EXCLUSIVE

By **Jane Warren**

MILK ON THE MOVE

It's not just donated blood that criss-crosses the country on the back of motorbikes, but emergency breast milk brought direct from generous mums to the most vulnerable babies

JUST after 6am on a sleepy Saturday morning in Worthing, West Sussex, the only sound to be heard is the steady hum of Roy Stagg's motorbike. Thirty-five miles away in Eastbourne, premature triplets born overnight are clinging to life. And in the secure, temperature-controlled box on the back of his bike, Roy is carrying more than just a delivery – he's a courier for the precious gift of breast milk, a lifeline for fragile newborns fighting to survive.

Every journey holds meaning when you're riding for a cause. But for this softly spoken volunteer, who leads the milk donor programme in Sussex, every mile he travels carries the memory of a little girl he never got to see grow up – his granddaughter, Maggie Mae, who died at just 19 days old in 2011.

"I ride in her name," Roy, 71, says gently, his voice steady but heavy with feeling. "She's with me on every trip."

A former Sussex Police officer with a lifetime of biking behind him, including on the road policing unit, Roy never imagined his retirement would take this shape. But then, no grandparent expects to lose a grandchild.

Maggie Mae was born prematurely at 24 weeks. She spent her short life in the neonatal intensive care unit at St Peter's Hospital in Chertsey, Surrey.

"She was very poorly, and required a number of transfusions. She battled for 19 days, but in the end her underdeveloped lungs and an infection took her from her mum and dad, and from the rest of us," he explains.

In those heartbreaking weeks, Roy noticed "gallant knights" constantly arriving at St Peter's – men on motorcycles, arriving at all hours. "I was too preoccupied at the time to appreciate the job they were doing, and the contributions they made to Maggie's care."

Months later, still processing his family's heartbreaking loss, he was astonished to discover that the riders behind these life-saving deliveries were all volunteers.

"I made me even more determined to join and put something back for all the hard work given to us, not to Maggie but to everyone all over the country."

He signed up for SERV Sussex (Service by Emergency Rider Volunteers, Sussex), one of several UK groups that transports urgent blood products and donor breast milk to support the Hearts Milk Bank, part of the Human Milk Foundation (HMF), a charity working to ensure nationwide access to donor human milk.

The HMF was founded by Gillian Weaver and Natalie Meehan in 2018. Gillian is a global human milk banking specialist. Natalie is a doctor. They were fuelled by frustration at the lack of assured donor milk supply in hospitals to support the most vulnerable babies, as well as the difficulties families faced when breastfeeding was impossible – and who could not donate of accessing donor milk except in very rare circumstances.

"In a similar model to the UK Blood Bank Service we are establishing donor milk banks to ensure all parts of the country have equitable access to donor human milk," says a spokesperson for the charity.

BREAST milk provides a host of benefits for the most poorly babies, including reducing the risk of gastrointestinal disease, necrotising enterocolitis (NEC), providing essential nutrients, growth factors and hormones, improving brain development and being more easily digestible and better absorbed than formula milks.

In 2013, Roy delivered breast milk daily to the father of a newborn in East Sussex who was had died giving birth. "Seeing that – it means a lot to be able to help. I feel so very proud to be involved in what we do."

The service also supports families who struggling or unable to breastfeed for whatever reason, but is due to mastectomy following a cancer diagnosis or prematurity. The team also delivers the donated milk to special care baby units in a number of hospitals.

"There is a certain joy in the milk programme – meeting those donating milk and delivering directly to those that need it, who are equally happy to receive it," he says.

A bike relay can be set up instantaneously across the country if demand is suddenly required, drawing on further Milk Bank hubs with riders waiting to hand over the precious resource. The positive is unpaid, the 12-hour shifts unmissable and the stakes impossibly high. But among the riders there is a palpable sense of camaraderie – equally comfortable helping tiny babies, it's a profoundly moving mission and clear that they view this endeavour as a privilege.

