

WITHOUT WHOM...

CZECH-ING OUT

Exhaust manufacturers come in all shapes and sizes, from huge factories churning out hundreds at a time to the smaller cottage industries which specialise in products for classic bikes and scooters. Built by hand with a loving touch.

Words & photos: Iggy

In the case of JL Exhausts it really is a cottage industry. Jim Lomas, his son Oliver and their staff of 10 work in the converted outbuildings and barn at the beautiful traditional family home in Elatna, an hour's drive from Prague in the Czech Republic.

The house has been in wife Helena's family since before the war, it's surrounded by stunning countryside and is steeped in history. For instance, the final shot of the Second World War was fired at a German sniper just a couple of miles away by American soldier, Domenic Mozzetta of the 387th Infantry Regiment as the troops protected the uranium mines.

After the war Helena's relatively wealthy family (like many other homeowners) were turfed out of their home by the communists and forced to share a flat miles away with three other families. It was only after the end of communism in 1989 that they were allowed to reclaim and move back into their former home. Although JL Exhausts is based in the former Czechoslovakia, the man behind the name, Jim Lomas,

was born and raised in England but moved to the Czech Republic in the early 1990s after meeting and marrying Helena.

It was a pleasant surprise to arrive at the factory, and rather than a run of the mill unit on a dreary industrial estate I was greeted by the sight of a pretty cottage and the smell of traditional Czech cooking as English scooter dealer and JL distributor, Andy Francis whipped up a delicious meal for us all. Andy had driven over to pick up a van load of exhausts but he's virtually an honorary member of the Lomas family and has his feet well and truly under the large kitchen table. After tea I was shown around the converted outbuildings, all the staff had finished for the day so the workshops were quiet but production would be in full flow the following morning when I returned. Jim let me have a quick glimpse at his retirement fund, a barn full of bikes either waiting for, or part way through, restoration. Jim is currently restoring a Kawasaki KH500 and a Honda CB450, he also owns an ex-Wayne Gardner Yamaha TZ250 and has about 45 classic

JL EXHAUSTS

bikes to either sell or restore, so there's plenty to keep him busy.

The following morning I was back at the factory to see how it all works and to have a chat with Jim about his work. JL has a staff of 10 traditional and very experienced engineers and fabricators who craft every exhaust individually by hand. Despite working in a fairly relaxed atmosphere the factory turns out 200 exhausts a month on average. Each man has his own job to do, for instance one worker will be responsible for marking out

the templates, another cuts the individually shaped exhaust sections from a flat piece of either mild or stainless steel (depending on the product), another will form them into cones, further down the line they're welded into sections using a jig to guarantee they are all exactly the same. Eventually the handmade silencer is built and packed ready for shipment. There's also a Dyno room, which is invaluable while developing new products.

Aside from exhausts, JL also builds

Seeley 'Yamsel' frames and can supply a complete replica Suzuki Seeley TR500 or Yamaha TZ350A. The company also supplies fairings, seats and tanks for various classic bikes and manufactures specialist parts, supply brakes, rear sets, fork tubes and tyres. The chances are if you're looking for a part for a classic two-stroke, race or road bike, then JL will be able to help you out. Jim told us: "We do TZ head bolts, rear axles, chain tensioners, wheel spacers, drain plugs, tank breathers and fairing brackets, we'll



Covered in dust and awaiting Jim's loving touch, this barn full of bikes will keep him busy for a while!



Breakfast at the family home before a day of dyno testing a new scooter exhaust

also be doing radiators for them soon and we're thinking about doing head bolts and power valves for LCs in aluminium. I also build frames and my son Oliver, does lots of off-road and MX products."

Jim's had quite a career and has been surrounded by bikes since his teens, so how did it all begin? Jim explained: "I started riding when I was 16. I had a 50cc Honda to begin with, then a year later in 1964 I bought a Honda CB72 250 and started racing it the following season. I had that in various guises until 1968 until I sold it and started racing Yamahas. My best season was 1969; I won two British

Clubman's championships on an ex-John Cooper Padgetts 250 and carried on racing until 1974.

