

## WHITHER TRIALS

Just back from the Youghal Clubs two championship trials (one National and one Southern Centre) at the Vee on the Tipperary/Waterford border. Two excellent events well received by the riders despite very cold and, later, wet conditions.

But I came away worried....worried about the ancient and honourable sport of motorcycle trials. Despite their championship status and being held on a bank holiday weekend there were only 37 starters in the National event and 27 in the Southern Centre one. What is happening to Trials? Where have all the riders gone? And where have all the supporters gone? Friends and relations of riders who in other days would have been active in the organising and running of the event as observers and course setters and the like are nowhere to be seen. The immediate result of this dearth of helpers was that at The Vee a number of club riders had to act as observers and forego taking part. That is a sad situation. This state of affairs is in no way particular to the recent Easter trials. Most trials in the Southern Centre are organised by a very small (I mean less than a handful) of loyal club members who turn out regularly to set courses and to run the event on the day with the hope that sufficient observers can be magicked up out thin air....

It is absolutely apparent to me that the enthusiasm of these stalwarts is running out and I don't blame them. Not often thanked and frequently criticised there is no fun in the sport for these people..... and I saw this last weekend. So no organisers....no trials.

I have racked my brains to try and put a finger on what is wrong..... but it is difficult to identify where the problems are. We have good riders on good machinery who are well able to hold their own in international events. Almost all riders give the impression that they enjoy riding...why wouldn't they...no one is making them take part but the numbers continue to fall.

Has the nature of motorcycle sport changed fundamentally? At the very top end it is a highly specialised professional business...glamorous but accessible only to a small number of riders but attractive to spectators who are drawn to the commercial glitz. It appears to me that at club level i.e. where the vast majority of riders are, the attraction of just riding ones bike in competitive trials at whatever level one is at, and being prepared to bust a gut to get to the finish has lost its appeal. Trials have become very much simplified... performance in observed sections seems to be all that matters. Leaping off a big rock with all the right gear on to make an impressive Facebook photo seems often to be the main aim. The pleasure of covering big distances in wild places, finding your way, keeping the machine going or even (dare I say it) the concept of reliability using time controls, special tests and the like seems to be totally

forgotten. A big flat field with sections conveniently spaced round the edge and lunch in the middle seems to be the ideal of many of our younger riders. Why is this? Have trials outlived their function? An anachronistic throwback, perhaps, to the days of belt drive and Barbour jackets? Perhaps we should call it a day and retire to the convenience of arena trials (no difficulties with land owners) or better still indoor trials where no one gets wet and burgers and beer are available..... Would we miss the hardships of traditional trials? Just head for the arena, pay your entry to the commercial organisers and let the gawking, paying spectators pick up the tab..... No, I don't think we are there yet (or anywhere near it). The Scottish Six Days Trial (which incorporates all the extra elements mentioned earlier) is annually oversubscribed and the retrospective pleasure and satisfaction experienced by the riders in that ancient and traditional event far outweighs that of six simple highly technical one day trials. Organised and competitive trials as part of a season long championship are, to me, the kernel of our sport. Riding across the hills for a non competitive days outing with ones pals is another integral part of the game and great fun too. 'Go-as-you-please' trials where riders observe each other may sort the observer problem but (as I see it) lack the connection to the bigger national (or international) picture and do not improve standards. Recreation has been, and is changing. At one time people had one sport or interest (frequently because they couldn't afford more) and ones sport and social life were intertwined and the trial at the weekend was just one part of their motorcycling life both competitively and socially. Now people frequently have a number of different interests and sports. There is more activity but less involvement. Increased affluence has allowed us to pay and play in a less involved way with less commitment. Communication is continual (by various electronic means) so that we are never 100% there. (or here). We have become used to just turning up and doing our (rather self centred) thing with out wondering how the trial appeared for us ready-to-go on the side of the mountain. I understand that this is the situation in many branches of our sport. Before the Youghal lads and the small band of similarity committed organisers in the tiny remnants of other clubs finally throw in the towel it is to be hoped that the riders who enjoy our sport will realise that they and their friends are a vital component of what goes on. Riders must realise that if they want trials then they have to be involved in the organising. But who will tell them? Perhaps, too, the governing body of motorcycling, Motorcycling Ireland, might descend from its rather disconnected pedestal and become involved in the promotion of sporting motorcycle clubs before they are left with no one to govern....!

That's enough. I do not have the answers. Perhaps there aren't any. Perhaps we are trying to square a circle. But if competitive trials were to disappear I for one would be very sad because they are, in my opinion, a fundamental part of motorcycle sport.

Pat Ewen. April 2018.