

# **Motorcycles in Mind**

**A route to serenity**

**Peter Steele**

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*For Ann*

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All my other friends and colleagues who responded to my requests for confirmation of the events my faulty memory told me had happened.

## Introduction

This is not your standard book on motorcycling, nor is it a memoir in the traditional sense. It's about my life with motorcycles and how riding them has helped me through very difficult times.

It's also about people. The kindness of strangers, people I barely know and those I consider friends – past and present. How the phrase 'you cannot choose your family' applies, particularly to me.

I have changed the details of the cases I dealt with, while working for the Police as a Covert Surveillance Officer, to protect the innocent (and the guilty) and ensure I do not disclose Police intelligence tactics. I was fortunate to work with a great group of officers and have changed their names to protect identities, but I'm certain anyone who has worked with 'Rick' will be able to identify him.

If you do work with Rick, check your keyboard for swapped letters, check that the mouse is connected to YOUR computer and not your neighbour's, and check that there's no clear tape over the speaker on your job phone. Happy to help.

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This book covers forty-two years of my life, mostly written in the present tense, with the narrative moving forward in time.

Occasionally, when I've wanted to cover a large span of years and events I have written in the past tense with those sections printed in *italics*.

I subscribe to the Mental Health Motorbike charity which aims to grow the wellbeing of the motorbike community and reduce suicide rates amongst bikers in the UK. You can find them at: <https://mhmotorbike.com>

## Prologue

Friday 12th August 2016

I'm sitting on my BMW F800ST, in the staff car park at Hatfield police station, about to leave for the very last time, after my rather sudden decision to retire. The bike is rumbling away underneath me, eager to escape the car park and head towards the as yet unknown adventures we'll have together in my retirement.

This morning I'd handed back my police airwave radio, covert ear piece, mobile phone, uniform fleece and fluoro jacket and our Inspector had made a farewell presentation in the Operational Intelligence Team office. Everyone in the 'Intel Unit' next door had come in. He finished with "*Peter, you have made a difference*", triggering a round of applause from the assembled crowd.

I **had** made a difference. How do you like that, Dad? Probably not much, even if you were still alive, let alone interested. In 2005, when I told him I was working for the police, as a catchily named "*Technical Support Officer, Level One Covert Deployments for Volume Crime*". His response had been, "What use is that? Doesn't make anything. Bloody useless." Even translating the clumsy job title from police-speak to English – Covert Surveillance Officer – failed to raise the slightest degree of curiosity or encouragement. He was very much alive then and totally disinterested. Yes, I did make something, Dad. I made a difference to people's lives. Criminals got the punishment they deserved, the victims of their crimes had the justice they deserved.

*Justice, Safety and Reassurance* – I remember the Area Commander's speech years ago, saying these are our key values as a police force. Our team has helped bring offenders to justice, ensured the public's safety, and reassured them when they needed it most.

I'm going to miss the work and the people, but I won't miss the stress of the job, made ever greater by continuing government funding cuts. More work with fewer resources.

What am I going to do now with my time? Wish I'd had time to plan my retirement, but I've got Ann, the love of my life, to share my life and I'll continue to have adventures on my motorcycle.

My motorcycle. When I look back to my traumatic days as a youngster, I realise I'd discovered "mindfulness" before it was even invented – riding a motorbike gave me total peace of mind and a way through all my seemingly insurmountable problems.

I take one last glance around the operational yard and ride off, through the gates which close behind me, cutting me off from that world of 11 years for the last time. I'm on the dual carriageway heading towards home and the song playing in my head is Judas Priest's 1984 *Freenheel Burning*....

*"Fast and furious we ride the universe  
To carve a road that slices every curve in sight  
We accelerate, no time to hesitate  
This load will detonate whoever would contend its right."*

## Chapter One

### “Bad Motor Scooter” – Montrose

“So get on your bad motor scooter and ride”

June 1983, 20 years old and I’m a failure.

