



# WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ZED ZAWADA?

The old saying goes 'the more everything changes, the more it stays the same.' I won't bother with the more common French version, mercifully shortened to 'plus ca change... ' or a neat twist much loved by dictators and philosophers 'everything must change so we can stay the same'. This blather is only to explain that the invitation to write this pinged up on my laptop while I was soldering up the bottom of the awful piece of plastic and compressed cardboard masquerading as the fuse box of my '75 Ducati 900ss. It doesn't feel so long ago that I was doing much the same to my first Ducati, a 204cc Elite. I was fifteen, and the year was 1969.



a Cotton racer, so I reckon I earned my first speeding ticket, 86 mph in a 30 limit, exaggerated no doubt by the Mr Plods who really, really were not impressed by chasing me along the South Circular at 3 am, making a noise like all the pneumatic drills in the world firing at once.

The last day before I sold it, whilst desperately fettling the electrics at the kerbside (again) so it would start for the new owner, I chanced a "hello" to a schoolgirl with nice legs

that wandered past. She ran away, but eventually returned, forever. Yes, I met my future wife, Anne, fiddling with Ducati electrics!

Actually a lot has changed. I don't have to go to school on the bike tomorrow (yes, I know, the minimum legal age was 16 back then, what did I care?). I'm working in a brightly lit, warm garage with compressed air, three phase and a roll-cab full of Snap-Ons, not by a wet curbside, under a sodium streetlight with a plumber's paraffin blow lamp, but you get the idea.

If anybody still has FTD 87B, get in touch and I'll apologise for the terrible things I did to that lovely little bike.

That 204 Elite, or was it an SS? (I've still got the original handbook, published by none other than Vic Camp, the UK Ducati Importer at the time, that claims it was an SS, I've never been able to find the difference, if any) was rescued from a front garden in South London, it was seized and rusty but already sported a straight through megaphone instead of the fancy dual silencer it must have come with. I borrowed the 30 quid required to buy it from eighteen different people and set about mending it, badly. Actually, eventually, after an almost intimate relationship with Vic Camp's wife (Rose?), who ran the spares department and explained patiently which bit went where and usually managed to rummage out a secondhand bit when I couldn't afford a new part (always!), the thing actually ran quite well for brief but heroic periods. I fitted a set of John Tickle clip-ons halfway down the stanchions and bright red glass fibre tank from



My next bike was the embodiment of all evil, it was black, oily and British, a BSA A65 Thunderbolt. I decided to match the look with a secondhand Lewis black leather jacket, complete with generous blood stain from the previous owner (deceased), a

pair of sheepskin lined, zip-backed boots from the same source, and the bike's padlock and chain around my neck. All that this managed to achieve was to horrify my future parents in law, making the path of true love very rocky indeed!

The BSA also highlighted the little Ducati's positive points. The BSA wasn't much faster, handled so badly it should have been put in protective custody and broke down just as regularly. It also was made of great lumps of iron beaten together by blokes in leather aprons called Ron, rather than of exquisite alloy castings machined by Leonardo Da Vinci himself ... so I started thinking about another Duke.

I wasn't alone in this thinking, the British bike press was praising Ducati singles in general, which in the new wide case versions were exploding less frequently, and getting irrationally enthusiastic about the yellow Desmo versions that really looked, and did, the business. They went completely bananas when the V twins appeared, as did I. Alas, I couldn't afford one of those, or a desmo single, or even close, so snagged the next best thing, a tidy 350 Mk 3 in blue and gold, huge bargain because, of course, it wouldn't start, stuck points, but why should I tell the guy he could fix it with a drop of 3 in 1 and a needle file? I still feel guilty. When fitted with the obligatory open megaphone and bellmouth, the 350 at least sounded fast and could probably achieve the 86 mph the poor Elite was accused of.



I bought the 350 after finishing college and getting a ridiculously well paid job as a security guard in a new building. The job consisted of being locked in from 6pm to 6am, drinking a few cans of lager, chatting to the girlfriend on the provided phone, and getting a splendid night's sleep. Knowing that this couldn't last, (it didn't, some likely lads reversed a Bedford truck through a giant ground floor plate glass window, making a spectacular mess, but

failing to wake me, oops!), I started applying for 'proper' jobs, one of which was selling classified advertising on *MCN*. When I turned up at their London offices for interview two weird things happened. Firstly the job was not for *MCN* but for *Bike* magazine, my motorcycle magazine of choice, read assiduously from the first issue to emerge from Mark William's off centre psyche. The second was that a part of the interview was to write, and draw, a small ad for, of all things, a headlamp unit for a Ducati single! No kidding, Vic Camp had bought a job lot of 100 surplus Elite headlamps from Aprilia or CEV and was trying to shift them on to chopper builders and the like. Resisting the urge to headline the ad 'Peeling Chrome and 6 volt Gloom can be Yours' I wrote something sensible (ish) and got the job. I thus became the newly minted 'Junior Advertisement Representative' for *Bike* magazine, which involved rattling around the countryside on the 350 Mk 3, chatting to and drinking with bike dealers, workshops, clothing emporia etc. and getting paid for it. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven.

