

Founder of the line—
James Parkes, of
Birmingham.

JAMES PARKES was a well-known Birmingham industrialist in the second half of the last century, and it was one of his enterprises—Messrs. James Parkes and Son, brass founders, of Alma Street, Birmingham—which, in 1885, established the trade name of "Sun" for its products. The choice was not inappropriate, for the firm made incandescent lamps; that they originated the carbon variety is recalled by the telegraphic address "Carbon," which is still used by the present company. They started to make lugs and frame parts for the pedal cycle industry, which was approaching its boom years, and proceeded to play a significant part in the establishment of that industry in and around Birmingham.

The firm prospered to such an extent that in 1887 it became necessary to seek fresh premises and they occupied part of the present site, Phoenix Works, in Aston Brook Street, Birmingham. Here, that year, they formed the Sun Cycle Fittings Company, with the Parkes family in command, and later produced the first complete pedal cycles under their own trade name. James Parkes' son Joseph had been joined by his brothers William, Thomas and Frederick. After the founder's death in 1896, the four sons continued and in turn brought their own sons into the business.

The present chairman, F. C. Parkes, is the last of this third generation, while one of the fourth generation, Peter Parkes, is joint managing director with him today. "F.C." was commissioned in the Royal Engineers in the 1914-18 lot, then seconded to the Royal Flying Corps. There he flew single-seater stringbags in No. 60 Squadron in company with Albert Bull, V.C., and Billy Bishop, V.C., great names among that great company of early pilots. He has been responsible for the policy of the company since 1930. With strong ideas on modern trends in pedal cycle design, he has had much to do with the development of today's lightweight sports bicycles, among which his company's Parkes Lightweight Cycles are well known. His son Peter has extended this interest to the design of the "specials" used by some of the most successful competition cyclists at World Championship level.

The Sun Cycle and Fittings Company (the slight alteration to the name was made in 1907) did not come into the motorcycle industry until 1911, when they started to produce machines with Birmingham-made Precision engines, continuing the same models for 1912. A rather pleasant-looking,

SUN

*A Birmingham Marque
with a History
of More Than 70 Years*

by JIM SHELDON

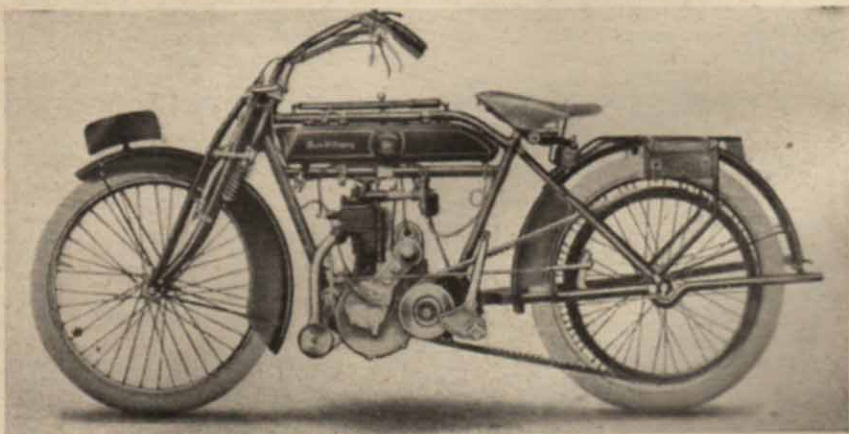
medium-weight single, the 3½-h.p. job had an 85-mm. bore by 88-mm. stroke air-cooled engine, with mechanically operated side valves and the usual accessories of the day—Amac carburetter, Bosch magneto and belt drive to a Sturmey Archer three-speed hub gear. A basketwork sidecar was also offered. The job was turned out in a handsome grey finish, with black lines, and had a number of "rider's points," such as a front-wheel stand on separate lugs, balanced guards, a leather mudshield and a small "sump" to the petrol tap in the flat base of the tank. For 1913, the range was extended to include a 2½-h.p. T.T. edition, and also a model with the J.A.P. 4-h.p. engine.

