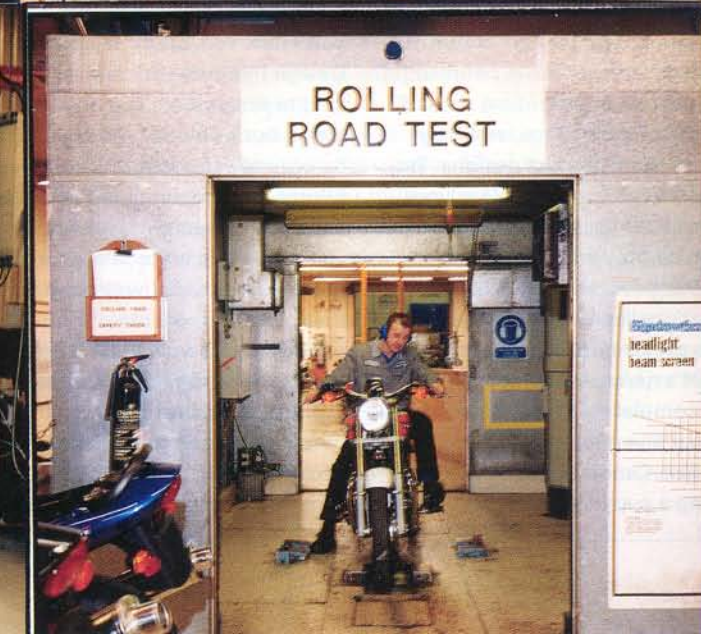


At its plant in Hinckley, England, Triumph cranks out some 33,000 bikes a year.





Nineteen years ago John Bloor bought a defunct British motorcycle firm. (What was he thinking?) Now, \$150 million later, he's on a roll.

A SWEET TRIUMPH

BY STUART F. BROWN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE PYKE

BACK IN 1983, WHEN JOHN BLOOR VISITED A SHUTTERED factory in Coventry, England, the housing developer was looking for his next building site. What he found instead was an idea for a new business. As it turned out, that decrepit factory had once produced the legendary Triumph motorcycle. Although Bloor decided not to buy the property, he did acquire for about \$200,000 the Triumph motorcycle brand name and the defunct company's designs and tooling. Now, some 19 rough-and-tumble years later, the brand is back. With 2001 sales of \$245 million, the company still trails giants such as Honda and Harley. But Bloor says Triumph

Motorcycles, of which he is the sole owner, has finally become profitable. And this year Bloor is trumpeting the 100th anniversary of the Triumph marque, a name he rescued from the dustbin of history by spinning out innovative new models faster than the rest of the industry and by waging a savvy marketing campaign.

Today Triumph is enjoying healthy sales in Europe, Asia, and the U.S., where Bloor sees most of his company's future growth. Motorcycle sales in America have been rising considerably in recent years, and demographics promise that the trend should continue over the next decade as affluent, aging baby-boomers

buy bikes in a quixotic quest to reignite their long-lost youth.

Like many successful entrepreneurs, Bloor is a contrarian. He invested \$150 million and the best years of his life in a business that seemed doomed from the start. By the early 1980s, Britain's motorcycle industry had gone belly-up. Big, efficient Japanese bikemakers like Honda, Yamaha, and Suzuki dominated the global market. In the U.S., Harley-Davidson, with its styling and marketing mastery, was battling with the Japanese for market share. And to top it off, Bloor, who had made a fortune building residential housing, knew nothing about manufacturing, never mind motorcycles. Why would anyone willingly enter such a slugfest? "In the early 1980s I was watching the Japanese set up automobile plants in the U.K. to take advantage of currency exchange rates," Bloor recalls, "and I thought the playing field might be getting more even for manufacturing things again in Britain."

