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Vespa - The Seductive Sting of the Wasp

An analysis of the socio-cultural influence
of the Vespa scooter

by

Christopher Murphy

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I would like to thank Ms Shirley Pattison of Piaggio UK and the editorial staff of 'Scootering' magazine for their assistance in providing material whilst researching this thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

Rarely does a product come along that becomes an instant success, revolutionising the industry it was born into, setting new standards for the future. It is rarer still if the same product is designed with such style and innovation that the original concept would remain virtually unchanged in nearly fifty years of continuous production. Such a description qualifies the product in question to join the elite ranks of the design classics - The Vespa motor scooter was such a product.

Besides being an outstanding example of innovative industrial design, the Vespa became an endearing leisure vehicle that that captured the hearts of four generations. From its introduction in 1946 as a utilitarian mode of transport, it liberated the youth of post war Europe and went on to become a cult object among the youth subcultures that derived from the sixties.

The aim of this thesis is to examine the history of the Vespa scooter in relation to its socio-cultural influence, from its introduction to the present . It will show how the Vespa evolved, and how it was received by the various cultures that adopted it. It will examine what the Vespa meant fundamentally and symbolically to these cultures, and how and why it developed from humble utility transport to immortal cult object among the ' scooter boys' of the eighties via the post war age of consumerism and the revolutionary period of teenage liberation. It will also analyse what exactly it was about the Vespa that endeared it so much to its owners, and what its introduction meant to the future of two wheeled transport.

The thesis will be dealt with in the following manner;

CHAPTER ONE will examine in detail the chronology of the Vespa, from its introduction to the present. It will trace the products origins and look at the innovations that set it apart from other forms of transport.

CHAPTER TWO will look at how the Vespa was received by the residents of post war Europe. It will discuss what the Vespa meant to them and how it influenced their lifestyles and also how it heralded new values of youth and freedom in the accelerating age of consumerism.

CHAPTER THREE will trace the evolution of the British scooter culture from the Vespas introduction , to its adoption by the mods of the early sixties. It will show how and why the Vespa was embraced by a nation, and how it went on to become a cult object with the advent of the teenage revolution.

CHAPTER FOUR will look at how the Vespa acheived cult immortality in Britain through the legacy of sixties subculture and its adoption by a group of loyal devotees that became the 'scooter boys' of the eighties. It will show how and why such diverse youth groups came together for the single minded love of their scooters, and how their attitudes and lifestyle differed form that of their ancestors, the mods.

CHAPTER ONE

As the second world war ended, the full extent of its plundering trail of destruction became all too evident across Europe. Italy, as a former belligerent nation, had been left in virtual ruin by Allied raids. The captains of industry that had once prospered in Italy were left crippled by the ravages of war. Something was needed to boost morale, kickstart the economy, and above all, to restore national pride. Under the Marshall Plan of 1948, the American government made financial aid available to help economic reconstruction in western Europe. In the four years that followed, life began to ebb into the veins of Italian industry, as financial stability was re-established, and the looming threat of communist subversion from the east vanished. Western ideals began to spread across Europe, and freedom and consumerism gradually became an accepted part of everyday life. Industry and mass production was the way forward - The Vespa scooter became the physical embodiment of this spirit of reconstruction.

Piaggio, manufacturers of the Vespa, may have seemed at the time unlikely candidates for the production of a scooter, as their background had been in heavy industry and in particular, aircraft manufacture. However, their vast production plant at Pontadera, about forty miles west of Florence had been left bombed and badly damaged by the war, and obviously enough, the market for Italian combat aircraft did not have a glowing future. The company needed a new product it could produce in volume in order to get back on its feet. Enrico Piaggio, son of the companys founder realised the potential for a two wheeled transportation vehicle, originally to shuttle staff from one end of the damaged plant to the other. Realising the possible market potential for such a product, Piaggio handed the project over to his chief engineer, Corradino D'ascanio, who undertook the products design with a very simple brief - To design a low cost two

wheeled transportation vehicle which could be mass produced efficiently at the Pontadera plant.

Corradino D'ascanio was an aircraft engineer with no formal background in motorcycle design. He was however a far sighted innovator, and his fresh approach to the problem was to be the key to its success. Two wheeled transport at the time was dominated by motorcycles which had evolved from the humble bicycle with the addition of a crudely obvious engine. D'ascanio on the other hand set out to design a complete product. His lack of experience in the world of motorcycles meant he had no subconscious preconceptions of what a scooter should be, and he undertook the Vespa's design with a clean drawing board and a clear head, approaching the problem objectively.

His background in aircraft technology led to his use of a pressed steel frame onto which all the other components were bolted. The resulting steel shell, or 'monocoque' as it was known, was entirely self supporting. Unlike the motorcycles of the time which were built around a load bearing frame of tubular steel, the Vespa had no backbone, it was in effect, an invertibrate. The compact single cylinder two stroke engine D'ascanio chose to breath life into this new creature was completely enclosed in this shell, and acted as a rear suspension member onto which the back wheel was bolted directly. There was no chain, and the frame was open and could be stepped through. Both wheels were the same size and held on stub axles which meant they were interchangeable. All of these features were highly innovative, and the logical process D'ascanio applied to the creation of the Vespa ensured that production and assembly would be simple and efficient. These features were unique to the Vespa, distinguishing it from any other form of transport of the period. Combined with handlebar mounted controls, they made the Vespa extremely user friendly, and from the outset

the resultant form of the product was instantly attractive and had a curious charm.

By 1945, D'ascanio had built a prototype suitable for mass production. The product became known as the ' Vespa' meaning 'wasp' in Italian. 1946 saw the first Vespa roll of the Pontadera production line. Enrico Piaggio was also a man of vision, he saw the potential for such a product and wasted no time in implementing its production. The American government provided financial assistance to manufacturers of low cost transport, and Piaggio took full advantage of this opportunity to upgrade and refine his production plant.

The Vespa had more in common with car design than that of motorcycles. Its pressed steel shell was welded together using bolt-on assembly techniques similar to car construction which was becoming an accepted standard, particularly in the United States. Because of the extensive use of steel pressings, a streamlined, stylistic form resulted. Two wheeled transport was now more attractive than ever before, as a rift was clearly established between the Vespa and the exposed, mechanical and physically demanding images that surrounded motorcycling. Piaggio now had a product they could produce efficiently and in volume.

Corradino D'ascanios solution for the Vespa was so successful, it only received minor changes in terms of design development as it approaches its fiftieth year of production. The basic layout as it was in 1946 is still the same today and the distinctive shape and flowing lines are still very much evident in todays Vespa range. Within the first years of production, minor changes were made to successive models which gradually refined its design. The first Vespa as designed in 1946 was very basic, in fact quite 'agricultural' , by todays standards (Fig. 1).

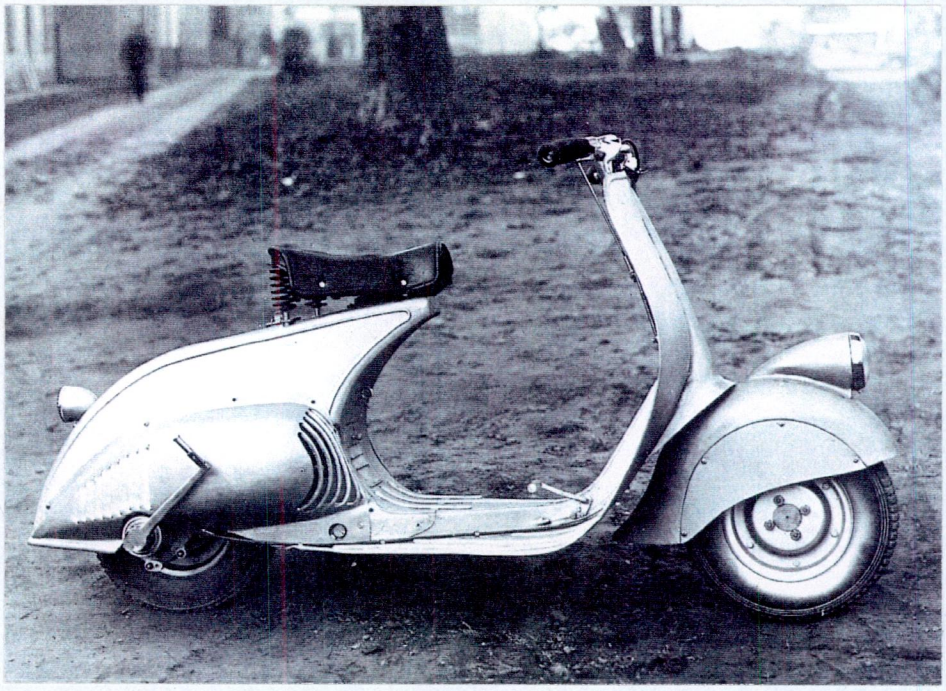

Fig. 1. The first Vespa model of 1946.

