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# BIG HEARTED LITTLE ENGINES



**W**e're skilful riders, you and I. We steer a hair's-breadth line through corners, and judge our braking to the last foot. Yet we are ever ready to allow for the other fool's ineptitude. Our ability makes up for his shortcomings.

When we make mistakes — it happens so seldom that I hesitate to mention it — but when we do make mistakes, they are so minor that the casual observer might miss them altogether; yet we're humble enough to learn from them. Most important of all, we know the limits of our machine.

The bigger the cylinder capacity, the more dangerous the motor cycle; so

Velocette's Noddy bike  
and Vogue tested.

Photographs; John Overton.

Story; Jonathan Jones.

runs the simplistic political thinking that makes regular inroads on cylinder capacity limits. You and I know better, of course. Small machines demand as much, if not more of our skill, than the rip-snorting roadburners.

Velocette's 192cc MkIII LE is feeding me information on every bump and bend, and without the braking efficiency to compress forks and squeal tyres into the apex, or the power to catapult away

down the next straight, the flowing control of momentum is my ally.

The twist grip is no longer master of all. It has to listen to the motor, coax it along when a groaning incline threatens, encourage it when it soars downward into a hollow.

A pleasant warmth floats up from the water cooled bike's radiator, and is trapped in the still air behind screen and legshields. Ahead, the rider of the 192cc Velocette Vogue, and owner of both machines, is setting the motor-inspired pace.

Expedience is not the key here. Dennis Butler could have the pick of the

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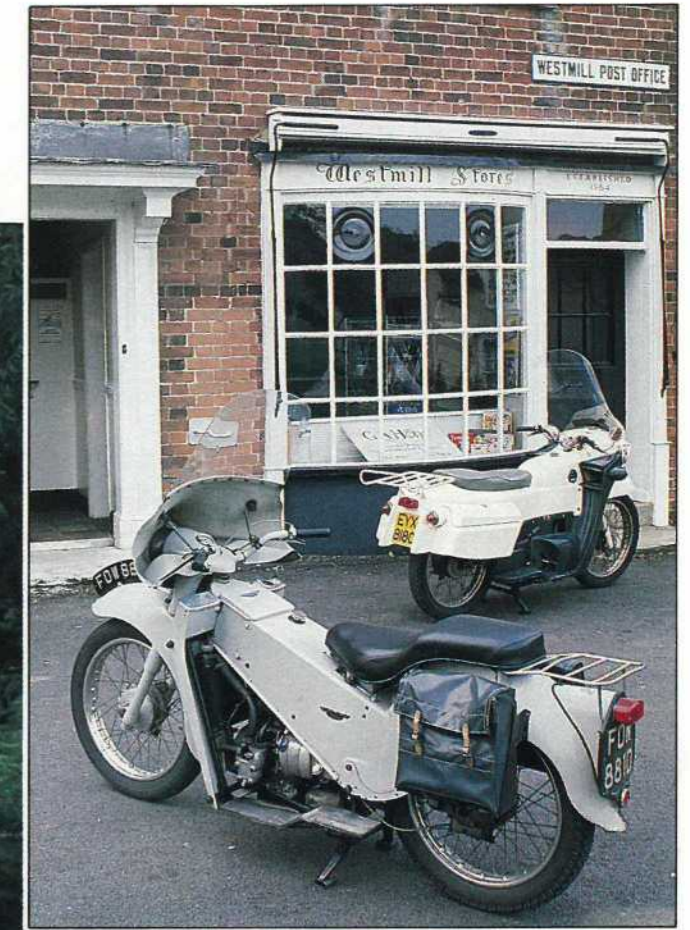
Left: The Vogue's twin headlights look impressive but are not noticeably brighter than the LE's.

Below: Water cooled Velocette riders enjoy protection from the elements, thanks to integral footboards and fairings.



Right: Neat GRP panniers and flashing indicators brought the LE Velocette back into vogue.