During 1912, Villiers had been developing their first motorcycle engine over in Wolverhampton, and early in 1913 it was being tested in its final form at Brooklands and on the road. Rated as a "2½"—as we called the 350 c.c. class then—it had a bore of 77.5 mm. and a stroke of 80 mm. and was a four-stroke with push-rod operated overhead inlet valve and side exhaust valve, the engine being in unit with a two-speed gearbox. Before the end of 1913, Sun had announced a model fitted with this engine—the first Sun-Villiers.

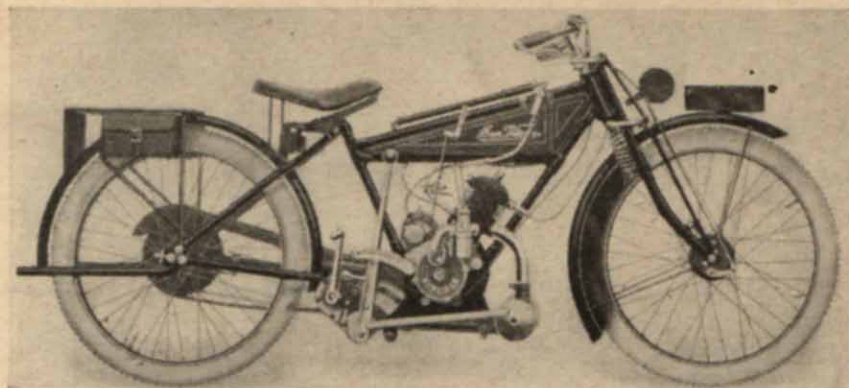
First Villiers Two-stroke

This was the beginning of the heyday of the flat twin, and Villiers were also engaged on the design of an engine of this type during 1913. But before the Show at the end of the year they announced that the twin had been shelved. In its place they were producing a single-cylinder two-stroke, a simple little job with bore and stroke of 70 mm. (269 c.c.), a roller-bearing big end, large outside flywheel, non-detachable head and so on.

The Sun range for 1914, as announced at the 1913 Show, was a very wide one indeed, catering for every class of rider. At one end was the interesting little 2-h.p. Precision-engined model with horizontal valves and gear primary drive to a unit-construction two-speed gearbox; at the other were the J.A.P. V-twins. The Villiers overhead-inlet-engined model was there, of course, and a novelty was the introduction of a machine with the Villiers

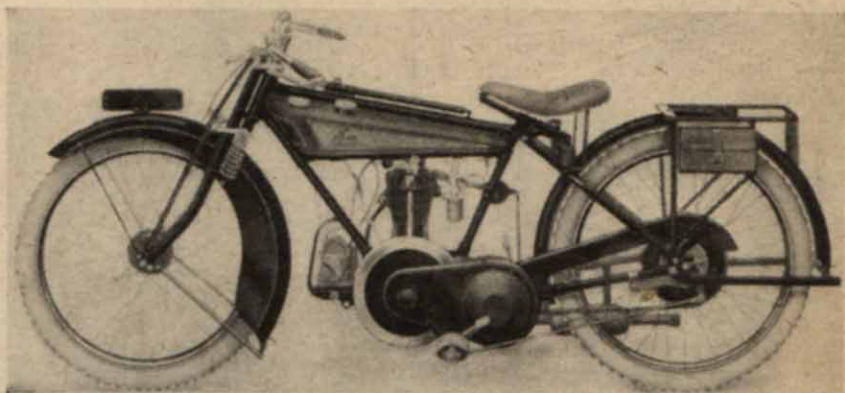


The first Sun-Villiers of 1913. The engine was a 350 c.c. four-stroke with push-rod operated overhead inlet valve and side exhaust valve.



(Left) The 1922 sports model, the 250 c.c. rotary-valve two-stroke Sun-Vitesse, had a guaranteed top speed of 50 m.p.h. Note the induction pipe to the offside crankcase cheek, in which the rotary valve was mounted.