The gear change mechanism was controlled by the left hand handlebar twist grip which was connected to the gearbox via a steel linkage rod. The headlamp was located on the front mudguard and the scooter featured a single sprung seat. By the mid 1950's the 'rod' mechanism had been replaced by the cable operated system in use today, the headlamp after a brief stay on the front apron, was finally located on the handlebars, and an optional dualseat appeared, soon to stay, making the Vespa an even more sociable and versatile creature.

Throughout the fifties and sixties, new models appeared as Piaggio began to corner every aspect of their new and rapidly expanding market. Various engine sizes were introduced which meant that larger capacity models could reach speeds of up to 70mph. The GS or 'Grand Sport' model of 1955, became a lasting example of how well Piaggio had refined and honed the original design (Fig. 2). The overall form form and layout of this machine became the accepted standard for Vespas in the future, and is still held in almost sacred regard among devoted scooterists as the definitive

Fig. 2. Vespa GS 150.

'classic' Vespa. Another notable example of how Piaggio sought to satisfy the diverse needs of their market was the controvercial 90 SS or 'Super Sport' model of 1967 (Fig. 3). Its relatively small capacity engine (90 cc) offered performance that could only be matched by much larger machines.

Fig. 3. Vespa 90 SS.

The combination of this compact, high performance engine, narrower profile and generally scaled down dimensions, made it an ideal choice for the more sports orientated enthusiasts. The 90 SS was also somewhat of a 'tongue in cheek ' model. It featured a controvercial fake petrol tank located in the same place and of a similar shape to the motorcycle tank which was hollow and used for storage. This may well have been an attempt by Piaggio to widen the Vespa's appeal across the by now, well established divide between motorcycles and scooters, and certainly caused controversy among conservative scooterists, not to mention more than a little irritation among the motorcycle fraternity. For this reason the 90 SS became somewhat of an instant cult model, and is today a much sought after collectors item.

Sales of the Vespa peaked during the mid sixties, although the manufacturers continued to introduce new models. Perhaps the most radical changes ever made to the Vespa came in 1978 with the introduction of the 'New Line' or 'P' range (Fig. 4). These included flush fitting indicators, a glove box behind the front apron, improved suspension, and a new handlebar layout. Their styling was more refined and subtle - a blend of classic Vespa lines and modern looks which were refined even further with the introduction of the 'PX' range of 1983. These were complemented in 1986 by the addition of the eagerly anticipated 'T5' model (Fig. 5). To many Vespa purists, this was the last straw, already dissatisfied with the 'P' range, this new mutant was clearly unacceptable. Its styling was aggressive, and broke away somewhat from the classic flowing Vespa shape, and was epitomised by its square headlamp. By now however, the scooter market (as the Vespa fitted into it) was considerably smaller than the boom time of twenty years before. Many factors influenced this, such as the trend for smaller more efficient cars and smaller capacity motorcycles that had become more attractive to the youth of the eighties.

Fig. 4. Vespa P 125 X

Fig. 5. Vespa T5.

Piaggios market share was also seriously under threat from the Japanese, who were producing a range of mopeds that were cheaper, more stylish and efficient (Fig. 6). These factors were far from beneficial to Piaggio, and the

Fig. 6. Suzuki AE 50.

original T5 has now ceased production. Ironically however, the threat of its cessation led to it becoming a collectors item and it has been re-released by Piaggio as the 'T5 Classic' . The radical changes of its predecessor were subtley compromised on this model - it features a traditional round headlight.

Today Piaggio have found their niche by manufacturing and marketing the Vespa as the classic Italian scooter it is, as attempts to modernise it in line with the Japanese have obviously failed. It still has its loyal devotees such as the 'scooter boys', who ensure at the very least its preservation as a cult item. Piaggio are by no means falling out of the scooter market, they now produce a range of lightweight scooters that are in some cases more stylish and technologically advanced than their Japanese competitors (Fig's 7 - 8).

FA50
Low-positioned seating. Automatic transmission. Large, convenient basket.
BLUE
RED

Fig. 7. Piaggio Quartz.

Fig.8. Piaggio Typhoon.

QUART

LIQUID COOLED

Typhoo

CHAPTER TWO

By 1946, Piaggios plant at Pontadera was ready and waiting in anticipation of the mass production of their new product on which so much was literally 'riding', not only the future and reputation of Piaggio as a manufacturer, but an a more global scale, Italys reputation for innovative design and efficient mass production was about to be confirmed. 1946 saw the first Vespa roll off the production line and although it was met with mixed critical opinion, it quickly became an overwhelming, even dramatic success. The negative veiws that were expressed at its official launch were levelled largely by traditional motorcycle manufacturers. This new product was alien to them, and so naturally criticisms abounded, from poor performance to unsafe handling - accusations that found their roots in malice and prejudice. This stern motorcycle fraternity nervously laughed off the notion that the Vespa would pose any threat to the popularity of the motorcycle. However any fears they may have had were to prove to be valid, as the Vespa not only shook up the motorcycle market, but it created an expansive new market of its own. In the first ten years of production over one million Vespas were produced. By 1961, this figure had doubled and Vespas were being produced under licence in Germany, France, Spain, Belgium and the UK. By this time, the Vespa was the most popular two wheeler in Europe.

The Vespa represented a new era for Italians as production boomed and demand for the product increased. Piaggio , realising the potential of their new found success, instigated a marketing and advertising campaign that complemented the product and created the new scooter market it was to dominate. Having been left in confusion and ruin by the war, Italians were only too happy to let their hair down and have fun, all of which Vespa owners were encouraged to do by Piaggio. At its simplest level, the Vespa

was a fundamental mode of transport, a vehicle to get the population up and moving, but with the dawn of new hope, prosperity and freedom that captured Italy during the post war 'ricostruzione' period, Piaggio saw the benifits that lay in marketing the Vespa predominantly as a leisure vehicle. Throughout the fifties, the Vespa became a symbol of Italian national pride, as its popularity soared on a wave of enthusiasm.

The reasons for the Vespa's success were more deep rooted than than the fundamental need to get around, after all motorcycles provided the same facility but the Vespa proved to be more popular. The Vespa owes its long term success to the ingenuity that was intrinsic in its design. From the outset it was designed as a completely new product. Unlike motorcycles, it was designed as a complete product. Its wraparound bodywork took the emphasis away from how it worked, and created a stylish alternative to the former who owed its evolution to the crude addition of a proprietary engine to a bicycle frame. The Vespa was different, it had more in common with car design than that of motorcycles. It could be mass produced using steel pressings rather like the automobile plants of the United States. Other features such as interchangeable wheels, handlebar mounted controls, and fuel efficiency made the Vespa more user friendly. The bodywork enclosed the rider and gave a high degree of protection against the weather. The bodywork also hid the engine, and so the Vespa did not have the dirty, machine-like feel of equivalent motorcycles, an image that attracted people that would have been repeled by the contrasting aggressive exposed look of the motorcycle. Italians at the time looked to the future, and modernism was the way forward. The Vespa's extensive use of steel pressings resulted in a streamlined futuristic form which fitted in perfectly with these aspirations. All of these factors made the Vespa unique and served to create a brand new market.

