

Editor's introduction:

Rob Andrews was one of Britain's most well-known and successful motocross riders of the 1980s. Racing for the factory Kawasaki team Rob raced all around the world, competed for Great Britain at the 1985 Motocross des Nations event in Germany, and in 1986 finished in 9th place in the World 500cc Motocross Championship.

Rob's motocross career is chronicled on his web site www.robandrewsmx.com

We were recently contacted out of the blue by Rob, who explained the remarkable circumstances in which he came to be interested in motorcycles and which set him off on the path to his notable achievements in motocross racing. His fascinating story, of which the Imps played a pivotal, if purely accidental and unwitting role, follows:

How it all began - My one-in-a-million encounter that led to a career and lifetime in motocross.

It can rarely be said that one's future is pre-planned or predictable. Sometimes we end up at a place in life, whether that be in terms of location, or a career, or perhaps in a relationship, where upon close examination, the origin of the path to that point might be traceable to a one-in-a-million chance occurrence, encounter or decision.

Often, by pure accident, perhaps just by being in the right place at the right time, some small thing can happen which subsequently affects the course that the rest of your life will take. Had you not taken that particular turn, or made that snap decision, at that precise moment, then your entire life may well have headed in a completely different direction.

As lifelong motocross riders, fans or enthusiasts, I'm sure that we all have a story about how we first came to discover the sport that would influence and define our lives. For some people the connection may have been there from day one, perhaps by being born into a racing family. For others, like me, we perhaps happened upon the sport purely by chance - an accidental twist of fate that would lead to a lifetime of involvement.

Recently the origins of my lifelong interest, enthusiasm and, ultimately, my career in motocross, which had been pretty much forgotten by myself, unexpectedly came to light once again, and gave rise to what I consider a remarkable story, which I would like to share.

I wrote elsewhere on my web site that my personal interest in motocross started after I had bought an old 80cc Suzuki road bike to ride around the fields when I was about 13 or 14. One day I went to a local bike shop to see if I could buy a knobbly tyre for it and the shop happened to be owned by the father of a local schoolboy racer, Patrick Goddard. The Goddard family introduced me to schoolboy motocross, which I subsequently took up with support from my parents. I got hooked and it all went from there.

But in truth that isn't the full story. My initial interest in motorcycles themselves - leading to me wanting a field bike in the first place - can be traced back a step further in time.

When I was a boy I lived in Worcestershire. I had no interest in motorcycles of any kind and in fact had no knowledge of motocross at all. My close friend Jeff Neathway and I would pass our time playing football, or cricket, and sometimes exploring the local countryside on long bicycle rides, as boys did back then.

Somehow we discovered a place called Bockeridge Common near Strensham, five or six miles from home. This was (and still is) a spectacular piece of common land that was covered with natural bomb holes. It was therefore great fun to ride around on a bicycle, riding in and out of these fascinating grassy hills and hollows in the ground.

Bockeridge Common is right at the back of what appeared to us to be a derelict and deserted property called Ley Farm, which we had to ride through to get to the common. One day in the summer holidays of 1975, Jeff and I, bored with football, got on our bikes to go to Bockeridge Common. However when we got to Ley Farm we found the place to be far from deserted, but instead swarming with kids riding mini bikes and trail bikes!

That was the first time either of us had ever seen off-road motorcycles. However not only were they off-road bikes, but they were being ridden by schoolboys of our age and even younger! (I was 13 and Jeff was 12 at the time).

We were both awe-struck. We asked what was going on and were told that these boys were *The Imps* junior motorcycle display team and they were staying at Ley Farm which was their summer base. We had never heard of the Imps (or even realized that young boys could even ride motorcycles) but we were both so excited by what we saw that day. Kids of our age riding motorcycles! We couldn't believe it!

We watched and got talking to the boys and the adult organisers who explained a little about what the Imps were all about. One of the older boys then gave us a pillion ride on a Honda trail bike around the field. I was smitten. I so wanted to ride motorcycles from that point, and I so wanted to be in that display team!

