

TIMEWARP

RIDING BACK IN TIME TO 1947 ON THE FLYING SQUIRREL...

FEATURE BY
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It fires up with a defiant snarl; a loud, aggressive, high-pitched, cackling two-stroke cacophony that has more in common with a modern grand prix racebike than with a typical roadster that was built 70 years ago. Underestimate me at your peril, the Flying Squirrel seems to be spitting. I'm one of the famous Scotts – a descendant of the bike that first won the Isle of Man TT as long ago as 1912.

But once you get under way on this 1947-model Flying Squirrel, it doesn't take long to discover that this bike's personality is very different from the racy image that its raucous exhaust note and its family's distinguished competition history might suggest. The Scott accelerates reasonably briskly, and cruises at a steady 90km/h with a fair bit of speed to come, but this bike's bite doesn't come close to matching its fearsome bark.

Far from being typical racy two-stroke with all its power at high revs, the Squirrel is a gentle, softly tuned machine that revs to only 5000rpm and is pleasantly smooth, particularly by parallel twin standards. Rather than being especially light, agile and sporty, the twin from Shipley in Yorkshire has a solid, touring feel.

The Flying Squirrel's gentle personality should hardly have come as a surprise, given that this bike was built more than 30 years after its TT-winning forebears. In that time the Scott chassis format had changed considerably, from the open-framed, almost bicycle-style layout of the original machines, to a more conventional motorcycle set-up that resulted in the bike weighing twice as much.



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Scott's first major update had come in 1922 with the Squirrel, on which star rider Harry Langman had scored a third place in the TT. Apart from the death in the following year of founder Alfred Angas Scott (who had not been involved with the business for some time), the mid-Twenties were successful for Scott, on the track and in the showrooms. In 1925 the firm introduced the Flying Squirrel, featuring a mechanical oil pump and uprated three-speed gearbox.

The Flying Squirrel was updated on various occasions in subsequent years, with its capacity increasing from 498 to 596cc, and power output going up towards a limit of 30bhp. But Scott's production levels fell with the Depression of 1930, and the firm's finances never really recovered. The two-stroke motor had barely been uprated since gaining detachable cylinder heads in 1934.

Inevitably this meant that although the 1947-model Flying Squirrel lacked its ancestors' competitive performance, it had inherited their distinctive family feel and sound. The model's sales brochure of the period made the most of this: "The Scott has ever been known as the 'different' motorcycle," it said. "Silence, performance, simplicity and smoothness give the Scott an individuality which cannot be rivalled by any other make of machine."

The Scott's unique personality was both a strength and weakness. Many who rode one loved it, and the marque continued to inspire great loyalty – albeit from fewer riders than in years gone by. As the brochure continued, "Not until you ride a Scott does the full significance of its happy difference, and the reason for the unique spirit of camaraderie which exists among Scott riders, become evident. It transforms a commonplace ride into an inexplicable thrill."

One problem for Scott was that the idiosyncratic two-stroke took some time to get used to, particularly as it required very regular maintenance. It was said of early machines that riders needed to serve a three-year apprenticeship before they were fully tuned-in to the engine – and those three years were likely to involve plenty of time and money spent replacing a variety of parts such as pistons and bearings.

When it was running well, though, a Flying Squirrel had a sophisticated feel, and that was certainly true of this nicely restored bike. The engine might have surprised me with the volume of its voice through that single silencer – why that brochure had mentioned 'silence' as one of its attributes I've no idea! But as well as starting easily given a gentle kick, the bike idled reliably, pulled away crisply and was generally well behaved.

The bike's owner had carefully calibrated the notoriously fickle oil pump, which some owners claimed was so sensitive that it required re-setting on entering and leaving towns. As the bike's engine was newly rebuilt the pump had been set to be slightly generous, so I was leaving a light trail of blue smoke as I set off, after hooking the large, chromed gearlever into first with a firm movement of my right boot.

