

Ace veterans Malcolm Edginton (left) and musician Derek Addison have fond Ace memories



'...then we turn left onto the North Circ and Bob's your uncle!' Original ton-up tigers point the way to the Ace

As it is now (left) and as it was then (below). The Ace cafe attracted hordes of bikers over the years



Below: Still rocking outside the Ace, from left, Ken Miller; revival organiser Mark Wilshire; Ace veterans Jackie and Steve Hammond (see page 30); former night manager Terry Childs; rock 'n' rolling ace regular Graham Fenton; Alan Dodsworth; twice a week regular Malcolm Edginton; ton-up boy turned racer Arthur Brown; Derek Addison; George Gunthorpe; Bob Innes; Wiggy and revival organiser Chris Church. The original Ace cafe should not be confused with another Ace cafe opened on the A40 at Perivale in the early eighties for bikers



Just ACE

On the eve of the Ace Cafe Reunion we take a trip back down London's North Circular Road with some of the former ton-up boys and girls who frequented the famous transport caff during its heyday/Mick Duckworth

IF MEMORIES were concrete, the building that was once the Ace cafe would rise higher than Canary Wharf. As it is, London's former motorcycling Mecca looks small and vulnerable, surrounded by change and development. A thirties-style brick and steel edifice converted into a tyre-fitting depot, the old place doesn't rate a second glance from drivers crawling by in the perpetual blockage known as the A406 North Circular Road.

The historic site is not even on the 'North Circ' anymore: an underpass recently scooped into the drab landscape has put the old Ace, now mainly occupied by Just Tyres, onto a byway. If it wasn't for the fact that the southern end of the premises bears the sign Ace Vehicle Deliv-

eries, you could miss it altogether.

But there are thousands — maybe even a million — former Ace customers who'll never forget this place and the way it was before the cafe closed in 1969. And, as any of the old stagers will tell you, to recall the Ace merely as a 'rockers' caff' doesn't tell the whole story.

'Rockers came along after the ton-up boys,' says Terry Childs, who knew the Ace well in the fifties and was night manager there for a year in the early sixties.

'Rockers were more about posing. They were into the clothes, and thought it was butch to have a big bike, and do all the things that ton-up boys did.'

In the fifties, Terry lived a few miles north of the Ace at New Southgate. He and his mates lived and breathed motorcycles and, like hundreds of others, →



PHOTOGRAPHY PATRICK GOSLING



From left, Chris Church, Del and Mark Wilshire, the driving force behind the Ace reunion (see below)

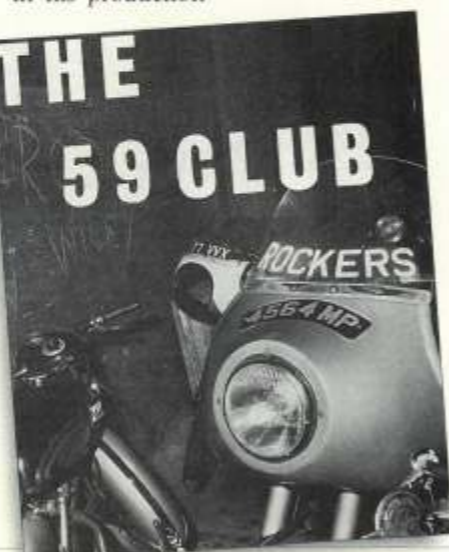
Ace cafe revisited

THE ACE Cafe Reunion is on September 4. Find the site by taking the A406 northwards from Hanger Lane: Just Tyres is on the original North Circular Road before the arched railway bridge. There is a dance on the previous evening at the 59 Club in Plaistow, with sleeping facilities for those far from home. Contact Sandra Rowe on 081 599 8048. Runs to the event start from Box Hill (11am), Jock's Cafe, Bath Road, Colnbrook, Berks (noon), Quincy's bar, A41, Bushy, Herts (noon), Dunstable Downs, Beds (0525 712197), and Chelsea Bridge, in Central London.



they would head along the North Circular to the Ace in the evening, mainly on Thursdays. 'It was the place to show off your bike, talk about bikes and where you got your bits,' Terry recalls. Challenges to prove one machine against another were inevitable. 'You might say: "What you got on there then, a TT9? I've got a TT10, mine's gotta be quicker."' To prove the relative merits of Amal racing carburetors and other tuning modifications, Terry and his contemporaries would set off from the Ace for burn ups. The format varied over the years, and among different groups, for there was clearly more than one Ace generation. But a typical blast might be southwards down to nearby Hanger Lane roundabout (now the day-long snarl-up fancifully called a gyratory system) and back.

One shilling bought you Link, the 14,000-member 59 Club mag in the sixties



Just ACE

continued

Tales of making such journeys, including kick-starting, timed against the duration of a 45rpm single record's play on the cafe juke box are legion. But Terry doesn't enthuse about them.

'Yeah, it was done,' he says. 'But it wasn't very sensible.'