Far right: Clean and quiet, the Velocette twins were ideal for shopping or nipping down to the Post Office.



fastest modern multis from D C Butler Motorcycles, his shop in Stanstead Abbots High Street. But although he likes riding fast and far, he is not so narrow minded as to think that's all there is.

"I fell in love with this LE when I saw it in the Motor Museum at Hatfield House," he says. "And when the collection came up for auction a year later, I thought I'd have a go for it."

Saturday is one of the shop's busiest days, so his friend Mike went to bid for the Velocette, with a purse of £800 and a simple brief: 'Don't spend more than that; and don't dare come back without it!'

Mike only just broke the bank to secure the LE, and it turned out to be a little jewel. A 1966 model with just 15,000 miles on the clock, it's nut, bolt and washer perfect, right down to its Bluemels 'Motobike' pump.

"I had to have the seat re-covered, and I got a new front number plate pressed, because that was missing. But otherwise it's as I bought it," says Dennis.

Hailed as 'A multi for the masses' when it was announced at the end of 1948, the Little Engine Velocette was in production for 22 years. Its strength was in its quiet, gentle demeanour and its pressed steel construction, simple but robust, which gripped the steering head as obstinately as any Nineties frame; the root of the LE's precision handling.

Veloce Ltd had dabbled in steel pressings before. The Model O prototype of 1939, though it never went into production, used a stressed skin rear frame and

mudguard. The Phil Irving designed O also predicted another feature of the LE; shaft drive.

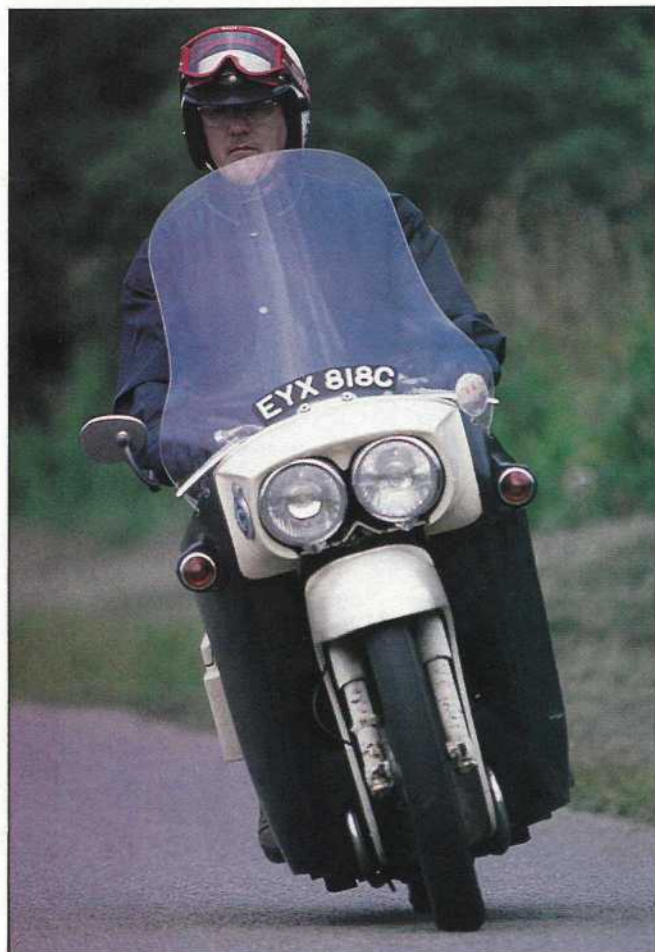
Originally of 149cc, the three speed LE was soon increased to 192cc with the MKII of 1950; its 44x49mm flat twin side-valve engine bored out to make it 50x49. The MKIII version was introduced for 1958, with a four speed gearbox, and at the same time the outmoded hand change gave way to foot operation. For the rest, there are plenty of books where you can research the minutiae of design modifications that thread their way through this long-running design.

