

Vindian Project

By Bill Gordon

What might have been! What could have been! What should have been! These statements describe an experimental project by the Indian Motorcycle Company during 1949. The project was proposed in an effort to generate much-needed cash, but the project failed, and as they say, the rest is history.

There's no way to prove what the final outcome of this project might have been, because it never got beyond the prototype stage. But if it had been successful, it's quite possible the Indian Motorcycle Company would have celebrated its One Hundredth Birthday in 2001, and it would still be in business competing with Harley Davidson!

So, what was this project, and what did the Indian Motorcycle Company hope to accomplish? The purpose of the project was to update the Indian Chief with a new unitized overhead valve engine/transmission! It was hoped that the updated Chief would generate enough profits to offset the revenue lost when the planned introduction date for the new British-style Indian machines was delayed. The six month delay was necessary, in order to conduct a cost analysis study that would determine the actual manufacturing costs of the new models, as well as to establish their retail pricing.

The outdated Chief was to receive an all-new power train that featured an overhead valve engine of unit construction, including a four speed transmission that would be operated by foot shift and hand clutch. If this project had been successful, Indian would have instantly matched, or possibly exceeded, the specifications and performance of the 1950 overhead valve Panheads produced by Harley Davidson.

But Indian was in very poor financial condition in 1949, and could not afford the huge expense of designing and producing a new power train for the Chief. There was a solution to the problem, though, and it would come from a very well-known British motorcycle manufacturer, namely Vincent.

In 1949, P.C. Vincent was touring the United States, visiting Vincent motorcycle distributors in America. When Ralph Rogers, President of Indian Motorcycle Company, learned of the visit, he arranged for a meeting in Springfield, in order to determine what they might be able to do for each other.

As it turned out, there was much they could do for each other. They conceived the brilliant idea of simply installing a Vincent Rapide unitized engine into an Indian Chief chassis. If the transplant was successful, Vincent would profit from the sales of engines to Indian, and Indian would avoid the huge cost of developing a new engine.

Basically, there were four "players" involved in the Vindian project, which was the name used to describe the hybrid Vincent/Indian. Ralph Rogers (the owner of Indian in 1949), P.C. Vincent (the owner of Vincent-HRD, Stevenage, England),

Phil Irving (Chief Engineer at Vincent), and John Brockhouse (Chairman of J. Brockhouse & Company Ltd. of Birmingham, England)

Vincent and Irving were eager for the project to be successful, but they were not the decision makers. The decision makers would be Rogers and Brockhouse! Both of them, however, had vested interests in other projects. Neither of them would approve the Vindian project unless it was profitable and would benefit their vested interests.

What P.C. Vincent could do for Indian was considerable, because he was already producing a world-class motorcycle that was very fast. A stock 1948 Black Shadow could cruise all day at 100 mph, even reaching 125 mph if needed, and a race version of the Black Shadow would set a world land speed record in 1950, at just over 150 mph. The 1,000 cc Vincent engine was the perfect engine for upgrading the Indian Chief.

The Vincent Black Shadow was a world-class machine, but it was also relatively expensive. Mr. Vincent was quite eager to participate in this project, because Vincent sales in America had been somewhat disappointing, and this created a financial problem that was threatening his continued existence as a manufacturer. That threat would be eliminated if he could sell a large number of engines to Indian.

The exact date of the agreement between Rogers and Vincent is unknown, but a deal was struck, and a complete 1949 Chief was shipped to Stevenage, England. The 1949 Chief arrived in England in August of 1949, and promptly turned over to Phil Irving for the installation of a Vincent drive-train in the Chief frame.

Mr. Irving was the “Chief (a very appropriate title for this particular project) Engineer” for Vincent-HRD, and he was well qualified for this unusual project. He was tremendously talented, and could create a design in his head, draw it up, and then build the part himself. As an engineer, Phil Irving had already enjoyed great success in the design of race car engines, motorcycle engines, and Vincent motorcycles. He was also highly involved in designing the Rapide engine! Not only was he immanently qualified for the job...he got the job done!

