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■ This is what greets you, chez Chatokhine: a garage crammed with family racing memorabilia and motorcycles including the pre-unit Triumph Frank's building for his sister

FAMILLE AFFAIR

Meet the passionate owners of a motorcycle shop in a small French village – a father and son with an undying love for British bikes

WORDS: GARY PINCHIN. PHOTOGRAPHY: DANIEL BERES



The shop sticker states: 'British Motorcycles Only' – not the sort of thing you'd expect to see in this area. We're in Ouerray, near Chartres, 60 miles from Paris, at Atelier Chatokhine – and the sign is a serious statement of intent. This family-run concern received the seal of authenticity from legendary figure Colin Seeley after building the replica Seeley Condor unveiled at last year's Salon Moto Legende (featured in the January issue of *CB*).

The Chatokhine family is about as passionate a biking clan as you'll find – totally immersed in machines from the pre-WWII era right up to the final days of the Harris Triumphs. Father Roland used to run the show with an NVT franchise in Chartres, selling Triumph, BSA and Norton, before setting up his own independent dealership in the village where the business continues today. Son Frank took over when his dad retired – and he's well known to classic bike enthusiasts in the UK in his own right, as one of the leading contender in the classic class of the Dirt Track Riders Association (DTRA) championship on board a Rickman Triumph.

Atelier Chatokhine is a treasury of classic bike joy, laden with trick old British iron, spares, memorabilia and the sweet aroma of Castrol R. The kind of old-school bike shop that bombards your senses as you cross the threshold, encouraging you to stay for hours, investigating every last nook and cranny.

Roland, 69, still rides every day. His collection includes three Velocette Thruxtons – a 1967 race bike, a '67 racer in the farmhouse lounge and a fully restored '67 model in his bedroom.

"My father and I both raced bikes – and we both rode them on the road," explains Frank. "The last time I rode a Velo, this happened..." he holds out a tiny fragment of broken, melted piston and bent gudgeon pin. "The day after the rest went – maybe out of the exhaust, because it wasn't in the engine when we stripped it," he says with a shrug.

One of Roland's bikes was featured in *CB* way back in 1979: "We had a Golden Gun Norton, with a '74 front end – big conical hub," he says. "The engine was a 1980 Speed Twin motor and the bike was built in 1967. Philip Webb wrote in *Classic Bike* that it

**'THE BSA OUTFIT WAS OUR
FAMILY CAR. WE WENT
EVERYWHERE IN IT. IT'S LEFT US
WITH MANY FOND MEMORIES'**





■ Frank loads up the Seeley Condor replica

could have been the first ever Triton – and it was built in France!”

Roland still has the BSA Spitfire he bought in 1969, later adding a £20 sidecar. The outfit's done over 400,000km (around 250,000 miles) and is still going strong.

“Look at the mileage of this bike,” says Frank. “It makes me laugh when I hear people deride the BSA A65. My father has never had a car licence, so he has always had to use a motorcycle anyway. The BSA was our family car. We went everywhere in it and it's left us with so many fond memories.” BSA outfits run in the family – Frank has his own A65 Thunderbolt with a sidecar. He's clocked over 300,000km (190,000 miles) on it.

In 1994 Roland suffered a back injury and couldn't work. The family needed some income, so Frank left school at 14 and worked full-time at the shop. “Before that happened I was already spending time in the workshop, so it's always been in my blood – and on my skin too.” He holds out his arms covered in bike-related tattoos.

Roland stopped working full-time in 2004 and Frank took control of the shop, changing the simple sales-and-repairs theme by offering specialist engine tuning and custom work.

“I'm a big fan of welding and machining, so I wanted to change the style of work we offered customers,” says Frank. “I wanted to do this before when I was working with my father – but we had no space, no machines, no money. So we did it step by step. We built a new workshop, got new machines. I was young, so I learned slowly. I had time, so I taught myself new skills by working evenings and weekends.

“From a very young age, I've always been in love with motorcycles – especially pre-war motorcycles. I loved the sprint bikes, record bikes. I loved the shapes. I loved how the guys would create the special parts to build these bikes. The special engine tuning.”