Bloor was also betting on the nostalgic power of the Triumph brand. Back in the '50s and '60s, Triumph and Harley-Davidson were fierce rivals. The original Triumphs offered lighter weight and better handling than Harley's machines, and sales of the British bikes were stronger in America than they were in their British home market. The bikes are also part of American lore. Despite what flag-waving Harley guys in bars may mistakenly claim, Steve McQueen in *The Great Escape* and Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* rode Triumphs. James Dean had one too. Legend and myth and the power of branding don't come any better.

A soft-spoken and unflashy man, Bloor was born in England's Midlands and went to work as an apprentice plasterer at age 17. That job introduced him to the housing industry. Before long he had launched J.S. Bloor Holdings, which he gradually built up into one of England's most successful housing developers. (Last year, Bloor constructed some 2,000 new homes.) In a sense Bloor backed into the bike business. His company happened to include a

RIDING A BRITISH LEGEND

WHEN TOM CRUISE, IN *MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE 2*, ROARED ONTO THE screen on a sleek motorcycle, it wasn't a Harley or a Honda but a Triumph. Good choice, Tom. With its goggle-eyed headlights and elemental look, Triumph's Speed Triple is a bike that says *machine*. Powerful machine. Its name refers back to the 1930s, when the original Triumph company introduced a two-cylinder bike called the Speed Twin, which quickly became the hot thing to have. The reborn three-cylinder Speed Triple gives a nod to this heritage.

The Speed Triple occupies a popular category of machines called "naked" bikes. Devoid of those plastic fairings that shroud so many of today's cycles and make them look like vitamin pills, naked bikes project a slightly rowdy, bad-boy image that puts the "motor" back in motorcycles. In this case it's Triumph's signature 955cc, fuel-injected motor, which telegraphs a message to the rider that's somewhere between the thumpiness of a twin-cylinder engine and the carlike smoothness of a four. It's a motor both growly and creamy-feeling at the same time, with a charismatic exhaust note.

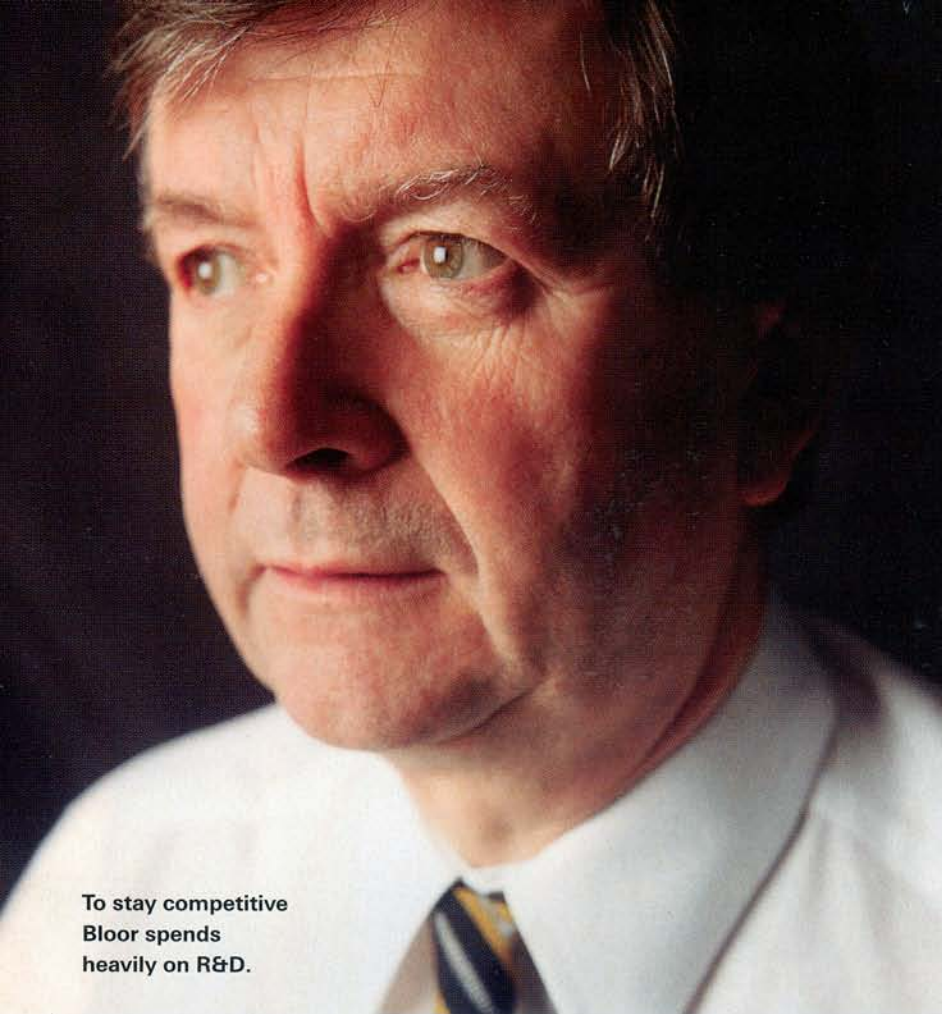
The neon-raspberry example shown here is a 2001 model. The fit and finish of this bike are quite good, if still a half-step behind Honda's meticulous build quality. On a test drive through the winding roads of upstate New York,

