

# END *to* END

## ON VENOM AND COMMANDO

*An illustrated diary by Alan Morris*

EVER SINCE I STARTED THIS TWO-WHEELED LARK, back in the summer of '53, I've been keen on the idea of long-distance endurance riding and racing. Yet all I managed in the early days was the odd weekend where I would get in as many miles as I could on my 1946 250 BSA C11, with its rigid rear end and three-speed gearbox. Those years of masochism were numbered, although I didn't realize this until I attended the 1956 Motor Cycle Show where I quickly became fascinated by that magical marque called Velocette. Two years later I bought my own, a Viper, followed in 1960 by a brand new example of the Venom which I picked up from Messrs L Stevens of London. This, to me, was the ultimate in motorcycles, the machine which would fulfil all my dreams of adventure in the world of motorcycling!

Since then, the Venom has seen me safely through many a road trial, race meeting and rally — the Dragon, St George and ACU — not to mention trips abroad and visits to the Isle of Man during TT week. I've rarely used it for hacking backwards and forwards to work in the City: it doesn't deserve such treatment, but likes the opportunity to really stretch its legs. Land's End to John O'Groats is a journey that has long appealed to me, and after reading accounts of the pioneering runs made by other motorcyclists, I was hooked on the idea of doing the same trip on the Venom.

My idea was to go downhill, starting at 11 o'clock in the morning in Scotland, and reach Land's End within twenty-four hours. The mid-morning start would mean that most of the night driving would be on motorways, a good test for the rider, machine and Miller electrics, as well as being convenient for food and fuel. My old friend Roy Neil was persuaded to join me, but it took some time before a suitable bike could be sorted out. Unfortunately, he had sold his Venom and was trying out a Honda 400. After a week's riding, Roy decided that he didn't want the Japanese machine after all, considered getting a Goldie and, a few anxious weeks later, settled for a 1973 Norton Commando instead. It was going to be a British do after all!

Preparation of the Velo started with 93,300 on the clock. The machine had been running well for the past four years, but it was time for a de-coke. I checked out the crankcase and decided that as there was nothing drastically wrong, it was best left alone. The mains, which I had replaced at 61,000 miles, were still running perfectly. As for the big end, well, they just don't make them like that any more — the original still seemed good enough to get right round the clock. The little end, on the other hand, had to be renewed: the new one was reamed out to a slightly loose fit, in keeping with the rest of the engine.

Although the valve seats were on the limit, the valve guides slightly worn and the cylinder head now on its third inlet (though still sporting its original exhaust valve) the whole lot was just

going to have to do. The Alfin barrel was on its second rebore (plus 0.040) with 32,000 miles to its credit; the bore was unmarked and compression was still remarkably good. After giving everything a thorough clean, I bolted it back together and the engine fired on its second kick. The gearbox has always been trouble-free so I simply changed the oil. The primary chain had 5,000 miles to its credit and was still looking good, but I replaced the secondary one with a new Renolds. Moving on to the clutch, I recorked the chainwheel which had done umpteen thousands of miles. All of the clutch plates seemed to be in excellent condition; however, I decided it would be wise to replace the notorious thrust race.

The Avon tyres had seen a fair mileage, but there was still plenty of tread on them; I replaced the front inner tube, balanced both wheels and replaced the original head races with a set of Timken rollers from our friend Ralph Seymour. I discovered that the centre-stand was in urgent need of attention, so I had the eyes reamed out and new bushes turned up, making them perfect and just like new. As the 60 watt Miller dynamo was working, I left the thing well alone, but although, at four years of age, the Exide battery was getting on a bit, I had no time to replace it.

Preparation completed, I allowed the Venom a good testing period and took it out on several trips, the last being the ACU National Rally. And the verdict? Except for an oil leak down one of the cylinder bolts, everything was going well. The only thing that worried me was that there did seem to be more vibration than usual, though perhaps this was to be expected with such an old engine?

