

From ships to motorcycles

Even before motorcycles were invented, the Kawasaki name was well known in Japanese industrial circles. In 1878, soon after Japan's emergence from centuries of seclusion to join the industrialised nations of the world, Shozo Kawasaki had established the Tsukiji Shipyard in Tokyo. This was followed in 1881 by another shipyard, the Kawasaki Hyogo Shipyard at Higashide-cho, Hyogo. These were merged in 1886, and Kawasaki Shipyard Incorporated was established a decade later, in 1896. Decades of steady expansion followed. In the early 1900s Kawasaki produced their first locomotive, which eventually led them to automotive and aircraft production. Soon they had plants throughout the country, with shipbuilding at Kobe, locomotive production at Hyogo, and, from 1937, aircraft production at Fukuoka. It was at this point that the aircraft and automobile divisions were separated from Kawasaki Shipyard Incorporated to become Kawasaki Aircraft Co Ltd. In 1940 Kawasaki Aircraft was relocated from Kobe to Akashi, the present home of Kawasaki motorcycles.

Following the end of World War Two, Kawasaki Aircraft found itself idle, with a surplus of engineering and manufacturing resources. Like other war-damaged countries, Japan faced a shortage of basic transportation and there were opportunities for the producers of small motorcycles. Soon over a hundred manufacturers had sprung up, and Kawasaki Aircraft became involved in the production of gears and gearboxes for some of these, before moving on to producing its own engine, the KE, in 1950. This

148cc four-speed overhead valve four-stroke single was used by various manufacturers – notably Fuji, Gasuden, and IMC – to power their small motorcycles.

Because it was designed and produced to aircraft standards, the KE was far superior to many of the other motorcycle engines produced in Japan during this period, and was very successful. This led to Kawasaki Aircraft producing another engine in 1952, the KH, a 250cc four-stroke. In 1953 a new subsidiary of Kawasaki Shipyard Incorporated, Meihatsu Industries, was formed as the sales outlet for motorcycle engines produced by Kawasaki Aircraft. Meihatsu was the predecessor of what we know today as the Kawasaki Motorcycle Co, and it was not long before Meihatsu was involved in the building of complete

motorcycles. In the meantime Kawasaki Aircraft produced the KB-1, a 60cc two-stroke engine designed specifically for bicycle attachment.

Throughout this period frequent name changes and corporate restructuring were a feature of Kawasaki's motorcycle operations. A further corporate development in 1954 saw Kawasaki Aircraft capitalise Meihatsu Industries to create Kawasaki Meihatsu Industries. The same year also saw Kawasaki Aircraft develop two new engines, the KB-5 and the KB-2. The KB-5 was a 125cc two-stroke, designed specifically for the Meihatsu 125V motorcycle, while the KB-2 – a development of the KB-1 – was a 60cc two-stroke, used in a scooter produced at the Gifu factory. This scooter was the first to bear the Kawasaki logo.

During the 1950s Meihatsu Industries was created to market the engines produced by the Kawasaki Aircraft Company. In 1954 this led to the Meihatsu 125V with the KB-5 two-stroke engine. (Kawasaki)



The Meihatsu 125 was typical of Japanese motorcycles of the 1950s. Though initially built with a full loop frame with plunger suspension and telescopic forks, by the end of the decade it featured a pressed steel spine frame. The engine and gearbox were suspended from this. Front suspension was by a leading link fork with pressed steel stanchions. The three-port engine itself was fairly unremarkable, and not unlike that of the BSA Bantam and Yamaha YA-1. These were both descended from the pre-war DKW, and featured unit construction and a central spark plug.

By 1959 motorcycle production in Japan was increasing almost exponentially, but many manufacturers were being left behind. The number of companies producing motorcycles shrank to a mere handful, and the Meihatsu concern was one of those which was faltering. While total motorcycle production in Japan topped 755,000 that year, Meihatsu sold only 10,000 of its 125s. Seeing motorcycles as a growth industry, these poor sales figures prompted Kawasaki to establish its own motorcycle production research department in preparation for a full-scale entry into the motorcycle market. This led to the construction of a new motorcycle assembly plant at the Akashi works, enabling Kawasaki Aircraft to expand from the manufacture of engines to the production of complete motorcycles. Its completion in October 1960 was fortuitous, since the following month Meguro, Japan's oldest motorcycle manufacturer, and one of its most respected, became affiliated with Kawasaki Aircraft. This would eventually give Kawasaki a wider range of products and allow it to expand its sales network throughout the country.

In the meantime, though, Kawasaki Aircraft was continuing to develop and produce new engines. During 1960 came the KB-25, a 250cc two-stroke, and the first Japanese motorcycle engine to feature a quick return gearshift system. This was followed by the KB-6AS, a 125cc two-stroke which, the following year, would power the first Kawasaki-built motorcycle, the B7. However, while this small two-stroke was significant, it

was the agreement with Meguro that gave Kawasaki credibility as a motorcycle manufacturer and distributor.

The Meguro

Founded in 1928 as Meguro Seisakusho, Meguro's initial efforts were rather unsuccessful. Using drawings and tooling supplied by Harley-Davidson, they built an obsolete side valve Harley-Davidson copy called the Rikuo. This not being successful, in the mid-1930s Meguro decided on the 1935 MSS Velocette as the basis for their next venture. Released in 1937 as the Z97, this 500cc twin port four-stroke single produced only 13bhp at 3,800rpm but established a reputation for durability and reliability that would typify all Meguros. When manufacture of the Z97 was interrupted by World War Two, Meguro resumed production of the Harley-based Rikuo for military duties. It wasn't until 1948 that Meguro was able to recommence production of the Z97, which was now joined by smaller 350, 230, and 125cc singles.