It got better. The editorial staffers of *Bike*, then Mike Nicks, Peter Watson, Bill Haylock and Graham Sanderson, were based in Peterborough, so there was a certain amount of ferrying test bikes up and down to London; they found out I was a biker so roped me in. I didn't crash or steal any, so quite soon, when logistics and time got on top of them, they asked me to write a roadtest on one of the bikes. It was a Honda 400 four, part of a ten bike giant test, which was really ambitious back then. I can't kid myself that the roadtest was any good, but it was copy, on time, to length and sort of in English, so it went in the magazine.

Suddenly I was on the road test team, and test bikes started to come thick and fast, which I loved but quickly caused an unexpected problem with the 'day job'. I was flogging advertisement space to dealers and manufacturers on one day then slagging off their products in editorial on the next. This conflict of interest was quickly solved with a by-line change. I chose 'R P McMurphy, central character in *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, memorably played by Jack Nicholson, not because he ended up lobotomized, not funny now, or even then, but for the scene when he took the guys out for a bus trip, possibly the funniest cinema scene ever.

Thus disguised, I could write anything I liked about the bikes whilst continuing to schmooze

the advertisers, and, as a tribute to the anarchic atmosphere at *Bike* then, and to my own naiveté, it never occurred to anyone to write nice things in editorial to get the ads – how times have changed!

This was around the time that I first discovered the DOC GB, meeting at the Mawson Arms, a Fullers pub in Chiswick, West London. I can't exactly remember what or who caused me to rattle up there on the 350 one Wednesday evening, but that almost chance encounter had a profound future effect on both my wallet and my sanity, not always in a good way, linking me inextricably with Ducati, and particularly with the nutters that ride them!

Talking of nutters I had thought of titling this story 'It's all Ainslie's Fault' not because it is necessarily so, but the mantra has so often been repeated it is part of the fabric of the universe. I refer of course to Anthony, skilled racer and tuner of singles, selfless and erudite to a fault, (very) occasionally irritating beyond measure, for it was he that came up with the 'Imola Trip' of 1977 – a great Ducati odyssey across Europe, to pay homage to Smart and Spaggiari at the Holy of Holies, the Dino Ferrari track at Imola, taking in Borgo Panigale on the way back.

Planned by Anthony over pints of foaming ESB in the warmth and comfort of the Mawson Arms, it very nearly killed all of its participants, certainly wrecked their bikes, and made the Ducati factory wary of ever inviting British bikers again. Naturally, he declined to attend the actual trip, might have spilt his pint....



The trip has been described in the past, so I won't go over it again, but what it did for me was forge some lifelong friendships, even with Ainslie, introduce me to the joys of continental biking, and indirectly bring me to the present day in a garage in Poland, soldering up the crappy rivets in an Aprilia fuse box.



900ss Aprilia fusebox.



Zed's 900ss restoration.



Anne sitting on the Ducati, September 1979.

# ZED'S DUCATI CHRONICLES

– PART II, THE 900SS



Road testing with Bill Haylock of Bike on a 1978 black and gold Desmo.



Somewhere in Spain, madam in full leathers, 40 degrees, Desmo cool.



Calais, waiting for the ferry home, Desmo still looking good under 5,000km of road dirt.

I should have known what to expect, but love is blind, so I was more than taken aback when my bride of literally 30 seconds – we had just signed the marriage register in the vestry of a gloomy Victorian church – said, ‘It’s half mine now’.

The ‘it’ was not all my worldly goods, my body or my future, those were a given, but something much more important, my Ducati. Sorry, *our* Ducati ...

Yes, somewhat unexpectedly I had just signed away half of the most beautiful, fastest, noisiest and expensive motorcycle I had ever owned, and at the time, the world had ever seen, an original 1975 900 Super Sport. Love, honour and obey is all very well, but really, the Desmo?

Built by the Factory in a limited edition of 249 machines in response to a demand, mainly from Australia, for a homologated production racer based on the new ‘square case’ engine and to follow in the footsteps of the immortal 1974 ‘roundcase’ 750 ss of Imola fame, that run of early 900 super sports has gained almost mythical status over the years, to the extent that there are many more bikes claiming to be one in existence today than were ever built. This is quite an achievement since many of the ‘real’ ones were raced to death and the breakers yard in Australia and elsewhere was their original, and honourable destiny. This is all despite the fact that they were knocked together out of a mix of obsolete parts-bin junk, execrable hand-laid glass fibre and ‘prototype’ engine bits, the posh Ducati factory term for ‘unfinished’, or indeed ‘scrap’. Cynicism and objectivity aside, back in the late seventies, they were the most beautiful, exotic thing (on two wheels...) a young man could swing his leg over. At least I thought so.

