

## The "A" Class Motorcycle Licence

By Jack England

I decided to write about my experiences of taking the bike test for the benefit of anyone looking to take theirs in the future. It may also be of interest to the longer licence holders wishing to find out what the current test involves.

I would like to start by saying that it is worth saving up before starting lessons. Bike lessons cost on average £40 hr compared to car lessons at £20 hr. This is because you have to pay for the insurance and use of your bike, plus that of the instructor. CBTs currently average around £120, module 1 is £15.50 and module 2 cost £75. Unfortunately, long gone are the days when you just had to ride around the block a few times, which was the case for many riders I spoke to.

The motorcycle test is now broken into 3 categories in ascending order; A1, A2 and A. A1 allows you to ride up to a 125cc (11kw) from 17 yrs of age. A2 up to 400cc (35kw) from the 19 yrs of age and A, taken on a 600cc (unrestricted power) from 24 yrs of age or 21 if you've held an A2 for 2 years.

In January 2015 I bought my first bike which was the 250cc Can-Am Bombardier. I bought it with the intention of taking it to military vehicle shows. However, I didn't have my bike licences, so naturally that became the next item on the agenda. Having taken my car licence in 2011, I expected it to be somewhat similar in layout but with the addition of the CBT. So I began by going onto the government website to read up on what was involved. The first hoop is the CBT and theory test.

I began by taking the theory which costs £23 now and was virtually the same as the car theory, but with the addition of 10 motorcycle questions. I found the best way to pass this is to buy the DVLA CD-ROMs. These cover the hazard perception and theory tests. They do not cost much from ebay and work out cheaper than paying to do a re-sit. Plus you can sell them on after. The questions and answers are written almost identically to the real test and after a number of go's, you will become familiar with all the questions and how the interactive video part of the test works.

After passing that, I booked my CBT with James Robinson in Hereford. As I was going for the full A licence geared. So I had to take my CBT on a 125 geared respectively. The CBT was very straight forward. Prior to that, I had an hour with Ian Hince on his 100cc motocross bike around his garden to learn the controls. The CBT goes over the basics like clothing, bike checks, highway code and how to ride on the road regarding positioning. After an hour in the classroom, we began by riding around the yard in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> gear performing loops and figures of 8. In the afternoon we went out on the road around Hereford. On completion I asked about booking lessons with them. But being the only school in Hereford, they were fully booked for the next month! So I looked into the next nearest school which was Ross-On-Wye.

I did a handful of lessons at Ross to progress from the 125 to 600 and train for the Mod1. However I failed when I took my Mod 1 which I would put down to lack of experience with the weight and handling of the 600.

So rather than forking out more money on lessons, I decided the best option would be to get a 125 to practice on. So I bought a cheap and simple Yamaha SR125. The CBT and theory test last for 2yrs, so at that stage I had over 18 months to complete. After a number of months of saving the pennies up again and working on my balance and handling, Ian recommended that I should try West Side

Riders in Gloucester as recommended by a friend of his. They have a large off road compound set up for Mod 1 training, so it looked ideal. The other advantage of doing lessons at Gloucester, was that the test centre is in Gloucester too. This meant I was able to save money on test days by travelling just a short distance down the road to the centre. Although the Mod 1 test cost £15.50, the day from Hereford or Ross to the test centre would total to around a hundred quid! Instead it cost me £5 of fuel from Hereford to Gloucester return for each lesson and gave me 45mins of practice each way on the 125. I also found riding the 125 on the way there got me ready to switch onto the 600.

I emailed West Side Riders, but after a week not having had a reply (perhaps they were out of the office) I decided to give Joy Riders a go who are another school in Gloucester. I soon had a reply back from them and I booked my first lesson with them at the beginning of February 2016. The weather in February was mild in comparison to previous years. But I wanted to make a start before the summer season and the books were filled up. I was able to do about 1 lesson a week (like car lessons), so I was able to keep the skills fresh.

Unlike Hereford and Ross which used the Honda CBRs. Joy Riders used Suzuki 650 Gladius. I found these a lot easier to ride than the CBR as the CBR required a leant over position and feet placed backwards. The Gladius however is a commuter bike with a level seat and handle bars and an upright riding position. Which as a result, I found far more controllable on the slow manoeuvres. The Gladius is also fitted with an LCD speedo, which was to prove much easier to read than looking down for a needle dial amongst the fairing while doing 30mph around a bend and avoiding the cones.

