

John Britten

Tim Hanna

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DEDICATION

To Mary Rose Hanna

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Preface

When I began researching this book I discovered that John Britten did not seem to have known anyone who kept a diary. This made researching his life and works somewhat complicated as his story was held in the collective memory of a community of people whose numbers seemed to expand in any direction I cared to explore. Many of those whose memories became part of this account often did not remember things the same way or even in the same chronological order as each other, a situation additionally complicated by the obvious variety of opinion about what it all meant and the occasional stubborn silence.

It was inevitably something of a trial. A trial in which I hope there is no judgement, only a sincere attempt to understand why, given the usual human frailties, things happened the way they did. The great majority of the quoted material in this book is from interviews that I conducted or personal correspondence. In a few cases I have used material whose source is unknown, and accordingly, I apologise to anyone who has not been acknowledged.

This is largely a story about one extraordinary individual, but it is also the story of a number of others, all of them talented and most of them equally individual. Together they were 'the Team', which built the Britten V-twins, possibly the fastest four-stroke motorcycles in the world for a time, machines that could wheel-stand at 150 mph in top gear simply by opening the throttle and could hurtle all the way up to 185 mph and beyond. Machines that, furthermore, presented a vision of motorcycle design to the legions of fans they enthralled that was, at least in part, romantic—a romance featuring an individual standing against the status quo, a drama played out against the sound of thunder.

Let no one seek to diminish the difficulties of John Britten's undertaking or decry his achievements. John Britten was a dreamer and motorcycles have a habit of inspiring dreams in those who fall prey to their seductive guiles. He was set apart from his fellow dreamers, however, by the depth of his talent, the tenacity

of his character and the strength of his spirit. Most dreamers are defeated simply finding the starting point, the moment when dreaming must give way to action. John Britten was different. He had the ability to think his dreams through and to quantify what would be for most the wildest flights of pure imagination, reducing them to logical, achievable steps. He was by nature an adventurer, a man who knew that nothing was ever gained until it was attempted, and he acted boldly and with confidence. It was true that once he accepted a place in his family's business he had money to pursue his passions. However, it was equally true that having money was never a guarantee of success. And money is a relative measure. He had to be very, very clever. He had to achieve a number of critical goals, any one of which would have required a corporation to dedicate many times more than the amount he spent in total. There was no research and development department, no vast resource of top-flight specialist engineers and advanced computer modelling facilities. He therefore had to achieve his critical goals from a stand-up start because he could never afford anything like the money an established manufacturer would spend doing a fraction of what he attempted.

And so to all who contributed to the remarkable story of Britten Motorcycles, I say, as Lindsay, whom you will meet in this account, would say, 'Good on ya.'

And to the rest of you, happy trails.

—Tim Hanna, August 2003

Introduction

I met John Kenton Britten a few times. The first time was in 1993 when I walked into his office in an old commercial building called Kenton Chambers in downtown Christchurch to keep an appointment. I wanted to write about him for a magazine and after some protracted negotiations he had reluctantly agreed to an interview. The fact that he worked in an office rather than a shed at the bottom of his garden, as was then the popular conception, was the first surprise. The second was that the building shared an old family name with him. It was the first intimation of the standing John's family enjoyed in Christchurch, where four generations of Brittens had worked diligently to become a solid, established and successful presence in society. By this time John had been the subject of a television documentary and quite a number of stories in the international motorcycle press. Like most people, I had formed from these the impression that John Britten was a somewhat intense man with a shy but engaging manner who struggled mightily in the solitude of his simple workshop to create the most ferociously powerful and daringly innovative motorcycle in the world. Instead, I found him sitting behind a very smart desk, his own handiwork as it transpired, looking highly groomed in a beautifully cut, dark suit. If this was also not exactly what I expected, neither was his opening remark, which was 'I hate talking to journalists.'

I told him that was all right—I didn't really consider myself a journalist. And so we talked. He told me that he was a property developer who liked designing and building things in his spare time instead of watching television. Property developers, he said, were megalomaniacs. He pointed through the window at the city below and told me that he wanted to move streets and buildings around so that everything could work better, and he outlined an obviously enormous plan in broad, bold brushstrokes that meant little to me, a stranger in town, but made his eyes light up with excitement. We went to lunch and talked about ornithopters and architecture, evolution, yacht design and ... motorcycles. At some point the

discussion turned to personal motivation and he said something that was probably as responsible for my writing this book as anything else. He said he had always believed that if he did the things he wanted to do the rewards would follow. Later that afternoon we dropped into the Britten workshop, a spacious and generously equipped building, located a five-minute walk away from the office, where I encountered a team of fellows beavering away in different sections of the place on various parts of Britten motorcycles. Night fell and still the work went on until John gathered them all up and we went out to party. I wrote my piece and shortly after that John phoned me to say that he had enjoyed reading it. 'I think you got me,' he said candidly.

I next encountered him up at the racetrack at Pukekohe where two Britten motorcycles were contesting a round of the 1994 New Zealand Formula One Championship. The first of the two races began for the Britten Team with pandemonium, as John made a last-minute decision to switch tyres. I can't remember now if he wanted wets, drys or intermediates but, typically, it was what everybody else did not have. The delay denied Loren Poole, one of the two Britten riders, his place on the grid and it looked like he might miss the start altogether. During the madness I wound up standing in the wrong place outside the tent—John, careering around the outside, ran straight into me and we both ended up on the ground. Amid the growing panic as the back tyre on Loren's Britten refused to bite on the metal starting rollers, which were misted with light rain, he laughed. And then he helped me up. Loren's bike finally fired and, as he was easing up to the back of the grid with the clutch out, the flag fell. He opened the taps blasting straight through the field on the back wheel to lead into the first corner, such was the power of an already unleashed V-1000. Of course, his tyres were cold and other bikes soon slipped past.

