

## 2. Sweet Sixteen - Skirmish with a 125 cc BSA Bantam

Like many lads of my age back in the mid fifties, I began my solo motorcycle career riding “pillion,” a quaint English term for a motorcycle passenger, stemming from the makeshift upholstered square pad they



**Stock 1949 BSA 125 Bantam, note the pillion rack, rigid rear frame, absence of rear seat and rear foot-pegs.**

used to bolt to the top of the rear fender known as a “pillion seat.” (It gets its origins from the Irish word “pillin,” a light cushion attached to the rear of a horse’s saddle.) Still at High School and with no form of realistic income - - or parental permission to buy my own bike, I rode pillion behind a good friend of mine, Denzil Hughes, who had an old late-forties BSA 125cc BSA Bantam.

These machines were in their heyday with teenage lads around this time, being inexpensive to buy and run and simple and easy to maintain. The pair of us really thought we were cool, bless our little cotton socks! Someone had made a pillion seat cushion that was bolted to the carrier rack but had apparently been unable to come up with foot-pegs for the passenger. Being that young and that stupid, this did not deter me from riding pillion.

Of course, we were an accident just waiting to happen, and it was not long before the laws of probability obliged us. The combined effect of having no foot-pegs and a complete absence of any rear suspension made it almost impossible to keep my feet placed firmly. With my right foot placed on the muffler and my left held up against the frame, standing up to absorb some shock from hitting the bumps was not an option. Suddenly, we hit a big pothole, and I was completely dislodged. With my feet flailing and the back end of the bike bouncing all over the road, I struggled to hang on and replace my feet on their precarious resting places. I almost succeeded, but then we hit another pothole, and the next thing I knew was that my left heel had been drawn into the spokes of the rear wheel. Somehow, Denzil managed to keep the machine from crashing, and we came to a rapid halt. Stepping off the bike onto the sidewalk, I felt a mind-stunning pain such as I had never experienced before. My shoe was completely demolished, and blood was cascading out of the wound on my heel. It would not stand my body weight, and I fell to the floor.



**By 1951 a ‘Plunger’ Rear Suspension was fitted as an option. The Swinging Arm came along in 1958.**

The best thought we could come up with was to get home as quickly as possible, assess the damage after stopping the bleeding, then get medical assistance if needed. Cell phones had not been invented, and many regular families in the UK didn’t even have telephones. Neither of our families or friends possessed a car, so our options were most limited. Finally, Denzil helped me climb back on the pillion, and we rode the bike home to where I lived -- fortunately, close by.

It was horribly obvious that the heel and Achilles tendon were very badly damaged, and there was no stopping the bleeding. The nearest hospital was an hour’s bus ride away; nobody nearby had a phone to call an ambulance; and my mother was almost hysterical. Suddenly, Denzil disappeared for a couple of minutes, returning with his father’s single-wheeled gardening barrow. Helping me into the barrow, he took up the two handles and began sprinting for our family doctor’s surgery in a building about half a mile up the street. The surgery was jam-packed with people awaiting their appointments, and he ran the barrow with me still in it right up to the door, yelling, “Get the doctor, get the doctor. This man’s bleeding to death.” I, of course, obliged them by accumulating a good-sized puddle of blood on the surgery floor. It’s

amazing how quickly people move over when one threatens to bleed all over them. That was the quickest I ever got to see a doctor in my whole life, both then and now.

Our family physician, a regular MD, dismissed all his patients and feverishly went to work on my heel. He stopped the bleeding and broke the news to me. My Achilles tendon had been almost completely severed, and he was going to perform a very new and intricate medical procedure to try to repair it; it might save me from becoming lame for the rest of my life. I had lost too much blood to have it done at the hospital, so the operation took place right there in his office and lasted for what seemed an eternity. Afterwards, he told me he thought it would be successful and drove me to my home and sent me to bed.

This wonderful doctor came by our house several times daily for a week to inspect, clean and change surgical dressings and administer injections to combat infection. He even dictated and often supervised the physiotherapy to help me regain mobility and slowly increase strength and flexibility. In six months I returned to my other passion, gymnastics, with no loss of power, making for a total successful recovery. The doctor had performed a surgical procedure that was not perfected by the medical profession until many years later. I salute the memory of Dr. Siddhanta, who died just a few years after this incident happened. There will never be a more dedicated doctor and more caring human being.



**Mid 60's Bantam D7, note Swinging Arm suspension, Rear Foot-pegs and Dual Seat.**

I never did ride on the back of that motorcycle ever again. After all, it was originally intended only for one person. Instead, in secret I became a part owner with a couple of other pals of several old forties and fifties machines which we bought cheaply because they needed repair; it had to be “in secret” since my parents banned me for ever more to have anything to do with these “dangerous machines”. We pooled our limited mechanical knowledge to fix them back up and sell them. Over the next couple of years, I learned the old-fashioned hard way about what makes these lovely old bikes tick, drawing much knowledge from the experience and advice of older enthusiasts and shop mechanics. An Engineering Apprenticeship at Ford Motor Company and attendance of one of England’s last “Technical Schools” helped the learning process too. In the process of the “road test rides”, which were usually

secretly carried out in fields, I became far more proficient at riding and started to learn how to master the finer points of controlling a motorcycle. I eventually did get to pass the official Motorcycle Test and get my endorsement when I reached nineteen years old.

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