He gave more credence to attempts to hold certain speeds through the tricky Iron Bridge bends at Willesden, a mile or so northwards from the Ace, where the A406 snakes over steel-latticed railway bridges, still there today.

'As I remember, the record was 80mph. I think that was on a Triumph Thunderbird,' Terry says.

Triumph twins were the first choice for the elite of seriously fast riders who gathered at the Ace. Other machines of the period have more florid reputations, but the Thunderbirds, Tiger 110s, and later Bonnevilles did the business because they were readily — and, above all, cheaply — tuned for performance.

The big boys would have a 3134 cam on the inlet, a ton-ten exhaust cam, and compression raised from eight-and-a-half to nine,' Terry says.

The crank would be balanced, and a bit of meat taken off it. The inlets would be opened up, the heads polished and gas-flowed, with bronze valve guides.'

He worked for north London Triumph dealer White and Martin, and prepared the factory T120 Thruxton engine Ron Wittich, another Ace regular, used early in his production

racing career. Terry's bias shows when he describes mid-fifties' riders of expensive BSA Gold Stars, Norton Inters and Vincent twins as 'frightfully nice chappies'.

One of several eateries in London run by the Ace Catering Company, the cafe's intended role was as a round-the-clock refreshment stop for truck

rich vein for reporters and photographers. What mostly intrigued tabloid journalists in the fifties was the horrific death toll among young people in the burn-up set. Looking back, survivors agree that similar figures today would draw much more adverse comment.

Steve Hammond, one of the fast men on Nortons, Triumphs and Tritons at the Ace before and after doing his National Service from 1956 to 1958, can readily tot up the names of eighteen absent friends. Everyone has their own death stories, from how popular Mick Sheehan died in Minerva Road, to the one about the lady, known for speedy exploits, who smashed into the railway arches next to the cafe. After a blast down to Hanger Lane and back on a borrowed machine, she had waved to the crowded Ace forecourt as she passed, and lost control.

There were several female riders in the burn-up ranks. Steve Hammond's wife Jackie was a well-known figure, not just because she rode a Tiger 100 and later a 350cc BSA Gold Star with panache. Her attractive looks made her a photographer's favourite, and she modelled with



Section of the North Circular Road at Willesden today. Seven rail and canal bridges cross it near the Ace.

drivers. Terry became an employee after one of the incidents that were bound to occur at a 24-hour London transport cafe.

'Some Willesden hoodlums were in one night, and this Scots bloke picked an argument. He smashed a sauce bottle and put it through a lad's wrist. The bloke who was meant to be in charge ran out the back,' says Terry, who marshalled regulars, ejected the troublemakers and was offered the night manager's post.

Bob Innes, a cafe-racing stalwart since the fifties now restores classic machines professionally. 'I sometimes spent 24 hours on end at the Ace,' he says. 'If we got really knackered, we'd sleep in empty carriages on the railway.'

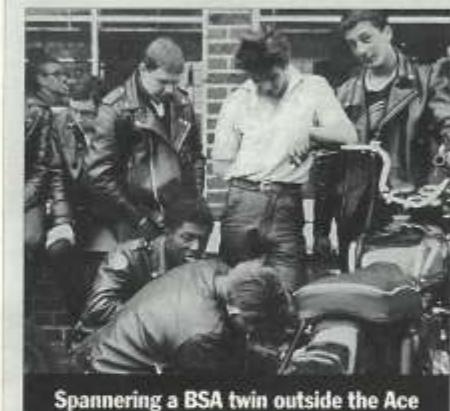
Not one to follow the crowd, Bob rode two-strokes, including a German Adler, in his Ace days. But his faired Triton, Genghis Khan, was famous around north London.

Years before the fuss about mods and rockers in the mid-sixties, sections of the press hit on the ton-up phenomena as a source of shock-horror material. Being conveniently near to London's newspaper and television offices, the Ace was a

Steve for a nationwide Drinka Pinta Milka Day advertising campaign.

The pair that epitomised the ton-up couple were married by the Reverend Bill Shergold, founder of the 59 Club. The still-thriving 59's history is inextricably linked with the Ace, and Sher-

Cafe society



Spannering a BSA twin outside the Ace

Coffee bars where people met and listened to music were an important feature of London social life 30 years ago. Groups from various cafes and clubs would visit the Ace at weekends, or when their own local base closed for the night. Those the Ace veterans remember best include the Aladdin in Western Avenue, the Cellar at Windsor, the Crusader in South Ealing, and the Dugout in Golders Green. Other bikers' haunts were Chelsea Bridge's all-night tea stall, Ted's Cafe, the Blinking Owl, and the Busy Bee, the second most famous rocker haunt after the Ace cafe.

