

BLAST PAST!

GUZZI LE MANS v 1



It's not only the Lemon's electrics that were faulty. God, what a caption. I must be tired

PICS BY: PHIL MASTERS

The Moto Guzzi Le Mans Mkl was, in its day, one of the fastest, most stylish bikes you could buy. Grant Leonard rides it back-to-back with the modern equivalent, the Moto Guzzi 1100 Sport

It's ironic that the reason I wanted a Le Mans, back in 1977, was because it was so fast. Yes a Guzzi was one of the fastest production bikes available back in the days of Barry Sheene, Saturday Night Fever, Jim Callaghan and Johnny Rotten. The big loping twin could hit a genuine 130mph (140mph in pub-speak), on a par with the Jap bikes of the day, like the Z1000. In November 1977, Super-Bike Magazine (the very same) tested a Le Mans and writer Steve Brennan recounted the story of how he left a Z1000 (albeit two-up) for dead on the motorway. 'Jaws on two wheels' he described the Zed. Jaws was a scary film back then, apparently.

But what also turned me on was the fact that the Lemon had a shaft drive. I wouldn't have to worry about chains and lube again. And the Guzzi's simplicity appealed too: a push-rod twin with carbs on the outside. It had a certain implied reliability and home-mechanic-friendliness. I think what I was looking for was a partner for life – a sportsbike that would last forever and always have cred and style.

Well, if Dad had won the pools like he

You need a 38-inch inside leg measurement to use the side-stands, so walls come in handy



1000 SPORT

Wet roundabout in January. Leonard gets the very short straw, with narrow tyres and rock hard suspension. Ian Cobby on the Sport managed to drag his knee all the way round



promised (yes, my childhood was a catalogue of let-downs), I may even have bought the very bike you see here. I slobbered on the seat of one just like it, on the main plinth in the showroom of Freddie Frith's in Grimsby. The price tag said '£2,099 *ex works*'. In my cluelessness I thought it meant works as in works racer.

But in a way, the Le Mans was up to race spec. This was the hottest Guzzi ever made, built in honour of a couple of hopefuls who raced a Guzzi in the famous 24-Hour race. As Brennan said eighteen years ago: "It looks and rides like a machine that's been built for the road merely to homologate it for production races." Hmm, a bit like a 916SP, then?

PROPER MOTORBIKES

The Lemon was based on a T3. The T3, if you remember or your dad remembers, was bereft of any embellishment beyond the basic necessities to qualify it as a

motorcycle. A proper motorbike, if you like. The Le Mans was plastered with trick bits in comparison. It was a no compromise job with high compression

pistons (10.2:1) 'big' and open 36mm Dell'Orto carbs, 6mm up on those adorning the T3. The Le Mans barrels differed from the T3, in that they were made of an experimental, ultra performance material, called cast iron. It all contributed to a 11.5bhp hike in power over the T3 to a claimed 80bhp at 7,200rpm at the back wheel. Phew!

FAMILY LE MANS

The Le Mans started a series which ended with the Le Mans 1000 V (as in five), just before the factory saw the light and employed 'Doctor' John Wittner. John promised much more than in-house dental treatment for the Guzzi factory. His arrival

If you're gonna get your knee down in the wet in January, you've got to make sure the tyres are warm enough

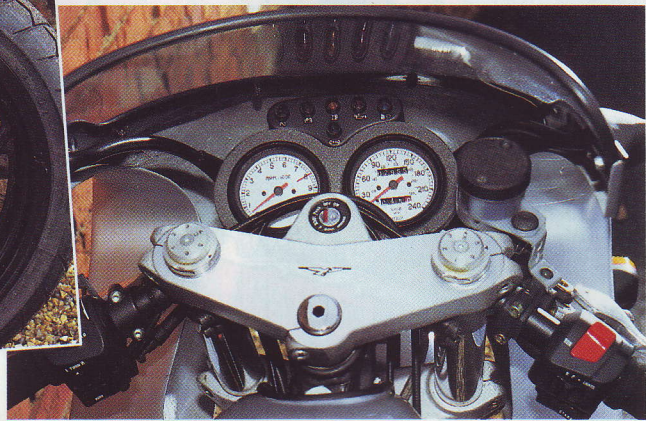




Sport's suspension is more or less separate to the drive system. Torque reaction is lost in the frame/engine



BELOW: Clocks and switch gear on the Sport are as neat and swish as any Japanese bike; yes, they've come a long way since the steamed up dials and vague touch-and-snap knobs of yesteryear



Lemon's suspension function is hampered by the fact that one end of one shock is attached to the drive box

heralded a new era of fuel injection, four-valve head technology and anti-torque reaction rear suspension. These proper motorbikes, 'nineties style, are the Daytona and 1100 Sport, the latter being the chosen Son of Lemon for our purposes in the test. Well, the Daytona's paint didn't match Joanne's nightie thing, so we had to go with the 1100 Sport.

TOO LITTLE TOO LATE

And so it came to pass that I got go on a Le Mans 1, eighteen years too late to afford me any useful cred. We don't worry too much about the 100% original concours anal retentive rubbish here, though, so it didn't matter too much that the seat was a replacement item. Well, it wouldn't have mattered, only this happened to be one aspect for which the

realised I didn't know how to start it. No of course you don't just press the starter. This is an old bike, an old *Italian* bike and it wasn't going to give in without a fight. Five minutes later, the rhythmic thumping was becoming more laboured. It didn't help that the headlight was permanently on (I had to read the eighteen year-old road test to suss how to switch it off). I tried every throttle and choke combination. No there was not going to be any action shots of this one. Then it changed its mind, fluffed, caught and thrubbed into action. I gave

Lemon was notorious: an excruciatingly uncomfortable breeze block of a seat. I really wanted a go at flattening my cheeks into submission as per all the road tests of yore, but no luck. This Lemon had 57,000 miles on the clock and the seat was history.