In the second race John and I watched from the embankment as Jason McEwen, the other Britten rider for that season, hammered his V-1000 around the track, rubbing shoulders with Robert Holden, one of New Zealand's true motorsport heroes, who was pounding his Ducati along on the very ragged limit. The two were in a race of their own, way out in front of the rest of the field. Every time they went through the awkward high-speed flat-camber corner that leads onto the pit straight, so close they might have been connected by a very short rope, John was on his feet punching his fists into the air, roaring warnings and encouragement. And as they droned off into the distance he broke into a kind of dance, actually more of a crazy, arrhythmic shuffle, which he accompanied with loud whooping and hollering.

While we were waiting for the bikes to come around again John calmed down, resumed his seat and told me he still derived enormous pleasure from just walking

around his machines, considering them from different angles. Sometimes, he said, that alone almost seemed sufficient reward for his efforts, but then there would be another day at a racetrack when he would rediscover the incomparable thrill of watching a talented rider wring out the best his machine had to offer.

As we walked back through the pits, a band of Hell's Angels greeted him affectionately and he exchanged a few words with a couple he obviously knew. As we went our different ways someone said that they loved the bike and there was a quick murmur of agreement. And they said 'love', not 'like'. No one tried to shake his hand or pat him on the shoulder—it was enough that he acknowledged the compliment with an open grin and a word of thanks. It was a great day and I looked forward to the next one.

But there would never be a next one and I will never forget the strange sense of unreality that accompanied the news just a few months later that John Britten had only weeks to live. Just before the end I was back in Christchurch staying with one of his many, many friends. There was reason to celebrate in the Britten Team because they had just won their first International Championship, in the British, European and American Racing Class, or BEARS as it was known. This was the class John and his friends had started in 1983 in order to continue racing their non-Japanese motorcycles at their local racetrack without having to compete against Japanese motorcycles, which were by then too quick for the likes of Triumphs and Nortons. The idea had proven enormously popular locally and had been the catalyst for John to build a BEARS bike that could foot it in any company. The idea had then spread rapidly through much of the rest of the motorcycling world, finally spawning an international series in 1995. The World BEARS Championship had been contested for the first time that year and Britten motorcycles had cleaned up. The television news showed a still photograph of John and the rider who had taken the championship, Andrew Stroud. John was sitting up in bed, looking gaunt and wasted. Next to him, Andrew was holding the prize, a huge glass cup. A recording of John's weak and laboured words was played over the image. He congratulated his team and said how very thrilled he was to win, and by the time he had delivered his brief statement my host was in tears. It was just a plain rotten, bastard of a situation and many people had great difficulty accepting it.

There was another day at Pukekohe, six months after John's death, for classic race bikes and a Britten was there to do a demonstration. Andrew Stroud, who was John's favourite rider, tore off a quick lap, wheel-standing the big barking V-twin all over the track. He finished this circuit by standing the bike on its shark nose with a savage application of the front brake, before proceeding on the front wheel for an impressive distance. When he had reached the part of the track that faces the middle of the stands he subsided back onto two wheels. A great, rolling cloud of

white smoke quickly enveloped the machine and the crowd caught only occasional glimpses of Andrew shuffling the bike about before both disappeared in the smoke completely. How long they remained hidden was hard to say, but the bike suddenly launched itself, very nearly vertically, out of the smoke with Andrew standing bolt upright on the pegs. All eyes followed him as he kissed the front down and tipped into the sweeper at the end of pit straight. We looked back as the smoke drifted gracefully away from the launch site and the Britten droned off into the middle distance—and we saw a big, black, rather neat B smeared on the light grey track surface. There was a cheer but it was somewhat ragged, as if all the hard men up in the stands had collectively caught something in their throats.

Two-and-a-half years later I was again in the South Island researching this book, riding around on my Norton for the better part of a year. Along the way I met many riders who had memories of John to share. He had a remarkable selection of friends in many different areas but none were more loyal to him than his mates in the motorcycle fraternity. I expected wariness on their part but instead found the company of this hardy southern band congenial and encouraging, and in time learned something of the spirit that had encouraged John Britten to reach so far beyond anything anyone ever expected of him.

Throughout the period when the Britten motorcycle was being developed and raced, and for some time before that and ever since, the chill of economic depression breathed coldly through New Zealand. This was most obvious in the country's provincial towns where struggling businesses were often surrounded by the empty buildings left by those that had already shut down. Old towns founded on sweat, ambition and forethought, all once busy and full of purpose, had fallen on hard times. People who owned property lost their savings as values slumped. Tourist dollars went only to a few very select places. Farming wasn't generally worth a damn. Manufacturing had been gutted by cheap, uncontrolled imports from Third World countries where child and slave labour were acceptable.

Many of New Zealand's major national assets, including such items as the telecommunications system, railways network, forestry (including the biggest planted forest in the world) and generous natural gas resource, had been traded away. No practical answer had by then been proffered, except to allow the country's slide into permanent penury to continue by selling what was left, including the land itself, to her new foreign masters.

Many BEARS racers were struggling to stay out of debt, or, in even more cases, to manage the debt they had. Certainly it was harder for many to indulge in pleasures like motorcycle racing. In spite of this I never encountered any of the resentment that one would normally expect from those who were struggling toward those who, like John, had always enjoyed the security of inherited wealth. I believe

the reason for this lay in something John Britten once alluded to in a television interview. He said he was awed by the way people around the world really seemed to love his motorcycle and he thought they did so because they saw the machine as a victory for the individual. I'm sure he was right. In all the dealings I had with the BEARS fraternity, no matter how threadbare they may have been, they were always proud of John. And they claimed him as one of their own even though he was, by most of their standards, rich and privileged.