For the past year I’ve been a student on the Graphic Design degree course at Preston Polytechnic. I met a girl on my first night and immediately moved in with her. The halls of residence became just a place to do my course work. Her flat was five times the size of my room, which added to her attractive proposition as a girlfriend. All was not well. I hadn’t been getting the marks I needed on the course assignments, regardless of how hard I worked. Realising I was never going to make it as a Graphic Designer, I left the course. A bit stunned, to be honest. What was I going to do now?

Just to brighten my life even more, on the day I quit the course, my girlfriend decided it was time to upgrade her boyfriend and I was ditched in favour of a newer, taller, blonde cowboy-boot-wearing-heavy-rock-fan model. He had a groin so large, he was either very well endowed or kept a spare canoe down his trousers. So, in June 1983, I find myself girlfriendless, homeless and futureless, my career plans firmly flushed down the toilet of failure.

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Fortunately, I have a Saturday job at Debenhams, in Manchester town centre, flogging cheap, dodgy suitcases. After another night sleeping on a mate’s sofa, I cycle to

work, heading round the back of the store to the loading bay, my usual routine. The Supervisor is there, which is a bit of a blow, as nobody else has a problem with me leaving my bike there. But, The Supervisor Knows the Rules and the Rules say, “NO PERSONAL VEHICLES TO BE LEFT IN THE LOADING BAY” and he sees my bicycle as a vehicle. I see it as a bike I can stash safely round the side of the loading bay office out of sight, but one look at The Supervisor’s wagging finger tells me I need to park my “vehicle” elsewhere.

“You need to park your vehicle elsewhere. Them’s the rules.”

So, I cycle to the nearest lamp post and chain my bike up with the two low quality combination locks and cables bought from a mate for 50p. I hope for the best and walk the three flights of stairs up to the third floor and the Personnel Department of the store. I quickly check my appearance in the handy mirrored wardrobe – Personnel is lodged in the corner of the Furniture Department. Not too bad, just a bit sweaty.

“Oh, hello Peter.”

“Morning. Can I work full time, please?”

The lovely personnel lady already knows of my sudden career problems.

“Yes, Luggage is very busy this time of year. Thought you might be popping in. You’ll still be classed as temporary staff, but you’ll get the same rate as the full-time staff.”

Wow, that was easy. From a future career designing logos for toilet roll packets to selling suitcases. Er...result?

I suppose there are some upsides. It’s an easy job,

customers see a suitcase and bring it to the till. If it's one of the cheap-as-chips yellow plastic jobs I'm particularly nice to them, I know I'll probably see them again in a few months when the handle drops off. They always do. I call them 'backwards kit cases', you buy a fully finished suitcase that gradually deconstructs back to its component parts. I wouldn't be surprised if someone returns one as a bag of yellow dust. As I say, they are cheap.

Now I have a job I suppose I can move back in with my parents. My dad's reaction to me attempting to become a paid artist was "unless you've got a job, don't think you can move back here when it all goes wrong". I desperately don't want to move back in with them. Dreading the prospect.

My parents are hoarders, and if/when I move back in, I'd still have to share a bedroom with them. What should have been my bedroom has been filled to the brim with junk for as long as I can remember. The house is also in a bit of a state, heating in one room only and damp everywhere.

I'm chatting to another Saturday staff mate, Drakey, a Fine Art student, always dressed in black, who has just moved into a shared house in Chorlton.

"Drakey, do you know anywhere that has a room to rent?"

"There's a room in our place in Chorlton, one student's not moving in until October and I'm living with me bird in her flat till she kicks me out, like."

"Four months is better than nothing, mate. I'm in."

