

Working for this magazine, I get to see a lot of the motorcycle world at large; including an awful lot of bike shops. I've also seen a terrifyingly large number of them vanish over the past few years, and one thing sticks in my mind about most of those that have gone. It wasn't surprising. You know what it's like, you wander in and shoot the breeze with the person behind the counter, they have a bit of a moan about how quiet it is and how everyone buys stuff off the internet and how it's all someone else's fault.

So it came as a real treat to find out that someone out there is making it work. And not just making it work, but thriving and expanding their business. Pin back your eyeballs for a visual feast and open your mind to a world of possibilities; this is Shaw Harley-Davidson, a bike shop with a true vision of the future. A future that is as bright as the chrome that adorns their stunning custom bikes.

SHAW THING

A Harley dealer that used to sell agricultural machinery? Let the tractor jokes begin...

I was sent down to find out all about its latest venture, the Shaw Speed Shop, where their guys design and build custom bikes for which they have already received a stack of awards. Much like bikes, plans are made to be modified and it soon became clear to me that this plan was about to be torn apart and rebuilt from the ground up into something as entirely different as a Shaw Custom.

Sure, Shaw does make some eye-poppingly gorgeous bikes, some of which you see here. But the real story for me was how it's found a way to make a great success out of a business that often seems to be dead in the water. Besides, the shop seems to be getting one hell of a lot of press coverage for its custom work these days. It seems everyone is caught up in the bright lights of the Shaw bikes. If you want to know more about the bikes themselves, take a trip down and see them: it's a great venue for a rideout, in a superb location down near Lewes on the South Coast.

Harley-Davidson are (in)famous for being the best marketers in the business, so of course the showroom looks great and very much like most Harley shops. But there the similarity ends. I'm looking for Steve Willis; Dealer Principal and Sales Director. I'm told he's with some folks





"This isn't the usual Harley way..."

In the showroom, custom show bikes which are proudly displayed along with the standard Harley range and vast swathes of Harley Davidson branded everything. But these shiny new standard Harleys aren't all exactly as they appear.

Quite a number of them have received the Shaw custom touch. There are mildly-customised new bikes alongside the stock bikes, each one declaring its modifications with a spec sheet. Custom parts on display aren't just the usual Harley-Davidson approved fare either – the name Roland Sands mean anything to you? Sands, son of Performance Machine founder Perry Sands,

and former 250GP racer, founded the now highly successful Roland Sands Design firm which produces some way-out custom motorcycles and parts. Gorgeous RSD bits are hanging on the wall here

and adorning various bikes. This isn't the usual Harley way. But it seems that Shaw likes to do things its own way and maybe Harley-Davidson doesn't mind since the Shaw guys are clearly making it work.

Sitting in the middle of the warehouse is a much modified Softail Nightrain in Playboy livery, put together by Shaw for the launch of the Playboy energy drink and graced on the day by model Kelly Brook.

OK, so these guys are serious about this. I'm shocked by the level of custom business and Playboy is quite a promotional coup for a relatively new custom bike shop.



from Harley-Davidson UK, who I later found out have come down to find out more about how this place is run and how it's able to put in such seriously good results. Now there's a surprise. Once Steve is free, we take a tour of the building. There's a huge warehouse and occupying one large section are several rows of bikes in various states of build. Some stripped right down, some half-built and rows of complete bikes. I'm almost speechless when Steve tells me that these are all part of the new Speed Shop

Below: Steve Willis (left) and Roland Sands San

custom business. Either part-finished bikes waiting for paint and parts to be made, or just customers' bikes waiting for the custom process to begin. For a custom shop to be this sought after just blows me away.

We head out to the workshops, where I get a sneak preview of a bike destined for the Verona Bike Expo, a heavily modified XL1200 Sportster, dirt track style with a horde of delicious detail features and clever

design, destined to be another show winner for Shaw (I need to stop doing that). When did you last see a Harley-Davidson with Öhlins suspension, Brembo brakes, chain drive and a super trick digital dashboard?

Time to prise myself away from the workshop, as Steve is scaling the stairs to the Custom Suite. No, I didn't know what one of those was either. Once again showing how Shaw thinks differently, it hasn't simply decided to build a few custom bikes and see if they sell. Oh no, it's set out to generate new business by carefully fostering a good relationship with one of the most respected names in the custom bike

business, Roland Sands, then building some truly great custom bikes and using them as promotional vehicles along with some of the biggest brands in the world, such as Playboy. But that's not enough for Shaw. It takes it to another level by providing a whole new market layer, custom bikes for the budget conscious.

But there's more. Shaw has built what it calls the Custom Suite, to give the VIP treatment to Shaw Speed and Custom customers. This is a truly cool space up in the roof of the workshop. Basically a huge glass box, overlooking the Speed and Custom workshop. Customers can relax in real style and comfort, looking out over



existing projects which are being built before their eyes, as they discuss their own ideas with Steve and the team. Most bike shops have a table with a few five-year-old bike magazines and a coffee machine, if you're lucky. Most custom shops don't even have that, which I guess some people prefer.

The 'back-to-basics' image works for many but if you want to attract new people into a world, you need to make it easy for them to walk through the door. The Custom Suite is lush, with cool stuff seemingly just lying around everywhere: custom painted crash helmets, a big shiny V twin, bits of custom painted bike. It's all there for inspiration and ideas – it's hard to make something truly innovative happen in an office, but you can go a long way towards making it as pleasant an experience as possible.