So I sat on the plush replacement seat, slotted in the ignition key and



Brakes on both bikes are Brembo; the Lemon's were traditionally praised for power, but slagged for feel ('wooden' was the cliché). The Sport's are beyond criticism



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it a big hard rev as punishment for being sulky and it nearly threw me off the side, such was the torque reaction. Cantankerous git.

"Progressive wound springs at the back provide sophisticated damping," garbled Brennan in 1977. About as sophisticated as bouncing along with two pogo sticks rammed up yer arse, I'd say. The whole feel of the bike is long and stiff, not a condition I'm familiar with these days. The wheelbase is several yards, the headstock raked out like a chopper and the suspension not so much progressive as sudden. You steer it with your bum rather than your arms and it reluctantly falls in with your suggestions. Once on course, it's difficult to persuade it otherwise, even without the steering damper screwed up. So it's extremely stable at speed except for the violent jolts the suspension throws at you occasionally. Any spirited throttle action seems to upset the rear end rather dramatically, causing the wheel to skip or

120mph on the speedo and the less lardy and more plucky Cobby pushed it up to 140mph, verified by the speedo of the 1100 Sport. In 1977, this was serious going.

Having ridden several later Le Mans models in my time, I can say the original was certainly as good as any of them. Guzzi never really changed the bike right through its fifteen year history; it gained some cubes, but not a notable leap in performance. No, it took Dr John to achieve that. He did it with the Daytona 1000 with its four-valve heads, fuel injection and monoshock back end. The 'low spec' 1100 Sport which followed was unpredictably brilliant, despite its two-valve heads and carbs.

QUANTUM LUMP

Jumping from the Le Mans onto the 1100 Sport, felt like a twenty-year Quantum Leap. So much of the thudding grunty, character remains. If

SPECIFICATIONS

	MOTO GUZZI LE MANS 850	MOTO GUZZI 1100 SPORT
PRICE	£2,099 in 1977	£7,895
MU INSURANCE GRP	Classic	13
ENGINE SPEC	Air-cooled four stroke push rod 4-valve twin	Air-cooled four stroke push rod 4-valve twin
Displacement	844cc	1,064cc
Bore x Stroke	83x78mm	92x80mm
Compression	10.2:1	10.5:1
Carburation	Dell'Orto 36mm	Dell'Orto 40mm
Max Power	80bhp @ 7,200rpm	80bhp @ 8,000rpm
Gearbox	5-speed	5-speed
CYCLE PARTS		
Chassis	Steel cradle	Steel spine
Suspension	Front: Marzocchi fork Rear: Twin shocks	Front: Marzocchi fork Rear: WP Monoshock
Brakes	Front: Twin Brembo Rear: Single disc	Front: Twin Brembo Rear: Single disc
Tyres	Front: 3.50-H18 Rear: 4.10-V18	Front: 120/70-17 Rear: 160/60-17
Wheelbase	1,470mm	1480mm
Seat Height	774mm	760mm
Dry Weight	Wet 221kg	Dry 200kg
PERFORMANCE		
Top Speed	130mph	150mph

THANKS TO: Chris Penny, owner of the red lemon and a truly trusting soul indeed. Howard Parrin at Conquest Classics (01202 820009) for convincing Chris we could be trusted. Market Motorcycles (01422 822599) for lending their demo. Genuine buyers book your test now (but the rest of you, the seat's been cleaned since Joanne sat on it, so forget it), MotoMecca, Guzzi spares folk – a gratuitous mention as they were very helpful (01202 823453).

Ask anyone and they'll tell you there's a character in Joe Bar with a Le Mans. S'not true, though Joe rode a V1000 once



the back end to rise or fall on acceleration and deceleration. Odd indeed.

I traced the problem to one of the Marzocchi shocks which had been inadvertently attached, at one end, to a giant, heavy drive box in the centre of the rear wheel. Apparently this design fault had gone unnoticed at the factory for several decades until eagle-eyed Dr John spotted it and built a 'live' drive box suspension system which channels the torque reaction into the frame instead of the shock absorber. Good man! His monoshock system is fitted to the Daytona and 1100 Sport.

POLISHED NAIL

For an old nail with 57,000 miles up, the Lemon had a healthy turn of speed. I saw

you were blindfolded (not recommended) you'd still know you were on a Guzzi. But the riding position would be more spacious, you'd be sitting over the front end, the suspension would rise and fall as you moved around on the bike, the brakes would shock you with their grip and potency, the engine would rev freely, there would be feel and reassurance from the back end. Indeed there is twenty years of development in there, but it's only been applied in the last five years. Such is the nature of progress in Italy. Guzzi has taken a lumbering, harsh plodder and made it into a fast, torquey sportsbike with a top speed of 150mph and the chassis to handle it. Styling is 'contemporary' which says a lot; finish is dodgy and the only aspect the Guzzi seems to fall down on. I can

guarantee plenty of work to anyone who fancies opening a plating company at Mandello del Lario.

FREAK OUT

For a Guzzi freak, the two would make ideal stablemates. The Lemon you'd use for nostalgic Sunday runs to your local bikemeet where it's guaranteed to pull a crowd of Guzzi *anoracci*. The Sport's place in the world is alongside Jap middleweights, showing them how hard Dr John's been working lately. Still, the performance gap with the big sportsbikes is too great to close, now. If Brennan's 1977 clash with a Z1000 is to be repeated twenty years on with a Sport and a ZZ-R1100, the outcome would surely be different. Now there's a challenge, Dr John.

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