



James Smith rides the Slinger in 1952 on its first run in forty years

THREE WHEELS IN LINE

One of the most extraordinary motorcycles ever to have been made must surely be Electric Billy's three wheeler. By great good fortune it survived and has been looked after for many years by JAMES P SMITH, who has been telling Nick Baldwin about its history and idiosyncrasies.

AUTOMOBILE CLUB OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND

119, PICCADILLY, LONDON, W.

This is to Certify that
Mr William Slinger (aged 43 yrs.)
of Goldilands, Settle
duly passed the qualifying examination
held by the Club on the First
day of February 1906 and is granted
this First Class Certificate for
Mechanical Proficiency
Dated this Seventh day of March 1906

Signed

Secretary

AT first sight the Slinger exhibits some marked eccentricities, and yet closer thought leads one to realise how very ingenious its design was. It allowed a virtually standard bicycle frame, wheels and pedals to be used to give human assistance to the miniature motorcycle attached to the front forks. This arrangement reduced the cost of having to have a rugged frame and wheels and at the same time gave a lower centre of gravity than was generally available on motorcycles in 1900. It also gave more room for a powerful motor and did away with the need for either belt drive or the complications of a joint pedal and motor chain arrangement.

The ingenious brain behind the one and only three wheels-in-line motorcycle was William Slinger of Settle in Yorkshire. He was born in 1862 and was nicknamed Electric Billy after the splendid lighting display he put on in Settle to mark Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887. In about 1890 he opened a workshop off the town's market square specialising in electrical repairs and, by 1895, in steam car maintenance as well. He was in great demand with travelling show people for traction engine and dynamo repairs and he was also millwright to the local Kings Mill, as well as becoming agent for the Beeston Humber tricycle (£36, tyres extra!).

It was in about 1897 that he turned his attention to 'improvements in and relating to motor cars and cycles'. His Slinger motor-bicycle took four or five years to materialise and was finally patented (No 19775) on 3rd October 1901.

It started life with a 3hp De Dion air cooled engine but a 4½ hp 668cc water cooled unit of the same make was soon substituted. It had a single gear and no clutch, whilst the brakes were external contracting bicycle type on the motor driven wheel and an 1898 'New Departure' back-pedal type on the rear wheel. The driven wheel was originally fitted with a pigskin leather tyre protected by boot studs to improve traction on the loose surfaces of the Yorkshire Dales and the original mould still survives.

It seems that the inventor used the Slinger until about 1910, probably with the registration number C46 or C52 and then tired of it and took to four-wheel motoring. It was left on its side with a broken frame in his shed and finally rescued by Tot Lord, a well-known local historian and archaeologist, who gave it to its present owner, James P Smith, about 1950. James Smith, with help from Eric and Oliver Langton and other local enthusiasts, eventually persuaded the machine to run and it took to the road again in 1952.

William Slinger as he appeared in 1906 on his 'small power petrol car' driving certificate

DRIVING CERTIFICATE.

ISSUED BY THE

AUTOMOBILE CLUB OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND.

Owner's Driving Certificate.

This is to Certify that

Mr. William Slinger
of Goldilands,
Settle

has been examined by the Automobile Club of Great Britain and Ireland, and that he is qualified to drive a

Small Power Petrol Car.

No.

