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## Harley Owners Group (HOG) – New South Wales Chapter

### HOGS – The Official riding club of Harley-Davidson – Established 1983

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## Biker Article – February 2020

### Vincent Motorcycles – A Brief History

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Our sponsoring dealer is located at 153 – 165 Parramatta Road, Concord NSW 2137

As well as writing ride blogs for our Chapter I occasionally enjoy doing some research on motorcycle related subjects. With this I am also endeavouring to make our Chapter Hoggies the best informed bikers on motorcycle trivia! So read on and enjoy this article about the brief history of **Vincent Motorcycles**.

*This article includes 49 downloaded images and information sourced through Google.*

### **Vincent Motorcycles – Million Dollar Machines!**

Today I bring you a story which I think is compulsory knowledge for motorcycle enthusiasts and NSW HOG Chapter members! It's about the Vincent HRD motorcycle produced in Stevenage, Hertfordshire - England from 1928 to 1955. Vincent is a revered name in motorcycling. It has an aura & a cache to them that is vastly out of proportion with their production output. It last rolled out of the Stevenage factory over 60 years ago but it continues to cause pulses to race today.

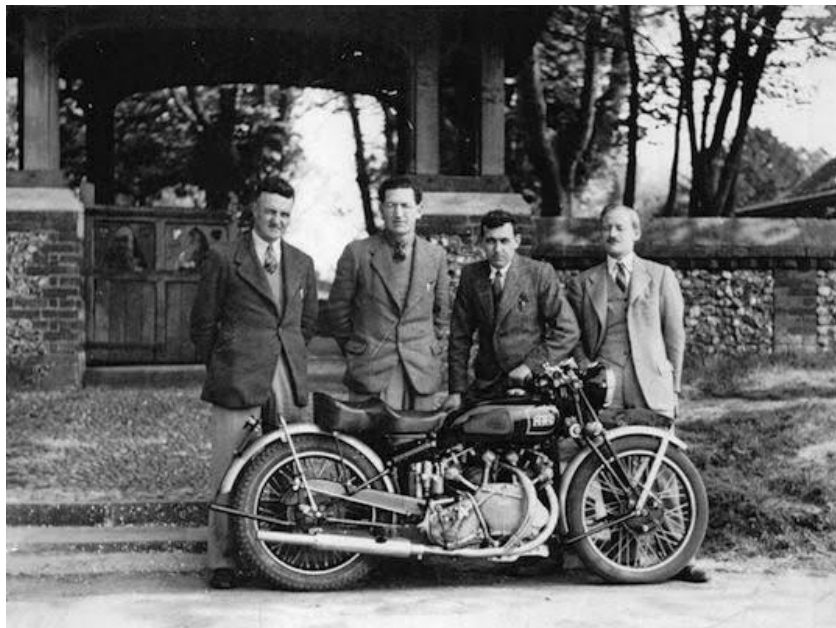
Although Vincent HRD Motorcycles produced many different models, this article will focus mainly on the Black Shadow and Black Lightning models.

The motorcycle business was established by a Mr. Philip Conrad Vincent (1908 – 1979, 71 years) who bought an existing motorcycle manufacturing name – "HRD Motors Ltd" - in 1928, initially renaming his new business the "Vincent HRD Co Ltd", and producing his own motorcycles as did HRD previously. From 1934, Vincent developed two new engines with Australian engineer Phil Irving, a single cylinder 500 cc and a V-Twin 1,000 cc.



**Image 1** - Phil Vincent testing one of his motorcycles.

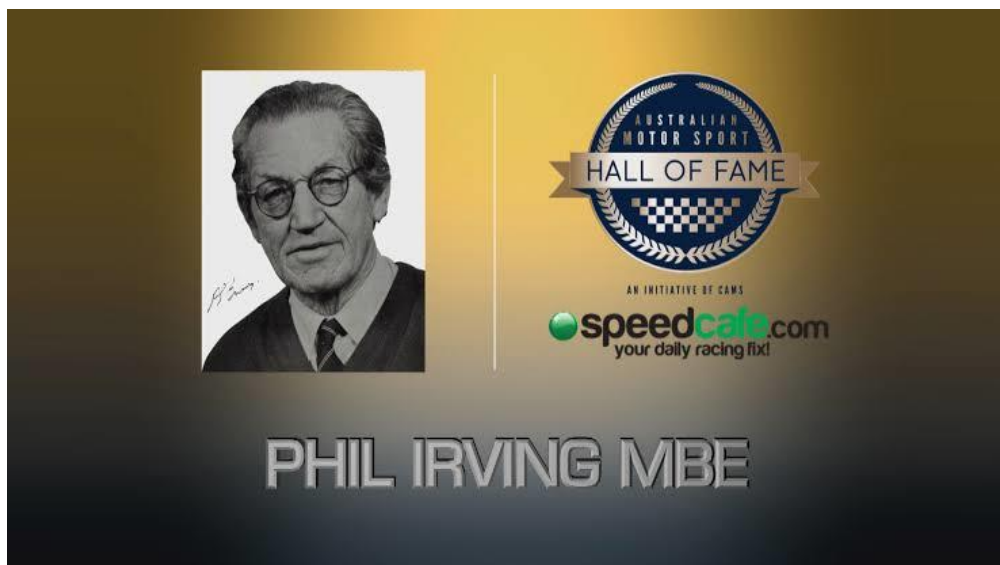
Personally, I find the works of Philip Conrad Vincent to be far more interesting than the works of Vincent Van Gogh! Philip Conrad Vincent created some of the world's most interesting motorcycles which you can have fun riding, racing, or pulling apart and fixing. Vincent Van Gogh just did paintings which people can hang on their wall and look at. But if you want, you can even display your Vincent motorcycle in your living room as an iconic piece of automotive art just as people display a Vincent Van Gogh painting. So there you have it, the Vincent Van Gogh painting is a single purpose object whereas the Vincent motorcycle is multi-purpose and most of these purposes are for fun!



**Image 2** - Vincent HRD staff with Phil Irving (second from left) and Phil Vincent at right, co-designers of Vincent HRD motorcycles. Phil Irving was also the company Chief Engineer.

