

## IN APPRECIATION OF THE HUMBLE HONDA C50

By Tommy Hourigan and Michael Barry

*By Tommy*

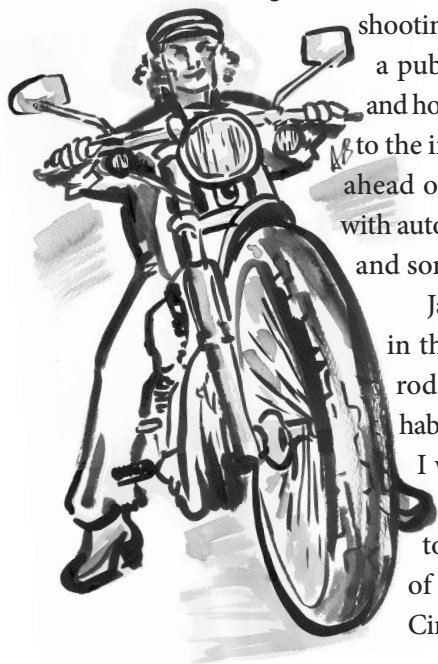
I never owned a 'Honda 50' motorcycle, but I had the ultimate pleasure of having two great friends, each of whom was the proud owner of one of those marvellous machines. In reality, I had four friends, two of whom were of the more silent type, their little engines never becoming boisterous. In each case, the motorcycle bore 'Ferrari-like' red colours. This was in the 1960s and 1970s, during which time, I rode pillion on both machines on numerous occasions.

My next door neighbour, Brendan Madden, bought his new model in the early 1970s for the princely sum of a little less than £250, and, as he recalls, it served him well for nigh on ten years, when it was still in good operating condition and was sold. Over much of this time, it faithfully transported him to and from work in Limerick in all kinds of weather. On other occasions, it was our transport

to Lough Gur, Glen of Aherlow and public houses as well as on fishing and shooting outings. More than occasionally, it sat parked outside a public house, patiently awaiting a journey farther afield and home eventually. Brendan's motorcycle was a great testament to the ingenuity of Japanese engineering and technology, well ahead of its time. The model must have been covertly fitted with auto-pilot, 'sat-nav', self-parking sensors, lane management and some type of 'smart' spirit-level.

Jackie O'Connell of Lower Grange acquired his model in the 1960s, and it served him well for several years. He rode it to and from work in Roadstone. Jackie was in the habit of travelling to the cinema in Limerick and occasionally

I was his pillion passenger. This brings back memories of the fine old Limerick City Theatre Cinema at the top of Mulgrave St, approximately the current location of Shannon Furniture Ltd. The Carlton, Lyric and Savoy Cinemas were located elsewhere in the city.



We went to see *Ben Hur* amongst many other films. Jackie used to tell me about a great film he saw, named *Alfie*, but I got the impression from him at the time that Alfie was a rather scandalous character for the era. I still haven't seen that movie which starred Michael Caine and premiered in 1966. In due course, Jackie swapped his two-wheeler for the comfort of an enclosed machine on four wheels, much more ideal for amorous and other excursions outside the parish and ultimately to Barefield in County Clare, whence he enticed the lovely Frances to relocate to Grange.

There were other owners of the Honda 50 model in Grange over a number of decades from the 1960s onwards. Some names come to mind: Pat O'Dwyer, Jimmy Higgins and Mike O'Brien. Pat recalled that his bike was subsequently owned by Monsie Purcell and later again by Pat Purcell. It was a machine favoured for simplicity of operation and maintenance, ease of handling, longevity and low running costs as well as the aforementioned Japanese hidden 'smart' technologies that seemed to guarantee a safe journey. You could identify an oncoming Honda 50, without seeing it, from the gentle purr of its melodious engine, a pleasant sound that did not intrude or easily frighten young children, as did many more powerful, muscular and vocal motorcycles of the era. And yet, this gallant machine, exceptionally reliable and friendly, would transport its rider and passenger from Grange to Limerick in less than half an hour. And while its passengers might feel the need to fuel-up on the homeward journey, the little engine seemed to prefer air-intake to liquid. Moreover, this reliable minion did not appear to mind Monday morning start-up and did not share any of the coughing and spluttering of its master!

#### *History of the Honda 50*

First seen in 1958, the Honda C50 Super Cub is still in production today, easily making it the world's most popular motorcycle. Of course, many changes to the basic specifications were made in the five decades plus, but the basic appearance and design has remained faithful to the very first 1958 C50. A very small vehicle, it was powered by a tiny 49 cc (cubic centimetre) engine that produced barely 4.5 horse power. When Honda began to export the Super Cub in 1959, they faced an uphill challenge against the much bigger British motorcycles. With the slogan – *You Meet the Nicest People on a Honda* – they managed to find acceptance from people looking for a decent ride that came with a clean reputation.

Right from the start, the design of the Honda C50 made it stand out, looking colourful and petite next to the larger chromed motorcycles. While other smaller motorcycles used two-stroke engines, Honda introduced a four-stroke engine in the C50, increasing rpm (revs per minute) to squeeze out additional power and improved fuel efficiency in excess of 300 mpg (miles per gallon). Weighing just 170 pounds, this tiny bike had a simple three-speed transmission, making it easy to learn to ride at any age. The Honda C50 also had a large wheelbase that made it a stable ride, even if the top speed was not much above 50 mph (miles per hour).

