



# A Triumph of British heritage

Famously ridden by Steve McQueen in *The Great Escape*, the Triumph has long been many film stars' motorcycle of choice, says Hugh Francis Anderson, as he talks to devotees of these iconic British-made motorbikes

Mirisch/United Artists/The Kobal Collection; Kamar Srisikanandan/Alamy Stock Photo; Henderson/Miller-Militsis/Paramount/The Kobal Collection; Columbia/The Kobal Collection; David Hartley/REX/Shutterstock

I'M king of the road, with a grin from ear to ear, and very often singing in my helmet,' admits Ken Talbot, chairman of the Triumph Owners Motorcycle Club, when asked what it feels like to ride the iconic British motorbike. It's this *joie de vivre* that encapsulates why it has occupied a special place in motorcyclists' hearts for more than a century. Indeed, whether or not you ride a bike, the name is instantly recognisable. 'Many people see Triumph as an icon of when Britain was truly great,' enthuses Mr Talbot. 'I've even been pulled over by a policeman who just wanted to talk about my bike.'

Now 135 years old, Triumph is not only the last all-British owned and run vehicle manufacturer in the world, but also the oldest continuous motorcycle production company.

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'As they were the fastest and most reliable bikes on the market, they've always been desirable,' explains the club's vice chairman, Mick Barratt. 'They put an enormous smile on my face and a buzz in my heart.'

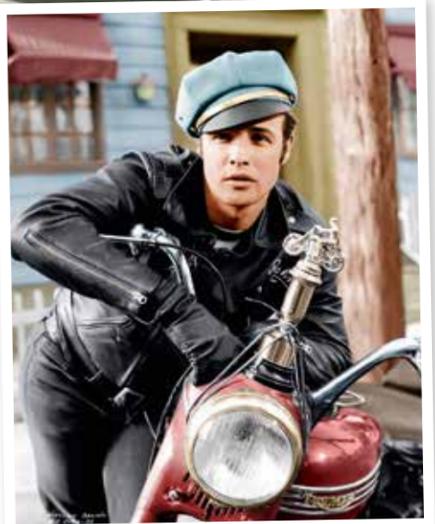
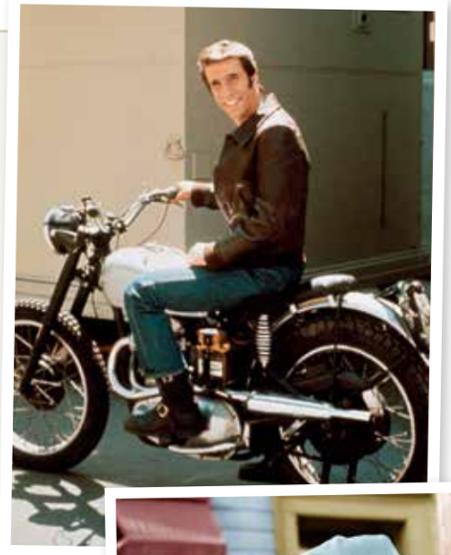
Starting life as a bicycle manufacturer, Triumph didn't wheel its first motorcycle onto Much Park Street, outside its original factory in Coventry, until 1902. This tiny, single-cylinder, 2.2bhp Minerva-engine motorcycle formed the inception of Triumph's pioneering ascent to automotive greatness. By 1915, its H-Type model was the go-to motorcycle for the allied forces during the First World War.

In 1937, it solidified its dominance of the industry through chief designer Edward Turner's revolutionary parallel twin engine—a design that survives to this day. Production continued to boom throughout the Second World War, when more than 50,000 motorcycles were sold to the military.