A job and a place to stay, temporarily at least. I'll have to cycle the four miles from Chorlton to work on my

bloody lovely bike, a ten-speed Raleigh Medale. I love cycling and I love this bike. My parents bought it for my fourteenth birthday and it wasn't cheap. To be honest, they were driven to spend the £120 it cost because my best mate Phil had been bought a £100 five-speed Raleigh for his birthday. My mother's life-long obsession is out-shining and out-doing anyone and everyone in her circle and no one escapes her net.

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I head down the stairs to the loading bay and I chat to the lads there – I've worked with them all at some stage. I avoid The Supervisor and walk back to the lamp post for my bike, but it's not there. The remains of two broken locks are, but no bike. It's been bloody nicked.

I can't believe it.

My Dad will kill me.

Mum will have a bloody fit.

I'm gutted. But at least I know it's covered on Dad's house insurance policy.

I walk the ten minutes to the Police station to register the theft.

"Any chance you'll be able to find it?"

The cop looks at me like I'm a loon.

"No, not likely, lad. Best speak to your dad about an insurance claim."

I'm given a bit of paper with a crime number on it.

"You'll need that. And maybe next time, see if you can leave your bike inside the store somewhere. Bikes are always getting nicked in the town centre."

Great. There's zero chance of that.

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So, breaking the news to Mum wasn't as bad as I expected. Seems Phil had his Raleigh nicked from outside the dole office. I told her Phil had also jacked in his degree, and was looking for work but hadn't found any, which pleased Mum no end. There's no good news like bad news.

Dad was none too chuffed about the insurance claim.

"Bloody stupid, you are. Should have left that bike in the loading bay. Should have told that supervisor you were keeping it there and that's that. I've a good mind to go and see him and get him to pay for it."

He would do, too. He likes an argument does my Dad. Everyone needs a hobby, I suppose.

A few weeks later and I bank the insurance cheque into my account. They paid out okay, once I'd remembered where the crime number was.

Dad said, "Buy your bike with this. Now you're working you can pay for another one yourself if the new one gets nicked."

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I'm in Preston, it's where my bank branch is and I need to see about transferring my account to one nearer to work. It doesn't take long and I've got time to kill before the train back to Manchester Victoria, so I'm taking one last walk along Fishergate. Can't see me coming back to this town again. I walk past Woolworths and there, sitting in the window, is a silver moped, shining in the sun. The advert says: *New in, 50cc Tomos Moped. Cheaper than the train, easier than cycling. 158mpg, 30 miles an hour! All for only £199! (Plus, on-the-road costs).*

Two hundred quid? Bloody hell, I only need to put £80 towards it. And 30 mph is a lot faster than I can cycle. But can I do without a bicycle? I'm going to be earning fifty quid a week so I can buy another Medale by saving up a tenner a month.

Oh God, Mum'll have kittens when she finds out.

Dad will go mental.

But I don't have to tell them. Not as such.

I'm going in. I want to find out a bit more.

I speak to the tall, well-dressed chap at the counter. His badge says *Ian Kerr, Department Manager* and he spots a sale.

"We've sold quite a few, mainly to students and commuters. The on-road costs are £34. I'm doing a deal this week where we pay the £34, but that ends tomorrow. They are made in Yugoslavia, very nice bikes."

I read the leaflet. 49cc, air cooled two-stroke engine, producing a massive 2 horsepower at 5500rpm. Well, that's more than I make on my bicycle. Or did before it got nicked.

Two-speed automatic gearbox, integral one gallon tank with one pint reserve, handlebar brake levers like a bicycle. Kick starter, so no pedalling to start the engine like my old school teacher's Puch moped, plus it's got big wheels. Can't see any indicators or mirrors, but my Raleigh Medale hadn't got them either.

Mr Kerr, Department Manager, moves in for the kill.

"I'll throw in a free tank of petrol and a bottle of oil. We've got a bike in the back, customer never paid after we got it ready for him. He left a £20 deposit, which he won't get back, so I'll knock that off the price."

I'm already getting my cheque book out, writing one for £179. Lovely.