By the early fifties, scootermania had gripped Italy, and began to spread across Europe. More people now had access to individual transport than ever before, and no sector of the population benifitted more than the youth. The Vespa's success came At a time of great change in Europe, the post war boom had opened manufacturers eyes to new markets and marketing techniques. The economic optimism that swept Europe during the fifties had created a new type of lifestyle that attached more importance to leisure and the persuit of having fun. Young people had more money in their pockets, and more time on their hands. Manufacturers now realised that the youth were the new consumers and began to target products directly at them, as a new market sector was created. Now free of the dark mantle of fascism, the concept of consumerism flourished in Europe.

While the Vespa may have been designed with all sectors of the population in mind, it immiediatly found popularity among the youth for obvious reasons. It was a relatively cheap, efficient form of transport - an essential commodity to a new breed of young people who had money in their pockets and an overwhelming desire to enjoy life. Piaggio marketed the Vespa surrounded by images of youth and freedom. Young people were shown enjoying themselves around coffee bars, at the beach or simply with groups of other young people. Needles to say, the Vespa featured prominently in all these images (Fig. 9). It evolved a happy carefree personality of its own, attractive and friendly, it became 'one of the gang'. Another of the key reasons for the Vespas success was its style. In a time when the emphasis was on leisure and free time, style and fashion played important roles. The Vespa's flowing lines and futuristic looks made it immiediatly attractive to young people. It had never been so easy to get from one place to another on two wheels. The Vespa was an easily accessible form of transport for people to enjoy, people that would never have considered using a motorcycle.

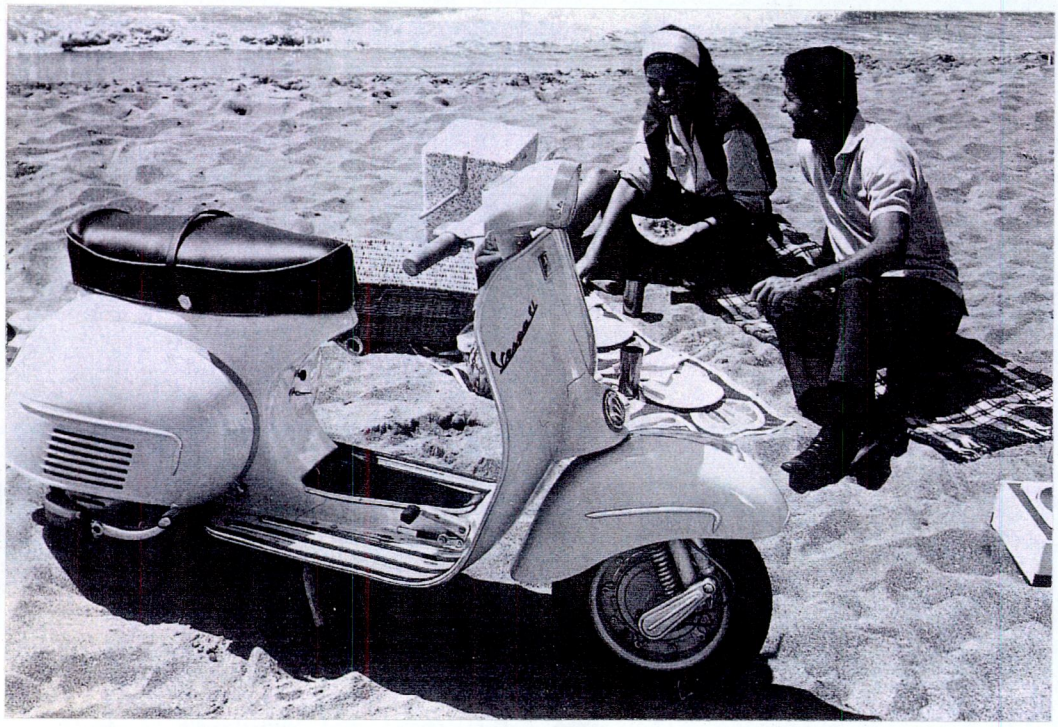

Fig. 9. The Vespa as a leisure vehicle.

For the first time, women were encouraged to get on two wheels as the Vespa was the first two wheeled vehicle to be asexual in terms of its target market. Traditional motorcycles were noisy, oily, dirty and exposed. They required a degree of skill and sheer strength to operate and maintain - all features of a clearly masculine environment. The Vespa with its small capacity single cylinder two stroke engine even sounded friendly, it was clean, its handlebar controls made it easy to operate, and it looked equally attractive with either a male or female rider. Piaggio by the early fifties were aware of this, and images of attractive women in the driving seat featured strongly in their advertising campaigns. While the intent behind this was to encourage women to buy a Vespa, Piaggio knew that the sight of an attractive woman adorning the equally shapely form of their scooter would hardly alienate their male customers (Fig. 10). Through images like this, its accessability and sheer style, the Vespa played its part in the definition of Italian 'chic'.

Fig. 10. A female Vespa rider.

The introduction of new more improved Vespa models meant that piaggio had cornered every aspect of their new market. By the mid fifties, a comprehensive network of dealers existed around Europe to handle the servicing and repair requirements of the million or so Vespas that were on the roads. The concept of leisure and free time was taken a stage further, as owners were encouraged to load up their scooters and take them on holiday. By now accessories were available to facilitate extra luggage on the already relativly spacious Vespa and faster more efficient models ensured distance was no object. As they became an increasingly migratory species, Vespa riders were encouraged to travel, to tour and to touch this brave new world that was embraced by the birth of consumerism.

The United states played a vital role in the spread of consumerisn in Europe. American money was used to practically rebuild post war desolated countries that have become the major industrial nations of today. It is no surprise therefore that strains of the ideal of the great 'American Dream' and the consumerist culture it created should become evident in this new society. While the Vespas success may be largely due to its own innovation and timeless design, 'Uncle Sam' played his part in financing the Vespa's initial production, while established American 'assembly line' mass production techniques contributed to its initial manufacture. However, one of the key reasons for the Vespa's success was that Piaggio had the right product at the right time. The consumerist culture that was the legacy of the United States in Europe meant that the concept of cheap efficient transport was welcome, even nessescary to the young people of the time, giving them instant independance in a society that was realising the economic importance of youth and freedom.

Like all monarchs of classic design and success, there were of course pretenders to Piaggios throne. The established motorcycle manufacturers that were the first critics of the Vespa soon jumped on the hurtling two wheeled bandwagon of scootermania. Manufacturers such as Triumph and BSA in Britain, and Ducati and Capri in Italy all produced scooters during the fifties. However none could even remotely compare with the popularity of the Vespa. Their attempts to ape the Vespa's success by using pressed steel all- enclosing bodywork usually resulted in hideous bulbous forms that could not compete with the elegant shape and classic lines of the former, which had the all-important ingredient of timeless aesthetic appeal.

