

SHADOWS AND TRIBULATIONS

Whilst poking about in my garage recently I noticed that the Shadow had a distinct list to Port, and a further examination revealed the fact that the front nearside tyre was very flat. Now this happens to be the side of the Shadow that is very close to the garage wall so that changing the wheel was out of the question without moving the car. It was therefore necessary to re-inflate the tyre in order to drive the car out and then change the wheel. The inflation of the tyre was accomplished with some difficulty and the use of a small compressor. The car started with its usual alacrity but while I was waiting for it to warm up a little the engine stopped. This was most unusual but even more unusual was the fact that it flatly refused to start again.

I had had a similar problem to this some time ago so I knew where to look. I removed the distributor cap and sure enough, the rotor arm could be turned independently of the engine. The Shadow distributor is driven from the end of the camshaft through a fail-safe device which consists of a spade end on the rotor drive engaging between two thin strips of spring steel. Thus, should the distributor seize, the camshaft drive merely bends the spring steel strips out of the way allowing the engine to stop without causing mayhem in the process. Removal of the distributor confirmed that this was indeed what had happened, and the rotor arm instead of spinning freely could only be turned with difficulty. I diagnosed a lack of lubrication to the rotor and as I was uncertain as to the condition of the rotor bearings I decided to replace the whole distributor.

I eventually tracked down a (second hand) Opus distributor (at enormous expense) and as this was the bare bones only, I spent a happy hour or so transferring the electronic gubbins from the 'old' distributor to the 'new' one.

Now came the task of installing the 'new' distributor and retiming the ignition. The former presented no problem and for the latter I turned to my Workshop Manual. "The engine is timed on cylinder A1" I read. So far so good. "Remove 'A' bank rocker cover from the engine". Stop right there. Anyone who has ever looked under the bonnet of a Shadow will appreciate the compact complexity of the engine and its ancillary parts. Considerable demolition of the engine and ancillaries is necessary before 'A' bank rocker cover can be reached. The list includes the air intake, part of the wiring harness, the spark plug leads to 'A' bank, the primary fuel supply, throttle linkages, cruise control, etc. etc. and all this just to ensure that the inlet valve on 'A1' had closed and the engine was on the compression stroke of 'A1'. There had to be an easier way than that!

After giving the matter some thought (the little grey cells don't work as quickly as they used to) I reasoned that the piston in 'A1' would rise to T.D.C. once in every revolution but the ignition spark would only occur once in every two revolutions at, or just before, T.D.C. Ergo, if the spark was timed to occur at T.D.C. on 'A1' there was a 50/50 chance of hitting the compression stroke with the desired result. Pleased with my subterfuge, I lined up the timing marks and set the distributor to deliver its spark to 'A1'. Expectantly, I turned the ignition key - nothing. I tried a second time - still nothing. On the third attempt I was just cursing the fact that Sod's Law had beaten me again when the Shadow erupted in the loudest and most violent exhaust backfire I had ever heard. It was so totally unexpected and delivered without warning that I swear I rose a full six inches in the driving seat, all the birds in the area stopped twittering, and even the neighbour's kids playing in the adjoining

garden fell silent for a moment! My dear wife came rushing into the garage convinced that our gas fired boiler (by coincidence time to ignite about then) had exploded. On seeing me sitting in the driving seat still shaking like a jelly, she correctly concluded that I was somehow at the bottom of all this excitement and she returned to the house with, I suspect, a sideways glance at the boiler in passing.

When I had recovered from my fright I decided to try again. I released the distributor, rotated the engine through 360 degrees, and set the distributor to spark on 'A1' again. With considerable trepidation I turned the ignition key and was mightily relieved when the engine fired first time and quickly settled down to a regular beat. Now at last I could drive out of the garage and change that damned wheel.

But why the big bang? All my deliberations had been concerned with cylinder 'A1' and I had overlooked the fact that the Shadow has another seven cylinders each surreptitiously pushing a highly explosive mixture of petrol and air into the exhaust, just waiting for the first slow burning charge to frighten me half to death! Oh the joys of D.I.Y.

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