The police force had been quick to seize an opportunity for silent transport for the uniformed bobby, Kent constabulary ordering a batch of LEs in July 1949, soon after the model was launched.

"These will be employed," said *Motor Cycling*, "on checking the thefts of fruit and poultry that have lately been rife."

Police preoccupation with the model is explained as soon as you tuck your feet up onto the boards. The LE is highly manoeuvrable, and turning in a narrow lane can be achieved without a single dab, much less an ungainly waddle. It's easy to park if you need to investigate a scene of crime, and above all the water cooled motor cruises with almost complete silence. Proceeding down a quiet suburban road would cause no distress to the good citizens, and the stripe-shirted felon would still be stuffing his pockets with apples, when he felt that firm hand on his shoulder.

A good number of ex-police 'Noddy' »



Broad Avonair fairing fitted to the LE offers better protection than the slimline Vogue. Top speed for both models is a beady 60mph.

bikes' are masquerading in mufti these days, but Dennis Butler's declares its civi roots; sold through ex-TT racer Alec Bennet's Southampton shop. In that respect it's a rare machine, for by the mid Sixties, LE production was almost exclusively for the police.

If I have a reservation about the LE Velocette's looks, it's the way it appears to have been lovingly put together in a private workshop. Isn't it the kind of thing an ingenious man might have knocked up using proprietary engine and transmission, a supply of sheet steel and plenty of nuts, bolts and pop-rivets? And when he had finished, I can imagine him finding a pot of Dove Grey among the half-empty tins on the paint shelf; just enough, when the skin was lifted off, to give the whole thing a lick over.

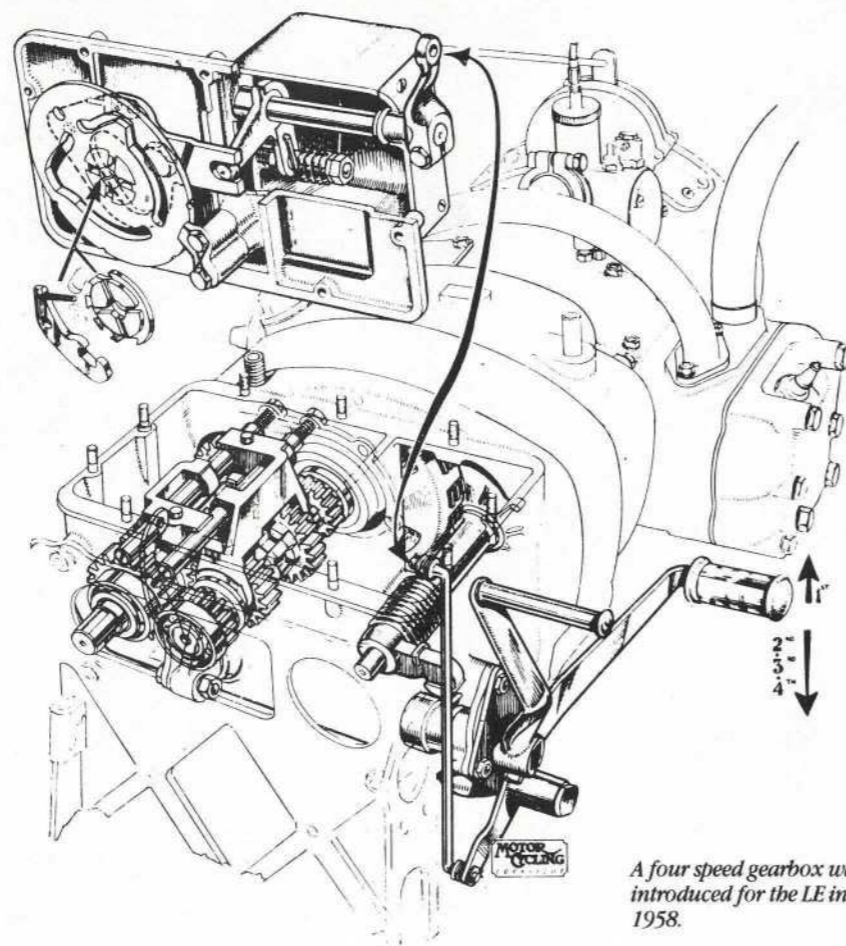
But if Velocette's LE was the chrysalis, their Vogue was the short-lived butterfly; launched in 1963 and withdrawn in 1968, with a total production of less than 400 machines.

