

A DAY AT THE RACES

By Tom Hesom

The year; 1975. The place; a small town in rural Natal Province, South Africa, where early morning preparations are being made for a trip to the Roy Hesketh Racing Circuit in the city of Pietermaritzburg (about the same size as Winnipeg), about a $\frac{3}{4}$ hour drive away. The firm's service vehicle, a 1974 Chevy long box 2 tonner, with rear pipe-carrying rack on the back had been commandeered. Sufficient plank timbers were loaded to construct an elevated viewing platform, complete with ladder to climb up, 4 beach umbrellas for shade in the hot African sun (inserted into the 4 open upward-facing pipe ends of the rack), folding lawn chairs and huge hard cooler box for the favorite South African Castle Lager and Lion Ale beers. Sufficient binding wire and pliers were also included to secure the chairs so no-one would topple over the side in the heat of the moment of exuberant cheering during a close race, more likely as the cooler box gradually emptied of course! Ham sandwiches, cold chicken and hard-boiled eggs had been prepared for us by our wives and my brother and I together with friends, would set out for the city. "Biltong" (a South African snack of cured dried strips of beef, as essential to beer-drinking South African men as sunflower seeds are to Mennonites!), was an essential part of the picnic basket. It was also important to get to the circuit early to secure a prime spot at Henry's Knee as close and parallel to the fence as possible. This was where most riders fell off or "went farming," especially as the day wore on and oil spilled on to the track, as was inevitable from some of the self-tuned privateer race bikes still to be found competing in those days.

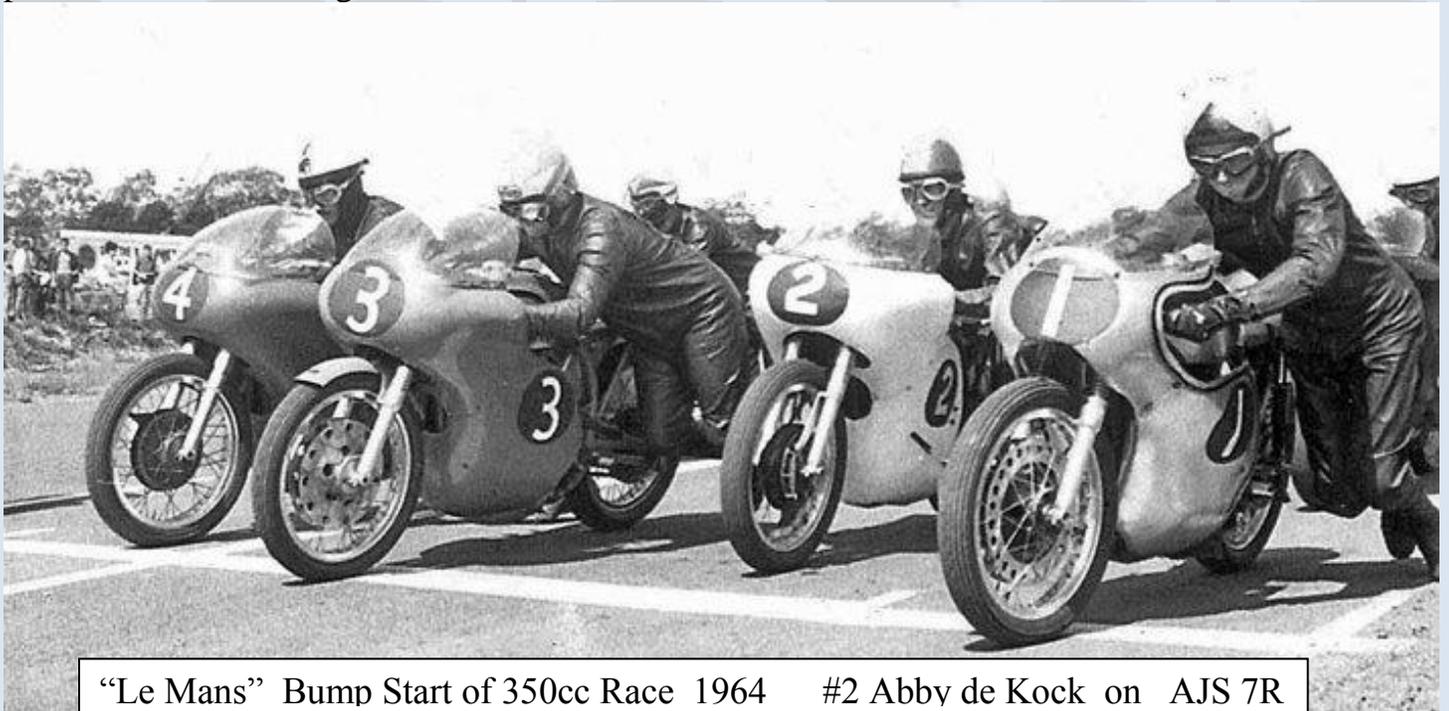


The very first time we went my brother and I rode down on our motorcycles. Me on my 1952 BSA A10 650cc Golden Flash with plunger rear suspension, and brother Robin on his much faster and later model BSA Super Rocket. The Rocket with it's candy-apple red tank was

