

# 50+ years in the Saddle

By William Wally  
Houston, Texas

(This story was originally written for the members of the Houston Morgan Owners Group who asked to know more about my (even rarer) Vincents)

## Background

I heard about the legendary Vincent Black Shadow while still studying math and physics at Oberlin College. A fellow student claimed to be rebuilding one in his basement at home.

3 years later, I was working in London after a couple of years in Libya. A chance meeting at "Finch's on the Fulham Road"(aka "The Kings Arms") with a chap named Alex was a life-changing experience. He owned a Vincent Black Shadow and was in the midst of rebuilding it. As I enthusiastically questioned him, he suggested I drop by that Sunday since he was finishing the rebuild and planned to then take it for a ride.

Alex didn't mention until I arrived that the bike was in his bathroom on the 4th floor of a building with no lift, and that he needed me to help carry it down 4 flights of stairs. This was doable since the Vincent has no frame, so the bike can be disassembled into 3 major components, the front end, engine/gearbox, and rear end. The powerplant is the heaviest part but still only weighs about 150 pounds.

We lugged the bits down the stairs, put the bike back together, and it started on the 2nd kick. The test ride didn't last long, however, as the engine began to seize. Nursing the bike back to his flat, we took it apart again, and lugged it back up 4 flights of stairs.

Alex subsequently fixed the problem (he had installed the cylinder liners the wrong way around, so the oil feed holes were blocked), and subsequently rode his now like-new mount for thousands of miles. I began to look for a Vincent for myself. Each week I searched the classified ads, but on the rare occasion a Vincent was listed, it was always sold by the time I called.

After about a year, in April of 1969, I finally found a '50 Rapide, owned by a butcher in Ramsgate. He accepted my offer of 210 pounds (about \$500 in those days), and a few days later I collected the bike.



**Rapide in Hyde Park ,  
1969.**

Rolling Stones were  
performing nearby

I should mention that Marguerite accompanied me when I first looked at the bike, and later admitted she had hoped I wouldn't buy it. Her attitude fortunately changed, and in fact we took the Vincent on our honeymoon from London to Nice a few years later.



**William Wally astride his Rapide in Hyde Park, 1969**

The next year in 1970, I bought a '52 Black Shadow "needing some work" for only 160 pounds. Still knowing little about Vincents, I figured I could use it for spare parts. The 1000 cc Black Shadow was similar to the Rapide, but its engine was stove enameled instead of polished and produced 55 bhp to the Rapides 45 bhp having slightly higher compression and bigger carburetors. Top speed for the Shadow was about 125 mph, and the Rapide 115 mph, which until the 70s made them the fastest production motorcycles in the world, leaving lesser machines like Harleys, Triumphs, BSAs, Velocettes, and BMWs in the dust.

### Ownership

Despite being 20 years old when I bought it, the Rapide had few problems, and was an instant introduction to many aspects of British life. Complete strangers would come up to admire the bike, asking questions about it (and me), something not usual for the normally reserved British. Neighbors would come over when they saw me working on the bike on weekends, reminisce about their previous bikes, and then in several cases again buying a motorcycle (never a Vincent though, as total production was only about 13,000 machines).

The Vincent Owners Club held (and still holds) rallies and meetings all over the UK (and in fact the world), and there were several shops in London selling Vincent spares. Although the Vincent Company went bankrupt in 1955, the receiver was still manufacturing almost all the parts until 1972.

Unlike Morgan, the Vincent Company published a comprehensive parts book (showing how everything fits together), a well-written riders manual, and a service manual. In 1972, Eddie Stevens, a French teacher originally from Iran who had owned and ridden Vincents since 1950, published "Know Thy Beast", now in its 4<sup>th</sup> reprint and still considered the definitive technical bible of the marque.



Marguerite with the Rapide, Shadow Lake 1977

I soon realized that rather than cannibalizing the Shadow, I should fix it up instead, so within a few months I had two superb running Vincents on which we traveled for thousands of miles around the UK and Europe.

