; to ignore the disc brakes – and even the master cylinder despite noticing the painstakingly hand-stitched leather shrouding that ages its hydraulic line, along with the clutch cable, that took almost as long to do as the attempt to distress the Mesinger saddle: that's seriously tough leather.

If you stopped to think about it, you'd know that the modern shape of the new Fat Bob tanks was introduced in 1936 for the new Knucklehead and were never graced by the diamond decals, but you're wooed by Charlie's attention to detail in replacing chrome plate with the warmer, softer hues of nickel where practical, or lost it altogether where it would have been inappropriate. You can't help but wonder whether the painted and lined pushrod tubes got that treatment back in the day, without really thinking about whether it shouldn't have a kidney-shaped timing cover, and all credit to Charlie for not going too far and dressing the motor in faux covers to visually take it back to Knuckle or Panhead territory: another secret to good customising is knowing when to stop.

The super-short rear mudguard is reminiscent of board racers, which will torment your memory banks

a little further, questioning whether the unfamiliarity of this oh-so familiar motorcycle might be that it was modified when stripped for racing, but by now you're starting to see through the thin veneer and seeing the custom motorcycle beneath.

Of course Harley never fitted big spoke wheels, and that's a very modern tread pattern on the tyres; good heavens, those are indicators ... and hang-on, there's a headlamp lurking by the tank – does it work? Apparently so: good enough for city streets at night, and even blasting round the French Riviera at this year's Port Grimaud event. And obviously side-mount plates are a much more modern style statement, even if dressing it up with an antique taillight and decorative braided flex makes you question it for a second. And no matter how close to the timing side's early footboard and oval brake pedal those short pipes are, you know this isn't a bike that would live up to the 'Silent Grey Fellow' legend.

And as with all good custom bikes, the more you look, the more you see, and you wonder how you were ever taken in ... if you were? That's an easy question to answer: you wanted to be.

You saw the '24' number on the race plate, registered the 'since 1924' legend that accompanied it and took it at face value for a second ... or maybe longer. Don't beat yourself up. It's been very carefully put together to make you think – perhaps too cleverly done to take the Modified Harley class at the Ally Pally, but then on Warr's stand, rather than in the corralled show arena, maybe too far from the main action to realise just how clever.

As an advert for Warr's and King's Road Customs, however, and eighty-plus years of Harley-Davidson's continual evolution it's priceless.

Words & Pictures: Andy Hornsby

