

## The Danish Nimbus

We don't know who he was, or exactly where he came from. Neither is it known where he was going or even when he arrived, but what we do know is that forty odd years ago a student set off from his native Denmark on a bike that was a few years older than himself and rode as far as Dublin before the valves on his machine coughed their final protest and expired. Then, for the princely sum of £12, he secured it a new owner and slipped from its life forever. That is how the Nimbus came to Ireland and she has been here ever since.

For nigh on thirty of those years the bike has belonged to Willie Anderson of Carlow, not just owned, but ridden, restored and tended to gently. It is part of his life and there is not a soul alive who could talk him into parting with it. And what a rare bird she is, not just because she is the only known example over here but mainly for her design and construction which is fairly unique and oddball in itself.

It doesn't really strike you at first glance, just another continental from the thirties, pretty in a way but not a trendsetting TT winner so let's move on. But take another look, is that engine really mounted longitudinally, four cylinders as well? Must be shaft driven then, and she is. And the petrol tank, it sits inside the frame. How so, surely the frame tubes get in the way? But observe again and there are no tubes, just lengths of flat steel bar riveted, yes riveted, to one another to form the frame.

Now this really is curious and the interest mounts. When was she made? Well the frame and engine in 1937 but the front end was replaced at a later unknown date. Who made her? Would you believe Nilfisk, the very same company that is famous for its industrial vacuum and floor cleaners! They made motorbikes as well? Yes, but only two different models and this is the second of them, first produced in 1934 and then continued in production until 1959 more or less unchanged. The questions mount as the realisation sinks in that this is most defiantly something different.

So let's start again with the Danish company itself. It was founded by a young electrical engineer by the name of P.A. Fisker who joined forces with an old friend, Mr Neilson around 1910, the year in which they patented their portable vacuum cleaner. Sales boomed with up to half the product being exported, notably to Germany. Come the end of WW1 however and this particular market collapsed leading them to diversify into motorcycles with the first model, nicknamed the Stovepipe, being launched in 1919. Approximately 1,250 of these were manufactured up until 1928 when a recovering export market for the electrical products squeezed them out of the factory. This healthy state of sales was short lived however, and with the onset of the 1930's depression Nilfisk once again found themselves looking to diversify and so they turned to motorcycles to see them through the hard times as before, which is how the Bumblebee, as it became known, was brought into this world.

Quite why they settled on this method of construction is lost in the mists of time but it can be imagined that pressing and riveting of flat bar and sheet was an easier skill for the workforce to learn than the brazing of metal tubes, especially if we think of the bike as a stop gap measure where it was not intended to invest heavily in either machinery or training for a brand new product line. But whatever the reasons it works very well for even with a cast iron block and an ignition system that would serve well as ballast on a trawler she weighs in at around 180 kg. A weight that compares favourably with today's 750cc tourer's where 200kg is the norm, although it must be said that modern frames often have four times as much power to cope with.

This sounds all very basic, even prehistoric in fact, but there was one great innovation that sets this machine apart and that is the appearance of telescopic front forks. Is there a mainstream motorcycle built today that does not have this form of front suspension? And here it is, appearing for the first time on a bike that few have even heard of let alone seen. BMW may dispute this claim, and it is true that their system, introduced the following year, had hydraulic dampening which the Nimbus did not. It is also true that the German giant experimented regularly with new front wheel mounting arrangements but 99.9% of bikes sold worldwide are steered around corners and over bumps by this invention which seems to suggest that Nilfisk were on to something and got it right first.

So enough of the history and lets have a look at this particular example to see how she has fared over the years. Remarkably well it seems for Willie is not one to begrudge an expense to keep her in top form. It is no show bike either for she has taken her owner on many a trip around the country as well a journey across to Wales a year or two back. A full strip down and rebuild was undertaken in 2003 which included replacing all the usual suspects such as the wiring loom, exhaust and clutch lining etc which may sound a tricky job but with around 4,000 of these machines still running out of the 12,000 originally made there is a good supply of parts and expertise at the end of the phone, just so long as that other end is in Denmark. Indeed, such was their popularity and robustness in her home country that there is quite a strong club scene devoted to the marque and even the Danish post office was still using them up until 1978, nearly 30 years after the last was one was built.

