

# TERMS OF REFERENCE

**Moto Guzzi's Mk V Le Mans versus its granddaddy, the Mark One. TM peers back in the mists of time**



*Latest Le Mans ultra-civilised, apart from poor quality paint*



*The high and the mighty: which one would you choose?*

**W**ithin 50 miles of collecting the 3500-mile Moto Guzzi Le Mans V demonstrator from Three Cross, the speedo packed up. A low groan issued from inside my Arai. Oh no, not *now*, just when it was beginning to look like I'd actually have some nice things to say about a Guzzi for the first time in ages...

Fortunately, apart from a couple of very damp mornings when the Le Mans nearly cranked itself into silent oblivion, that was the sum total of the grumbles. It's not all strawberries and cream, but things are definitely looking up.

As luck would have it, a Mk I Le Mans was made available to us by the boys at Moto Vecchia, one of Britain's Ducati importers. They were confident that their nicely original 25,000 mile 1978 Le Mans would not disgrace itself on test. They were right.

Physically at least, the Le Mans has come a long way since its arrival in this country in 1976. You may not think that the Mark V represents any sort of visual improvement over the

Mark I, but it's certainly different. The truth is that the latest Le Mans is body-heavy. It has none of that slinky feline grace that so endeared the Mark I to British enthusiasts.

Our F-reg demonstrator also suffered from the depressingly typical Italian syndrome of using petrol-soluble paint around the tank filler hole.

How can they keep making such elementary mistakes like this, and like their continually busting speedos, when the Japanese and the Germans have had these problems licked since time immemorial?

But I'm getting on my hobbyhorse again...

The Mark V may look tall in the saddle, but it's actually a more accessible ride than many Japanese machines of lesser capacity. 'Er indoors measures but 5'4", yet she could put the balls of both feet solidly down on the ground from the pilot's position. (*Hmm... Kinky! GL*) The Mark I feels positively titchy after the V, but in reality there's next to no difference in the bum-to-bitumen dimension. In 1978, the Guzzi's twin clock instrument panel (with its battery of indecipherable warning lights largely hidden by the dinky dayglo bikini fairingette) was regarded as pretty nifty and comprehensive. Better yet, the speedo needle (whether it was working or not) told you that you were doing 18mph when you were standing still. The gaily coloured and rightly notorious 'Lego' switchgear was yet to appear; instead, the Mark I sported a fragile-looking array of thin and/or minutely small rockers and toggles, including an indicator switch whose movement was measured in Angstrom units rather than millimetres. Mark I riders halfway across the Alps would look down to find their bikes still indicating the right turn out of their driveways

back in Acacia Avenue.

