

# Olympian heights

In this new section of The ROAD we look at the lives and views of some exceptional MAG members whose activities and accomplishments we hope will provide interest and inspiration. These discussions are also intended to open up the debate on how MAG reaches out to a wider audience.

This issue the editor talks to Gary France. A high flyer with an impressive record in the world of project management. Gary owns a superb collection of customised Harley-Davidsons which he tours on but Gary was not born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Ian Mutch had a long after dinner chat . . .

If the London Olympic Games brought a tear of emotional patriotism to your eye you might want to buy Gary France a beer sometime.

Gary's project management company was responsible for helping London win the 2112 games and then for managing the construction of all of the facilities, venues and logistics at the Olympic Park in Stratford.

Gary has retired from that world at a young age in order to spend more time with his motorcycles and recently honoured the editor with a visit to his Glastonbury retreat where MAG, Gary's bikes and his future plans were discussed.

Life did not begin easily for Gary as his father died when he was twelve and he left school early, going out to work to assist the family finances.

In 1990 Gary and eight colleagues founded the company which employed 3,500 people when Gary finally sold his share in it a few years ago. Before he baled out however he was recruited by the Russians to handle the project

management side of their mega building projects for the Sochi winter games. On this venture his line manager was the deputy prime minister of the world's biggest country which in the post cold war era is comfortable with reaching outside its borders to secure the best services on offer anywhere.

Finally finding himself in the happy position of no longer needing to work, Gary has turned his attention to the serious business of motorcycles and motorcycle travel. High on his list of must dos was a trans-USA road trip which he made on a Harley-Davidson Road King affectionately called 'The Leading Ladies.'

I first spotted the bike when I was judging the HOG festival ride-in show entrants at St Tropez a couple of years ago. The bike's unusual name owes itself to the superb air brush work immortalising such movie beauties as Audrey Hepburn and Elizabeth Taylor.

Gary believes in riding bikes, not just showing them and in one trip *The*

*Leading Ladies* covered 21,000 miles across America, a journey illustrated in one of the most impressive and heftiest coffee table books I have ever set eyes on.

The book *France in America*, which was reviewed in the ROAD last year, reflects the kind of production values you would expect from a man whose demand for excellence has got him where he is today.

Gary's bikes radiate the same five star standard. Let's be clear, they are not owner-machined works of sweat on a shoe string and no-one is pretending they are. Gary has spent a lot of his life working very hard against the odds from an early age but today his bikes enjoy the skills of the best in the business working to bring his artistic conceptions to colourful roaring life.

When I met Gary at that ride-in show in France he admitted that he'd heard of MAG. He had even thought about joining so I dialled our office on my mobile and handed it to him which is how he came to become MAG member



....., but what had postponed his membership for so long, I wanted to know.

*When I first heard of MAG my initial impression was that it wasn't for me. It looked too hard core and that put me off. It just felt a little too 'right on bro.' Rightly or wrongly I didn't join at once. It was after we met in St Tropez that I bothered to find out about MAG and read stuff and realised it did represent me and what I stand for. That message hadn't come over strongly enough until I went and looked for it.*

In an effort to pin down the source of Gary's earlier reservations I suggest that maybe the magazine projects an image that is a little more traditional rally world than St Tropez and Gary agrees.

*It must be hard to get the balance right. There are so many different types of biker who don't often mix. We're not all the same kind of people just because we*



Above: Gary taking a prize with 'Amelia' at St Tropez  
Right: Gary on a Motorway MAG motorway protest riding 'Tradewinds'

*favour two wheels. There are loads of great people in MAG who do great work for the organisation but the world still judges books by cover and sometimes you have to prune and manipulate images to avoid deterring people who might make unfounded judgements. It's the world we live in and I made a career which hinged on successful presentation so I am unusually aware of how critical it can be.*

*Specifically I think it's important to try and appeal*

*as many different types of rider as possible such as HOG members as HOG is such a big group of people, and it's a group with a mindset very much focussed on fun and freedom and the joy of the open road which is what MAG is all about. HOG offers a natural recruitment pool for MAG.*

*MAG needs to make use of social media to project itself to a wider audience. I use Facebook and Twitter continually. My best posting was one of me riding The South Dakota*





Badlands. That one got re-posted and tens of thousands viewed it. It was an image that resonated with a popular appetite and that is what works.

MAG needs to get some images that people instinctively like and identify with and then get them out there with the MAG badge on them. MAG needs to form those kind of positive associations with itself and it must be said that there is a lot MAG can learn from HOG.

Harley-Davidson don't just sell motorcycles, they sell a lifestyle and that is what keeps people buying their bikes. People buy a Harley-Davidson for all sorts of reasons including buying into a club and a lifestyle.

To some people MAG can still come over as this partyin' bearded hard core that might be unsympathetic to outsiders or new riders finding their way in the world of motorcycling.

