



Stylish and functional BMW combination at rest.

European Union

*The harmonious union of BMW and Steib is the combination of choice for the discerning charioteer. **Roy Poynting** rides Graeme Crate's own interpretation of sidecar utopia.*

Whenever I glance at magazines dealing with modern motorcycles, I get irritated by testers who condemn machines which don't conform to their own priorities. If they won't pull wheelies and stoppies, the acceleration and front brake must be inadequate, and if the rider cannot get his knee down (see, I know all the jargon) the roadholding is termed pathetic.

Whatever must these pampered playboys think about a motorcycle combination? Attaching a chair inevitably chops a sizeable chunk off of the available performance. And all one-sided three-wheelers have different (or indifferent) handling characteristics depending upon which way you are turning, and on what you are doing with the throttle.

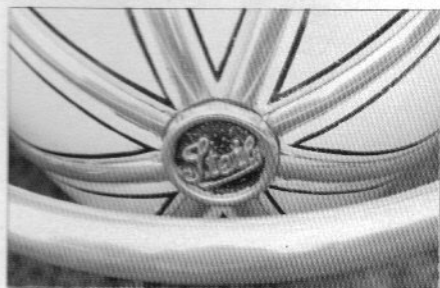
I suspect that a tester used to modern superbikes would simply write outfits off as the only choice of sad people who cannot afford anything better. Well, that might apply to the traditional side-valve/double adult combination, but it doesn't explain the attraction of the BMW/Steib outfit. You have to fork out real money to buy this marriage of two prestigious German companies.

"So why does it appeal to you?" I ask owner, and builder, Graeme Crate. "Well,

I've always had outfits," he explains, "and it's true that initially it was because I couldn't afford a car. My first was an old BSA onto which I attached an enormous home made sidecar. It was so big that the bodywork went outside the sidecar wheel, and in it we carried the kids and the pram! Then I had other ones, including a 197cc Ambassador with a single seater sidecar. But by then I was hooked, and when that happens you always want something better. Eventually, I graduated to the ultimate – the BMW/Steib – and I love it!"

Even those who know nothing about sidecar outfits, and would never choose to own one, must admit that this one is a real looker. Graeme has actually made a bit of money out of it, hiring it out as an alternative to the traditional wedding car. No less a person than racer Colin Seeley rode it for his own wedding, with his bride in the chair.

Before the anoraks reach for their pens, let's get the details sorted out. The BMW can fairly be described as a 1961 R69, although production of that model actually ceased a year earlier. The R69 and the smaller R50 had been introduced in 1955 as BMW's first true post-WWII models. Apart from the use of a 600cc or



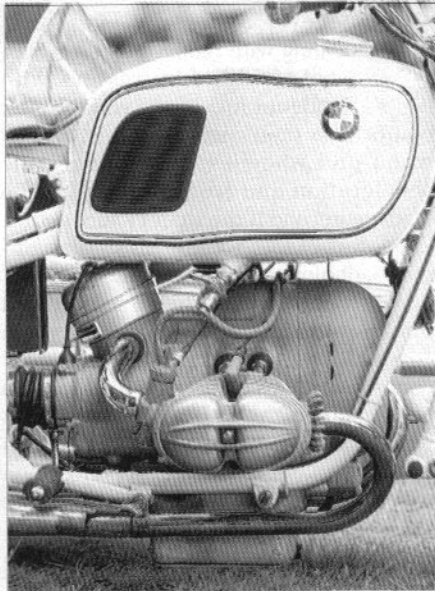
Badge of quality.



Tester Poynting samples the BMW outfit, whilst owner Crate relaxes in the relative luxury afforded by the Steib sidecar.



Control layout, with speedometer mounted in headlight and rev-counter on separate bracket.



R69 engine fitted offers more power than the R60 unit that sidecarists were supposed to be content with.



Craven luggage carrying equipment, with cut down top-box to aid aesthetics.

a 500cc engine they were virtually identical, and their instantly recognisable Earles front forks made them the definitive BMWs of their era. Their derivatives populated the range for the next 15 years.

