

Celebrating 50 golden years



Karen Metcalfe and Mark Smith – overseeing success in their panoramic showroom



Clothing manager Gaynor Robinson and Phil Dougherty serve customer Phil Woods



Among the Triumphs, sales executive Dave Brown – 20 years with Bill Smith Motors

A half century in business and each and every year in profit. It's a remarkable record, one that Bill Smith Motors is justifiably proud of.

**Story and pictures: Brian Crichton
Period pictures courtesy of Bill Smith**

One of the dynamos of the motorcycle world, Bill Smith has always been able to spot opportunities and rev them for all they are worth. A first-class road racer with four TT wins to his credit, he has chalked up numerous other firsts. Best of all, the Smith talent has filtered down to his son and two daughters, who have been reinforcing the Smith imprint on the world of two wheels.

You will find Bill, his managing director son Mark and finance director daughter Karen running their super looking showroom in Chester. Meanwhile second daughter Claire works as a TV presenter. A former Miss Great Britain and Miss World runner-up, her duties have included presenting British SuperBike coverage.

Both Smith girls have brains and beauty and at the shop Karen can handle any showroom situation. Now 42, she started in the family business as a 17-year-old.

Sister Claire's husband Sam Broome is general manager at Chester, and also responsible for website and IT matters. He has been with the company for six years.

In Chester, at the Boughton end of the city, the shop has a corner position that really gets noticed.

"Six thousand cars a day pass this corner," says Bill. Location, location. The sleek Chester showroom sees an annual turnover of about £5m, and this year business is half a million up over 2008. In these tough times that sort of performance is remarkable.

It's not through luck that the Smith family have never faltered. Down-to-earth nous and a go-get attitude produce results. And they enjoy terrific customer loyalty. Their star customer is Bob Beese, who first popped into Bill Smith Motors in 1986 and since then has bought 14

GSX-R Suzukis, one RGV Suzuki, and two Hondas – all new.

Bill Smith is a legend, both in the showroom and on the race tracks. The first to race a Honda on a British short circuit (1959, Oulton Park). The first to sell Kawasaki in numbers. The first to import Bridgestone motorcycles. A winner in the first year of the Isle of Man Production TT (1967, 250 Bultaco). For years the holder of more TT Replicas than any other rider. A sponsor of numerous road racers over the years. Has he retired as a competitor? You can see the pain as he has to admit that yes, his racing days are behind him. Well, he is 74. But he still gets to events, especially the TT, and he sponsors his workshop chief Ian Mackman on a Triumph plus several local riders.

Legendary status results in people coming into the shop to give him things out of respect and admiration. As the business's figurehead he's now enjoying the luxury of complete confidence in his son Mark and daughter Karen. They run the

'If you don't give a good service you fail. Service has to be spot-on now'

business. Recently married Mark, 31, masterminds new and second-hand sales and Karen finance, clothing and accessories. They oversee a smartly turned out staff of 22, a staff that can relate to customers of all types.

It's a perfect combination. Bill is from the years of take a chance and to hell with the consequences, but tempers this with experience and common sense to such a degree that the risk is all but eliminated. While Mark and Karen have forged their own steel to deal with the reams of bureaucracy and red tape that running a modern business demands.

They cope with a mountain of paperwork that exasperates a man with Bill's background.

The gaffer doesn't really need to come in any more. But he's there every day. Why? The bikes. The buzz. The bizz. It's his lifeblood. But he might skive off early when his 6ft 4in grandson Andrew Metcalfe (Karen's son) is playing football. Bill is a football fan and as a young man played two seasons at Everton (1955-1956) after coming out of national service with the RAF. And he had a trial for Manchester City. He reckons his schoolboy grandson Andrew is going to be a name to watch, and he is already penned in to play for Wrexham.

Bill Smith Motors at Chester incorporates bike sales, clothing and accessories, workshop and CBT training all run as separate businesses. The set-up works. The clothing department has been doing exceptionally well. In charge is Gaynor Robinson, who is justifiably proud of a variety of ranges on offer and the department layout. Customers are given space and time and just the right amount of attention.

The Triumph clothing range as well as Triumph bike sales are the star turn. Says Karen: "Some Triumph customers are spending £900-£1000 on clothing. We

have non-motorcycling customers who come in to buy our retro gear. The clothing side is unbelievable – up to £12,000 turnover some weeks."

The clothing side is so busy that Phil Dougherty has been drafted back in to help part-time. He was with Bill Smith Motors for 26 years, the longest serving non-family member of staff.

The workshop is busy – service, MoTs, assembly of new machines, and repairs keeping all hands occupied. While we were there Keith Speed was judiciously using a fork lift truck to lift a new Suzuki Burgman 650 scooter from its crate so that final assembly

could be undertaken. "It's the heaviest machine in the Suzuki range – more than 500lb," he said. The workshop staff of five includes senior technician Ian Condliffe, who had his own bike shop before joining a Honda dealer for 12 years.

Bill Smith Motors no longer sells Honda. They had a falling out over Bill selling Hondas to small dealers. Importing bikes didn't go down too well either with Honda. Previously they had some great years together. For example, in 1978 Bill sold more than 3000 Honda motorcycles. He went on to also sell Honda cars and at one time ran seven shops with a total staff of 70. "We were selling 600 a cars a year," says Bill, "but Honda still wasn't satisfied." Despite the rift Bill holds Honda product in high esteem and rubbed shoulders with the late Soichiro Honda a few times. These days Bill prefers the multi-franchise approach. "People want a galaxy of bikes to choose from. Don't put all your eggs in one basket," he says.