BILLERICAY, SUNDAY 5 SEPTEMBER. *We have an early start in brilliant sunshine — Weather changes dramatically in Lake District — Spend congenial evening in Cumbrian public house.* Up with the lark and time for final packing and checking over of all the gear. (Bet your best riding boots I'll forget something or other!). 9.15 am, the Commando bumbles down the front drive with Roy aboard, looking pleased about the weather. Sun still shining brightly as my wife takes a few important snaps. 10.20 am, I kick the Velo into life and, in excitement, almost forget family farewells.

Soon well on our way: A414, A10, A14, followed by A1; our destination today is a friend's abode near Ambleside, Cumbria. Good to leave A1 and get the Velo onto the "swervery" of A65, through Skipton and on towards Kendal. As we approach Kendal, weather changes drastically. Rain coming down in buckets. Arrive at our destination like a pair of drowned rats, but friendly greetings and a grand supper soon make up for wet discomfort. Finish off evening at local hostelry, appropriately named The Drunken Duck! Camp beds seem remarkably comfortable and we sleep like logs.

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FORT WILLIAM, MONDAY 6 SEPTEMBER. *Good weather — Norton's carb blows — Lunch of "haggis pie" sustains us through fearful rainstorm — Roy mislays footwear — B&B at Fort William a great disappointment.*

Awake to clear blue sky, although Roy refuses, at first, to believe me. After hearty breakfast we inspect our wet gear and machines. Our friends wish us luck as, once again, we make our way northwards.

As we approach Carlisle, my nylon jacket still feels damp. The Norton has sprung a bad leak at the carb and we purchase new gaskets and fuel pipe. Maintenance complete, we leave Carlisle and soon cross border into Scotland where we have a bite to eat (haggis pie, according to Roy). Weather still reasonable but strong headwinds make Venom work hard as we push along M80 towards Stirling. From there we cruise at around the 70 mark to Callander where scenery becomes more magnificent and majestic. Approaching Glencoe, rain starts again and up ahead looks as black as Doomsday. Holy conrods! It's like driving into Hell. The rain lashes down, high winds whip across our path, but the Velo never misses a beat.

Up ahead I spot a solitary motorcycle — a 750 Suzuki, two-up with camping gear, taking it pretty easy. We overtake and between the mountains I spot a glimmer of light. The Norton close behind me, I push on to drier parts. We reach Fort William — by now quite dry — and obtain, with some difficulty, accommodation in a Bed and Breakfast. Disaster! Roy discovers he's left his only pair of shoes at Ambleside! Dumping our gear, we hurry into town (Derri boots and all) for a good meal and well-earned pint. Due to diabolical plumbing, we hardly get a wink of sleep! *Can't and won't* recommend this place to anyone.

JOHN O' GROATS, TUESDAY 7 SEPTEMBER. *Start day in glorious sunshine and swap bikes for a quick blast up A833 — Find I prefer my Velo in the wet — Roy opens up the Commando but quickly loses exhaust rings — We stay at Seaview Hotel, which proves a haven of rest and good service.* Leave Fort William at noon and again join the A82. Good weather and marvellous scenery makes it a sheer pleasure to be motorcycling. But for persistence of Velo's oil leak, both machines running well. Stop on A833 to pick heather for luck. This is real motorcycling country! We decide to swap machines: the Norton seems massive and heavy after the Velo, but no problems once on the move. Has plenty of power, combined with good handling, as I find on this twisty, narrow road. All too soon rain starts chucking it down. I pull in, glad to get back on the Venom which feels much safer under these conditions. (Sorry Roy!).

Join A9, a favourite route with end-to-end pioneers. However, we have done our homework and will be coming down west side of Scotland using A82. It's the A9 all the way now. Roy decides to give the Commando its head and disappears from view. Not long afterwards, I find him on side of road doing a bit of emergency maintenance. Those damned exhaust rings have come loose and one has actually unscrewed itself from the head and is dangling on bottom of pipe. We fix it temporarily and push on. Mountainous scenery now disappearing, but still fairly hilly, especially around Wick where we stop for quick cuppa. Only 6p per cup!