BMW's model numbering system was often inscrutable, but their reasoning seems to have been that the smaller version was numbered to match its capacity, while the larger one was seen as the successor to the previous sporting

600cc model - the R68. In 1956, BMW took the unusual step of producing a detuned version of the 600 especially for sidecar duty and gave it the logical designation of R60. In 1960, the R69 was replaced by a more sporting 'S' version, and an R50S completed the four-model range.

The upshot of BMW's 'we know best' policy was that people - like Graeme Crate - who had bought the model expressly intended for sidecarring found themselves shortchanged. The

motor, which gave 42bhp in the R69S, was detuned to 28bhp (30bhp after 1960) in the R60!

Graeme bought his R60 as a solo in 1977 and put the Steib on it straightaway. A hard rider who annually treks to the TT, he enjoyed the outfit, but longed for more power. His opportunity came in May 1988, when he and his son Jeremy - who had previously passengered in Graeme's chair - decided to travel separately to the Isle of Man. They had to



Owner Graeme Crate poses with the BMW outfit which he rates as the 'ultimate combination'.



Handsome single seater Steib sidecar complements the style of the BMW wonderfully

make an outfit for Jeremy in the space of a couple of months, but that didn't faze Graeme who has a garage full of BMW bits and bobs. Not only did the duo complete the second outfit on time, but Graeme donated his own R60 motor to it and built a more powerful R69 power unit for himself.

For Graeme Crate, building an engine isn't a matter of assembling new parts. He does virtually everything himself, including rebuilding the rather complex BMW crankshafts. In this case he did have a new crank, but it was a factory reject with a faulty oilway which he had to sort out. Apparently he only put the motor together in the week before the TT, and it ran perfectly.

Perfectly – in Graeme's case – means standing up to some pretty hectic use of the throttle. I ask him what sort of speed he cruises at. "Oh, about 65 to 75mph," he replies airily, adding with a grin, "but I got 85mph out of it on the Island, going down towards Creg-ny-baa." Such brio is not without risk, and Graeme turned the outfit over one year during TT week. Damage to the frame running round the outside of the chair gave him an excuse to ply his panel beating skills. It was trimmed by an aluminium tube slid on before the frame was curved. Obviously, this process could not be replicated, but Graeme hand beat a piece of aluminium sheet over the steel tube, and invisibly welded up the joint.

The enormous petrol tank – an aftermarket Hoske accessory – was

added two years after Graeme bought the R60. He needs its 32litre capacity, because the outfit only gives about 35mpg. As he says; "you can't expect any more when you're always flat out!" The tank needed yet more panel work because it was totally gummed up. Graeme cut an access panel behind the knee grip in order to get inside and clean it up. A patch welded back in completed the job. The size of the tank meant moving the saddle mount back, so its rubber suspension block is more visible than usual.

Other jobs done at home included making replicas of BMW's braced handlebars. Ordinary bars of roughly the right shape were cut and welded and a brace was added and faired in. Again, you cannot see the joins. Graeme even bought an industrial sewing machine so that he could stitch the trim onto the edge of the sidecar's screen, and he also made the tonneau cover.

The rear carrier on the Steib is home-made, too, but it's a bit of a sore point. Graeme spent three months making a replica of the Steib item, working from solid aluminium stock, and then found an authentic one selling for £8 at an autojumble! On the subject of carrying luggage, the set on the back of the BMW is of Craven manufacture, but he has cut the top box down for aesthetic reasons. And, I suspect, because it makes it easier to mount the outfit. The grid on which the top box is mounted is supported by brackets made from a pair of bicycle

forks. Their tapered oval section is both stiff and aesthetically pleasing.

Before letting me loose on the outfit, Graeme takes me for a spin in the sidecar. Despite his self-confessed hard driving, I find it a surprisingly pleasant experience. Getting in is the hardest part, it can only be done by standing on the seat and sliding down. I can't help wondering if brides using the outfit for their big day get footprints on the back of their wedding dresses. Come to think of it, I would like to see them trying to get in and out with any degree of modesty!



