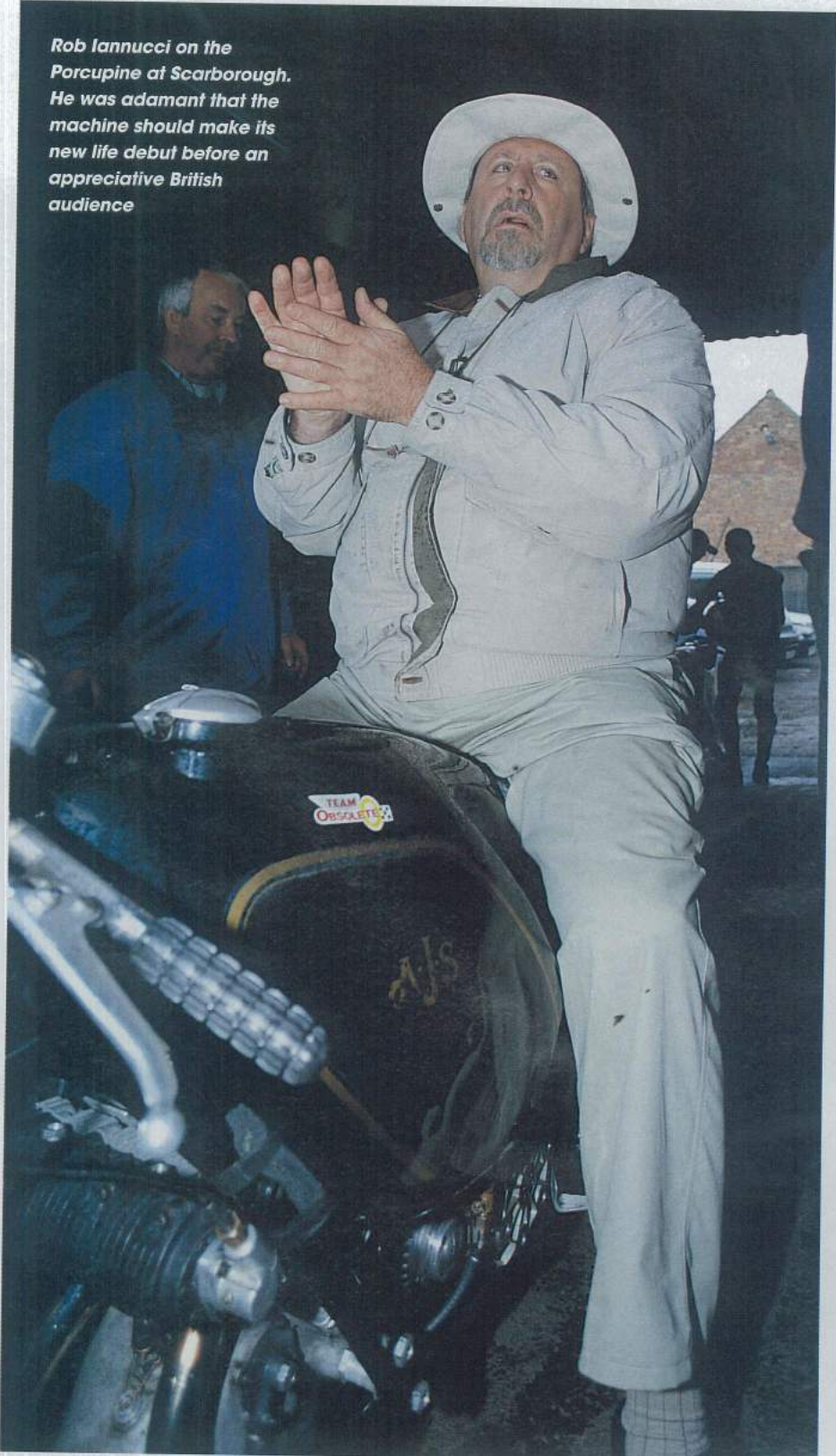


# An act of faith

Rob Iannucci on the Porcupine at Scarborough. He was adamant that the machine should make its new life debut before an appreciative British audience



The spiky saga of sleuthing, derring-do and, most of all, perseverance

By Brian Crichton

Studio pictures: Dave King

AN AJS PORCUPINE is back on the track thanks to Team Obsolete of America. The saga of the team's efforts to own a living example took 18 years to realise, and it's an amazing tale of sleuthing, dealing, enthusiasm, sidetracking – and patience.