At last we are nearing our destination, John O'Groats, and

scenery changes yet again. Flat, long stretches of road, the sun beginning to sink low, and beneath me the Velo thumping with regularity. Small group of buildings appear on horizon. One is the Seaview Hotel where we will recuperate for a night or two. We pull into the forecourt, struggle to put our respective machines on their centre-stands and stagger into the hotel where proprietress gives us a warm welcome. This is a one star hotel with five star service! After hearty meal we somehow end up in bar.

JOHN O' GROATS, WEDNESDAY 8 SEPTEMBER. *More rain — Roy and I prepare machines for the mission to come — Enjoy a wee dram or two and, as a consequence, forget to adjust the Venom's headlamp.*

A day of relaxation and final checking over of machinery. Early morning spent looking round harbour and picking our point of departure for 11 o'clock tomorrow morning. In this part of Scotland weather changes so rapidly, it's unbelievable. Rain showers make it impossible to check machines until later in the day when weather clears.

Roy manages his maintenance on the Commando much more quickly than I do the Velo (must be getting old). Nuts on fairing and front mudguard need tightening; oil tank, modified to be rubber mounted, is also on the loose side. Both chains need slight adjustment which I follow up with the Duckhams Chainguard treatment — great stuff! Oil leak is no worse, but then, it wouldn't be a Velo if it was totally oil-tight. Would like to tinker for another hour at least, but Roy is getting impatient and says couple of pints waiting for us at bar. All I have left is the headlamp to set up. Plod off to only petrol pump in town and fill the three-gallon tank to the brim. A final blast down one of those beautiful, long stretches of road proves all is well.

Afternoon spent exercising legs on five-mile walk to Duncansby Head, Roy in his Derri boots, of course. Back to hotel for evening meal and, would you believe it, we end up in that dreaded bar again! Schedule does not include final training session on good scotch, but that is what transpires. Forget to set headlamp — oh well, to hell with it! Do hope we don't have cause to regret this tomorrow.

BASE CAMP, THURSDAY 9 SEPTEMBER. *The longest day and night — Machines stand up though Norton almost runs out of illumination — My old back trouble starts playing me up — Roy has difficulty keeping awake.*

Come to at about 7 o'clock and lie there for some time thinking about the day ahead. Slowly make our way down to breakfast table. Can hardly believe it — no hangover! Both feel fine and eat a hearty breakfast. Pack our gear, pay our hotel bill and wonder, for umpteenth time, if we've left anything behind. I nip over to post office to send important postcard to Mr Geoff Blanthorn, editor of *Fishtail*, the Velocette Owners' Club magazine.

Air vibrates as two British machines leave the forecourt for northernmost point of the British Isles (northernmost on the road, that is). Sun scorches our eyes as we await the bewitching hour of eleven. A motorcycle pulls up alongside us: it's the two chaps on a Suzuki we passed at Glencoe. They are intrigued by our plans but don't envy us our task. A quick photo and time check and at last the hour arrives. It's now downhill all the way...

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**11am JOHN O'GROATS**

Held up by roadworks within minutes of starting. **6 min delay**

**64 MILES: 1ST STOP**

Raining heavily: I pull in to put on orange jacket. This is also a good excuse for getting off the machine as am suffering from severe back pains (an old trouble!). **10 min delay**

**75 MILES: THE MOUND**

Mileage recorder on Velo spot-on (according to AA maps). Back pains easing.

**98 MILES: 2ND STOP**

Norton exhaust ring comes adrift again. Roy has been trying to do it up going along, but now gives it some drastic treatment. Doesn't think it will come loose again. **15 min delay**



**INVERGARRY: 3RD STOP**

Had planned to refuel here, but petrol station has run out of 4 star. We push on. Time 2.50pm. **5 min delay**

**160 MILES: 4TH STOP**

Refuel. Now on look-out for place to eat. **10 min delay**

**SPEAN BRIDGE: 5TH STOP**

Pull in for meal. Take off all riding gear only to find they are serving high teas only. **12 min delay**

**GLENCOE: 6TH STOP  
(216 MILES)**

4.35pm. Both starving. Tea and cheese sandwiches obtained at small wayside cottage. **35 min delay**



**LOCHEARNHEAD**

Now behind schedule and feeling a sense of urgency to move faster. Norton must be pushing the ton. Velo going well but quickly losing sight of Roy. Weather and road conditions very good.

