

# VOYAGER

**The star of the 1989 motorcycle show began life on the road as a pre-production prototype. It came to an untimely end. We rode it in the summer of '88 —**

Much as I had enjoyed riding the Voyager around Wroughton aerodrome, the experience was all too brief and removed from normal road conditions to make any serious assessment of the machine compared to conventional bikes, other than the fact that it was the most comfortable thing on two wheels that I had ever driven. In the summer of '88 I was privileged to have a decent ride on the new FF after first comparing it directly with one of my all-time favourite motorised bicycles, the BMW GS100.

By this time Royce had the engine run in and had seen over 130mph on the clock in favourable conditions (on a private road of course, M'Lud). He was using Voyager to commute the fifty-odd miles from his home in Bristol to Crickhowell near Abergavenny where Speake and Company were secretly gathering together men and materials to start the long haul towards volume production.

With Royce in the Voyager and me on the BMW we rode from Bristol to Powys on the twisting back-road route that he'd come to know like the back of his hand. Although the GS 100 had a better power-to-weight ratio and was ideally suited to those sort of roads, I had to ride very hard to keep up. Royce said the Voyager lacked the needle-sharp handling of the old Techati, but it still looked well nimble to me. 'Think of it as a Ford Sierra, man,' he said. It occurred to me that the Techati was more of a two-wheeled Mini, by comparison.



At Crickhowell I met Richard Noble, one of the directors of Speake & Co. whose main business is in computing, but previous side-lines have included the production of a highly successful microlight aircraft. Speake have licensed the rights to manufacture the Voyager from Single Track Vehicles Ltd, of which Royce is one of five directors.

It was dark when we rode back to Bristol and it soon started to rain. I stopped to put on wet weather gear but of course Royce did not need to ... I would never have dreamt of going so quickly if I'd been on my own ... it was a memorable ride.

The next day it was dry and I felt more confident of giving Royce a run for his money on the big Beemer as we set off for some more fun on the back-roads of Avon. He knew the roads much better, but I had more power and a lighter bike (the original Voyager scaled about 530lbs wet), although much of the weight advantage was off-set by BBF (Blezard Bulk Factor) since I'm about half a hundredweight heavier than the diminutive Mr Creasey.

In fact we were pretty evenly matched and I actually did not have to work as hard on the BMW as when I chased the old High Techati on a VF500. I was able to use the Boxer's superior acceleration to get past at one point and stay in front. But what the Beemer gained on acceleration it lost on the brakes as the front end dived in time-honoured fashion and the single sided disc made the forks twist and squirm in discomfort, while Royce had 'brick-wall' brakes and no dive at

*Designer Royce Creasey on Voyager; and, below, the Voyager in company with an Avro Monocar. ... 60 years apart, but so similar!*



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all thanks to the twin AP Lockheeds and hub-centre steering.

In the handling stakes the BM's Para-lever shaft drive system was clearly superior to the Voyager's standard Guzzi 'jack-up', 'jack-down' set up and that helped to balance out the FF's much lower CofG. Royce was also still experimenting with different combinations of tyres and suspension units at the time and subsequently came to the conclusion that the Guzzi rear rim was too narrow for the low-profile radial tyre that he'd just fitted. (The Techati had had the opposite problem, with tyres that were too narrow for the rims.)

The two machines were moving about quite a bit on the bumpy B-road but both were a lot of fun to drive. The BMW is some kind of ultimate all-round motorised bicycle with 60 years and millions of pounds worth of accumulated development behind it, whereas the Voyager was just a pre-production prototype built by hand in a garden shed with just a few hundred miles under its belt. Hardly a fair comparison, but even at that early stage in its development the FF acquitted itself admirably.

## Riding the FFuture

I finally got a ride on the public highway in Voyager that afternoon. The first impression was of a heavier version of the High Techati, which is not surprising since it actually used the self-same aircraft-style handlebars and Volvo car seat. (Techati: 59in wheelbase, 30-odd bhp, 450 lbs wet; Voyager prototype: 63in wheelbase, 50-odd bhp, 530lbs wet).

For my money the much smoother and more relaxed feel of the Reliant engine is well worth the weight penalty over the air-cooled Eyetie single (not to mention the better reliability: the painstakingly rebuilt Ducati 450 mill blew up after only 9,000 miles, back in 1986).

The bigger machine also had a more unified and integrated feel and was even more comfortable, although the screen was too small for a beardless youth like myself. (I'll never forget watching Royce set off for Bristol from the '88 Stafford Classic Bike show wearing only a Barbour jacket, jeans, open face helmet, trainers and no gloves on a very chilly spring night.)

The new prototype was really stunningly compact for a two-seater FF with a longitudinally mounted car engine: about six inches shorter than the Flying Banana and about a foot and a half shorter than a Quasar. And although it looked very bulbous from some angles, once sat in it you could appreciate just how narrow it was — everything in front of me apart from the mirror was narrower than my shoulders, enabling Honda 50-style traffic filtering.

The right-foot gearchange was much better than the High Techati's but still fairly clunky. I had no difficulty re-acquainting



*Voyager at the NEC last November. Steering now shows considerable improvement over the prototype's, says Royce Creasey*



myself with the trigger-finger throttle first used on the Techati, although for some reason I found myself using only my middle finger to brake in traffic — I had to keep blipping the throttle because the tickover was set too low at the time. The brakes were dramatically effective, as I knew they would be, although a little lacking in feel for my liking.

The performance was certainly very respectable, although personally I would have liked a little more 'oomph' for overtaking on the open road — ideally I would like to see the production machine match the power to weight ratio of the BMW GS100 (60bhp/450lbs) which would be more than enough to blow off the keenest four-wheeled boy racer.