A few had leaked out onto the British market, selling new at a breathtaking two thousand pounds, about how much I earned a year at the time. I had to wait a while to consummate the lust felt for those sinuous blue and silver curves, patiently plodding about on my

pedestrian 860GTS, knocking out a big-end in the process (there goes the cynicism again). Anyway, despite that experience, when a second hand '75 900ss came up for sale at Geoff Daryn's Kent shop in late 1977, I was down there like a shot, ostensibly to talk about advertising in *Bike* magazine but really to drool over that Imola tank. Love really is blind.

A dodgy deal was struck and I was soon hooning up the A2, bum in the air, Conti's barking and a grin the size of a planet under the Bell Star. The bike had only about four thousand klicks on its wobbly Smith's speedo so was fresh and tight. It wasn't raining so both cylinders were on full baritone song, and, with a descant of induction roar from the open PHF 40 Dellortos, all I could add was to giggle like an idiot.

At the time, the Desmo really was something special: rare, exotic, fast, it ticked all the boxes. UK roads were over-run with ubiquitous Japanese across the frame fours with elastic chassis, stainless steel disc brakes that didn't and perfectly competent engines that sounded like domestic appliances. The Desmo was like a silver and blue thoroughbred bullet, no namby pamby electric start, no indicators, no mirrors, no tick-over and a sound straight from *Apocalypse Now*. A long stiff frame, Marzocchi forks and shocks with no appreciable travel and a crazy steering angle made it track straight and true, dual drilled Brembos could chirp the front tyre from any speed, and Ing. Taglioni's mystical cams and shiny forked rockers kept the engine together and breathing right up to and beyond 8,000 rpm.

Of course, anything more than the briefest visits to the land of 'over 8000rpm' would be rewarded with, at best, broken rings, and more usually a big-end making an oily, noisy, bid for freedom. Equally, trying to hustle that long stiff chassis round tight bends was a steroid sapping experience, only enhanced by the adrenalin rush of having the rear wheel come off the ground in mid corner as the exhausts grounded. Many of these shortcomings and their heroic banishment were written up superbly, at around the time I bought the Desmo, by Cook Nielsen and Phil Schilling of *Cycle* magazine in The States.



*Somewhere in the Alps with the Desmo in full 'Sports Touring' mode, 1978.*



*1978. In France: Anthony, Charlie and Zed.*



*One of many, many rebuilds.*



Although based on a 'round case' 750ss, their Daytona winning 'California Hotrod' was an inspiration to all Ducati obsessives, and showed what could be done when Taglionis' design was re-built from real steel, with the might of California's aerospace and automotive tuning industry behind it.

Even more inspiring were a bearded chap from the suburbs of Manchester and his moustachioed mate from Birmingham, none other than Steve Wynne and Mike Hailwood. The IOM TT was a major annual jolly for anybody working in the bike press, my job was to organise the "Ogri TT Supporters' Pubs", and get any potential advertisers to sign contracts by pouring unlimited quantities of Castletown Ale down their, and my, throats. It was a tough job, but somebody had to do it... Steve was one of these potential advertiser chaps, but, unsurprisingly, in 1978 he was a bit too busy for a beer. Being the great guy he is, instead of telling me to bugger off, he invited me into the filthy, leaking garage of the Castle Mona Hotel where the Holy of Holies was being prepared – the Sports Motorcycles Ducati – to talk while he and Pat Slinn wrestled with bits of green and red NCR bodywork, and swore at there being absolutely no factory support. When Mike subsequently won, it was just the best possible outcome for the Ducati factory and very possibly one of the most important contributors to the marque's survival, but they still didn't help, and I accompanied Steve and Pat on a visit to the factory that November to literally beg for parts for the next year's efforts.

Racing then started to creep into my existence. Not racing the Desmo, I had to ride to work on that every day, but the joys of endurance racing, first as an innocent spectator at the Le Mans 24 Heures,

then farther afield: The Bol d'Or at Paul Ricard, Montjuich Park in Barcelona, then, fatefully, the most exotic of all "The West Raynham 1000km", because this is where 'Team Bike, The Endurance Racing Years' came about. Yes, this godforsaken, windswept airfield in Norfolk was where, with the immortal words 'yeah, we can do that' we started an odyssey that would take us to most race tracks in the world: Suzuka, Phillip Island, Sepang included in 12 years of sleeping too little, drinking too much, and going too fast.

