Italian Stallions

Ducati 900SS & Moto Guzzi Le Mans III The best Italian bikes ever? We ride a couple of fine examples of the breed

"As incongruous as a great white shark in the municipal goldfish pond . . . a thoroughbred racer, pure and simple . . . an ultimate . . . a bike for the few".

Steve Brennan, August 1978

"Reckoned by many (myself included) to be God's own motorcycle . . . unadulterated riding bliss."

Mike Maxwell, May 1980

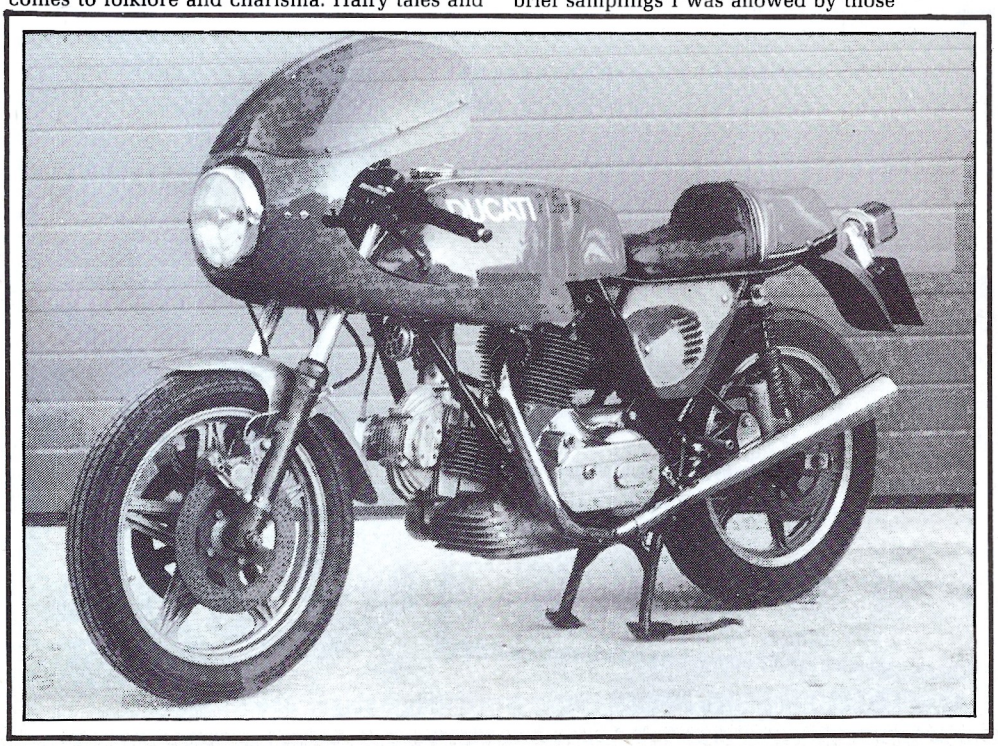
"To ride it is to love it . . . one of the fastest tar-road point-to-point machines in the world . . . the last of the real motorcycles".

