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- ★ Inside a good **SOCKET** ★ Behind the scenes at **DAVID SILVER**

WITHOUT WHOM...

DAVID SILVER SPARES

Words: Bertie Simmonds Photos: Joe Dick



Silver struck gold in the 80s when he began selling Honda spares. 25 years on he's still keeping Honda's finest on the road, be they 15 or 50 years old.

Although he doesn't like the comparison, David Silver himself can't deny it.

"Yes, I was living in a flat above a bike shop on the South Ealing road. And yes I had tea-chests full of spare parts, along with lock-ups dotted around the area, again full of spares. I know it sounds all a bit Arthur Daley, but I was and still am a lot more reputable. Honest!"

Of course he is. As David Silver Spares he has been helping us all keep our Hondas on the road: Hondas from the

50s through to much more modern tackle. He provides a vital service for every owner of 'older' Hondas. So while Honda bigwigs (if they visited) would look down their noses at the lack of 'optimum use racks, the odd cobweb or two or even the lack of 'accurate Honda branding', they would be missing the glorious point: David Silver Spares fulfils a need that Honda dealers could not (or would not) provide. And we should all thank him for it.

With many years of interest in bikes (see boxout) David Silver wanted to make

a decent living in motorcycles. Being handy with the spanners David soon decided to resurrect and restore: "I wanted to buy up old wrecks and do them up for a profit. I bought a 550 K3, which was missing third gear - I then had to become extra handy with the spanners! A friend then explained to me that when I divided the hours I was spending rebuilding the bike I would probably be making about 50p and if I wanted the extra income I should go work in a bar." ☺



Box-fresh bits



Among the treasures David has 400/4 exhausts

What the 550 did make David realised is that getting parts for bikes was both expensive and time-consuming. He also knew – from his time in the trade working for Sondel Sport on Highgate Corner – that some dealers or distributors were sitting on a lot of unsold stock.

“Today Honda sells parts direct to the dealers, but in those days in the mid-80s, Honda had umpteen parts distributors who then sold to the dealers,” says David. “I came across one in London called Parts of Lewisham who were sitting on a lot of unsold stock: all going cheap. So on the spur of the moment I went and filled the car up with all of it, but as I was driving away I was thinking to myself... ‘a fool and his money are soon parted...’

Visiting the first breaker he came across soon changed his mind as he sold half the stock for twice the money he’d spent. Then an advert in MCN sold the rest. He says: “This was about 1985/86 and I realised this had mileage and so went back and cleaned them out. I then realised if I could get the names of parts distributors across the UK, I could go and call on them for their excess stock. As I worked for Sondel on Saturdays – a Honda dealer – I had the information. They had a wall-chart of all the distributors from Scotland down along with contact details so during my spare time I went around the country in a hired Transit van hoovering up any old stock and the distributors were happy to do it – it was sell to me or throw it in the skip for most of them.”

David Silver Spares became bricks and mortar in 1987 when he bumped into a



friend in the trade who had some office and warehouse space going begging. Again, it was all a little bit 'Arthur Daley'. "It was in Kilburn, London, 1500-2000sq-ft. I think it was a little bit dodgy as he may have rented it from the council - I'm sure there was no sub-letting!"

Let's stick with this Arthur Daley angle, eh? After all, before sinking a vodka and slimline in the Winchester, Daley would want to sink a decent deal, and there must be one, memorable day, when David Silver hit gold?

"Oh yes, at one point I was buying stuff so cheap. Even in the 80s some fuel tanks were £200-300 quid but people then weren't prepared to pay that. I bought 100 fuel tanks for a quid each in a real 'Poundstretcher' kind of deal. In the mix were tanks for CX500s, Super Dreams (they were always in demand) 550s, 650s: all at £1 a tank. They finally went out for around £25 to £30 and at that price people had no hesitation buying them."

David even snapped up mint CB900 bodywork (tank, panels, tail-units) in the 80s and sold them as 'kits' to owners - similar to what Ducati do today with their panel sets to Ducati Monster owners...

A move from London to Suffolk in 1989 saw more space for more spares; then came another breakthrough which made the company truly global: the Internet. "Before the web we were solely reliant on ads in Motor Cycle News, but it would take forever writing down parts for each bike in the adverts: we would be up until the early hours proof-reading! With the internet, we

developed a website very early on in 1995 or 1996," says David. "We used eBay pretty much straight away and through this we gained a lot of US customers. Today with our own website - we just use eBay for the rare stuff: a speedo for a 750 K0 is like a daVinci - it will fetch £400-£500."