"After that I had a couple of years away from bikes until my dad and I started up a Suzuki dealership in Windham, Norfolk. Then in 1979 we sponsored a South African champion, Mike Cameron, who came over to race in Europe. We bought him a new TZ250 and he raced it under our name in the British championships. We also had a second rider from Africa, Mike Crawford. He came over for the British Grand Prix and qualified third on our bike at Silverstone, unfortunately he fell off and

broke his leg so didn't get to race."

Making the swap from racing and running a race team to a career in exhaust manufacture may seem a bit diverse but Jim explained: "We were helping this South African rider out, his mechanic, Tommy Crawford was from what was then Rhodesia and he was into making race exhausts. He got me to buy the equipment so he could make his own pipes and then he went back to the States after the season ended. I was left with all the equipment so I started making pipes for myself. The first exhausts were just for race TZ250/350s and we made silencers for stock bikes as well. Then we got involved with Padgetts doing all their Formula 2 sidecar exhausts; Steve Webster won the British Championship with our exhaust on and broke every lap record in the UK in the process. Then for the first year when he did world championships we made his exhausts as well."

Being from a two-stroke racing background meant kart racing was a natural progression for JL. "In 1987 we were asked to do super kart exhausts, they used a 250 Rotax engine and in the first season we were first and second in the British championship. The following year we won every championship, including world, European, Australian and South African."

Building and tuning a competitive two-stroke is almost a black art and getting

the exhaust right is critical for optimum performance so it helps if you start with a bit of inside knowledge. "When we first started out I was basically just copying standard TZ250 exhausts but through one of my South African contacts I got to know Jon Ekerold's mechanic. Jon was world champion in 1980 as a privateer on a very special Yamaha TZ350 with a Bimota chassis; his mechanic gave us the exhaust dimensions for it. That was the basis for an awful lot of my exhausts because it was such a super design."

"For the kart exhausts we were given some factory dimensions from Aprilia but we made some changes to them. For the RGV250s and Aprilia RS250s we were given factory drawings again but we made all sorts of changes before we were satisfied with it. It evolved from there really. We don't really sit down with a clean sheet of paper and design an exhaust, we know what to change and we also know if we make certain changes what is going to happen to a bike's engine characteristics. We've tried computer programmes in the past but quite frankly they're bullshit, they just don't work. To build a good exhaust takes a lot of trial and error. There was a kart company in England who made a 125 and asked us to make exhausts for it, I think we made 18 before we were satisfied and could put it into production."

Although Jim started out in business in the UK he found himself over in the Czech Republic in the early 1990s after a divorce. "My first wife was a partner in the company and we got divorced so I

STEVE WEBSTER WON THE BRITISH CHAMPIONSHIP WITH OUR EXHAUST ON AND BROKE EVERY LAP RECORD IN THE UK IN THE PROCESS

closed the business down in England. I met a Czech girl, Helenka and in 1993 we moved over here. To start with I was just making a few exhausts, eventually we increased the range and employed more workers. The authorities wouldn't let me run the factory in my name to begin with though, they didn't think I was experienced enough! So Helenka, who has never made an exhaust in her life, had to be in charge – on paper at least."

Classic two-stroke bike exhausts are still in demand, Jim told us: "I don't think there's a country we don't sell them to; we sell to the States, Australia, Japan, South Africa and every European country. Fondseca supply the UK bike market, then there's a guy in America, another in France, in Germany there are two people doing bike exhausts for us, a couple in Australia, Japan... it's pretty much worldwide. We do pipes for all the Yamahas, from the 1970s right through to the last two-strokes ever made, but the 500 Yamahas are the most popular bike product. We've started making the TZ 250/350 pipes and silencers again as well. We also do a lot of Aprilia 125 and 250 exhausts, plus the RGV250s and 500s."

Like many of us Jim still loves two-strokes but has reluctantly dabbled with the odd four-stroke. "In 2010 we were approached by two MX1 Grand Prix Motocross Suzuki teams. We made some prototypes for them to test; they'd been using Akrapovic and straight away, and this is not bullshit, we were one-and-a-half horsepower through the range better than Akrapovic. But we decided we didn't want to go down that route, it's not our scene, we're two-stroke people. We do the odd four-stroke exhaust for road bikes but it's not really what we're interested in."