CHAPTER THREE

While Enrico Piaggio had secured a glowing future for his previously ailing company as Vespa sales rose dramatically, in 1949 a British company - Douglas faced the same daunting problem Piaggio had successfully overcome three years earlier. Douglas were motorcycle manufacturers with an impressive production plant and foundry located at Kingswood in Bristol. The company, headed by its managing director Claude Mc Cormack, had a proud history of successful motorcycle manufacture since 1907 but now faced an uncertain future as it lay in the hands of an official receiver. Like Piaggio, Douglas needed a new product that they could produce efficiently and in volume, in order to keep their creditors from the door, and to guarantee at the very least a stable future for its employees. While on holiday in Italy, Claude Mc Cormack saw the Vespa for the very first time, he was so impressed by the sight of this strange and wonderful new vehicle, that realising its potential on the UK market, he decided to seriously consider the possibilities of manufacturing the Vespa under licence at his Kingswood plant. The Vespa became the highlight of the 1949 Earls Court motorcycle show, when it was seen for the first time in the UK at the Douglas stand (Fig. 11). The curious sight of the Vespa aroused such positive intrest by motorcycle dealers at the show, that Mc Cormacks far sighted hopes for its UK production were confirmed. A mammoth task was undertaken by Mc Cormack and the engineers at Douglas to equip thier works for the Vespa's mass production. By March of 1951, the wheels had been set in motion that shook the cobwebs from the mighty Douglas plant, and the first Vespa rolled off a purpose built assembly line.Although Douglas was capable of mass manufacture of the Vespa, they acted as distribution agents for Piaggio in the UK and imported some of the later models directly from Italy, as well as some of the larger components for early Vespa models.

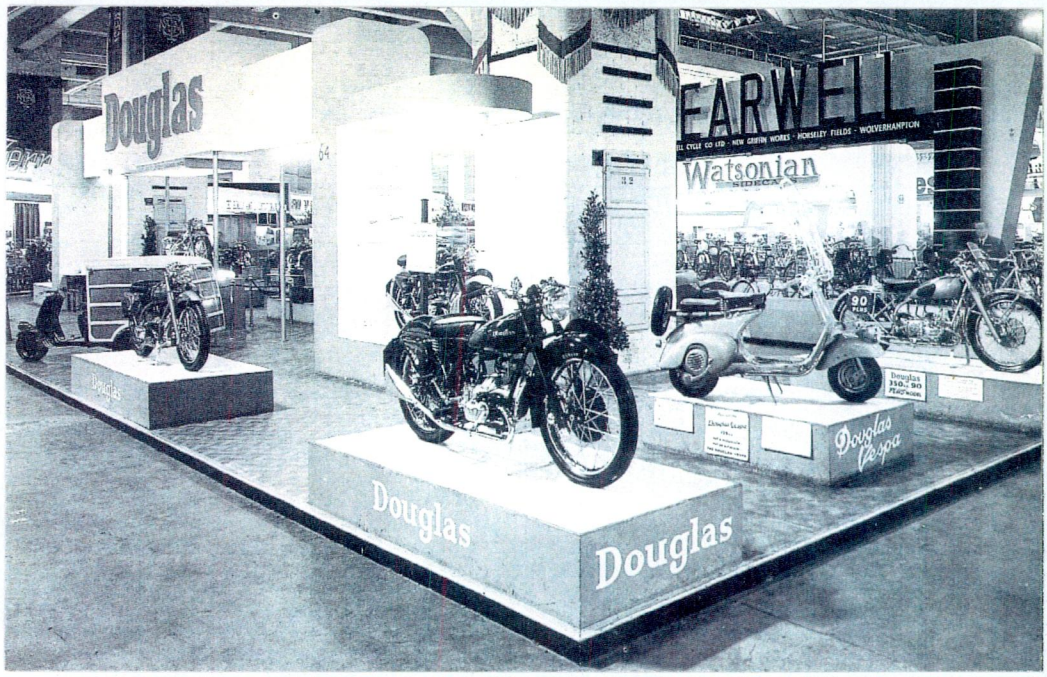

Fig. 11. Earls Court motorcycle show, 1949.

The same success that the Vespa had seen in Europe now began to spread across the UK. Although the first British scooter riders were young proffessionals from the upper and middle classes, the British scooter culture was born and boomed throughout the fifties.Before long, like minded scooter riders discoverd that they held a common intrest, as a ritual of saluting one another as they met along the roads emerged. In a typically British fashion, the scooter culture of the early fifties was a very civilized affair. British scooter riders were initially generally a little older than the carefree, liberated youth that had been set in motion throughout Europe with the adoption of the Vespa. In 1952, only a year after the introduction of the first British made Vespa, the comradeship that had been seen among Vespa riders on British roads led Bill Bond to form the Vespa club of Great Britain with a number of his fellow scooter riding friends.The club rapidly grew in numbers, and still exists today with the clear aim of facilitating social activities among scooter riders, and promoting the pastime of scootering among those who shared the love of riding and owning a Vespa. As well as an annual conference and the publication of a bi-monthly

magazine - Vespa News. The club organised highly successful rallies and sporting events of all kinds as a hospitible social institution grew around the newly adopted humble Italian imigrant (Fig. 12).

Fig. 12. A VCB rally.

The British public had clearly taken the Vespa to thier hearts (Fig's 13 - 15). By the mid to late fifties a comprehensive dealer network had been established to ensure trouble free motoring,and as production continued at Kingswood, new and more varied Vespa models were imported from Italy, to meet the demands of an expanding scooter market. The advent of hire purchase now meant that anyone could own a Vespa, which rapidly facilitated the mobilty of the British youth, of all classes and backgrounds. The sheer popularty of the Vespa saw the introduction by Douglas of various optional accessories, the most popular of which were chrome plated carriers, crashbars, footrests and horn covers, as well as the ever popular windscreens (Fig. 16). Initally these accessories may have been functional even nessescary in some cases, but gradually they became more ornament as owners became passionate about personalising thier machines. These accessories, together with the various colour options

Fig. 13. London Pearly Kings and Queens with their scooters.

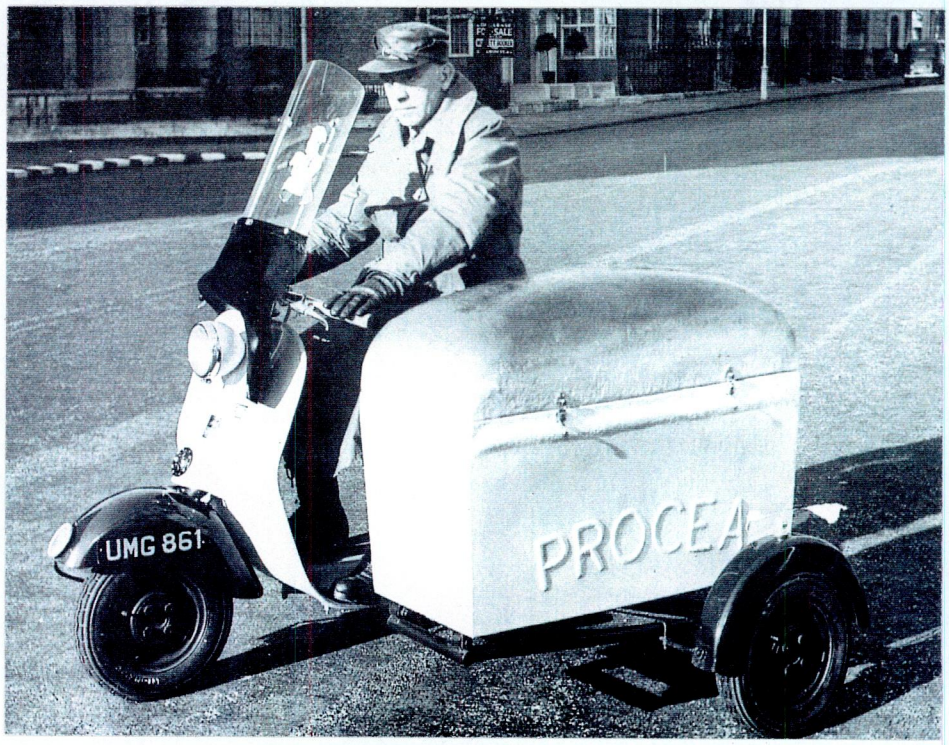

Fig. 14. The Vespa with a commercial sidecar.