Michael Scott, July 1981

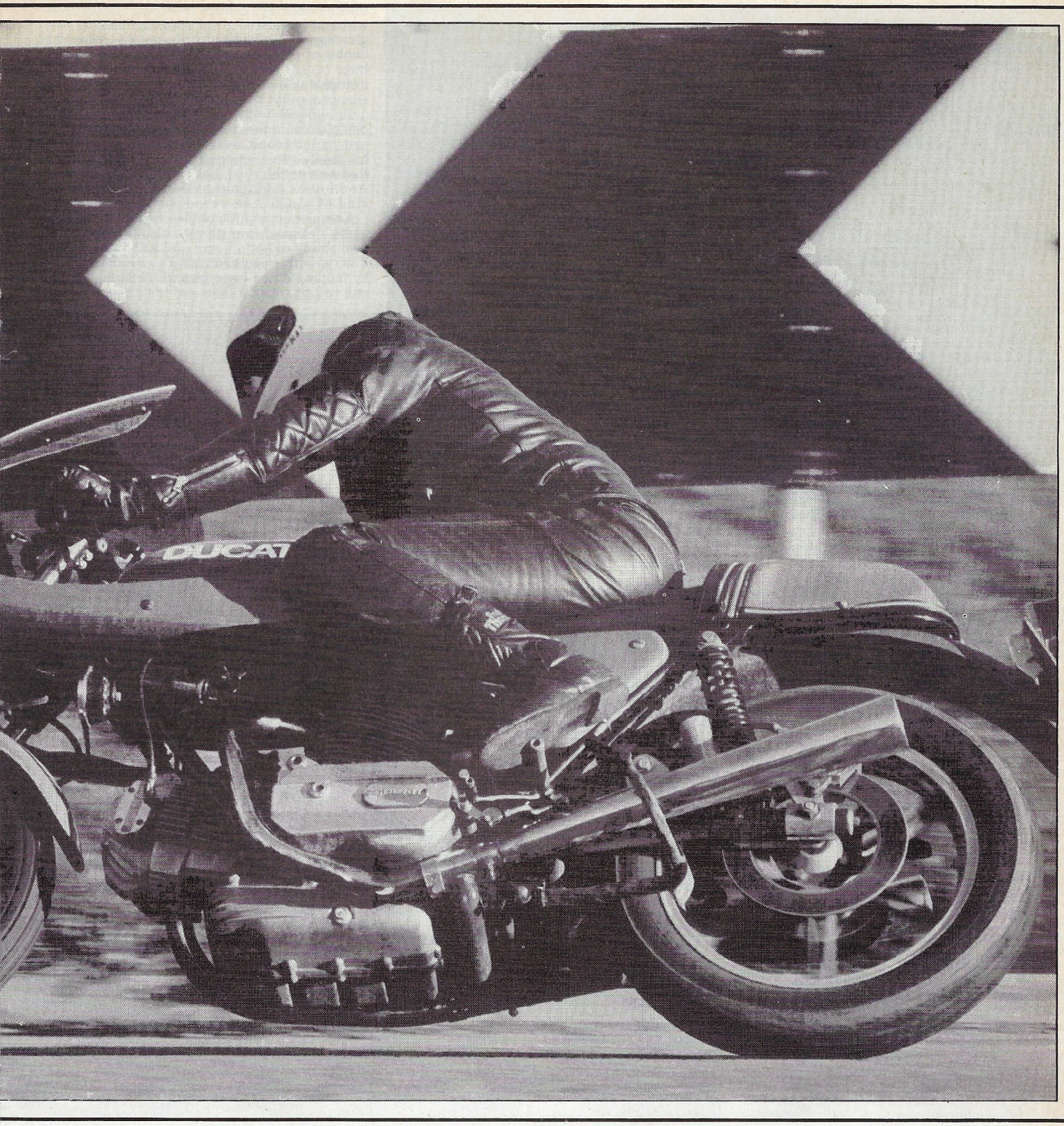
The above quotations, lifted from old copies of *SuperBike*, were all used to describe the same motorcycle. Reading those old tests again, each one written by a different journalist at different points in history, you're struck by the degree of consensus reached between the three. Almost as if each one of them had been entranced or bewitched by the object of their lyrical attempts at praise.

Considering the bike in question was Ducati's 900SS, such fulminatory lapses are entirely forgivable. Indeed, I expect to tread the rose petal-strewn path myself during the course of this feature. And why not? For, besides being the last of the real motorcycles, the 900SS ranks right up there with the Laverda Jota when it comes to folklore and charisma. Hairy tales and heroic deeds encircle the SS like a rampant climbing ivy, endowing it with a status that borders on the mystical. I remember a time, not so very long ago, when no biking fiction writer worth his salt would pass up the opportunity to incorporate a thundering Duke or two into the storyline (usually hammering across a desolate landscape at dead of night with a sinister black-leathered loony in the saddle). Fabulous wins at romantic circuits in the hands of legendary characters did little to diminish the big twin's fantasy value, especially when such wins occurred in the face of overwhelming Oriental bad-guy odds. If ever there was a motorcycling equivalent to Roy of the Rovers, the Ducati 900SS was it.

All these images came flooding back to me as I revelled in the time-warp aura aboard Three Cross's 1979 SS, burbling sinuously around the edge of the New Forest on an unseasonably warm day in early December. Casting a dreamy eye over the curiously antiquated instrument console (a good eight inches between the speedo and tacho gauge centres, the orange generator light glowing brightly in confirmation of a correctly functioning electrical system), I tried to remember how long it had been since I'd ridden God's own motorcycle. The only ones I could recall were the bastardised late models, with their strangulated exhausts and/or puny 32mm carbs, or, more horrible still, electric starters (yurrgh). Straining the memory to its limit, I managed to latch on to a couple of Mike Hailwood Replica memories, the haziness of which was in direct relation to the fleetingly brief samplings I was allowed by those fortunate enough to be nominated as testers. But, excellent though the MHR undoubtedly was, it wasn't a true 900SS somehow. Less scantily clothed and marginally slower at the top end, the Rep was more of a cousin than a brother to that great Ducati progenitor, the 750SS.



