

Northern Soul

Playing proud host to the Lambretta Euro Rally next year, Scotland boasts a thriving scooter scene, fuelled by music, sartorial style and a love of two-stroke transport
By Graeme Bowman

Animals fae Naboombu, Clyde Panthers, Lone Sharks, Ghosts, Outlaws, Gorehounds, Reivers – they have all converged at the Lambretta Club of Scotland Rally in Stirling. And if you think scooter means exclusively mod, you may need to revise your opinion. Quadrophenia may have firmly linked scooters with mods in the public mind, but in spite of a few parkas in evidence, the overwhelming vibe at Stirling is strongly skinhead – and totally friendly.

Some scooter skins look pretty fierce, but many of them have brought wives and kids to the event, so there's little likelihood of boot-boy ultra-violence kicking off. For these two days, Stirling boasts the highest concentration of shaven heads, Doc Martens, Ben Shermans and outrageously flamboyant sideburns anywhere in the universe. You'd probably experience a stronger undertow of menace at your average church social.

“There's less difference between skins and mods than you'd think – skins are just a harder, sharper version of mod,” says Billy from scooter tribe Hector's Heroes, explaining the softer side of skin culture and its ongoing love affair with two-stroke transport. “In the late Sixties, some mods got into Paisley pattern shirts and became hippies, and some – mainly the poorer kids who couldn't afford all the flash gear – became skins.

“The original look was based on the immigrant Jamaicans – short hair and half-mast trousers. So it's bollocks to say that all skins are racist. The original skinhead gods were Jimmy Cliff, Lee Perry, Don Drummond and Desmond Dekker.”

It was skins who kept scooter culture going during the lean years of the late Eighties before Britpop bounced on the bandwagon, but what on earth possesses anyone to drive 500 miles on a machine designed as an urban runaround, to show off their wheels in a field outside Stirling? The Italian DNA of the scooter probably explains its ongoing sex appeal, but the whole scooter scene revolves around The Eight Principles Of Scooterism.

1. GETTING THERE

In today's hectic, fast-paced world, most people want to get from A to B as quickly as possible, but scooterists are different – the longer and more gruelling the journey, the greater the reward, and trophies are regularly handed out for 'longest distance travelled to a rally'.

“Until you've spent eight hours soaked to the skin, chilled to the bone, and your arse is nipping with saddle sores, you don't really know what its all about... but when you turn that final corner into yet another faded seaside resort, the feeling of euphoria you get makes it all worthwhile.”

Andy, Strathclyde Senators, 1964 Vespa SS 180

2. MOTORS

If your scoot's older than you are and spares are hard to get, you've just got to get into pistons and gears to keep your wheels on the road. Gillie (aka Dr Lambretta) explains his ongoing fascination with two-stroke oil:

“I just get a buzz from fixing bikes. Its an amazing feeling to transform a pile of shite into something that looks really good. Somebody gave me a bike once and it was just two baskets of spare parts and a frame but I got it running – eventually. I'd rather work on my bikes than watch telly. I used to have seven at one point.

Gillie, Lambretta Club of Scotland, 1960 Lambretta TV 175 Series 2

3. LOOKS

Your bike's your calling card to the world and some people just want the most dynamic calling card possible, spending thousands of pounds on sexing up their machine.

“Your scooter reflects who you are. You spend a lot of time and money on it and when you get a response, its great; you feel about ten feet tall. Its brilliant when people admire your scoot – it means all your time and effort's been worth it.

Jimbo, Edinburgh Blues, 1959 Lambretta Series 1 LI

4. CLUBS

Everybody wants to be part of a gang and scooterists are no exception. Most scooter boys and girls are members of clubs and all clubs have their own rules and regulations. For example, to join the Edinburgh Blues and stay in them, you need to attend two national rallies per year and there are Blues Scooter Clubs throughout Scotland, England, Europe and America.

“It was boring when I got my bike at first because none of my other mates were into it, but being in a club means you're with like-minded people, you go to rallies, and people

help you if your machine's knackered. And don't underestimate the pose-ability factor – its great when you ride through all these wee villages with people looking at you.”

Iain, Hamilton Ghosts, 2002 Vespa PX 125

5. GEAR

You either like Fred Perrys or you don't, and in an age where everyone's pretending to be a bad boy rapper from a bogus 'hood, skins and mods deserve Arts Council grants for helping maintain authentic British street culture.