"It's about what we can do for people," explains Roy.

Last year the team transported 590 litres of donated breast milk to mothers at home or in the hospital or to the milk bank, covering 4,000 miles, in a bid "to help little babies that are struggling".

In 2016, the charity purchased a new motorcycle fleet. "The chairman asked me if I would like to have the motorcycle named after Maggie," he tells me.

"I came off the bike. Broke some ribs. I called the committee and asked not that the products were still delivered."

It's this quiet humility and strength that defines his dedication. He says he is old enough to remember how milk was once shared informally among mothers in this country, before official services existed.

"My mum probably did it or received some from neighbours without any checks being done, or that sort of thing: the transfer of breast milk has gone on for years. It was just what people did.

"Now, it's safer and properly managed. But it's still about one mother helping another."

He now helps train new riders, reminding them they're not emergency services – there are no blue lights, no sirens. "We ride safely and predictably". And always, for him, with Maggie in mind.

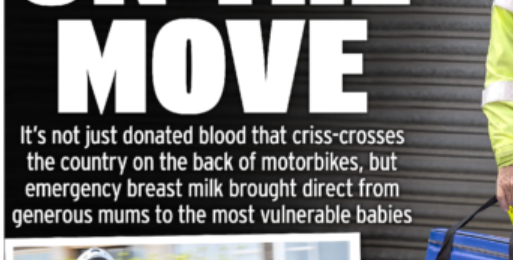
He doesn't know how many lives the team has helped save. But each time they load up a bike and fasten the lid on the cool box, they think of the families at the other end.

"I know how it feels to be in their shoes," he points out.

As dawn breaks, another baby begins a new fight for life.

Somewhere, a siren wails for milk that hasn't arrived yet. But it's coming. Because Maggie Mae's name is on the tank, and her grandpa is already on his way.

● *The national human milk banking service is not financed by government funds. To donate or find out more see humanmilkfoundation.org*



COLLECTION: Jane Warren joins the milk run

READY TO HELP: Frozen milk at the donor hub

GIVING BACK: Roy Stagg, left, with his beloved Maggie Mae bike. Right, with Alison Spears who generously donates her milk

THE DAY I HELPED COLLECT MILK

AS THE sun sparkles on the English Channel near Worthing Pier, we skim along the seafront road in high-vis jackets – including Express photographer Adam Gerrard, who has been a volunteer rider with the charity for the past five years.

We set off from the SERV Sussex headquarters. We are going on an unusual milk round. A blue thermal top-box is strapped to the top of my bike, ready to receive a fresh delivery from a generous donor mother.

I'm riding with Professor Simon Morley, a trustee who founded the hub. A biochemist at the University of Sussex for 35 years, Prof Morley was instrumental in forming the volunteer team that delivers milk and blood to hospitals and private homes.

He recently retired to dedicate ever more time to the project. "Donor milk enables premature babies to receive this perfect specialised food so they can thrive," he says.

After 15 minutes, we arrive at the home of Alison Spears, a primary school teacher and the mother of Ethan, 18 months, and two-year-old Josie. For the past six months, and after undergoing a health screening process, she has been donating her breast milk to the Hearts Milk Bank.

Every two weeks, the SERV team collects around four litres from Alison who freezes it during that time with pre-prepared donor labels.

"I was weaning Ethan and had excess milk, and thought someone, somewhere must want it," Alison says. "The fact I can do something to help others is a satisfying feeling and my husband is fully supportive of it.

"I always expressed milk so family could help feed Ethan, it felt a natural thing for me to continue to do."

Her decision to donate coincided with the birth of a friend's premature baby. "I was donating while seeing the difference in person what donated milk was making to my friend."

Once back at base, the little cubed bottles of donated milk are placed carefully in a medical-grade chest freezer. When the freezer is full, they will be driven by a volunteer rider for pasteurisation at the Hearts Milk Bank in Barkhamsted, Hertfordshire.

Each tiny bottle, frozen with care, holds the chance of life.

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