that were becoming available, meant that a potential scooterist could tailor a machine to thier own indivdual needs. It was as if the constent tinkering

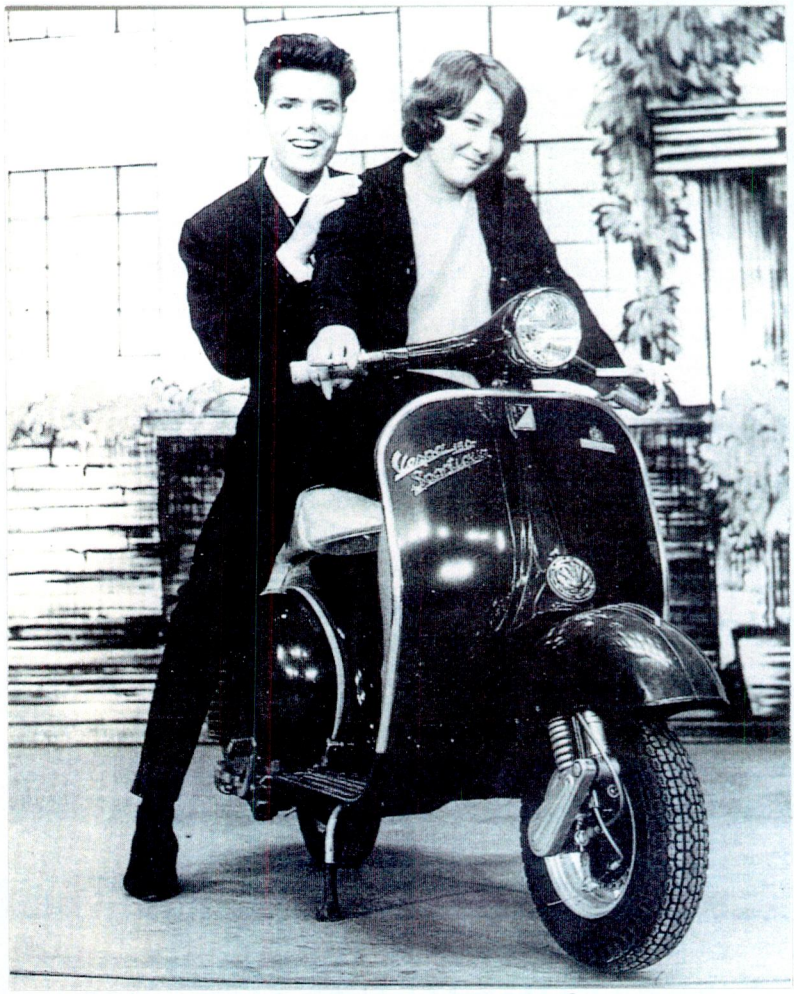

Fig. 15. Cliff Richard astride a Vespa.

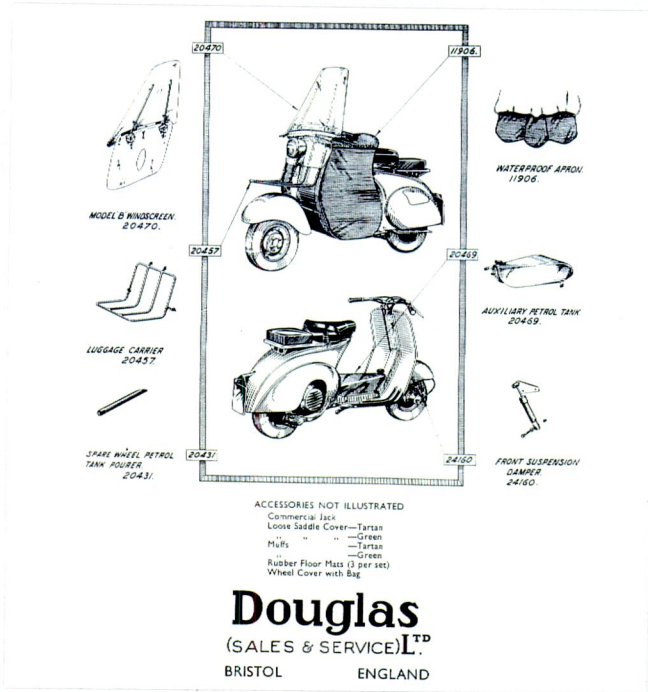

Fig. 16. Vespa accessories offered by Douglas.

that had been associated with motorcycles and thier riders had found its equivalent in accessorising on the part of the Vespa owner, as it was becoming an extension of its owners personality (Fig. 17).

Fig. 17. A Vespa fitted with various accessories.

The Vespa succeeded in Britain for much the same reasons as it did in its home country, it was the happy medium between getting the bus and owning a car, as it was relativly cheap to buy. It was easy to park, very economical to run and ideal for city traffic and commuting. As in Italy, it evolved a character of its own as owners heaped affection on thier scooters. However, as in Italy, it was not without its critics, and these were largely affillated somehow to the well established British motorcycle industry.As the sixties loomed around the corner, a cold war was developing between motorcyclists and scooterists, each breeding a passionate distaste for one

anothers lifestyle and transport. This is ironic when one considers the contribution the Vespa made to breathing new life into the ailing Douglas motorcycle plant.

The late fifties and sixties was a time of great change and revolution in British youth culture, and the Vespa became as much a symbol of youth and freedom in Britain as it had in Italy. Influences from other cultures were adopted and gradually evolved in to the identitys of young Britons. The consumerist culture of the United States and the definitive continental 'chic' that was emerging from Europe left thier mark on a new figure that was to emerge from Britain - The teenager. The void that existed between childhood and adulthood was gradually being identified, and left the new British teenager with a sense of independance and identity. Britain was also a refuge for thousands of immigrants from former colonies and was becoming a cosmopolitan melting pot with an increased awarness of style and fashion. The Vespa, as an example of purist Italian design was also an immigrant, albeit a well respected one, and as factions began to emerge in the new youth culture, it unknowingly took sides,becoming a fashion accessory more than anything else, as seeds of cultism began to take root.

Perhaps the best known youth movement to adopt the Vespa were the British mods of the early sixties.Like any other youth culture, the mods had to get around, and the Vespa was the obvious choice. It was streamlined, modern, and its wraparound bodywork meant that the impecably neat and sharp dress style was not ruined by the British weather. Above all however, the Vespa was Italian, and fitted in well with the mods frothy coffee, sharp haircuts and tailored suits. To the mods, the Vespa was a symbol of continental 'chic' which helped to contrast thier 'cool' image from that of thier rivals, the rockers. The rockers lifestyle was largely derived from fifties American rock and roll imagery, and as the name

suggests, thier style and poise was distinctly masculine, heightened even further by thier choice of transport - noisy, greasy, powerful British bikes. While the rockers were somewhat of a revivalist culture, the mods were compleatly new, and made thier own rules in a society where sexualty was beginning to be questioned and explored. The vanity and sense of style of the mods often teased the accepted rigours of ' straight' sexualty which made the Vespa an even more attractive mascot and potent symbol because of its asexual appeal. Of course this only added to the explosive atmosphere that was building up between the two groups.

The style concious mods also apprieciated the low maintenance associated with the Vespa, which left more time to shop for clothes, hang around coffee bars and be seen with ' faces'. This contrasted with the constant tinkering and tuning associated with the rockers and thier loud oily motorcycles. To distinguish themselves even further from the rockers and indeed the mainstream scooterists of the time, the mods like to customise thier machines, this process very often went over the top, and a typical mod scooter may have had twenty or thirty assorted rear view mirrors and lights bolted to a perimeter frame of chrome. The weekend was sacred to the mod, and bank holidays in particular. Well planed weekend trps would take them in packs to the coastal resorts of England which became forums for the latest styles and trends. Once again the Vespa had become a migratory species. However, the mods did not have the beaches to themselves, and the great British working class tradition that took the mods to the coast, also took thier rocker counterparts. In most cases this was no accident, the fact that each group led such diverse lifestyles meant that they rarely met, so both naturally relished the idea of a well planed, well observed open confrontation. And so eventually they met, mod vs rocker, head to head. Antagonistic jeering and taunting led to violent clashes on the beaches of the summer of 1964. These 'moral panics' were

regared as a social outrage, and were generally over - hyped by the media because of thier shocking nature. As the clashes eventually died down, so did the public interest. The tension that had been building up between the oposing groups had reached its climax.