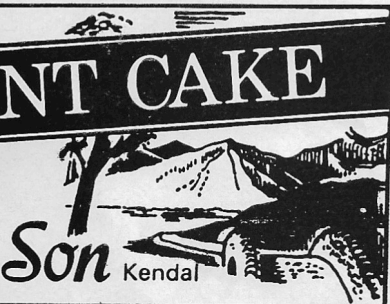
Police diversion owing to accident ahead. Have to take A85 (our route should have been along A84). Traffic builds up and slows us down.

**COMRIE: 7TH STOP  
(282 MILES)**

Norton pulls in and discovers shattered headlight bracket. This causes loose headlamp. I find a nut is missing from my petrol tank: replace it with nut off spare brake cable. Roy checks out new route. **20 min delay**

**STIRLING: 8TH STOP  
(296 MILES)**

Refuel and put pint of oil in Velo. 7.50pm and back on schedule again. Bounty bars all round but could do with hot drink. **12 min delay**



**PENRITH: 9TH STOP  
(427 MILES)**

Losing sense of time on motorways. Darkness draws in so am in hands of Miller equipment. Had curious sensation of something graunching at rear of machine but all seems well. Plenty of heavy lorries about, cruising at 70mph plus! Roy's dip beam blows.

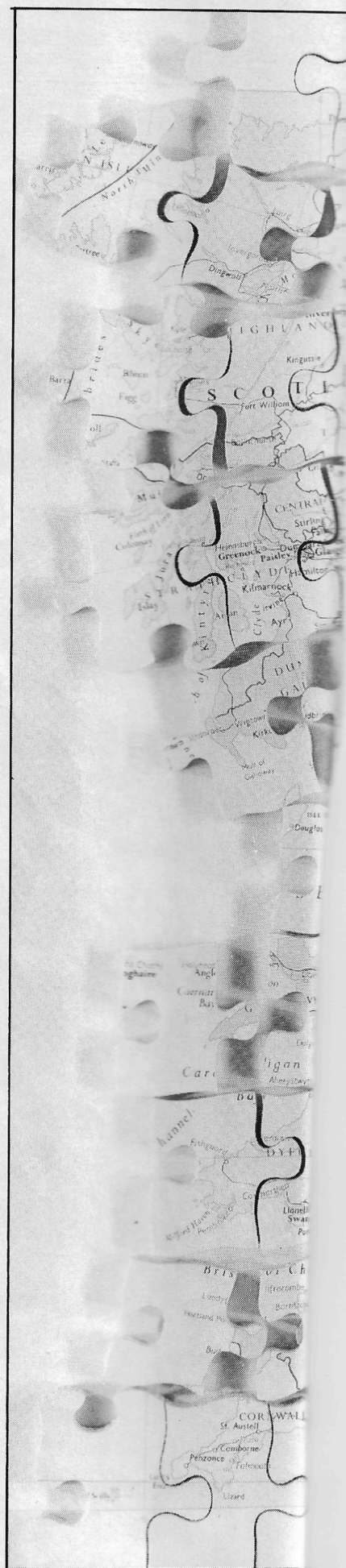
These fast lorries are dicing with us! Some have grit on board and it's spraying everywhere. Norton rev counter bulb gives up. My Miller equipment seems to be doing its job very well.

Refuel. Another pint of oil in the Venom. Norton blows speedo bulb. Can't tighten headlamp. Coffee and eats obtained. **30 min delay**

Am now leading but realize headlight is set too low. Roy follows close behind and is casting huge shadow in front of me. Looking forward to next service station. Velo drones on.

**PRESTON: 10TH STOP  
(528 MILES)**

Refuel. Norton blows ignition warning light. Velo's battery gone flat. We settle for some hot soup which tastes like cardboard.



