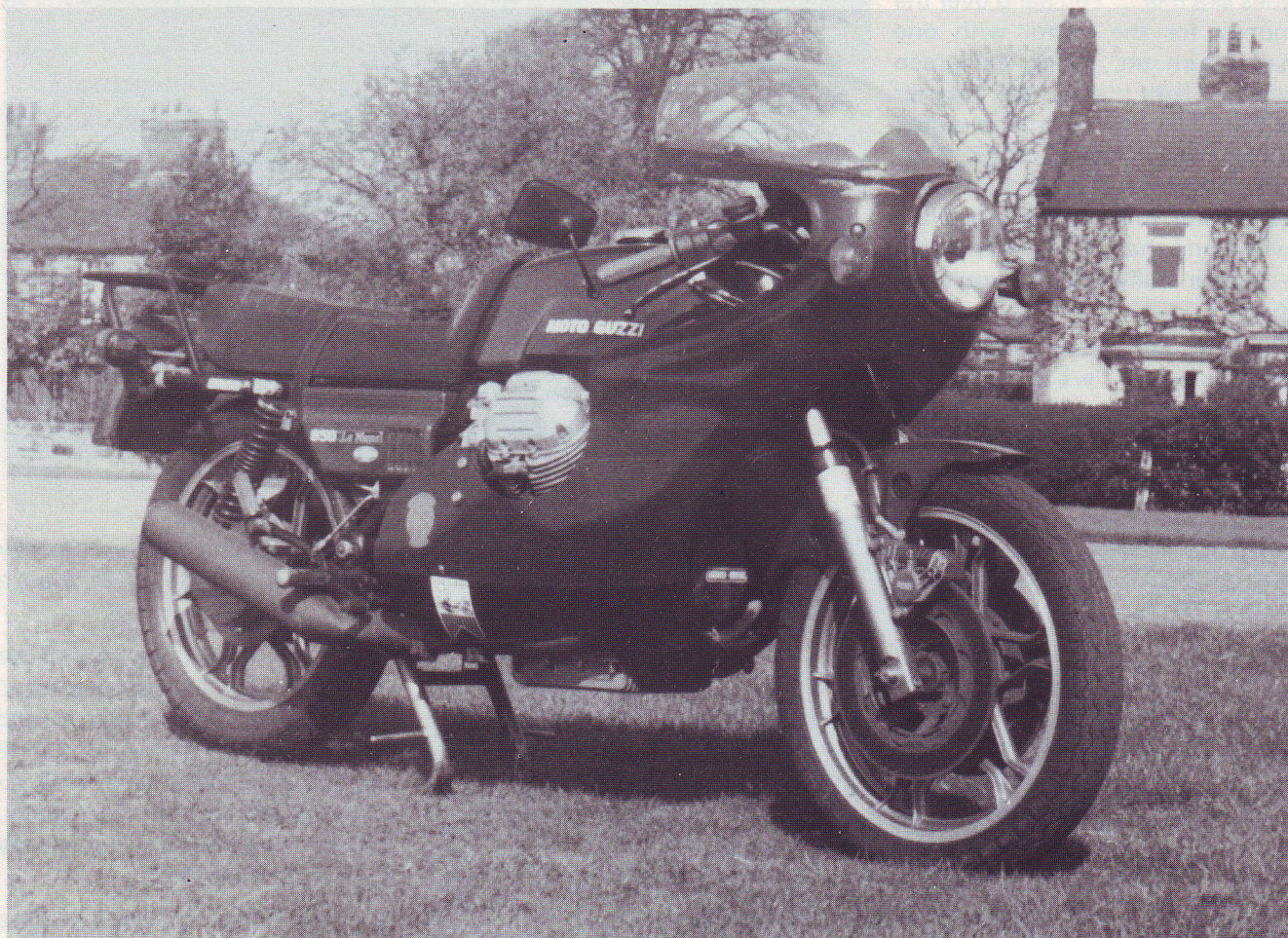


850 MOTO GUZZI LE MANS



THE MANDELLO MASTERPIECE

She doesn't just start, she grinds and growls into life, panting furiously. When you blip the throttle, she tries to kick your right leg away, and the fairing shakes like a jelly till the motor warms up. Right from the start, I realised that she was no smoothie. You could hear and feel the explosions in the cylinders as they kicked the huge flywheel round; you could feel and hear the lower gears as they fought themselves into mesh as the rear-set gear lever was pressed. On pushing the brake pedal for the first time, I found out why the back of the tank was padded.

