Stand up for scooters

There's nothing new about stand up scooters – DAVID JARVIS explains

David demonstrates the riding technique

For over a century, the bicycle has been a popular means of transport for both pleasure and practical purposes, and today we see the rise in popularity of electric bicycles – a lot easier than pedalling. Step back 100 years and the same requirements existed. Cycles then were much harder to ride, and respectable ladies were obliged to wear the long dresses of the time (or show their knees, not socially acceptable at all!)

The next part of my tale may or may not have occurred as I describe, but why let facts get in the way of a good story? The scene is the living room of a well-to-do house in the Midlands in early 1919. Captain Smith-Clarke, having recently left the army, is in conversation with his wife: "I would like the convenience and freedom of the new-fangled bicycle," she said. "But find them somewhat unseemly." "Well," he replied, "I'm a clever chap with a mechanical background, so let me consider the problem."

Starting with the need for his wife to travel at bicycle pace with some decorum, he concluded that she should stand, rather than sit, and be propelled by a petrol engine rather than by her legs. After a few weeks of banging and bashing in his shed using some pieces of metal, an old pre-war Clement engine, and other stuff he had lying around, he was ready to demonstrate the result. "Oh darling, you are so clever," she said, "I'm off to the shops!" With that, Mrs Smith-Clarke scooted off, standing as a lady should, at speeds of up to 15mph.

The device was so successful that Capt. Smith-Clarke was approached by an old army chum, a Mr Booth. "I say, old chap – my brother and I have set up a manufacturing company in Coventry and would like to put your invention into production." he said. An agreement was reached and, after the production of a few prototypes in 1919, machines were available for sale in 1920 under the name 'Kenilworth,' where the Captain lived at the time.

Seats and lights

So what was the result? Obviously it had no saddle. There was one pull-up cycle type brake at the front, and no suspension. Sales catalogues of the day claimed two brakes, but none of the three known survivors show any evidence of a second one. The engine is a 143cc overhead valve unit made by 'The Norman Engineering Co. Ltd' of Leamington Spa (not the 'Norman' you were thinking of, that came later). Transmission was by a belt driving a countershaft, which in turn drove a chain to the rear wheel. Sparks came from a Runbaken Miniature magneto, though the carburettor, a simple single jet, needle-less instrument with a single side, was unmarked. What could go wrong?

Unfortunately, the post-First World War scooter boom soon fizzled out since 'ladies' were now wearing trousers, much to the disgust of their mothers, so the need stand up to preserve one's modesty no longer existed. Booth Brothers (the Captain still doing the design work) moved with the times and during 1920 introduced the Kenilworth Miniature. This was the scooter with a sprung seat pillar, saddle and battery-powered electric lights...and it now definitely had two brakes, the rear being the contracting band type.

The Motorcyclette followed in 1921 with a redesigned tubular frame with swept back handlebars and leg shields. The engine and were transmission were unchanged, but still no front suspension! My wife has one of these, which has been used regularly on the Banbury Run. The last of the Miniatures appeared in 1923 with friction drive, with its engine mounted across the frame driving a Neracar-type mechanism. It also had a clutch and a crank handle for starting, so no more run and jump! Optional extras included panniers and top box for use by doctors, nurses and travelling representatives. There was even a Delivery Box version with a carrying capacity of 72lb.

In one last hurrah, in 1924 Kenilworth produced a conventional miniature motorcycle using the existing friction drive set up plus 24-inch wheels and Supreme forks. But their market was disappearing as more affordable and practical small motorcycles became available, and the Booth brothers decided to move into motorcars, with Capt. Smith-Clarke again providing designs. The result was the famous Alvis marque, but that's another story. As for the Kenilworth, from known engine numbers my guess is that about 550 were made over five years, and I know of ten survivors, three of them in road use.

The Kenilworth riding experience

In 2018, I bought the remains of one of the 1919 prototype Kenilworth scooters, and after about a year in my shed 'Lenny' was ready for the road. He became Lenny because having no stand of any sort, he leans on his side when not in use.

Most parts were salvageable, so I went for the quicker and cheaper oily rag look, though more rust than oil. Some missing parts had to be made, like the front pull-up cycle brake, and the fuel/oil tank, which was a real challenge. But the most difficult part to find was the missing rim for the rear wheel. Nowhere could I find one of the right size, and nowadays nobody in the UK has the machinery to make them. Eventually I found someone who could make a rim, but he was in Australia! Through the power of the internet, this was arranged, and an Australian friend visiting the UK brought it over, protectively packed in with his underwear.

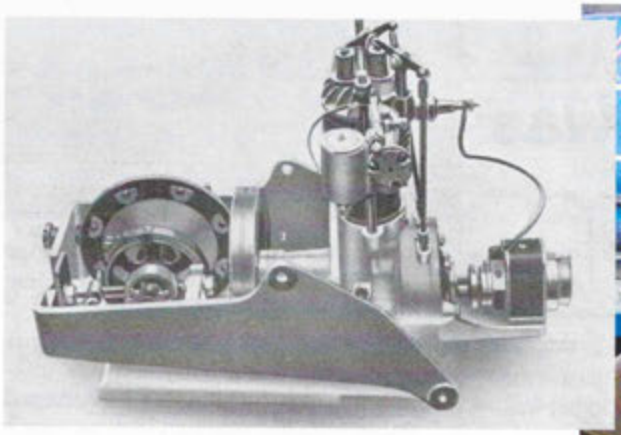
Lenny is now complete and at his de-bug stage. The fuel level of the 'what can go wrong' carburettor seems critical and it is proving difficult to find its sweet spot. Unfortunately, no progress is being made on that front at the time of writing due to the virus shut down.

Riding a Kenilworth scooter is...different. There are no gears, clutch, ignition or air controls to bother with – you just pull a lever to lift the exhaust valve, scoot off and release the lever, which unleashes 1¼hp of surging indifference!

Once standing and moving (and hanging on for grim death) opening the lever throttle allows a comfortable cruising speed of 10-15mph, which is slow enough to step off in an emergency. 20mph might be possible for someone brave enough! Stopping involves braking (of which not much is available) and closing the throttle lever (quite effective). Stopping the bike stops the engine, so should be avoided wherever possible. Hills...I should mention these, because it is hard going up and hard to stop going down – best avoided, which is difficult if you live in north east Wales.

So, does Lenny have a practical use nowadays? Probably not, but he is a curiosity and is still running after 101 years, which is probably more than I will be. My wife Jane and her 1921 Kenilworth Motorcyclette – called Kenny for obvious reasons – will be riding the next Banbury Run, accompanied by myself and Martin Taylor, who owns the only other running Scooter.

Martin has already completed a number of Banburys on the machine, so we will be in good company. It will mean my standing up for 35 miles, about 2½ hours, whilst following a route sheet. As I write this, I am wondering if this is a good idea!



Clockwise, from above: Lenny on the bench, as bought; Complete, running and oily rag; Motorcyclette added a seat, amongst other things; Friction drive used in the final Kenilworths