Unlike most other vehicles including Morgan which were built to a price, Vincents were built to a standard, which priced them about 50% higher than any other bike. Although they managed to sell enough to stay in business for a while, by 1955 with the advent of the Austin Mini which cost about the same Vincent closed its doors. Altogether about 13,000 Vincents were built. Today more than half are still on the road, and prices continue to climb. Now a good running Shadow or Rapide fetches between \$50K and \$100K. A 180 mph Black Lightning (of which about 50 were built) changed hands for more than \$1 million recently.

### 3-wheeled travel

In 1981 sidecars were still quite popular in the UK, and there was a sidecar shop in Brixton, Mundy's, one of the oldest and best. I happened to be on a business trip to London, and hired a cab to take me to Brixton, a scary place where there had been serious riots a few weeks before with ruined buildings and cars all over the place. But Mundy's was still there, and after some discussion as to my requirements (right-hand fitting, attach to a Vincent, Golden Retriever passenger), suggested a Watsonian Monaco. I gave them a deposit, and a few weeks

later a letter arrived advising that the sidecar was ready. I sent a check for the balance, and a couple of months later it arrived at our house in Pittsburg.

The Vincent normally is fitted with a right-hand (or right-foot) kickstart, since in the UK a sidecar would be fitted on the left. But there was provision to instead fit a left-hand kickstart, which would be needed for my right-hand sidecar. It turned out that these were exceedingly rare, which meant the combination needed to be bump-started.

We were undaunted by this minor inconvenience, and in '82 Marguerite, the first Nero, and I took the bike on a 1500 mile trip to a major Vincent rally near Toronto (at "Shadow Lake"). Marguerite, and sometimes some helpful strangers, helped bump-start the bike every time, though I tried to park at the top of any hill we could find. Finally a few years later I located a left-hand kickstart lever, a major improvement.

In '83 Gulf transferred me, the bikes and cars to Houston. Marguerite for some reason thought 3 motorcycles and 3 cars were more than necessary, and suggested we ship one of the Vincents to France where her sister in Nice owned a small garage. So in '84 I rode the Black Shadow to an airfreight company near Bush Airport, and a few days later we flew to Paris in a Boeing 747 "Combi" which had a few hundred passengers as well as a full load of freight including the Vincent. The next day we put petrol back in the Vincent and rode it to Nice.

We have now traveled about 20,000 miles on the Shadow combination, to Vincent rallies in Brittany, Bordeaux, Orleans, and others, as well as several trips between Cahors and Nice. Most of the time we camp out, and of course always traveled with Nero and his predecessor Rumpel.

The outfit is comparable to a Morgan, but with much more carrying capacity. Marguerite rides pillion and Nero is in the sidecar, sometimes sharing it with a human. There are two panniers and a top box on the bike, and the sidecar has space under the front scuttle, a luggage rack in back, and a boot (filled with tools, a compressor, and spares like inner tubes, spark plugs, etc.)



Nero



**Shadow with right-hand fitting Watsonian sidecar in Central France**

Over the years I have done much routine maintenance, replacing batteries, spark plugs, and tyres (esp. the rear which on a sidecar outfit rarely lasts more than 4000 miles). In 2000 I fitted a new electric starter system and alternator, developed by some French and British Vincent enthusiasts.

Before returning to the States each year, the bike is put up for storage. The oil is changed, stabilizer added to the gas, WD40 squirted into each cylinder, and the outfit is jacked up off the ground. A few more hours is then spent on return, to get the outfit back on the road.

Bill

Postscript - 7 years ago we sold the Nice apartment and garage, and planned to move to Normandy. Assuming it would be impossible to find a garage in Deauville, we shipped the Shadow combination back to Houston. On a house hunting trip a few months later, we in fact did find an apartment with electricity and a TWO-car garage. I cursed myself for not putting the Vincent in storage with the rest of our Nice possessions...

So now both Vincents are in Houston, and "Bluebell" ('89 Citroen 2CV) sits by itself...

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