We never raced a Ducati, not even our inflated egos thought we could make one last 24 hours, but it had a profound effect on how the Desmo got used. In the words of Pete Watson, then editor of *Bike* magazine, "you should call what you do *Sports Touring*." With this a complete new category of biking was, if not born, at least described. I had to get to the races, and since the Desmo was my only form of transport, there was nothing for it but load up the camping gear and the girlfriend and head down to Dover, fast.

It makes sense, if you have to load up a bike with tons of junk and a passenger, then choose the fastest bike you can to start with, particularly if you really, really, have to get there, and 'there' is Circuit Paul Ricard, not much less than a thousand miles south of our London squat. The Desmo once made it, one-up, overnight in less than 10 hours, including a hovercraft crossing. (The ramp was coming up as I rode on, I was in the suburbs of Calais less than 40 minutes later, and it's actually about 800 miles, but my bum thought it was 1,000.)

There were many slightly more leisurely, but fully loaded up trips in the late '70s and early '80s. Purists will recoil in horror but I fitted a

dual seat robbed from a 750 Sport, a snappy pair of blagged Krauser panniers which actually tucked in really well when I cut and shut the rack, a set of Paioli motocross shocks to keep the rear off the deck, some squishy foam grips and voila! – the Desmo was a tourer. It might not be the most comfortable or reliable machine for the task, but with my gut resting on the tank bag, Anne keeping my back warm and the Mediterranean approaching at 120 mph, it certainly did the job.

It did have its limitations however: not enough capacity. Not the engine you understand, but not enough beer capacity. On our very first trip to the Bol d' Or at Ricard, as spectators rather than competitors, we still prepared to endurance standards, so a huge supply of beer was required to keep us going for 24 hours. The cheapest was evil stuff called 'Valstar', naturally re-named by us Brits as 'Valspar', the paint, which it smelled like. This came in one litre brown glass bottles, and we could only fit some 34 bottles into the Krausers and rucksack of my pillion. This was more than most of our motley collection of café racers could manage, but still meant several trips up and down the swoopy, hairpinned, French nutter Motard infested road down to the nearest little town. We didn't fall off, and (most) of the beer made it to the campsite.

Thus supplied we settled down to watch the race and became predictably tired and emotional (it was the close racing, officer....) Then some Swedes turned up with bottles of Jim Beam, and suddenly, in a fit of romantic fervour, I found myself proposing marriage to Anne, thus leading to the scary moment, a year later, when she laid claim to half my (sorry, our) Desmo.

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That motorcycle has a lot to answer for, mostly good; I'll finish the story of how I made up for abusing it and abandoning it, by restoring it, next time.



*Essential after-lunch recovery on the road to Le Mans, 1978.*



*Zed fixing the Desmo, in the Isle of Man, 1980.*



*Zed's Desmo at Ricard in 1978.*

# ZED'S DUCATI CHRONICLES

– PART III, ABUSE, ABANDONMENT & RESURRECTION

There wasn't a precise moment when my 900ss stopped being the most important thing in my life and I sometimes think it never has, which might be news to my kids, and a positively dangerous admission to my wife, but let's just say that 'other stuff' started to intrude on the pure joy of charging around on that blue and silver bullet, sometime in the mid '80s.

From the mundane, like getting a 'proper' job, and a company car (sometime two ... this was the '80s!), through the life stage thing of buying a house complete with giant mortgage, to the more exciting madness of 24 Hour Endurance racing, then to spectacular unfaithfulness in the shape of a Yamaha FJ 1200 (just for commuting, you understand, she'll never find out ...) and eventually the messy business of procreation – 'other stuff' just started to get in the way. The Desmo didn't do itself any favours either by regularly and spectacularly imploding and spending ever lengthier periods in bits. Even when complete it's just not a 'touch and go' kind of machine, needing at least short period of meditation, a massive pair of boots and considerable physical prowess just to start, and titanium wrists and bum to ride.

I might have had all that once, but the siren call of a hand-stitched Connolly leather armchair, air conditioning and a 3.2 litre flat six woofling away in the boot soon won that contest on a wet Monday morning. When Team Bike's racing efforts got serious there were just no 'sunny riding Sundays' which weren't occupied with either racing our endurance bikes or endlessly re-building them. All weekends, As team boss Howard Lees would put it, "From boxing day to the Bo!" (September then) were taken, either with angle-grinder or Tig welder in one hand and red hot brake pads and mountains of slicks in the other. I'm not complaining, it was great fun, but the Desmo, suffering from some clattery internal complaint, just got shoved in a corner and all but forgotten.

I did force myself actually to get it all in one piece and running when we moved house and I had to store the Desmo and loads

of similar junk (is that blasphemy ... I think so) in another lock-up and I just knew that if it wasn't at least complete, it never would see the light of day and the open road again, and probably wouldn't anyway. Luckily the new lock-up was a big one, so I also decided to keep pretty much every broken/substituted part and a considerable pile of accumulated spares, just because it was easier than throwing them away ... phew, what an unintended good move that was!