Ah yes, the 750SS, the first big Ducati V-twin to feature springless desmodromic valve operation, a limited edition racer-for-the-road and successful track campaigner from 1973 to 1976, and certainly a contender for the title of most handsome motorcycle with its misty green frame and silver flake bodywork. When the 864cc version of the perfectly balanced 90-degree vee twin engine came out in 1975, the inevitable happened, and the 900SS was born. Desmo heads driven by bevel gears, electronic ignition, a power output of 69bhp or 79bhp



(depending on who you believed) allied to a fully wet weight of 450 pounds and a rear sprocket the size of a small saucer, all added up to a comfortable 130mph cruising speed. Downhill the SS would approach 140mph; at any speed in a straight line, the Duke was a paragon of civility and *sangfroid*, thanks to a combination of low frontal area and the tremendously long wheelbase necessitated by that unique engine format. And in the days before aerodynamics and drag factors became trendy, the bike's long-leggedness was in no way compromised by a thirst for fuel; 50mpg was the norm, 45mpg the mark of a hard rider, and 75mpg easily attainable under gentle use.

In an ill-advised effort to increase the then-new Darmah's sales appeal, it was decided in 1977 to detune the 900SS by way of 32mm carbs and asthmatic Silentium silencers. The immediate outcry which followed led to the restoration of the Conti pipes and the 40mm accelerator pump Dellortos in 1978, which brings us neatly to the bike in our pictures. That's a 1979 model, complete with stainless steel Conti replicas and non-standard K&N-type carb filters. Also non-standard is the colour scheme; originally black and gold, it's now in a distinctly Italianate livery of red and green, with a rather uninspired choice of typeface for the factory logo.

Checking out the bike at Three Cross's showroom, it showed no signs of owner abuse. In fact, its "lived in" yet still basically clean appearance indicated that all three of its previous owners had been enthusiasts. Not perfectionists or fetishists, but enthusiasts. The gold Campagnolo wheels had a patina of gunge on them as evidence of all-weather riding; cleaned up, they would have set the rest of the bike off a treat, something the next owner may well take the trouble to do. Although not in *concours* condition, the engine was, nevertheless, very clean and tidy. The fairing had an uncracked screen and sat solidly on its mountings, and I was pleased to note that the minimalist SS persona (no indicators or mirrors) had not been interfered with by the addition of tacky aftermarket items. There are few things I can think of more disgusting than those awful bar-end mirrors with which some people despoil Ducatis. Much more pleasing on our bike was the classic solo seat with zippered tail hump, just right for a packet of fuses and a journey-splitting butty. Whatever happened to zippered tail humps?

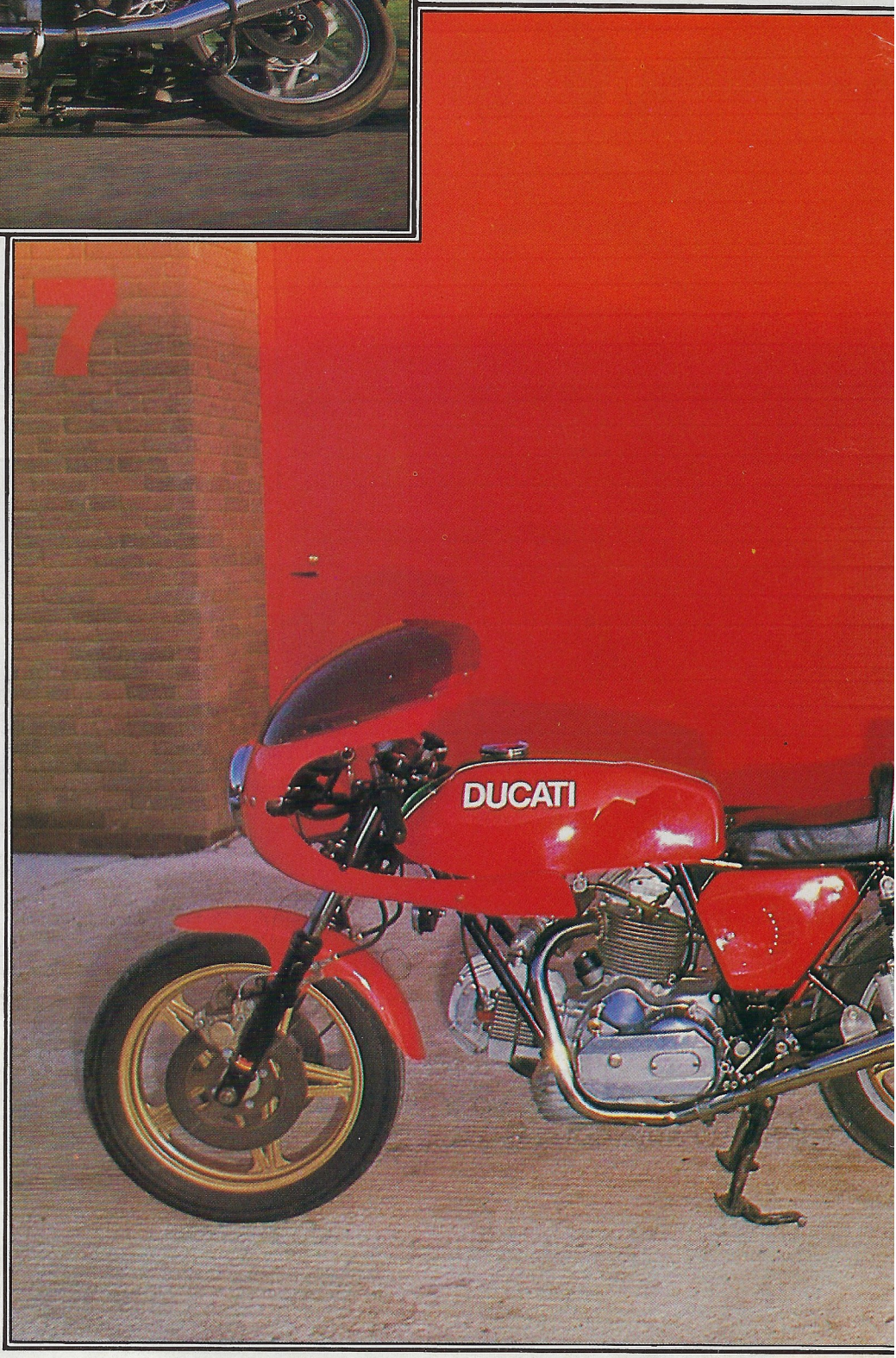
It was time to get out on to the road. Before setting off, the Ducati was quickly checked over

