

BLAST OFF FOR ROCKET BOBS

It might look pretty nondescript, but a small unit on an industrial estate outside Swindon is home to an internationally successful business. Rocket Bobs Cycle Works was founded by Pete and Lisa Pearson to provide aftermarket parts and servicing for Harley-Davidsons. Today, the majority of its parts production, which is the larger part of the business, is exported.

Rocket Bobs began life in the corner of a barn on a farm local to Pete and Lisa's home five years ago. The impetus to start the business was a trip to Vegas during which Pete and Lisa got married. Having spent his youth working as a dispatch rider during the week and racing at weekends, Pearson put motorcycles behind him after losing too many friends on the road – until he went to Vegas and hired a Harley.

"It was the best time I've ever had on a bike, riding the Strip after marrying Lisa in Vegas. I knew then what I wanted to do, so I started to look at the Harley custom scene and did my homework."

Pearson began surfing US-based forums for Harley owners and discussing ideas he had for parts, gauging the interest he got in them. It was also the source of the very first order for a Rocket Bobs part – a Voodoo fender kit which was duly shipped to New York.

Domestic sales were also targeted, but success was slower. Having modified a Street Bob for himself, Pearson rode it to his local

The reputation of Rocket Bobs Cycle Works in the custom bike world was underlined recently when owner Pete Pearson joined the judging panel at Kickback. The event, held at Stoneleigh Park in Warwickshire, celebrates the vibrant new wave of custom machinery – something Pearson is well qualified to assess, Rocket Bobs having come third in the 2013 custom bike world championships.
Report: Duncan Moore

H-D dealership and parked it outside with a stack of business cards tucked under the seat for people to help themselves. Unfortunately, no-one took a card, but the bike did get the attention of the dealership's manager. He had a Harley-Davidson Rocker in store that no-one was interested in buying and asked Pearson to take it away and see what he could do to freshen it up and make it more saleable. When Pearson returned the bike, resplendent with Rocket Bobs rear fender and seat, along with other aftermarket parts, it sold almost immediately.

However, before it sold it caught the eye of Andy Hornsby, the editor of *American-V*, who subsequently featured it in the magazine, with the inevitable result that people started to take note of Pearson's work. From that point on Rocket Bobs has seen consistent growth year-on-year, both financially and physically, having outgrown the barn where it all started and moved to a dedicated industrial unit.

The UK accounts for 10%-15% of Rocket Bobs' turnover, the USA being its main market with at least 70% of its parts sales. The balance is spread out across the rest of the world. Talking about export sales, Pearson says: "For us, North America has always been the focus, but we've just done our first shipment of parts to Taiwan. We have lots of Voodoo fenders and Zombie bars going to Hawaii and Canada, too. Northern California has suddenly discovered us and we've recently sold a lot of Voodoo fender kits to that part of the States as well."

The techniques started by the Rocker transformation have continued, with custom builds regularly being used to showcase new parts. One example was a bike known as



Rocket Bobs proprietor Pete Pearson with 3 Finger Eddy.



Its humble appearance belies the creativity and precision that emanate from the Rocket Bobs workshop in Swindon.

Bank Robber, which won the Freestyle class in the 2012 London International Custom Bike Show at Alexandra Palace. A bike from the shop also came third in the 2013 World Championship.

Rocket Bobs has 22 builds in the shop currently, but recent accounts show that 85% of the overall business is parts and 80% is exports.

While Pearson appreciates having bikes booked into the shop for him to work on, it is not where he envisages the business heading in the future. "I have a degree in design engineering, which focused on product development. There is much more money in that – it is also more fun and more rewarding for the business too, especially in terms of how good it is for turnover.

"There is no money in having a bike in from the average man off the street. You can't cost jobs up to take account of crossed threads or broken parts that are not at first obvious. If you did, the customer would never agree to the work being done. But I can't turn the work away because the customer wants our parts fitted to their bike."

Pearson continues: "The future of Rocket Bobs is three-fold. Firstly, high-end, big-budget, ground-up builds from £30,000 upwards, machines like 3 Finger Eddie, which we took to the World Championship in 2014. That level of bike building is not sustainable in the UK, but spread across Europe and the UAE it's definitely workable.

"Secondly, I want to do a Shovelhead Speed Shop, where I source Harley-Davidson Shovelhead engine bikes from the US, do a few quirky things to them, go through the engine and wiring and send them out fully warrantied.

"Then the final part of the plan is the parts business, which is continuing to grow.

"It is critical to develop the parts business, but it is also a Catch-22. We really need our own CNC equipment to develop the parts line fully and

make the most money from it. The cost of CNC production is too high at the moment because it is all out-sourced. While we make money on our parts, we simply can't make enough from them to be able to invest in our own machinery."

An alternative would be to move production overseas, and Pearson now has the contacts necessary to gain reliable quality control in the Far East.

When it comes to gaining traction in new markets such as the UAE and Dubai, Pearson uses the same channels he employed when he began Rocket Bobs: the internet and social media. "Without the internet Rocket Bobs simply wouldn't have happened. Even before Facebook I was on bike forums the whole time, pushing the business. Without things like Facebook we simply wouldn't have the global reach we have now."

By combining solid engineering practices with modern media, Rocket Bobs Cycle Works has seen growth that could not have been achieved had it relied solely on one and not the other. It is certainly a winning formula as a mezzanine storage level to the 1200sq.ft unit has been added and plans are developing for a move to larger premises to meet the demand for parts.

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Gas'd Rat achieved third place at the AMD World Championship in 2012, plus wins at the BSH Xtreme and Custom Bike shows in 2013.

TIMELINE

- August 2009**
Rocket Bobs starts up in a barn with a commission from Oxford Harley.
- April 2010**
Voodoo fender kit is sold to a customer in New York, USA.
- June 2010**
First two Pintail seat units exported to Florida and New Orleans. Zombie handlebars introduced.
- April 2011**
First bike build featured in UK consumer magazine *American-V*.
- May 2011**
Relocates to start-up unit at Basepoint Business Centre in Swindon.
- March 2012**
Custom-built Bank Robber placed first in AMD World Championship of Custom Bike Building event at London International Custom Bike Show.
- May 2012**
Relocates to current larger unit at South Marston Park, Swindon.
- May 2013**
Ground-up custom build Gas'd Rat placed third in Freestyle class at World Championship of Custom Bike Building in Essen, Germany.
- December 2013**
Gas'd Rat overall winner at Custom Bike in Bad Salzuflen, Germany.
- 2015**
Twelve new products to be launched during 2015.



Carlsbad is based on a 2009 Street Bob.



Blackbird has won two third places in competition – Britain's Got Biking Talent 2011 and California Dreamin Expo.



Bankrobber, won Best in Show at the 2012 London International Custom Bike Show.