Humming down the M32 in luxurious comfort the Voyager felt so absolutely 'right' that I kept asking myself 'why haven't bikes like this been available for years?' Lapping the roundabout under the M4 I felt much more in control than on the High Techati, but for some reason not quite as confident as I had at Wroughton the first time I rode it.

I never felt unsafe for a moment but on the other hand did not feel I could pilot it with quite the same precision as with a more conventional handlebar layout, such as that fitted to the Banana. Discussing my thoughts with Royce afterwards, a couple of things occurred to me. Firstly the sliding seat was set much further back in Bristol than at Wroughton when I felt so at home; perhaps the right seatback setting is essential for the right 'seat of the pants' feedback to ride the Voyager with confidence?

On the other hand the empty runway had not required any great precision in any case.

On the street I felt least confident when filtering in slow-moving traffic at say, 8-15 mph, and I rationalised this phenomenon with the following explanation: This speed band roughly coincides with what Royce calls a bike's 'stall speed'. Below this speed you need to turn the front wheel left to go left, above it you need to lean, a manoeuvre which can be initiated by counter-steering — turning the front wheel right to go left.

Now then, with a conventional handlebar layout, whether it be fitted to an FF or a motorbicycle you can counter-steer either by turning the bars right to go left, or by simply pushing down on the left handlebar to make the machine lean left. But with Royce's neo-steering wheel arrangement pushing down on the left handlebar will have the opposite effect above stall speed; it will not make the whole machine lean left but instead will make the front wheel turn to the left and so make the bike fall to the right.

Below stall speed, you want the wheel to turn left to go left anyway so it's not a problem. Above stall speed you get used to the feel of doing the opposite; but when you're constantly passing above and below stall speed in slow-moving traffic then perhaps your brain can become confused as to which side of the steering wheel to apply pressure at any given moment, hence the need to steer by 'thinking' with 'the seat of the pants'.

All of this is just theorizing in an attempt to rationalise my own slight lack of confidence after barely half an hour's acquaintance with the prototype. Perhaps if I'd had a bit longer on it my brain would have got fully tuned in and I would have been able to ride it with a bit more verve. There's no doubt that the steering layout can be mastered to devastating effect, as anyone who has ridden in company with Royce will confirm. He says that the latest prototype (launched last November at the NEC) steers much better than the Green 'Un, an observation which I hope to confirm for myself in the near future. But my theory may explain why my friend Vic Allan criticised the Voyager launch model on Top Gear recently for being 'unstable' at low speed. A little disconcerting on first acquaintance for an FF neophyte perhaps, but unstable, never.

To put all this in perspective I should say that the Voyager prototype was much easier and less intimidating to ride than a Quasar, and positively user-friendly compared to the Oekomobil. Still, it would be interesting to ride a Voyager with more conventional handlebars like those fitted to the Banana.

The Difazio centre-hub steering fitted to the Green 'Un obviously limited the bike's lock, although the only time this made itself felt was when turning around in a narrow road. The production Voyagers are fitted with an entirely different centre hub system based on Bob Tail's design which, at 38 degrees either side, gives more lock than many conventional bikes and nearly twice as much as the Difazio.

My introduction to the Voyager was completed the following day when I had a ride in the back. If anything it was more impressive than actually driving it myself; Royce whisked

me to the other side of Bristol in his inimitable 'take no prisoners' riding style. On the back of a conventional bike it would probably have been fairly alarming, but in Voyager it was pure enjoyment. It occurred to me that I could have been drinking a cup of tea while we travelled too, since there is no need to hold on at all — the Volvo seat provides more than adequate bracing against acceleration, and your forward-facing feet do the job under braking. Although the pillion sits three or four inches higher than the rider, this is still so much lower than on a conventional bike that you never get the feeling that you're going to tip right over — you just feel amazingly secure. In fact I would go so far as to say that pillion riders could be responsible for the sale of more Voyagers than would-be riders, it was that good.

The testing of the green pre-production prototype came to a premature end when a Fiat estate car turned right across Royce's bows on a derestricted section of A road at night. He braked and swerved but could not avoid hitting it square on the rear axle at an estimated 50mph. The impact was severe enough to disconnect the car's drive shaft, spin it through 180 degrees and put the two passengers in hospital with concussion for several days.

The whole front of the Voyager crumpled as it is designed to do, and Royce was finally spat out of the side, stubbing his toe as he departed. It was he who picked himself up first and walked to the nearest house to call an ambulance. The police apologised when they finally arrived because they had assumed that it could not be a serious accident if the motorcyclist was in a fit state to use the telephone. It was a dramatic demonstration of the strength and efficacy of Royce's design and of the safety of the FF layout.

Fortunately the pre-production prototype had largely fulfilled its purpose by the time of the accident. Aerodynamic tests showed it to be satisfyingly efficient in most areas, but with some room for improvement in one or two places, mainly behind the rider. The shape of the production Voyager shown at the NEC was largely dictated by aerodynamic considerations. Fuel consumption on the Green 'Un improved from 62 to 65 mpg at 70mph and from 51 to 55mpg at 95mph after changes to the standard Reliant carburettor. The production machine may finish up with a bigger carb, but Speake and Co. are still confident that they can achieve 80mpg at 70mph ... a pretty impressive claim by any standards. We shall have to wait and see ...

To sum up, I have no hesitation in describing the Green 'Un as the best and most complete FF I have ridden so far, by some margin. (The Oekomobil is in a separate 'cabin category' all by itself) Since riding it I have lost all interest in the Flying Banana and plan to sell it. I just can't wait to get my hands on a production Voyager, even if they do cost a hefty £9,000. My life will not be complete until I have begged, borrowed or bought one. Watch this space!

PNB