Talking of moves, the house move was caused by small pink wobbly things, babies! Actually, by the time we moved, they had become highly mobile pink wobbly things, my son was 2, daughter was 4 and they were mightily impressed when I fired up the Desmo in a great cloud of smoke and escaping rodents. They are in their twenties now but I still get blamed for their deep seated childhood trauma, the symptoms of which are an unhealthy, sometimes life threatening addiction to the internal combustion engine.

I didn't even manage to ride it further than the couple of miles to its new resting place where I emptied a can of WD40 onto the shiny (ish) bits and chucked a tarpaulin over it before returning to the joys of parenthood, and what I laughingly called a career. Turns out that I was the only one laughing, since soon after I got spectacularly fired from one of the world's best jobs, setting up MTV (Music Television) in Europe. "Money for nothing and chicks for free" was the motto, but I don't think the serious Americans in charge expected me to take them at their word. Oh well!

Luckily help was at hand in the unlikely form of the grizzled and scarred countenance of Mac McDiarmid, friend for life from the Imola Trip, erstwhile editor of *Bike Magazine*, staring at me across an equally scarred pub table. "I'm off to Czechoslovakia (it still was then) to check out what's left of the bike industry there and I'm thinking of swinging through Poland for a drink, fancy coming?" It was 1993 and the Berlin Wall had only been down a couple of years, but that meant travel for me to the land of my father was finally possible. "When

do we leave?" was the only possible response from a guy with a house full of kids, nappies and Lego. I was taken slightly aback that the answer was "Tomorrow", but an afternoon of blagging on the phone secured an Africa Twin from Honda to match Mac's Super Tenere and off we went, eastwards.

The trip was brilliant fun and a big eye-opener for me, and literally the day after we got back I was offered a job setting up a publishing company in Warsaw. A week later I was getting off a creaky old Tupolev in Warszawa Okęcie airport, suited and booted, looking for an office building and a beer, and, successful in both enterprises, I eventually set up my own company and moved with the family to Poland. This is only relevant because the poor old Desmo was still under the tarpaulin in south London, and was to remain there for the next 16 years.

I did visit it occasionally to feel ritually guilty and empty another can of WD40 over it, but it just sat there, getting browner and furrer with each passing year. Finally, motive and opportunity to disinter the Desmo presented themselves at the same time, bizarrely provided by the very same kids that led to its abandonment all those years ago. My son was struggling a bit during his first year at Uni in the UK and we decided that what he needed was a direct injection of adrenalin. He had been racing karts, then cars in Poland for years, and continued to return for events, but couldn't do much racing in the UK and was getting a bit fed up, so his mum ordered me to take his 6-speed kart and KTM 125 enduro to the UK to cheer him up – mums are the same the world over! An epic van journey from Poland to the UK was planned, and the idea of bringing the Desmo back to Poland on the return leg and finally doing a ground up restoration was born.

When I made it to the bike over tons of junk in the lock-up and lifted off the now mostly rotted

tarp I was kind of encouraged, it was all there, the garage was mercifully dry and well ventilated and nothing much seemed to have eaten it or fallen on it. The plan was quickly to drop the engine and deliver it to Nigel Lacey in Portland for a full re-build and take the rolling chassis back to Poland. Nigel had been recommended to me as a premier engine builder by Anthony Ainslie (already mentioned in dispatches) when I decided that I just didn't have the equipment, or frankly the skills to properly do an every moving part engine build which would likely involve new rods, pistons, liners and most of the gearbox as well as valve seats, guides, valves and every rolling bearing. Despite Nigel not being able to start the job for many months, it taking around six months and costing a very serious (but entirely fair) amount of money, it was the best decision I could have taken.

I've helped build quite a few race bikes, karts and, more recently, rally cars but I've never tried re-building a classic to original spec so the whole thing was quite an experience, and brings up unexpected issues, particularly about what you are actually trying to achieve, which always ends up as some kind of compromise between originality and function, without even bringing in safety, legality or aesthetics. I had a head start because I had had the Desmo from nearly new. It was 'original' when I got it, although that doesn't mean it was necessarily exactly the same as all the others in that production run, or the factory brochures, or the manuals. I wanted to ride it, not show it, so decided a 'functional' restoration was the way to go, original but retaining the essential mods that made it 'my bike' and rideable back in the day.



It had been ritually thrashed all over Europe so all the paint, the chrome and rubber bits needed serious attention as did the fasteners and alloy but there was nothing fundamentally missing or modified except the rear subframe, broken in the famous 'beer incident' at the

'78 Bol D'Or and replaced with a bit of Reynolds 531. This also required the fitting of a slightly later, and much better designed, rear mudguard, also from 1978 I think. I had also ripped out the original, useless, Magnetti Marelli ignition and replaced it with a Lucas Rita unit which amazingly still worked.