The business has been transformed from a sales and repairs shop with a finite local customer base to a specialist outfit offering the full range of engineering services that has a worldwide appeal, while still retaining all the old business values established by Roland.

Atelier Chatokhine has a database of 4000 customers worldwide. “We sell complete bikes all over the world,” says Frank, proudly. “We recently sold a Manx Norton to the Hong



■ Roland sits on his 250,000-mile A65 combination. Son Frank (right) has one too, with 190,000 miles on it



Kong Museum.” They sell direct through their website, maintained by office manager Renia. “She deals with all the orders, invoicing, posting parcels, etc. She also rides a Triumph – a 1958 T110 that she built herself.

“We have a great parts service. We know British bikes from pre-war to Harris Triumph, so if a customer needs parts but isn’t quite sure what he or she needs, we have the experience to help. We can even tell them over the phone how to fix a bike.

“I personally can’t be bothered with the internet at all,” continues Frank. We don’t have a Facebook page for the business – I’m not interested. I don’t have the time, physically or mentally, for social media. I prefer to work on or ride my bikes. I don’t even have time to worry about my phone,” he offers it up – it shows 248 missed calls. “I just enjoy what I do. After work I take my bike and go for a ride with my workmates and friends.”

Frank, now 35 years old, says his Velocette Venom is his daily rider. “It’s a 1962-registered model, but with a lot of different parts. I love this bike. It was my best friend’s. I made the engine and gearbox for him, but sadly he died, so I have the bike now. I love this bike so much. At Christmas I rode to Toulon – 1000km [620 miles] in a week. It’s got a 22-tooth sprocket so it does 130kmh [80mph] at 4000rpm, so I can ride it on the autoroute!”

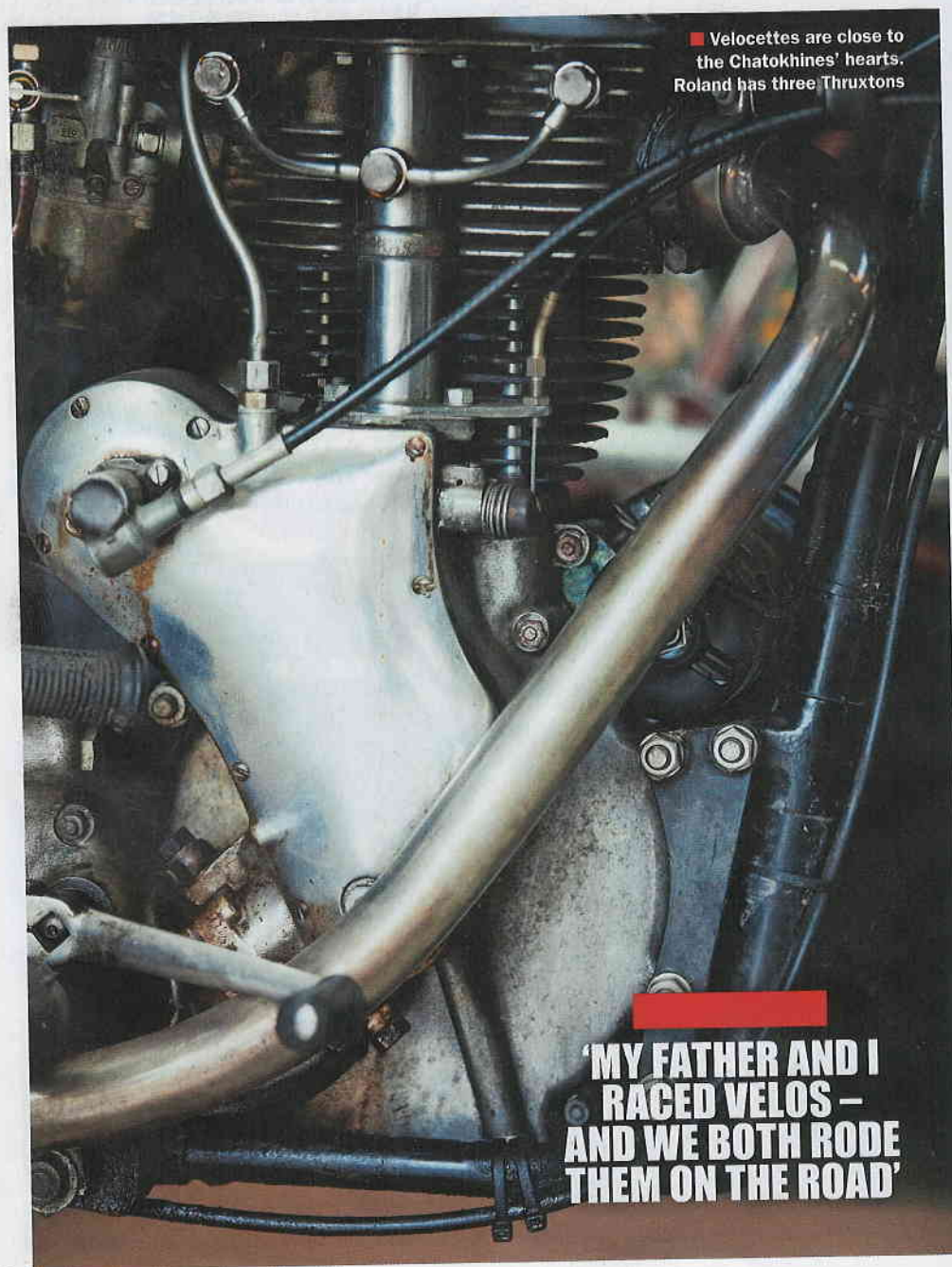
Frank still has the Velo trials bike he campaigned at the age of 14. “It’s a 1936 MAC. We did many trials in England, including the Talmag and Bonanza. Roland did sidecars trials in the UK too.

