

Mistral Engineering

Within the British motorcycle world of the 1970s and well through the 80s tailing off into the 90s there were two names synonymous with electronic ignition especially for the parallel twins, Boyer Bransden and Lucas RITA. The latter sold and manufactured by Mistral Engineering. Boyer Bransden is still in manufacture with many kits for the parallel twin, single, and multi-cylinder machines from across the water or even Europe. In the great majority of cases the electronic ignition system vastly improved the mechanical based system offered by Lucas, it got rid of the vagaries of points and flying bob weights in the advance retard system and the unreliability of condensers.

Mistral Engineering was the brain child of a John Carpenter a design draughtsman and Tool Maker who had an interest in motorcycles; somewhere in the mid 1970s he made a connection to Lucas that they would supply John with the Lucas RITA electronic ignition amplifier they were already making for the car world. The motorcycle world being 'small beer' to Lucas compared to the car manufacturers. So supplying a small independent company with part of a system and letting Mistral (John Carpenter) adapt their amplifiers to each motorcycle seemed an easy assistance to both parties.

One of the first bikes to receive the Lucas RITA was the Norton Race Commando as used in the 1972 racing in USA. This would have been an early AB5 with a very special pickup apparently it worked well but it was very vulnerable in its position at the front off side of the engine. Shortly after this John (Mistral) 1974/5 came onto the scene on behalf of Lucas to fit the AB5 for aftermarket sales for the Norton and very soon the Triumph twin and Trident as well. Right from this beginning the Pick Up that was used was from an American car engine and adapted by John to try and make it a bit slimmer as it protruded from where the point's plate and advance and retard used to be. The RITA PU also had a special cover made by John due to this extra depth. Sometime later the AB5 Amplifier was replaced with the AB11. The former used too much current so was a bit of an embarrassment with regarding power needs certainly on Dynamo equipped bikes, while the later AB11 used about the same as a traditional coil/points system. The two systems are exactly the same in performance, coil and pickup connections apart from the AB5 having one 5 pin plug and the AB11 having a 3 and a 2 pin connection.

The AB11 lasted through till Lucas ceased production somewhere in the mid 1980s. At its height of sales and production in the early to mid 80s John employed up to 8 people, making parts for the RITA kits, putting them together and of course sales to the bikers and trade so there was a good degree of Mail Order.

Mistral Engineering was based in Carysfort Road, Stoke Newington through the 1980s having started in Turner Road in Walthamstow in the late 1960s. The later was a tidy clean place I recall, but not so Carysfort Road. More like something out of Charles Dickens, the windows were very high and barred to stop you looking out and save thieving when you went home. The yard outside was always knee deep in sawdust from the wood workers next door, while car parking was very tricky, ie who's way are you in next? The work shop was very crowded, machines and benches everywhere, and a large corner was made to fit in a Dyno machine for engine testing, used by Jim Wells at least for race tuning multi-cylinder Japanese engines. Space was so short that John's office was mounted on a mezzanine platform, perhaps he just wanted to keep an eye on his staff! Sales expanded in them days to include quite a few Lucas motorcycle parts, indicators coils Zeners etc. One of the specialities around that time was a high output alternator RM23 and RM24 3 phase kit. The later had to be a kit as the single Zener wasn't good

enough for the higher output so a matched pair of Zeners and a small special loom were provided by John. They gave many years happy service.

A nominal list of machines that kits were made for included, Norton Triumph twins/triples, Suzuki, Honda, BMW, Kawasaki, BSA, Moto Guzzi, Yamaha, Vincent, Neval, Morini. Royal Enfield and Ducati. Some 150 kits in total.

As we turn the millennium Mistral Engineering closed down both the London workshops and started up in Gravel Lane, Chigwell. Which continued for another decade with a short term (far too late) attempt at a replacement the MOIRA. Although partially successful in the racing Ducati world they never made it to production for the road bike. By now the British bike scene was no longer in any form of manufacture that needed after market ignitions. During the 1980s Lucas ceased production totally. So the, by now famous in Motorcycles circles, Lucas RITA ignitions were no more in production. Some spares and repairs have continued with A O Services when demand shows up.