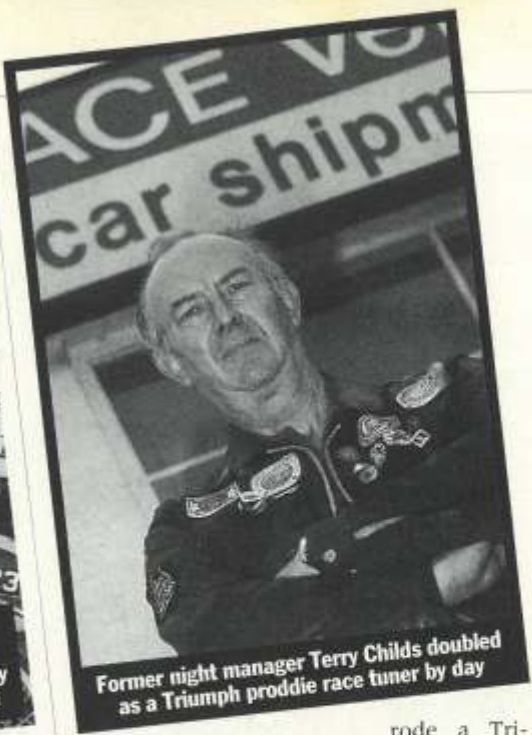
Too tired to party: Rockers travelled from far and wide to meet at the Ace Cafe



◆ COFFEE BAR MEMORIES



Ace regulars Steve and Jackie Hammond (left and second left) were married by 59 Club priest Bill Shergold



Former night manager Terry Childs doubled as a Triumph proddie race tuner by day

gold's church-based organisation was, for a time, sited in nearby Paddington.

Many girls who hung around the Ace were happy to ride pillion. According to Jan Turner, who admits to putting her age up when she first visited the cafe in the mid-sixties, they rarely considered the risks.

'We were lunatics, taking lifts here and there, riding at 100mph without crash helmets,' she says. 'My parents don't know to this day what I was up to. I used to creep out after going to bed. I certainly wouldn't like my daughter to do what I did back then.'

Remembering her sixties rocker days, Jan thinks her generation were more rebellious than today's teenagers.

'Bikes are considered okay now, but in those days we were all out for a punch-up with the mods, and the police weren't exactly popular.'

Norman Burman, also of the Ace's second generation, has two outstanding memories. One is of a huge crowd gathering on the waste dump opposite the Ace to watch a much-rumoured race, eventually stopped by a police swoop. The other was of a petrol tank's contents being set alight across the North Circular Road to celebrate Guy Fawkes night.

The days of a relatively traffic-free North Circ patrolled by sluggish Wolseley police cars were a far cry from today's speed-check cameras and heavy traffic.

When a fifties rider pulled out of the Ace with a muddy rear number plate and thumped provocatively on the roof of a police car parked opposite, he knew he could out-accelerate his pursuers. By the time an officer reached the nearest police phone to report him, he had been round Hanger Lane, and was back at the Ace, having a chuckle with his mates.

'One of the bike cops, old Bill who

rode a Triumph, was alright,' Terry says. 'But some of the ones on Noddies were right bolshie little bastards.' He says that when a nearby canal was drained some years after the Ace was shut, several Noddy Bikes, police issue Velocette LE twins, were uncovered.

These memories, and a load more will be heaped up when old-timers from the Ace have their *Classic Bike*-sponsored reunion in early September. The open-to-all gathering has been instigated by dedicated London biker and rock 'n' roll fan Mark Wilshire. Too young to have known the great days of the Ace, he is nevertheless passionate about the need to commemorate them.

'The Ace is more important than much of the imagery that now surrounds us in London. The Hard Rock Cafe, Planet Hollywood, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe — that's not really our past. After all, we did have the real thing: Billy Fury, Diana Dors, ton-up boys — and the Ace Cafe,' says Mark.

Ace graduates

GRAHAM FENTON, leader of the enduring rock 'n' roll band Matchbox, and a solo recording artist, traces his roots back to the Ace.

'My BSA Gold Flash and sidecar caught alight there once. Some of the older guys helped me put the fire out by throwing cups of tea over it. In later days, we used to pop in on the way back from gigs in the West End. Mostly it was a great laugh, although I did once see a guy running round with a knife sticking

out of him. But violence was rare.'

He also remembers the Ace's jukebox being firmly penned in after repeated attempts to drag it onto the forecourt.

Willesden-born Les Harris, now proprietor of LF Harris, maker of the Triumph Bonneville in the eighties and big-time classic spares manufacturer, was another Ace regular.

'I had a two-year ban after being chased by the cops. I escaped by riding into a park,

through a football game, and out the other side, but they had my number. Some of the guys in those days couldn't half ride — they were nut cases,' recalls Harris, who like many Acers also frequented the Busy Bee cafe on the A41 near Watford. Several top road racers, including Dave Croxford and Ray Pickrell were Ace graduates.

There are probably thousands of other respectable members of society who prefer not to talk about their tearaway days.

Graham Fenton used to pop into the Ace on the way back from gigs