In France there’s not so much interest in classic or vintage trials, which is why we used to come to England for many weekends when I was younger. But I’ve fallen out of love with British trials. The bikes have modern suspension, new engine internals, Mikuni carbs – it’s not classic/vintage any more. It’s modern in a classic style. We don’t have a good organisation in France either, so I ride mostly in Belgium now, where they still have real bikes.”

Frank used to race motocross, too – also in the UK – but has had to give that up recently after succumbing to the same back problems that afflicted his father. Instead, he races dirt track with the UK-based Dirt Track Riders Association and won the opening round of this year’s classic championship at Rye House.

“I originally built my 500cc pre-unit Rickman Triumph dirt tracker as a motocrosser 15 years ago and raced it. But my bad back forced me to stop motocross. So I modified the chassis for dirt track racing. I love the speed of road racing and the dirt of scrambles. So flat track is a good compromise.

“The frame is a late



■ Velocettes are close to the Chatokhines' hearts. Roland has three Thruxtons

**'MY FATHER AND I
RACED VELOS –
AND WE BOTH RODE
THEM ON THE ROAD'**



Rickman, by Pat French. When I ordered it I asked for a steeper steering head and longer swingarm. The engine is a 1954 500cc T100; it has a Newby belt primary and a Gold Star scrambles gearbox. I had CZ hubs when I used it for scrambles but the rear hub drum brake caught fire so I converted it to a disc. The hub is a 1960s-style Barnes dirt track replica I made and is quickly detachable so I can get a fresh edge to the rear tyre. The disc and carrier are original Barnes, the caliper is Lockheed."

Frank's other outstanding Triumph is his burgundy 1938 Speed Twin, which he calls "my laboratory for testing my ideas. I built it for sidecar racing, but when I tested it the first time, I thought: 'this is brilliant,' and kept it as a solo. I'm looking for another

British bike to build into a sidecar racing outfit!

"The Speed Twin is crazy. It's the bike I always had in my head. It's a small bike, but with a lot of energy and inner vroom! It makes 50bhp at 8500rpm. For a '38 Speed Twin, this is very good!

"It's got a stock crank, but it's one piece – welded up. It has Morgo old-stock alloy conrods. The pistons are Triumph racing. The valves are original Triumph too, but not from 1938! The camshaft is original Triumph, but it's a secret which year. The timing is really special, too. If someone wants my specs, they are tattooed on my arm – but even the marks on there aren't totally correct! It took me seven years of testing to find the optimum timing and I'm not revealing the details to anyone!