I was also privileged to meet many of John's personal friends who had not been involved in the motorcycle project, and to share with some of them the relaxed and generous hospitality they once shared with John. I survived one of Robin Judkins' legendary post-'Coast to Coast' parties, when a seemingly limitless supply of Speight's beer—the major sponsor of the marathon running, canoeing and cycling event he started—and methode champenoise fuelled a shindig to rival any I'd ever attended. And then there was the invitation to attend a barbecue hosted by Derek and Rebekah McCullough, proud owners of the only house their old friend John Britten ever personally helped to build using the revolutionary sandstone and expanding styrene foam composite system he'd invented and developed. I arrived early and had a good look around their home, which was perched high on a steep slope overlooking the ocean where a brisk, chill wind whipped trails of spume from the crests of the waves. There was a generous open kitchen and lounge-cum-party area curled around a big deck with large folding doors linking the outside and the indoors. The walls looked like big blocks of earth-toned stone, revealed as being half a foot thick at the window and door openings. We were out of the wind and the evening was mild, but as the sun set a long, low, wet, cloud rolled in from the sea and blanketed the hill. Temperatures on the deck plummeted. One had only to step back through the still open doors, however, to find the house pumping out the most cossetting warmth. It was a superb illustration of the structure's quite outstanding thermal qualities. Rebekah told me that she could not, and would not, ever live in another house, and that she would eventually die in it. Derek nodded in agreement. 'This is our terminal home,' he said.

During the final weeks of my stay in the South Island I lived in John's old seaside holiday home at Church Bay on the shores of Lyttelton Harbour. One very dark night when the wind was moaning through the pine trees Robin Judkins made his way out from town and we spent the evening talking about old times. His old times with John. About how they would convene late at night in some quiet pub when they felt the need to unburden themselves of the press of the dreams, plans and reflections that drove them both. He recalled how at these meetings they would unleash a flood of words and ideas on one another, each trying to say as much as possible before the other interjected. He also told me how in the final

weeks he sent a picture postcard to John every day featuring a graphic he knew would interest his old friend. And then he told me that to understand John's story you had to know that everyone who knew him was in love with him. I took that with a heaped teaspoon of salt, but subsequently, even after I'd spent time with the bitter and the disillusioned—and there were a few—I began to wonder if it wasn't actually true. Later that night as I walked up the drive with Robin he told me how on another dark night walking there with John a tree branch had poked John in the eye. And just as he told me this, the same thing happened to me. I cursed and Robin laughed.

'That's just like him,' he said. 'He always demanded the last word, even if he had to stay up all night to get it.'

CHAPTER ONE

First Steps

In January 1989, a small group of motorcycle enthusiasts gathered at Ruapuna Raceway on the Canterbury Plains in the South Island of New Zealand. It was a practice day and a number of other riders were running off laps out on the track. Although it was high summer and the plains are known for the endless parade of hot, dusty days the season brings, it was a dull afternoon with low clouds. The group wheeled a dark grey motorcycle with white wheels and a white exhaust system down off a trailer hooked up to a Mercedes 280SL. The motorcycle looked like a tough piece of race kit, unlike any recognisable make, while the Benz looked as if it had seen slightly better days, as did the faded maroon 1936 Ford Coupe that was driven onto a set of rollers used to start the bike. After one of the crew had perched the motorcycle on the rollers another fired up the V8 Coupe. For some time nothing much happened and then suddenly the V-twin motorcycle barked into life. It was no symphony. The sound was harsh, raw and penetratingly loud.

Out on the track the machine circulated erratically as the engine spat and popped, while a plastic hose poking out the back of the bodywork dribbled a steady stream of oil from the crankcase. For the rest of the afternoon the group fiddled with its innards between hesitant laps, tweaking the fuel-injection system in a vain attempt to find smooth running and power. They fidgeted uncomfortably when other riders stalked over to complain about the oil the machine was leaving on the track. When the light finally faded the group loaded the bike back on the trailer and a somewhat forlorn little cavalcade headed back to Christchurch. Obviously they had a long way to go before the bike would even run reliably, let alone win a race. It was hardly an auspicious start, but great endeavours and abject failures often begin in the same humble fashion. For John Britten, the man responsible for the grey machine, it was just another set of obstacles to be overcome or, in other words, business as usual.

In time, the Britten motorcycle would go on to capture the imagination of a

nation not given easily to bestowing such celebrity, as well as motorcycle enthusiasts around the world. John Britten would stun the motorcycle establishment with a series of racers that would carve out a reputation for being among the most ferocious 4-stroke motorcycles ever built. The fact that they were also breathtakingly, outrageously different added an element of genuine consternation for established motorcycle manufacturers. For them, design was of necessity a slowly evolving process with small advances following equally slow market acceptance. It would have been courting disaster to act without such restraint. To their chagrin, however, a growing multitude of fans, and a significant part of the international motorcycle press, would in time regard the Britten as a dynamic package of fresh thinking that made everything else look old hat. Every heartbreaking failure and every victory added fresh lustre to the evolving romantic saga of a brilliant privateer defeating the best with a motorcycle he made himself in his backyard shed. The reality that John Britten was by most standards a wealthy man, and that far from being a garden shed, the space he laboured long and hard in with a growing band of highly talented helpers was more exactly the workshop wing of his mansion (and then a succession of industrial buildings culminating in the substantial art-deco ex-railways building owned by one of the companies in his property development group), did not substantially alter his achievements, or the odds against success. To enthusiasts of motorcycles, design and the competitive spirit the unfolding story of the Britten motorcycle was an inspiration for reasons that transcended pure results, although there were plenty to celebrate.

In some ways John Britten came to represent all things to all people. For many New Zealanders his endeavours were a tonic against the unrelenting programme of dominant New Right market-force ideology that insisted New Zealand could only follow where more powerful markets led, to the point where local industry had been all but destroyed in a slavish rush to join the new global economy. The promise of trickle-down rewards for those not in a position to benefit from the feeding frenzy that accompanied the dismantling of what had been one of the most successful and benevolent social experiments in the world proved hollow. Instead, generational unemployment had become a harsh reality for many families, 'trickle down' resembling nothing so much as being pissed on by the new rich.

To critics of the New Right, John Britten's achievements were proof positive that New Zealanders did not have to follow meekly; that they could do anything they set their minds to do and could do it brilliantly. It was in that sense a reaffirmation of a splendid national value that stated that New Zealanders, forced to accept the responsibility of self-sufficiency by their very isolation, had developed the ingenuity and audacity to attempt and succeed where others faltered. It was a triumph for the little man that all could rejoice in. To defenders of the New Right,

on the other hand (and the arguments between both sides very neatly divided the country down the middle), his successes proved that an open-market economy was effective because it favoured the individual and encouraged enterprise.