Because the Rita has an ugly black cover over the rotor and reluctor on the rear cylinder I did consider changing the whole thing for a 'Silent Hektik' Unit (what a great name!) but couldn't find any definitive info on whether it would easily fit such an early 900 as it was designed to replace the later Bosch units, and, more importantly I had personally brazed a 2p piece into the gland nut that allowed the original ignition wiring out of the crankcase, which I thought was cool! I had also chucked out the original ignition flywheel which made a small but noticeable improvement to engine response.

The original Jod Duplo headlight glass had long gone in some slow speed, not-enough-lock pub car park scenario and been replaced with a much better Cibie sealed beam unit and that was about it for non-standardisms, except for the wheels. I had managed to blag a set of cast Campbray alloy wheels when they were first introduced and had them anodized blue, which looked good and proved to be seriously strong, but luckily kept the original spoked, Boranni Record 4777 rimmed wheels in a box, covered with the now familiar can of WD40. These now change hands (if you can find them) for ridiculous amounts of money, and here I had a perfect, hardly used set!

There were a few war wounds: a bent clip-on, ditto brake lever and, of course, the entire contents of the original Contis poured out as a fine red dust as soon as I unbolted them. Again, in a great bit of serendipity (what?) I had bought a pair of small bracket Contis from the factory when I visited way back in '79 with Steve Wynn, and I had emptied a can of WD40 inside these, and a handful of Vaseline on the outside before chucking them into the same box as the wheels. This all sounds as if I had an 'Ikea Flat-pack 900ss Restoration Kit' to hand, and compared with some heroic restos, I did, but the list of stuff that did need replacing and sourcing started getting long and hours of internet searching ensued.



I decided not to be a hero and tried to out-source as much as I could. I'm never going to be as good an engine builder as Nigel Lacey, I'm never going to accumulate 20 years of spraying experience like Pawel Foremniak who did the paint, I don't have a ten foot high bank of tiny drawers with every Dell Orto part ever manufactured towering over my flow bench and ultrasonic cleaning bath like Mike Davies of JRS who rebuilt my carbs. Anyway there were enough rusty rotted bits to keep me going for ages, and I wanted to ride the bike again in my lifetime!

The biggest surprise was discovering just how many Ducati nuts are out there, and how many bits you can get your hands on if you persevere. The weirdest thing about finding parts was the fact that there are essentially three sources, one in California, one in Australia and one in Italy, with an honorable mention to Shipley in Yorkshire! With me doing the resto in Poland, it meant that DHL, FedEx and the rest were the ones making the profits, and I spent as much time at the keyboard as in the garage. California first, Bevel Heaven is both a forum for Ducatisti and a very comprehensive on-line shop for bevel bits, singles and twins. It's an inspired combination because every possible restoration issue, problem and solution can be found in the hundreds of pages of posts on the forum. If you manage to find a new problem, you'll immediately get answers from some really knowledgeable, experienced people, including Steve Allen, the site owner, who likes to intervene in the occasional 'rivet counting' squabble about what is 'correct' by reminding people that some questions couldn't be answered by Ing. Taglioni himself, and then directing them to a practical, elegant

solution. The online shop is a model of its kind; each part properly described, photographed clearly and with much better application data than Ducati themselves could ever manage. Much of his stuff is actually manufactured (I think) by my next two sources, but he makes many precision parts locally, and has a wide range of 'improved' bits that look like the originals but are correctly dimensioned, and made of good materials, something the factory never managed.

Moving right along to Australia, we find 'Bevel Rubber' another well-organised online store, specialising in that bane of all restorers' lives, all the rubber, plastic, and trim bits that fall to bits first, and just cannot be re-manufactured in your garage, even if you have a 5 axle NC machining centre. These boots, grommets, washers and rubbers are just essential to make the bike look right and almost none of them are useable after 20 years of storage. The guy who runs it, Damien Birch, also has an expanding range of hardware and is particularly knowledgeable about the early 900ss. More than half the production run of 246 machines was exported to Aus. (according to Ian Falloon, an Australian and high priest of Ducati gurudom) so not surprisingly some of the best restored, and original, examples can be found there, including Falloon's own bike which features as a reference in his book, *The Ducati Bible*, and in which he obligingly describes the '75 900ss as "one of the finest of all production Ducati motorcycles." Doing no harm at all to the notional value of my bike, or indeed his own!