By 1954 their range had expanded to include the Z500, a single port 500cc overhead valve four-stroke single with a sprung frame and telescopic forks. Meguro then produced a twin, the Senior, as well as an overhead camshaft single for the Asama races. The latter events were very restrictive in terms of entry, and were designed to speed up the development

of Japanese machines. Though the domestic market suffered heavy import restrictions during the 1950s, manufacturers' efforts were facilitated by having no import duty to pay on foreign machines bought in to study and improve on. Thus Meguro's designs were heavily derived from existing British engines, and consequently they were essentially old fashioned. When the Senior was transformed into the K1 in 1959 it was almost a perfect copy of the BSA A7, undoubtedly due to the success of the BSA A10 at Asama that year, the first in which imported motorcycles had been allowed to compete. However, industrial problems hit Meguro in 1960, prompting Kawasaki Aircraft to step in to assist their marketing and sales.

In 1961 both Kawasaki Aircraft and Kawasaki Meihatsu were involved with motorcycles. This year also saw the first motorcycle completely built by Kawasaki, the B7. This 125cc two-stroke single, featuring a four-speed gearbox, was initially sold as a Meihatsu. An unremarkable motorcycle, it was very similar to the earlier 125 and was soon joined by a step-through, the M5, marketed as the Kawasaki Pet. Following the normal practice for this type of vehicle, the M5 featured a three-speed gearbox and a single cylinder 50cc two-stroke engine.

As part of the continual development of Kawasaki's motorcycle activi-

With the affiliation of Meguro in 1960, Kawasaki inherited several designs based on the British BSA. One was the 500cc Meguro K1 of 1959, a design that would later provide the basis for the W1. (Kawasaki)



ties during this period, a new company headquarters was built at Tokyo in June, and Kawasaki Meihatsu's name was changed to Kawasaki Jidosha Hanbai Co Ltd. By September 1961 another motorcycle assembly plant was operational and production of complete motorcycles was initiated. With an expanding sales network, and the products of both Meihatsu and Meguro on offer, Kawasaki was now able to provide a line-up from 50cc to 500cc.

Though these initial Kawasaki motorcycles (both the Pet and those produced under the Meihatsu name) were mundane and utilitarian, they must be seen in the context of the Japanese motorcycle industry at that time. This was a period of amazing growth, particularly by Honda. While other countries (such as Britain and Italy) were suffering a decline in motorcycle sales and production, the Japanese had adopted a forward-looking attitude. Kawasaki was no different. Within this large organisation, motorcycles were seen as an important element of product diversity, and direct competition with market leader Honda was not a serious consideration. From the outset Kawasaki was looking at a way of building and promoting motorcycles that were different to those of other Japanese manufacturers, and the Meguro fitted the bill perfectly in the early years. It was a philosophy that would continue through to the present day and would also permeate the company's eventual racing programme. In future years it would often be as important for Kawasaki to be seen competing as actually winning races.

Soon the B7 too would be developed into something more interesting and uniquely Kawasaki.

The B8

In September 1962 Meguro Manufacturing was totally absorbed by Kawasaki, and the corporate name was changed to Kawasaki Meguro Manufacturing Co Ltd. By this time the M5 step-through had grown into the B53 55cc machine via a larger bore, and October saw the announcement of the first motorcycle to carry a Kawasaki badge, the B8 for 1963. A development of the B7, the B8 was a typical utilitarian motorcycle of the



Kawasaki's first production motocrosser was the four-speed 125cc B8M of 1963. With its distinctive red fuel tank, this highly successful machine was important in establishing Kawasaki as a credible motorcycle manufacturer. (Kawasaki)

period but proved to be surprisingly popular in Japan due to its reliability. It was a single-cylinder 125cc two-stroke like the B7, but with a revised engine, gearbox, and suspension. Though a conventional unit construction two-stroke with a four-speed rotary shift gearbox, the transmission was moved to the left, along with the rocking gearshift pedal. Maximum power for the 54 x 54mm two-stroke was quoted at a meagre 8bhp at 6,000rpm, although this was soon increased to 11bhp. Lubrication was by petrol/oil pre-mix, this being before the days of 'Superlube' auto-lubrication.

The frame consisted of a pressed-steel backbone spine, and suspension by telescopic forks and a swingarm with twin rear shock absorbers. There were 16-inch wheels front and rear, drum brakes, and the final drive was by a fully enclosed chain. Only a single seat was provided, along with a rear rack. While the B8 seems unremarkable today, it was to spawn a whole range of motorcycles over the next few years, in particular the B8M. This motocross racer became so successful that it established Kawasaki in both the competition world and the marketplace.

While production of the B8 was gathering momentum, there was continual corporate reorganisation within Kawasaki's motorcycle divisions. In

February 1963 Kawasaki Aircraft merged with Kawasaki Meguro Manufacturing and the range of motorcycles expanded. Soon the M5K, with a kick-start, joined the M5, and the B53 was joined by the 55cc B55K, also with a kick-start. Then came the M5NC – an M5 with a centrifugal clutch – and Kawasaki's most significant machine up to that time, the B8M. Works versions of the B8M had set Kawasaki along the path of motorcycle competition success during the earlier part of the year, and in October it went into mass production, the first competition Kawasaki available for general consumption. This pure motocross machine used a modified version of the four-speed 125cc B8 road machine, retaining the carburettor behind the barrel and piston port inlet system, but with a high level exhaust. A similar spine-type frame was retained, there was no longer an enclosed chain, and brakes were full width drums. As with the road version, the engine was supported by a single downtube.

While the B8M was undoubtedly important, the next big move for Kawasaki was an expansion into the export market, in particular the United States. The first batch of exported B8s left Japan in 1964, when an overseas branch office was established in California.