

A bit of Brough

The bike immortalised by Lawrence of Arabia has returned to production. Ian Mutch talked to the marque's fourth owner, recently returned MAG member Mark Upham

There's probably no other bike in history so connected to one man's personality and one unfortunate event. Negative though that last ride was for Lawrence it added an increment of mystery to an enduring legend who had a passion for the machine that was known as the Rolls Royce of motorcycles.

Rather like the word 'Great' in GB, adopting the word 'Superior' for the bike's name says something about the manufacturer's perception of this motorcycling icon that is almost Arthurian in its legendary status.

Well the legend is back. The mummy has been liberated from its sarcophagus and is rolling free on the roads of our island nation once again.

Who is it then who has breached the pyramid of peril to breathe life back into this quintessentially English creation of elite engineering? Step forward Mark Upham, baron of the classic motorcycle parts trade, former bike dealer and entrepreneur extraordinaire.

Mark has some pretty impressive pedigree. His father served in the Union Castle shipping line, rising to the rank of captain before which he saw service in a WW2 Russian convoy and was aboard the first ship into Malta when the German siege of the island was broken. I'm guessing he was a popular arrival and, given the legendary looks of Maltese girls, a spectacular opportunity that political correctness discourages me from dwelling on at length. He also saw the German cruiser Graf Spee under the water when

he was collecting meat from Argentina.

Sticking with Mark's father for a moment, by good chance he took many photographs of the Falkland Islands just six weeks before the Argentine invasion. This provided up to date information that was critical to our military and may well have abbreviated the conflict that ended with the Union Flag flying once more in the South Atlantic. Another case of right time right place. His father's cousin was Charles Hazlette Upham VC and Bar one of three VC's and bar and the only one to live; retiring to his farm in New Zealand. Mark's mother's father was in REME Bomb disposal, latterly at Donington Park and received the George medal twice and received one of the First George Crosses, but did not survive the war.

To return to the Brough – Mark has a long-standing fascination with the marque, having made a very good living from the vintage motorcycle parts business, a trade in which he is the biggest supplier to the European market. Besides his vintage involvement, Mark has run a motorcycle retail business from Wellington in Somerset. At one time he was the top Triumph dealer in the UK and at another worked for the auctioneers Phillips that is part of the Bonhams company, famous in motorcycle circles for the extraordinary prices knocked down by their gavels in the classic bike world.

While quintessentially English (educated at acclaimed independent Ditcham Park School in Hampshire), Mark lives near Salzburg in Austria.



Lawrence was an enigmatic Englishman who organised an Arab revolt to overthrow centuries of Turkish rule in the Middle East. Lawrence, whose exploits turned him into a reluctant national hero was a great advocate of the Brough Superior. Approximately 3048 motorcycles (19 models) were made in the 21 years of production; around a third of that production still exists. Lawrence owned eight of these motorcycles and died from injuries sustained when he crashed number seven, the eighth was on order. George Bernard Shaw was another among many celebrities who were enthusiastic about Brough motorcycles.

Every motorcycle was test ridden to ensure that it performed to specification, and was personally certified by George Brough. The SS100 model was ridden at 100 mph or more before delivery. The SS80 model was ridden at 80 mph or more before delivery. If any motorcycle did not meet specification, it was returned to the works for rework until it performed properly. The fit and finish was comparable to a Rolls-Royce car, and they were the most expensive road-going motorcycles in the world. No great change there then.



Mark behind the record-breaking Brough 1,100cc SS. The figure on the backdrop is Sam Lovegrove from Henry Cole's TV show *Shed and Buried*.

Here he shares his home with a dog named Benjamin Brough, his Austrian wife, and a 13 year old daughter who has already taken to riding motorcycles.

'Mark describes him as like Van Gogh with both ears cut off.'

Mark describes his riding achievements as few though in 2016 he crashed a 1924 Bert LeVac replica at Punks Peak in the Basque Pyrenees. He showed me a clip of the drama on his phone. This was no flash in the pan minor flicker of flame but a full bodied 'stand well back' fireball of promethean excess. The unplanned stunt earned him the nickname locally 'Hombre de Fuego' (Man of fire or Burning Man). The time of this was 12.30, exactly the same moment as George Cohen (psychiatrist turned motorbike builder) was being lowered into the ground.

Mark is a mustard keen biker who started repairing British motorcycles at the age of 15. He bought his first Brough Superior project aged 20, the experience

confirming an innate appetite for classic engineering that has determined the course of his colourful life so far.

