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Written by Dawn Martin

Joe Stevens, father of Harry, George, Jack, and Joe Stevens, first built an internal combustion engine in 1897, although his engines did not enter production until after 1900. His first engines, of 125cc, were sold as proprietary engines to other manufacturers.

In 1905, Stevens built a JAP V-twin engined motorcycle, with leading link front forks and a swinging fork at the rear. This was done at the father's Stevens Screw Company, where the family were all employed.

A new company, A J Stevens & Co (AJS), was founded by Harry, George, Jack and Joe Stevens on 14th November 1909. After much deliberation of a name, they chose to use initials only, and as only one brother, Jack had two Christian names (Albert John), the new name AJS was christened.

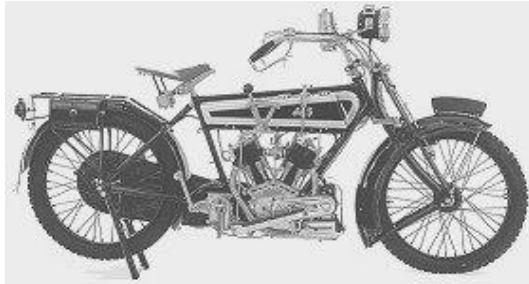
Harry set about designing the first two machines called model 'A' and model 'B'. Model 'A' was the cheaper machine, and was fitted with a 2.5hp single cylinder, side valve engine and a direct belt drive. It sold for 37 guineas.

Model 'B' used the same 2.5hp engine but was fitted with a two speed gearbox, cork inserted clutch, chain drive and sold for 44 guineas. The first machines were produced in August 1910 and production costs were largely paid for by Harry, from the money he got for designing a 2.5hp engine for the first Sunbeam motorcycle.

Initially the frame and engine production were carried out at the Pelham Street works with final assembly at Retreat Street. However, later on, the whole business was moved to Retreat Street when Clyno came to Wolverhampton and took over the Pelham Street works.

The new machines appeared at the 1910 Cycle Show at Olympia in London, along with a one off 3.5hp V-twin chain drive machine. The show was a great success and orders followed. H Taylor & Co was appointed as the sole London AJS agent and fame followed, as the machines were very successful in endurance races and the Isle of Man TT races.

1912 saw the launch of the model 'D'. It had a 5hp V twin engine with a two speed gearbox, chain drive, kick start and sold for 60 guineas. In that year sales again greatly increased and the future looked very good. In 1913, the model 'A' was discontinued and the model 'B' updated. The alterations included a three speed gearbox and enclosed chain drive. The model 'D' was given a 6hp V twin engine and a sidecar version was introduced.



AJS Model D

In 1913, AJS also introduced a version of the model 'D' motorcycle with a coach built sidecar. The sidecars were purchased from C. W. Hayward who was a local manufacturer. The sidecars were built to a very high standard using an all steel, welded body with a sprung tubular steel chassis. AJS became a good customer and the model 'D' and sidecar combination was extremely successful and sold for 84 guineas.

The sidecars were extremely well fitted out with 'Leverine' leather upholstery, fully sprung and a weatherproof hood was available as an extra. In 1915, the 'Sociable' was introduced. It was a model 'D' motorcycle with a 2 seater sidecar in which the occupants sat side by side. The person nearest the motorcycle could steer and control the machine by means of a tiller. The idea was not very popular and only a few were made.

A new 2.75hp sports machine was developed for the 1914 Isle of Man TT and it proved to be extremely successful as the five machines that AJS entered, came 1st, 2nd, 4th, 6th and 29th in the Junior TT race, with a record speed of 45.58 mph. On their return home, the team was given a warm welcome by a large crowd at the High Level Station and members of the press were present.

The sidecar version of the 6hp model 'D' proved so popular that the company could not keep up with the demand and many delays led to many impatient customers. Orders also poured in for the new 2.75hp sports machine following its success at the TT, and in order to keep up with demand, production had to be increased, and there was no more room in the cramped Retreat Street works so new premises were essential. To achieve this, additional finance would be required, and so a new public company was formed.

The new company A. J. Stevens & Company (1914) Limited, had a nominal share capital of £50,000. The directors were H. Stevens, G. Stevens, J. Stevens (Junior), A. J. Stevens, E. E. Lamb, E. L. Morcom, and the registered offices were at Retreat Street.

New versions of most of the models were introduced in 1915. The new model 'A' had a 4hp V twin engine, three speed gearbox, Amac carburettor, Splitdorf Magneto, fully enclosed chain case and was designed so that a sidecar could easily be attached. The machine sold for 66 guineas, or 81 guineas with a sidecar.

The 2.75hp model 'B' was available as a tourer or sports model. It cost 50 guineas with a three speed gearbox, or 47 guineas with a two speed gearbox. The new 6hpV twin model 'D' was larger version of the new model 'A'. It had a slightly longer wheelbase and sold for 72 guineas for the basic machine, or 88 guineas with a sidecar.