Anchor man behind it all is the New York lawyer Rob Iannucci, founder of Team Obsolete (TO). A bear of a man – although he now tells us he has lost 40lb thanks to a strict training regimen and plans to lose 100lb in total – Iannucci dominates the classic paddock when his show is on the road.

These days he often sports a wide-brimmed hat which gives him an almost papal eminence over the crowds.

He such a well-known figure now that people ask for his autograph. This tickles him.

The TO Porcupine story has contributed to his current stature in the classic world. Not universally loved, he nevertheless elicits grudging respect from his detractors who admit that Rob Iannucci is not short on enthusiasm for racing motorcycles.

It is almost a religion to him – and he makes things happen. He has a power, presence, bravado and that New York frame of mind that pushes to get its own way.

Iannucci's successful powerplays have included scooping a major slice of Italian national treasure in the shape of a stack of racing MV Agustas. (The full list was given in our November 2000 issue).

TO bought the machines in 1986 but a legal wrangle meant that they were not released to Iannucci until 1993. The MV saga was an adventure in itself, one of the many encountered over the past 18 years.

But back to the Porcupine.

As a young motorcyclist Iannucci was knocked out by the looks of a hybrid roadster that was produced by Associated Motor Cycles (AMC). The G50 CSR single was introduced in 1961 comprising a G50 race ►

# Classic Bike

1954 AJS PORCUPINE E95



## PROJECT PORCUPINE



From left: Vic Webb, Rob Iannucci and Matt Wright at the project launch in 1984

It's been my rare privilege to rebuild the most exotic motorcycle the world has ever seen



TO's project banner at Scarborough last year

◀ engine in a road frame. Iannucci bought one in 1974. It was featured in our full story on the model in March 1987.

By this time Rob was hooked on riding British bikes thanks to a Norton Commando he bought in 1970 when serving in the US Peace Corps in Barbados. He subsequently raced an AJS 7R and has always maintained an ardour for Woolwich products.

Iannucci admits he was never the world's greatest road racer, but he did have a talent for organising and for working on machinery. And so he progressed naturally to the role of sponsoring riders.

Having become an AMC owner, his thoughts broadened to owning the most exotic machinery to emerge from the south-east London factory.

He focused on an example of the AJS 'Porcupine' – so called because of its spiky head finning – and the machine on which Les Graham had won the first world 500cc championship in 1949.

The late racer/journalist John Griffith had acquired a 1954 example for the Stanford Hall collection in Leicestershire while curator there. His son Steve took over after John was killed in a road accident and, in a reorganisation of the collection, some machines were sold to appropriate collectors.

For example, the Velocette Roarer went to Velocette specialist Ivan Rhodes.

Iannucci successfully negotiated for the Porcupine which came with an engine but minus some of its internals.

Rob then launched 'Project Porcupine' in an effort to restore the machine while keeping as much originality as possible.

He enlisted the help of many people who were involved with the Porcupines in their heyday and persuaded this magazine, then under the editorship of Mike Nicks, to set up a meeting in London of all interested parties.

That meeting took place on 14 December 1984, by which time *Classic Bike* had launched *Classic Racer* (first issue Summer 1982) to cater for the burgeoning interest in the competition greats of yesteryear.

As well as Iannucci and Nicks, those present were Alan Latham and Ron Mountford (UK project co-ordinators), Rod Quaife (gearbox specialist), Vic Webb (Porcupine chief designer), Norman White (ex-works Norton rider/mechanic), Peter Williams (ex-Norton works rider/development engineer), and Matt Wright (AMC chief development engineer 1948-1952).