However, it wasn't until after the war that Triumph

## Easy riders: Triumphs on film

- James Dean owned a Royal Enfield and an Indian, but the last bike he rode before he died in 1955 was a Triumph Trophy TR5
- Clint Eastwood appeared on a Triumph Bonneville in *Coogan's Bluff* in 1968
- The Fonz (*right*) is seen astride a Triumph Trophy TR5 in a 1974 episode of *Happy Days*
- Richard Gere rides a 750cc Triumph T140E Bonneville in 1982's *An Officer and a Gentleman*
- In 2008's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, Brad Pitt rides a 1956 650cc Triumph T110



truly came into its own. When Marlon Brando appeared astride a 1950 Thunderbird T6 in *The Wild One*, the firm immediately became a household name, heralding the beginning of an era of international superiority. This reputation for speed and build quality was strengthened in 1955, when Johnny Allen set a new land-speed record of 193mph at the Bonneville Salt Flats on a modified 650cc Triumph Thunderbird—a record the company held for 15 years.

Mr Allen's success also inspired one of the firm's most famous designs, the Bonneville, which quickly became the best-selling British-twin motorcycle of all time. 'It's probably the best-known name in motorcycling, even today, and

*Facing page: As well as riding one in The Great Escape, Steve McQueen competed on his own Triumphs. Right: He's a wild one: Marlon Brando helped to make the brand a household name. Below: Prince William, known for his love of motorbikes, arrives at a polo match in 2005*



it still lives,' adds Mr Talbot. 'Its heritage is clearly visible in what's still a state-of-the-art machine.'

In 1963, Triumph's enviable provenance was enhanced by Steve McQueen, riding a 1961 TR6 650 Trophy in *The Great Escape*. In real life, the bike mechanic turned actor was a keen motorcyclist and racer, who owned dozens of Triumphs that he regularly rode in competitions. 'He certainly lives on in Triumph,' asserts Mr Talbot. 'Until recently, it was possible to purchase a new bike painted and dressed to look like the machine from the film.'

Indeed, many film stars—including James Dean, Clint Eastwood, Richard Gere and Brad Pitt (*see box*)—have appeared on the silver screen on Triumph bikes.

'It's amazing how many people come to talk to you when you park up on a Triumph,' says Mr Talbot, who admires the way the company has



managed to survive through the tough times as well as the good. In the 1970s, when many British motorcycle brands were falling apart, its workers formed a cooperative to keep the name alive and, although they produced a fraction of the motorcycles made by other firms, their commitment helped to keep it going.

In 1983, Triumph was purchased by John Bloor, a property tycoon, who soon got the firm back on track. 'He immediately set about modernising the brand at the same time as paying homage to its history, resulting in the marvellous machines we see today,' says Mr Talbot.

Triumph now produces more than 50,000 motorcycles a year, with some 80% sold overseas. 'It's a brilliant product with a phoenix story,' enthuses Mr Barratt. 'The Triumph brand is as strong as ever, with a legacy of competition and record-

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setting successes that other brands would die for.'

The appetite for vintage Triumphs is as strong as ever, too. 'Although other brands were consigned to skips, Triumphs were kept in the back of sheds to be "put on the road one day", to be resurrected by later generations,' explains Mr Barratt. From rusty barn-found projects used as run-around bikes on farms and estates to customised cafe-racers, reminiscent of the

**Leader of the pack: Triumph boasts a legacy 'that other brands would die for'**

1960s Ace Café rocker culture, and the high-performance race machines seen flying around Goodwood to *con-cours*-ready immaculate two-wheeled steeds, Triumph has a national following like no other.

This is, in part, due to the resurgence of production parts. Twenty years ago, it would have been impossible to restore many vintage machines without creating parts from scratch. However, as numbers of enthusiasts have grown, so has the market for spare parts, enabling many once-forgotten motorcycles to be brought back to life.

'There are so many vintage Triumphs out there to be ridden,' notes Mr Barratt, 'Many embrace the ability to repair, fettle and ride a bike that gives you so much sheer satisfaction. They're beautiful, lithe, reliable and cool.' *Triumph Motorcycles, Hinckley, Leicestershire (01455 251700; [www.triumphmotorcycles.co.uk](http://www.triumphmotorcycles.co.uk))*