John Britten had little if anything to say on the subject, which of course made his success available to both sides of the argument. It did not matter what political, economic or social view New Zealanders had when they considered John Britten; he was simply 'the motorcycle guy'—a diffident, personable hero for difficult times. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that he was popularly revered.

John (who also answered to Johnny among his friends) Kenton Britten was born in Christchurch on 1 August 1950 ten minutes before midnight and half an hour before his twin sister Marguerite. As he weighed in at a hefty 8.5 pounds and his sister 7.2 pounds, their mother, Ruvae, must have felt relieved of a substantial burden. (Pronounced Roo-vay, John's mother's name is of Fijian origin.)

The twins' father, Bruce Britten, was a businessman who had inherited his father's successful bicycle manufacturing and retail business, Butler Cycles, which he shared with his brother David. The two brothers were at the head of a family that had originally hailed from a small, rural community in England, the beginning of the new line having arrived in Canterbury in the form of one George Britten in the 1880s.

When George Britten first stepped off the sailing ship that had battled its way around the world to bring him to Lyttelton Harbour, he found himself among a thriving society already proudly self-reliant, an achievement that was only partly explained by New Zealand's extreme geographic isolation.¹ The rapid success of this, the British Empire's most southern outpost, reflected various propitious circumstances peculiar to the settlement of southern New Zealand, all of which boded well for new arrivals such as George.

Unlike their northern New Zealand counterparts, the new settlers of the south were little troubled by the objections of local Maori. The native population of the South Island, already comparatively sparse, had been viciously cut back around the time of the early settlements through savage incursions by predacious northern Maori war parties armed with muskets. The survivors therefore offered little impediment to the new arrivals' ambitions, and when the First Fleet splashed its anchors into Lyttelton Harbour in 1850 land was virtually free for the taking.

The English immigrants who established Canterbury were drawn for the most part from rural stock rather than from the ranks of craftspeople living in England's cities. Although they were generally poor and unskilled they were not, as was the case in Australia, convicted felons and their warders. They were industrious and solid, and they made dependable neighbours. Because they were not specialists, and had not specialists to go to, they became jacks-of-all-trades. With the kind of

absolute confidence that only absolute religious and cultural certainty can inspire, they set about the enormous task of transforming the mysterious, forest-shrouded land in which they found themselves into a northern English landscape. To quite an astonishing degree they succeeded. And they did so very quickly.

Ballast stones in Lyttelton Harbour told the story. In the earliest days of the Christchurch settlement, sailing ships from the mother country arrived full of supplies. These included all manner of foodstuffs, fabrics, tools and machinery and even prefabricated housing. After discharging their cargo they then loaded up with ballast rocks for the return voyage home.² Within twenty years, however, the ships were dumping ballast rocks, brought all the way from Plymouth, into Lyttelton Harbour and were taking cargo, mostly wool and grain, back to England. In just two decades the southern settlement had become largely self-sufficient and it was making money.

Until relatively recently, New Zealanders on the whole accepted an egalitarian ethic that generally denied the accumulation of great wealth for a few in favour of adequate means for the many. However, if there was an early exception to this it was on the plains and in the high country of the South Island, where farmer barons soon accumulated great wealth, primarily through the export of their wool to the hungry mills of north England. It was the kind of wealth that allowed them to buy the very best the world had to offer, including of course the very latest of mechanical innovations for modern farming and urban living. At that time, when the British Empire was at its most influential and the Industrial Revolution at the height of its momentum, such innovations were astonishingly numerous and ingenious. Enthusiasm for such machines almost became a popular mania and local entrepreneurs were soon involved in their manufacture, taking on the challenge not only of replicating the devices sent out from the industrial mills of Mother England, but also improving them and inventing new ones of their own.

Of all the new machines none made a greater impact on the general populace than the bicycle. At first it was strictly an indulgence for the wealthy, but very quickly ordinary citizens realised the unheralded mobility offered by the new machines. Christchurch, being situated on a flat plain, was the perfect place for cycling and by the 1880s it seemed that everyone was doing it. Soon a number of local manufacturers had sprung up, among them the company Butler Cycles Ltd, which would eventually play a significant part in the lives of George Britten's son, two of his grandsons and one of his great-grandsons.

As he surveyed his new home, however, it was unlikely that George entertained any thoughts of bicycles. His one ambition was to resume in better circumstances the farming life he had left behind in Ashley Guise, the tiny English country village where his family had lived for countless generations. He was lucky enough to

meet and marry Catherine Pigeon, the daughter of a Banks Peninsula farmer, after whose family Pigeon Bay was named. Catherine was an accomplished landswoman and was known throughout the district as an outstanding side-saddle rider. The couple's farming prospered on the peninsula and, as was the fashion of the day, they had a large family, including a son called Arthur George.

By 1914 Arthur had made up his mind to leave the farm and he managed to buy the tiny bicycle manufacturer Butler Cycles Ltd. He hardly had time to open the doors under his new management, however, when war broke out in Europe and he joined the army, training as a gunner in the artillery. Along with most of the young men who made up his generation, he endured the miserable hell of the trenches in France, but returned home at war's end. While away he had learned that his father had abandoned his mother and, severely upset by the news, he undertook to look after her, a pledge that rested easily with Isabel, the woman he married shortly after his return. Her father had brought his wife and five children to New Zealand from Scotland, where he had been a printer, to find a better life for them. By all accounts it was a wise decision and after some initial privations the family thrived.

Isabel was sixteen years old when she arrived and she was already a devout woman who prayed every day for several hours on her knees for those she loved, a habit she was to hold all her life. She and Arthur were engaged shortly before he left for war and married soon after he returned. The marriage was a happy one. Arthur shared his wife's faith and understood her fervour, in time providing her with a small room where she could practise her devotions without interruption. The couple had three girls and four boys, but two of the boys died while still very young, one of meningitis and one from a fall, leaving Bruce, the elder brother, and David. Arthur died at the age of sixty-four, after suffering from a weak heart for many years, whereupon Bruce took over the business, which under Arthur's steady guidance had grown into a solidly successful if unspectacular enterprise.