He's also raced a Vincent and side car at the Salzburgring, a contest in which he started last but finished first.

Mark now frequently rides with his daughter Viktoria, the heiress to his empire. A recent joint adventure for father and daughter was the 'Great Mile'

(A 1200 mile, four day motorcycle rally from the northern tip of Scotland to the southern tip of Cornwall; for custom, classic and cafe racer motorcycles.) It was a challenge from which they had to retire due to Viktoria's broken back. Having sustained the injury a month before the ride, her supporting back brace and corset sadly proved inadequate to cope with the speed and rigid end of the 1927 SS100. Anyone who has ever ridden a hard tail will cut Viktoria a little slack I feel and as a one time hard tail chop jockey I can feel the pain.

Mark's business ventures dictate a great deal of travelling which I sense he relishes, his imagination tickled by the reality that in a single day he can have breakfast in Salzburg, lunch in London and dinner in Toulouse; Toulouse being home to the Brough factory.

While Mark intends to bring production to the UK eventually, the Toulouse



Go on then find something less than perfect; you'll struggle with that one

*We say “welcome back” to The Brough Superior,
the Rolls Royce of motorcycling*



connection reflects the French government's €4m investment in his company. It was a business opportunity that our government turned down, though David Cameron personally invited Mark to No10 to talk over the project. Despite the PM's enthusiasm, the opportunity for GB PLC to capitalise on its heritage fell foul of government accountants driven more by caution than imagination – c'est la vie.

Mark is the fourth owner of the Brough company, having bought it in 2008, his purchase essentially amounting to the rights to use the name and a mountain of paperwork.

Backpedalling slightly – it was 2007 when Mark found that the Brough Superior name was for sale in the USA at Jared Zaugg's Legend of the Motorcycles, an American marketing entity.

It took 11 months to purchase and a further two years to establish sufficient intellectual property to proceed with his dream and then things moved very fast.

Mark spoke to veteran journalist and author Alan Cathcart, to help him find a partner to bring his dreams to life.

On July 4 2013, hands were shaken and at the end of July Mark arrived with a petrol tank, a speedo, a pair of wheels and then a complete motorcycle, his Pendine.

By November the new company was at the Milan show with the first prototype.

By 2014 the first running motorcycle was born and 2016 saw the first deliveries of the new Brough Superior to customers.

Mark has gathered some impressive players in the motorcycle market around him to propel a dream into a rolling reality and a viable business. It was in 2013 that Mark met motorcycle designer and constructor Thierry Henriette a fellow Brough devotee who has been designing bikes since 1984. Mark describes him and his team, led by Albert Castaigne to whom Mark is especially grateful for driving the project, as 'the brains behind the new Brough Superior', likening Henriette to 'Van Gogh with both ears cut off.' Eared or not, with Henri and Albert on board the new company began to take shape.

Mark's plan was to build a modern motorcycle in terms of quality, reliability and refinement, while staying faithful to the classic aesthetics of the George Brough originals. Having outlined his aspirations to Henri, as he calls him, the Frenchman got to work and produced a detailed technical image that hit the spot with a sniper's accuracy. As soon as Mark saw Henri's plan he applauded the designer's brilliance in interpreting his dream to a tee. "That's it!" said Mark, "that is the bike we shall build." And build it they did.

Mark tells me: "We have people working for Brough Superior Motorcycles who are as good as anyone in the game."

One of the elite team was there at the Motorcycle Live Show where I met Mark. Mike Russell de Clifford is a motorcycle design engineer with the kind of pedigree and track record that Mark identified as critical to his mission. Mike is the brains behind Moto Corsa, the importer of Brough Superior in the UK.

"In his own right he's a wizard, a technician, a professor," Mark tells me.

British-born Mike has worked on a variety of marques with a special emphasis on the stable of Moto Guzzi that owes him a lot for the refinement or development of every model that has left the Mandello del Lario factory over the last 30 years. He was a major player in the development of the MV Augusta and the Ducati 916.

Besides development, Mike has a passion for restoration and is known for buying wrecks that inspire critical incredulity from friends; the scorn turning to admiration when he returns them to their original condition.

Mark credits Mike with a lot. "He's redesigned everything from the prototype; the engine, the clutch, the run of the chain, the alternator, you name it," says Mark. The project is constantly

evolving, with current efforts addressing the design of the cams, ABS, a turbo option and a phone-activated ignition.