"The frame has been broken several times – the engine vibrations and sheer speed are the causes. It was so badly broken once, the engine was wobbling around. I've welded and braced the frame since and it's really good now."

Frank's sole concession to modern bikes is a Ducati 748RS he used to race at French club meetings. He can't bear to sell it, so it's kept in his bedroom. In his lounge is a Jawa speedway bike, bought from a Dutch rider.

"The speedway bike, to me, is the ultimate motorcycle. It is a 500cc engine in a bicycle frame. No brakes. No gears. I've tested a speedway bike before – one with a B50 BSA engine – and it's great fun. ▶▶



■ Frank plans to take this Jawa speedway bike racing soon



■ A rare non-Brit bike chez Chatokhine: Frank's ex-race 748RS lives in his bedroom

We're talking about having some vintage speedway races with the DTRA. I think there are eight of us with old speedway bikes, so the Jawa will have to come out of the lounge!"

Among the ranks of gorgeous machines in the shop are several G50-powered bikes. The orange Seeley Condor replica Frank built for a customer is an obvious standout, but there are also two G50 racers: an original 1961 G50 and a white replica Frank built five years ago – the first G50 he built complete, though he says he's worked on many over the years. The replica has a Taber engine. The main loop of the frame is from a genuine G50, Frank built the rest. "I painted it white because it is a replica; I didn't want to paint it as if I was trying to pass it off as original," he says.

There are two Seeley G50 racers that are owned by a customer. Frank rebuilt them both. The owner finished third in the vintage series in France on one of them. "I rode a Seeley G50 at Montlhéry when I was 15 years old," says Frank. "I'd love my own one, but they are so expensive."

Wherever you look, there are cool bikes and memorabilia – each racing plate on the wall has a story, let alone each bike. But does Frank ever have a conflict over which bike to ride next?

"Yes, it's a problem," he smiles. "I've ridden trials and scrambles in the past. Now I like to build speed record bikes. I've done Bonneville in 2010. The Triumph T110 we ran there did 120mph and the standard Velo Thruxton ran 116mph – a record speed, but not confirmed because the second run wasn't done. I have good memories of that and it would be fun to go back. I helped my friend Dimitri Costes with his TR6 at Pikes Peak. I'm not sure I want to do it again. When Dimitri raced there, it was the last time on the dirt roads. Now it's all tarmac – it's just a road race."

Frank also rides on the road every day. And even though he races with the DTRA in England and plans to race a speedway

bike, it's still not enough for a man addicted to motorcycling.

"I need to find some new things to do with old bikes," he says.

"Ride the wall of death maybe? I need different experiences.

"But to make a good racing bike I think you need to race to understand the limits of the bike – what is a good set-up, what makes it reliable. You need to try each discipline to make a good bike for your customer. If the customer comes in asking you to build a road racer or scrambler, you need to know what to build."

It's amazing Frank has any time to work on customers' bikes, he has so many personal projects in the pipeline.

"I want to restore my '67 Lightning next.

And we need to finish the Triumph for my sister, Laurence (38). She races too. It's in our blood. We've specially built a lowered duplex-framed bike for her.

"After this I don't know. I have a project in my head to build a Seeley G50 sidecar outfit but I have no money. I need to find a customer who wants to build something like this – like we did with the Condor."

But Frank knows he also has to balance personal projects with the business – and

that, right now, is almost too busy. He says: "If we stop taking orders for work right now, we have two years of work ahead of us."

Frank may be enjoying what might seem like a perfect life to many of us, but he's caught between a rock and hard place.

The shop has just four staff including himself – but finding and employing someone with the right expertise and personality to fit into such a tight-knit group is not easy.

"For me the work is here [he thumps his heart], so I need to work with my family or my friends. It's more than just work. But we are also very busy. Every day we have to refuse work because we don't have the time, or space, to do any more.

"It's difficult. But it's also my life." CB

'EVERY DAY I HAVE TO REFUSE WORK – WE DON'T HAVE THE TIME OR SPACE TO DO ANY MORE'