Bruce proved to be a businessman of a more ambitious nature and he soon began to build up the company. In addition to pushbikes, he began to sell motorbikes and acquired agencies for ranges of lawnmowers, whitegoods and televisions. Brother David joined him in the business and they did very well. Bruce built a splendid home in Christchurch and then built an equally smart holiday home in Queenstown, the alpine resort town on the shores of Lake Wakatipu in Central Otago.

David Turner, a contemporary of John's and a person destined to become one of his close life-long friends, first encountered the Britten family at home in Queenstown.

It was an impressive modern structure built of stone and timber. Even though I was

only about nine I knew it was very stylish. I was surprised to find the children already in bed when Dad and I arrived, as it was only seven at night. The twins were in bunks and John had the top one. He leaned over and gave me this warm, open smile. There was a beautiful aura in that room that I remember to this day. The Britten family home in Christchurch was an equally graceful, modern structure in the fashionable suburb of Fendalton. It was set on generous sweeping lawns bordered by a stream that flowed with crystal-clear spring water like most such streams that run through the city. The home was an immaculate setting for an immaculate family. Ruvae was very involved in ikebana, the ancient Japanese art of flower arrangement, and the interior of the house generally reflected the fastidious simplicity that is the hallmark of Japanese art and design. Shoji Hamada, the famous Japanese potter, who was revered in his homeland as a living national treasure, actually stayed there on a visit to New Zealand.

Bruce's interests were somewhat less esoteric. He travelled to America on a number of occasions and was tremendously impressed by the 'can-do, up and at 'em' aspect of the American national character. He became a determined modernist.

Many visitors to the Britten household of John's childhood saw various items of domestic electric gadgetry and experienced such American basics as instant coffee for the first time. It was often the first place they saw the very latest sporting equipment. The Britten family was equipped with moulded-plastic ski boots, for example, years before they became available in New Zealand. A weed-free, white-stone-chip driveway approached the house across the perfectly manicured lawn. Fine new cars and shiny new bikes were always parked in the garage. The house was arranged in an L-shape around a large pool and the rooms inside were large and airy. The family played tennis in crisp, new whites and entertained with tasteful precision. Life was pleasantly rather than relentlessly social.

Among the many visitors, however, was one who remained disinterested in all such things. Bruce's mother, Isabel—'Gran' to his children—was as always far more interested in the promise of eternal life than anything as obviously transitory as instant coffee or flower arranging. Isabel's love for her grandchildren was, like her faith, absolute and overpowering and she visited often. John and his sisters adored her in return, completely entranced by the indomitable little Scottish lady who continued to drive her car well into her nineties, reminding everyone with gusto and bright, shining conviction that there was more to life than the material rewards of this Earth.

For their first few years John and his sister (because they were born on different days they were never referred to as twins) operated as a single unit. Ruvae recalls that the two conversed in their own language and at school learned as one

person. In most respects they were quite opposite and therefore complemented each other well. They divided tasks evenly and played to their respective strengths, so, as it turned out, Marguerite did all the reading while John did the arithmetic.

Ruvae remembered John laughing constantly but said that even tickling Marguerite would not raise a giggle. Marguerite, she said, was shrewd and careful. She would lick all her lollies and put them back in the package while John would scoff all of his straight away. (Marguerite was not that shrewd because John would apparently eat her lollies next, anyway.) When both were young adults John kept his accounts on the floor of his car while Marguerite kept immaculate books. According to their mother, Marguerite was always placidly even-tempered while John, like his older sister, Dorenda, could be fiery. If you could have boiled them up, Ruvae said, you would have had a perfect individual.

It was partly to overcome the fact that they were operating as one individual that they were separated at age eleven, when John became a day-pupil at St Andrew's, an exclusive private school catering to the scions of the establishment in Christchurch.

David Turner also attended St Andrew's, a highly regimented school run by a board of old boys with an ex-Royal New Zealand Army brigadier as a headmaster. It was, he recalled, an establishment that typically prided itself on its sporting traditions and maintained rigid discipline with generous lashings of the cane.

It was not uncommon for the headmaster to have an entire class lined up outside his door waiting to be given a couple of strokes across the bum for something or other. You would go in one door and out another. We were expected to wear our school uniforms at all times and we caught hell if we were seen wearing mufti by a master or a prefect during the weekend. When that happened you could only spend the rest of the weekend shuddering in anticipation of being called up at Monday morning assembly for a beating. But John seemed to avoid most of that and I don't recall him being caned much. Actually I don't remember him being in trouble of any kind, he just quietly got on with his own programme.

As was the case so often, John seemed able to enjoy the things he liked while disregarding the rest, and yet the odd, chance remark later indicated that the threat of failure, a threat that hung over him throughout his time at St Andrew's, and the summary brutality of its administration, was not always lightly born. When John was later celebrated as something of a national hero, a teacher at his old school approached him to see if he would speak there and was asked, 'Are they were still torturing kids?' Typically, however, he obliged.³

From an early age John showed an aptitude for mechanical matters, something

he was more likely to have inherited from Ruvae than his father, who had little interest in such practicalities even though he owned a business manufacturing bicycles.

Friends who attended primary school with John remember how at the age of about eight he brought a Revell scale model V-8 engine to class, complete with all essential internal mechanisms. He had completed the assembly of the kit-set and used it as a prop for his comprehensive morning talk on the dynamics of the internal combustion engine, a dissertation that left his teacher and fellow pupils in a state of bemused silence. It was an uncharacteristic performance from a boy who normally kept his own counsel in class, but John spoke so assuredly on his chosen subject that many children who witnessed his performance remembered it for the rest of their lives.