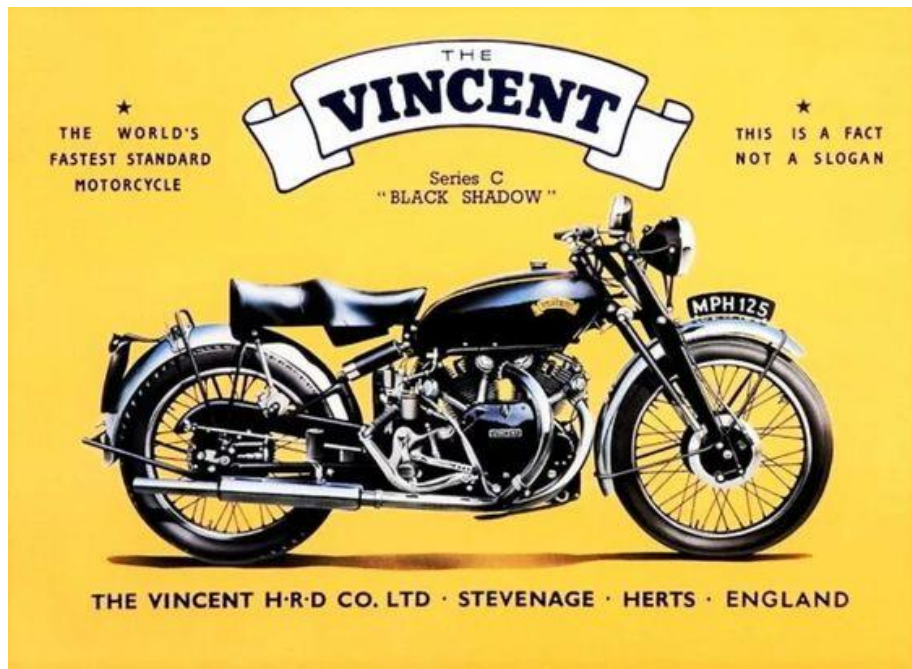


**Image 3** - Phil Irving (1903 – 1992, 89 years) testing the 1949 prototype “Vindian” motorcycle. This motorcycle had an Indian rolling chassis fitted with an English Vincent Rapide engine. This was done in collaboration with Indian but did not eventually go into production.



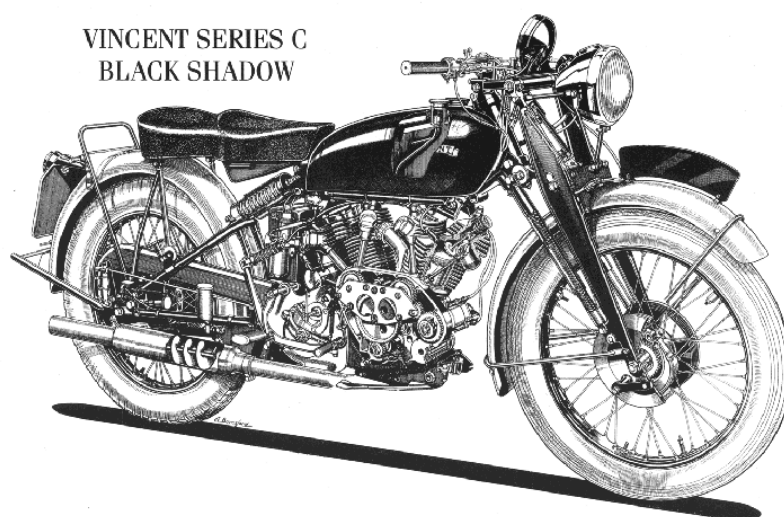
**Image 4** - More on Phil Irving. He was a Certified Engineer, a Fellow of the Institute of Mechanical Engineers (being a Fellow rather than just a normal Member is quite an honour which is only granted after outstanding achievements in the profession), an author of books, and he received an MBE for his services to automotive engineering!

Irving’s life was devoted to his passion for motorcycles and motor racing. And in his honour, there is a Phil Irving Trophy motorcycle race held at the Phillip Island Grand Prix Motor Racing Circuit in Victoria, Australia during its annual Island Classics race meeting. The current circuit was first used in 1956.



**Image 5** – The Vincent Black Shadow – The World’s Fastest Standard Motorcycle in its day. It is the most famous of all the Vincent Motorcycles.

The Black Shadow cemented its status by setting a new fastest production motorcycle record at 125 mph (201 km/hr) becoming “The World’s Fastest Standard Motorcycle”. A completely stock Black Shadow was guaranteed to do 125 mph right out of the box. It is considered to be the world’s first superbike and it remains the most desirable Vincent model together with the Black Lightning. It had the 1,000 cc V-Twin motor.



**Image 6** – The Series C Black Shadow. Founder Phil Vincent had been steadily improving the Vincent line through several successive ‘series’.

What made Vincent famous and their bikes so prestigious was their extreme quality. Vincent was a low-volume producer of high-quality motorcycles, but very high priced for the time.



**Image 7** - The Black Shadow engine. It stands out being all black, together with the crankcase and body.

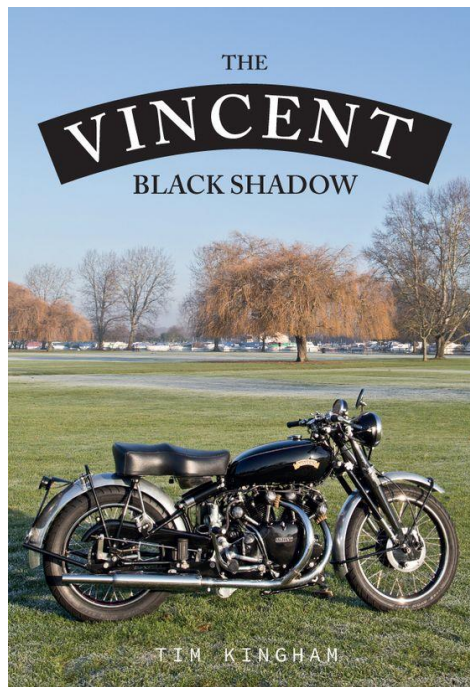
In their heyday, these hand-built swift machines were a biker's dream, amongst the most desirable vehicles to own on the planet. In those more austere times, they were seen as poetry in motion, blending engineering innovation and expensive exclusivity with downright sexiness.