As the mod movement declined towards the late sixties, so did the Vespa's popularty among the general public. Although this was more than likely coincidental, the public outrage at mod - rocker violence alienated somewhat the typical mainstream scooter buyer. However, the Vespa had played its role in the polarisation of British youth culture. It was there when youth began to question thier motives and look to a trend or style to cling to as they desperatly tried to be somebody. This was the beginning of the cult status the Vespa achieved that was revived throughout the eighties and still survives today.

CHAPTER FOUR

The popularity of the Vespa had reached its climax in the mid sixties which was also a time of exploration and discovery - both technological and cultural. The teenage revolution that had been synonomous with the sixties had given the youth of the period a new found sense of purpose and identity, but more importanly, it had set new standards of liberation for the next generation. As the seventies approached, mods had given way to 'flower power' and psychedelia as British youth culture thrived.Technology and innovation were largely responsible for the slump in Vespa sales and the lucrative market for cheap efficent transport that the Veapa had created now began to be exploited by other manufacturers. The introduction of the first definitive small car - the 'Mini' and the increasing dominance of the highly efficient Japanese motorcycle industry created alternative products for the consumer. The adoption of the Vespa by the mods in the early sixties meant that it had crossed the barrier between mainstream utility vehicle and subclutural icon status. Once this move hade been made, The Vespa's future credibility as an anonymous form of transport had been tainted subconciously in the minds of consumers. It had become a creature of the underworld, to be worshipped and celebrated by an accomadating subculture - if one exsisted, but it did'nt and would'nt for more than a decade to come. The Vespa had achieved immortality, in the hearts and minds of a highly influencial generation and as the eighties approached, the revolving cycle of subculture saw the mods make a comeback. The mod revival was now accompaniedby other styles that had left thier impression from skinheads to the 'two-tone' movement. From this melting pot of contemporary and revivalist styles a new figure emerged which was to carry the Vespa to the cult status it enjoyed throughout the eighties and up to the present. They became known as the 'scooter boys' .

To understand the motivation and lifestyle of the scooter boys, it is nessesary to examine in a little more detail, thier complex ancestory. When the mods lost popularty in the mid sixties, they fragmented into other groups. The more style conscious mods simply drifted into the next fashionable fad, others were influenced by the 'flower power' drug culture and became hippies. The more militant mods cut thier hair a little shorter, adopted boots, blue jeans and braces and became the 'bovver boys' who were the founders of the violent rightwing skinhead movement of the late sixties and early seventies. As punk came and went, its sheer impact led to a period of confusion where nobody knew what would come next. The clothing and music styles of the mods began to make a comeback towards the end of the seventies. A new generation of mods was born and the Vespa once more became a vital part of thier ensemble . By the early eighties, this group had revived the scooter culture that brought the original mods to the beaches, as they began to band together in weekend migratory packs (Fig. 18). However, this period also saw the skinhead make a return to the streets of Britain. Now motivated by fashion more so that the right wing politics of thier predessesors, a number of these new skinheads, perhaps influenced by thier mod ancestory began riding scooters and became known as 'scooter skins', much to the amusment of thier more hard line counterparts (Fig. 19). meanwhile in the north of England, another group was beginning to gain recognition whose ideals had also derived from the orginal mods. This group also rode scooters and were heavily influenced by obscure American soul music of the sixties which evolved into thier own brand of dance music which became known as 'northern soul' .The scooter held cult status among this group, and became the focal point of thier social lives (Fig. 20). Mod-derived fashions were eventually relaxed in favour of a more casual dress style dictated by the practicalities of riding a scooter. The scooter skins and the mods shared an interest in the music of the early eighties which acted as a gelling ingredient between the two groups.

Fig. 18. Revivalist mods preparing for a rally.

Fig. 19. A group of revivalist skinheads.

Northern soul music as it was known was derived from 'ska' and the 'blue beat' style of reggae listened to by the original mods. Common dress styles emerged and those that shared an enthusiasm for scooter riding gradually let it become thier motive, while the gap widened between the more hard line members of each group.

Fig. 20. Agroup of 'northern' scooter devotees.

By 1982, a common style emerged that was to amalgamate these scooter riding groups. Scooter clubs were gaining popularity, and rallies and associated events were being held on a more national scale which helped unite diverse groups that held the same affection for scooter riding. It was now clear that the common denominator was the scooter and moves were made to organise a like minded collective body. The establishment of the National Runs Committee in 1982 saw the first organised national rallies to coastal resorts. The attendance at these events grew rapidly, and a common figure emerged on a national scale. The diverse style and musical intrest of these pilgrims became amalgamated and centered around the passion they shared for thier scooters. The scooter boys (and girls) had arrived (fig's 21 -22).

The years that followed saw a dramatic rise in the popularity of this new found activity. Rally attendance that had previously been in the hundreds quickly rose to thousands. It was as if a national network of dorment scooterist had suddenly become active. Thier new lifestyle was

intense and exciting. Months of preperation would lead to mass gatherings at coastal towns where a wealth of styles co - existed for a singleminded

Fig. 21. The arrival of the scooter boys.

Fig. 22. A couple of scooter girls.

passion. The influence of the northern soul trend of all night dances was adopted by the scooter boys as they partied hard from Friday to Sunday, there was no time to rest. It was as if every minute shared together at these pilgrimages was sacred and had to be lived to the full.Inevitably, the success of these runs were to be exploited by commercialism and before long, independant rallies were being organised by profit reaping promoters. Rallies were suprisingly peaceful unlike the mods and rockers excursions of the sixties and the influx of thousands of hard - earned money wielding scooterists was a welcome prospect to the ailing fortunes of seaside ghostowns. Gradually the rallies developed other attractions such as souvenier stalls, scooter trials, events and shows, as the mid eighties saw it becoming an accepted social activity (Fig. 23).

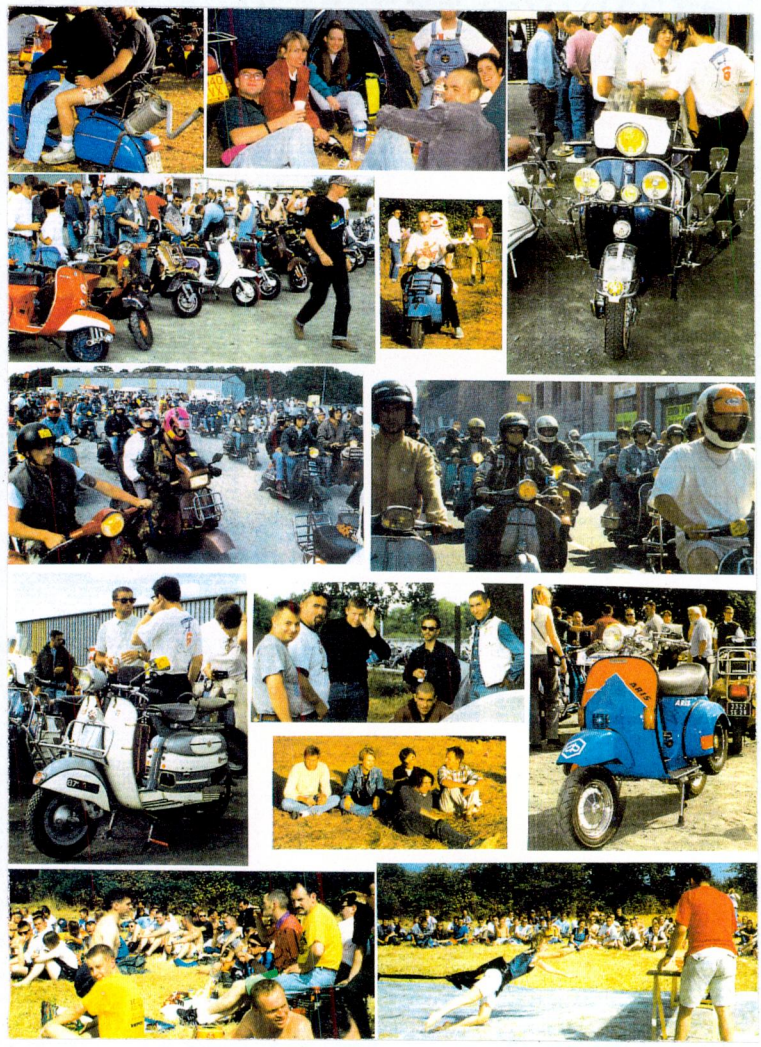

Fig. 23. Scenes from a typical scooter rally.