“It's a really smart look. Anyone can have their hair cut short but being a skinhead's all about the way you walk, the way you carry yourself – razor sharp creases, perfect seams, boots you can see your face in. Most skins are working-class so being a skin's also a statement of working-class pride

Caroline, Bolton Spartans, 1964 Lambretta TV 200

6. TUNES

Most people think of The Who and The Jam when they think of scooters, but the scooter scene musical church is more catholic than that, embracing northern soul, skinhead reggae, two-tone, indie, ska and Britpop.

“Some scooterists even got into the scene through punk and psychobilly. A lot of us got into it through The Who and The Jam, but then you want to check out The Small Faces or track down a rare Kinks B-side or hunt down the original of a cover and you can only do that by getting to know people and getting involved. Rallies are definitely the best place for listening to northern soul, skinhead reggae and mod revival.

(Luke, Lambretta Club of Scotland, 1967 Lambretta SX 150)

7. MATES

Friends are the new family and scootering lets you pick your own new family on two wheels. Rallies are for catching up with mates and gossip.

“Until I became pregnant, I rode my scooter every day and went to all the rallies in Britain, Europe and America – I even spent my honeymoon at a scooter rally in San Francisco. Its an amazing feeling of belonging and once you're in – you're in! Most of my friends are on the scene, and I can't see me ever leaving it.”

Maddy, Strathclyde Senators, 1980 Vespa T5

8. FUN

At the end of the day, it's all about enjoying yourself and everyone at Stirling has a blast. The rally season lasts throughout the summer and autumn, and there are dances and club socials throughout the rest of the year. Some people grab the rally calendar as soon as it comes out and plan their work and holidays around it. For them, scootering is more than a mode of transport – it's a way of life.

“You arrive at the rally on Friday, get pissed, dance, fall over and end up with 16 new mates. Its a great place for getting buckled because people really watch out for you.”

Bert, Animals Fae Naboombu, 1981 Vespa P210

the big issue: Lambrettas vs Vespas

Most punters think a scooter's a scooter's a scooter, but Lambrettas and Vespas are totally different and it all comes down to how they're powered. Lambrettas are chain-driven while Vespas are powered by a central shaft, so Lambrettas tend to be leaner, longer and cleaner at the back and more evenly balanced. Purists love the Lammie's sleek lines but Vespa-fanciers, such as Andy from the Senators, idolise their machine's curves. Its like the contrast between Kate Moss and J-Lo – both are equally beautiful but mounted on very different chassis.

One further difference separates Lambrettas from Wasps. Italian Lambretta production ceased in 1972 and even the Japanese and Indians don't make them any more, so if your Lammie breaks down, getting spare parts and replacements can be hard work. If its hassle-free mobility you're after, best go for the slightly more reliable Vespa.

the verdict: Neil (Stirling Scooter Club)

Neil's been into scooters since 1992 after taking a ride on his mate's Vespa. As a punk, he favours the distinctive cut-down look to distinguish him from mods and skins on the scene. His cutdown is 90 per cent Vespa, five per cent Lambretta (forks), five per cent BSA (fuel tank) and 100 per cent pure class. He used to be into motorbikes but prefers the atmosphere at scooter rallies, and rates the Vespa more highly than the temperamental Lambretta.

Peter (Dogcatchers SC, 1970 Lambretta RS 250)

Peter's two-wheeled tribute to Newcastle's most famous export is a show bike which arrived at the custom show in the back of a van. He doesn't take it out on the roads in case the paintwork gets chipped and there's only three miles on the Black'n'Chrome clock. He doesn't know how much he's lavished on his machine but wouldn't part with it for less than £10K.

Mick (1959 Lambretta)

Mick Lloyd from Worcester paid £200 for his 1959 Lambretta in 1996 and plans to sell it later this year for £3500. Restoring bikes is a big part of the scooter scene and once an enthusiast's got a bike up and running, he'll often sell it on to finance his next re-build project.

Ginger (Bolton Spartans, 1971 Lambretta GP 200)

Ginger's an original skin from '69 and bought his first scooter in the same year. As head honcho of the Bolton Spartans, he organises their famous Easter Egg Run to children's hospitals, and the Spartans tend to team up with the Blues, Victorians and Reckless Souls at rallies. Ginger employed very stringent criteria when judging the Stirling custom rally show— he believes that all bikes should be ridden to the show, so if it ain't got a tax disk or a bit of road grime somewhere, it ain't a contenderu

Next year, scooter fans, for the first time ever, Eurolambretta – the European Lambretta Rally – comes to Scotland, a three-day Lambretta love-in scheduled for Kelso Agricultural Showgrounds during the first weekend of June.

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