Take a look at Harley-Davidson's marketing imagery. They consistently feature young attractive healthy people in their images. They always look like they're enjoying themselves but there's an inclusivity about the images.

*I just love going to far flung places, pitching up a tent and toddling along to custom shows. I derive enormous pleasure from watching other show entrants being unloaded from the back of vans, secure in the knowledge that my bike is on an even footing with the trailered bikes and once the show is over I'm going to have the indescribable pleasure of riding my bike home.*

**Gary's bikes**

We discussed Gary's bikes, two of which I'd seen at the St Tropez ride-in show in different years. The Leading Ladies, a Road King with an exceptional paint job and Amelia, a 1970s retro-styled radical custom that looks like an uncompromising show bike. Sceptics might imagine this to be a trailored bauble with less miles on its wheels than a Coronation carriage. The sceptics would be wrong.

After completion Amelia's first trip was to Cascais in Southern Portugal, a ride during which the bike performed fantastically in all respects.

Gary explained that he wanted a full-on retro 1970s custom bike but one that would be practical for long distance touring. For this the frame geometry had to be spot on and an early hardtail frame intention was wisely abandoned in favour of the softail option. This provides the same line as a rigid with enough suspension movement to deny chiropractitioner, indefinite employment. The donor bike was a 2009 FXST whose reinterpreted skeleton can just about be recognised by students of Darwin with imaginations on full throttle.

Since its creation the spectacular rolling artform has lowered more jaws than Hannibal's elephants in an odyssey through France, over the Alps to Rome and back again.

How can a bike that looks this arty with 14inch overstock forks measure up as a riding machine? The answer lies with the A team of specialists employed to reconcile what Persig would describe as classic and romantic qualities.

Step forward Dave Batchelar who is to frame building what Brunel was to bridges. The mathematical perfection he brings to a project ensures a marriage of form with function that might enable a Bugatti to negotiate a bob sleigh track.

Notwithstanding Gary's conceptual input, the overall build fell to Charlie Stockwell, resident maestro at Chelsea-based Warr's. Charlie spent countless hours milling brass parts in a matchmaking exercise of metallic dovetailing.

The result is crowned by a paint job that makes the finest Hurst look like a paint-by-numbers watercolour.

Keith 'Chuckles' Baker at Classic Cycle Works is the

Da-Vinci who has primed, blended, overlaid, lavished and lacquered to create this visual symphony of yellows browns and oranges over a gold base. With more than a nod to Celtic runes, the result suggests an Arthurian inspiration that resonates with appetites for historical roots reflected in contemporary paint technology. (If that doesn't get me in Private Eye's

Pseud's Corner then I'll try harder)

Fortifying this dimension of the bike's character we find the incomparable art of engraving legend Don Blocksidge. Not since John Reid's ground-breaking Yamaha custom have I seen this much engraving on one bike. The quality and symmetry of the work is all the more incredible for the fact that Don works with nothing more sophisticated than a hammer and chisel. He doesn't even draw out his art on the 'canvas' first, the grooves being the result of a head to hand relationship that has established Don as the grand master of this art for decades.

Now this bike may look to many like the kind of show bike that goes nowhere slowly. The reality is that Gary draws enormous pleasure from confounding sceptics by riding to shows.

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What of Gary's future plans post working life? These involve running tours across Europe and tearing up the Bonneville Salt Flats on budget bikes.

*A while ago I met Henry Cole who presents The World's Greatest*



Yachts are so yesterday man – Amelia turning heads on the St Tropez waterfront. Below: The Leading Ladies, Audrey Hepburn

*Motorcycle Rides on the Travel Channel. He told me he was going to Bonneville with a Brough Superior and his trip coincided with me finishing a holiday with the family in Colorado. I extended my trip and flew to Bonneville where I fell in love with the place. Being there made my hair stand up on end just thinking about the likes of Donald Campbell and Burt Munro who'd driven and ridden into the history books over the years.*

*I watched Henry Cole go for a speed record which he managed to achieve and I got salt fever. I'm going back in 2015 with a team of Brits, maybe 12 or more mates of mine. The plan is to ride the flats on bikes, none of which will cost more than £1000 or so. There are loads of categories to compete in against past records, so you don't necessarily need to invest megabucks to set a record in a modest class. It should be fun.*



European Tours – Gary recognises that a significant number of Harley-Davidson owners enjoy riding to and attending European Harley-Davidson rallies, but are often limited by the length of holiday time they are able to dedicate to their riding.

Tour1 concentrates on one-way, one-week long tours where customers are taken on guided tours with six days spent riding their own motorcycles across Europe on some of the best roads available,

nearly always including the Alps. They then spend 2-3 days at the Harley-Davidson rally. We plan the routes, research and book the hotels and Gary personally leads each tour. The unique aspect of our tours is that we then transport the customers' motorcycles back to the UK by truck, allowing owners to fly home for work the next day. In 2014 Gary is leading tours to Croatia, St Tropez and the European Bike Week in Faaker See, Austria.