**Image 8** – The Vincent Rapide.

Predecessor to the Black Shadow, the Rapide, had a silver coloured engine. Rapide's were produced from 1936 – 1955 and were the first Vincent's with a 1,000 cc V-Twin motor.

Note here the absence of steel frame tubes supporting the engine. This was achieved by making the combined engine and gearbox a stressed structural member. This was also adopted on the Black Shadow and Black Lightning models.



**Image 9** – Black Shadow Books.

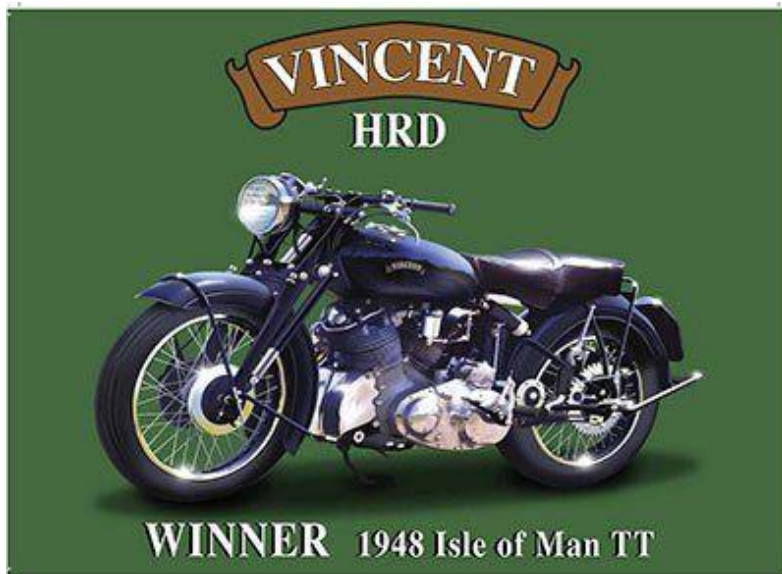
There are many books written about the Vincent Black Shadow as they have become one of the ultimate collectible bikes by both fans and investors. They are widely considered one of the most beautiful bikes of all time.



**Image 10** - It's a beautiful beast!

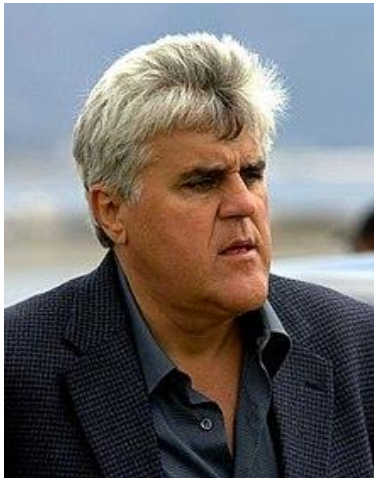
It's always amazing how much attention a Vincent Black Shadow garners at motorcycle auctions & motorcycle shows, considering how few there are in the world.

These machines were by far the fastest things on the road with a 1948 Black Shadow capable of 125 mph (201 km/hr). They were produced from 1948 – 1955 and official records say that 1,774 were built.



**Image 11** – Isle of Man TT Winner!

Surviving examples are so sought-after that prices have accelerated faster than a TT winner!



**Image 12** – Jay Leno.

Jay Leno is an American comedian, actor, writer, producer, and former late-night television host. He spends much of his free time visiting car collections and working in his own private garage which houses his own car and motorcycle collection, considered one of the most impressive in the world. He owns approximately 286 vehicles (169 cars and 117 motorcycles) all in excellent working condition and not surprisingly, includes “a bunch of Vincent’s”. He has a TV program called ‘Jay Leno’s Garage’ which showcases in detail a select vehicle from his collection per episode.



**Image 13** – Leno with his Vincent Black Shadow which he regards very highly.



***Image 14 - Mechanical porn!***

Behold the gorgeous Vincent engine in all its sophisticated glory! Black Shadows are instantly recognizable by their blacked-out engines.

*The engine is at* the heart of the motorcycle. This beautiful bulbous 1,000 cc engine with its sweeping exhaust pipes is another instantly recognisable Vincent feature. No other bike engine looks like this.

It's the level of attentiveness to detail and quality that made Vincent's engines true works of art. Non-bikers fail to understand how a lump of metal can stir up so much emotion in us!

The V-Twin used in the Black Shadow and the Black Lightning was in fact designed by Australian engineer Phil Irving and the same Phil Irving would later in his career develop the Repco V8 engine used by Australian driver Jack Brabham to win the 1966 Formula 1 Driver's and Manufacturers' Championship against the best drivers and engineers in the world.



**Image 15** – The Vincent aura!

Vincent motorcycles do indeed have an aura of greatness about them and they never made very many of them making them even more sought after.



**Image 16** – Signature look.

A beautiful large black Smith's speedometer helps define the Shadow's signature look. This speedometer goes all the way up to 150 mph (241 km/hr).



**Image 17** – Vincent logo.

The now famous Vincent name is hard to spot on the early models with the letters HRD scrolled on the petrol tank with *'The Vincent'* above it in a much smaller typeface. The HRD stood for Howard Raymond Davies, the owner of HRD Motors Ltd which was purchased by Philip Vincent in 1928. HRD Motors Ltd had run at a loss and went into voluntary liquidation.