By 1985, the scooter boys fast moving culture was well established. A number of magazines devoted to thier lifestyle were being published, the most influencial of which was 'Scootering' which is still being published today.It featured photographic highlights of previous rallies, details of future events, as well as reviews of the latest scooter styles and trends. It became a notice board for the scooter boys, helping to keep the movement alive between rallies and off season, when intrests could have turned elsewhere (Fig. 24). Clubs were by now well established throughout

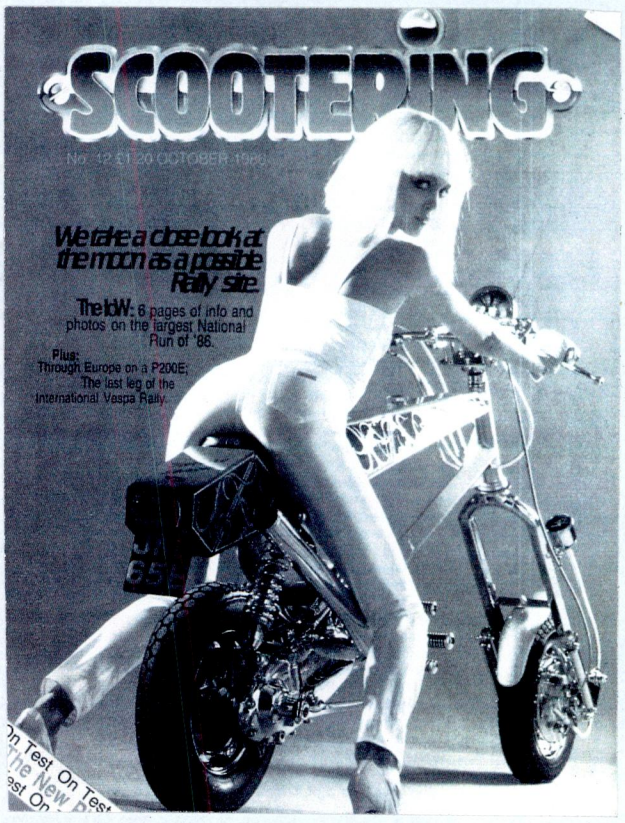

Fig. 24. 'Scootering' magazine.

the country and a type of tribalism developed through the wearing of embroidered patches displaying each clubs logo or motto. The concept of patches was taken a stage further when they began to be introduced for each national run. They became collectors items, worn on the scooter boys by now standard uniform of an olive green bomber jacket, these patches

became the 'notches on the belt' of the scooter boy, physical proof that they had been to the rallies. The sheer popularty of the new scooter scene saw manufacturers introduce various new accessories and 'bolt on bits' for scooters. Through this move, combined with the desire to break with traditions of the past, the scooter boys were to develop thier own unique style of customisation that was to become an accepted symbol of scooter culture in the eighties.

Vespa's sales in great Britain since thier slump in the mid sixties had not improved throughtout the seventies. In some parts of the north of England, it never lost popularty as a cult item, as a handful of post - mod scooterists ensured its preservation even through the skinhead glam, and punk periods in time to be replaced by the mod rivival, and later to swell the ranks of the scooter boys. sales to mainstream customers remained consistent, but unimpressive untill the intrduction of the 'P' range in 1978, when the Vespa got a futuristic facelift that gave it a more widespread appeal. By the time the mod revival came about, cheap second hand Vespas dating from the sixties were in plentiful supply, as thier former owners had lost intrest, and thier re - sale value had plummetted. A revivalist mod could be mobile for as little as forty pounds. The mods of the period, because of thier links with the past preferred to ride the 'classic' Vespa of the sixties, and were disgusted with the break with tradition that was made with the intoduction of the 'P' range. The scooter boys, of later years, while they always held a personal reverence for the 'classic' Vespa, had 'grown up' with the 'P' range. Although there were loyal hesitations from the older, more hard line of the fraternity, the 'P' range eventually became the staple steed of the scooter boy. Homage was duly paid to the classics through 'blood sweat and tears' lovingly restored vintage models that became a feature of the scooter boys activities as the 80's progressed. However the scooter boys created thier own style of customisation during

this period. Influenced by 'glam' rock and the 'easy rider' biker imagery of the 70's, they created - 'The chopper'.

As the name suggests, the chopper was a scooter whose frame was literally chopped down. A motorcycle type petrol tank was bolted between the seat and handlebars and the front fork was extended dramaticaly in the most definitive examples. The result was a mutation between scooter and motortcycle that served as a symbol of the scooter boys desire to break ties with thier mod ancestory. In most cases chromed parts were used exstensively, as well as other features such as painstaking elaborate engravings and detailed airbrushed murals. The chopper was the climax of the scooter boys ' development of Vespa customisation., which had progressed gradually since the early eighties (Fig's 25 - 27).

Fig.25. Vespa 'chopper' - 'Love Remover'.

Strains of the chopper ideal were seen during the late seventies when the devoted scooter enthusiasts of northern England would cut away portions of the Vespa's bodywork to make thier machines look more dramatic.

Fig. 26. Vespa 'chopper' - 'Day Tripper'

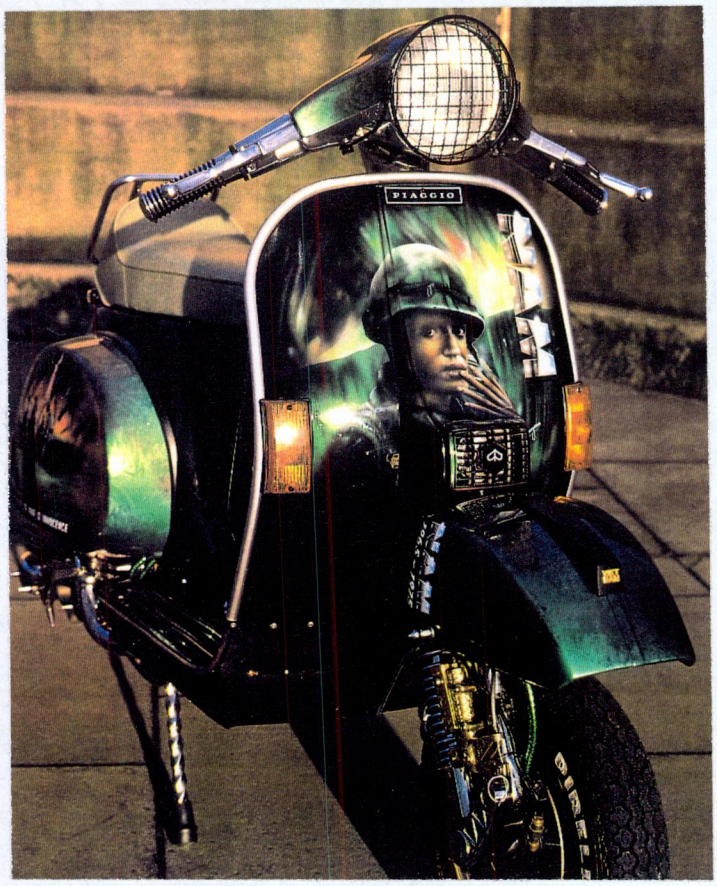

Fig. 27. Custom painted Vespa - 'Nam'

