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TAKING THE LEAD
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GAME-CHANGING CLUB

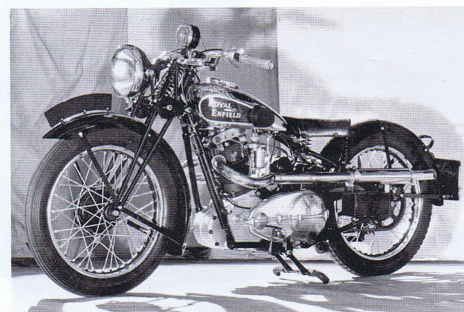
Clockwise from below: Royal Enfield's new Interceptor street bike, £5,995. The company's first Bullet from 1932. Its new Continental GT café racer, £5,995. Royal Enfield CEO Siddhartha Lal



KINGS OF THE ROAD



Classic Indian brand Royal Enfield is accelerating back into the limelight with bikes that combine retro styling with impeccable performance and an eco-friendly heart. Simon de Burton reports



The future of motorcycling? It could well be in the past. That's what Siddhartha Lal believes – and he should know because he runs Royal Enfield, the India-based company that's been building shamelessly old-fashioned, low-tech machines at its Chennai factories for more than 60 years and now hopes to capitalise on the increasing desire of many of us to return to a slower, simpler pace of life.

Well, they do say that what goes around comes around – but rarely does it do so in quite the way that it has with Royal Enfield, the once truly British marque that began in 1851 as a maker of sewing needles, before winning a contract from the Royal Small Arms Factory in Enfield, north London, to create precision parts for firearms.

The deal gave the company both its name and its motto – “Made like a Gun” – which alludes to the quality of the motorbikes it began to build

in 1901 and which it later exported to India in large numbers for police and military use.

By 1955, the Bullet model was so in demand that Madras Motors began assembling machines from parts imported from England under the Enfield of India name. Within two years it was making components in-house and building bikes from the ground up under licence – and while the original, UK-based Royal Enfield marque went bust in 1970, the Indian operation has continued as an independent entity ever since.

By dint of its robustness and simplicity, the single-cylinder Bullet came to be regarded as India's ultimate in two-wheeled transport and a machine to which every family aspired. Throughout the country, Bullets were used for everything from helping to maintain law and order to carrying entire families from A to B, for moving unlikely objects (including animals) and for traversing seemingly impassable roads.

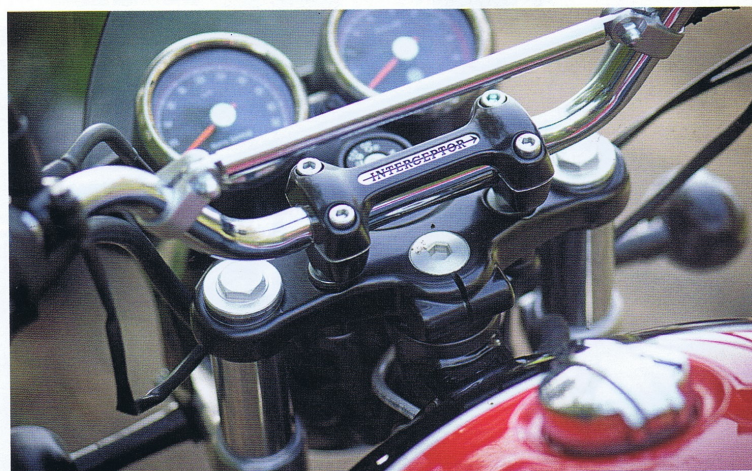
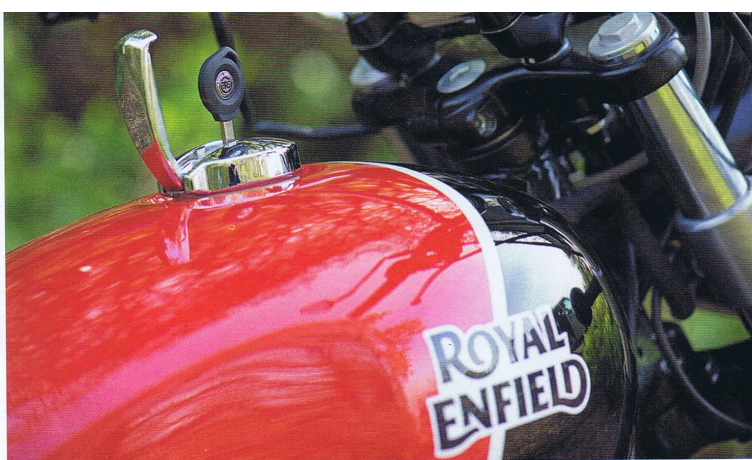
But while quaintly retro in appearance, the Bullet remained mechanically unchanged for 40 years and was being left behind in terms of reliability, performance and ease of use by smaller, lighter, better-engineered competitors pouring into India from China and Japan. Exports were hit, too, by the Bullet's unacceptable emission levels and underperforming brakes.

Had it not been for Lal, Royal Enfield's star might not be in the ascendant once more. In 1994, the marque was acquired by his family firm – the giant Eicher Motors engineering group – as a loss-making concern that was building fewer than 20,000 machines per year and facing the axe. In 2000, Lal was appointed CEO of Royal Enfield at the age of 26 because, he says, "things couldn't get any worse".

He worked on improving build quality and reliability, added fuel injection to make the Bullet run cleaner, upgraded to a disc brake system and introduced the luxury of electric start. By 2010, annual production grew to 50,000 machines – helped, serendipitously, by the growing trend for bikes with old-school looks. By the end of last year, the number had soared to close on 800,000 and made the marque the world's largest manufacturer of mid-sized motorcycles.