In 2008 at Chester they sold 1400 bikes – 650 of them new models. The new brands on offer are: Suzuki, Triumph, Piaggio, Vespa, Gilera, Kymco and Yamaha. They sacrificed BMW for Triumph and it has worked out to be a good move. "Their quality and product is excellent," says Bill. Triumph outsells Yamaha at Bill Smith Motors and is tops in terms of profitability.

To enhance Triumph sales and presentation a winter revamp in the showroom will result in a Triumph corporate corner. Says Mark Smith: "We are going to have a big facelift – new ceilings and wooden floors. Our Triumph specialist salesman Kelvin Sirrell runs RAT (Triumph) Club membership from the showroom. Triumph's marketing is streets ahead of the Japanese."

Talking in more general terms Mark adds: "Cheshire is a wealthy area and we are always looking for potential while concentrating on the resources we already have. We are buying into lifestyle product and planning to attend a big show at Cholmondeley House, Cheshire, in July. Customer expectation is the biggest change over the years. We try to meet that expectation. It's not about price and just selling the bike.

It's about full customer service." Adds Karen: "It's a different world and it's harder now. The customer is looking at quality and service. It's a lot more professional today." Adds Bill: "If you don't give a good service you fail. Service has to be spot-on now."

Among the second-hand machines on offer are a range of road racers and Bill's staff are working on a budget racing single using a 450cc Yamaha engine. The racing DNA will not be denied.

You could fill this magazine with Bill's stories of 50 colourful years in the bike trade. At one time he had grand prix aces Mike Hailwood, Jack Findlay and Jack Ahearn building up Honda 50s for him at £1 a bike. "And they loved it!" he smiles.

At 74, Bill Smith has his eyes firmly fixed on the future.

He watches the traffic go by, iterating thoughts as his sales mind ticks over.

"Twenty-seven point five million people go to work every day in a car, and that's where the youth market is... Our customers are 90/10 per cent male/female, yet 50 per cent of the population is female... You would think that with the recession people would be flocking to buy..."

The beat goes on seven days a week at Bill Smith Motors, and the next half century beckons.

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Karen Metcalfe (left) with clothing and accessories boutique boss Gaynor Robinson



Busy workshop – diagnostic equipment plays an increasingly important role

Bill Smith – racer/dealer

1953 Bill Smith takes up road racing on a BSA Gold Star.

1959 He is the first to race a Honda on a UK mainland circuit – a 125cc RC161 twin, at the Oulton Park round of the British championships. Finishes second to Mike Hailwood (125 Ducati Desmo), who would go on to win ten world titles. Earlier in the year at the Isle of Man he witnesses Honda take part in their first TT and requests a ride. With father, an ex-road racer, Mayor of Chester and Labour MP, opens Bill Smith Motors in Chester selling cars.

1960 Flies to Japan and orders 60 50cc C100 and 40 C110 Honda road models. UK Honda 50 boom starts.

1962 Becomes official Honda dealer. Wins Thruxton 500-mile 250 class with Derek Minter (CB72), Honda's first UK mainland win.

1963 Finishes third in 250 Isle of Man TT (Honda CR72). Finishes 12th in the 500cc world championship, his most successful GP year.

1967 Wins the 250cc IoM Production TT (Bultaco) in the first year of the Production races. Imports 780 Bridgestone motorcycles from Japan after attending the Japanese GP.

1968 Wins the North-West 200 350cc class race in Ireland. Adds imports of Kawasaki motorcycles from Japan to his Honda and Bridgestone enterprises.

1969 Last year of Bridgestone imports as factory runs down bike production in favour of making tyres.

1970 Opens Honda shops in Liverpool, Winsford, Rhyl, Bangor and Warrington. Honda cars included at the Wirral shop.

1971 Wins 250 Production TT (Honda) for second time.

1973 Wins 500 Production TT (Honda-4).

1976 Competes in his last grand prix race, the Isle of Man Senior (500) TT. Appointed Honda spares distributor.

1978 Wins the the Formula 3 IoM TT (400 Honda-4). Sells 3280 Hondas, a record number.

1982 Suffers horrific crash at IoM TT. "The gearbox locked up at Ballaugh. I was three months in intensive care with broken legs, a broken back, a broken arm, broken elbow and broken pelvis." Despite this, the Mountain circuit remains his first love and he attends every year.

1986 Becomes ACU chairman and ACU representative on the FIM, the governing body of world motorcycle sport.

1992 Parts with Honda. Signs deals to sell Yamaha, Suzuki, Kawasaki and Piaggio.

1997 Moves into state-of-the-art former Mercedes showroom in Tarvin Road, Chester. Sells all other shops apart from Bangor, North Wales.

2000 Acquires Triumph franchise.

2002 Quits road racing after four TT wins, 51 TT Replicas, 14 GP rides, N-W 200 victory, numerous short circuit wins, and competing in other events including sprints. For years he held the most TT Replicas, until the careers of the late great Irishman Joey Dunlop (26 TT wins) and Welshman Ian Lougher (ten TT wins) matured. "I was going pretty good in the 1970s and 1980s and reckon I covered 70,000 racing miles on the Isle of Man," he says.



1959 Oulton Park – Honda UK debut



1963 – exotic racers at Chester shop



1963 TT – at Ballaugh (500 Matchless)



1964 TT – flying at Quarter Bridge



1973 TT Production winners (Bill on left)