(Below) This 1924 model was fitted with a 350 c.c. side-valve Blackburne engine. The large outside flywheel is characteristic. The machine had all-chain drive and was intended for light sidecar work.



two-stroke engine. The pre-show advertisements spoke at length of the extent of the range, but after the Show the firm's publicity stressed the little Villiers-engined job, the best value in the Show at 25 guineas. I think Sun learned quite a lot at the 1913 Show.

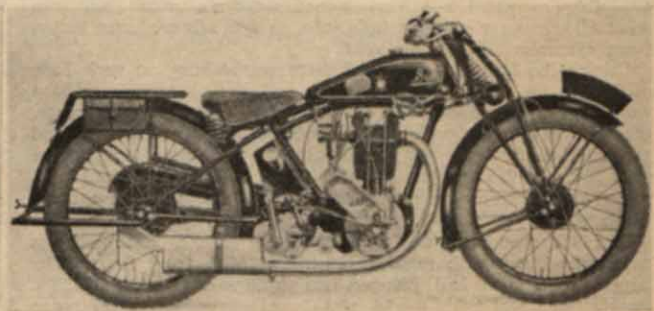
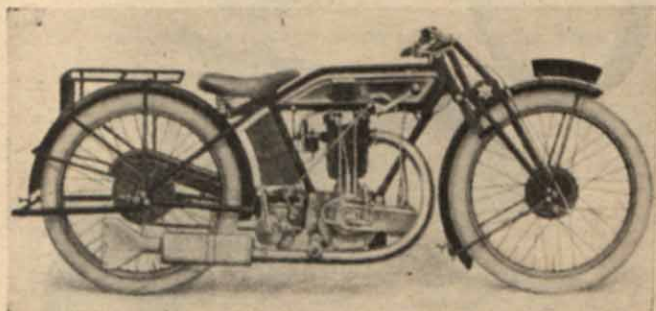
After half a decade on munitions, Sun came back in 1919 with a range of small inclined-engine two-strokes. The company had formed the V.T.S. Company to take over the Valveless Twostroke concern in 1915, and they started to manufacture a V.T.S. engine designed by J. Duffy, the engineering manager. It had "square" dimensions (70 mm. bore and stroke), with overhung crank and roller big-end. There was an H-section con.-rod and a ported aluminium piston, while lubrication was induced by crankcase suction. This engine was offered in the ordinary frame, with parallel top tubes and flat tank, and in the "Vitesse" model, with wedge-shaped tank and lowered saddle position. Soon the name Vitesse was applied to the engines themselves, and for 1920 and 1921 it was an all-Vitesse range. It was in 1921 that Sun first went to the Isle of Man as entrants.

There were two Sun entries in the lightweight class of the 1921 Junior T.T., ridden by B. H. Norris and W. V. Bishop, and they finished in far-from-discreditable 9th and 10th places. The Vitesse engines were reduced to 247 c.c., to bring them within the lightweight limit, by reducing the bore to 67 mm., the stroke remaining at 70 mm.; and, an interesting development, the crank was extended to turn a rotary valve in the offside crankcase cheek, to which was bolted the carburetter. There were three entries for the 1922 race—Bishop again, W. J. Lord and Gus Kuhn—and quite a lot of work had been done on the machines, which now had aluminium cylinders with steel liners in addition to Moss three-speed gearboxes and internal-expanding front brakes. This was the first year of the Lightweight T.T. proper, and Suns were rather fancied to give a good account of themselves. Unfortunately Jack Duffy, in his search for more knots, over-drilled the connecting rods, and dis-

covered too late that what he had got was more vibration instead. Gus Kuhn and W. J. Lord could manage no better than 12th and 13th places, while Bishop retired.