Back now to Italy and the backstreets of Casalgrande, an outer suburb of Bologna, where, on the wrong side of the railway tracks and unfindable with even the latest GPS, lives 'Old Racing Spare Parts', the real mother lode for Ducati bevel bits. I've only visited once, it was a freezing February Saturday morning and the spectacularly moustachioed owner, Mario Sassi, clearly wanted to be somewhere else, so much of what I write is conjecture. I had arranged to pick up a sizeable order of stuff whilst zooming through from Warsaw to Rome, (in an Audi ... it was February ...) and had got a bit frustrated with trying to order bits from ORSP. They have a comprehensive website with a literally mouthwatering selection of 'unobtainable '

parts, stuff of legend like two into one 'Imola' exhaust systems, original 'Roberto Ballanti' fairing screens, even small bracket Contis... BUT, no prices, poor photographs, part numbers that have no relationship to the originals and no way of actually buying stuff without endless to-ing and fro-ing of email lists to get pricing and availability. I'm sure that if you spoke fluent Italian and chatted on the phone, many issues would be cleared up, and I suppose it's time I learnt.

Back to Casalgrande, what a place the warehouse is for the Ducati obsessive: complete, new 900/750 ss frames in raw steel, sandcast 750 roundcase crankcase halves, piles of uncatalogued, unpriced stuff that people have been searching years for. The story is that Mario Sassi managed to buy quite a lot of the old production machinery from Borgo Panigale at scrap prices and, more importantly, rounded up the retired old gents that used to operate it, and they bang out short runs of stuff like rear light brackets, headlamp shells, swinging arms and the like. How authentic is that! The same applies to the Conti family, who knock out a few silencers with the old presses when they feel like it (unfortunately not often).

For me a big prize at ORSP was a complete, new, wiring loom which fitted and worked, a huge hurdle in most restos and particularly Ducatis since the original loom is complete rubbish, and had been repaired and bodged many times. There was, of course, a typical Italian issue of the new wiring loom appearing to match the colours in the wiring diagram, but not of the original loom. Other small but pleasing bits were a shiny new rear light lens and its long thin screws, the originals having fallen out on some distant autoroute a few decades earlier. The honourable mention goes to Mdina Italia, Yorkshire based and essentially marketing ORSP bits in the UK but quickly, clearly and without any discernible price hike.

Despite the efforts of everybody there were a few bits that I couldn't find anywhere. The '75 ss has a very particular, straight, kickstart lever with a clever, but totally useless stepped bolt that both clamps the lever to the splined shaft and acts as the pivot. The lever was bent, but nothing a sledge hammer and a trip to the platers couldn't solve. The pivot

bolt is another story, failing in both of its duties very early on in its career and being replaced with a straight through bolt and nyloc nut that had to be really carefully tensioned to both grip the spline and allow the lever to pivot and looked really ugly. Luckily I kept the original bolt and a consultation with my local machine shop produced a perfect, centreless ground bolt with a rolled thread that fitted the new, sleeved and line-reamed hole in the lever like it always should have done. The price? A bottle of (good) vodka.

Poland proved to be a good place to do quite a lot of work, despite being almost a Ducati Free Zone until recent years, and never having much of a motorcycle culture. What it does have is the remains of a substantial aircraft/precision engineering industry and a healthy approach to 'free enterprise' best illustrated by my nuts and bolts saga. All the original Ducati fasteners and lots of bits like axles and spacers were cadmium plated. Cad plating is a filthy process and has, over the years, been outlawed everywhere in Europe and much of the rest of the world. Standard nuts and bolts now come zinc plated and the only applications that will get you a special license to run a cadmium bath are aerospace, military and nuclear, only because cadmium is an inherently better coating for anti-galling and corrosion resistance in extreme conditions. I was surprised to discover that this even applied to the grimy, post-Soviet underbelly of Polish industry, in its newly acquired 'we're in the green, clean EU status' until the obliging chap in a brown work coat and horn-rimmed glasses that machined up my kickstart bolt said, 'ah yes, you want AtomPol'. Poland is somewhat famous for never having any Soviet nuclear reactors built on its soil and now touts its 'nuclear free' eco credentials loudly, despite the real reason being that the Soviets were scared the Poles would start stealing/manufacturing nuclear materials for us against them, rather than any eco sensibilities. Naturally, not all is as it seems, and there is, in fact a working nuclear reactor in Poland, somewhat alarmingly just down the road from where I live. "AtomPol is just for making medical isotopes and research" is the official line, the 6 metre fences, Kevlar clad, H&K MP 5 totting guards and battery of ground to air missiles might just tell another story, but whatever it might or might not be, it has a cadmium plating plant in its grounds!

Actually the plant is in a small industrial estate that the reactor has spawned, and all sorts of high tech services are available, metallic vapour deposition, spark erosion, laser cut ceramics anyone? I wasn't allowed in, but dumped my box of 100 odd little bits at the guard house and turned up a few days later to find them all shiny and new looking for the princely sum of 200 zloty (about forty quid). They lost the spring washer from under the steering damper knob, but I decided against making too much of a fuss...