The first major upgrade took place in 1967 when Honda tweaked the engine to deliver a slightly better 4.9 horsepower by using a new 49 cc engine. In that year, the C70 and C90 bikes were also introduced. These were the same Honda Super Cub design, but with larger engine displacements. Since then, Honda has continued to improve on the C50 with minor cosmetic changes and new features such as electric start.

Today, the Honda C50 remains a very popular compact motorcycle for short commutes in crowded cities and towns. In fact, sales in Japan have been improving, with the latest C50 models providing an even better ratio of power to fuel efficiency. For many young riders, it is the ideal choice for a basic run-around and fun ride. Motorcycle enthusiasts also love collecting older Super Cubs, especially since there is a large selection of variants such as the Baby Cub, the Press Cub and the Street Cub. If you take care to use genuine spare parts, you can keep any Honda C50 model running in perfect condition, joining the 60 million other Super Cubs on the world's roads.

Is there one hidden away in your garage or outhouse?

*An Interesting Perspective by Michael*

My younger days were bereft of Honda 50s. When heading out or off to matches, an old Land Rover was the vehicle of choice, which we used at home for feeding hay to cattle in fields far distant from the house. Or for doing some minor fencing works, wherever it might be required. A Honda 50 was something I saw Mike O'Brien or a smattering of other locals riding as they passed our house at the bridge from time to time. I must admit that the Honda 50 never much grabbed my fancy nor even very much my attention. Much less any other bike of any make or any cubic capacity.

But I was once stranded in the Red Cellar Bar by the lake, long before its conversion to a dwelling house, on a freezing cold winter's night where everything and anything outside The Cellar door had a covering of ice or icicles. I forget how I got there. But I don't forget how I got back home.

It was very late at night (early morning!) when thoughts of how to get back to Grange entered my slightly inebriated head. Looking around, I realised that all remaining at this stage were some locals within walking distance of their homes. I think Tom McNamara was one of those 'last men standing' along with some of the Ryan family. One of Tom Mac's great 'party pieces', as I now remember (and he had many), was the rendition of a humorous song called – *The Motor-Sickle Song*. "She'll be coming round the mountain throttle out, throttle out", as I heard him sing the chorus on more than one occasion previously. On this particular occasion, however, my thoughts were focused only on how I might get home at such an hour on such a night.

Lo and behold, as if sent by the good Lord himself, salvation was at hand in the form of a fellow *Grangeite* in the person of Ger Hourigan from the Old Road, who appeared apparition-like from the toilets.

“Any chance of a lift home?,” says I. “Come on, you can jump on the back,” replied Ger, the owner, from memory, of a racy Honda 125, a bike that would laugh in the face of any runt-like Honda 50. The Hourigan superbike climbed the frozen hill out of the lakefront and up to the cross, left for Herbertstown, left again for Crehan’s Shop and another left for Grange and Bridge House. It was too cold to expose hands to the frozen air, so a man just stuck his hands in the pockets of his jacket and balanced as best he could. By half way to Grange, both driver and passenger resembled and felt like two of the ice cubes back in the ice bucket behind the counter at The Cellar.

But soon I had arrived home all safe and sound, thanks to the wicked power of the ‘125’ and the bike-handling skills of a good pilot, albeit frozen as stiff as a board and blue in the face – and blue in the arms and blue in the legs and other places I won’t mention. All blue. My first and last trip ever on a ‘motor-sickle’!

Many years later, I found myself in the Middle East and taking occasional trips to poorer countries farther east, like Nepal or Sri Lanka or India. Talk about motorbikes! Honda 50s to Honda any cc you like, and every cc in between. Thousands of people on bikes, morning noon and night. No—correction—millions! Literally. No exaggeration. Millions. Men, women and children, and often all three together on a single bike. Occasionally you might even see four. And sometimes a dog, or even a sheep or a goat!

The vast majority of those who inhabit the third world, as one can imagine, are not exactly flush with the ‘green stuff’. A car is, therefore, a luxury beyond the means or dreams of most. But a motorbike or a scooter is very do-able for the average Abdul or Ajith. Even with a poor paying job or operating as a self-employed street seller of vegetables or seller of bottles of filtered water (sort of filtered!) as many do, it’s possible to save enough within a few years to acquire some form of motorised two-wheeled transport. And once acquired, life can sure take a turn for the better.

A boy with a motorbike or scooter is a more ‘suitable boy’ is he not? The fairer sex, when faced with the choice, will naturally choose ‘biker boy’ ahead of ‘walker boy’, all else being equal. What young lady in her right mind would choose walking miles along potholed roads or dirt tracks in all sorts of extreme heat and humidity, when she can instead feel the breeze in her hair whizzing past hundreds of ‘walker boys’ with their misfortunate ‘walker girls’?

From the evidence of my own eyes in such locations, I have seen the profound difference that a Honda or some Chinese or Indian competitor, of 50 or any other cc, can make to the life of the boy who owns one. All things become possible that once were not. A boy (or girl) becomes free to explore or travel or engage in business when previously he dared to do so only in his dreams. That transformation from ‘Walker Boy’ to ‘Biker Boy’ to ‘Suitable Boy’ is a path that occupies the daily thoughts and hopes of millions of young boys and men the third world over. Oh, but to own a Honda 50!