Gifted engineer, Australian Champion road racer, Les Diener left behind two examples of his craft in building Velocette-based specials – the Eldees. Now, for the first time, the original machine and its successor are together in Melbourne.
Les and I met on the first day that we attended Goodwood Technical School, (South Australia) in January 1934. This school was as close as you could get to a technical college in those days, and it was hoped that a trade apprenticeship would follow by the time that you reached the age of fourteen which was the normal minimum school leaving age in those times.

Within a week I had enlisted Les's home on Goodwood Road at King's Park on the way home from school. I had a rail pass but would often cycle to school, mostly as the result of missing the train, but sometimes with the express idea of spending time with Les after school.

These were the last years of the depression era and most people earned little more than a bare living. I never knew until later that Les's father had been running a local bus line with a partner and, as was common, debts had piled up and the business ceased to exist. It appeared that Les's father took it badly and just disappeared! So it was left to Les to grow up and become the head of the family with his mother and two younger sisters.

The day came when Les turned 14 and a family friend immediately found him employment where he quickly progressed to a position in an engineering machine shop. He later became a valued employee in the toolroom of Kelvinator Australia Limited on Anzac Highway Keswick in South Australia.

I remember that on my first visit to Les's home, the first thing that he showed me after introducing his mother and two sisters, was a Meccano model of a passenger lift. It sat on a small table, went almost to the ceiling and was run by a 6 volt electric motor that he had salvaged from an old Ahoogah car horn and had fitted into our primitive boilers that boasted no safety valves, no steam gauge and just the appropriate vanes detached from the tinplate rotor. Then the whole thing would self destruct with the appropriate noise! Peter Diener, he was certain that we would blow ourselves up, but Les always assured her that everything was under control, and we would test another of our creations until it was time for me to get on my bike and pedal off home. Around this time Les acquired a JAP V-twin. To us it was a huge power plant and on the paddock it was tested! We did have another passion, the power of steam! This came to a peak during our first year together at Goodwood Tech where our sheetmetal teacher was always happy to help us with our ideas.

We built numerous turbines from tinplate and solder which we can in Les's shed after school. There, for an hour or so, we would fire up ourprimitive boilers that boasted no safety valves, and were made from old treacle tins with the lids soldered firmly into place. When the ends of the tins started to buckle we would turn on the old petrol taps that regulated the steam flow and our latest turbine would howl at high revs until one of the soldered in vanes detached from the tinplate rotor. Then the whole thing would self destruct with the appropriate noise! Peter Diener, he was certain that we would blow ourselves up, but Les always assured her that everything was under control, and we would test another of our creations until it was time for me to get on my bike and pedal off home. Around this time Les acquired a JAP V-twin. To us it was a huge power plant and on the paddock it was tested! We did have another passion, the power of steam! This came to a peak during our first year together at Goodwood Tech where our sheetmetal teacher was always happy to help us with our ideas. We built numerous turbines...
Kelinators, and his attempts to break away from manufacturers production were blocked at every turn. A bit later in the war, he actually joined the army at nearby Keswick Barracks but the recruiting officer upon checking his occupational clearance, found out the true circumstances, and his army acceptance papers were cancelled forthwith!

Then the war was over, Les had left Kelinators and started a motorcycle business on Unley Road with a fellow enthusiast, Frank Tuck. The establishment was known as Tilt Motors, but more usually, Tuck and Diener, and it was here that I joined Les once more a few weeks after my discharge from the RAAF in March 1946. My job was running the robotic machines and general motorcycle repair work, including the rebuilding and painting of the odd prewar bikes that we were lucky enough to acquire. This was the time of the first post-war TT races and we journeyed over to Ballarat for the Victoria Park events on New Years Day and again at Easter when Les rode the MVV which at that early stage was already a force to be reckoned with. Unfortunately tragedy struck and Frank Tuck lost his life when his small car overturned at MtA. Luckily his family survived with minor injuries but the loss of Frank's presence and financial problems connected with his affairs meant that the Unley Road business was eventually closed in early 1947.

After the affairs of Clifton Motors had been settled, Les transformed the equipment to our old workshop. Les had left Kelvinators for the army and set up business as a one-man show. By this time he was in great demand for specialized racing parts and was fully active in the racing scene. On one occasion Fergus Anderson was racing in Adelaide, he had a little step-through Guzzi that was sold as a hack and he rode into Les's tough little workshop one morning in the company of Rex Eldee and was amazed at Les's facilities which were pretty basic!""""All the more so because on the showroom, Fergus, with his full factory team, never saw where Les went!"

It wasn't long after this that Les and Audrey moved to Ballarat and the workshop of George Morrison. This put him closer to the major racing venues of Victoria and of course Bathurst and Mildura. Les and Audrey returned to Adelaide where he joined the Symco engineering shop and his old South Australian racing associates. Here he once more became the centre of specialised racing parts manufacture, probably the best known being the Symco connecting rod. I had the odd contact with him during this period as we both had young families growing up. It was then that Les had a serious racing accident and quit the motorcycle scene completely for many years. Les's mother died suddenly of an obscure (at that time) sudden vision mirror. He said Les was riding close behind a trailer and the driver was observing him in the rear-view mirror. He said Les was having trouble with the lights (on the Gilera) so Bill Pfeiffer said ‘Bring it up here and we will have a look at it together’ so Les rode up to Gatton and saw Bill. He was following a semi-trailer and the driver was observing him in the rear-view mirror. He said Les was riding close behind and suddenly he just lay the bike down and slid along the highway. That was when he must have had the heart attack and died. He went the way he would have wished I guess.”