in the Three Cross workshop. It had to be quick, because our arrival had been somewhat unannounced and there hadn't been time to put the bike through the normal 3X pre-sale inspection, a thorough process which often involves reconditioning or replacement of even quite major parts on many of the used machines they sell. Fortunately, this 900SS had no particular problems. Everything seemed to be functioning perfectly, somewhat to my surprise I must confess, based on bitter experiences with our old office Darmah. The engine fired up first prod, settling down to a low but steady idle, and responded instantly to a twist of the quick-action Tommaselli throttle. Engaging first gear produced little protest from the transmission, despite the fact that the bike had been standing in the showroom for more than a week. The clutch felt strong and positive, another blow to my cynicism concerning Ducati clutches, while the exhaust note was deep and reassuring. I immediately felt an unusual confidence in this particular Duke, a confidence that it wasn't about to let me down, a confidence which would have been utterly misplaced on our sadly unreliable Darmah.

On the road, the SS continued to exude this (to me) unfamiliar air of integrity. Even the Marzocchi suspension felt good, offering both firm damping and a comfortable ride, although not without some fairly typical jarring over potholes and the like. Steering was typical Ducati too, being both slow and of limited lock. During stop-start photography sessions, I cursed the turning circle which was only marginally better than that of a cross-Channel ferry. Then again, shopping trips are not part of a 900SS's brief. Rather, it is a finely honed and oiled blade of a machine, a Wagnerian piece more at home on grand symphonic sweeping roads than fiddly, fussy, convenience-type roads. Try and hustle its raking length through a firework-quick succession of bends or around a tight roundabout and the front end begins to push out, nervously reluctant to respond to small corrections at the handlebars. Our bike was fitted with Avon Super Venom tyres, excellent all-round tyres to be sure, but possibly not as well suited in this application as the classic Pirelli Phantom alternatives. With relatively little weight to carry and a lowish power output by modern standards, the traditional Pirelli tradé-off (short life expectancy) isn't such a problem. Anyway, Italian rubber somehow seems more appropriate.

Dominating the Ducati experience though is that lovely engine. Creamy smooth and very torquey, it can be either quiet and civilised or loud and rorty, a perfect versatility that's dictated entirely by the size and speed of the throttle opening. Always there is a background whirr of lubricated gears meshing together, but give the engine its head and a totally different bubble of noise envelops bike and rider. The huge carbs hiss and roar as they suck in great draughts of air and petrol, while the conical silencers pulse with a mellow vibrancy that's quite unique. Some nights, usually at around one o'clock in the morning, I am awoken by just such a sound, as our local SS pilot makes his lonely trip home past my flat. My flat isn't that near to the road, but it still wakes me up. And I don't mind in the slightest. That's the kind of sound it is.