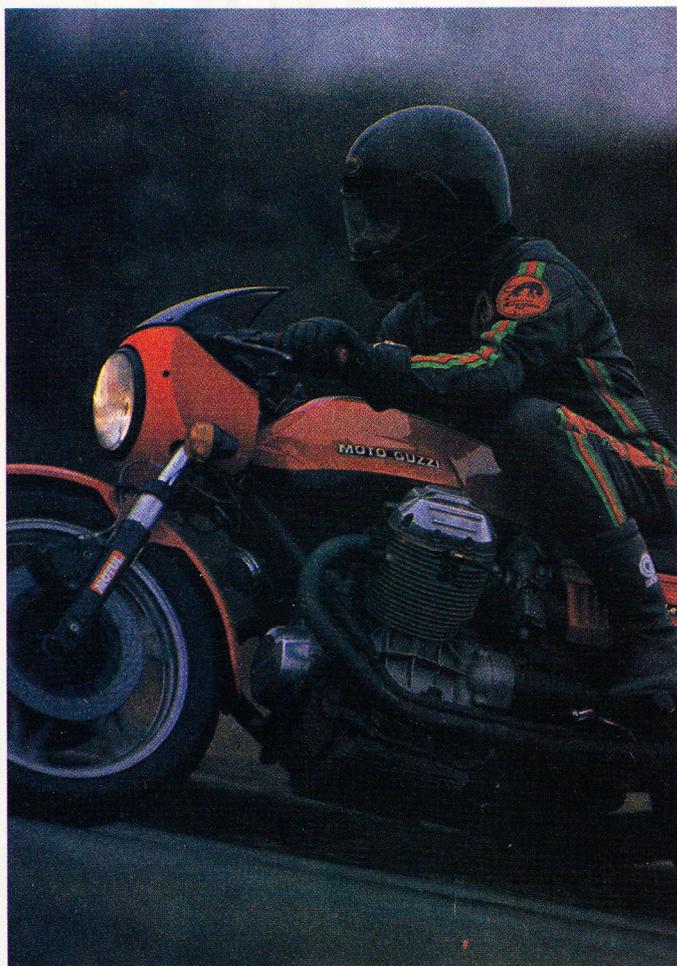
Some things never change. The Mark I sidestand is a case in point. To start with, it parks the bike at an angle of lean any circuit racer would be proud of. To retract it from a sitting position, the rider must extend his leg past the left hand cylinder, and then point his booted toe in a grotesque parody of a ballet *plie*, a movement akin to that of a reluctant bather essaying the temperature of the sea. In the case of my 32in inside leg, it was all a waste of time, because I still couldn't reach the bloody thing. I *always* had to get off.

A subtle variation on this theme appears on the Mark V. Although the stand is now in a more conventional position (albeit so well tucked away under the exhaust that a gloved hand is sometimes required to deploy it), a new element of fear has been injected by the necessity to tip the bike way over to starboard in order to clear the stand's arc. A strong and dogged return spring adds to the 'fun'.

Having liberated your Le Mans from metallic contact with the ground, the next task is to fire up the engine. Choke controls have moved up from the Mark I's classic position on the Dellorto carbs (36mm jobs, and a relatively light pull on the throttle compared to the tendon-snapping heave dictated by the Mark V's 40mm-ers), to a new and more civilised position on the Mark V's clip-ons.

Struggle to set the twin petrol taps (another unchanged feature) and hit the button. The lateral throbbing of the 850cc Mark I is surprisingly smooth in comparison to the jackhammering thud of the 1000cc Mk V. As with BMW twins, the smaller they are, the sweeter they run. Engage first. Selection is surprisingly smooth

# ENDURANCE



*850cc MkI revs easier than 1000cc MkV, handles as well too*

and quiet on both bikes; only between second and third does the action become clanky and obstructive. This is also the danger area for false neutrals. The only cast iron conclusion you can draw from the neutral indicator light is that the bulb is still working. Light front end damage on Guzzis is just as likely to have been caused by overconfident clutch lever release in traffic as by the more usual methods involving excess enthusiasm on the open road.

The Guzzi's on-off dry clutch takes some getting used to as well. It's a weak point of the marque; the Mark I's was on the way out, slipping ever so slightly under power and only

engaging in the last fraction of an inch of lever travel. Replacement costs go into three figures, much of which is the labour charge. While Guzzi parts are not generally expensive (with one or two notable exceptions), the less than ideal layout of the bike can make fitting those parts more difficult than it should have been.

Though the Mark V's riding position looks radical, the bar/seat/pegs relationship is actually extremely conservative and well suited to many long hours in the (comfortable) saddle. It's a bit more of a downward reach to the Mark I bars, but the plus



*Big-carbed MkV stomps on from nothing; throttle's heavy though*

side is a feeling of more direct control over the front wheel. Nothing interrupts the Mark I rider's view of the road passing under the tyre. In the case of this particular Le Mans, the tyre in question was a suspiciously original looking Pirelli Phantom, standard wear on Le Mans right through to the V and a perfectly adequate choice even now. Our Mk I's rubber had age-hardened and was relatively unworn on the sides, an indicator perhaps of the true touring role of these machines in spite of their sporting pretensions.