Birth of a legend

What became known as the Eldee Special began life as a 1936 250cc MVV Velocette, with 30,000 miles on the clock. Les acquired the machinery in 1940, intending to go racing on it, but with the intervention of the war, the Velos was used as road transport until 1944, when it was converted for scrambles use. It was still in basically this trim when it was entered for the first post-war road race – the Victorian TT at Ballarat on New Year’s Day, 1944. He managed one third place in Clifton’s events, but retired in other races with stripped flywheel magnets.

Over the next few years, the MVV was increasingly developed into a potent and reliable little race, bringing Les the Victorian TT at Ballarat in 1950 as well as state titles in South Australia and NSW. Perhaps inspired by Sid Willis’ home-brewed OKW 250, Les decided on producing his own double-kicker. The cylinder head and piston came from Ted Carey in Sydney, but the rest of the engine was built in Adelaide. A series of Velocette timing gears, nine in all and each carried on a double row ball race, operated the twin overhead cams in a BSA-style arrangement, with the inner timing case welded to the crankcases. A.csering adjustment on the final gear wheel allowed valve timing variation of three degrees. Camshafts were made from rolled steel, mounted on ball and roller bearings, with a short stellite-faced tappet between the cam and the valve. Solid cold-molded flywheels were turned, along with chrome-moly mainshafts and a Symco cover with two-piece camcase. The light alloy gear box case and the cam case were tapped into each other and bolted together, with thev
around and becoming something of a kids’ plaything, it was in a sorry state when Keith Hamilton began a rebuild for the Riley brothers in 1979. The rebuild took over two years, but try as he might, he could not get Les interested – at first. At the time of the fire, the fuel tank still contained alcohol, and was virtually destroyed, along with the carburettor and other alloy parts. Keith, a master with sheet metal, built an exact replica of the tank, salvaging the original filler neck, and after much painstaking work, Eldee was once again a runner. However, the bike passed through a number of hands before being sold to the UK, where it remained briefly until purchased by noted Japanese Velocette collector (he has 30 KTTs, ranging from a Mk1 to several Mk8s) Akihiro Kato. Far from a static exhibit, Akihiro ran the Eldee in Japanese classic events from time to time, but admitted to exhibiting Akihiko Kato. Far from a static exhibit, Akihiko ran the Eldee in Japanese classic events from time to time, but admitted to the idea of constructing a second Eldee formed. Fortunately, the original patterns were still in Adelaide in the hands of Peter Westerman, and in 1987, work began on what became Eldee 2. The inspiration came about after Les was invited to the Historic Racing Festival at Pukekohe and managed to obtain another Casey head. It was all he needed to fire the enthusiasm, and for the next two years, Les, now retired, could be found in his small workshop toiling away. Extensively, the new machine’s engine looked identical, but inside, there were several changes, including a titanium conrod running a German INA bearing and a 1½ in-dia Airsal piston. Instead of making the timing gears from scratch, modified BSA caps were employed.

A new drive-side crankcase, with extra strengthening (6x), was cast in 2400’s alloy by Adelaide foundry Castech, who also did the valve guide cases and covers, hubs, brakes and fork yokes. Speedway Jess valves with SWD oil cups replaced the bauers used on the original Eldee. Inside the magneto, Les modified the armature to accept an electronic triggering device from a Mitsubishi car, powered by a small 12-volt battery with a Yamaha solenoid.

The Featherbed frame and fork legs came from a batch of parts that Keith Hamilton brought back from Malaysia, with the rear section cut off and replaced to give a lower seating position. Keith also made the steel side tank. With the second Eldee, Les took up the tracks again at the age of 68, and showed he could still cut it with the younger bikes in the Historic Racing ranks, winning many races in Mallala and Mt Gambier. Following Les’ death, Eldee 2 was acquired by Akihiko Kato, and he has run the bike on several occasions. When the opportunity arose to bring the original Eldee back to Australia, the temptation was irresistible. “My friend Humphrey Smith alerted me to the possibility that Akihiko Kato may be interested in selling the bike, and the chance to put the two Eldees together was a challenge I couldn’t pass up. I sent a deposit over while Humphrey sorted out the transport and so on, and it was shipped directly to Melbourne. Since then, I have had discussions with the curator of the Birchwood Hill Museum, Alain Russell, and I am hopeful of obtaining the original racing for the Eldee which was donated to the museum by Audrey Diener, Les’ widow.”

And so one fine Melbourne day just prior to Christmas 2006, both the Eldees were assembled for a photo shoot near Fran’s Breaking Motor Bikes premises. “Now that they are together, I will never separate them,” he said, and you get the feeling that he really means it.