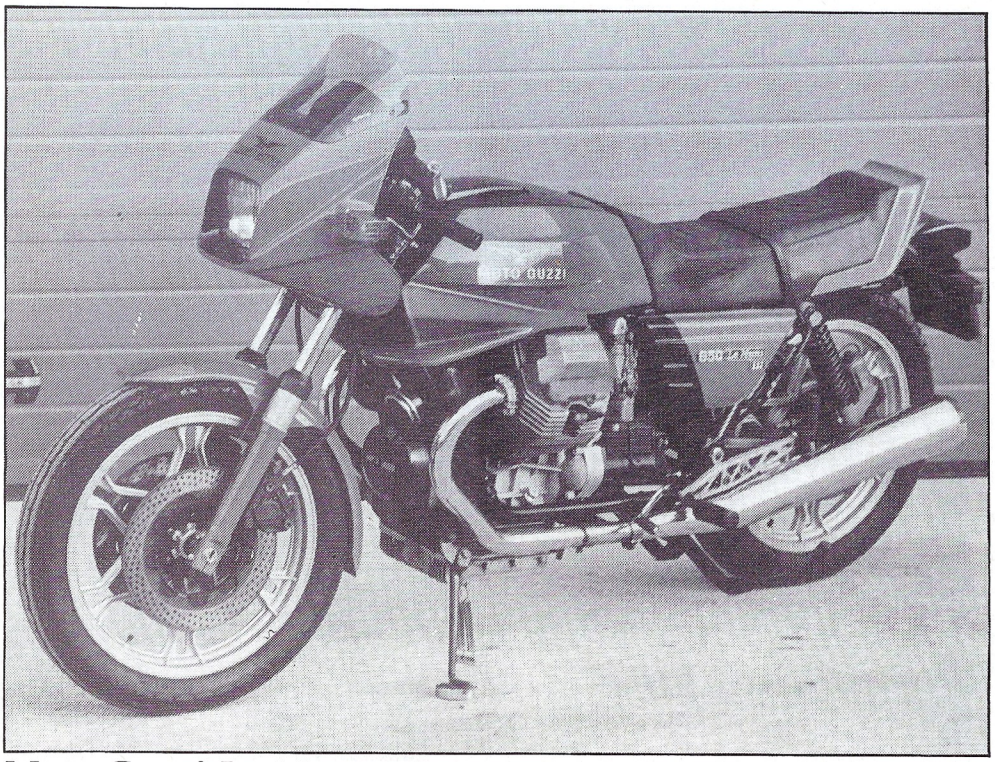
Complementing the engine is a fistful of tall gears, designed to maximise the abundant availability of bottom end and mid-range torque. The only time you can easily secure neutral is by tapping down from second while the bike is still rolling. Miss it then and it's often quicker



to switch the motor off and find neutral by hand. Ducati clutch plates have a notorious reputation, but even after lots of intentional slipping these were just as good at the end of the ride as at the beginning. One of the previous owners must have been a dab hand at boiling 'em up in bucketsful of detergent . . .

With a genuine-looking 15,785 miles on the clock, this 900SS was up for sale at £1999. That compares to an original ticket in 1978 of £2299, and is an asking price that reflects the worth put on clean examples of this desirable vintage. The skeletal profile, delicate spider's web of tubery and elemental bodywork of the 900SS give it a single-minded dynamism that is yet to be bettered. With no fat left untrimmed, it offers nothing more than the lean, hungry taste of pure motorcycling for the discerning two-wheel gourmet. It certainly got my juices flowing.

pic by Tony Butler



Moto Guzzi Le Mans III

Despite obvious factory conceit and a ludicrous translation into fractured English, the opening page of the Moto Guzzi Le Mans owner's handbook almost gets it right.

"Due to its exceptionally high feature, this motorcycle can be considered in the racing machine class and, as such, has to be ridden in a sportsmanlike way."

God only knows what the "high feature" is since everything on a Le Mans is set purposefully low. Certainly it *has* to be ridden in a certain way due to a unique combination of excellently sporting features and a few very eccentric peculiarities.

Perhaps the high feature is its top speed. Geared unbelievably tall, a good Le Mans has a blistering top end in excess of 130mph and many are the times over the years when I've been hauling along foreign motorways thinking I was going pretty quick only to see a well-tucked-in Le Mans rider come stretching past.

Add an excellent top end capability to redoubtable Italian handling and roadholding (read: effortless and super-stable) plus maybe the patented attraction of linked brakes and you have most of the Le Mans reputation and legend.

Naturally, it looks like a million dollars as well. Beautifully shaped and simply oozing with charisma, the Le Mans is an original Italian stallion, a sleek thoroughbred with a performance pedigree dating back to 1975. It hasn't really changed much from that original incarnation; it was then, and remains now, an exclusive factory cafe racer built for posers and hard men alike. It is uncompromising in a way only Italian sportsters can be and it has always been *the* best Moto Guzzi, the jewel in the crown.