Author Stuart Brown likes the way this Triumph Triple Speed whips through curvy roads.

its motor pulled hard from low rpm on up, and the bike blasted through snaky turns. This year's \$10,500 bike gets Triumph's new, third-generation triple-engine, which is more compact, refined, and powerful—as if that were absolutely necessary. Speed Triples have forceful Japanese brakes, capable French fuel injection, and handsome frames proudly welded up at the factory in England from cast and extruded aluminum pieces. Blasting around on one of these is a celebration of purposeful machinery.

—S.F.B.





To stay competitive Bloor spends heavily on R&D.

subsidiary that rents construction equipment, and Bloor says tinkering with that machinery aroused a longing to make something other than houses. "I'm interested in seeing things put together well, and I had just a little hankering to build some kind of product," he recalls. Bumping into the ghost of Triumph that day in Coventry provided an answer to the question of what to build. Although he rode motorcycles in his younger days, Bloor, now 58, has a cranky hip that discourages rumbling around on two wheels. A high-powered Mercedes is his preferred mode of conveyance.

His first act as a prospective motorcycle manufacturer was to hire three employees of the original Triumph company who had been involved in developing new models. The second thing he did was to head for the airport. Destination: Japan. "I knew the Japanese were the best source of motorcycle-manufacturing wisdom," he says, "so I took the guys over there with me."

The Triumph men solicited invitations

to visit Kawasaki, Suzuki, and Yamaha factories. Why would the Japanese help a potential rival? "They were very open, but they weren't scared of us," he recalls. "They must have looked at us and thought 'If you can do it, good luck to you.'" What Bloor saw convinced him that the old Triumph company's unfinished development projects were hopelessly obsolete. "We decided to scrap the lot and start again," says Bloor.

There's no way to **MAKE A BIKE** with a dull motor feel **RED-HOT** to a customer.

Bloor shouldn't have been too surprised by the sorry state of Triumph's technology. After all, Britain had long lost its prominence in manufacturing. When the original Triumph company took its final, gasping slide into bankruptcy in the early 1980s, Britain was left without a single volume producer of motorcycles. England once led the motorcycling world in performance and

engineering innovation with such bygone makers as BSA, Matchless, and Vincent, to name just a few. But Bloor does not have patriotic or sentimental emotions about these extinct companies. "They were mismanaged, plain and simple," he says.

The once great industry had fallen prey to a uniquely British combination of maladies, including high borrowing costs, a failure to introduce new and improved products quickly enough, and—worst of all—decades without replacing aging factory machinery, which made consistent quality control impossible. Thus when silver-haired, smock-clad machinists with names like Reg and Alf finally retired from their jobs in the old English factories, nobody on earth could figure out how to make accurate parts on the utterly worn-out lathes and milling machines that had grown ancient along with the men running them.