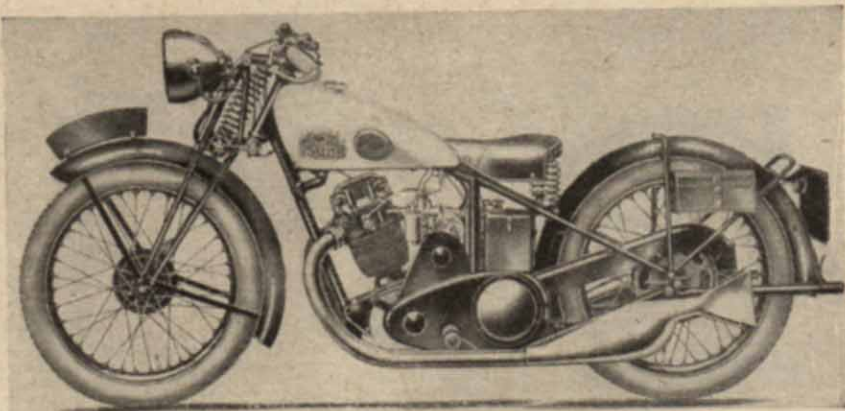
For 1922, the rotary-valve model was actually listed with a guarantee of 50 m.p.h. as the Sun-Vitesse Sports, at 69 guineas, as against the more conventional two-stroke at 45 guineas. There was also a little side-valve J.A.P. of 293 c.c. For 1923, two new models were added to the range, a small two-stroke with the 147 c.c. Villiers engine, again priced at 25 guineas in single-gear form, and a good-looking 350 c.c. job with a Blackburne side-valve engine and all-chain drive, intended to take a light sidecar.

A range of Villiers-engined models was listed for 1924—of 147 c.c., 247 c.c. and 343 c.c.—the frames being redesigned during the year. The Blackburne-engined "350" was continued. A model with the new Villiers 172 c.c. sports engine was added for 1925, and there were three J.A.P.-engined machines—300 c.c.* and 342 c.c. side-valves and a 342 c.c. o.h.v.—as well as a 499 c.c. side-valve Blackburne-engined job. Sun were also manufacturing parts, and even complete machines for other firms, frames and components going to Germany, Holland and Switzerland to bear well-known

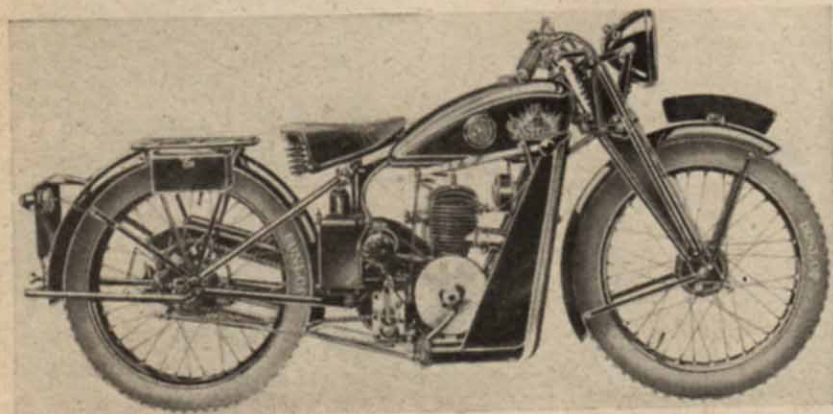


Transformation: the 350 c.c. o.h.v. J.A.P.-engined Sun of 1925 and (right) the same model redesigned for 1928.

(Right) In 1931, this good-looking sports "250" cost £45 10s., complete with lighting set. The two-port J.A.P. engine had enclosed rocker gear. A three-speed Burman gearbox was fitted.



(Below) The Sun "Super" of 1932 had the newly introduced Villiers long-stroke engine of 148 c.c. With direct lighting, it sold at £20 3s.



continental names. For 1928, their own range was redesigned with the fashionable short frame and saddle tank, Villiers and J.A.P. engines being fitted. The new 196 c.c. Villiers engine was introduced in 1930. Sun survived the slump which decimated the industry around 1931 by successful marketing of the 196 c.c. Villiers model, at £25, and a good-looking, sloping-engined model with the 250 c.c. o.h.v. J.A.P. engine, at £40.