Geoff Duke on a works 500cc Gilera Four negotiating "Henry's Knee" 1957

so much nicer-looking than mine with it's baby poop colour which was nowhere near gold! After fighting the crowds at the fence for a glimpse of the track and action we decided there and then that there had to be a better way and the plan to use the Chev truck was devised. I was the manager of the inland branch of the agricultural implement firm that employed me, so no permission was needed.

It was particularly thrilling to pay the extra to get access to the pit area in the centre of the circuit and witness the racers warming up. The smell of Castrol R and the Brrrrmm- - - Brrrrmm- - - Brrrrmm of the big single Nortons, AJS 7R's, KTT Velocettes and the howl of the MV Augusta or Gilera 4, were sights to behold! Getting a glimpse of Ago, The Duke or Mike the Bike was an added plus! If one was lucky it was even possible to get to talk to one of the pit crew members. The thrill of listening and seeing a big Manx Norton thundering down the main straight at over 100mph was a thrill indeed. The day came however when we witnessed the indignity of the big singles which had dominated for so long, being eclipsed by a minute Yamaha 2 stroke flying past with a high-pitched ripping sound like fabric tearing and bulbous exhaust system that rivaled the plumbing on the 100 year old Majestic Hotel in town! Although world sanctions on South Africa were imposed in the late 60's because of their Apartheid policies, they only really took effect from the early 80's. So in the 60's and throughout the 70's South Africa was still a Commonwealth Country and Motorcycle racing was very much part of the world scene there, with world international meets like the South African TT, South African Grand Prix, World Champion Rider and Manufacturer, all formed part of the world racing calendar.



“Le Mans” Bump Start of 350cc Race 1964 #2 Abby de Kock on AJS 7R

The Roy Hesketh Circuit (named after a famous SA motorcycle racer killed in WW2) was host to many memorable race meets from the early 50's and was sadly closed in 1981 mainly because of noise complaints from residential home encroachment, but also because South Africa was now excluded from all international sporting events by sanctions, including motorcycle and car racing. Many budding South African race riders learned their trade there including Kork Ballington and Jim Redman who won ten World Championships between them. Other famous names like Giacomo Agostini, Mike Hailwood, Geoff Duke, Barry Sheene, Percy Tait, Ray Pickrill, Phil Read, Paul Smart, Gary Hocking, Dickie Dale and Mike Fogg all raced there. South African Jon Ekerold was 350cc World Champion in 1980 and started his racing career at Hesketh.

(below) Paul Smart leads Ray Pickerill at BP Bend- - 1978



I had a good friend named Abby de Kock who like many cash-strapped South African wannabe race champions, campaigned in England and on the so called "Continent Circus" with a BSA Gold Star and an AJS 7R in the back of a clapped out Thames Transit Van which served as sleeping accommodation as well. Whilst Abby did well at Hesketh winning on a regular basis, he had only mediocre success overseas. He told in an address to our Classic Bike Club once, how he was given one crack at the Isle of Mann TT in 1965 and was determined to make the most of it. Riding a Manx Norton this time he fell off on the first lap and ended up in an English hospital thus putting an end to his racing career! We would joke with Abbey that if he was Irish his name would be O'Toole! Some nick-named him "Droopy" but never to his face! Sadly he passed away a few years ago after many years as a keen club member and having restored many fine British bikes, but never a AJ7R or a Gold Star.

These are memories that never seem to fade. It is over 40 years since we did these trips to the Roy Hesketh Circuit and I can remember every detail : even the smells and roar of the spectators is real. The taste of a Lion Ale together with the salty tang of biltong linger, and I'm sure my brother who now lives in New Zealand and who is half my size and very youthful-looking despite being only 3 years younger than me and married with kids, will remember when the gatekeeper at Hesketh would say "four adults and one boy?," pointing to him. We

didn't argue and he would get in for half price! My wife often chides me that I cannot remember my four sons birth dates but "when it comes to all things to do with motorcycles you remember EVERY MINUTE DEAIL!"



Agostini - Winner (centre). Barry Sheene (left) #2 Kork Ballington (right) #3
1972 South African Grand Prix



Jim Redman winning the “Dickie Dale Trophy” race in 1965 on a Honda 305cc Benly works machine.