

A little piece of history goes home to Italy.

This week saw a gift that came from a major Italian motorcycle company make its' return journey.

Behind this is a touching story connected to a great man and his family.

Robert Leslie (Les) Graham DFC. was born on the 14th of September 1911 in Wallasey. He was a British motorcycle road racer who competed in the 1930s and 1940s. He won the inaugural Grand Prix motorcycle racing 500 cc World Championship in 1949.

Graham served as a pilot in the RAF during World War II and was assigned to the 166 Squadron from 1940, flying Lancaster bombers over Germany. He attained the rank of Flight Lieutenant and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross in December 1944 for bravery.

In 1951, Count Domenico Agusta approached Graham to ride for MV Agusta.

Frustrated by a lack of development with the AJS bikes he was racing, he joined the Italian team to ride and develop their 500 cc four-cylinder machines and the Graham family moved to Italy. During his time in Italy and using his war time flying experience he helped Agusta form links with Bell Helicopters. His sons Stuart & Chris during visits to the many race-tracks mixed with other motor cycling and car racing legends such as Juan Fangio.

For 1953, Les Graham was the pre-season favorite and tipped to win the championship again. Alas, this was not to be. On the Thursday, he finally won an Isle of Man TT, winning the Lightweight 125 cc class for MV.

In the Friday's Senior TT on the 12th of June 1953, he lost control of his bike at high speed as he took the rise after the bottom of Bray Hill and was killed instantly. Carlo Bandirola and the rest of the MV racing team withdrew from the Championship that year as a mark of respect.

Against this tragic backdrop MV Agusta presented the two young sons with a top-of-the-range train set. They played with it on their return to the UK when living in Stone. For many years since the set has been in storage. Both brothers have retained interests in the motor racing industry throughout their lives. Chris having trained as an engine builder at Rolls Royce in Crewe is still involved in supplying quality American cars, specifically Corvettes. Stuart not only raced motorbikes and cars but he still displays the rare Honda 6 and early formula one cars at the Goodwood Festival of Speed and similar events. Perhaps Stuart is better known locally for the Honda dealership in Crewe that bears his name.

Recently the brothers, both now in their 70's decided to sell the train set as none of the younger family members showed any interest. Chris took the set to an Open Doors event in Wrenbury village hall being held by the local model railway club. The club secretary David Houghton was not familiar with this particular make of set manufactured by Conti but by happy coincidence Pete Waterman, an acknowledged expert in all things railway was visiting the event to sign copies of his book 'Just like the real thing'. He immediately recognized the locomotive that Chris had brought with him. Pete explained to those present that Conti was way ahead in terms of quality to anything being produced in the 1950's here in Britain. David promised to look into the range further and took a few photographs of the full set in the boot of Chris's car. The Internet provided the company history and a link to an Italian collector. The initial set of photos whetted the collector's appetite. A second visit to the model railway club by both brothers was made as the club meets every Wednesday and David took

comprehensive photographs of the entire contents of the set. The photos were sent by e-mail to the collector, followed by a realistic offer and the deal was sealed. The train set is being delivered personally by a family friend and for the efforts made by the club and it's secretary a donation has been made by the brothers.



Chris & Stuart Graham

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