Road Racing Legends

In 1922, local innovator Harry Ferguson, along with several interested parties, proposed the Road Races Act to the newly formed Northern Ireland government. The Act began a history of motorcycle and motor vehicle road racing that has made Northern Ireland famous on a global scale.

For over a century, road racing has been at the heart of the motorcycling community in Northern Ireland.

Unlike many other countries, the culture of racing on public road circuits has endured and thrived across the island of Ireland. The risks are high, but, in spite of the danger, riders flock to take part in the local calendar of races with the North West 200 becoming one of the most popular in the world.

This collection of motorcycles celebrates several generations of some of our leading road racers. Legends of the racing world, they are immortalised through their achievements and the talent and bravery they showed on the track.

Ivor Skelton

This collection of seven motorcycles was originally owned and restored by Ivor Skelton who sadly passed away in 2021. Ivor loved motorcycles from an early age trading in his bicycle for his first motorcycle at Billy Nutt's Shop in Coleraine. He went to school with one of the local racers featured in this exhibition, Robert Dunlop. They would race each other around Ballymoney, but Ivor never revealed who won! He travelled to motorcycle races with local racing legend Frank Kennedy and it was from here that his love for the sport grew.

Ivor Skelton was a motorcycle fanatic, riding and building motorcycles in his spare time, but his love for the sport and the people associated with it led him to acquire bikes raced on local roads by some of the leading names in the country. His foresight has ensured that these bikes have been preserved in excellent condition, meticulously restored down to the detailed advertising signage. His enthusiasm and expertise will now continue to inspire generations of visitors to the Ulster Transport Museum.

Robert Dunlop

1986 Special Honda RS125RW

HOYFM.2023.63.6

Born: 25 November 1960 – 15 May 2008

Home town: Ballymoney

Younger brother of Joey Dunlop, Robert Dunlop is part of a family synonymous with road racing in Northern Ireland. Multiple wins at the Isle of Man TT reflect his skill but his fourteen victories at the North West 200, a record which stood for over twenty years, is what cemented him as one of the most talented riders Northern Ireland has produced. He had several serious crashes during his career, one of which, in the 1994 Isle of Man TT, he was lucky to survive. Despite the severity of his injuries he made a comeback.

In 2008, he was killed following a crash during the practice session of the North West 200. His son Michael went on to win the race and dedicated the victory to his father.

Owen McNally

1987 RS Honda 125

HOYFM.2023.63.7

Born: 2 March 1969 – 27 August 1999

Home town: Coleraine

Coleraine rider, Owen McNally, lit up the racing world during his short career. Tipped to be the 'next Joey Dunlop', he won races at the North West 200 and the Ulster Grand Prix in 1997 and became the Irish road racing champion in the 125cc class and holder of the Superteams title. In 1999 at the age of 30, he tragically crashed at the Ulster Grand Prix, Dundrod, and later died from his injuries.

Ryan Farquhar

Suzuki TT McAdoo Superbike GSXR 1000

HOYFM.2023.63.4

Born: 2 February 1976

Home town: Dungannon

In the early 2000s, Ryan Farquhar exploded on to the professional road racing scene winning thirty races in 2004 alone. This was only the beginning of an incredibly successful career spanning twenty years. In 2019, he was entered in to the Guinness World Book of Records for having the most career motorcycle road racing wins at a staggering 357. Following his retirement, he continues to build bikes for other competitors.

This bike was first raced by Ryan Farquhar in the NW200 in 2003, where he finished 4th. He used this machine to win the Southern 100 breaking lap and race records.

Philip McCallen

Yamaha F1R1 1000cc

HOYFM.2023.63.5

Born: 22 September 1963

Home town: Portadown

Philip McCallen began his career in 1984 and soon earned a reputation for fearlessly pushing the limits of his motorcycle and himself. Following a number of victories in 1989, he was drafted into the Honda factory team to replace the injured Joey Dunlop. He would ride for Honda for the next ten years. During his time racing he achieved a phenomenal five wins from six starts at the 1992 North West 200, thirteen wins at the Ulster Grand Prix in three years and eleven wins at the Isle of Man TT.

This bike is the last one McCallen won a race on, winning the Tandragee 100 in 1999. He retired later that season due to injuries sustained throughout his career. He now owns a successful motorcycle dealership in Lisburn.

Frank Kennedy

1976 Maxton Yamaha TZ350

HOYFM.2023.63.1

Born: 5 June 1948 – 14 November 1979

Home town: Armoy

Frank Kennedy came from Armoy, Co. Antrim, home of the famous group of motorcycle racers, the 'Armoy Armada'. They often competed with each other and their rivals the 'Dromara Destroyers' during the late 1970s. Frank Kennedy achieved a career best with a second placing at the 1976 North West 200. Unfortunately, his career was cut short, as he was killed at the 1979 North West 200 in what became known as 'Black Saturday'. Three riders were killed in one race including Frank Kennedy, who died from his injuries several months later.

Tom Herron

1977 Spondon Yamaha TZ250

HOYFM.2023.63.2

Born: 14 December 1948 – 26 May 1979

Home town: Newcastle

Tom Herron began his racing career in 1965 and won his first international race at the 1970 North West 200. He spent most of his racing life as a privateer, a rider who enters races without being supported by a bike manufacturer. He was successful in races at home and in Europe finishing third in the Finnish and Swedish Grand Prixes. His most notable achievement was for the course record of 127.63mph at the 1978 NW 200. Tragically, he was killed on the last bend on the last race of the last day of the 1979 NW 200.

Credit

These motorcycles were acquired in 2023 thanks to support from the Department for Communities and the National Heritage Memorial Fund. Our thanks to the Skelton family for their assistance with this acquisition.

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