Various decisions were made to tease out original parts, have new parts made, track down blueprints, and persuade other specialists to become involved.

On 15 March 1985 Iannucci issued a progress report that included the following:

■ Norman White has disassembled the motor

TO has kept as much originality as possible and refrained from putting team decals on the machine



and found it to be in excellent condition. The crack in the crankcase does not appear to be very serious.

■ Norman has located the perfect person to make a crank.

■ I have disassembled the chassis and found it to be in superb condition.

After this promising start the project began to falter. There were subsequent differences of opinion and some recriminations. Also, by this time TO was busy with other classic racing machinery which would establish the team as the highest profile equipe on the classic scene.

The project then went on the back burner for 15 years. But the gas was turned up to high regulo last year by a sensational auction at the Stafford show.

Auction house Brooks (now Bonhams & Brooks) had just acquired the services of Colin Seeley as a consultant. Seeley, who had bought the AMC race shop in the Sixties, has filled just about every position possible in the motorcycle world. Highly professional and respected, he was instrumental in persuading AMC tuner Tom Arter (who died last November) to let his collection of AMC racing machines and spares go under the hammer.

The result was a record price at auction for



Period picture of the E95 Porcupine. Four were made, also four of the preceding E90 version

a British machine. Classic race replica builder and InCA classic race series creator George Beale paid £157,700 inc premium (estimate £80,000) for Arter's 1954 Porcupine.

More relevant to this story, TO paid £78,500 for a Porcupine engine that was part of the Arter collection.

Iannucci, who had flown in from New York for the auction, declared that he was heading a consortium of backers to provide the finance

to see through the project.

Iannucci remains convinced that the auction engine was the original from the TO machine. The engine was flown to New York and work began on its restoration. Iannucci and his TO riders Dave Roper and Erik Green submerged themselves in the rejuvenated project.

At 7.19pm on Sunday 27 August last year, Iannucci recorded that the TO Porcupine engine roared into life for the first time in

## Iannucci's vision of classic racing

Rob Iannucci is lobbying for the classic race scene to be split into two categories: one for genuine original machines, the other for modern high performance replicas.

Such a split would encourage non-replica machines including the TO Porcupine on to the track without fear of being outclassed by the high performance lightweight replicas.

"The replicas are so much faster than genuine machines they don't belong in the same race," says Iannucci, adding constructively that both types could be run in the same race, but under separate classes with a "two wave" start.

He further argues that this 'bifurcation' would stimulate more interest in both types of machine. "This could be a 'win-win' situation. The manufacturers of replicas would have an expanded two-tier market. The genuine machines would return to the fray, older competitors could enjoy more relaxed rides, and spectators would see closer racing in an expanded format. Nobody loses."

<46 years. Rob briefly rode it in the street in the New York suburb of Brooklyn.

Then followed the Porcupine's public debut of the new millennium. It was on Friday 8 September along Scarborough seafront as a taster for the weekend's 50th running of the Scarborough Gold Cup road races. On the Saturday, six times world champion Jim Redman rode the Porcupine over three demonstration laps. Further work was evidently needed on the four-stroke twin, but an example of the legend was finally back on the track.

The following weekend (15-17 September) the dohc twin was taken to Goodwood for the Revival road races where it was ridden by Stuart Graham, son of 1949 world champion Les.

Former Suzuki works rider Stuart completed three laps in the Sunday (17 September) race, marking the machine's return to actual competition. Project Porcupine – an act of faith – had truly been realised.