Its heart is an 844cc OHV engine with a longitudinally-mounted crank and shaft drive, an arrangement that necessarily occasions the bike to shudder to the right every time you blip the throttle. The full double cradle frame (with removable bottom rails) has the engine hanging low, with the sump suspended between the down tubes. A seat height of just over 30in enhances the rider's feel of the bike, which has a very low centre of gravity.

For an 850 (bore × stroke is 83 × 78mm) it has always worn rather large 36mm Dellorto carbs. Consistent too, has been the use of a dry, twin-plate clutch, reckoned by many to be good for 20/30 000 miles, even though the abnormally high gearing necessitates much clutch slipping, abuse and subsequent adjustment.

Revisions over the years have been genuinely few and parts accessibility for all models is excellent. The Le Mans is a tried, trusted and proven motorcycle.

The Le Mans II is generally regarded to be the guv'nor. It had a fuller fairing replacing the MkI nose cone, two-piece with lowers stolen from the Strada snaking around the pots. From the Strada too, came the bog-awful instrument panel with a useful voltmeter and clock, but more dimly-lit and dimly-working idiot lights per square inch than anybody else had ever dimly thought of. By the MkIII and 1982, they'd stuck an enormous tach onto the panel, reduced the fairing frontal area for less drag and trimmed the fairing lowers so big guys no longer bashed their knees. They made some sensible chassis changes like lengthening the swing-arm and wheelbase and adding a balance pipe to the air-assisted Cerianis, they also gave it a bigger tank (5.5gal and good for nigh on 200 miles), colour-matched fork legs, square style cylinder heads and a chrome exhaust (whereas before both the fork legs and the pipes had been a nicely understated matt black).

By far the biggest changes though were to meet nasty, restrictive emissions controls. No longer did the accelerator-pumped, 36mm Dellortos vent to atmosphere and roar through open grilles, now they were using the top tube of the frame as an intake route with air filters and all kinds of shoehorn gimcrackery.

Compression was down to 9.8:1 (from 10.2). They gave it bigger valves with increased lift, new ports, new combustion chambers and generally claimed more efficient combustion, higher output and lower emissions. Well they would wouldn't they? But the lingering suspicion was that, having cleaned up the Le Mans' act, they'd also taken a tad off its performance.

Having never ridden a MkIII before I was pleased to seize the opportunity of a crack on a Three Cross Motorcycles' second-hander. Soon the memories of the Le Mans experience came flooding back, though really my last ride on a MkII was too long ago to make worthwhile comparisons with the III. They are, after all, almost identical.

This one had had only one owner, was X-reg with 12 000 miles showing and appeared in very good, well looked-after nick. The clutch was slipping and needed adjustment to give more slack. Merrily turning the handlebar adjuster the wrong way, I made it worse than ever, before finally salvaging something like decent grip and free play. Adjusted properly ie, at both ends, would've been a doddle if we'd only had some tools and some time, but we had neither. The fairly light action gearbox doesn't mind being booted through anyway, though even *with* the clutch, the Le Mans has always been a pig for hard-charging, down changes into a corner. Nothing can cure that apart from a more sober and premeditated riding style. Also the clutch, though it takes abuse by the bucketful and slips increasingly as it gets hot, has remarkable self-healing properties once you let it cool down.

This particular Le Mans had but one major problem, an inability to take a flat throttle from low revs without gassing up. Now, in truth, since all Lemons are well over-carburated low down, they all have a tendency to gas-up when you whip open the throttle from low revs. What happens is that they respond slowly until the mix is flowing nicely, whereupon they take off like a rocketship. But this one wasn't picking up at all. It was fine in the mid-range and at the top but low down, nothing, a fluffy pretender. It turned out afterwards, that the Three Cross mechanic, upon removing the bike from the showroom (where it'd stood for weeks) had noticed a low oil level and had mistakenly overfilled the sump. Not only was he endangering the rings, but the MkIII has an oil breather that routes to the air box. Result: an oil-saturated air filter and some strangulated sucking. You could say the same of the mechanic afterwards when the boss got hold of him.

