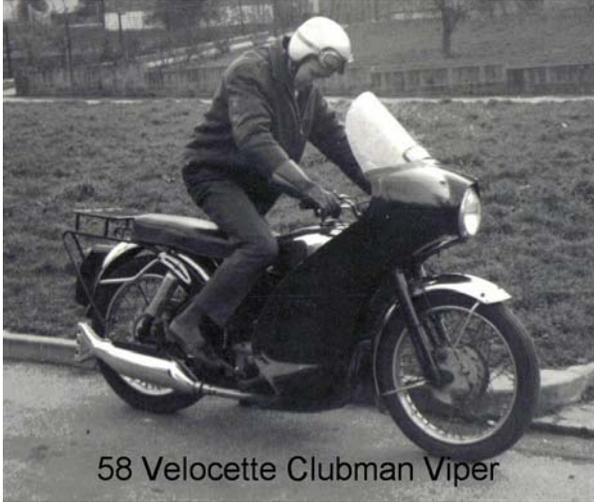


6. One Cold Rainy Night in 1967

Another lovely motorcycle I once owned and have fond memories of was a 1958 350cc Velocette Viper Clubman. Today, it is more usual to see the more sought after and much more well-known 500cc



58 Velocette Clubman Viper

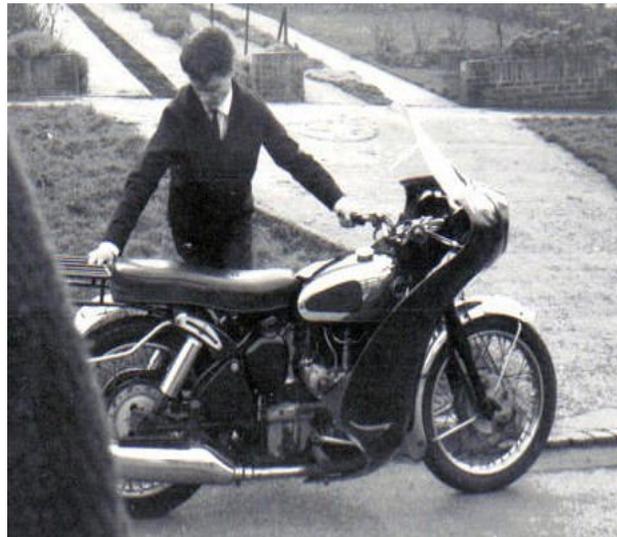
Faded but rare photo of my 58' Viper Clubman, seen here with my buddy Tony Cox aboard. Soon after this photo was taken in 1967, Tony emigrated to from England to Canada and went on to take several consecutive Canadian National Road Racing championships over the next few years.

Thruxton Venom, named after racing successes at the Thruxton 2.356 mile racetrack in Andover, Hampshire, UK and introduced in 1965. The Clubman Viper and Venom were Velocette's answer to the highly successful and very fast BSA 350cc and 500cc Gold Stars. In my opinion, the Viper was a real 'sleeper' of a machine, both then and to a lesser degree, still now. Like the Gold Star, they were Clubman Racers, this meant that they were used ride to the circuit, take part in a race, and then were ridden home. Back in England, they were considered by the motorcycle community as being 'Rider's Bikes', as opposed to 'Steerer's Bikes'.

Both Clubman models offered a component package which included some very unique Velocette features. My Viper left the factory with a highly tuned performance engine with a close ratio gearbox and a big 1 3/8 inch Amal GP racing carburetor. The factory also fitted a Dolphin Fairing to all Clubman models. Other Velocette trademarks included the famous

'Fishtail' Silencer with perforations in the tail pipe, radially adjustable rear suspension, Miller lighting and a racing BTU magneto. Bates Pannier boxes were also fitted to my machine for touring. Electrical power was from a 6 volt battery system, charged by a vee belt pulley driven dynamo, driven directly off the crankshaft.