John earned pocket money working for Bruce at the Butler Cycle workshops from the age of about eight, and he spent many happy hours there during the weekends. David Turner's father owned a printing business in a similar old wooden commercial building across the road in the heart of Christchurch, and in the upstairs loft where the presses sat, lead letters were everywhere wedged between the wooden floorboards. David recalled his first visit, at about the age of nine, to the bicycle workshop, where he found John spray-painting bicycle frames that were hanging in the loft. Instead of dull lead letters, there were necklaces of shiny ball-bearings glistening seductively in the floor-cracks as John methodically went about his task.

'There was always,' David recalled, 'a kind of careless magic surrounding John. It was something he seemed quite unaware of and that made it even more pointed.'

By the age of ten John was assembling bicycles and he had also built a go-kart. His original drawings for the go-kart still exist and it is reported by his neighbours at the time that he seemed to find increasing speed out of it, until finally his fellow go-karters could no longer keep up. At home his father was happy to encourage his son's enthusiasm for mechanical activities by supplying a properly set-up workshop, and from a very early age this was one of John's favourite places.

The happy atmosphere in the loft that David Turner shared with John when he visited was apparently a rarity at Butler Cycles, where Bruce Britten had a reputation as a hard taskmaster to those he employed, yet another attitude he apparently gleaned from his visits to America. Not long after David's visit, Bruce relocated Butler Cycles to new premises in the city that featured a gleaming showroom and set about ratcheting the business up another notch by establishing a comprehensive maintenance division. Soon Butler Cycles employed sixty staff.

One former employee recalled that each morning Bruce, like a general, would inspect all the salesmen who worked in the showroom while they stood stiffly at

their appointed posts. It was understood that each would snap out a respectful 'Good morning, Mr Britten' while he appraised them in cold silence. Bruce also insisted that they stand all day at their stations (with the exception, of course, of their legally protected breaks), carefully isolated from one another and without chairs, while he observed them through the large window of his office. The former employee believed that Bruce had read somewhere that a healthy turnover of staff was desirable and that he therefore contrived to fire a regular stream of them. Few lasted longer than six months.

According to Ruvae, Bruce tired of the retail business about the time the children were leaving school and so he sold it for a handsome sum, embarking on a second successful career as a property developer. For nine years he was also a city councillor, his standing as a pillar of society and a leader in the business community now assured.

Bruce's experience as a councillor was somewhat marred, however, when the very council he served elected to rezone a precinct in which he had purchased considerable property in such a way that his plans for a residential development were thwarted. But it was a minor setback compared with the fate awaiting his brother David, who elected to remain in retail only to be wiped out by the onset of an economic downturn in the early 1970s.⁴ Fortunately for Bruce, the situation was suited to those with cash in hand who could buy property cheap and develop it with freely available loan money. He continued to do very well.

And until it became apparent that his son's activities in the workshop were more of the nature of a vocation than a hobby, Bruce was a tolerant and even indulgent father. He was a hunting, fishing, outdoors type who included his children in such pursuits when he could. His own youth had included the kind of high jinks that were almost expected of wealthy young Cantabrians, including a spell in the airforce, where he learned to fly and incurred the wrath of his superiors by buzzing an aunt's tennis party with a Tiger Moth trainer.⁵

Bruce encouraged his children to exercise and always stayed in shape himself, finding time throughout his life to play tennis five days a week (in winter after first carefully applying fake tan to his legs). He also had a golf handicap in single figures and played a round at least once a week. He was always up for new experiences and took up scuba diving in late middle age. Often he would dive on his own while Ruvae stayed on the boat. Even in later life, when most men his age would have been happy to accept a comfortable chair with a warm pair of slippers and a good book, Bruce refused to slow down. To celebrate his sixty-second birthday he learned to fly a helicopter and then he bought one. (According to Ruvae, the Robinson helicopter he shouted himself was ostensibly purchased to allow them to get into the backcountry to go trout and salmon fishing, but as there was no room

for luggage she ended up driving the car there anyway.) He and Ruvae walked all the major trails in the South Island (and that's a lot of walking by any standards) and Bruce bungy-jumped at the age of sixty-five. (The jump was free to pensioners, an added incentive according to Ruvae.) He also whitewater rafted (in a punishing class-5 river) and made a parachute jump. And throughout their lives Bruce and Ruvae travelled abroad a great deal, usually without the children.

The effect Bruce's somewhat dogmatic pragmatism had on his son was at the very least a complex matter. However, it was certainly true that John loved the time Bruce was prepared to share with him and he absorbed many of his father's values and interests. Although John could never bring himself to shoot anything, he did become a keen fisherman with both rod and spear, and he always loved nature. Bruce encouraged all his children to enjoy outdoor activities and all had lessons in a diverse range of sports. These included sailing P Class yachts (New Zealand's classic learner's sailing dinghy), horse riding (which John quickly became proficient at and bored with) and skiing behind the family jet-boat. Bruce was also a pioneer in the jet-boating scene, Canterbury being the home of this universally acclaimed invention.⁶ It was an exciting and potentially hazardous pastime, given the wild and woolly reputation of many of the rivers the jet-boaters navigated, and to test his children's life jackets Bruce had the youngsters put them on before he threw them off the end of a wharf. They all floated.

Like his father, John excelled at tennis and played the usual games New Zealand boys played, principally cricket and rugby, but he never showed any real interest in team sports and avoided them as far as possible. Jet-boating, on the other hand, became a life-long passion. When John finally acquired his own jet-boat he drove it so hard he succeeded in sinking it at least three times.

