

MORE THAN OK...

WORDS & PICS: NIK

MODERNISED CLASSIC CUSTOM

SOMETIMES IT CAN BE QUITE DIFFICULT TO SAY WHERE THE LINE BETWEEN WHAT IS A CUSTOM BIKE AND WHAT IS A CLASSIC BIKE IS DRAWN, AND SOMETIMES WHEN IT IS DRAWN IT CAN BE QUITE FUZZY...





GILBERT SILLS OF THE CRETINGHAM CRANK COMPANY CAN BE CONTACTED ON 01473 737467 OR VIA EMAIL AT SILLS4@BTOPENWORLD.COM



purchased with a plan to do something slightly more interesting with than just a complete restoration and, after a number of discussions with Gilbert, in late 2016 he gave him a box of rusty bits; an engine, a gearbox, a frame and a pair of Webb girder forks.

They spent many hours discussing how the bike should look and function, and the finished bike is the product of a lengthy and creative 'conversation'.

They wanted to avoid the conventions of custom builds (no side-mounted number-plate et al), and intended the completed machine to look as if it'd just emerged from the 1930s, but with disc brakes capable of dealing with modern traffic, reverse-pull 'bar end brake and clutch levers, LED lights etc.; a synthesis of old and new with these new items, and also the original exposed valves and the total-loss oil system. Equally, all the finishes (paint etc.) were to be deliberately 'old school' – it had to look as though it'd been built (hand-built, as they were back then) back in the Thirties with brass components, and a suitable paint scheme too.

The first thing Gilbert did (well, possibly not the actual first, but the first for the purposes of this article) was to strip and rebuild the old JAP motor to stock specs, using his lifetime's accumulation of knowledge gained from working on classic old British engines.

Along the way he made a new carb bell-mouth that has, cunningly, been fashioned with a machined-in fitting that does away with the need for an unsightly jubilee clip – the kind of attention to detail that characterises Gilbert's work. Similarly, the primary drive cover's been machined for both aesthetic reasons and to help with cooling too.



Another gentleman with something of a reputation, this time for art, is the owner of this 'ere bike, Mr Graham Cowley. He's a former Professor of Painting at the Royal College of Art in London, and a respected artist who's (almost) lost count of the number of displays and exhibitions he's either put on himself or been part of, and he's also, for just about his whole life, been a huge fan of old British motorcycles – in fact he's the artist responsible for this year's Isle of Man motorcycle stamps.

He picked up a rather battered 1937 OK-Supreme Flying Cloud with an overhead valve JAP (JA Prestwich) 250cc engine, which he'd

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e've run any number of modified old bikes, Harleys, Triumphs and the like, over the years, some very modified, some cunningly kept almost stock, and they've often been among some of the

cleverest builds to've been featured in the magazine.

And among those that've been featured, some of the most technically exquisite've been those built by a gentleman by the name of Gilbert Silles from over in Suffolk, the guy behind the wonderfully alliterative Cretingham Crank Company. He's been building custom bikes for many, many years (there are some wonderful Seventies chops that come up when you Google his name), and in the last few years he's gained himself something of a reputation for reworking some stunningly venerable classic bikes with modern components, yet keeping their essential 'classiness'. We've featured a few of the bikes he's had a hand in over the years, and they've all demonstrated exactly what I've said above.





looking suitably olde-worlde, is another modern one-off, handmade by Mr Sills, as is the neat little battery box tucked away down the back of the motor, as are... well, just about everything else really, including all the brass, alloy and stainless bits, and the carbon fibre components too (look for 'em, you'll see 'em). The number plate, for example, letters and all, has been milled from solid.

The all-important paint was done in a steel blue/cream ensemble by Simon Emery at The Paint Box, and the striping, on both the bodywork and the wheels, by Neil Melliard of Prosign. That tank logo is a gorgeous period piece, and came from Classic Transfers (www.classictransfers.co.uk) and was expertly lacquered into the paint.

The finished bike, Graham says, is exactly what they planned it to be, thanks to Gilbert's skill and patience – at shows people often ask if it's a restoration even though the discs are staring them right in the face. As for ride, he says that it feels good: "It's amazingly planted (for a rigid/girder bike), as it has a very low centre of gravity and very low weight. Unsurprisingly, it has amazing brakes – it was important that it should handle and stop etc., and it most certainly does."

So there you have it; Graham's stunning 1937 OK-Supreme custom, one of the subtlest and cleverest customs we've featured in *BSH*. If you have a moment, check out his website at www.grahamcrowley.co.uk – there's some really nice art on there, and an interesting musical playlist that contains some stuff you may not've heard too. 🎵

He then turned his attention to the frame and cycle parts. After repairing and restoring the 81-year-old frame, and the potentially 92-year-old Webb forks (HC Webb & Co Ltd produced their 'Heavy Weight Girder Forks' from 1926 to 1932), he built a pair of wheels with chrome rims and spokes, and fitted them with distinctive wavy discs intended for some form of Kawasaki, and Kawasaki four-pot calipers front and rear on one-off brackets. A new front mudguard was fitted with one-off stays that both mount it and give the correct period look, and a very clever rear muddie was created; it's been fixed to the rear wheel spindle so that it stays in constant, and optimum, position when the rear wheel and chain are adjusted.

Equally clever is the fuel tank... well, the combined fuel and oil tank actually. While it may look like an old 'un from days gone by, it's actually a one-off made by Gilbert, and fitted with brass/bronze caps with capstans (like wot ropes are wrapped around on ships to tether them). The seat, despite



ENGINE: 1937 OK-Supreme Flying Cloud OHV JAP 250cc, exposed valves, one-off carb bell-mouth, one-off stainless exhaust, modified primary cover, one-off kick-start pedal **FRAME:** 1937 OK-Supreme Flying Cloud 250cc, one-off foot-rests/hangers/controls **FRONT END:** Chrome rim/spokes, unknown hub, aftermarket wavy disc, Kawasaki caliper, Webb girder forks, aftermarket brake lines, one-off handlebars/bar end levers/master-cylinder/controls/switchgear/concealed wiring/brass risers, BSA Bantam speedo in one-off surround, soft foam grips **REAR END:** Chrome rim/spokes, unknown hub, aftermarket wavy disc, Kawasaki caliper, one-off master-cylinder, one-off torque arm **BODYWORK:** Modified unknown front mudguard with one-off stays, one-off combined petrol/oil tank with brass/bronze filler caps/capstans, one-off sprung seat, one-off rear mudguard, one-off alloy battery box, one-off alloy number plate **ELECTRICS:** One-off loom, painted Bates-style LED headlight/tail light **PAINT:** Steel blue/cream by Simon Emery at The Paint Box (01376 563859 or www.thepaintbox.co.uk), pin-striping by Neil Melliard of Prosign (07768 901853 or www.prosign1.co.uk) **POWDERCOATING:** Most brackets/handlebars 'blackadised' **POLISHING:** Gilbert Sills of the Cretingham Crank Co **ENGINEERING:** Gilbert Sills of the Cretingham Crank Co **THANKS TO:** "Gilbert Sills at the Cretingham Crank Co; Simon Emery at The Paint Box; & Neil Melliard at ProSign..."