The Viper 350cc single cylinder pushrod engine was tuned and geared to be revved, maximum power came with the higher revs and with a close ratio gearbox, this meant frequent gearshifts to 'keep the power on the mega'. (A quaint English term used for the Manx Norton style megaphones that had tuned exhaust frequency as a source for increased horsepower within a limited rev-band.) The rev-band for maximum power was quite narrow on the Viper, but the huge flywheel effect was terrific if you rode it within that range of revs and to my way of thinking, that made for a very busy and very exciting style of riding. I never actually competed with a 500cc Venom, but I'm told that the Viper was very close in performance to it, much like the 500cc Triumph Tiger 100's were to the 650cc Bonneville. Another rider controlled variable was the manually operated advance and retard lever, although automatic mechanisms had been available for some years, once mastered, the manual lever located right next to the throttle was yet another form of rider control which could give your machine that extra edge on hilly roads.



A youthful and skinny looking me in 1967 with the 58' Velocette Viper. Not a good photo but the 2nd of only two in existence.

Although by now I had just got a car, the trusty and reliable Velocette was still my main mode of transport. Considering how hard I rode it and through all kinds of weather, it was one of the most reliable bikes I ever owned. The only electrical problem I ever encountered was when after a while the vibration would shake loose the clamp holding the dynamo in tension with the vee belt and the belt would jump right off the pulley. One nice thing about the old magneto ignition systems was that no matter how bad the battery was, the magneto had its own independent energy source supplying the spark at the plugs. The Miller dynamo put out more than ample output to power the lighting. One cold, dark and rainy night, these factors all combined to almost bring me to grief.

Riding home through a deserted narrow winding country lane on a disgustingly dark and wet night, I was approaching a very tight bend in the road. Suddenly, without so much as a warning flicker, the entire lighting system failed, plunging me into pitch black darkness, instant blindness. There was no hitting the brakes for an emergency stop, the road was far too wet and slippery and being a country lane, also had a fair coating of mud from the fields either side of it. A now invisible steep grass bank, about seven feet high, lined either side of it and I was terrified I would strike it on the bend any moment. Sticking out my leg I used my foot as a feeler as I wrestled with the controls to gradually slow down and prayed I could achieve this before running into the banking. Too late, in a split second, first my foot struck it and with no time left to react, I was literally catapulted from the saddle high into the air as the foot peg gouged deeply into the grass lined banking.

It is strange how everything seems to happen in slow motion when such incidents occur, it's true that "Our lives flash before our eyes", I guess it's to do with the adrenalin surge. It had been raining all day long and the steep banking was saturated, so my eventual landing was a very soft, albeit messy one. Even as I slid down the steep slope I recall waiting for the anticipated sound of the bike crashing sideways onto the paved muddy road. But no sound came; in fact, I could still hear the engine running in the distance as I came to rest at the bottom of the grass bank where it reached the road. As I gasped to regain some of the breath that had been knocked out of me upon landing, in the blackness surrounding me I heard the engine suddenly splutter and cut, then only the sound of the rain could be heard, Yet still no sound of a crash. Puzzled, I started to walk in the direction I had been heading in but still could not even see the banking in the darkness. For what seemed an eternity, (during which time I had all kinds of visions of the bike having run up the bank, over the top and into a lake or swamp, never to be seen again), I carried on fumbling my way along the road.

All at once, I walked right into the rear carrier rack of the bike, didn't see it until I struck it with my leg. Pulling out a cigarette lighter and shielding it from the rain I was able to glimpse momentarily that it had come to a halt still in an upright position, miraculous! The foot peg had dug deep into the bank, embedding itself right up to the frame attachment point, and that was why the engine, still in gear, had stalled. The bike could not topple sideways, the buried peg was preventing that. Eventually I clawed the foot peg free with my bare hands and fingernails and began the long dark push back to the main road where I might better examine the damage under the street lighting.

During the mile or more push, the rain subsided and once under the street lighting I was able to see that once more, the vee belt had jumped off the pulley. A ten minute roadside fix was all that was needed and there was no other damage sustained. After a few kicks, the Viper started right up, complete with lights and I was able to complete my journey home in disbelief that both the bike and myself had been so fortunate in getting off so lightly. Now, I had been wearing my Belstaff black rain gear at the time and during that last ten miles home, the cool night rush of air dried it out. Arriving at my house I parked the bike in the garage and still suited, rang the door bell. My wife opened the door and let out a scream, she didn't seem to recognize me nor did our pet Welsh collie, who flew at my ankle and started biting on my boot. Yelling back and removing my crash helmet, normality quickly returned, at least until I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror in the hallway.