There is something rather intimate about a concept that conjures images of Roy Rogers' horse Trigger who responded to a whistle from his owner and whose life overlapped with the earlier incarnation of the Brough.

Mike runs through a catalogue of technical language that leaves me slightly punch drunk. My notes tell me that the suspension choices involved Ohlins and Paoli.

'This bike is a celebration of elite engineering from its Titanium 7 frame to the exquisitely machined double headlamp shell'

Building a new bike for today's market is a monumental mission of challenges both technical and legal, with everything needing to be type approved to meet pan European regulations. Just as with the original Broughs, many companies are involved in the production, that distinctive long flat tank for example being constructed by aircraft manufacturer Airbus, who have used CNC machining to produce a unique appearance. If a single element of the bike provides the umbilical cord to the past that I sense Mark felt to be essential, then it is this fuel tank.

Astute observers will notice there is no frame downtube. The engine is a stressed member to which everything at the front of the bike is bolted. This of course helps minimise weight and is kind of smart.

To meet a bike like this, close up, feels like a privilege. Virtually all motorcycles produced today are built to a price in pursuit of commercial viability – the Brough by contrast is just so not. Those of an engineering bent will drool over the detail. I'm not an engineer but I had to dab persistently at the corner of my mouth with a wad of tissues I'd fortuitously trousered that morning. As one whose motorcycling roots lie in the realm of impecunious bodging it is wonderful to see such meticulous attention to detail in pursuit of excellence.

I can't avoid the phrase 'steam punk' rising to my keyboard as it just so is. The Brough hides nothing but makes exhibits of every element of its propulsion in a marriage of form with function that has no rival in contemporary engineering. I spent several minutes just staring at the right hand engine cover whose polished finish contrasts so exquisitely with the deep black of the crank case; very much the pearl necklace on a panther and conveying that same sublime sense of menacing superiority. The Brough really is the antithesis of the streamlined sports bikes with fairings sheathed in sponsor stickers. This bike is a celebration of elite engineering from its Titanium 7 frame to the exquisitely machined double headlamp shell.

Mark describes the performance as "calm but impressive. It can be ridden as a normal motorcycle or at 130 mph. It is not heavy at under 200kg and has a wheel base that is about the same as the original Brough Superior's."

The front forks are a special design, pre BMW, pre Hosac, they are Fior developed in Toulouse.



Who is buying Brough Superiors, I asked?

"Many are self made men who started with nothing and love motorcycles. One started his working life filling shelves, others are farmers, riders from all walks of the motorcycling world. We've had some joint purchases where two men have bought one bike between them. I've had customers who have sold five bikes to buy one Brough. What they all have in common is that they really are all genuine lovers of motorcycles. Oh and I must not forget the two Welsh brothers, stonemasons and builders, who bought one each."

The Brough is very much a bespoke project with the cost of a machine rising way above the £58K base price depending on owner specification. What customers are clearly paying for, beyond the mystique of owning perhaps the world's most exclusive motorcycle, is the privilege of being able to indulge their personal style or self indulgent aspirations in an icon that will be tailor made to their every whim, like a Saville Row suit or a personally balanced Purdey shotgun.

Mark emphasises that there is a strong customer-led element to the development of the 21st century Brough, the refinement

of individual bikes emerging from a coalition of consciousness between factory and client.

Mark has now founded a new company in England, for 2018. Brough Superior GB Ltd. GB? George Brough? Great Britain? With the celebrated brand-building guru Gary Burnand at the helm as MD, BS GB Ltd, will have entered the fashion world at Pitti in Florence by the time this is published. It will have been complemented by such sympathetic products as helmets by Davida with accompanying style coded luggage that is in the pipeline as I write this.

There's something about the emergence of this elite machine which resonates with a broader cultural trend in motorcycling that has seen the arrival of such phenomena as the Bike Shed and the Distinguished Gentleman's Ride. In a nutshell it is the gentrification of motorcycling. Inevitably there will be some who will resent this evolution just as people resented the establishment of HOG and wrongly predicted its transience.

I love the evolution because I love the diversity of motorcycling and the growing impossibility of pigeonholing bikers by a set of preconceived criteria.

I am reminded of a Springsteen line – "whatever dies some day comes back again." There is something so fundamentally reassuring about that. The ROAD salutes Mark Upham and his team of engineering artists, we salute the French government for their faith in a British icon and we say "welcome back" to The Brough Superior, The Rolls Royce of motorcycling.

T E Lawrence would approve.