From left: Dave Roper, Erik Green, Mike Braid and spectator at Scarborough

## Looking back

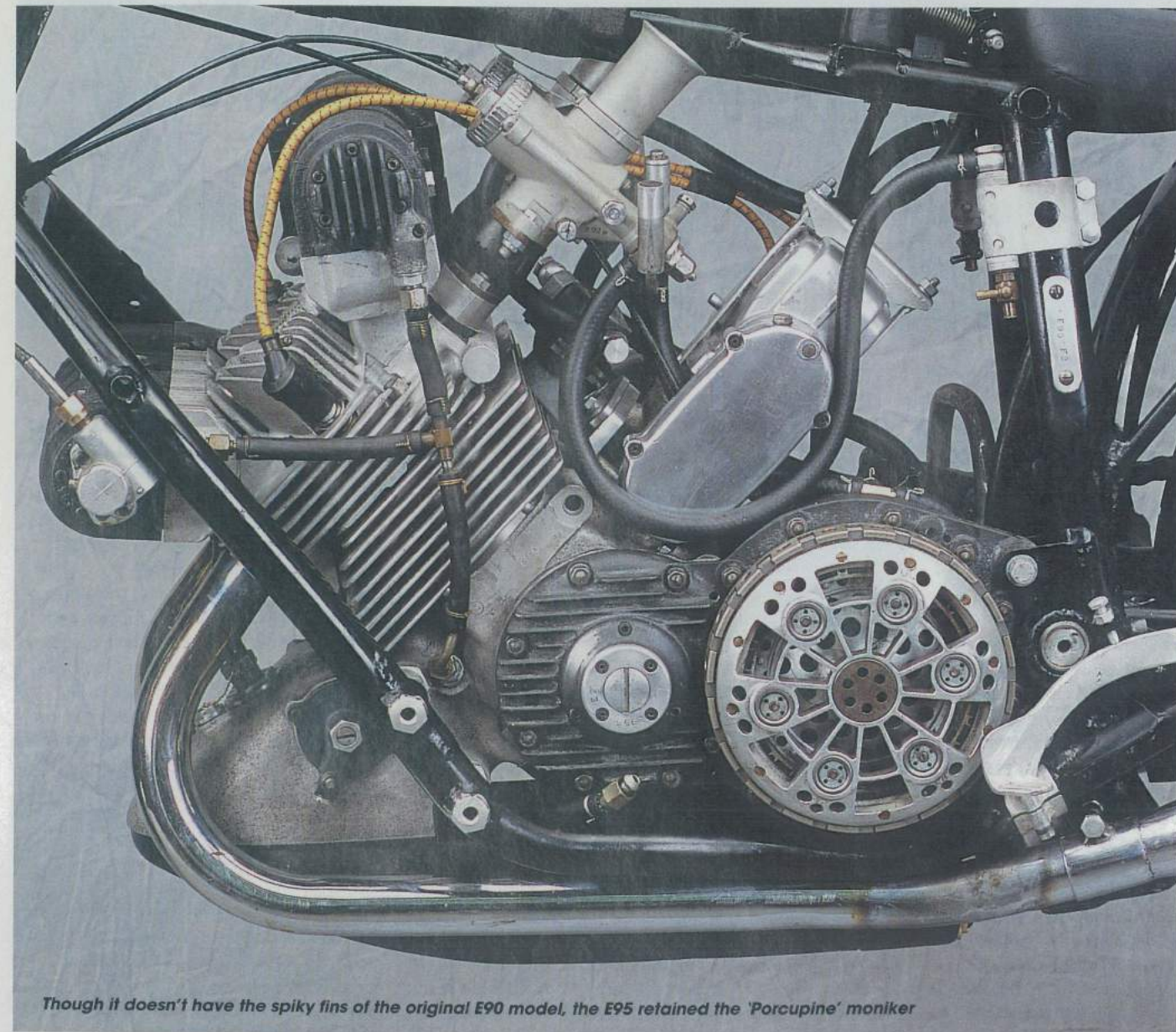
Rob Iannucci, 55, reflects: "From my earliest days as a motorcycle enthusiast when I discovered the existence of the 1961 Matchless G50 CSR (in 1970), I have been in love with AMC engine design and AMC racewear.

"The Porcupine and Triple Knocker were the 'Holy Grail' because so few of them were made. Fewer still have survived and the machines seem to have this 'almost there but not quite' existence.

"They were built on limited budgets by very passionate men, and were extremely beautiful machines in my eye, much more feline than the Norton Manx by comparison.