Oh what a sight to behold and Oh what laughter! While sliding down the muddy grass banking, I was covered from head to toe in a mixture of now dried out and encrusted beige colored mud, liberally flecked with green grass stains, some with blades of grass still sticking out of the mud. I would have been

impossible to detect sitting on a dung heap. Even my face was covered in mud since I was wearing an open faced crash helmet and goggles. It took weeks to hose and scrub off the stains from my riding suit. But apart from that I was completely unscathed, not even a scratch or a bruise. As for the Velocette, the only damage it suffered was a slightly bent foot peg and a few fine horizontal scratches along the lower portion of the Dolphin fairing, both easily repaired.

“Veloce” is an Italian word meaning “fast”, “Velocette” stood for a small Veloce. The motorcycle Company was originally formed in 1907 by two English brothers named Goodman in Hall Green, Birmingham, but went into liquidation in 1971. During its 63 year old history the name Velocette was synonymous with performance and handling, with countless race wins and a Venom 500cc Veeline setting a new world endurance record in 1961 of 100.05mph for 24 hours.

The road-holding and handling of the 350cc and 500cc ‘big singles’ was outstanding and made them a legend, especially on the narrow winding English country lanes and the Isle of Man. I still vividly recall getting into some pretty competitive riding with the world famous Aston Martin sports performance cars as I passed through the quiet country lanes close to their factory in Newport Pagnell. Factory drivers would often road test new

cars out on these same country lanes. Acceleration up to 80mph appeared to be about equal between our vehicles but of course, the Astons had complete mastery in top speed. But around quiet country lanes they had no opportunity to use it and the superior cornering capabilities of the Velocette I think astounded many an Aston test driver.



1968 500cc Velocette Venom Thruxton Veeline with Avon racing fairing, owned and ridden by Keith Hogland. Note the huge Amal Concentric carburetor.



The trigger for writing this article came from running into my old friend Keith Hogland at this year's 2007 Battle of the Brits Classic Bike Show. A retired Engineering manager at GM, Keith's love of classic British bikes has been with him for as long as his career in cars. His lovingly executed restorations of beautiful Velocettes, which he then rides with the same vigor as he put into his career, makes his bikes masterpieces, not just museum-pieces.

The previous 2 photographs are of his fabulous 1968 500cc Velocette Venom

Thruxton that narrowly was nudged into 2nd place of the Master's Class in the Mid-West Show, The Battle of the Brits, held at Freedom Hill, Mi. earlier this month. First place went to another Velocette, a 1929 Velocette KN. Poor Keith, last year this same beautiful machine was also narrowly voted 2nd behind a rare and equally beautiful 1951 Vincent Rapide. The 'Squish' Cylinder head technology that was used on other past Velo racers and fitted to Keith's bike achieved 126 MPH at this year's Isle of Man "Manx GP", within 1mph of the Manx Nortons.

The last photograph is of the bike that re-united Keith and I at the 2005 B.O.B. show. One look at it brought all memories of my own Clubman Viper streaming back. Then, to my amazement and delight, its owner showed up and turned out to be Keith Hogland, whom I had not seen for almost 20 years. His 65' Venom Clubman Veeline was fitted with a megaphone, a works performance option to the famous 'fishtail' silencer for the Clubman editions by 1965. It sounds even better than it looks to the race tuned ear, and is guaranteed to be heard by all cell-phone users. If the lame excuse "Didn't see you" is used by an offending motorist, they certainly would have heard you. Talking to Keith he recounted how on many occasions the excellent road holding of this machine had directly saved him from coming to grief. Some slight changes, always following in the fine Velocette tradition of being real improvements, were implemented during the seven years that separated my 58' Viper from Keith's 65' Venom.

Today, good Thruxton Venoms will fetch \$16,000 and upwards at classic bike auctions and the rarity and collector value of the famous overhead cam 350cc KTTs' almost makes them priceless, even if they are not in running condition. They all have deservedly become fully fledged exotic members of the classic motorcycle world.



1965 500cc Venom Clubman Veeline, a Thruxton ahead of it's time. The relationship to my 58' Viper Clubman is still quite apparent.

Photo by courtesy of Keith Hogland, thanks Keith

(Word count – 2090 words)