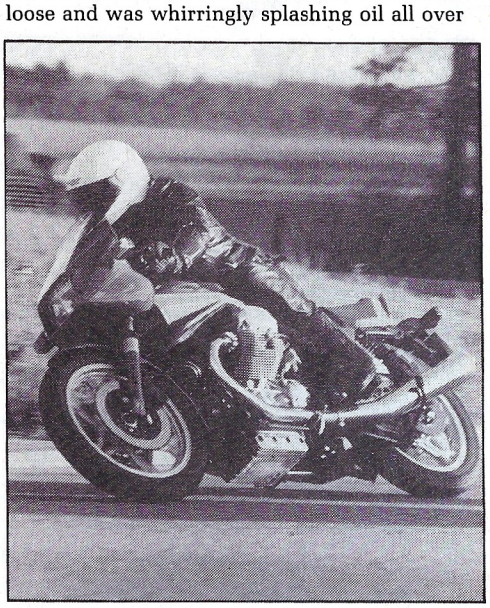
Given its head, those 36mm pumper carbs still roar, though the old licking flames-through-the-open-mesh routine is sadly gone forever. It still makes all the tractor-like noises of an agricultural Guzzi pushrod engine, less so when it warms up thoroughly, but definitely a valvegear chatterbox all the same.

The cycle gear is ace. All right, the suspension may be a bit on the harsh side but it certainly does a sportsman-like job. Both the fork legs were weeping on this one, the left-hand leg in particular, displaying a perished seal.

You'd think the ground clearance at 7.5in would be more than enough, but Moto Guzzi have consistently and perversely fitted huge outrigger footrests that deck long before anything else does. Aftermarket replacements are readily available.

It holds a tight line superbly, is eminently flickable, thanks to quick steering response from the low, long, stretch bars and this one had a good, almost new, set of Phantoms. Incidentally, there's a huge range of quality alternative rubberwear available for this bike — Phantoms, Roadrunners, Metzelers, Dunlops — since few untweaked Italian bikes have either the horsepower or the sheer acceleration that shags out tyres within a heady afternoon's enjoyment.

The only oil leak we could discern was from the head-mounted tach drive which had come loose and was whirringly splashing oil all over



the fender and alternator and looked far more serious than it actually was. The steering damper had a slight weep too, hardly worth bothering about since it's hardly worth fitting (though they did as OE) since straight-line stability has never been a Le Mans problem and is, indeed, something it's rather good at.

The brakes, as expected, were brilliant. I think I prefer unlinked brakes generally, and I once rode a Le Mans with unlinked stoppers where the front pair were like hitting the proverbial brick wall. Brilliant. Overall though, as a road-riding proposition, the Guzzi brakes are a boon to safety. Just using the pedal you can brake on wet roads with much more confidence than on a conventional set-up. I've only ever known of one person who crashed because of locking up the front end and he admits he was daydreaming a bit and panicked.

The bodywork of our sample bike was immaculate, no dings or signs of a spill anywhere and no rust. The owner had welded an extra bit onto the sidestand, which made the propstand more stable, but more difficult to extract since you have to lean the bike away slightly over centre before you can get it out. As far as I can tell the bike was in entirely stock condition (including the bright chrome exhaust system but not the Marzocchi Strada shox). As stock it sports the world's worst neutral light (nine times out of ten it tells tales about it being in neutral, the other time it's probably in a false neutral) and the instrumentation generally is pathetically unilluminating and always has been. The switchgear, too, is unappetising, seemingly constructed from cast off, plastic children's building bricks. None of this really matters overmuch, you just learn to live with it. Kind of character forming . . .

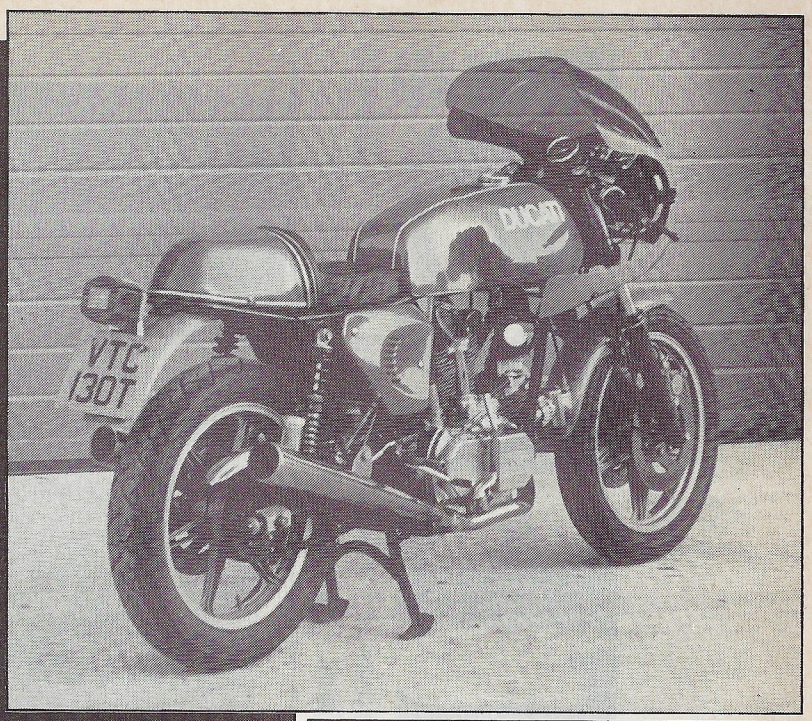
Is it worth £2399? In truth I don't know. The price is straight out of the formbook for the model and year. I would've thought maybe it was a bit on the high side and you could've easily talked turkey about losing £100 off the asking price. Not because of the condition it was in (it would've been fully serviced before you bought it) but because why shouldn't you haggle with a dealer as you would with a private seller? The main reason the Le Mans is more expensive than the 900SS is because of the age difference, the Duke is two to three years older.

