

# CLASSIC DRIVER

## [This Vincent was even faster than its shadow...](#)

### Lead

Has there ever been a motorcycle that's vanquished almost everything else on the road to the same extent the Vincent Black Shadow has? Rare, exotic, complex, and fast — really fast — the British bruiser is the absolute dream for anyone with the slightest whiff of two-wheeled interest...

"That Goddam fiendish Vincent Black Shadow." That's how the legendary American journalist and author of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* described what is commonly regarded as the world's first 'superbike'. Thompson was a certified speed freak, and the Black Shadow, with its "bottomless pit of torque" and insatiable desire to kill whoever was brave (or foolish) enough to climb astride, was as addictive as any drug — and it's fair to say he knew quite a bit about drugs.

### The Widow-maker



It's hardly surprising that Thompson was so infatuated with the Black Shadow. There was little else on the road in the early 1950s that came remotely close to offering the same kind of performance. Vincent's adverts, which read, 'The world's fastest standard motorcycle — this is a fact, not a slogan', said it all. "Its nickname was the 'Widow-maker' because the engine was far too powerful for the chassis", comments Jean Marie Maréchal, a motorcycle connoisseur and the former owner of this fabulous three-owner Series-C example.

At Montlhéry in '52, the company broke eight speed records, including one for maintaining above 100mph for over six hours. And at Bonneville four years prior, Roland 'Rollie' Free famously removed the seat of his modified Black Shadow, stripped down to a swimsuit, a bathing hat, and a pair of borrowed trainers, and proceeded to break the 150mph record while lying prone on the mudguard.

### An Aston Martin on two wheels



“If MV Agusta is the Ferrari of the bike world, then Vincent is the Aston Martin”, suggests Maréchal. “And if a Rapide is a DB4, then the Black Shadow is a DB4GT. They were both so innovative, and their respective visionary fathers, Phil Vincent and David Brown, were geniuses.”

Indeed, the bike was technically masterful, and some would say beautifully overdesigned. Characteristics such as the fact that its thunderous 53bhp, 998cc V-twin was a stressed member of the chassis, negating the need for a heavy steel frame, and that it had two drum brakes at both the front and the rear, in a time when some bikes were still sold with just one rear brake, made the Black Shadow a force to be reckoned with. What’s even more startling is that a tiny company from Stevenage, England, with scarce resources and budget, was able to develop and build these beasts for over 20 years.

## An instant classic



Naturally, all this technology came at a cost — £400 to be precise — which was ultimately the Black Shadow’s, and the company’s, undoing. But this only heightened the elusiveness of both it and the Vincent’s well-heeled clientele. “I know a woman whose husband owned a Black Shadow in the 1950s”, recalls Maréchal. “She told me that whenever they arrived anywhere astride the bike, they were treated like royalty. Other bikes were just not comparable!”

It’s this that Maréchal believes earned the bike’s collector status almost immediately and has since stapled it onto every motorcycle enthusiast’s dream shopping list. “The Black Shadow was already a collectors’ item when it came out, and it’s maintained that status ever since”, he explains. “It’s an absolute must-have in any collection — you simply can’t fail to be won over when you stand in its presence.” Inevitably, prices have risen steadily, and today, these purebred British machines fetch over 100,000 US dollars. And while that’s undoubtedly a princely sum, in comparison to several other very rare pre-War motorcycles, Maréchal deems it a snip.

## Spine tingling, wonderful





The bike you're looking at, which Maréchal recently sold to a good friend of his, is a Series-C model, which benefits from the more advanced and strong Girdraulic forks. They were so strong that even after being crash-tested into the side of an Austin A35, the blades remained "dead true." "The Series-C is the best from a riding point of view", comments Maréchal. If the grin on his face as he carves through the French countryside is anything to go by, we've no reason not to believe him. The raucous digadigadiga of the V-twin is spine tingling and wonderful.

As the Black Shadow has aged, so too has its aura and mystique. You can gauge a car or a bike's legend simply by your reaction when you're greeted with it in real life — one glance at the Norton and we were trembling at the knees. A true motoring milestone, the Vincent Black Shadow once ruled the world, and we think it's only a matter of time until it climbs back atop the throne, this time in the collector motorcycle world.

*Photos: Rémi Dargegen for Classic Driver © 2017*

## Gallery





















**Source URL:** <https://www.classicdriver.com/en/article/bikes/vincent-was-even-faster-its-shadow>  
© Classic Driver. All rights reserved.