

# Osborn Engineering Company

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Until recent years, when the Rickman brothers set up business in New Milton, the only motorcycles ever to have been manufactured in Hampshire were the famous O.E.C. machines. A product of the Osborn Engineering Co., these two-wheelers (and occasionally three-wheelers) took their place in history as among the most unorthodox machines to have come from any British factory.

Under the directorship of Frederick Osborn and Frederick Wood, this company was formed in 1919, and the old United Aircraft's premises in Lees Lane, Gosport, were acquired for the manufacture of O.E.C. motorcycles.

Frederick Osborn had built his first machine in 1901 - a track-racing motorcycle powered by a 4 h.p. Auto-Motor mounted on the front down tube of the lightweight frame. He had earlier made a name for himself as a racing cyclist, and had then turned to the manufacture of motorised bath-chairs.

And therein lies the key to such success as was enjoyed by O.E.C. throughout the 'twenties and 'thirties. Both Osborn and Wood were men of exceptional ingenuity, blessed with inventive brains from which emerged many brilliant ideas.

One of the first examples of Osborn "non-conformity" was marketed in 1922 - a 10 h.p. O.E.C. Blackburne Sidecar Taxi, priced at £285 and weighing all of 300 lbs.

The sidecar itself was a totally enclosed cab, four feet in height, and the motorcycle was fitted with a steering-wheel instead of handlebars. Rumour has it that Osborn even toyed with the idea of a speaking-tube (from passenger to driver), but Wood persuaded him that such a device was

unrealistic in view of the fact that the driver would have to wear head-phones to make it effective.

It was Fred Wood who had the most fertile imagination. A younger man than Osborn, he was for ever striving to produce some entirely new sort of motorcycle which would succeed in extracting the company from the financial difficulties that beset it almost throughout its chequered career.

The Atlanta Works in Lees Lane Gosport (1933), formerly the old United Aircraft's premises which was built on the site of the old Saw Mills. Now used as the Sanderson Centre.

### The O.E.C. Blackburne

In 1927, O.E.C. obtained a patent on the revolutionary Duplex steering mechanism. It was this, perhaps more than anything else, which was to put Osborn on the motorcycle map.

In conjunction with a novel rear-sprung frame, this new form of steering caused a real stir among designers. Described in the technical press as the most unorthodox machine of the year, the O.E.C. Duplex was the first real milestone in the company's history.

During the early days at Gosport, they had contracted to assemble the famous Blackburne engines. This tie-up helped to keep O.E.C. solvent, and for many years they used Blackburne engines in all their models.

Their racing successes were considerable, and it was with an O.E.C. Blackburne that Portsmouth motorcyclist Harry Evans won the 350cc Aggregate Cup at Brooklands in 1925. There were O.E.C. machines being raced in the Isle of Man T.T. throughout the 'twenties, and, in later years, Joe Wright attacked the world motorcycle speed record with a 1000cc O.E.C. J.A.P. He achieved 142 m.p.h.

The frame for this historic machine - like those for all other O.E.C. specials - was designed by Fred Wood and constructed by George Williams. Now retired and living in

Portchester, Mr. Williams joined the company shortly after it was formed. He clearly recalls the sensation caused by the Duplex steering, and the great interest which it created among technically-minded motorcyclists everywhere.

Duplex steering was incorporated in O.E.C.'s next brainchild - a remarkable three-wheeler (not a sidecar outfit or tricycle, but a single-track machine with a large wheel in front and two smaller ones behind) which was built for military use.

With a ground clearance of nearly 12 inches, and both rear wheels driving, the cross-country capabilities of this curious machine were almost limitless. Further, a caterpillar track could be fitted to the twin rear wheels for traversing boggy ground.

One of the 1929 frames constructed by George Williams

housed a water-cooled Tinkler power unit - with radiator, engine and gearbox all enclosed in a sheet-metal casing. Mr. Williams recollects it was the biggest attraction at the 1929 Motorcycle Show in Olympia - but he also recollects that it never went into production.

It was just too ambitious. Too unorthodox to find real favour with a conservative public. 'Fred Wood's ideas were far ahead of their time,' says George Williams, 'and we lacked sufficient funds to do them justice.'

He often talks about the old days at Lees Lane, before the firm moved to Highbury Street, Portsmouth. A financial tie-up with Glanfield and Lawrence (the well-known motorcycle agents then operating in Lake Road, Portsmouth) gave O.E.C. a new lease of life.

One of the chief testers at Glanfield-Lawrence was Stuart Wallbridge, former sidecar passenger for Wally Waring in grass-track races and sporting trials. He struck up a friendship with George Williams which persists even to this day, and in later years he took employment with the Osborn Engineering Co.

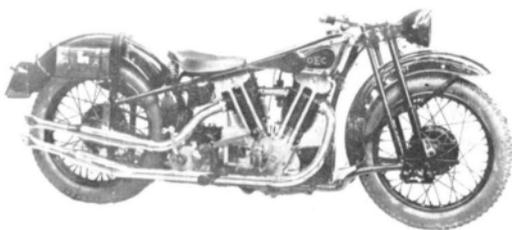
These men are part of O.E.C. history - part of the motorcycle business which once made Osborn a household name. Among older enthusiasts, the mention of Lees Lane, Gosport, still stirs nostalgic memories which will persist as long as motorcycles are made.



OEC motorcycles, competitors in the Isle of Man TT Races. This image was taken in the grounds of Forton House, Gosport, Hampshire. 1920 - 1925



Cork. 150 miles an hour on a motor cycle! Streamlined in every possible way even to his helmet - J S Wright and an O.E.C. - Jap-engined - wins back record for Britain from Germany. Facebook Video



A classic example of the 1000cc Jap-engined 'Big Twin' O.E.C. complete with the Duplex steering for which the Gosport machines were world-famous.

