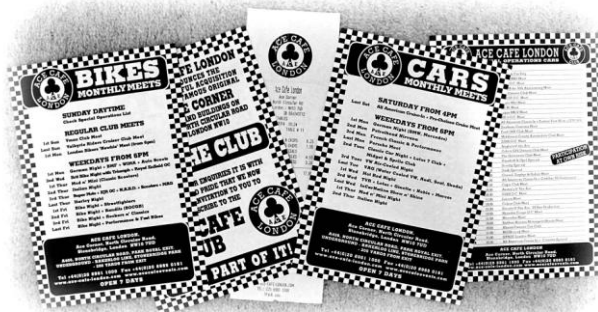


## THE ACE IS (STILL) THE PLACE



The chances are that you've already heard of the Ace Café on London's North Circular. Given that it's been there since 1938 this is hardly surprising, although you may not be quite so familiar with its history and its place in the present day.



Built as a 24-hour transport café, in 1939 expansion took place on some adjacent land in the shape of a workshop, a car dealership and a petrol station, the latter boasting an impressive battery of ten pumps. Other facilities included tyre fitting and a car wash, but unfortunately during the forthcoming war the proximity of the business to a large railway yard saw it sustain air raid damage. The cafe operated out of temporary accommodation until rebuilt in 1949, when the previous rather homely building was replaced by a larger modernist structure which still stands today. This took many of its styling cues from the 1930s and indeed looks quite typically late pre-war.



The popularity of the Ace must at least have been in part due to its state-of-the-art approach to what it did, its facilities and home-cooked meals being at the opposite end of the scale from the typical 'greasy spoon' cafés that were its all too common contemporaries. As well as serving its commercial clients it also found itself well-placed to capitalise on the 1950s explosion of 'youth culture', particular that associated with motorcycles. It proved to be just the venue for the members of this aspect of the burgeoning counter-culture to meet, eat, drink and listen to their jukebox favourites and soon became what might be referred to today as a 'social hub', although in those simpler times it was just a place for like-minded individuals to gather in the evenings and at weekends. During the latter it was also used the meeting point for group runs.



Unfortunately for the Ace social change never stops adapting and reinventing itself and so by the end of the 1960s things like the motorway network and other road improvements plus increasing affluence led to the Ace closing its doors for good in 1969. It was during its afterlife as a tyre depot that I remember it in pre-M25 days, the floor-to-ceiling glazed bays of the post-war facade making its adaption to this new life as easy as if it had been built for the purpose. In fact, it was this ease of conversion to a totally different use which probably saved the building from demolition and so for 25 years the original Ace slept until its spirit was reawakened by Mark Wilsmore in 1994 when he organised a reunion in what was then still the fast-fit *Just Tyres*.



The interest and affection which this aroused is reflected in the attendance of around 12000 people that day and from that time until 2001 Mark and his team worked tirelessly to bring the café back to life and after seven years their tenacity was rewarded and the café lived again. While the garage and filling station on the adjacent site are long gone, the café still sits on its slightly awkward triangular patch of land not far from the Hangar Lane interchange (star of many a radio traffic report), bounded by the A406, a railway viaduct and the River Brent, in what cannot be described as one of

the most salubrious parts of North London. However, it is a building steeped in social history and so is well worth a visit - and the food and drink are good too!



These days there are themed car and bike meetings on most weekday nights along with weekend days and evenings and one of these is a regular Italian night. The café still operates from 7am to late evening seven days a week and while Stonebridge may be a little off the radar of most IAMC members a trip to the Ace is a worthwhile thing to make today, not to mention being something of a trip back in time too.

**MJB**

