



The Official Newsletter of The GoldWing Owners Club of Great Britain

Real Bikers?

Al Gillard ponders on what makes a real biker – and whether he fits the criteria himself

How many times have we heard it? GoldWingers (or whatever) are not real bikers. Really? And just what is a real biker anyway? I think I am, but probably so does everyone else. So, is there some qualifying characteristic that makes a real biker? If so, what is it? It could be the type of bike, but you don't really need to have a big bike to be a real biker. I know several chaps who have never ridden anything more than Honda 90s, and a CG125 forever, but who have done so for 40 years or more, and with BSA Tiger Cubs, Bantams, and Francis Barnett, James, Greeves, DOT, etc., before that. So it can't be the size of the bike that defines the real biker. That these guys are real bikers is not in doubt, no sir. One of them doesn't own another vehicle of any kind either. Never has, never will.

So is it perhaps the type of riding? I'm not sure, because of the time span required to find out. I've only been riding for 30 years, and ridden for loads of different reasons at different times. However, when there has been a journey to make, where I am not required to either represent my employer in a suit (and sometimes even when I have), or carry big bulky things, I have frequently gone on the bike just because I love it so much, even when the weather has been iffy. Does this qualify me as a real biker? I don't know. I frequently wimp out nowadays too. I spend hours cleaning and polishing and I often don't want to get it all dirty again just for a five miler on a Sunday afternoon. For a 50 miler, I do though. And I take advantage of opportunities as they occur too, like several very late rides to look at the stars or the sea, or even early morning ones to watch the dawn, or going to work! I commuted all through last year when possible, as did a load of other bikers I see every day, especially late in the year when the cursed A12 was stricken with major road works. I waved to my colleague on his red Beemer twin whom I see going the other way quite often. Never met him, but wave every day. And even a Wing can filter, and we did this year. So am I a real biker yet? Don't know.

Maybe it's the self-maintained bike that defines the real biker. I bet there aren't many Wingers who have all the correct tools to maintain all of their own bikes, some, sure, but not many. I have always maintained my own bikes, but for certain tasks where I have either a tool requirement (sometimes) or skill deficiency (more often), I take it in to the shop now. Besides, a Wing needs all the attention of an anvil and is very little fun to maintain. Servicing my ancient old bikes was much more involving, but these days checking the tyre pressures is about it, except for regular service things which I do, and those that I get someone with a workshop to do for me. But I have spannered most of my bikes, including my previous GL11 for the 16 years that I owned it, with only one trip to the shop, in 1985. I tuned my own spokes on my Suzy, which loosened them regularly. I set points with a fag paper on an AJS, I balanced twin carbs with knitting needles and a mirror. I changed head bearings, wheel bearings, tyres, cylinder head gaskets, did valve grinding etc., on old Brit bikes, decoked two strokes, all that stuff, by hand when I was younger and had all the facilities available, courtesy of my employer. But now I haven't. I whizzed my GL11 engine out in my back garden, so my mate Brian could weld the frame, and then I put the bugger back in. It only took me two weeks of weekends and a few evenings to do the job. Some guys thought I was mad. But it cost me precisely nothing to repair the frame, except a few pints for Brian, my good friend and the best welder in captivity. So, perhaps I might be a real biker now. No? Oh well.



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Might it be the annual mileage that makes the difference? No. I don't think so. Can't be. My dad's a real biker, who hasn't turned a wheel on his Norton since 1967. But he lives and breathes bikes, including that Norton which is still in his garage in suspended animation while being very slowly restored, every day of his life. And I do remember him riding it, and others before it, when I was little. And he sprinted his AJS (blowing the clutch out too), and hill-climbed it (breaking the gearbox), and when he competed on it he rode it to work next day too – if it had survived the weekend's competition, and he spannered it himself, which is what taught me at an early age. And he crashed it once or twice. But he hasn't done a mile on a bike for 36 years, except on the back of mine last summer. I, on the other hand, rack up about 12,000 per year. Does that make me a real biker now, at last? Perhaps not, other people do twice or three times that mileage.

What about the type of bike? Is riding a Wing really biking? Of course it is, it's just in the style and manner of grand touring. One does not drive to the shops in a Bentley, one is transported to Tesco's in a Bentley. So it is with a Wing. Sports riders who thrash about on Ducati's with squeaky new Alpinestars boots, matching baby-gro romper suit leathers with virginal knee sliders might look like real bikers, but are they? Maybe they are. Those who do an impressive thousand miles on hot sunny Sundays in four months of the year may be forced to by their circumstances. Maybe the same circumstances that only permit me to attend one Treffen per year now, where I used to do four or five a year and some Wing Dings too, years ago. Maybe biking is only one of many interests that consume their leisure time, so their bike riding is limited. Does this make them any the less real bikers? And does posing around on a Wing make us any less real bikers because we are not necessarily knee dragging, fire breathing, rip snorting about at warp factor 6?

Is it the camping/non-camping? I have always camped, but I know others who have never camped at a rally or Treffen or even when touring. So what. Maybe it's the trailers/ no trailers brigade? Who cares? I personally don't have a trailer, never have, never will probably. Because I like to get a move on, and travel light, like the mobility that even a small trailer restricts. OK, you wheedled it out of me; I just can't be bothered really. But loads of other riders have trailers so they can carry the comforts of home with them on their travels. Doesn't make them any the less of a real biker though does it? Of course not.

So, I don't know what makes a real biker. But is it important? Not to me. The main thing is to ride, enjoy motorcycling in whatever guise one can, and share the camaraderie and feeling of belonging while one can, however one can. In our club, that means on, or around, GoldWings, no more, no less. Enjoy.