

Denis Jenkinson - Motor Cycle Legend

By Bob Melvin

As a young lad, one of my treats in life was to read my father's only subscription magazine, Motor Sport. In the 1960s Motor Sport was sort of the gentleman's version of Autosport magazine with one of its regular contributors, Denis Jenkinson, their regular European and Formula 1 correspondent. Whilst Denis, known to his pals as 'Jenks', Jenkinson's professional life revolved around 4 wheels, his heart was always in the 2-wheel camp.

I first met Jenks at the 1972 Motorcycle World Records meeting at RAF Fairford. I was the travelling marshal and he turned up in a pre-production, Jaguar XJ12, that he was driving on a road test for Motor Sport. During a 'testing' of the timing lights, Jenks took the new Jaguar through the speed trap at a smidge over 140mph, a seriously quick motor at the time. Later, he took me for a brief 'spin' and I was mightily impressed – being driven by Jenks!

Amongst his claims to fame, Jenks was sometime passenger to World Sidecar Champion, Eric Oliver, winning the event in 1949. He was also a supporter of both motorcycle and car hill climbing, sprinting, and drag racing in the UK during its formative years. He campaigned his own, modified TriBSA at various events and was, until his passing in 1996, a Vice President of the National Sprint Association.

In 1979 Jenks competed at the inaugural Ramsey Sprint during TT Week, an event organised by yours truly. He arrived on The Island with his competition machine lashed to a sidecar, hauled by a Norton twin (from memory). This was true motorcycling dedication. The last time I met Jenks was on ride-out to a club trial, somewhere in the depths of Hampshire, where his familiar figure, sporting the distinctive beard, was Jenks, observing a true grass roots motorcycling event.

Jenks greatest achievement however, was, without doubt, his navigating Stirling Moss to winning the 1955 Italian road race, the Mille Miglia. This event saw cars racing over 1,000 miles on open public roads with Moss and Jenkinson, the event's only non-Italian winners, at an average of 98mph over the actual course distance of 992 miles. A record that still stands today, with the event being discontinued in 1957. Jenks account of this event remains, for me, one of the most descriptive pieces of motoring journalism I have ever read.