On my first lesson we practiced the manoeuvres, which I found were a lot easier this time around. Once out on the road, the 600 took a bit of getting used to again when it came to selecting the right gear and clutch control with the amount of extra power available compared to the 125. I also needed a bit of practice riding slowly to get my balance adjusted for the weight of the 600 and to feel fully in control of the bike. But after a few lessons, I was fairly confident that I had grasped the handling and able to ride it smoothly. After a few weeks they put me in for my Mod 1 and I felt a lot more confident than the year before. Prior to the test, myself and a few other students went to the test centre where schools can rent the Mod 1 compound for a few hours. We "walked the track" and re-capped all the manoeuvres as previously rehearsed around the many car parks and side streets in Gloucester.

To begin with, the rider has to ride into the compound and stop in a box for the first exercise. For each exercise you're expected to check over each shoulder for traffic as good practice before moving off. The first exercise, you need to manoeuvre the bike in reverse into an adjacent box so the bike is facing the other way. The second exercise is the slalom which has to be performed in a zigzag. The schools use small cones whereas the test centre use tall cones, so you must make sure you zigzag through them and not weave through as I found out the first time I took my Mod 1. For this exercise it was important to master the clutch control, remain sat upright and concentrate on aiming for the spaces and not the cones. A friend of mine said speeds under 30 require steering whereas speeds over 30 are leaning which I found was a useful bit of advice. This then runs into the figure of 8 which can be done with a bit of speed and momentum. The examiner then calls you over and tells you to ride slowly over to the U-turn part of the test. This is to demonstrate riding slowly in traffic and the aim is to keep your speed down to around 5mph on the clutch. The U turn is marked out by 2 white lines, 3 car park spaces apart which you need to stay between. You start off stationary, perform a

shoulder check, pull off and then perform another shoulder check before making the turn. I found the best way to get round without losing balance was to position myself over the left side of the bike.

This then leads onto the last three high speed exercises. The first is the controlled stop, second is the emergency stop and the final is the avoidance. The course dictates that you have to get up to speed and into 2<sup>nd</sup> gear, go through the bend and accelerate out of the corner up to 50km/hr (32mph). I found if you took it slowly and then exit the turn as soon as possible. This then gave you the most length to line up on the cones and get the correct speed, as opposed to going all the way around the bend and having to steer the bike to the left after the exit. The digital speedo was great for this as you could read it easily and quickly and you knew what your speed is exactly unlike a needle which takes time to interpret. There are 4 cones which mark out the speed trap - two at the front and two at the rear. I found the trick to getting the right speed was to aim for the back two. If you aimed for the front two, you would release the throttle too early and your speed would be under and thus a fail. I passed the controlled stop and emergency stop but I was a couple mph under on the avoidance test. But you're allowed 2 attempts for the high speed manoeuvres. So determined not to fail on the last exercise, I pushed my "serving at speed" ability to the limit and secured a pass.

The final step to getting your licence is the Module 2, which is the practical part out on the road. The other advantage to taking tests in Gloucester, was we were able to practice riding the known routes that examiners take. Frustratingly, I failed the Mod 2 by getting stuck behind a slow moving van on the A38 dual carriage way. Had I known the road layout better, I would have overtaken when there was a gap sooner. But that section of the road has a roundabout and traffic lights along it, plus trapped by other over taking vehicles, I subsequently failed for "lack of progress".

So the second time around and £75 shorter, I went up and down that section of the A38 about three times prior to the test. So in the end I knew the distances between each junction, the best places to overtake, best engine set up, best tyres, best line... For this stretch, the instructor expects you to ride at the national speed limit along here which is 70mph. Despite my practice runs, this time it was uneventful with only light traffic and I didn't need to overtake anything. Once back at the test centre, the examiner told me I had passed in the same tone of voice he used for announcing fails. He concluded with some small talk asking what type of bikes I was into. To which I replied classics, however he said he didn't like classics because they usually break down. I was tempted to say something along the lines of stop being a miserable old fart but I was happy just to get my bit of paper and shoot off.

So to round up, I would recommend any new riders buy themselves a high seated 125. I found good balance could be practiced on the 125 and applied to the 600 by working on where you look such as at the horizon and sitting upright. I also found riding to the lesson got me prepped and into the riding state of mind, which I still notice when I switch from car to bike and vice-versa. I would also recommend doing lessons where the test centre is as you'll be able to practice on the same roads as the Mod 2, save money on test days (not paying for travelling to and from) and hopefully your school will be able to use the compound. I would also check to see which bikes the school uses and if possible, find a school that uses digital speedos. Demonstrations of the Mod 1 and 2 are available on Youtube.