Although John's childhood may be seen as a privileged one he certainly faced challenges that could well have proven overwhelming. His father was a driven individual who could at times be domineering and intolerant, a considerable burden for a young boy who tended to be more sensitive than outgoing. It was a situation that could easily have been exacerbated by a condition John suffered and that Ruvae fortunately recognised when he was still very young. Like most parents she began reading to him when he was little more than a baby, encouraging him to pick out words. By the time he was four years old she had noted a tendency for John to transpose common words like 'was' for 'saw', and she began to suspect that he might be dyslexic. As time went by it became increasingly obvious that this was indeed the case. Ruvae had been trained to teach reading using the phonics system and she employed this method to teach her son as best she could at home. Unfortunately, the phonics system was not then in vogue in primary schools, where it had been replaced by the Look and Say technique, a method of teaching that

Ruvae knew was hopelessly inappropriate for John. With his teachers largely unable to help, Ruvae continued to teach him, mostly from the Janet and John books of an earlier period. She did so throughout his time at primary school until he could just manage to read and write. However, he later easily satisfied examiners that he should have a reader and writer for his degree exams, without which he would certainly have failed.⁷

When he was eventually able to instruct other people to write most of his communications, the only letters he bothered with were personal, including letters to business colleagues he considered personal friends. He had by then clearly abandoned any inhibitions he might have once had about simply expressing himself as best he could. His spelling was still primarily phonetic, but if it was difficult to ignore the incidental yet undeniable humour of his writing it was at least easy to understand. After all, a 'wishboan' is clearly a 'wishbone'. As is the sense of the question 'Can the pivot point of the bottom wishboan be on asentric bushers for ajustment?'

A number of people close to John claimed to know the name of the only book he was said to have read but it was invariably a different book. His mother, for example, thought it was Dale Carnegie's classic *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. One friend remembered him telling her, however, that it was *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, a book concerned with the ethics of work that had misled him with its title but delighted him nevertheless. Yet another friend said that the only book John ever read was a book on time management by an author now forgotten. Kit Ebbett, a close friend who met him toward the end of his school days, could remember John battling through two books and confirmed that *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* was indeed one of them.

'The other,' Kit said, 'was an account of the Canterbury aviation pioneer Richard Pearse, a slim volume given to him by a girlfriend. He got through that in about 1988 and never finished another.'

John could certainly read technical manuals if he had to but he found it a tiresome task when he had too much to do. He enjoyed words most when they were associated with something graphic and he especially loved cartoons. Among his favourites were Gary Larsen's *The Far Side* collections and the adventures of Fred Gassit, an Australian cartoon canine written and drawn by Simon O'Leary, a New Zealander living in Sydney.⁸

As it turned out, John's dyslexia may well have been a blessing, albeit in heavy disguise. As he was to tell many school children later in his life, both personally and in a widely distributed school reader he helped write, such afflictions are often the goads individuals need to discover greater depths and talents within.

John Bain, another old friend, went through school with John from primary

school at Elmwood School, and then through St Andrew's. From the beginning the two shared a fascination for mechanical things, which burgeoned in both into an enduring love of classic and performance machinery of all types.⁹ John Bain was aware from the start that John's interest in such things was bound up in a wider love for all manner of creative expression, including his own art. Bain remembered how, even in primary school, John's artwork stood out with the brightest colours and the clearest designs. He was also aware that the way his friend thought was distinctly different from how most people thought. When they later sat together in physics class at St Andrew's, John had the habit of often volunteering correct answers to problems posed by the teacher. When asked to explain how he arrived at them, however, he would confidently launch into an explanation that had no connection with the textbook, leaving his teacher trailing helplessly in his wake.

By then Bain had also become aware of a quality of character that set his friend John Britten apart. It was the quality of tenacity, and it became very apparent when John acquired his first real machine apart from the go-kart. And what a machine it was.

He discovered it at the age of thirteen, while on holiday at a school-fellow's family farm deep in the south near the small town of Gore. As one would expect, John roamed far afield on explorations when not performing the various chores that are the lot of boys visiting in the country. It was on one such ramble that he came across an old bit of junk poking out of an irrigation ditch. Exploratory digging revealed that the rusted metal was part of an ancient motorcycle. This fired his imagination and he instantly determined that he would somehow get it home to work on it. The farmer was duly inveigled to take his tractor out to the ditch and the old machine was exhumed with the assistance of some heavy chains. Careful examination of the rusted mess revealed it to be a 1920s V-twin 1000cc Indian motorcycle. John managed to persuade Bruce that the machine was worth saving, and with the farmer's help the hulk was then dumped into a railway freight carriage for shipment to Christchurch. On arrival, Bruce picked it up with a trailer and took it home. John then wasted no time in getting the thing pulled apart. An early setback occurred, when he dismantled the engine in the family living room while his parents were away. Apparently the old thing had remained oil-tight all those years, but when John proceeded a bolt too far it dumped its entire crankcase contents on the very expensive pure wool, shag-pile carpet. The resultant black spot proved resistant to the combined efforts of John and his sisters to remove it.¹⁰ However, the motorcycle project survived the moment of fury that followed the presentation of the black spot to Bruce and Ruva. As his mother said, 'he was usually such a sweet boy.'¹¹

John's enthusiasm for old motorcycles, and soon old trucks, was difficult for

many of his friends to understand as, like most schoolboys, they were drawn to the latest, the most expensive and the fastest. In this, to a degree, they reflected the attitudes of their parents. The conservative and determinedly materialistic Cantabrian establishment, of which Bruce was a good example, then largely regarded anything other than a certifiable vintage car as being merely yesterday's junk.¹²

However, no matter how obscure his enthusiasms might have seemed to most of his peers, John made good childhood friends because his enthusiasm was infectious. Fortunately, there were also a select few, like John Bain, who actually shared John's interests and they were soon drawn into a succession of John Britten projects, each more ambitious than the last. From the outset, John Bain was singularly impressed with the way his friend went about his never-ending stream of tasks with a single-minded determination that saw them rapidly through to completion. He remembered the Indian being completed so quickly that he and his fellow helpers were constantly amazed at the amount of progress that occurred between visits.

John Bain also remembered whipping off from school on his pushbike with a number of fellow truants to turn the first of two 1920s International trucks John was to own over on its back so that the bottom could be painted. The truck had been obtained after yet another expedition in search of interesting mechanical detritus in the rich and fertile Canterbury region. John had learned to keep his ears open and to follow his nose, and when he heard that an old vehicle that had been used to power a ski tow was no longer required he followed it up and acquired it. Because the International had enjoyed a reasonably easy life with regular maintenance, at least on the engine, it was in quite sound mechanical condition. The body, however, was more filigree than fact and the general consensus was that John had taken on an impossible task.