One of the adults told us that they would be there again the next week and kindly invited us young gatecrashers to visit again. I was therefore convinced, (perhaps rather optimistically) that the following week I would be signing up to join the circus, with or without my parents' blessing!

Jeff and I eagerly returned on our bicycles the following weekend but Ley Farm was deserted. The Imps were gone - never to be seen again. We subsequently rode back to the farm on countless occasions over the following months, hoping to see the Imps there again, but we never did. We were both devastated.

That was my real introduction to off-road motorcycling. That was *my 'Genesis moment'* - my brief, one-in-a-million happenchance encounter without which I would never have become involved in motorcycles. That un-planned and spur-of-the-moment bike ride to Brockeridge Common in 1975 gave rise to my chance encounter with The Imps. What I witnessed that day inspired me to save up money from a Saturday job and buy my little field bike the following year, at age 14. That in turn led to the equally-accidental introduction to schoolboy racing a little while later. From there my motocross racing career built slowly, ultimately leading to me becoming a full-time professional racer, riding for my country in the Motocross des Nations in 1985, and finishing in 9th place in the world championship in 1986. Motocross enabled me to race all around the world and it became a lifelong - and indeed life-changing - passion and interest which stays with me today at the age of 51.

I had pretty much forgotten about this rather pivotal piece of my own personal motocross timeline. However recently Ley Farm cropped up in conversation on a Facebook group. Ley Farm, back when Jeff and I stumbled upon the Imps there, was just a derelict smallholding and wasn't actually a motocross track. However, purely coincidentally, in the late eighties the Cotswold Youth Motorcycle Club did end up holding some races there and some of the Facebook group members were discussing their memories of them. This reminded me of my Imps encounter and just out of curiosity I Googled the name to see whether I could find any historical information or photos of them. To my complete surprise I found that the Imps still exist today.

So, I then sent an email to their web site, asking (but feeling rather stupid for doing so) whether there would be anyone at the Imps today who would have also been involved 39 years earlier in 1975. It was a rather crazy shot in the dark if ever there was one.

However to my astonishment I received a reply straight back from the Imps' founder, Roy Pratt (MBE), who advised that he and his colleague Brian Stewart were still there, having worked on the Imps project since the seventies, and asking me how they could help.

I then recounted my story, as told above, and received the following reply.

Dear Rob,

What a delight to receive your email and story and the knowledge that the Imps may have been an inspiration for you to take up the sport and reach the dizzy heights you have done. My most sincere congratulations.

Your story is heart-warming. All my life I have worked with young people, both professionally and in my voluntary endeavours. Whenever youngsters stand by and watch with awe other young people riding I am apt to engage them and make them welcome. That's just in my nature as I love our youngsters to share their passion with others.

I do remember the occasion you describe as not many youngsters ventured that far in land so it was unusual to have visitors.

I am now in my 46th year with the Imps, and we have travelled the world performing from as far afield as Bermuda to Singapore and beyond. We have made three successful crossing of the Sahara Desert high dune area, the Grand Erg Occidental, and became the first people to make a successful motorised crossing of the area using Honda All Terrain three wheelers.

I do thank you very much for your email and generous words. It would be great if we could find time to meet up for a jar and a chat sometime and just explore that little encounter and your very successful career a little more.

Thank you very much for relating this story to us.. By the way, it would have been me who organised the little pillion ride for you. I even know who the rider would have been - Andrew Sparkes who was a youngster I was fostering at the time.

My very best wishes to you.

Roy Pratt MBE

HYPERLINK "http://www.impsonline.com/" <http://www.impsonline.com/>

I am both astounded, and absolutely thrilled that after 39 years, (during which time I had no idea that the Imps were even still in existence), their founder should not only still be involved with the project, and remember their trips to Ley Farm in the seventies, but also that he remembers the chance visit of two young lads on push bikes one day in 1975. That chance encounter inspired a lifelong

involvement and interest in off-road motorcycling for both Jeff and I, and in my case led to a career and sporting achievements that not only would I have never dreamed of as a 13 year old boy, but also would never have even happened had it not been for that one day in 1975.

I therefore am indebted to the Imps for their unwitting inspiration which set me off on a path that changed the entire course of my life. Thank you Imps!