

Stan's an affable bloke.
Nothing extraordinary
about him... then you get him
talking about bikes. 'My third
VFR lasted 850,000 miles'

This is Stan Wilson. He's just done 600 miles on his Honda Blackbird, but it's a quiet day. He'll probably go further tomorrow. Since he began despatching, Stan has ridden more than two million miles. And that's just for work. He is...

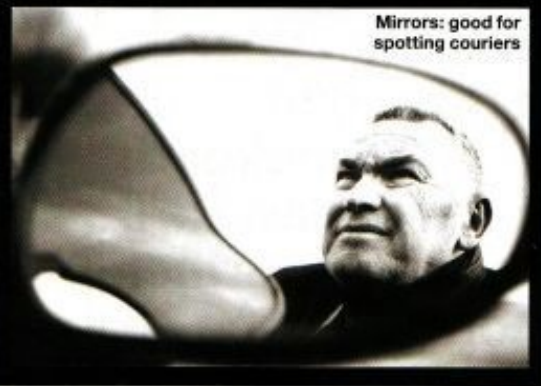
Britain's highest mileage rider

By Simon Weir

Sit opposite Stan Wilson as he sips a coffee in a service station, both hands wrapped around the cup, and you probably wouldn't give him a second glance. An old guy with a lined face, a shock of cropped grey hair and a hint of a paunch pushing at his well-worn black one-piece suit, he looks like any older biker taking a break on a quiet ride. But follow him outside, as he pulls a jacket on over his leathers, puts his ear plugs in and slips his battered black Arai on, and you'll get a surprise. The bike he climbs onto isn't some shiny Sundays-only 600. It's a weathered Honda Blackbird with two topboxes and 205,000 miles on the clock.

In reality you're unlikely to catch Stan in the services. He doesn't stop that often. Now in his early sixties, he started despatching part-time in 1982 and gave up his job as a shopfitter to become a full-time courier in 1984. Since then he's clocked up nearly two and a half million miles. 'I'd wanted to despatch for years - my brothers did it, telling me about the fantastic wages,' says Stan. 'Didn't tell me how many miles they were doing, though...' >

Mirrors: good for spotting couriers



Living in Swindon, working out of Cirencester, he began piling on the miles. 'I started full-time on the worst bike I ever bought,' he recalls. 'A Kawasaki GT750. Mind you, it lasted for 180,000 despatch miles.'

Every bike Stan's owned has its story, every one did its share of the miles – even the brand-new Yamaha FJ1200 that lasted Stan for three weeks. 'It was killing me with vibrations, so I took it back to George White's dealership and traded it for another one. When he saw I'd done 14,000 miles, he said to me, "Christ Stan, what am I going to do with it – how am I going to explain this?"

'I persevered with that second 1200. It did vibrate a bit, but not as badly as the first one. I got rid of it at 90,000 miles. Still had the original set of front brake pads in it, as it happens,' Stan adds. 'The torque was such that you'd just roll off the engine and that would stop it. The fuel economy wasn't a lot of good – I was lucky if I was getting 40mpg – so I progressed to the Honda VFR and everybody thought I was mad.'

Stan ran three 750 VFRs. The first one did 140,000 miles and the second was already upto 146,000 when it was knocked over outside Luton Airport. Restored to pristine condition, it was traded for a new, red FL model in 1990. He talks about the third VFR affectionately, like a man remembering a favourite dog that was put down years ago.

'I had that one for six years. I did 852,000 miles on it, with two engine. The first motor did about 440,000 miles. It blew its head gasket a bit before that, but I didn't know it – I must have run it for 10,000 miles. I used to get on the motorway and let it have some throttle and it would run well. It was only in town that it became obvious it was broke.

'It just fell apart under me,' Stan sighs. 'I'd be going down the motorway and a hairline crack would appear in the fairing. I'd get home and lace it together with cable ties – red ones, of course. Didn't want it to look too tatty! When I sold it for £1300 it had 53 cable ties holding the fairing together. Used to cost me a bomb for red cable ties – you can get them in any colour you want now, but back then I had to order the red ones specially.'

After three VFRs, he switched to Kawasaki ZZ-R1100s. 'At one point there were 18 of us

despatch riders in the company. We all knew each other but it was very rare that we all went down the M4 together. If two or three of the fast guys met, we used to go for it – and I mean flat-out, like loonies. On a ZZ-R1100. It was very fast, alright. I used to have it on the stop on a regular basis.

'I stay at around 80-85mph now. I get there as quick as anybody. If you take it steady from Swindon to London you're seven minutes slower than if you're going balls-out.