"So in the late Seventies, we started coming to England which is the Promised Land if you are into British racewear.

"My good mate Alan Latham, from Chorley, Lancashire, called to say the Porcupine at



Though it doesn't have the spiky fins of the original E90 model, the E95 retained the 'Porcupine' moniker

Stanford Hall was available. Looking back now, the price was a joke – so small. Even so I didn't have much money. But I said 'Yes' and set about looking for the money later.

"This has always been my style in these sorts of endeavours – a complete lack of common sense. But my willingness to take chances has paid dividends over the years.

"Not long after that, the E95 with a rather empty motor was on its way to New York. When we got the bike to my home at Henry Street in Brooklyn Heights, I wheeled it across the street. Just then somebody locks up his brakes, jumps out of his car and says: 'I helped build that bike!'

"It was very clear that this man knew all about Porcupines and had worked at the Plumstead factory.

"We had a party for the Porcupine in my front parlour. Not long after, Mike Duff came down and did a slide show that included photos of him riding Tom Arter's Porcupine.

"Mike told me that Tom had a spare motor and lots of parts. I had been in touch with Tom before we got the Porcupine and we'd got along OK. After we got the Porcupine, however, he just didn't want to know.

"We tried to make the Porcupine a populist oriented project. Alan Latham was very successful in digging up some bits and George Beale helped out with some drawings.

"In 1986 we made the 'Deal of the Century' when we bought out the MV Agusta racing department, and so we forgot about Porcupines for a while.

"Then last year, Tom Arter's complete Porcupine, and engine, and famous racing singles were put up for auction.

"It was a spirited sale and there was a lot of intrigue involved. Other bidders really wanted the Porcupine but, equally, perhaps they didn't want us to have them.

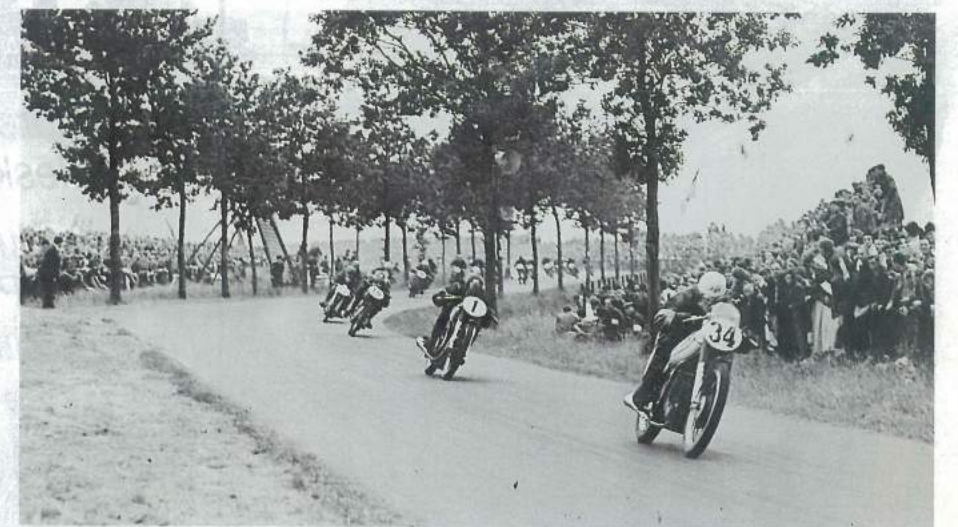
"We ran the bid for the complete Porcupine up very high because we knew other bidders would go as far as they had to – and perhaps deplete their treasure a little bit in the process. As a result, we were able to get the engine at a price we could afford.

"I was ever so happy that we were not the winning bidder on the complete bike: first, because we didn't need it, and second, because the price was silly.