I found myself unexpectedly nervous on threading my way through the Wisbech traffic,

heading home for Yorkshire. It crossed my mind, two and a half years ago, that nothing I had ridden in the last sixteen years had prepared me for this sort of ride, especially the Japanese bikes, like my RD400 Yamaha, which I'd been riding of late. Even my recently departed BSA Spitfire Production Racer hadn't shaken like this, stumbling and shaking round town like a late night drunk, heaving and snorting when stopped, and punching away from traffic lights searching for open spaces. The words of the dealer rang in my ears, "They get smoother after 5000 miles." "They'd better," I thought!

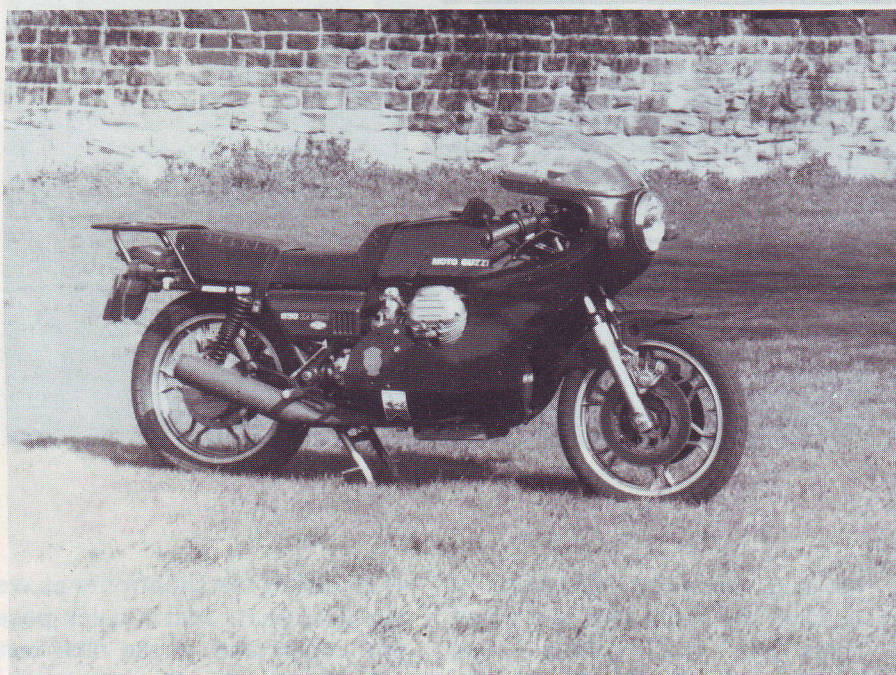
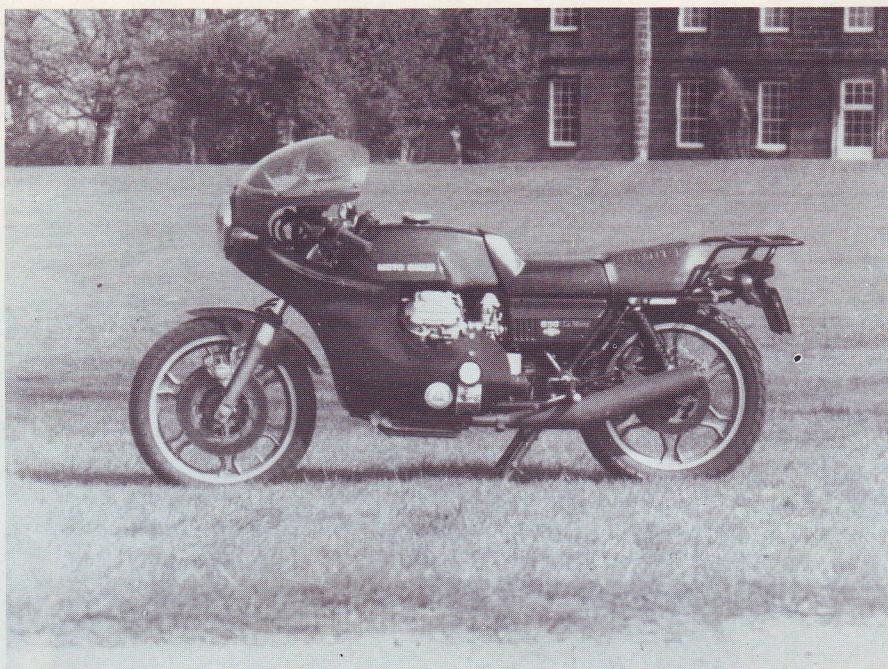
At least the sun was shining now, and I could catch a quick glimpse

of myself in the shopfronts as we thumped past. Just a quick pose you understand — the bike was definitely better looking than I was in my traffic-stained Belstaff. Better fill up with petrol before getting out of town, ah! there's a garage. Quick look in the mirror, check that all's clear, a blip of the throttle and stab down on the gears before pulling in ... out with the clutch as first gear clangs in and ...Aah! Here I am checking out the padded tank again, as the rear Metzeler locks up on compression.