"I remember a chap bringing this one for a MOT test in 1975," says Dennis. "He was immaculately dressed in a long Belstaff coat and Corker helmet, and the bike was in beautiful condition.

"As he left I told him to give me a call if he ever wanted to sell it."

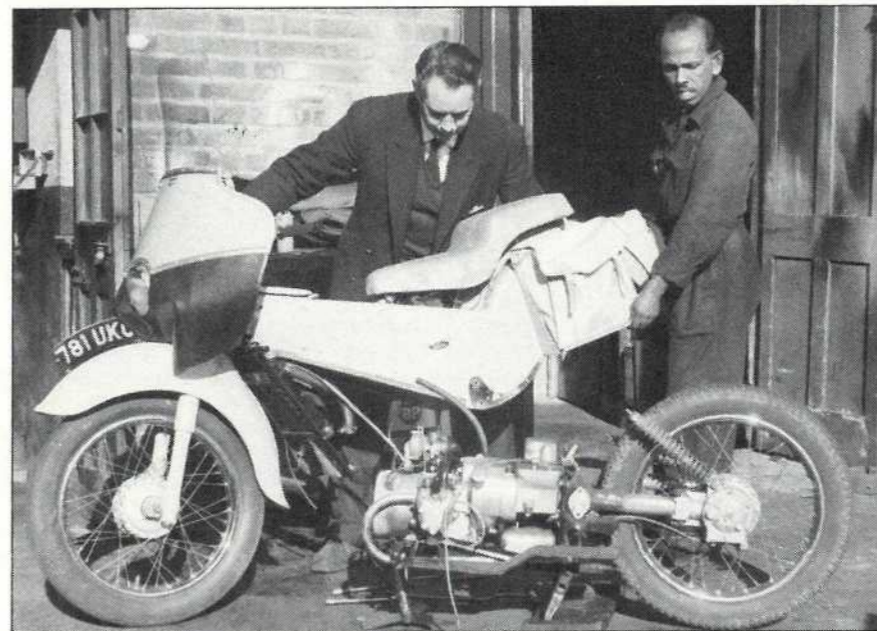
It was 13 years before the bait was taken. A lady phoned to say that she was selling the Vogue on behalf of its owner, and was Dennis still interested?

"I drove up to have a look, and we

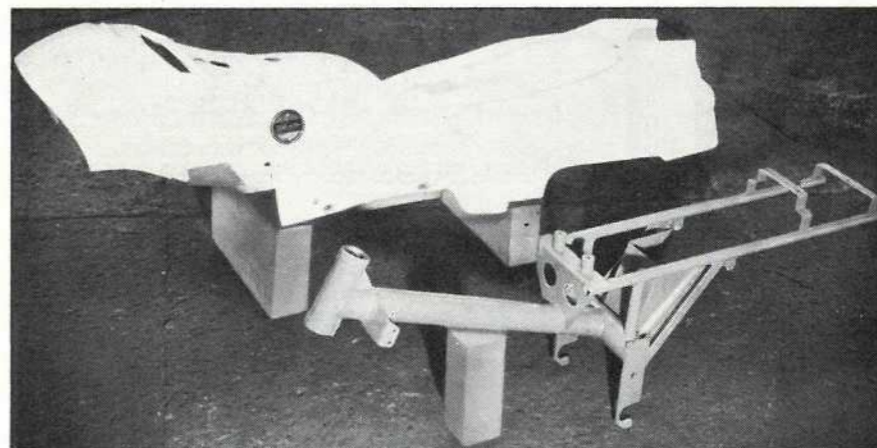


A four speed gearbox was introduced for the LE in 1958.