For 1932, the J.A.P.-engined models were discontinued, but the Sun "Super," with a long-stroke Villiers engine of 148 c.c. which was inside the new taxation limit, had been introduced towards the end of the previous season, and another new engine from Wolverhampton, a little 98 c.c. job, also found a place in the range, powering a model priced at 16 guineas. I saw one of these machines in use a few months back, with two lads of 10 or 11 summers aboard, taking refreshments from a farmhouse to the hayfield. Their father said it just would not wear out. I should imagine he has had his 16 guineas' worth out of it by now!

In 1935 there was a capital reorganization at Aston Brook Street, and the firm became a public company. The concern concentrated on their pedal cycles and fittings, though they still made up parts, and indeed complete machines, to be marketed by other firms. In 1938 they marketed a Villiers-engined autocycle under their own name. These were excellent little jobs, as one can see, even today, from examples still on the road.

During the last war, Sun had three works busy on such little matters as the insertion of six and a half million aircraft rivets a week, not to mention work on land-going vehicles. With peace, they returned to the cycle and parts trade they knew so well, and showed their first post-war motorcycles on their cycle stand at the 1948 Show—a lightweight with the 98 c.c. Villiers two-speed unit, priced at £55, supported by a development of the pre-war autocycle, similarly powered at £45.

For 1951, models powered by 122 c.c. and 197 c.c. Villiers engines were introduced, with maroon finish and M.P. front forks. The larger model also had plunger rear springing. During 1952, a starkly functional trials model of 197 c.c. was added to the range and much experimental work was done on such items as frames made up of square-section tubing. For 1953, there was a new frame

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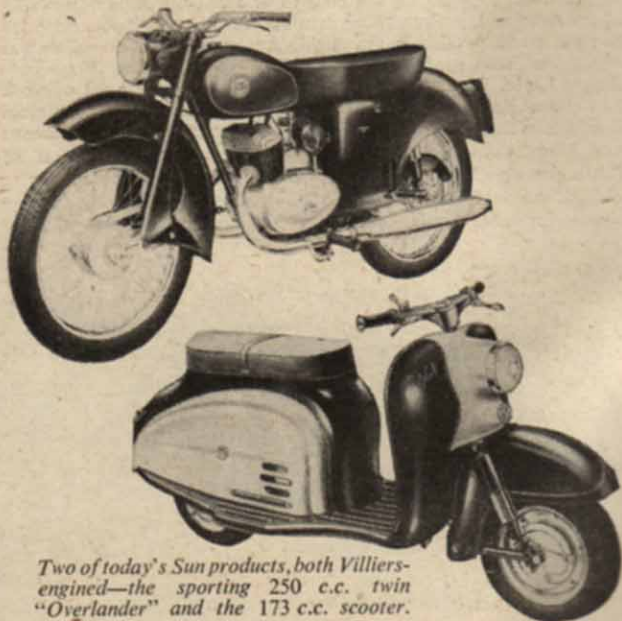
(of normal tubing) with pivoted-fork rear springing and hydraulically damped spring units, and the 197 c.c. job became the "Challenger." There was also a special pedal-cycle frame to take the little Vincent "Firefly" unit.

By now Sun were very much back in the manufacturing industry, and for 1954 there was another new model, the "Cyclone," with Villiers 225 c.c. 1H engine and a new cradle frame with twin seat tubes to give a firm pivot to the rear springing. In 1955, there was a scrambler edition of the "200" with leading-link forks, and a 150 c.c. edition of the "Challenger" specially made for Bermuda. The little 98 c.c. job was christened the "Hornet," hereabouts.

A new frame with partial enclosure housed the Villiers 9E engine in 1956; this model became the "Wasp," reviving a name first

used by Sun in the vintage years. For 1957, Sun introduced their own scooter, the "Geni," with the little 98 c.c. Villiers unit. Finally came the "Overlander," with the new 250 c.c. Villiers twin. Today, the range has been rationalized into four two-stroke models and an interesting new 173 c.c. scooter, the specification of which includes electric starter.

The company was recently taken over by the Tube Investments combine, but is continuing production, as before, in its Phoenix and Century Works under the same family management.



Two of today's Sun products, both Villiers-engined—the sporting 250 c.c. twin "Overlander" and the 173 c.c. scooter.

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