The company was now involved in a great deal of war work but still managed to carry on near normal production. On the 30th November H. Taylor & Co. Ltd, the London agent held an extremely successful exhibition at their London showrooms. Late in 1915, the model 'B' was discontinued until after the war because of the shortage of materials and labour.

In 1916, petrol was scarce and extremely expensive, due to the war. AJS, being inventive decided to use town gas instead of petrol. A large gas supply pipe ran along the back of the test bench and small branch pipes fed the gas directly into the engines. At the induction pipe entrance a bunsen burner attachment was fitted so that the quality of the mixture could be adjusted when necessary. The speed could be varied by turning the gas on or off at the supply.



1916 4hp Model A

The Ministry of Munitions prohibited the production of motorcycles except for military use, on 3rd November 1916. AJS was forced to cease production of its current products. In 1917, the Ministry of Munitions received an order from Russia for extremely large numbers of motorcycles to equip its armed forces. The order included machine gun carriers, ammunition carriers and light ambulances. AJS received an order from the Ministry for 1100 six horsepower military machines. These retained many of the existing AJS features including the desirable easily interchangeable wheels.

At the Olympia show in November, the company displayed a new version of the model 'D' combination. It had a 6hp V twin engine, new style saddle tank, rear stand and quiet running engine with a cast aluminium silencer. The sidecar was more luxurious than ever with full weather protection consisting of a folding hood and cover, side curtains and a storm proof apron. It also had a luggage grid, a tool locker and a spare wheel that was interchangeable with those on the motorbike.



AJS SC1

In 1920, the company decided to try to repeat the success that it had in the 1914 Isle of Man Junior TT. Harry developed a new 2.75hp overhead valve engine, and the TT machine included a 3 speed countershaft gearbox, which provided 6 speeds by engaging either of the 2 engine sprockets. It had a Thompson Bennett magneto and an Amac carburettor. The new machine did the trick, and Cyril Williams came in first. It was a good year as AJS greatly enhanced its reputation by winning a number of trials and races, and factory building continued at Graiseley Hill.

The best selling model 'D' passenger combination now sold for £159.10s.0d. The company had another successful racing and trials year. An improved 2.75hp machine was entered for the Junior TT. AJS machines came in 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 6th, and 8th and did the fastest lap at 52.11mph. AJS also won the Senior TT with the machine ridden by Howard R. Davies. It was another excellent year for sales, which were greater than ever. Nearly 600 people were employed on motorcycle production and yet more building work was undertaken at Graiseley Hill.

In 1922, the price of the model 'B' was reduced to £85 and two new models, which were based on the model 'B' were introduced. The 'B1' was a standard sporting machine and the 'B2' was a stripped sporting machine. The 'B1' had TT pattern handlebars and footboards, the 'B2' had no kick start or side valance to the front mudguard, but included a lighter chain case.

Both machines sold for the same price as the model 'B'. A new lightweight sidecar was introduced for the model 'B'. It included a storm proof apron and sold for £25. The price of the model 'D' passenger combination was increased to £175. AJS achieved its fourth consecutive Junior TT win and building work at Graiseley Hill continued the works now covered 167000 sq ft.

A new machine that was based on the TT racing machines was shown at the Olympia exhibition. It had a 2.75hp, overhead valve engine and became known as the 'Big Port'. It was included in the following year's catalogue as the TT model and sold for £87. In the 1923 Junior TT the company took second place.

In 1925, new letter codes were used for all models, starting with the letter 'E'. The models 'D' and 'D1' were now classified as 'E1' and 'E2'. Model 'E1' was the deluxe version with the sidecar having a glass windscreen, celluloid side screens and storm proof apron. The combination sold for £115. The 'E2' was the standard version and sold for £90. The 'E3' was the deluxe touring

machine and the 'E4' was the deluxe sporting machine. Both models sold for £57.

Model 'E5' was the standard sporting machine and sold for £49.10s.0d, and the 'E6' had an overhead valve engine and sold for £60. There was also the 'E7', which was a special sports machine also with an overhead valve engine. The following year saw the introduction of some new models. The 'B3' and 'B4' featured the 2.75hp overhead valve engine and sold for £65. The 'B5' was a lighter sporting model weighing just 198lbs, and sold for £52. A cheaper version of the model 'D' passenger combination called the 'D1' was introduced, and sold for £95. 1924 was the best year so far for sales, which exceeded the supply. Graiseley Hill works had now been extended to cover 230000 sq ft.

Also in 1926, the letter codes started with 'G'. The 'GR7' and 'G10' were 498cc overhead valve racing machines; the 'GR7' weighed only 203lbs. The 'GR8' used the same engine and had a large fishtail silencer. It sold for £62.10s.0d. Prices were reduced by around 11% and AJS took second place in the Junior TT with a machine ridden by Jimmy Simpson.

