

Living the Dream



Jesvin's writeup got me thinking about my first Club rides, and yes, it was in a bygone era, a long, long time ago – exactly 30 years ago back in October 1982. I was 22, first year working, just done 3 months suspension (“all licences cancelled and suspended” – court case, 80 in a 60 km/h while on P plates. A day off work in the Magistrates Court (3 times in the end, all the same crime), Mum as a character witness, with my court and weddings suit. Pretty unforgiving times.) I was itching for a ride, having ridden around and around the family home to stay sane.

I had picked up an itinerary card from the Club display at the Showgrounds after an MRA Rider Awareness ride out to Tullamarine Airport and back. The itinerary card had 4 months worth of ride start locations and times printed and could fit in your wallet. It is now superseded by the Internet itinerary page. I had done about 50,000 km riding, commuting to RMIT and back and now first year work at Melbourne University as an electronics technician, with very regular trips around this great road called the Reefton Spur which no-one new about (or so I thought). Often after work I would blast out to Yarra Glen and back on the Christmas Hills Road because it was so much fun. And it was never policed and it was 100 km/h anyway. Saturday morning was a 200km loop out to the Reefton and back over the Black Spur.

I was also playing a lot of pennant squash for Northcote and then Lower Plenty (4 times a week, 3 competitively, one training) which was taking me all over Melbourne, from Melton to Keon Park, to Diamond Creek to Doncaster – all on the bike, and for a long period I played Sunday night – after a 500 km ride. To say I was tired the next day at work would be a slight understatement. Though I was young and fit! I was only 66 kg with no bum. Now I'm battling to hold 74 kg!

On the 24th October 1982 I went on my first Club ride. I was immediately hooked – just the thing I had been looking for – people to go riding with to far flung places. I was riding a near new red Kawasaki GPz550, the latest and greatest 750 beater. (What is a GPz550? It's an air cooled, DOHC, in-line four cylinder, two valve head, claimed 61 HP, bikini fairing, twin disks, carburetted, mono-shock rear suspension (normally twin shocks); light and fast. Light is relative of course – about 190 kg. 19inch 110/90 front tyre and 18 inch 120/80 rear tyre. Front tyre lasted 35,000 km! I digress.

First Club ride was down the Grand Ridge Road with 27 bikes, a high attrition rate (one pillion head on into a VW Golf, a 650 Honda had a serious oil leak, various other departures), about 100 km of dirt, the leader sitting on 180 km/h heading out the Mulgrave Freeway and me/the bike unable to reach that speed, a crash on my first ride following a bloke called Mick Fagan with his missus on the back. An ex-A grader I was later informed. BMWs were crap, I thought, and of course I should be able to keep up with an old bloke two up. Lasted four corners and learnt a lot of valuable lessons. Someone was booked, a total of 4 crashes for the day. And 520 km.

A big first ride and potentially off-putting? And I couldn't understand a word they were saying, talking about spark plugs and suspension and preload and rebound damping and sprockets and tyre pressures and needle heights and K&N filters. Total gobbledygook. I started reading Motorcycle News to learn the language and culture.

My normal riding attire was threadbare blue cords and my old man's black leather (1940's) flying jacket and later on yellow postie wet weather pants. Luckily I bounced pretty well in those days and gravel rash to the hips healed a lot faster back then. A couple of years later I bought a set of brown Mars leathers from the shop in Elizabeth Street. They eventually rotted out.

I went on the Club ride every week for the next five rides, missed a couple, and did the last two for the year, making 8 rides in 1982. After the first ride with so much excitement I daren't miss a ride.

Second ride was to Bacchus Marsh with only 10 bikes and one sidecar. All the BM's were at a rally at Mt Kosciusko. A what? I had electrical issues with the bike's tacho.

Third ride was an economy ride which consisted of starting with an empty tank, adding two litres of petrol, then seeing how far you could ride, the longest distance clearly getting the best economy. A side car with missus pillion and three kids squashed in the sidecar towing a trailer with jerry cans of fuel followed along behind refuelling the bikes. The procedure was to remove tanks and drain; ride around until fuel consumed from carbies; ride around on choke until engine finally dies. An organiser comes around and if the engine barely kicks on the starter motor, then keep working at it! This takes at least half an hour to complete! I managed 89.1 km on the two litres (Kingleake, Kingleake West, Flowerdale, Broadford, Kilmore) at 2000 rpm in top (6th) up hills and 1600 rpm along the straights, clutch in, kill switch on the down hills, lying prone on the tank. I took my cue from everyone else. Beaten by a woman on a Kawasaki Z200, my previous bike. I knew it was impossible to beat her as I normally got 80 mpg thrashing it!

It took me until 1993 until I eventually won an Economy ride on my very frugal 1988 ZX10 – but using a completely different format – fill up, ride, fill up again. We eventually had to stop this style of Economy ride as it is patently dangerous. In a similar vein, we had to stop running the Hill Climb, last held at Mt Wallace, and organised by the Geoff Jones' clan. Great while it lasted, but modern technology (mobile phone) meant the risks just got too great.

Next ride was up Cathedral Lane (just out of Buxton turn right and just keep going – dirt tracks). Unbelievable places we used to go and often with lots of dirt.

In 1983 I did 34 rides. How do I know all this? Memory? If only. No, I am re-reading writeups that never made it to print. I wrote-up every ride from Day 1, for the first couple of years. So 34 writeups for 1983 using a prehistoric word processing application on a mainframe. (PCs didn't exist let alone the Internet or Microsoft Word processing packages though Universities were early adopters of email and the Internet, particularly the Computer Science Department where I worked, conveniently!) I still have the write-ups in hard copy and possibly in softcopy in this weird (think raw html) typesetting language, having faithfully copied them from machine to machine, technology to technology, over the journey. Who was I writing too? A lecturer in the department who rode a black and gold Moto Guzzi 850 MK III (?) Sport, an expensive dream bike in their day. I think he lived his biking life vicariously through my Sunday ride adventures, committed to electronic format each Monday post ride and emailed to him. He came on a couple of rides.

And so the journey began and has continued in much the same way, year after year, waxing and waning ever so slightly with work, school and family commitments sometimes taking precedence.

And here I am riding 30 years, 9 Kawasakis, 6 Hondas, 1 BMW, and 1,234,700km later, still riding 7 days a week, still wanting to ride, still searching for improvement, and enjoying the Club more than ever. I'm living the dream.

Ben Warden