Currently around 95 per cent of Royal Enfield's production is for the domestic market, but Lal is now poised to take the firm properly international following the opening of a state-of-the-art technical centre at the UK's Bruntingthorpe Proving Ground in Leicestershire – a move to build on its existing presence in Europe and the US and spearhead expansion into new regions including South America and Southeast Asia, where the large majority of motorcycles currently sold are Japanese.

And Royal Enfield's main weapons in its campaign for globalisation are its first entirely new models since the original bikes were manufactured in India 63 years ago. Designed as affordable competitors



From top: the Interceptor has a classic-but-modern air-cooled engine, has been subjected to 1,500 hours of testing at full throttle, and draws on key design elements from the original model. Royal Enfield fans join the company's One Ride event in Pune

To ensure sharp handling Royal Enfield called on former Ducati star designer Pierre Terblanche to head up the design department

to Harley-Davidson's Sportster and Triumph's Bonneville ranges, the new arrivals take the form of the Interceptor street bike (£5,995, pictured above and on previous page) and the slightly sportier-looking Continental GT café racer (£5,995, pictured on previous page), and instead of the Bullet's familiar 350cc or 500cc single-cylinder engines they have specially developed, twin-cylinder, 650cc units.

Both have been designed to appeal to new motorcyclists and the less experienced, while still being of interest to hardened riders who appreciate the history and heritage of British motorcycle manufacturing and who are looking for a machine that combines classic design with modern reliability.

To get the required "look", the firm hunted down and bought back various examples of British-built Royal Enfield models from the 1950s and '60s, including

several versions of the original Interceptor, a high-performance twin-cylinder machine built in 1960-70. These were carefully studied in order to invoke (rather than simply copy) the best styling elements from the past and create a traditional-looking motorcycle with a classic-but-modern air-cooled engine that would make the lineage of the bikes instantly recognisable.

To ensure sharp handling and consistent production, meanwhile, Royal Enfield acquired the highly respected UK frame builder Harris Performance lock, stock and barrel and called on former Ducati star designer Pierre Terblanche to head up the design department.

The result is a pair of motorcycles that appear to have succeeded in capturing the current two-wheeled zeitgeist that eschews plastic-clad, aerodynamically efficient bikes with huge power outputs in favour of a more laidback, old-school look.

Indeed, with engines that produce a gentle 47hp, neither model offers much competition to similar-capacity Japanese sports bikes in the performance stakes – but according to Lal, high speeds and blistering acceleration have never been anywhere near the top





Royal Enfield also sells a clothing line in its stores, which offer club-like surroundings

of Royal Enfield's design briefs for the twin-cylinder machines since they were first drawn up in 2014.

"The whole point was to make a bike that would be an easy step up from the Bullet and offer pure riding pleasure without being overly challenging to anyone," explains Lal. "The Interceptor and Continental GT twin-cylinder machines are intended to appeal to a large number of buyers by being affordable and stylish as well as easy and fun to ride – we've tried to create something that is both accessible and aspirational but also long-lasting, a machine that an owner will build a relationship with and plan to keep for a long time."

Lal believes, too, that the current popularity of retro-looking bikes in the café racer, bobber and "street" styles is here to stay, partly as a result of a gradual shift in our outlook on consumerism.

"The irony is that for more than 60 years Royal Enfield has been building the sort of motorcycles that other manufacturers are only recently starting

to produce as side products in an effort to capitalise on a growing market. We have never been the kind of company that makes our own bikes redundant or worked to a programme of planned obsolescence – apart from anything, that strategy wouldn't succeed in our domestic market where the longevity of a motorcycle is key. The idea of sustainability, simplicity and permanence is becoming more important to people across the board, and that fits in perfectly with what Royal Enfield has always been about," adds Lal.

"Owning a motorcycle and passing it on is part of everyone's life where I come from, so in designing these models, we have asked ourselves what a young person will think of them in 20 years' time and tried to create something that they will regard as a thing of beauty rather than a machine that might once have seemed state-of-the-art but failed to grow old gracefully."

The marque's global aspirations, however, have necessitated a rethink of Royal Enfield's test and

development programme and required an investment last year of \$120m. In India, motorcycling mainly takes place in hot weather at low speeds and on bad roads, whereas in Europe and North America speeds are higher, weather is milder and surfaces are faster – which is partly why the firm decided to establish its UK technical centre and why the Interceptor and Continental GT twin-cylinder bikes have been subjected to 1,500 hours of being run at full throttle and ridden 1,000,000km on roads in both Britain and India.

Lal has also rethought the way in which Royal Enfields are marketed. On its home turf, the name is universally regarded with respect, partly as a result of its associations with the police and army, which have given its machines a gentlemanly image.

With the arrival of the new models, however, the firm hopes to tap into a type of motorcycling lifestyle in which individuality is key, both in terms of the rider and the bike. Since 2010, the average customer age in India has dropped from 45 to 26 and buyers now typically have more disposable income. To that end, Royal Enfield has developed an extensive range of customising accessories for the new bikes, is growing its clothing line (pictured left), rolling out a comprehensive programme of rental and tour services and opening a worldwide network of stores in which sales, spare parts, customising products and accessories are offered in club-like surroundings.

"We don't just want to be a company that shifts metal," says Lal. "Our aim is to create an entire ecosystem around the Royal Enfield marque – but, in one way or another, everything we do must have ties to the bikes and add value to owning them. Even if the market seems to be in a totally different place, this is where we're going to play. And we'll never change our philosophy of making products that are not intended to be disposed of."

Imagine the CEO of a consumer electronics company saying that... ♦ royalenfield.com



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