1420

Issued

Mar 26 1906



Signature of Holder

Wm Slinger

Secretary

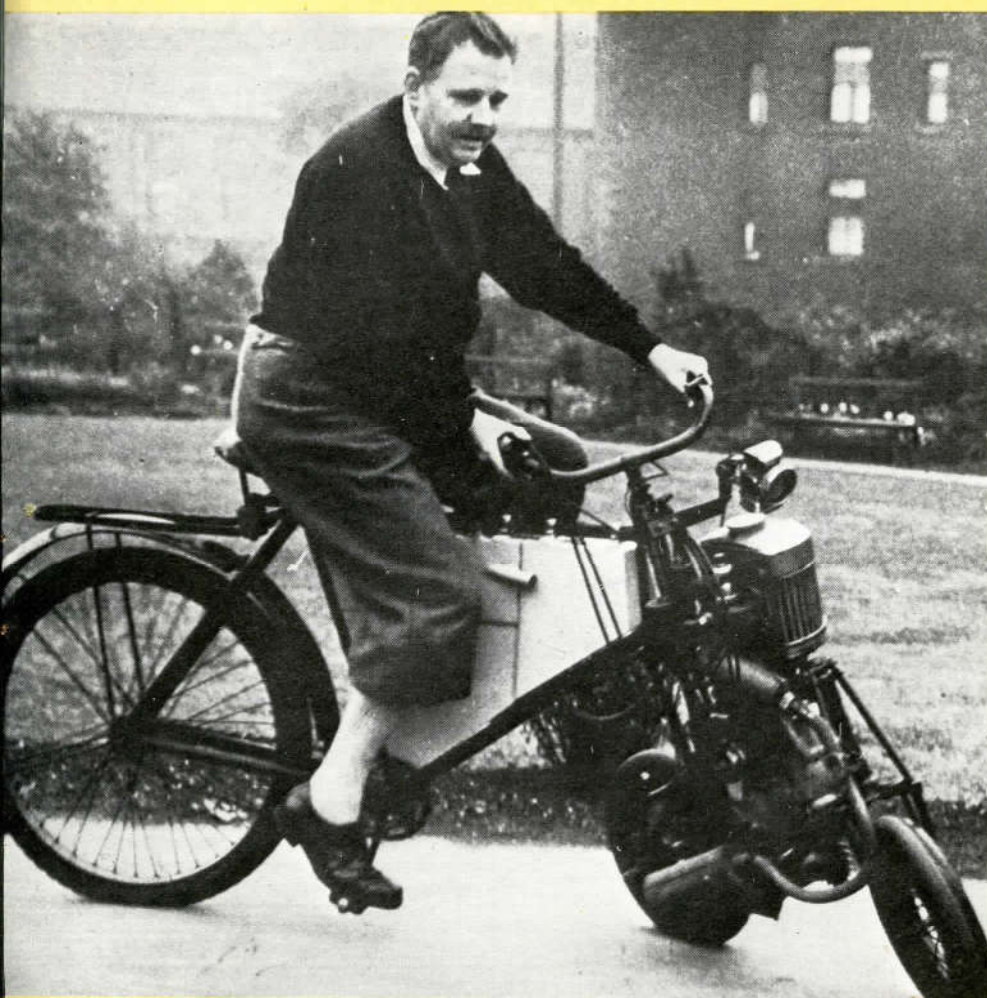
This Certificate does not testify as to mechanical proficiency

The Slinger Special in its original form with carburettor mounted on the main frame and De Dion 3hp air cooled engine

completing the 16th Pioneer Run from London to Brighton and returning on a sentimental journey to Settle. When in its birthplace, Mr Smith met the son of the apprentice who had originally drawn up the patent specification and who, by coincidence, is the town's electrical engineer today. He recalled that his father had received no pay for six months and when he asked William Slinger if he was satisfied with his work, he was told, 'You're doing fairly well, lad, but you need another six months apprenticeship'.

The original air cooled engine was soon replaced by a water cooled De Dion 4½hp with automatic inlet valve and here the radiator is refilled on the 1959 London to Brighton Pioneer Run





Demonstrating how the Slinger turns corners. The whole front bogie is free to pivot on the main forks but the handlebars only actually turn the front wheel via rods and levers

Not surprisingly, the apprentice packed his bags soon afterwards!

The Slinger handles surprisingly well and can be driven 'hands off' at 25mph with a top speed of about 35mph. It consumes petrol at the rate of 45 miles per gallon and undoubtedly would have been marketable. Quite why Electric Billy made only one is something of a mystery, but one can only assume that the arrival of lighter, less cumbersome and cheaper motorcycles in the early years of the century made it redundant. It seems probable that William Slinger was also happiest when playing with experiments and that, having achieved his goal, he could not be bothered with the future uncertainties of selling it.

In 1906 he obtained his Certificate of First Class Mechanical Proficiency from the Automobile Club of Great Britain and Ireland and also obtained a driving certificate from them to handle 'small power petrol cars'.

He became increasingly involved with motor cars and of the countless tales told about him the following is perhaps typical:-

On one occasion whilst going up Buckaw Brow on the A65 over the Pennines, a trial to the early motorist, he came across a car that was stuck, its harassed driver perspiring under the bonnet and his fair companion eager but helpless. Electric Billy, in his forthright manner, demanded, 'What's matter, lad?' and dived in to join the startled driver. In a few minutes he emerged to thrust up his beard, at the same time handing the now wilting driver a pair of pliers. 'Pull one out,' he said. 'Pull one out.' After which, the most bristling bristle ever grown was used to clean the carburettor jet. The couple drove on their way, dumbfounded but thankful that the Dales produced such redoubtable men.

Electric Billy was also the first man in the district to mow by motor. He used a Chapuis-Dornier engine, made in Puteaux (Seine), coupled to a Darracq gearbox and a 'sprint' petrol tank.

William Slinger died in 1926 and is buried at Settle Church, where he was an enthusiastic Sunday School teacher. Miraculously, his extraordinary invention lives on and is taken out by its intrepid owner, James P Smith, for the occasional airing. Between times, it resides in Peter Black's collection in its native county of Yorkshire.



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