As four gallons are pumped in, I notice one or two curious stares — at my riding or at my bike I wonder. But all's well. "Nice bike" says the boy on the pump,

"My dream bike, — if only I could afford one ... " The next bit comes with practice, and timing is very important, but the sequence goes like this ... You hand over the money for the petrol with one hand, turn on, check the green neutral light, stab the starter button, grab first gear, and watch his expression as you reply: "Yes, I've just won it in a competition." Remember to smile as you blast away; and thanks, 'Spot the Ball' — I never really believed you were true!

Out on the open road, first impressions were quickly cancelled. I kept below 4000 revs. as instructed, but as this turned out to be a smooth 70



mph, this wasn't too much to bear. Three days and 500 miles later I was back for the first free service. I'd already learnt a lot about the bike. She loved long sweeping main road bends, ran smoother as you went faster, and didn't take at all to bumpy 'back-doubles', where the small Yamaha reigned supreme. But the best was yet to come, as the 'running in' mileage disappeared and the engine, as promised, began to loosen up.

Guzzis love miles, they shift ground with the best. The handbook warns the rider never to

race the engine until warm, but it's worth waiting for. Twist the throttle and as the revs rise, she surges forward with a roar, the power rushing in as the tacho needle swings over 6000 and heads for the red line at eight.

You have to be careful not to over-rev. in the lower gears, especially as the gearchange between the first two gears is clunky, and responds best to a deliberate pull up on the pedal, rather than a short Japanese jab. I've never had her jump out of gear yet, even if each gearchange can be heard if the revs are too

high. Fourth and fifth are usually changed with little more than a click.

On the seemingly accurate speedometer, 125 mph comes up very quickly. Tuck down behind the fairing and there's another 8 mph to come, but it takes time. At speed, even on bumpy roads, stability is impressive, rock steady is an understatement.

The only time the Guzzi feels a handful is on very bumpy, broken roads full of potholes, of the type best found in the lanes round Mallory Park, or the mining areas of Yorkshire. The potholes and ridges don't upset handling or steering even with a thirteen stone passenger. Tracking is excellent — but you get shaken, and shaken so violently that either you, or more likely your passenger, will beg for a little less speed before many miles of treatment have passed.

Guzzis seem to have a more than healthy appetite for tyres, which I change as soon as the tread goes below 2mm. The last front tyre, a Dunlop K181, hit 2mm centre tread at a surprisingly low 4000 miles, about the same mileage from the last K181 used on the back. I'm trying Pirellis now and they seem to be wearing at about the same rate. The

original front tyre was a ribbed Metzeler which lasted the first 6,500 miles of the bike's life. Unfortunately, it gave a less confident feel in hard cornering and braking than the Dunlops or the Pirellis.

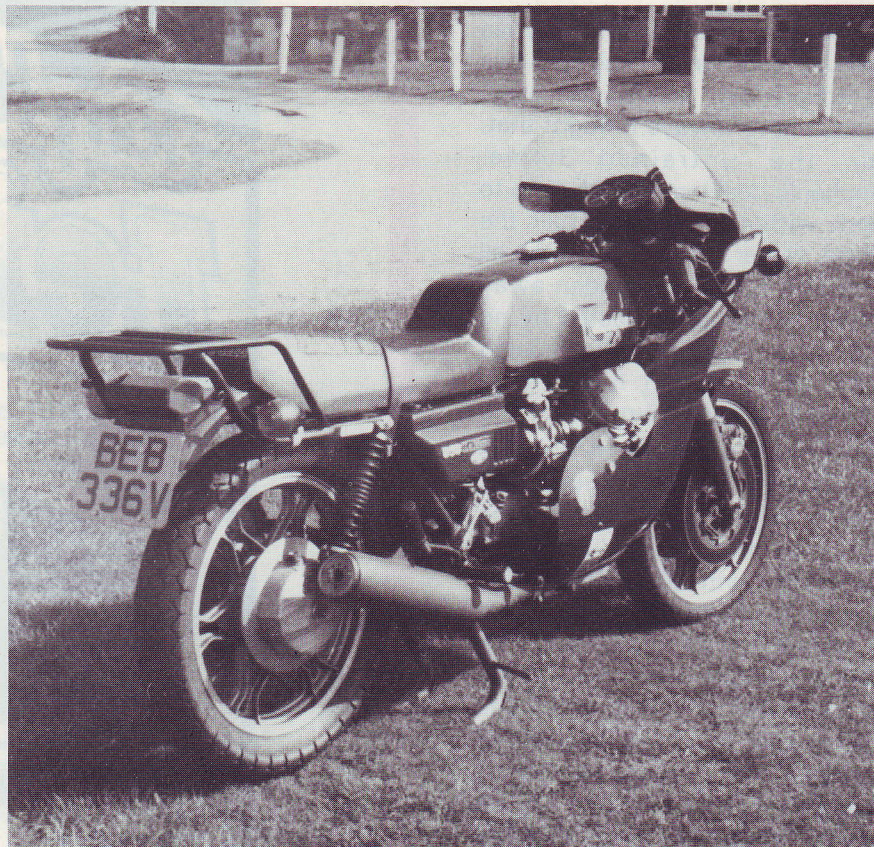
Triple Brembos, utilizing the famous Guzzi linked braking system took some getting used to. They are powerful and progressive, and can stand the Le Mans on its nose time after time with no apparent fade. When the brakes were applied hard at low speed, the front wheel used to pull slightly to one side.