I follow Mr Kerr, Department Manager through the shop to the back. There it is, my first bike, silver, like the one in the window. That'll last me years!

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*IN CHORLTON WITH THE MIRAGE HELMET,  
PLASTIC GLOVES AND MY LEATHER JACKET*

I'm riding my Tomos home on the A6. I find a cheap insurance at a broker and I've bought a "Mirage" motorcycle helmet for £20 from Argos, plus some stylish black and orange bike gloves – just a fiver from a second-hand shop. The gloves are guaranteed waterproof. They should be, they're plastic and bloody huge. But not as huge as the "Mirage" helmet. The chap in Argos says they only make one size, but I'm pretty sure I could get somebody else's head in there alongside mine. The wind is pushing

the chin bar up to my nose. I've got a big nose, which is just as well, as it stops the upwards rotation. A normal hooter would have seen the helmet flying off into the not-very-rapidly-receding distance.

By luck I'm wearing my blue biker's jacket, bought from Manchester's underground market last year as a present from my Preston girlfriend. I just liked the look of it, and it helped me to blend in at weekends in Jilly's Rock club on Manchester's Oxford Road. Never thought I'd ride a moped while wearing it. Crazy idea.

30mph never felt so slow. That's because its *top speed* is 30. Uphill the bike is slowing down, the automatic gearbox has changed down to first gear and I'm flat out at 12mph and I've been overtaken by a laughing Lycra-clad cyclist. Mr Kerr, Department Manager did say the bike would need running in, but for how long?

The back ache starts around Chorley and worsens as I reach the outskirts of Manchester.

I'm back at the house in Chorlton and my spine has turned to dust. I just about manage to stop the bike and put it on the tiny centre stand, before lying on the pavement groaning. Oh great, here's Drakey.

"Pete, mate. Why are you wearing a space helmet and orange marigolds and whose...bike...is that?"

Long story, Drakey...

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Both the Tomos and I are in the house as I'm a bit worried about it getting nicked. There isn't an ignition key, just a miniature steering lock with a key smaller than one used in a Debenhams suitcase.

Drakey has a great idea – put the bike in the kitchen

by the sink. We're short of kitchen work surfaces anyway, so Drakey gets an old chopping board and bungy-cords it across the rear carrier. Sorted! Safe bike storage and improved catering facilities.

It's really my first proper look at the Tomos. It's silver with a spindly frame containing the petrol tank, the cap is set slightly to the top right and is a bugger to get off. Equally spindly looking wire wheels with tyres only slightly bigger than my Medale's. Drum brakes front and rear, handlebars lifted straight off a Raleigh Chopper and a thick seat that looks comfortable but deflates slowly with a hisssss when I sit on it.

The kickstart is a bent metal bar situated next to the black engine, which sports the "TOMOS" logo in silver. The cylinder (complete with spark plug) sits upwards at forty-five degrees, looking like someone has taken offence and kicked it, which is understandable as the bike is pig ugly.

Drakey is still living with his girlfriend, but the house is full of stuff from his band. Guitars, keyboards and loads of expensive looking amplifiers and speakers. No-one else has moved in yet so I have the place to myself, which is why Drakey is so keen on me living here – he needs a minder for his gear. He presents me with a rusty poker.

"Anyone breaks in, hit them with that."

Fat chance.

I'm more likely to say, "Do you need a hand carrying those guitars to your scabby van, sir?"

Drakey has departed and it's my first night alone in the house. I'm bored so I practice starting the bike up in the kitchen. I pull the throttle open and push a little black

choke switch next to it. The kickstart fires the Tomos up first time, with a loud YING YING YING and blue smoke fills the kitchen so I open the door as the windows are all painted shut.

The kitchen in this house is huge, high ceilings with tall, narrow cupboard doors. I have a bit of a rummage and I hit the jackpot with the last one – a bag of oily tools, spanners, screwdrivers and a new-looking pair of pliers. There's also a bottle of two-stroke oil, which I need to add to the petrol.