However, perhaps the earliest example of this trend was the 90 SS model of 1967, (discussed in chapter one) which featured a dummy motorcycle - type tank similar to the chopper, and slimmer legshields similar to the 'cutaway' customs. Had Piaggio predicted the future? The reality was that the scooter boys chose customisation in order to create thier own identity. The seventies were dominated by figures such as the 'biker' the 'lone desperado' and 'Hells Angels'. Combined with the OTT of glam rock, this imagery lent itself naturally to customisation and was hard to ignore. The scooter boys, who wished to distinguish themselves from the mods welcomed the idea of borrowing trends from the motorcycle world, as the bikers ancestor, the rocker was not exactly mods best friend. While Piaggio may have predicted the future with the 90 SS in terms of motorcycle / scooter crossover, albeit in subcultural circles, thier main aim was to simply widen the vespa's appeal in a declining market.

The scooter boys had successfully revived the Vespa as a cult object. In doing so they ensured and continue to ensure its preservation as an immortal classic. However, it could be argued that the annonymity that the mods influence took from the Vespa was replaced somewhat by the scooter boys. Unlike the mods, they rode scooters for the sheer love of riding scooters, there was no political masterplan, the scooter was not a blatant symbol of a fashion orientated movement, it was a leisure vehicle - pure and simple, to be used and enjoyed. the scooter boys were made up of such diverse cultural groups, they were in effect a cross section of the British youth culture of the period, and each rider made the basic Vespa what he wanted it to be. Unlike the original mods violent encounters, the scooter boys rallies were peaceful and socially acceptable. It was the 'second coming' of the scootermania that had been seen in Europe 30 years before, a kind of 'return to innocence' for the Vespa, and is best summed up in the

motto of the most influencial magazine devoted to scooter culture - "Scootering - a way of life".

Fig. 28. '.... a way of life'

CONCLUSION

When it was introduced, the Vespa's success led to it becoming an accepted symbol of Italian national pride, a pride and spirt that was desperatly trying to overcome the tainted image of defeated fascism. The Vespa was the result of a distinctivley Italian approach to design, whose convient carefree image, together with its style and innovative concept and construction restored lost confidence and created a completely new market. It is widely regarded as an example of Italian 'chic' and the leisure and pleasure orientated lifestyle of the post war age of consumerism.

The Vespa was and still is a perennial symbol of youth and freedom. Its success came at a time when youth culture and the values attactched to being young were becoming more and more relevant to industrialists. Manufacturers such as Piaggio realised a brand new market in the young as modern youth culture was in its infancy. The Vespa became a symbol of youth emancipation and liberation. As youth culture began to develop and polarise, the Vespa also played a leading role. It was an alternative means of transport for the mods of the sixties and became a vital part of thier ensemble. Through the influencial legacy of the mods, the Vespa had become a cult object in youth subculture, it had crossed into the realms of the underworld, achieving an immortality that would be preserved and handed down from one interweaving subculture to another.

Above all however, the Vespa was an extremely sociable creature. Although its success was largely due to its innovative design, the Vespa possesed a curious charm that captured the hearts of four generations. It was as if it possesed almost human - like characteristics, it was easy to use, it looked and even sounded friendly. People could relate to these atributes, and the Vespa became a loyal companion. The Vespa brought people

together. It opened up a new social scene to the youth of the fifties as they comingled at the beaches and coffee bars, and it unified the opposing factions that made up the scooter boys of the eighties. These qualities were responsible to a certain degree for the tribal banding together of the mods and thier inheritants and were vital in the evolution of the leisure orientated weekend migrations which reached a climax with the lifestyle of the scooter boys. Motorcycles or even cars with their comfortable spacious interiors never achieved this degree of social interaction. The Vespa had turned the need to get from one place to another into an involving way of life.

On a more fundamental level, the Vespa was the first definitive scooter, the true original. Its immediate success identified a vast new market for low cost, efficient transport. This success evolved into the creation of todays two - wheeled commuter market, which has become big business, as all major motorcycle manufacturers now include a range of scooterss in their product line-up. Gradually cars became more compact, and small capacity motorcycles were introduced by manufacturers in an attempt to corner this lucrative market. The emperors of the dominant Japanese motorcycle industry such as Honda built thier overwhelming success on the manufacture of scooters, mopeds, and small bikes to cater for the commuter market that was realised by Piaggio some thirty years before. The latest trend in the motorcycle world is towards the 'retro' or classic look, as manufacturers are increasingly re-introducing old models with updated technolgy. If the same trend develops in scooter design, then the legacy of the Vespa - 'The Seductive Sting of the Wasp' - may once again be felt.

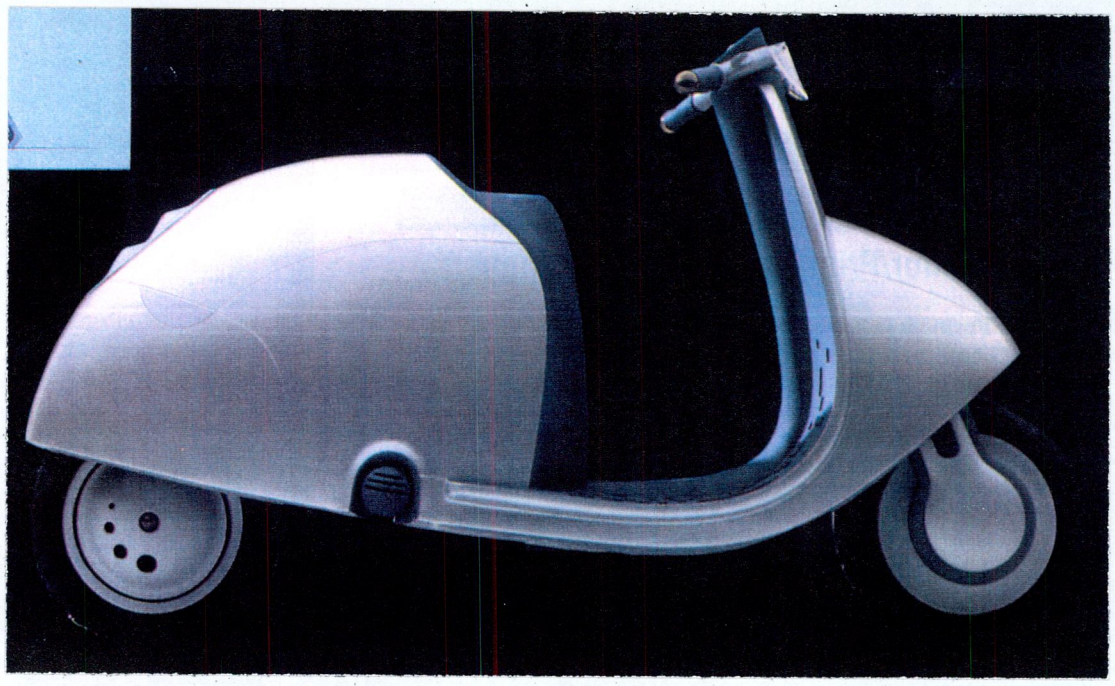

Fig. 29. A 1994 concept scooter. Its designers hope to take advantage of the current 'retro' trend in motorcycle design. Nearly fifty years on, the Vespa's presence is still evident in the 'desireable' aesthetics of today.

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