**Image 18** – New logo.

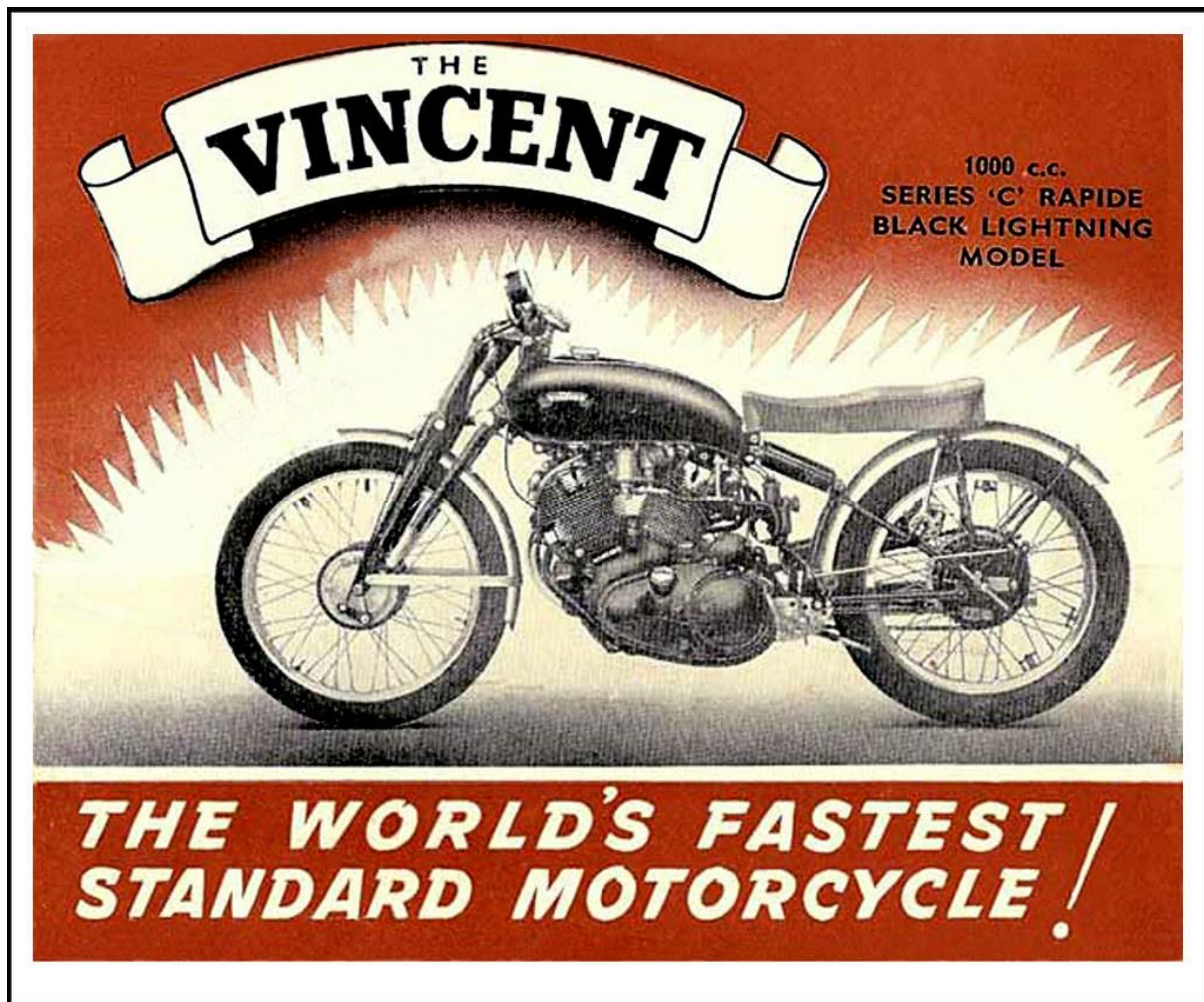
From 1950 the Stevenage firm tried to break into the American market and it is believed the HRD initials were dropped from the name to avoid confusion with the H-D of Harley-Davidson so the new logo simply read *'The Vincent'*.



**Image 19** - Gorgeous! If you could have afforded this when it was new you weren't short of a quid!



**Image 20** - Here you see the riding stance on the Vincent Black Shadow.



**Image 21** - The near-mythical Black Lightning, the most prized of all the Vincent's.

The Black Lightning was a stripped-down racing specific version of the Black Shadow and is the Holy Grail for Vincent collectors as only 33 were ever made. It wasn't developed for street use but was specifically intended for racing, and land speed record attempts. It's easy to distinguish one from the other with the Lightning having no headlight amongst many other changes.

It is believed that only 19 numbers-matching Lightning's still exist today and they are on every collector's wish list. It has now become the most expensive Vincent ever sold with auction prices nearing US\$ 1m. When it was released in 1948, the Lightning was the most desirable motorcycle in the world. A factory-delivered Black Lightning was capable of 150 mph (241 km/hr) right out of the box if you were brave enough, and no small amount of bravery was required as braking technology hadn't yet caught up with rapidly increasing horsepower levels.

The Black Lightning was clocked at an astonishing-for-the-time 150 mph (241 km/hr).



**Image 22** – Very limited production run.

Over the course of the 1948 to 1952 production run, Vincent-HRD built just 33 examples of the Black Lightning. You can't possibly own a Black Lightning and hide it in the garage, word just gets out somehow!

Prices for these bikes have begun shooting skywards. The most expensive Vincent motorcycle ever sold at auction fetched almost US\$ 1M at auction. More on this auction and bike below.



**Image 23** – Racing version of the Black Shadow.

The Vincent Black Lightning is the perfect combination of evocative design, forward-thinking engineering and racing success. Of course being the racing version of the Black Shadow, every necessary steel part on it that could be was remade in aluminium and anything not essential was removed altogether such as lights, hooter, silencers and instrumentation making it noticeably lighter than the Shadow. It also had magnesium alloy engine covers and rear-set foot pegs and controls.



**Image 24** – Shadow/Lightening Comparison.

The HRD Vincent Black Lightning's highly-tuned engines were capable of 70 bhp – 15 more than the 55 bhp V-Twins used in the Black Shadow and the kerb weight was a spritely 170 kgs, notably less than the 208 kg weight of the Black Shadow.



**Image 25** - Noiiiice!

The Black Lightning was a racing version of the Black Shadow, itself a sports model derived from the Vincent Rapide, and renowned as the world's first superbike.