'We had one bloke, Steady Eddie, who used to wobble along and get phenomenal fuel economy out of his old Revere or whatever it was. We'd get to Chiswick or Hammersmith and the little sod used to creep up on us. We'd nip into the petrol stations to fill up and he'd just plod on, do his drops and be on the way out before we'd even got there.'

Get Stan talking and he has the same relaxed, sure-of-himself air that some racers

have – but without the cockiness. He knows what he can do, what he's done, knows the value of his opinions. Where Stan's different is that he clearly doesn't feel the need to prove anything. Instead he leans back in his chair, sips his coffee, tells another story.

'I got hit by the bumper off a Mondeo on the M1. It had run into something else and the bumper flew off. I ducked and it clipped the side of my helmet, taking the vent off. Then there was the canoe that nearly hit me. It came off a Montego, complete with its ladder rack. It caught the air and, whichever way I went, the bloody thing floated at me. It hit the deck, bounced and went about a meter past my ear.

'And there was a brick. That hit me on the head. Came off the back of an eight-wheeler. It was wedged between the two back tyres on one side and I was looking at it, thinking, "What's that?" I realised what it was when >

Stan on... Getting high mileage for low cost



'I aim to run as cheaply as I can,' says Stan, adding that – doing at least 3000 miles every five days, he changes the oil and filters in his Blackbird every week. He uses Honda filters but 10w 40 car oil. 'Even the VFR engine that did 440,000 miles was almost all on the cheap stuff. Because I'm running constantly, not stopping and starting or leaving it to stand, it's been fine.'

Tyres are another big expense, but Stan has a solution. 'I'll put on part-worns, if they're not too tatty. I get them free. I'll even repair punctures and ride on them – I do it properly. I'd expect a new tyre to last 8000 miles in winter. In summer I do more cross-country stuff to even out the wear so they'll go a bit further.

'I just roll along because I'm thinking of chain wear, sprocket wear, tyres. I get about 80,000 miles from an RK chain – nothing else lasts as long. I run a Scottoller and the chains are always saturated in oil. And my chain and sprockets are always spotless.'

The other big expense Stan faces is petrol, so fuel economy is vital for him. 'I had the VTEC VFR for a test and it was a disaster. It's a great bike and I was very impressed, but I walked away from it because I couldn't keep up with the fuel consumption. It was only doing 35mph max.'

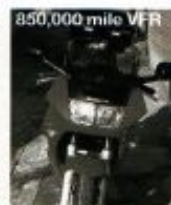
Stan has two sets of wheels, brake discs, forks and exhausts for the Blackbird – one set for winter, a cleaner set for summer. 'I don't run two bikes, though. I tried that and found that one always suffered.'



That tyre will last for 8000 miles



This FJ lasted only three weeks



850,000 mile VFR



Blackbird with cool cans and big screen

MODEL	MILEAGE	YEAR	STAN'S VERDICT
Kawasaki GT550	15,000	1983	'Crap. Constant problems'
Kawasaki GT750	184,000	1984	'It was a shed'
Yamaha FJ1100	30,000	1986	'Not much weather protection'
Yamaha FH1200	14,000 (in three weeks)	1987	'Terrible vibration, it had to go'
Yamaha FJ1200	90,000	1987	'Better at first, then shook itself to bits'
Honda VFR750 (FJ)	140,000	1988	'Superb'
Honda VFR750 (FK)	146,000	1989	'50mpg'
Honda VFR750 (FL)	852,000	1990	'Brilliant. But the sidestand rotted' (two engines 412,000 and 440,000)
Kawasaki ZZ-R1100 (C3)	252,000	1996	'Nice bike'
Kawasaki ZZ-R1100 (D1)	60,000	1997	'Written off in Brighton'
Honda Blackbird	410,000	1998	'Excellent. Smooth thanks to carbs'
Honda Blackbird	205,000	2001	'More powerful but not as smooth'

High Mile Man

it went *bang* on my forehead. I had a right wobble – nearly knocked me off the bike.'

They haven't all been near misses, though. In 1999 an untaxed, unMoT'd Metro driven by a lad with no insurance (or licence, naturally) collected Stan as he sat on the bike, parked up and eating an ice cream on Brighton seafront. The ZZ-R's frame was bent 3in out of line, the can flattened and the Stan had all his toes broken.

That marked the switch back to Hondas. But a year later, on his new Blackbird, he was heading up the Fosse Way when a TNT driver pulled out to overtake a combine harvester uphill – over double white lines. Stan was right in his path. He slammed on his brakes and headed for the hedge, but the truck's

“ The most I've done in a day was 1523 miles – mind you, it took me more than 23 hours to do it ”

wheel nuts ripped through the shin plates of his boot. The worst bit, he says, was being made to lie in the sun for half an hour in full riding kit, waiting for the ambulance.