Mr Kerr, Department Manager says the petrol/oil ratio is 1:50, so I fish out a measuring jug for future oil-dispensing use.

The hallway to the front door is long and wide. Drakey's currently unoccupied room is the smallest, so he's put his wardrobe at the bottom of the stairs, but I can still ride past it easily enough. I discover I can ride all the way from the front door to the kitchen, trying to get the bike to go fast enough to hit second gear, can't manage it, but I'm getting good at slamming the brakes on at the last second, skidding to a stop inches from the ancient oven door.

Monday tomorrow and I'm looking forward to riding to work on my own motorbike, flogging self-destructing suitcases and having a laugh with my mates.

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It's morning, I lift the bike down the step, close the front door. Warmer outside than in. Last night I was so cold I put a coat over my sleeping bag and almost considered starting the Tomos up so I could warm my hands on the engine. I'm in my suit, cheap as chips from a mate. It's

brown, with little curly grey hairy bits woven into the material. Unfortunately, they look a bit like pubic hairs, so it naturally gains the name “Pube Suit” amongst my sympathetic work mates. Nice.

The bike starts reluctantly. It’s wet from last night’s rain and I’m glad I can keep it in the kitchen. I set off, heading into Manchester city centre. The Pube Suit is giving me zero protection from the wind, the jacket fills up like a sail and slows me down. The only thing I have to keep me vaguely warm is Drakey’s balaclava, which as a bonus also bulks out the Mirage, making it feel a bit more like a bike helmet and less like a goldfish bowl.

It’s only twenty minutes to town from here and I’m almost at Piccadilly. I remember Drakey saying a lot of the lads from work park their bikes for free in the Tib Street car park, so that’s my destination. If we buy the attendant a bottle of whisky for Christmas, he’s well happy to let us park there. We can let ourselves out by riding under the barrier. Sounds a bit risky, the barrier thing, but I’ll give it a go.

The road is saturated and greasy. My shoes and trouser bottoms are soaking. I turn right into Oldham Street, foot down speedway-style then before I know it I’m off the bike, sliding down the wet road. Some drunk lad from the night before has thoughtfully left an uneaten tray of curry and chips in the road and it breaks my fall, which is nice. I stand up, the bike revving its head off. Nobody stops to help, so I pick it up myself. A quick look shows no damage to the Tomos, but my right-side is killing me, and I feel a right prat. I ride round to Tib Street and ditch the bike next to my mate Nick’s gorgeous, huge Honda

CX500 Eurosport.

My leg feels sticky, it's covered in red curry, bits of chips and gravel. I'm going to be late for work so I rush round to the Debenhams staff entrance. It's my first day working full time and I have to report to the Personnel Department. I run up the stairs, two at a time and the lovely personnel lady is there behind the counter,

"I've come off me bike on Oldham Street. I hit chips. Curry and chips. In the road. I think it was a Vindaloo."

She looks me up and down, now she's screaming, which surprises me and then I'm even more surprised because she crashes to the floor in a dead faint.

Mr Tierney, the Electricals Department Manager, runs up and picks her off the floor.

"She fainted," I say, just in case he hadn't noticed.

"Not surprised, you're covered in blood! We need to get you to hospital!"

Blood? I'm worried now so I turn round and look in the mirrored wardrobe. The curry has smeared itself down the arm and trouser leg of the Pube Suit and has mixed nicely with the bits of chips. It looks like I've come straight out of a Hammer horror movie, as the chips are remarkably like bits of flesh and the red of the curry sauce looks like blood. Wonder if it'll wash out? Oh great, I've got holes in the knee and elbow. Bloody hell. Scratch one Pube Suit.

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They send me home. Turns out I've shaved some skin off my leg and cut my elbow. Before I leave, I clean up as best I can in the toilets and buy a cheap pair of jeans off Menswear. Nigel, the manager, takes pity on me and gives