The International was so rusted that those who saw it both before and after believed John probably welded in more new metal than was left of the original. Nor was it simply a matter of replacing missing or hopelessly rusted steel. John's restoration included such detailed work as the re-manufacture of the tumblers in the speedometer. It did not seem long to John Bain, however, before the ancient vehicle emerged from the shed, transformed into a bright yellow open-cab beauty with gleaming black wooden wheels and a solid, new wooden deck. But he also recalled that it proved quite horrible to drive, with brakes and steering that really demanded the strength of a number of large, husky men rather than one slightly built schoolboy.

Richmond Paynter, a neighbour who was three years older than John, also witnessed the first foray in the International. He had been conscious of John tapping away in his shed, which Richmond's bedroom overlooked, for as long as he could remember but had never felt more than a fleeting curiosity about John's strange

and largely solitary activities. He had also observed John and his father driving in with trailer-loads of rusting junk on a number of occasions, but again had largely dismissed such activities as mildly eccentric happenings of no real interest. When the bright yellow and black truck emerged from the shed like a butterfly from a chrysalis and puffed off down the road with the skinny fifteen-year-old at the wheel Richmond was therefore somewhat taken aback. Later he heard that an American serviceman from the nearby airbase had spotted John going the other way and screeched his brand-new Mustang around to give chase. It could hardly have been a challenging pursuit but the serviceman was, according to the story, so taken with the truck that he offered John a straight swap for the Mustang. Richmond was even more surprised to hear that John had turned the offer down.¹³

David Turner was one of those who happily abandoned school to assist John with his projects and he remembered that the Britten house was nearly always empty during the day. 'John was so casual,' he said, 'that it never occurred to us that we would ever be caught. He would raid the larder and cook up generous baked bean feasts for lunch. His favourite food, then and later, were thick slices of bread with peanut butter but he particularly loved anything with mountains of sugar on or in it. If he had tea or coffee he'd always ladle spoonfuls of the stuff in. He was a sugar junkie.'

Once lunch was out of the way the happy truants got down to work. They lifted truck bodies on and off chassis and spent hours sanding the rust off old body panels. David remembered that on the one occasion when Ruvae did walk in, and he was busy sanding something back to bright metal with a group of friends, John was not even present. He seemed, even then, according to David, to possess the happy knack of being different without causing offence, or at least of getting away with it. A school class photograph taken in 1965 shows rows of freshly scrubbed fourteen-year-old boys resplendent in their identical uniforms and identical short-back-and-sides haircuts—except one. Beaming confidently in the back row is a cherub-faced youth with a bona fide Beatles mop top. It is a youthful John Britten looking very much like a younger version of Paul McCartney.

Although John's almost charmed ability to stay out of trouble was difficult to explain, Ruvae could offer a simple explanation for what she observed as a generous and selfless dedication of all those willing helpers, and it was something that would remain true for the rest of his life.

'I think they were there,' she said, 'because being with John was the most interesting place to be.'

It was at this time that John enjoyed his first foray into the world of design and commerce, with the encouragement of John Hughson, his maternal grandfather. John Hughson, after whom John was named, was a surveyor and an accomplished

'do-it-yourselfer', in the tradition of the remote and rugged West Coast of the South Island where he still lived. He had been there since 1908 after arriving on a sailing ship as an assisted immigrant from Britain, having abandoned the marginally more remote Shetland Islands. Then in his late twenties he had settled in the harsh extremities of the Buller Gorge, perhaps attracted by a familiar climate. Here, the emerald waters of the Buller River surge out of the mountains to wind across the boulder plane they have carved out of the steep foothills. Hot, clear summers are balanced by icy winters, with snow reaching down toward the valley and violent blasts of bone-chilling wind drawn across the Southern Ocean from the refrigerated voids of the Antarctic. It was a harsh, majestic and lonely place to start a new life, but John Hughson remained there until he was forty-seven years old. At that point he met and married the daughter of another immigrant Shetlander and moved to Greymouth, then a bustling West Coast port thriving on a booming coal industry.

Coincidentally, until his marriage Hughson was a V-twin Indian motorcycle rider, and it is quite possible that he was the first ever to ride the fabulous West Coast Highway, which he had surveyed, after it was opened in the 1920s. His wife, Margaret, was described by those who knew her as a fine woman who was sadly afflicted with an overly sensitive nature and a tendency toward depression. Tragically, her condition grew more acute until, as she approached old age, she was quite out of her poor mind. Her husband refused to even consider committing her, and as Ruvaie had flown the nest and John was frail with old age, it was left to his son Peter to shoulder the burden of her care, a circumstance that doubtlessly contributed to Peter's own subsequent breakdown.

By all accounts John Hughson was a stoic and immensely patient man whose most vituperative utterance was the word 'bother', and he had a quiet but determined way of finishing every job he ever started. He was also a fit man who continued to ride his pushbike well into his eighties and, according to Ruvaie, there was nothing he could not do if he wanted to.

It is easy to see that young John Britten may well have learned the habit of steady work and single-minded persistence from his grandfather, along with various manual skills. Among the latter was the ability to use a wood lathe, which John then used to turn up oversize candlesticks from native demolition timber. Because there were no supplies of oversize candles to go with them, he also made an arrangement to collect all the butt-end candles from a large Christchurch restaurant, which he then melted into his own moulds. The candles and candlesticks were popular, and John did brisk trade both selling them and re-supplying candles. Another early project was the design and production of his own ski boots, a task that led to his first experiences with fibreglass. The ski boots were not his only foray

into footwear. Not long after, John spent time at the local blind institute where he learned about making leatherwear from those who worked in the leather shop. Using his new-found knowledge he produced a pair of leather boots and various other items, including belts and eventually a range of chamois-leather fashion items. From an early age it was clear that John Britten possessed, like his grandfather,¹⁴ the confident and independent nature of the true individual.