
Introduction

If, as the saying goes, Britannia ruled the waves, it's just as true that it ruled the motorcycle lanes of the world. Today there are famous brands such as Honda in Japan, Harley-Davidson in America, and BMW in Germany. Yet any number of British marques belong in a motorcycle hall of fame. Velocette was founded by German immigrants circa 1905 and based in Birmingham. The family-owned business produced overhead-cam engines in the 1920s and introduced the positive-stop, foot-operated transmission, a feature eventually adopted by every other motorcycle manufacturer in the world. Norton, organized in 1898, built the most successful Grand Prix racer in motorcycle history — the lusty Manx Norton — and also made the Commando, the last great British “superbike” of the 1970s. Norton, too, was based in Birmingham for most of the brand's life.

Triumph traces its roots to German-Jewish immigrant Siegfried Bettmann and produced its first motorcycle under the Triumph name in 1902. Its great innovation was a successful range of “parallel twin” motorcycle engines dating from 1937; this design became the standard for both the British and the Japanese industries for the next 30 years. It is a twin-cylinder Triumph Thunderbird that Marlon Brando rides in the 1953 Hollywood release *The Wild One*.