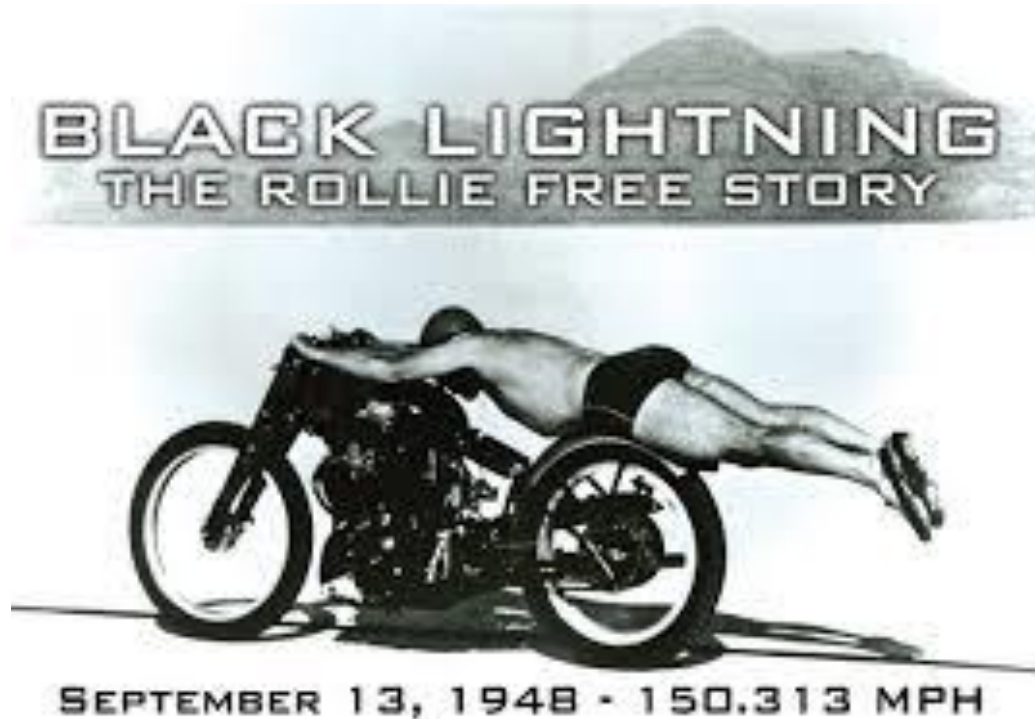


***Image 26*** – Lightening fakes!

Ironically, a number of Black Shadows have been modified by their owners to Black Lightening specifications over the years in a bid to increase their value but, with the ever-increasing cult status of original unmolested Vincent motorcycles, they would be worth more today if they'd been left original. Nobody wants a fake.

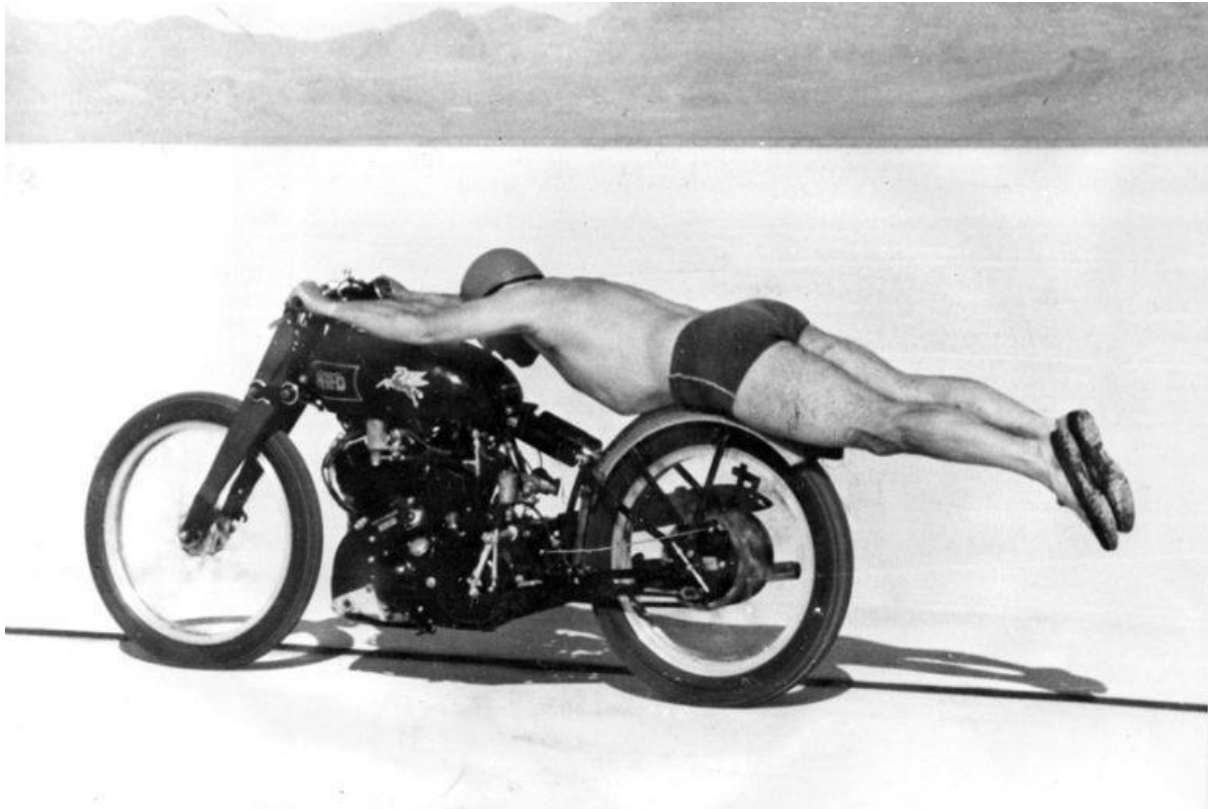
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**Now to a very interesting story about the Black Lightening that simply must be told!**



**Image 27** - That's what I call 'going flat out'!

One of the most interesting and successful Vincent record setters was Rolland 'Rollie' Free (1900 – 1984, 84 years). In September 1948, Rollie Free attempted to break the U.S. national motorcycle speed record at the Bonneville Salt Flats aboard a Black Lightning prototype, the very first competition-spec Black Lightning built. It was built specifically for record setting at the Bonneville Salt Flats. As history records, Rollie was successful in achieving a new U.S. motorcycle speed record of 150.313 mph (241.905 km/hr) at Bonneville making the Black Lightning an instant legend.