Earles forks on the BMW make steering a pleasure – "light, neutral and precise" reports tester Roy Poynting.

The chair itself is pivoted at the front and has two damped suspension units at the rear. In effect, it is just like sitting on an enormous swinging arm. Then the sidecar wheel has its own suspension via rubber in torsion. Lesser chairs have just the wheel suspension, which gives a harsh ride, or unlocated springing of the chair, which gives nausea. With such sophistication – and a well shaped seat – it's no wonder the

Steib is regarded as the Rolls Royce of the sidecar world.

When my turn comes to take the controls, Graham bravely agrees to replace me as ballast. "You won't turn it over with my weight in here," he jokes, as he squeezes into place. He's right. There is no danger of not keeping the plot the right way up, but it isn't just because of the weight distribution, this is one very well set up and balanced outfit. Like all combinations, it tends to twitch to left or right depending on how smoothly power is re-engaged after changing gear. But an experienced owner – and, after nearly a quarter of a century, Graeme is certainly that – instinctively applies corrective steering.

He is a great enthusiast for Earles type forks on sidecar machines, and as he promised, I find they give steering which is light, neutral and precise. Of course, BMW had sidecar duties very much in mind with this range of motorcycles, and provided their forks with alternative pivot and suspension points, so that they could easily be switched between solo and sidecar geometry.

It had occurred to me that there might be a problem starting the BMW, because Graeme has routed the top mount of the Steib higher than usual to give greater rigidity. It now runs very close to the kick start lever, and the traditional method of starting BMWs – standing facing the near side with your toe on the lever – is literally impossible. By studying Graeme's technique, I avoided joining the legion of people who ask him how on earth he starts the motor. The

answer is remarkably simple; provided you put just your heel on the lever, you can stay astride the bike and kick in a fairly conventional manner.

Needless to say, the Beemer starts so easily that practically any means of turning it over results in it burbling into life. Everything is well sorted, and there is never any hesitation. The engine is smooth enough that the handlebar mirrors remain clear, even though Graeme has extended their arms with barrel shaped threaded unions.

The sidecar and rear BMW brake are usually linked. Pressing the foot lever extends a neat actuator forming part of the brake rod, and automatically applies appropriate hydraulic pressure to the Steib's brake. Graeme has temporarily turned off the hydraulic connection because long term operation of the foot brake can result in the wheel cylinder sticking. Despite that, braking is good and does not upset the outfit's equilibrium.

Overall, the BMW/Steib is as easy to drive as it is on the eye. Predictable handling is allied to an engine having an ideal combination of low down torque and top end power. In fact, the R69 is so obviously right for a sports sidecar outfit that I cannot imagine why 'Big Brother' BMW felt that charioteers would be happy with the staid R60. In a way, it's fortunate that the company's financial problems during the Sixties prevented them from churning out new models. They were forced to mix and match engines in a common frame, so there is absolutely nothing to stop resourceful owners like Graeme Crate from doing the same.

Fact File

1961 BMW R60/R69 hybrid and Sports Steib Sidecar

Engine type	horizontally opposed ohv flat twin
Capacity	590cc
Bore x stroke	72mm x 73mm
Output	35bhp @ 6800rpm
Compression ratio	8:1
Carburettor	twin 26mm Bing
Ignition	Noris magneto
Gearbox	four-speed in unit
Transmission	shaft drive
Suspension	Earles type front forks, swing arm rear
Tyres	350 x 18in front and rear
Brakes	8in drums
Tank capacity	7 galls
Seat height	31in
Wheelbase	55in
Top speed	75mph (est)
Price new	approx £565 total
Price guide now	£4000-£7000

Club contact BMW Club. Membership Secretary, Dick Boyd. Stewart Place, Garmouth, IV32 7LX. Vintage Motor Cycle Club, Allen House, Wetmore Road, Burton upon Trent, Staffs DE14 1TR.



Roy Poynting lets Graeme Crate experience the outfit from the other side.