Amazingly, the Vindian was ready for testing within a month, but only after untold hours of cutting, welding, and fitting of custom made parts. Most of the seat down-tube, which housed the seat suspension springs, was removed to provide space for the Rapide engine, so the “Chumee” seat on the prototype was “sprung” with just the passenger overload springs. The Indian generator was retained in its normal mounting position, and coupled to the Rapide engine. The battery was located in its normal position, low in the frame and just in front of the rear fender.

The right-side gear change mechanism on the Rapide engine was taken across to the left side, where it was then connected to the standard heel-and-toe pedal that normally operated the foot clutch on a Chief. Maybe not the best of all possible solutions, but certainly adequate for the first prototype.

The Vindian featured dual exhaust pipes and mufflers, which of course required the custom fabrication of an all-new exhaust system. The front cylinder exhaust pipe passed through the downtubes on the way back to the left muffler, and the rear cylinder exhaust pipe had to be reconfigured in order to clear the brake pedal on its way back to the right muffler.

Photos of the Vindian prototype machine reveals an Indian Chief that would have given Harley-Davidson a run for their money! The Chief frame looked as if it was designed for the Vincent engine, and the finished product appeared to be an American motorcycle, from wheel to wheel. It was a perfect blend of British/American features and styling that produced a gorgeous touring machine! It was a perfect for American riders on American highways.

Road tests, both in England and the United States, proved the Vindian to be an excellent combination of chassis and engine that was responsive and nimble for such a large machine. Total weight of the machine had been pared down to approximately 500 pounds, and the Vincent Rapide engine had sufficient power to provide an honest 104 mph top speed. This was a beautiful machine with outstanding performance, exactly the type of machine preferred by most American riders in 1949, and ever since! So the question has to be asked, why did Indian not produce the Vindian? Read on for the answer.

Ralph Rogers was convinced that lightweight British-style motorcycles were the wave of the future, and he was dedicated to that belief, so the Vindian project was never conceived in an effort to save the venerable Chief. It was merely an effort to raise operating cash during the six month delay of initial production of the Indian lightweight models.

Furthermore, Rogers was totally committed to the exclusive production of British-style lightweight Indian motorcycles! The future of the Indian Motorcycle Company did not include American-style heavyweight machines, and as a result, Indian would no longer be competing with Harley-Davidson! Their new competition was the entire British motorcycle industry, and that decision would soon become disaster for Indian.

In September of 1949, at about the same time Phil Irving was building the Vindian prototype, the government of Great Britain devalued their currency. Their Pound Sterling was reduced in dollar value from \$4.05 to \$2.80, which created an instant 30% reduction in the American retail price of British motorcycles. This was strike one against the Vindian project.

Nineteen forty nine was a disastrous year for Indian. The year was filled with many serious problems, and it was capped with the resignation of CEO Ralph Rogers. Some of the problems included; Production of the new Indian models was delayed for six months (huge loss of revenue). The manufacturing costs were more than twice the original estimated costs (Indian retail prices were increased). Devaluation of British currency (eliminated Indian's competitive price edge). These problems were strike two against the Vindian project!

Ralph Rogers controlled Indian from late Summer of 1945 through most of 1949, and he spent much of his personal fortune in an effort to save the company. John Brockhouse, who controlled world-wide sales for Norton, Royal Enfield and AJS, assumed control of the Indian Motorcycle Company.

John Brockhouse acquired Indian for just one reason... he needed a sales outlet that would allow him to sell his British machines in America. He had absolutely no interest in saving the Chief, or the lightweight Indian models. In fact, he wanted nothing to do with manufacturing Indian motorcycles. This was strike three against the Vindian project, as well as the Indian Motorcycle Company itself.

Ralph Rogers sincerely believed that the wave of the future was lightweight motorcycles, be we are now living in the future he envisioned, and time has proven him to be wrong. Even if the Vindian had only succeeded in delaying the eventual demise of Indian for a few years, the world would have been offered an exciting new motorcycle during that time. And who knows, with the Vindian, and just a little bit of luck, the Indian Motorcycle Company might still be one of Harley's worst nightmares!