"Just in the UK we could sell some pretty obscure parts, but when you offer them to the world via a website it's a much bigger shop window. And the internet is perfect if - like us - you offer a service which has a large demand but thinly spread across the world. With a magazine article or advert it's there, then it's gone, but on the internet it's always there for the world to see. We now have loyal customers from around the world who have been coming to us for many years. 40% of our business is from overseas now, with the USA our biggest customer. They have their own dealers, but they will not stock older parts. We export around £250,000 worth of parts to them alone per year. Sales in Australia and New Zealand are also strong."

And sales closer to home have been getting bigger thanks to political rather than technological changes. David says: "When Europe opened up, sales did for us too, especially in Eastern Europe. Many Polish bikers went to Germany when they became part of Europe; they went and bought all-manner of old Hondas and they need parts." So they do, and the other 40,000 customers or so registered with David Silver Spares.

Today the 20,000sq-ft warehouse and office complex in Leiston, Suffolk send 400 parcels a day to all corners of the globe

and the feel is cosy, even if it's distinctly less 'Arthur Daley'. Sometimes they handle as many as 550 calls a day and David says their busiest period is normally after a long weekend or bank-holiday, where on their return to work they can have as many as 200 orders waiting to be processed.

And it's not always for your normal classic fare that David Silver Spares stocks parts, as the myriad of manuals and parts booklets pay mute testament to. In one corner of the office are hundreds of parts manuals for grey imports. "We still have around 5000 customers who ask for VFR400R NC30 parts, and around 3500 who ask for NC24 parts. So, we always collect any manual we can, no matter how obscure the grey import - even something called the 250 Degree! I think we provide a service which is important to Honda owners. If you rang a dealer and told them you had a Degree, they'd just offer congratulations, not realising it's a bike - and yet we've got around 100 customers with this model of Honda."

As well as classics and greys, part numbers of many UK, European and US-spec machines are kept in manuals, on fiches, or on computer. David adds: "We still supply parts for Hondas such as the C100 - that's a 1959 machine. Or one-year only models. There are people out there who need this information... and we never fob them off. We try and find it, we have a willingness to find out and I think our customers appreciate that."

And what the wider industry should appreciate is DSS' willingness to source cheaper, or re-engineered parts that keep

our hobby well and truly alive as well as sourcing un-tapped spares mountains, be they in Europe or Japan.

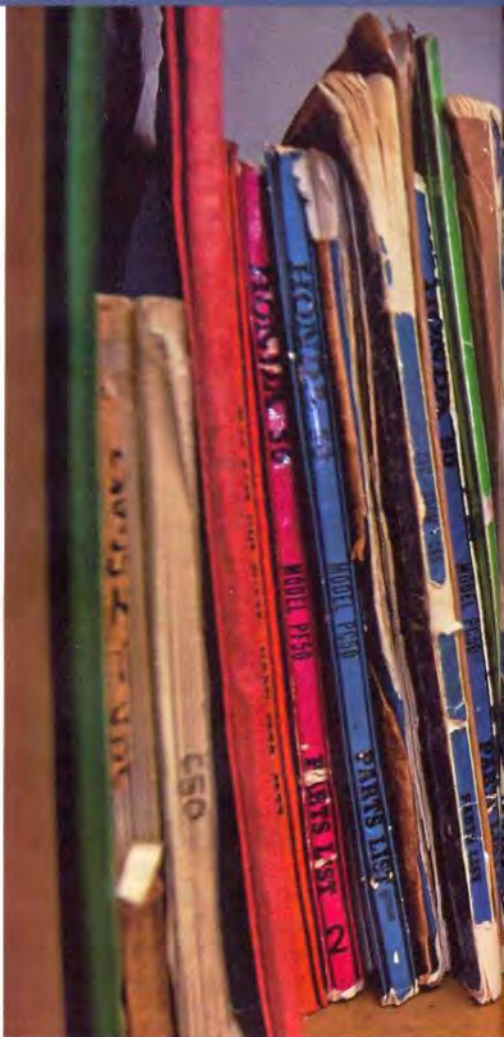
David says that dealer stocks are drying up, although he still does find the odd one that offers him spares, but it's the replicating of parts which is now tending to keep classics on the road.