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Body and front fork section of the LE can be removed for easy access to engine and transmission.



Instead of a sheet steel pressing, the Vogue had a tubular frame covered by a one piece GRP moulding.

could hardly get in the shed, the door was so overgrown.

The glass fibre body was completely covered in ivy and static dust, and the seller was delighted with an offer of £100. In fact, she was so keen to see the back of the Velocette that she almost brought about its destruction.

"The ramps onto the pick-up were icy, and I was just easing it up, when she gave a tremendous push from behind. My legs couldn't keep up, and I went down on my knees, still trying to hold it upright. The screen and body were about to explode against the side of the truck, and I was yelling: Stop! Please stop!"

Back at the workshop, Dennis cleaned the Vogue's bodywork with a power washer, and drained the oil.

"It had been standing so long that it had separated out; black sludge at the bottom and pure golden oil at the top."

A stuck valve meant a top-end overhaul, and the seat cover, like the LE's, was beyond saving. Then the 31,000 mile Vogue took to the road again, but

there was one other fault which caused more than its share of trouble.

"We traced a slight petrol leak to the tank, which is built into the one piece glass fibre moulding. The body is quite a job to remove, and I'd taken it off three times before I realised that no amount of patching was going to make any difference. The whole GRP tank was porous."

That's when Dennis had the kind of luck which gets restorers out of the tightest corners. He was put in touch with a sheet metal worker who happened to be making an inner tank for a Velocette Vogue.

With the bottom of the GRP tank cut away, the steel tank's filler slides up into the original, where it is sealed with an O ring.

"It fitted so well," says Dennis, "that it practically held itself in by suction."

Originally supplied by Stephens of Shepherds Bush in 1965, the Vogue has the MkIII LE's running gear, but is based on a tubular spine frame. Dennis feels that the LE has the better handling



Velocette Ltd announced the Vogue in 1963. The GRP body was made by Mitchenall Brothers.

because of this. The Vogue also differs in having no adjustment for its rear shock absorbers, which are set for a fairly firm ride. My impression was that the LE — with Velocette's slotted quadrant adjuster at the top of the struts — was a touch soft on bumpy bends, but it was still utterly confidence-inspiring.

The seating position; coccyx tucked into the back of the rider's share of the two-level saddle — is superbly comfortable. The stepped footboards follow the saddle line, but one's heels sit naturally up on the rear section. Keeping that steady flow through the tangles of a country road is no problem with such sure handling. Sweeping into one bend, something brushed the side of my shoe. I realised with surprise that it was the road.

"The Vogue seems to be set up for a pillion rider," says Dennis. "It's most comfortable ridden two-up." I liked its harder suspension, but was unhappy with the relationship between screen and seat. The books give both saddle heights as 28in, but I found myself looking over, rather than through the Vogue's screen, and in consequence the wind protection was not quite as good as that offered by the LE's broad Avonair fairing. The Vogue's handlebars have the rider sitting slightly more upright in the face of the breeze.

There is a positive feel to the four speed gearboxes, but no more than one would expect from a shaft drive motor cycle. Their ratios marry well with the motors' power characteristics, and both machines are perfect runabouts, pure pleasure on a jaunt through the lanes. They really come into their own when you want to nip down to the Post Office for some stamps, or run into town with your library books tucked in the panniers.

That's where the butterfly Vogue would win, for although the LE exhibits a slight flutter of tappets as you float along the High Street, the Vogue is so whisper quiet, that it would scarcely raise an eyebrow if you rode it right into the library and parked in the reading room.