# END TO END

## 60 min delay

Back on motorway with Norton leading. Now only head and rear light left working. Fascinating negotiating Spaghetti junction — like driving on strange planet. No other traffic about. Miller dynamo doing marvellous job as we wind down this concrete carpet on to M5.

Fuel top-up. Give chain Chainguard treatment. Getting cold and showing signs of fatigue. **20 min delay**

This is motorway madness! Back pains returning, don't really know what the hell I'm doing here. Who is this guy Zen?

Refuel and another pint of lube for Velo. Roy very cold. Coffee and sausage rolls keep us going. Before setting off again, Roy goes for a run and then pushes the Commando for 200 yards to get warmed up. Dawn breaks. **35 min delay**

Damned cold and am sure I can see frost on verges of motorway as we head for Exeter. Suffering badly from back pains; Roy struggling to keep awake.

Sun shines brightly as we skirt round Exeter and eases my lumbago. Getting sleepy — must fight it off! Heavy vehicles hinder our progress.

Time check: 7.45am. Our last fuel stop. Next stop — Land's End, but must move quickly to complete trip within 24 hours. **20 min delay**

Weather terrific but holiday traffic building up. Velo going well, Norton close behind.

Just outside Penzance, a Volks with German plates almost brings whole saga to untimely end. Recover from shock and press on as safely as I can, not daring to look at watch.

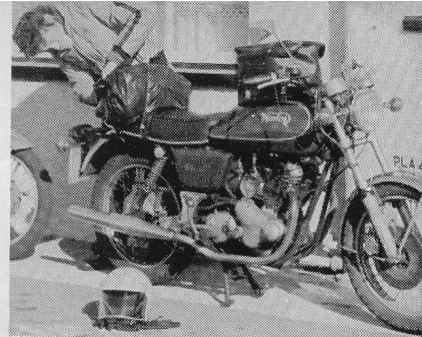
Anyone familiar with last stretch of road to Land's End will recall how demanding it is. Last few hundred yards in sight. We arrive at last.

The speedo reads 900.6 miles. It's been worth all the agonies — we've made it and now I know what it's all about!

LAND'S END, FRIDAY 10 SEPTEMBER. How to finish this tale of adventurous intrigue? With a few facts and figures, I suppose. Using a 19 tooth final drive sprocket, the Venom managed a remarkable 69mpg against the Commando's 55mpg. It has to be said, though, the Norton's oil consumption was practically nil while the Velocette was gulping down a pint every 300 miles (admittedly, I was over-filling the tank most of the time). Our overall speed averaged 40mph, although much of the time we were forced to do at least 50 to make up for delays.

After such an arduous run, the only problem with the Venom was that the rear wheel spindle had shifted forward. This was entirely my doing as during the final check, I neglected to tighten the lock-nuts on the chain adjusting bolts. This resulted in the spindle bending the bolt on the nearside in its efforts to creep underneath. This was obviously the graunching I felt on the motorway, but fortunately a chipped tooth on the rear sprocket was the only damage.

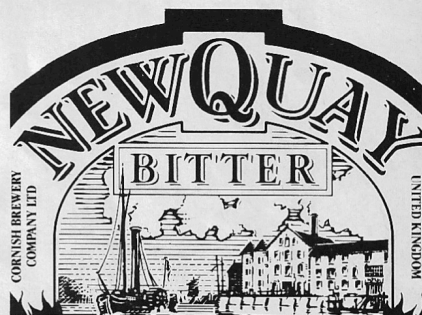
I had hoped, during this epic run, to bring the clock up to the magical 100,000 mark but was still 1,500 miles out. However, by the time this story goes to press, I am sure the Venom will have exceeded this figure — original big end and all! Velocettes are going to be around for a long time to come and, in my opinion, they will always be a force to be reckoned with in any form of motorcycle competition. You haven't heard of Velocettes, mate? Why, that's where the term Superbike originated!



**BIRMINGHAM: 11TH STOP  
(619 MILES)**

**BRISTOL: 12TH STOP  
(700 MILES)**

**OKEHAMPTON: 13TH STOP  
(796 MILES)**



**10.16AM LAND'S END**