So we sit and chat for what doesn't seem like very long, but Steve is passionate about what he does and I'm a sucker for a good story and time passes like a supercharged V-Rod passes the timing light at the end of the strip.

This is no 9-to-5 job for him, it's more of a way of life, Steve has been with Shaw for a long time and as we delve into the past I begin to understand why this shop is like no other I've ever been to.

This remarkable place wasn't always the way it is now. It used to be a place



Pop art that costs less than you think

Here's another Sportster that made me stop and look – very eye catching with its pop-art graphics and old-school tyres.

This is another side to the custom business, the promotion of low-cost custom bikes, built to a budget, but still exhibiting all the Shaw style and flair.

People usually think of custom Harleys as mega-buck trailer queens, but Shaw is building low

budget custom bikes to appeal to a far wider market, bikes that will get ridden regularly by riders who just want something a little bit individual.

This one is based on what was a cheap, second hand Sportster. The finished bike will cost less than you would believe, opening up a whole new world for young people who haven't had access to this type of bike before. Now that's forward thinking.



that sold and serviced turf machinery for golf courses and grounds maintenance. OK, so that immediately brings up the old joke about Harley-Davidson being akin to the tractors of the bike world, but this isn't as true as it used to be. These days your average Harley is as likely to have ABS, fly-by-wire throttle and a slipper clutch as any race rep sportsbike.

The turf machinery business wasn't working for Shaw, so the bosses sat down and thought about what else they might like to do. Selling Harley-Davidsons emerged as the slightly improbable, but ultimately successful solution.

A large proportion of the staff remained and are currently employed in various roles throughout the business. I spoke to a technician who had successfully transferred his skills from lawnmowers to bikes and now 'Harley Trained', he



loves creating custom bikes utilising his previous engineering skills alongside his new motorcycle engineering talents.

This unlikely transition has clearly worked extremely well, given that Shaw has been the recipient of the highly prized Harley-Davidson Bar and Shield customer service award for six consecutive years since 2003. No mean feat.

As Steve admits freely, none of the staff were motorcycle folk, which I think has been what has given them part of their edge over the competition. Most bike shops grow from small roots and from one person whose passion for bikes makes them believe that they can grow a successful business from their hobby or lifestyle.

This creates a business



Polly put your leathers on...

It's accepted common knowledge in the bike world that bikers are getting older. The average age of a biker when I was a lad was 20 something, these days it's 40 something.

There are many reasons for this and this is not the place to get into that, but Shaw H-D isn't satisfied with commonly accepted knowledge. They are the only bike shop that I know of that are actively doing something about this to change things. How would you possibly go about doing such a thing, where to start? Well Shaw started in the best place possible, at a party. Last summer the store

partnered with Roland Sands to put on the Roland Sands Beach Party motorcycle event in Brighton.

One of the people that attended that event was Polly Taylor, a 21-year-old with that rare quality for a girl of her age, a full bike license. Polly loves bikes and wasn't going to miss out on a beach party aimed at her passion.

But what she didn't know was how it would take her into a whole new world. After the party had finished Polly decided she'd like to attend an event at the Ace Café, and wanted to hire a really cool bike to ride up there. Having met Steve from Shaw, she gave

him a call and asked him where she might be able to hire a bike from. Steve invited her to come over to the shop and discuss what she wanted and to cut a long story short (which isn't like me) Steve offered to provide her a Harley for the event, all courtesy of Shaws.

The day went well and after a spell more of Shaw creative thinking, Polly became their official Ambassador for Youth and cover girl for Shaw Harley-Davidson. Polly, a trainee solicitor, now spends her free time travelling all over the place and promoting the use of motorcycles to young people.

that often retains the passion for a while, but ultimately peters out when the passion fades and is replaced by a dying love for the machine that originally sparked the idea, and they enter a kind of somnambulistic state for years, and all too often shut the doors in a state of disillusion.

Steve recalls learning the Harley way, FXSTC, FLHXSE, etc. a whole new world of acronyms and a whole new set of customers. But soon he developed a passion not only for Harley-Davidson, but also for motorcycles in general and it shows. So much for the past, this place is all about the future.

But that's not all, Shaw always seem to have more than one rabbit in the hat; how best to appeal to a young clientele than through music and celebrity? Enter Matt Willis, ex-Busted band member and star of reality TV. Having met at yet another promotional event, this time involving Gibson guitars, Shaw created an uber-cool 50's inspired Sportster custom for Matt.

His love of the 50's style and tattoo art has been skilfully transferred

to the final machine, with Genko (a famous Japanese tattooist) style tattoo imagery and hot rod styling. It's all about making the bikes appeal to younger people and making them accessible at the same time.

Sadly, being January it was a pretty grim day so I didn't get to ride any of these stunning machines, but I'll definitely be back for Shaw (sorry) when the dryer weather comes and do a test ride or two.

After all, these are no trailer queens, they're custom bikes that are built to be ridden. If any of this has inspired you to look into the custom bike scene, or take a closer look at the new Harley-Davidsons, I can't imagine a better place to visit, you cannot fail to be impressed.

One last thing, Shaw can always surprise you. Unlike every other bike sales team that I have ever come across, Shaw bike sales people do not earn commission. They are salaried. The reason given is that if they are salaried, they will take the time to talk to you properly and not be looking over your shoulder for the next customer, no matter how much you are looking to spend. Now isn't that refreshing?

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