Given a choice I'd definitely take the Duke even though, in direct comparison, the Guzzi has a lot going for it — like reliability. The Le Mans is a tough act for beginners but is ultimately very rewarding. It's a tight, though by no means impossible fit for a big guy. It displays a cussed awkwardness around town but nowhere else. On the open road proper it's a superlative, if dated, tool. Home-maintenance is one of its plus points.

Some final observations. Yer old Guzzi requires a lot less fettling than a Duck and is an excellent base bike from which to build a special and we've featured numerous fine examples over the years. Not only is there gorgeous free-flowing glasswear around (Crossbow born out of Motoplat, to name but one), but there's Imola cams, heavy-duty valvegear, polished and ported heads, trick barrels and pistons, double sumps and even a factory close-ratio gearbox.

It was a beautiful bike and still is. Owners everywhere will tell you of their deep-rooted love and unabashed fondness for "me ol' Guzz". It was one of the few Italian bikes to be regularly entered in depth and raced in World Championship endurance rounds until this year's 750cc ceiling rule. Expensive but accessible, the Le Mans has been the Moto Guzzi flagship for ten years now and sadly these days the factory appear unable to do anything but subsist. Age cannot wither its lines or appeal. It is both a brilliant and an agricultural motorcycle. Long may it flourish as the smartest factory cafe racer on the streets.

Both bikes in this feature were very kindly loaned by Keith Davies of Three Cross Motorcycles, Woolsbridge Trading Estate, Three Legged Cross, Wimborne, Dorset BH21 6SP. Telephone: 0202 824531.



1981 MOTO GUZZI LE MANS III
£2399 X reg

PERFORMANCE

Maximum Speed — 130mph plus
Fuel Consumption — Hard Riding — 40mpg
— Cruising — 47mpg

POWERTRAIN

Air-cooled, 90-degree OHV vee-twin, 844cc. Maximum horsepower 78bhp at 7800rpm. Bore × stroke 83 × 78mm. Compression ratio 9.8:1. Induction by two 36mm Dellorto slide carbs with accelerator pumps. Two-into-two exhaust with twin balance pipes. Wet sump lubrication. Dry diaphragm clutch. Five-speed constant mesh gearbox. Direct primary drive. Final drive by shaft.

CHASSIS

Duplex cradle with detachable bottom tubes. Suspension: air-assisted telehydraulic forks, swing-arm and twin shocks. Wheelbase 59in. Ground clearance 7.5in. Seat height 30.5in. Fuel capacity 5.5gal. Dry weight 431lb. Wet weight 490lb. Triple disc Moto Guzzi Integral Braking System with Brembo components. Tyres: Pirelli Phantoms 3.60 × 18 (front), 4.10 × 18 (rear).

1979 DUCATI 900SS
£1999 T reg

PERFORMANCE

Maximum Speed — 130mph
Fuel Consumption — Hard Riding — 45mpg
— Cruising — 51mpg

POWERTRAIN

90 degree air-cooled vee twin, shaft-and-bevel-driven desmodromic valve gear. Capacity 864cc. Power 69bhp at 7000rpm. Torque 58lb/ft at 5200rpm. Bore × stroke 86 × 74.4mm, compression ratio 9.5:1. Induction by two 40mm Dellorto carbs with accelerator pumps and air filters. Wet sump lubrication, Bosch electronic ignition. Wet multi-plate clutch, five-speed gearbox, helical gear primary drive, chain final drive.

CHASSIS

Open cradle spine frame with engine as stress-bearing member. Marzocchi 38mm forks, Marzocchi rear shock absorbers. Triple cast iron disc brakes with Brembo calipers. Wheelbase 59.5in, ground clearance 6.5in, seat height 31in, wet weight 545lb, fuel capacity 3.95gall. Tyres Avon Super Venom, 120/80V18 rear, 100/80V18 front.