

Wilkinson

The Edwardian era was, if nothing else, the pinnacle of rigid class immobility. The hoi polli were to know their place whilst the gentry were to lead a life of leisure if not decadence. This would appear to be how the almighty had ordained things and although the vulgar were by degrees agitated, and the common woman was demanding the right to vote no less, the upper classes could carry on pretending that the sun would never set on the British Empire so they might as well get on with their various pursuits.

Then, as now, the disposal of one's wealth was in no way restrained by a lack of people willing to help you in the noble practice of spending money and in the Wilkinson T.A.C. we have a delightful example how a well known household name diversified into the production of luxury goods in a bid to bolster their main enterprise which was suffering from a lack of wars.

Wilkinson & Son were originally gunsmiths and the sword making business a sideline but over the years blades became the greater part of the business and so the name changed to Wilkinson Sword as we know the company today. How exactly they became involved in motorcycle manufacture is somewhat clouded in mystery yet it is worth noting that the company had astutely moved into premises adjacent to the war office, their largest customer, in Pall Mall and as such they may have got to know about a certain Mr P.G. Tacchi who had tried to interest the government in his design of a motorcycle upon the handlebars of which he had fitted a maxim machine gun. Now, whilst many of us bikers may applaud such a development today the war office remained somewhat unmoved by the idea and so the disappointed inventor adapted his design to more civil uses, the carriage of the Edwardian gentleman upon his adventures being one of them.

Kitting out such intrepid souls with the necessary hardware for exploration such as knives and guns was another major part of Wilkinson Sword's business so adding a rather fearsome motorcycle to the brand would seem a logical move. It must be noted however that this was not their first attempt but the Antoine powered machine of 1903 had not proved successful. Better luck was to be enjoyed with Tacchi's motorcycle though, some 250 being built between its launch in 1909 and its eventual demise in 1916 due to the constraints of wartime production and, no doubt, the shortage of potential buyers who were unfortunately being removed from the market in the trenches.

The model shown here is from 1910 for it is fitted with a steering wheel instead of handlebars which not only served to elevate it above the more common machines but must have been the very devil when it came to contra steering. The plush seat and braised tubular frame spoke of craftsmanship and elegance whilst the tiny twin drum brakes on the rear wheel only displayed a greater faith in fate than engineering principle. The engine is an inline four of 848cc powering the rear wheel by shaft and worm drive at the hub. Later models had a more efficient bevel gear as well as proper handlebars and it would have all combined to produce the requisite terror from horses, respect from the peasants and blushing admiration from the ladies. History does not

record whether it was incumbent upon the rider to possess a dashing pointed waxed moustache to be stroked menacingly whilst under way but one rather fancies that how the bike was meant to be ridden.

This particular model can be found at the German Motorcycle Museum at Neckersulm, Baden-Württemberg where there are many other fine machines to be appreciated.