

CLASSIC DRIVER

Black Douglas bikes are handmade in... Italy?

Lead

Arrive at The Black Douglas Motorcycle Co. and you find yourself submerged in the atmosphere of a small workshop of the 1930s – one that built its own bikes. The style of the bikes, the small number of fiercely passionate individuals, the way in which they work and the quantity of bikes produced...

... it's all about using real craftsmanship to create a truly great motorcycle – just as it was for the pioneers of two-wheeled machines more than 80 years ago. We had the chance to visit the Black Douglas workshop and ask Fabio Cardoni, the founder, a few questions.



What is your oldest automotive memory?

When I was 11, I tried my first bike: a Suzuki Gamma 500. It was on a gravel road, the bike was powerful and much too big for me. After about 10 metres, I fell off into the road.

But in spite of this, you were still attracted to motorcycles?

Definitely. It's like falling off a horse – you need to ride one again as soon as possible, and it was this way for me. When I was 14, I had my first moped: a Honda PX 50. It was really ugly and all my friends laughed at me; I'd much rather have had a Vespa. I saved money for several months to buy my first bike, a Fantic Motor TX 96. At the time I was 15 – and so was the bike. I tuned the engine and felt like a king. And so I began my collection: buying without selling any of my bikes.



You're based in Italy and you're Italian yourself, so why a British name?

Douglas is a name that I happen to like. In Scotland, Sir James Douglas – a hero of the 13th and 14th Centuries – was also known as the Black Douglas, and so Benny and I chose this as our brand and Sterling Autocycle as the model name. At the time, we weren't even thinking of creating a real company to produce a series of bikes.

So how did that happen?

Each time I used my Sterling, people went crazy over it: thumbs up, pictures, lots of questions and, most often of all, "Where can I buy one?" So I thought, "Okay, so there are people interested in it... why not create a company and start producing it?" We established the company in 2011 and we've been working on the project ever since. I wanted to build it the right way; as it was done in the past.



What were your aims for the bike?

I wanted to make sure that even if the bike was a series model, customers could choose from a large number of options to have their own unique Sterling. And even more importantly, I wanted something handmade in Italy, with no plastic parts on it, and fully road-legal.

What are the main difficulties when you build an apparently 'period' bike?

As we didn't want any plastic on our bikes, we had to source a great many parts, as we needed metal parts that had been approved for European sale - and that's not easy. Many people put the EC marking on their parts but, when you ask for the certification, you stop getting any answers from them. We're using modern materials for the frame and the mechanicals, and it's always difficult to find the right supplier for every tiny part, so that you have the right item in the right style. We didn't want the bike to be 100% period correct, and nor did we want to replicate a specific model. Rather, we were aiming to recreate the feeling of a flat tank motorcycle, without the hassles that would come with a real vintage piece. We wanted it to be an everyday, usable bike. It seems that we succeeded.

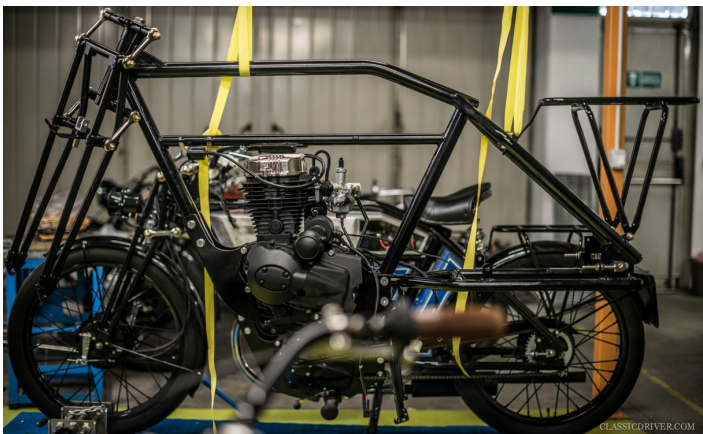


Are you planning some evolutions for the Sterling?

Yes, in 2015, we want to create the Sterling Imperial as the top of the range - with a 350cc engine. It's going to be 100% handmade in Italy, engineered specifically for us. We already have the prototype ready and we'll start testing it soon. I want a 350cc engine because of the torque, as we need it to compensate for the weight of the engine and the sidecar that will also be presented this year. The next step will be an electric Sterling, with a 150km range at about 80km/h.

Are you also selling bikes in the US?

We don't have a bike that satisfies American regulations at the moment. We can only sell the Sterling in kit form to the US market. We are also planning to develop other models based on Harley-Davidson V-twin engines that will be sold as kits.





What type of bikes will these be?

We have two running prototypes: the 'Sunday Morning' (a scrambler) and the 'Solace', which looks like a 1940s motorcycle. Both have Harley Sportster engines.

What are the ultimate bikes for you?

The Brough Superior SS100 for its perfect lines, and the Black Douglas Sterling Imperial with the versatility of a 350cc engine.



Do you have a dream bike?

Yes, a Brough Superior SS100... so I can feel like Lawrence of Arabia.

And is there a bike you'd like to try, if only for a few minutes?

The Husqvarna Proof 2000 prototype.

Photos: [Rémi Dargegen](#) for *Classic Driver* 2015

Gallery

Source URL: <https://www.classicdriver.com/en/article/bikes/black-douglas-bikes-are-handmade-italy>
© Classic Driver. All rights reserved.