It is, above all, a very easy machine to ride. Willie was kind enough to let me loose on it for a few minutes and after a dozen or so uncertain yards on loose gravel I suddenly found myself at home on something rather fun and incredibly comfortable. The gear selection is not quite what we have come to expect today with the toe piece a lot further forward of the foot peg than modern riders are used to. Probably a reflection on the fact that gear changes were simply not required on a frequent basis given the engines ability to pull from nowhere. It fired up easily on the kick start after a little fiddling with the choke and buzzed along nicely when the revs were up, hence its nickname of 'The Bumblebee' which is very apt, particularly on the fine spring morning that I visited her.

Willie's machine is a Nimbus Luxus, providing 22hp and a leisurely 50 -55 mph cruising speed in the top of her three gears, although as Willie points out, she has in fact got seven

gears, "it's just that four of them are neutral!" The final drive at the hub comes with a choice of gearing. As factory standard it has a fairly low reduction fitted to facilitate the running of a sidecar but this is replaceable with something a little quicker if the bike is run solo and this conversion was undertaken fairly early on in Willie's stewardship. Likewise there is now available a four speed box but with the flexibility of the engine and the taller gearing it is felt that this is not really warranted for the time being. The frame is solid with no rear suspension but the seats provide all the comfort one requires. They are large and padded and are held up by two rubber bands at the rear and a hinge attachment at the front. It really is a most comfortable arrangement and spending a few hours sat upon them would not induce the eye watering gait that often accompanies the climbing off of the average Japanese rocket machine. In fact the whole thing is quite restrained and gentlemanly and watching Willie sitting comfortably on the machine as it bowled along the pot holed lanes was to witness motorcycling of a type as far removed from today's tyre smoking antics as one could imagine. It really sets a different pace of life.

The engine itself is a 746cc in line four cylinder fourstroke set longitudinally and held in place by four bolts. The layout is simplicity itself with the gearbox mounted directly behind the engine and the drive shaft emerging in line with the reduction gear mounted on the hub of the rear wheel. It was Nilfisk's own engine and remained more or less unchanged throughout its production life. The four cylinders were air cooled although No3 could often overheat due to the high temperature of the air after it had passed over 1&2 and it not having No 4's advantage of only one neighbour. The valve stems and springs lie outside of the engine block and are driven from a single overhead cam that runs along the top of the engine which in turn is driven from a shaft that runs vertically up the front end of the block, powering the 6V dynamo as it does so. This cam arrangement is really quite a modern way of doing things and yet the external valve gear harks back to the Edwardian times. Such a mix and match of ideas and yet it works so beautifully.

As well as it seems to work Willie still has reservations about the design of the engine. He points out that the crankshaft is mounted on only two main roller bearings; one at each end and with no intermediate support which he fears must induce a fair amount of flexing under load. The configuration may lead to a more compact engine but the stress placed upon these bearings and the crank itself must be quite considerable, a situation not helped by the fact that it relies on splash lubrication rather than any forced oil feed. If a central bearing had been fitted then a gap between cylinders 2 and 3 would have been created, alleviating the cooling problem, but this is very much an academic argument as very little development work went into the bike as a whole during its life and there is little point in trying to right the wrongs of yesteryear now.

Looking at it now we can admire a rather interesting and graceful piece of engineering and perhaps shake our head sadly at the thought of what might have been if only more had been spent on development but that is to miss the point in a way. The Nimbus was created in response to a crisis and used some fairly original thinking in its design and construction. The fact that it needed very little alteration during its life was a credit to the draughtsmen and engineers who worked on it and one cannot but help think that Mr P.A.

Fisker himself had a large input into the machine. He obviously had a keen interest in motorcycling for he is pictured sitting proudly upon a 'Stovepipe' on the Nilfisk website. If the overall layout and appearance owed anything to alternative makes then it is Wilkinson TAC of 1909-1916 which may have inspired more than any other. Strangely enough this motorcycle was also built in response to a decline in the company's usual market, the making of swords in this case, and again, production was abandoned when sales of their traditional products recovered.

All good things must come to an end though and after some rather half hearted attempts at producing some new models in the 1950's Nilfisk bowed out of the automotive industry in 1959 to concentrate on their core business. No doubt the decision to do so was encouraged by the advent of cheaper cars, the VW Beetle had arrived and cost less than a Nimbus and sidecar but this was the state of play worldwide and all bike manufacturers were feeling the squeeze, except of course in Japan, but that's another story.