Soon I had a whole trestle table of either new or re-furnished bits and was just missing the engine and frame. Another epic trans-European van journey ensued, and when I picked up the engine I was just gob-smacked, every casting had been vapour blasted and every casing polished, it looked like a great big piece of jewelry. The list of parts replaced was pages long with every action and part meticulously logged. Nigel used to be a nuclear submarine engineer and his 'zero defect' approach really showed. I had no way of knowing if the inside was as good as the outside, but it was good start. The paint was done by a mate in Poznan (Fomen Design, see below) who supplies Arai helmets and HANS devices to our rally team but whose real passion is airbrushing helmets for the rising stars of Polish and German motorsport. He has super steady pinstripping hand and also runs a race/tuning workshop so was able to repair and prepare the crazed fiberglass and scarred metalwork of the Desmo to an extremely high standard before laying flawless paint on it for its very first time. I told him not to overdo it as I wanted to avoid the 'boiled sweet effect' so he used hardly any filler or clearcoat and came through with a paint job that could have come from the factory on its best ever day, exactly what I wanted.

Now I had to do some proper work, strip and clean the forks, replace the seals and paint them, put in new swing arm bushes and start assembling the whole plot. Painting Marzocchi forks is a trial known to many Ducatisti, the original, bobbly, half shiny, half matt finish is so appalling that no professional paint sprayer I know will take it on and yet it just looks so wrong when done 'properly'. There are pages and pages devoted to obtaining authentic "Marzocchi black" on various forums, I followed a Dutchman on 'Bevel Heaven' who said 'first

of all forget all you know about good spray painting, set your gun so wrong that it spatters and spits'. I had to strip off the first attempt, too smooth, but eventually got it right using thick gloopy two-pack paint barely dribbling out of the gun.

A big moment came when I finally re-united the engine and frame, I elected to keep the frame completely bare and drop it on to the engine: sounds simple but it took a fair amount of time, scratched enamel and very bad language. But it's a real buzz when the pile of bits starts looking like a bike again. A very satisfying period of bolting on shiny new or re-furbed bits, dropping in lovely new bearings, brake seals and the like followed, interrupted by the frustration of trying to make body parts line up when they never did originally, and hours of contemplating and testing the electrics – not easy even when armed with a new loom.

Suddenly, the list of things to fix, make or buy started to get shorter, and I had to think about a battery, tyres, chain, even oil! I had a bit of a scare when I read that modern fuels will eat fibre glass tanks and got an epoxy lining kit from Tankcare products in double quick time and then a pair of Avons AM 26s arrived, the seat came back from the upholsterers and I had no excuses left. Then another panic when the meticulously re-built (by me) 'shaved' Brembo PO8 calipers started to weep, the 'o' rings between the caliper halves in the Brembo re-build kits were the wrong size, nothing as obvious as O/D or I/D, just 0.2 mm to thin ... grrr! More meticulous re-building, finally a 'hard' lever, and it was time to heave the bike off the bench and see if it felt like living.

I left the fairing and side panels off, expecting lots of remedial work before it was ready to ride, even if it did start, and giving quick access if the loom started to short. A good few kicks with the plugs out to get the Mobil 1 about the place, plugs in with a new smear of coppa-slip, half a jerrycan of 100 octane and no further dithering, now was the time. Fuel taps on, hold the tickler on the rear carb until fuel drips on the floor, ditto front carb, ease over compression with the kick start, ignition on, three twists on the throttle for a good squirt of fuel from the accelerator pumps, then nothing left but to jump on the kickstart. Kaboom! Crobba, crobba, crobba ... it started first time, and ran, crisply and cleanly.



Nobody was more surprised than me, although the very shaky video on this YouTube link [http://youtu.be/Fohlb1v6C\\_k](http://youtu.be/Fohlb1v6C_k) shows the effect on my son, who was expecting to video an epic fail by his dad, but instead recorded the very moment the Desmo was resurrected.

This video link [www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIOGDbJVYrU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIOGDbJVYrU) shows me wobbling off on my first ride on the Desmo. I can't tell you how much fun it was blatting through the Polish countryside, scattering animals, children and serious church-goers on a truly sunny Sunday.

I've done a bit over 500km on it so far, it's running really well, better than I ever remember. There's a bit of smoke on startup from the rear cylinder which seems to be reducing and an oil weep from the base of the rear cam drive tower, otherwise absolutely nothing has broken or fallen off, including me!

It still needs to be physically threatened to go round tight bends and the suspension rattles my much older teeth much as before, but despite this I've entered the 2013 MotoGiro D'Italia in a fit of misplaced enthusiasm!

See you there.



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