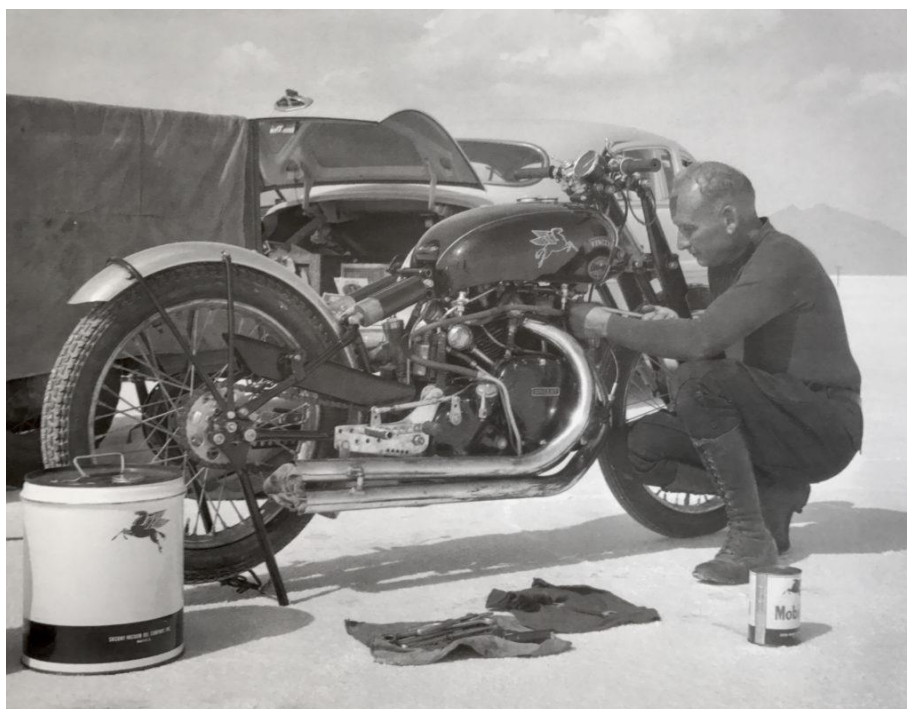


**Image 28** – “The Most Famous Photograph in Motorcycling History”!

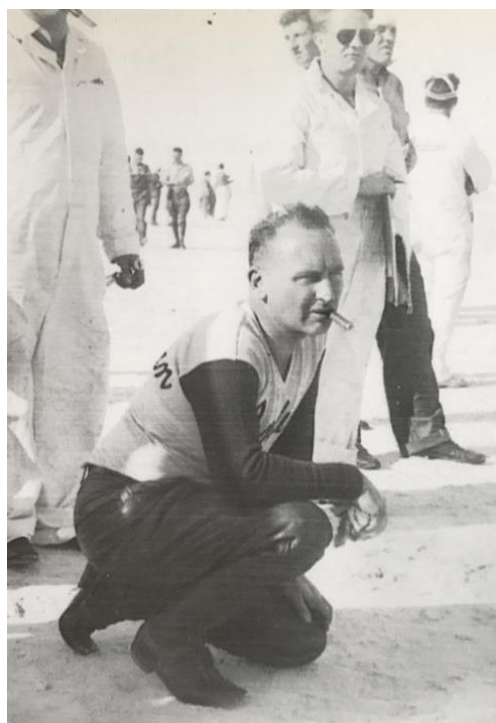
This is described as the most famous photograph in motorcycling history showing Rollie Free stretched out over his Vincent Black Lightning wearing only a helmet, sneakers and swimming trunks as he sped across the Bonneville Salt Flats setting a new world speed record of 150.313 mph! During practice runs he could only reach 148.6 mph (239.1 km/hr), so close, and then he determined that the wind resistance of his clothing and sitting in a riding position was keeping him from “The Big 150”. So in order to gain a fraction more speed, he stripped down to his swimming shorts, helmet and sneakers, removed the seat and laid prone atop the back fender and proceeded to break all records! If this photo didn’t exist, you wouldn’t believe the story!

The situation pictured here is outrageous, incredibly dangerous, and impossible to repeat today. This was a terrifically brave manoeuvre, considering the savage texture of the salt beneath him would have torn Rollie apart if he fell at 150 mph! Today, the ‘suits’ control the sport, the lawyers, insurance adjusters and bureaucrats, and this sort of crazy eroticism of speed just wouldn’t be allowed! That’s the poetry of this epic ‘bathing suit photo’, but there was a man aboard that Vincent who had a very long relationship with motorcycles and speed. And Rollie had several unique qualities suited to the task, these being a fiercely competitive nature (some would say ‘borderline insane’!), and a dogged persistence. He was the sort of guy who engendered loyalty among his friends, and incredulous admiration from his enemies. He was the perfect ‘nut-job’, just the sort of guy who would strip down to his swimming trunks to squeeze an extra mile per hour on his speed attempt, regardless of the highly abrasive salt bed just below his wheels.