Straight away, the Squirrel impressed with its effortless low-rev torque, even though the three-speed gearbox meant that the bottom ratio was unusually tall. Scott never got round to fitting a fourth cog, perhaps partly because the three-speed unit shifted so well. Despite the widely-spaced ratios the bike pulled respectably hard when I reached the open road and wound back the throttle, its generous midrange performance making for an effortlessly crisp response.

The old Scott was certainly a bike that I'd happily have ridden for a good distance, and I could see how it appealed to riders looking for something a bit different. Scott's brochure copywriter certainly thought so, praising "the effortless power of the two-stroke twin; the smooth acceleration; its carefree stability; its insatiable thirst for hard work; its never tiring glide; no vibration; no clatter; no fuss; just the powerful yet pleasing musical purr of the exhaust."

Back in the real world, with its rider tucked down over the tank with its twin filler caps (one for petrol, the other oil), a fully run-in Flying Squirrel would hit the 80mph (130km/h) maximum mark on its Smiths speedometer. But this bike's recent rebuild meant that the extra burst of acceleration that should have been waiting above 110km/h was out of bounds. So I never got to hear the famous high-revving 'yowl' that was a big part of the two-stroke's appeal. Mind you, such thrashing was not good for the health of the engine, with crankshaft failure a particular risk when the bike was revved hard on a regular basis.

This particular Flying Squirrel had a handling advantage over its predecessors, as 1947 was the year that Scott replaced the model's girder forks with the new Dowty Oleomatic air forks. These were oil-damped but contained no springs, relying on air that was introduced via a valve on the left leg. Performance deteriorated badly when the rather crude seals wore, but this bike's freshly rebuilt and refilled units worked reasonably well, apart from a rather juddery feel in corners.

The Scott's ride was hardly luxurious, as the rigid frame left only the sprung saddle and rear tyre to absorb bumps, but it was fine provided I stayed awake enough to avoid the biggest potholes.



Handling was stable and steady, needing little help from the friction damper. At about 185kg the Flying Squirrel was not particularly light, and its blend of 19-inch wheels and period geometry meant it steered slowly. The wide bars gave plenty of leverage, though they tangled with my knees on full lock during slow-speed maneuvers.

Another recent chassis update in 1947 was this bike's dual-sided front drum brake, operated from the normal handlebar lever via a self-compensating balance box. Despite a modest 152mm diameter this brake should have given stronger performance than a single drum, but was regarded as mediocre in its day. It was easy to understand why, because even a hard squeeze of the lever had little effect. Fortunately, the Scott's conventional 203mm drum was much more powerful.

Scott continued to make modest improvements to the Flying Squirrel, notably in 1949 when the bike gained a coil ignition system in place of its unreliable magneto. But sales had been very slow for some time, and in the following year the Yorkshire firm went into liquidation. The marque was bought by long-time Scott enthusiast Matt Holder, who moved production to Birmingham.

Holder's time was occupied by many other business interests, but he introduced some improvements to the Scott, most importantly a new frame with twin shock absorbers. The engine, however, remained almost unchanged. Not surprisingly, demand was limited and production levels remained very low, with a total of fewer than 300 machines being built over the next 25 years. The final Flying Squirrel was produced in 1978 – still bearing a close resemblance to its earliest namesake of more than half a century before. **LTR**

Scott Flying Squirrel (1947)

Engine type	Watercooled two-stroke parallel twin
Displacement	596cc
Bore x stroke	73 x 71.4mm
Compression ratio	6.9:1
Carburation	single Amal carburetor
Claimed power	30bhp @ 5000rpm
Transmission	3-speed
Electrics	Lucas magneto ignition
Frame	Tubular steel
Front suspension	Telescopic, air springing
Rear suspension	None
Front brake	twin 152mm sls drums
Rear brake	203mm sls drum
Front tyre	3.25 x 19in (Avon Speedmaster)
Rear tyre	3.50 x 19in (Avon Speedmaster)
Wheelbase	N/a
Fuel capacity	16 litres
Weight	185kg dry