The 1927 catalogue included eight production machines. The two versions of the passenger combination now called the 'H1' and 'H2' sold for £95 and £80 respectively. There were three machines all powered by the 349cc side valve engine, and were named the 'H3', 'H4' and 'H5'. The 'H3' was the deluxe tourer and the 'H4' was the deluxe sporting machine. Both machines sold for £48.10s.0d. The 'H5' was the standard sporting model and sold for £44. The 'H6' and 'H8' were overhead valve machines.

The 'H6' had an engine capacity of 349cc and sold for £53. The 'H8' had an engine capacity of 498cc and sold for £62.10s.0d. The last model the 'H9' was a deluxe touring machine using the 498cc side valve engine and sold for £56. This was the company's first bad year. The depression had started to effect sales that were much lower than usual. It was the first time that the company failed to declare a dividend to its shareholders.

In 1928, The 1928 catalogue included no fewer than 10 production machines with prices similar to the previous year. It included two new overhead camshaft racing models, the 349cc 'K7' and the 498cc 'K10'. The 'K7' sold for £62 and the 'K10' sold for £73. Another new machine was the 'K12' lightweight machine. It used the 248cc side valve engine, weighed only 191lbs and sold for £39.17s.6d. This was another bad year for the company as UK sales continued to fall due to the deepening recession. Overseas motorcycle sales however increased due to the efforts of George Stevens.



1928 750cc V Twin

1929 saw the introduction of the 'M' letter code for all models. The catalogue listed 11 models with 13 sidecar options. The machines were given improved weather protection and featured cleaner, quieter engines with dry sump lubrication. New frames were used to accommodate the new style of petrol tank and a new type of spring forks was introduced. Many of the machines had a flush mounted speedometer on top of the petrol tank. The 'M1' and 'M2' were deluxe and standard machines which were updated versions of the 'K1' and 'K2', selling for £76.10s.0d and £66 respectively.

The 'M3' was a deluxe tourer and was fitted with the 349cc side valve engine and the 'M4' was the deluxe sporting version. Both machines sold for £48.10s.0d. The standard sporting machine was the 'M5' that was priced at £45. The 'M6' had an overhead valve engine that was available with a single or twin port cylinder head. The single port version sold for £52 and the twin port version was £54.10s.0d.

There were two machines with an overhead cam, the 349cc 'M7' and the 498cc 'M10'. The 'M7' was available with wide or close gear ratios and sold for £62, whereas the 'M10' was £72. The 'M8' 498cc overhead valve machine was available with a single or twin port cylinder head. The single port version sold for £59.10s.0d and the twin port version was £62. The 'M9' was a 500cc side valve deluxe tourer and sold for £54. There was also a 248cc lightweight machine weighing only 193lbs. This was the 'M12' which sold for £39.17s.6d. The company had another successful trials and racing year. AJS came second in the Junior TT with a machine ridden by Wal Handley.



349cc M7

It was another bad year for the company with sales still falling and mounting financial difficulties. AJS had been making car bodies for Clyno at Walsall Street. This was an important contract for the company especially with the falling motorcycle sales. It was a bitter blow in February when Clyno went out of business. To try to offset this loss AJS decided to manufacture their own small car.

The 'R' series of machines were introduced in 1930 with a reduced model range. There was the 996cc, side valve, V twin, 'R2' that sold for £63. There were three 349cc machines. The 'R4' was the deluxe side valve machine and sold for £63. The 'R5' was the standard lightweight machine, selling for £40 and the 'R6' was the overhead valve machine that sold for £53.

There were two 498cc machines, the overhead valve, two port 'R8' and the side valve 'R9'. The machines sold for £59.10s.0d and £52.10s.0d respectively. The 'R12' was a 248cc overhead valve, 2 port machine that sold for £40. Sales were still low with the continuing depression and the company's financial situation was gradually worsening.

As optimistically as ever the company added 5 new models to the existing range for the 1931 catalogue. The 'S' series were extremely good value for money as they were offered at very attractive prices. Although the new machines were attractively priced, the sales were low.

At the end of August, a loss of £89,201 was announced and the shares fell in price. The company had previously taken out a loan with the Midland Bank to finance the commercial vehicle and car business. The bank decided to

foreclose on the loan and although the company managed to repay the outstanding amount, it was left with only a small amount of working capital. An extraordinary meeting of the shareholders was called on 2nd October, at the Victoria Hotel. A resolution was passed for the company to go into voluntary liquidation. John Todd Lewis of Agar, Bates, Neal & Company, of Birmingham, was appointed as liquidator.

Matchless Motorcycles Ltd purchased the AJS name and manufacturing rights for £20,000. Everything eventually sold and the creditors were paid in full by the end of September 1932.

This was a sad end to a company that had been so important to Wolverhampton. In the mid 1920s, about 600 motorcycles were produced in a good week. As the business was seasonal there was a lot of short time working, but the company still produced around 20,000 to 25,000 machines a year. The AJS name was well known and respected throughout the world; it was an excellent ambassador for the town. The workforce were well looked after by the family and were both loyal and hard working. Many engineers obtained their engineering skills while working for the company, which in its heyday had a workforce of over two thousand people.

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