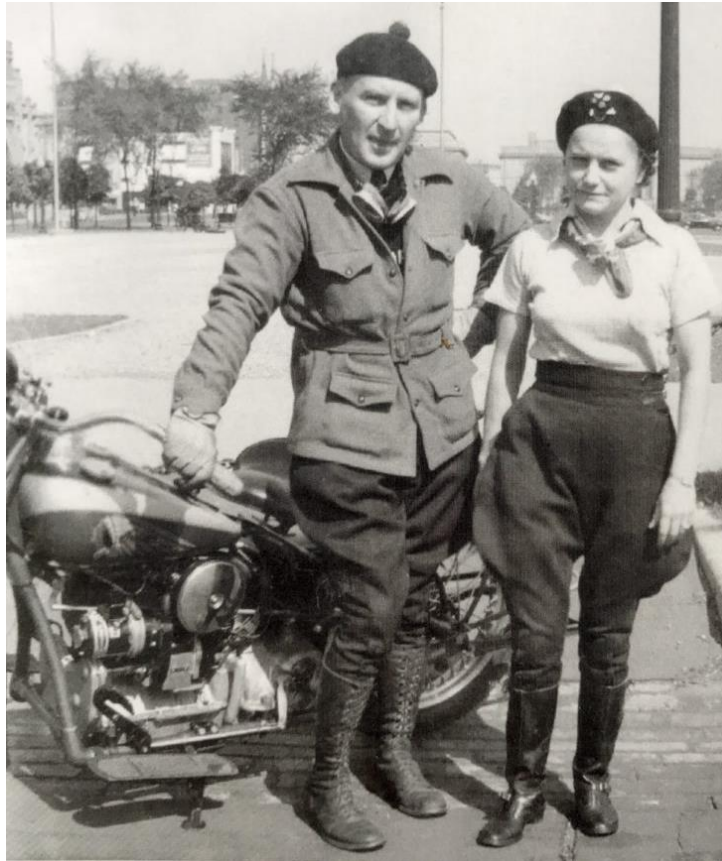
This bike is now referred to as the “Bathing Suit Bike” and everyone knows exactly what you are talking about when you mention it. It was the first bike to break the 150 mph barrier.



**Image 29** – Rollie Free working on the Vincent Black Lightning at Bonneville in 1948.



**Image 30** - Rollie Free as the cigar-chomping engine tuner and racer. You could always rely on Rollie to get that extra mph out of your machine!



**Image 31** - Stylish! Rollie with wife Margaret and their 1939 Indian 4-cylinder motorcycle.



**Image 32** - Rollie in 1922 with an ACE 4-cylinder motorcycle, the fastest motorcycle in America at that time. Rollie was addicted to motorcycles and speed.



**Image 33** - Repeat Offender! Rollie had a bit of history with his flat-out riding technique and had done it many times, always to get that little bit of extra speed from the machine. Apparently no one else was mad enough to emulate his technique!



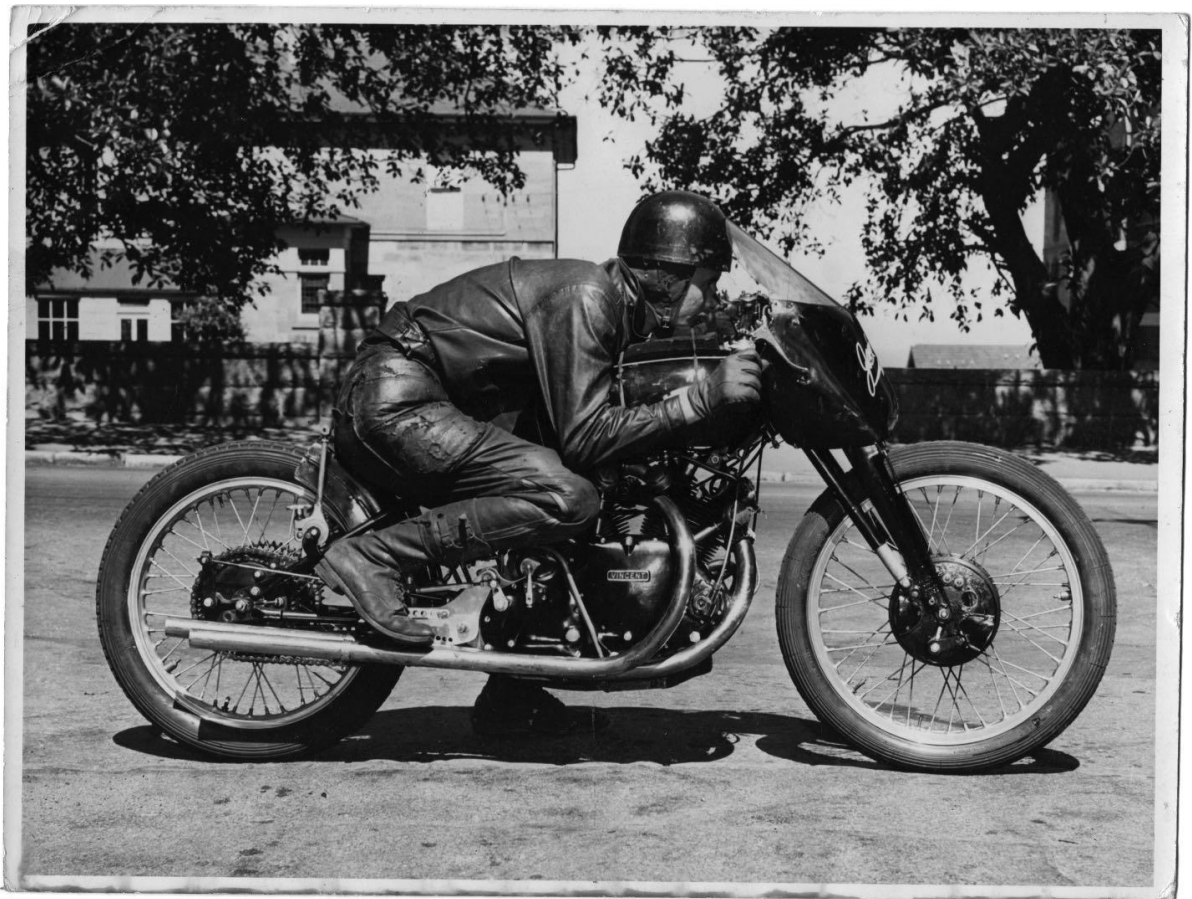
**Image 34** - The "Bathing Suit Bike".

This bike is considered one of the most famous and important motorcycles ever with its record-setting provenance. The bike Rollie Free rode on that September day of 1948 is still with us; looking fresh enough for another Bonneville run and now it's displayed at Motorcycle Museums in the United States. Note there is still no seat on it!

This bike sold in November of 2010 for a rumoured US\$ 1.1M.