Despite starting out racing bikes and building race exhausts Jim doesn't have much of an involvement with racing these days, although he still makes all the silencers for the ICGP Series. Jim explained: "They run TZ250s and 350s from 1974 to 1984 and were having problems with noise limits so we built an exhaust to quieten the bikes down. We're the supplier of homologated silencers for that series now."

Jim has also dabbled in a bit of off-road racing. "When my son Oliver was 14 he wanted to go racing so we bought him a new RS125 Honda GP bike but before the



Jim Lomas in the cutting room. This is where the individual cone patterns are scribed and cut

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start of his first season he shot up and was too big for it – he did a year on quads instead but that was just so dangerous, so we decided to try motocross instead! We got him a Yamaha YZ125 and in his first year during the last race of the season there was a big race locally, with bikes up to 400cc and he won all three races on his 125. The following year we bought him a 250 four-stroke Yamaha to do the Czech and junior championships, he broke his arm towards the end of the season, it was just about healed for the start of 2009. He was expecting to do well and came third in his first race, the day after that though he had a big crash, which wasn't his fault. He was hit on the start line and he broke his neck so that was the end of his racing. Thankfully he's just about recovered but can't ever race again.

"The following year we had two riders in our own team in the European motocross championships and Oliver was managing an MX3 World MX team before going to the states with a rider for six months. He's back home now though and looks after all the IT work and websites for JL. He's also started to sell his own stuff and develop products. When Oliver came back from the States he wasn't sure whether to go back there or not because he had doors opening for him. It could still happen because the Czech rider he took over may well get a professional ride and he doesn't speak much English, they almost got an offer from factory Kawasaki and if they had done Oliver would have gone into the team on a good wage."



Oliver Lomas, Andy Francis and Jim Lomas keeping an eye on the JL website

Although JL is perhaps best known in the classic and two-stroke motorcycle world it's also big in the scooter market. "We were at a show at the NEC in Birmingham in 1989 and were approached by a couple of scooter dealers; they asked if I'd make exhausts for them. At the time I didn't really think there'd be much of a demand for them and to my cost I almost said no! Thankfully common sense prevailed and they're a big part of the business now. I make a lot of Vespa exhausts for the German/Austrian market and Lambretta exhausts for the UK, we've also just started doing Vespa pipes for the UK as well. In Britain they're all sold through Andy Francis Scooters. We make more scooter exhausts now than bike exhausts."

Although the Lomas home is surrounded by fantastic biking roads Jim doesn't get a chance to ride as often as he'd like. "We're so involved with working with bikes that we very rarely get chance to actually ride them. That's why as I'm reaching retirement age I'm getting into restoration, which I really enjoy. Having said that though, two days spent developing a new exhaust on the dyno still makes my eyes sparkle. I like to get my teeth into something. I don't feel like I want to physically retire, I'm 65 but still fairly fit and as long as I can keep working I'll be making JL Exhausts. I've got the perfect set up here, I can just walk out of the front door and into the factory."

Jim Lomas may be getting to an age where most people are ready to slow down a bit but he still loves the challenge of getting the best performance from a two-stroke engine. Jim has an intuitive knowledge of how an exhaust will work with a particular engine at any given rpm, 20mm added to a cone here, an internal stinger there and a bit chopped out in exactly the right place can make a huge difference to overall performance. This skill and experience coupled to the right staff and the relaxed way the business runs allows changes and improvements to be made at the drop of the 'guru's' hat, I watched a scooter exhaust being developed and built, dyno testing at every stage. The improvements were immense and the excitement it created in Jim was a pleasure to watch, a true craftsman enjoying his life's work.

Son and heir, Oliver has grown up surrounded by two-stroke black magic and lives on a diet of semi-synthetic. His budding race career may have been cut short but at the age of 22 he's already sourcing and developing products to manufacture and sell, hopefully he'll keep the JL name going for decades to come. 🍀



This bike belongs to an Australian customer. Wouldn't we all love one of these in the garage?