Now on his second Blackbird, Stan reckons he's only got another year or so of despatching in him. 'I'm getting towards retiring. And my wife worries a bit more since I had those two accidents.

'I'll still ride for pleasure,' he adds. 'I'm like the grandad of the bikers round here. They know who I am. I'll always love my bikes, but I don't want to be doing this forever.

The shortest journey I do is 32 miles, which is Swindon to Cirencester. The most I've done in a day was 1523 miles – mind you, it took me more than 23 hours to do it. A typical day will be 600 miles – that's only three trips to London and back.

'Overall I've done nearly two and a half million despatch miles. Years ago, there were lots of people doing similar mileages, but there's not so many now. It's mostly vans now, or emails. The bike side is dying. It's a shame, really.' ■



Stan on... kit

'The kit makes a huge difference. I wear thermals, my Gear one-piece leathers, then my Spada jacket and overtrousers in winter,' says Stan. 'In summer it's just my leathers.' His gear has all been found by trial and error over the years. The best for the money, he reckons, is Belgian-made Richa kit. He also rates Hein Gericke kit ('That two-finger Pathan glove is excellent, if you can get used to the two-finger thing') and Buffalo jackets ('But the pockets always let in water. They say they don't, but they bloody well do.')

A good neckwarmer is essential for winter riding and Stan has a silk balaclava for the coldest days, but he doesn't have much time for heated kit. 'I've got some, but I'll only use it once or twice a year. It's lovely when you get that initial chill, but once I get going it makes me feel a bit sick,' he says. But then, Stan says he's acclimatised to the cold.

Stan on... the police

'Compared with ten years ago, there's hardly any police. When you're bombing, great. But they just don't patrol the motorways like they used to – and you can see that driving's worse. Back then they were everywhere: on the bridges, on the slip roads, on their little ramps at the side of the road. Always there. And always where you least expected them. Now it's just a couple of camera cars and these "safety camera" vans. That's a laugh, that is. They just want to nick you for speeding and tax. I always keep my tax up to date. It's not worth the hassle.

'In this game you're always pushing your luck. I've been pulled over by the Old Bill loads of times, especially up in town. Usually it's to warn me if oil from my chain oiler has dripped onto the tyre. Or I'll be trying to get one more day from a tyre and they'll tell me it's down to the warning line – then spray the tyre and say, "If I see you tomorrow with this mark on your tyre, I'll nick you", so I have to change it. Sometimes, it's to ask me where I got the Blue Flame exhausts on the Blackbird.'



Stan on... concentration

'You get to read the road better, the more you ride. I don't have breakfast or eat during the day, if I can help it. I get halfway through the day and feel bloated. I keep the concentration going because I'm racing the clock, thinking about where I'm going, how I'm going to get back – I do different route if I can. It's harder when I'm not on a job.

'Motorways are the trouble. I've passed the M69 before, when I was supposed to be going down it. I've gone past junctions without noticing. You know, thinking about something else and saying to myself, "Junction 9's coming up" and it's Junction 11... It doesn't happen when you know the junction that you've got to come off at, but on journeys like you're doing the full length of the M1.'

Stan on... weird cargoes

'I once took a stuffed Armadillo from Cirencester to Chippenham. Then there was the breast implants I took from Swindon to London. They told me to go steady...

'I had a pick-up from the GCHQ intelligence offices in Cheltenham and they fitted a lead lining to my topbox. I had one of those first, huge mobile phones at the time and the bloke said it wouldn't work while I was carrying this package. He was right – it didn't. No idea what was in there.'



Stan on... roads

'The roads are a lot slipperier now than they used to be. When you've got a bit of new tarmac it's very nice and smooth and the water disperses very quickly, but on older tarmac the water clings – not just in the lorry troughs, all over the road. The top of the Fosse Way is one of the worst bits if you want to tramp on. It's not damaged, it's just rippled. Really limits your speed.'

Stan on... punctures

Stan's more than happy to repair punctures in his rear tyres and ride for thousands of miles. In fact, he's been known to do a few miles with a puncture. 'Don't ride with a flat front – it's impossible. I once rode about 30 miles with a flat rear. You can go quite fast. There's a point at about 30mph when you think all hell's going to break loose, but once you're up to 60 or 70 the tyre seems to expand and it's okay. Roundabouts are tricky, though.'

Stan sets out for another 600 miles, minimum

