



Isle of Man TT Races

In the world of motor cycle racing, the Isle of Man TT races stand out above all other events as perhaps the ultimate test of rider and machine. For over one hundred years many of the leading motorcycle racers have come together to pit themselves against the formidable TT course.

The Isle of Man's first motor racing events were of the four wheeled variety when, in May 1904, the island was the venue for the eliminating trials to decide the British entry for that year's Gordon Bennett Cup, motor racing being illegal on the roads of mainland Britain. The eliminating trials were held again in May 1905 followed in September by the first running of the Tourist Trophy for racing automobiles (an event that is still run each year at Silverstone as the RAC Tourist Trophy).



Figure 1: Stanley Woods seen here at Ramsey Parliament Square during the 1938 Junior TT.

In the motorcycling world, dissatisfaction with the running of the annual International Cup race (like the Gordon Bennett races, held in the country of origin of the previous year's winner) led to a proposal by the Auto-Cycle Club (ACC, later the Auto-Cycle Union) to stage a major British road race for

touring motorcycles and the Isle of Man was chosen as the venue for this Tourist Trophy. The first event took place in May 1907.

The first TT was run over ten laps of a 15 mile/24.14 kilometre triangular course starting and finishing in St Johns. Separate classes existed for single cylinder and multi cylinder motorcycles, the first two winners in these categories being C.R. Collier (Matchless) and H. Rem Fowler (Norton) respectively. Other than during the two world wars the races have been held every year since.



Figure 2: Sidecar TT 1923. Freddie Dixon, an Isle of Man resident, won the first sidecar TT in 1923 on a Douglas. Dixon had a 'leaning sidecar' so that Walter Denny his passenger, instead of leaning out, pulled a lever, which tilted the whole outfit. The difference in attitude between Dixon's outfit and that of F.T. Hatton is clearly visible. At the finish Denny admitted that his arms were feeling the strain of operating the lever. It must have required a considerable amount of practice, not to mention confidence in one's partner, to operate at racing speeds.

The St Johns circuit was replaced with the much longer Mountain Circuit in 1911; a challenging 37.75 mile/60.75 kilometre course taking in Douglas, Peel and Ramsey. 1911 also saw the races divided into Senior (singles up to 500cc or twins up to 580cc) and Junior (singles up to 300cc and twins up to 340cc) categories. It was also the first time that foreign built machines won the TT with Indian taking first, second and third places in the Senior event. Tragically the race also saw the fatality of Victor Surrudge (Rudge), crashing into an earth bank during practice, the first of more than 200 riders to lose their life racing or practicing on the island's roads.

Following World War I the TT races were re-introduced in 1920 with a new Lightweight class for 250cc machines. 1923 saw the first running of the Sidecar TT with the 175cc Ultra-Lightweight category following in 1924 but withdrawn for the 1926 event along with sidecars. The Sidecar race was however re-introduced during the 1950s.

Various alterations and improvements were made to the circuit throughout the 1920s and 1930s with the race becoming far more commercialised in the years leading up to World War II. Leading British manufacturers used the races as a showcase for their products whilst German and Italian manufacturers would also gain a number of successes. Riders such as Wal Handley (4 wins) and Stanley Woods (10 wins) are synonymous with the period.

Revived again in 1947, for many the 1950s were the classic years of the TT although they also saw the beginning of the end of British manufacturers' domination of the event. For 1954 the Sidecar and Ultra-Lightweight events were introduced, run on the 10.92 mile/17.57 kilometre long Clypse Course. These events reverted to the full Mountain Course in 1960.

Perhaps the name that is most strongly associated with the event in the post-war years is that of Mike Hailwood. Mike the Bike's first appearance on the island was in 1958 and he would go on to record no fewer than 12 TT victories between then and 1967 riding Norton, MV Agusta and Honda machines. He made a return to the island in 1978 (Ducati) and 1979 (Suzuki), adding two more wins to his already impressive tally.

Between 1949 and 1976 the TT formed part of the Motorcycle World Championship, increasing fears about safety leading to its replacement as the British round of the championship by the British Grand Prix at Silverstone.

Joey Dunlop is regarded as the most successful of all TT riders, recording 26 class wins between 1977 and 2000 whilst John McGuinness has achieved 15 wins between 1996 and 2009.

Speeds on the Mountain Course now regularly exceed 120mph/193.12kph, a far cry from the 38.22mph/61.51kph of H. Rem Fowler's Norton in 1907! However, the last few decades have also seen the introduction classes for production based bikes, which is perhaps fitting for an event that originated with touring motorcycles.

Further Reading:

Deane, Charles., 1975. *Isle of Man TT*. Cambridge: Patrick Stephens.

Holliday, Bob., 1976. *Racing round the island*. Newton Abbot: David and Charles.

Last updated: 8 December 2009.