In 1991, the year he opened his new Hinckley plant, Bloor installed state-of-the-art machine tools he had come across in Japan. He also tapped into the brainpower of nearby engineering design firms, like Lotus, Cosworth, Ilmor, and Ricardo, that help design and build many of the world's winning racing cars.

Bloor realized that the engine is everything in a motorcycle, and there's no way to make a bike with a dull motor feel red-hot to the customer. So while he outsourced other parts of the bike, he put his team of engineers and metalworkers to work designing new liquid-cooled, three- and four-cylinder engines that

would save costs by sharing internal parts. "The engine is the core of the bike, the crown jewel, and you've got to keep control over it," he says.

Bloor's decision to keep a three-cylinder engine from the original lineup turned out to be a great marketing move. The motor created a distinctive mechanical calling card—like the V-10 engine in a Dodge Viper sports car—that

TRIUMPHANT MOMENTS IN FILM

Despite what flag-waving Harley guys in bars think, Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* rode a Triumph. Since then, the British bike has become a favorite Hollywood toy.



Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* (1954)



Richard Gere in *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982)



Ann-Margret in *The Swinger* (1966)



Carrie-Anne Moss in *The Matrix* (1999)

has helped the company stand out from the crowd. (Most other bikes use two- or four-cylinder engines.) Triumph's soulful triple has won a place in the hearts of many bikers, who tend to be a discriminating bunch when it comes to how an engine feels and delivers power to the road (see box).

By 2001, Bloor had put Britain back on the motorcycle map. His production volume had climbed to an impressive 33,000 units. That still lags Harley's 234,000 units but is impressive for a factory launched only ten years ago. "The fact that Bloor has created a modern manufacturing facility in Britain and resurrected an industry that died is pretty amazing," observes motorcycle-market forecaster Don J. Brown in Irvine, Calif., who worked for Triumph's Western U.S. distributor in the '50s and '60s and has served as a consultant to the new company.

Now to keep pace with the big bikemakers, Bloor knows he'll have to innovate at lightning speed. The company keeps about 90 people busy in product development, in which it has spent about \$15 million in each of the past three

years, a large amount considering the fairly low production volume. Pumping up sales and boosting output to reach the plant's 50,000-unit annual capacity would go a long way toward spreading these costs out, and exciting new models are the way to get there. "We've been paddling pretty hard to get up to speed," admits Bloor. "But we've got to do the R&D to survive."

Last year the company jumped into the burgeoning market for retro-styled bikes with the \$7,000 Bonneville, a twin-cylinder, 800cc machine with styling that's about 85% faithful to the 650cc Bonneville of yore, which was the machine to ride in the 1960s if you weren't a Harley man. For 2002, naturally, there's a specially painted centennial edition of the bike, and a Bonneville America version (\$8,000) with the lowered seat, high handlebars, and other "cruiser" features essential to the motorcycle market's biggest segment.

The motorcycle industry is a crowded field, and one of Bloor's biggest challenges is getting dealers to give his bikes prominent showroom floor space. One ploy: test drives. Fearing lawsuits, most

bikemakers don't allow potential customers to take their products for a spin. But Triumph lets dealers offer test rides, which can set a prospective customer's wallet afire if he likes a bike. Not many motorcycles are getting damaged in tip-overs, and the strategy has proven worthwhile. That's not all. Soon dealers will be able to take custom orders for bikes painted in colors chosen from an expanded palette, which the factory can supply within a 12-week turnaround time. Triumph also has a line of clothing and accessories for riders and style-conscious wannabes, a strategy that has generated a lot of traffic in Harley-Davidson showrooms.

Looking back over his journey, Bloor has concluded that motorcycle manufacturing, just like automaking, is largely a matter of sheer willpower—and guts. "Little did I know how difficult motorcycle manufacturing was going to be; they are extremely complex products. You need to multiply by two or three whatever amount of money you think you might need." And then hope you don't hit too many speed bumps along the way. □

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