This trait was not so noticeable at speed, but I was never too happy with the original plastic front mudguard which provided little or no bracing for the front forks.

The recent purchase of a Crossbow steel braced front mudguard has greatly improved the performance of the front forks, both while braking and over rough roads. There's a more solid feel to the already excellent steering, and pulling to one side under hard braking is hardly noticeable, even when the tyres are on the point of surrendering to the Brembos.

If you have small hands, the front brake and clutch lever are a bit of a stretch. Any suitable replacements have yet to be found. Like most riders, I also find that the heavy twistgrip makes my right wrist ache, especially in cold weather. I've not experimented with lighter springs in the Dell'Ortos, although I've heard that some lighter Volkswagen return springs work well.

One of the easiest improvements that can be made to the Le Mans, concerns the carburettors. The Le Mans in MkI and MkII form is supplied without air filters. Plastic bell mouths suck through a wide mesh. The bell mouths can be replaced by 'K and N' re-usable filters which clamp straight on and make no perceptible difference to mixture strength or



performance.

Fuel consumption ranges from the high fifties to the low thirties, with about 45 mpg. about the current average. It all depends on what mood prevails on the day.

Last year, I fitted an oil pressure gauge which shows about 50 psi. at 4,000 revs when the engine is hot. This is about 5 psi lower than had been expected, but C.S.C. who supplied the gauge kit answered my queries quickly and fully almost by return post to put my mind at rest.

The Guzzi uses little oil between changes, perhaps $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ pt. at most, every 2,500 miles. Some oil escapes via the breather, and some from around the sealing washer at the filler nut. Close observation of other bikes leads me to suspect that this is universal on hard ridden examples of the marque.

The exhaust system sheds its black paint pretty quickly, and the silencers were showing signs of rust at about 10,000 miles. A quick and ill advised prod with a screwdriver turned this into

terminal damage around the ends of both silencers and led to the production of the Mark 2 exhaust system! (4" shorter)

By Oriental standards, replacement Le Mans silencers are quite reasonable (about £80 a pair). A little work with a hacksaw and a welding torch comes even cheaper. The end baffles come courtesy of some Maxwell House coffee jar lids, brazed together with a set of stainless steel pastry cutters. Necessity is the mother of invention, and I sometimes enjoy a little 'bodging' just to see what the end result will be, and how long it will last. Although slightly louder than the original set of tubes, the Mark 2's seem to allow the engine to breath more freely and power comes in at noticeably lower engine revolutions.

Since the first free service, the bike has never been into a dealers for professional servicing, or work of any kind. Part of the attraction of Guzzi is that most routine servicing can be carried out at home, given a manual and decent basic set of tools. I've kept to the

routine suggested in the Haynes manual, and none of the jobs has stretched my admittedly basic skills. I have always thought that, for the untrained home-mechanic, leaving enough time to work without rushing is half the battle. Never try to change the oil filter in a hurry. It's hidden away inside the sump, protected by no less than eighteen allen-headed bolts, all of which have to be removed upside down.

The general standard of finish is satisfactory, and nothing has broken or fallen off yet. I come from the 'stitch in time' school of ownership, with plenty of routine checks, and immediate attention to details when necessary. My bike is a luxury which must earn its keep and is ridden in all the many and perverse shades of weather. I'm pleased to report that the Guzzi has never let me down. Water has never affected the ignition system or switches, despite once covering over 300 miles in driving rain which completely defeated my previously unconquered Belstaff XL500 suit.

As promised, the Guzzi gets better as the miles roll under its wheels. The engine is much smoother than it was on delivery, and will now 'plonk' through town like the most placid of tourers, while still responding to an open throttle with an exhilarating surge of power. A friend's Honda 900F will easily out accelerate the Le Mans in a straightline, but top speeds of the two bikes are identical and in the main road twists and turns, the Guzzi wins every time.

The Le Mans is reliable, easy to service and economical to run. On paper it's far from the fastest thing on two wheels, but out on the road, on innumerable long hauls to race meetings, or to visit distant friends its never given me cause to doubt its ability to keep up with all but the most furiously ridden flagships, of any other fleet.

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