"Take these tank strips for the bottom of the fuel tank of a CB750," says David. "They are made around the corner and to my knowledge we are the only people in the world who sell them. You can get an original, but they'd be yellow and nasty and you'd be spending money trying to clean it up, but to use this, no-one would know. It's the same with spokes, too. Honda only supplied individual spokes. You had to order the right spokes... 19 inside and 19 outside.. so that's £2 a spoke or something. We go to Japan and source - sometimes from the same companies that supply Honda - complete spoke sets for a fraction of what buying individually would cost. Carbs too, for £15 you have everything in a kit to re-build gummed-up carbs, if you bought genuine and individual bits to rebuild four CB750 carbs, it would cost hundreds. CDI units for the CB750, 900s and CBX1000s: they were discontinued some years back, we approached a company to make them for us; so we now supply them. Things like this move on to later machines. Look at 90s bikes...fuel-pumps are now becoming a

problem and perhaps we need to engineer some universal or generic pumps to keep these bikes going."

Perhaps, but in the meantime a walk around the warehouse shows just what is available. Fork tubes galore, down-pipes for 400-4s (David's getting copies done, but he's also got some four-into-fours from import 350-4s which are identical.) Seats, from everything from a Super Dream, CB750 to a CX500 are there stacked up. Fuel tanks, some dusty and rare, some boxed up are on the shelves waiting for a home, frames can also be found. David calculates that he has around one million spares sitting on shelves, so could you make a whole bike from what's available?

"No," he says. "The cost would be too prohibitive and some parts are just not around anymore, so you need a donor bike, but we do pull things together for owners, who inevitably have a shopping list of things they need. Take a CB900 for example. You've bought it, but the cam-chain rattles, it's smoking like a tractor so the list could be: gasket set, cam-chain, four sets of rings and pistons, and a few other bits and pieces. The cam-chain would be aftermarket as would the gasket set - perhaps an MP set - which is complete set for £40. If it was original Honda then you're looking at £200 and it's discontinued. Piston rings would be Japanese OE, along with Honda's own pistons then dozens of screws, bolts and



Tidy storage ensures faster delivery to the customer



A library of manuals help identify individual components

DAVID SILVER'S BIKES

The mouth-watering display of machines in the foyer of David Silver Spares tells you he's a real bike nut. "The first bike I had was an SS50 – one of the last models that could be de-restricted. It had those joke fold-up pedals that were more like footpegs. From then I had a Honda CJ250 and passed my test and then went onto a Kawasaki and from there various other bikes."

His office line-up contains a rare 1963 CR93 race Honda 125cc twin, which he reckons costs around £20,000; "...as we're sure this one was rarely, if ever raced..." There's a CB350 twin K4, the predecessor to the Super Dream, the popular 400-4, a CB750 F2 Rickman, a CBX750 police bike, sourced from Ireland which start a succession of CB750s, which had many of the 'drop-in' customers drooling: a 1969 K0 and a K1 "...bought locally, with just one owner since 1973, this one will be restored to its former glory..." He's now looking for another to complete the colour set... and a CBX1000 "...which we do replica exhausts for. So good you can't tell them apart..." But, right in the middle is David's favourite: the NS400R stroker: "I got this from a dealer and I've never ridden it, which I know people will think is strange, but I love it. It was a real 'hoolie' bike for a Honda, so when I finally saw one in this condition I had to have it."

washers, we'd order those in from a parts distributor and then the customer would get a package from us which would be a mix of quality genuine or pattern parts. The beauty for the customer is we can supply it all, whether it's in stock with us, or not. So, within a couple of days they can have the lot to overhaul the CB's engine."

Perfect. And many satisfied customers have done the same, but while things are good, David also knows that things are not going to stay the same. He says: "When you sit down and think about it, we are living off the fat of the boom times. We benefit from the bikes of the 70s, through to the late 90s when you had grey and parallel imports and CBR600s and Blades being sold by the bucket-load. We've had American classics brought into the UK by the container-load, Japanese sportbikes from the Far East, so the market was that much bigger than it otherwise would have been. There are lots of these bikes still around and we're keeping them alive, but wind forward 20 years and look at the numbers of new bikes that are being sold today and it will not keep 30 people employed in 10 years time. I hope the old models will still be around, but I don't think there's much prospect of living off today's sales in the future." ☺

The Man behind the name David Silver