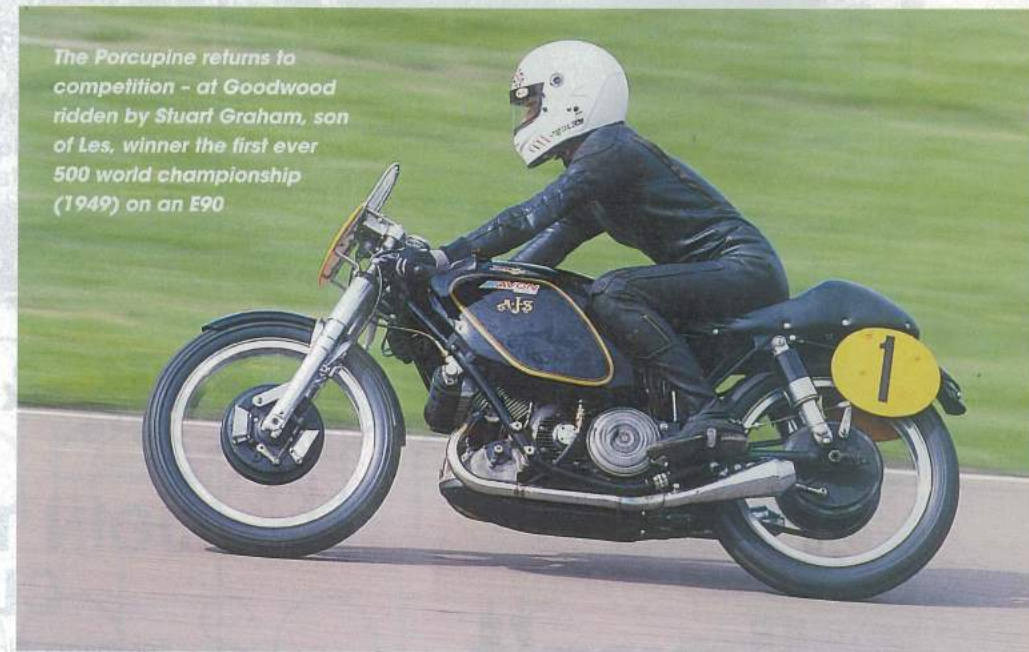
"The E95 engine was shipped to the States. It's a work of art internally and externally. The pieces captivate me and send me into a spiritual place. It has been my rare privilege to overhaul and rebuild the most exotic motorcycle the world has ever seen.

"So, after waiting for 18 years, I finally was in the Team Obsolete engine building room with Dave Roper and Erik Green building up the Porcupine. All other work was halted for three months.

"Sonia Fwens has been my partner in all my



Les Graham (E90 AJS Porcupine) leads from the start of the Dutch TT in July 1949



The Porcupine returns to competition – at Goodwood ridden by Stuart Graham, son of Les, winner the first ever 500 world championship (1949) on an E90

endeavours since day one and she played a significant role in Project Porcupine. She's a remarkable asset to the Team Obsolete and the sport.

"I should also give credit to Mike Braid who does a lot for Team Obsolete in the UK. He's a good friend and a very clever engineer.

"The Porcupine went together just beautifully. The bike fired up immediately. It had a totally unique sound to it. I thought it would sound like a 500 Triumph race bike, but it has a sound all of its own.

"The engine is very quiet mechanically and the bike is so low, so tiny, so compact that I felt we were the custodians of the work of geniuses. It was just so very special to carry on from Ike Hatch, Vic Webb, Joe Craig, Jack Williams, Rod Coleman, Les Graham, Phil Irving and all the people who rode it." ■

More on the AJS Porcupine will appear in a future issue.

## Where to see the Porcupine

1. Ron Iannucci promises that the Porcupine will be raced at Daytona (5-6 March) – the first time a Porcupine has been raced in America. Rider will be the machine's chief mechanic Dave Roper, the first only American to win an Isle of Man TT (Classic Senior 1984, Matchless G50).
2. The Porcupine will then be ridden in the TT Lap of Honour on the Isle of Man (Monday 4 June) by former AMC and Porcupine works rider Derek Farrant, accompanied by Ted Frennd and Rex Butcher on AJS triple knockers fielded by TO in association with the National Motorcycle Museum.
3. The TO Porcupine may also be seen later in the year at a UK event. Details have yet to be confirmed.