**Now to the Jack Ehret (1923 – 2001, 78 years) story, another  
Vincent must-tell tale.**

In 1953, Jack Ehret of Australia set a new Australian motorcycle land speed record on a 1951 Vincent Black Lightning at 141.5 mph (227.7 km/hr), smashing the previous record.



**Image 35** - Pictured here is Jack Ehret showing his racing technique aboard his 1951 Vincent Black Lightning, just the second one that was ever made. It was specially ordered and imported into Australia by Tony McAlpine who sold it to Jack Ehret in 1952. Ehret would end up owning this bike from 1952 – 1999, nearly 50 years.



**Image 36** - Jack Ehret looking very comfortable on the Black Lightning.

A search was made across Australia for a suitable strip of road to do the record speed attempt and The Oxley Highway at Gunnedah in New South Wales was chosen. This presented difficulties in that strict criteria needed to be satisfied in terms of road grading's etc. and there were safety issues to be addressed. Further, strict time constraints were also applied to the usage of the road. The Australian motorcycle land speed record attempt was made on 19 January, 1953 which is during summer in Australia.



**Image 37** - Jack Ehret aboard his record breaking machine. Under the ownership of Ehret, this Black Lightning would also clinch numerous race victories throughout Australia and it became renowned around the world.



**Image 38** - Jack Ehret at the office!



**Image 39** – ACCA Certificate.

The Certificate of Performance awarded to Jack Ehret, for achieving 141.5 mph (227.7 km/hr) aboard his 1951 Vincent Black Lightning on 19<sup>th</sup> January, 1953. Perhaps he should have emulated the Rollie Free stunt with the bathing suit and then he also could have cracked the 150 mph barrier as well!



**Image 40** - Speed is expensive! You are looking at a million-dollar motorcycle! This Jack Ehret bike was auctioned in Las Vegas in 2018 and sold for US\$ 929,000, setting a new world record for a Vincent motorcycle at auction. It has full ownership history from new, and it's the earliest most original example of a Black Lightning still in existence. Prior to the auction, this bike generated enormous interest from all over the world. Why is this so you ask? Simple! You have a motorcycle packed with all the right provenance: It was the world's first superbike, it was a production motorcycle speed record holder for 20 years, it was the most desirable and famous motorcycle at the time, it was of very limited production numbers, and it was hand-built in England by one of the most technologically advanced and admired brands. A very safe bet indeed! Not rocket science!!

Let's briefly check out another million dollar motorcycle so you get an idea of what they are.



**Image 41** - This 1915 Cyclone Board Track Racer sold for US\$ 775,000 in 2015. This was a very significant motorcycle in that Cyclone was a short lived but spectacularly successful brand (1912 – 1917) which made its mark doing very well on the board track racing circuits. This screaming-yellow motorcycle is one of just 6 still in existence and it was capable of 111 mph (178.6 km/hr). It was also once owned by Hollywood legend and motorcycle enthusiast Steve McQueen whose greatest passion in life was motorcycling. He had up to 200 bikes in his collection.

Anyhow, I digress! Back to the article!



**Image 42** – Famous sibling.

So the Jack Ehret bike is the most famous Vincent motorcycle in the world after the Rollie Free 'Bathing Suit Bike'. That's also why it fetched such a high price at auction.



**Image 43** – The Ehret bike in as-raced condition.

At auction, the Ehret bike, un-restored and in original, as-raced condition, was acquired by an Australian who returned it to where it carried Jack Ehret to a world record in 1953.

Note the different sprockets on the 2 sides of the back wheel to give different gearing options. This was utilized by using quickly detachable wheels, which also made wheel and tyre changes easier.



**Image 44** – Quick Release Wheel.

A close-up view of the twin sprockets at the rear wheel. The rear wheel was reversible, and different size rear sprockets could be fitted for quick final-drive ratio changes. The rear mud guard was also hinged to facilitate the removal of the rear wheel.



**Image 45** - Authenticity is a key to the value of these bikes.

After the “Bathing Suit Bike” ridden by Free, the Ehret bike is likely the most important Black Lightning in existence. Note the ‘original, as-raced-in’ condition of this bike.



**Image 46** – The hand-painted signage on the tank by Ehret is still to be seen on the bike's fuel tank.

**Now for the final throw of the dice at Vincent HRD Co. Ltd.**



**Image 47** – The Vincent Black Prince.

In 1954 Vincent motorcycle sales were slow and in a desperate bid to turn things around Vincent came out with a fully-fared (fully enclosed) line of motorcycles out of the bones of the Rapide and Black Shadow, to create two new models, the Black Knight (based on the Rapide) and the Black Prince (based on the Shadow). Unfortunately they were poorly received by the public and did nothing to stem the flow of red ink.

Both the Vincent Black Knight and the Black Prince (pictured here) used fibreglass bodywork to enclose the bikes and this was rare at the time. The Black Prince was designed to shield the rider, including his legs, from the harsh elements usually experienced in Britain.



**Image 48** - Here we see the fuel tank of the Black Prince.



**Image 49** - In 1955, the Vincent Company discontinued motorcycle production after experiencing heavy financial losses.

In total, Vincent made around 11,000 motorcycles, of which 6,852 were 1,000 cc twin-cylinder models and the remainder being the single-cylinder Comets and Meteors. Despite how solid the machines were on the road and racetrack and their undeniable quality, money troubles threatened the firm constantly.

Unfortunately Vincent motorcycles were hand-built and expensive. By 1955, the losses were piling up so high that Phil Vincent announced that the company could no longer continue in the face of heavy losses and that production of motorcycles would cease immediately. In 1955, one week before Christmas, the last Vincent motorcycle came off the production line. And by 1959, the Vincent Motorcycle Co. went into receivership.

Today, Vincent's, all Vincent's, but especially the Black Shadows, are extremely valuable and much sought after by collectors and investors alike. Their rarity certainly doesn't hurt (only 1,727 Black Shadows were produced over their entire lifespan), but their impeccable engineering, stunning performance and "coolness factor" are just off the charts! It is likely that the value of Vincent motorcycles will remain trending upwards making them a good investment.

The Vincent allure continues!

So if you learnt something here today my job as Historian is done!

Ride Safe,

Sergio Editor/Historian NSW Chapter