Despite the 13-year gap, there's really not much difference between a Mark I

and a Mark V as far as the feel of the cycle parts goes. The Mark I had aftermarket Fontana shocks fitted, a sensible and popular mod for pre-Mark V Lemons, on the grounds that anything is better than the original Marzocchis. The Fontanas offer much better damping qualities, and the front end of Vecchia's Mk I was taut and leak-free as well. Bitubo forks on the Mark V are technically adjustable, but the alignment marks on the adjuster knobs were so out of kilter on the demo bike that I deemed it safer to leave well alone after an exploratory fiddle had produced no discernible changes in the



# ▶ MEGA-TEST

behaviour of the fork. The V's Koni shocks represent another move in the right direction. The suspension in general was about the best I've tried on a Moto Guzzi thus far, not as good as the best Oriental systems, but certainly on a par with or superior to anything from Europe.

Pressed hard through a fast bend, Le Manses old and new will get a wobble on, and there's no way they can be described as agile. The steering is slow, but the tradeoff to that rock solid running on the long and unwinding road. Add the Le Mans's knack of cruising at three-figure speeds on a whiff of throttle, its good standard of seat comfort and its more than acceptable level of protection from the elements, and there's no denying the attractiveness of the Guzzi package as a truly serious contender in the touring market. Better still, the Mark V's switchgear (including push-to-cancel indicators) stands comparison with the very best.

The major difference in the way an 850 runs as compared to a 1000 is in the smaller bike's relative appetite for revs. Though the 1000 is redlined at 7750rpm, only a sadist or a Japbike owner would take it anywhere near that; 6000rpm really is the practical maximum for anyone with a degree of mechanical sympathy, because the engine is pretty thrashy beyond that point, and isn't making much more power anyway. Better by far to take advantage of the big, heavy pistons and the carburettors' ability to stuff plenty of mixture into the motor at low rpm. The Mark V steps off smartly with less than 2500rpm on the tacho, whereas cranking open the 850's slides at these engine speeds results in a windy roar of induction noise but practically nothing in the way of acceleration. Where the 850 thrums, the 1000 boffs. The smaller engine better fits the Le Mans's sports image, giving more pleasure to the rider who doesn't mind heaving the gearlever around a bit. The 1000 will run, pull or cruise in just about any gear, but that doesn't mean that

wimps can apply — one twist of the throttle would be enough to put off a fair percentage of potential Le Mans owners.

I enjoyed riding both bikes, but my new-found regard for the Mk V was tempered somewhat after a ride on the Mk I. Dynamically, there really wasn't a lot to choose between the two: the I's reluctance to lug from low down was more than counterbalanced by its willingness to rev; both bikes braked superbly, though the V benefits from extra power at the hand lever; the V is undoubtedly more 'civilised' — but isn't that a euphemism for 'soff'? Would a Mk I owner be tempted by Mk V? Probably not. Especially when he can still pick up a near-original Mk I for half price, or less, of a Mk V...

There has been a tendency in certain sectors of the motorcycling press to continue praising Moto Guzzis long after the products have ceased to deserve such praise. We like to think we've told the truth on *SuperBike*, criticising the Mandello products in the hope that some desperately needed improvements would ensue. This approach has meant that the relationship between us and the UK importers has not always run smooth.

The arrival of the Mark V Le Mans, whilst not changing the situation overnight, certainly gives cause for guarded optimism and some hope for the future. In some respects, the MK V offers less in the way of a pure motorcycling experience than the Mk I, and certainly less in the way of investment potential. The lack of basic development over the years acts in the Mk I owner's favour, in that parts availability for the older models is likely to remain excellent for years.

The improvements to the switchgear and the reversion to an 18-inch front wheel on the Mk V make it the best 'new' model from Moto Guzzi in recent memory, however. And in a time when new Ducatis start at well over £5000, the Le Mans's asking price of £4995 begins to look decidedly interesting. But £2500 for a Mk I is even more interesting...