

# Vee Bomb

***No doubt about it, Tony Hill's much modded Mark 1 Guzzi Le Mans is a weapon to take on all-comers, classic or modern***

## THE EARLY TO MID 70s

was something of a Renaissance period for the Italian motorcycle industry. Benelli had just given the world its first six-cylinder production motorcycle, the 750 Sei, Ducati had already introduced the 750SS Desmo and topped that up with the 900SS while MV Agusta followed a different

route with their highly expensive four cylinder machines, the 750S and then the America, probably the most beautiful bikes in the world. Even Laverda produced a limited edition SFC twin and followed it up with the legendary Jota three-cylinder Superbike. Things were indeed looking good for the Latins.

But what of the machines of Mandello Del Lario, the oldest motorcycle factory in Italy? Their first sporty V-twin, the V7, introduced in the early 70s, was well received and is today regarded as an outstanding classic though at the time it was viewed as lacking in a certain charisma. Never fear, for Guzzi had something special up its sleeve in the shape of the wholly idiosyncratic, 1976 Moto Guzzi 850 LeMans. It was an

instant hit and along with the 900SS and the Jota became one of the three most desirable bikes of the decade.

The styling was like nothing ever seen before with a long seat that actually covered the first part of the stylish red and black petrol tank. The 750 engine had been increased in capacity to 850cc which, with its wide spread of torque, made it even easier to ride fast. It did well in production racing and endurance racing and was revered for its sure footedness. With that first Mk1 LeMans Guzzi had produced another classic to follow in the V7's footsteps!

It was this very model, a Mk1 850 LeMans, that Tony the owner of this

**Main:**  
From this angle it doesn't look unlike a modern Guzzi road bike. Handles like one too  
**Opposite:**  
One look at that 160 section rear tyre and those decidedly non-standard Termignoni lookalike silencers and you know it's something special  
**Inset:**  
Top yokes and forks are Suzuki GSX-R 750J. Note Lockheed master cylinder. Clocks are Guzzi







fine machine purchased thirteen years later in 1989. Fed up with big Japanese fours he decided that the torquey V-twin Guzzi was the machine for him and set about restoring the machine to its original splendour. Well not quite. Rather, in true special builder's style he of course had no idea when to stop, and set about surpassing the original spec in virtually every department.

As such, in true specials builder fashion he simply had to tweak the engine a little. Which is exactly what he did. It was ridden in this simple tuned incarnation for a couple of years until 1993 when Tony decided

that a simple soup-up was not enough; rather he wanted to evolve and improve every other facet of the Le Mans experience. Two years later, and after two winters of toil and much burning of the midnight oil, the final 2nd version hit the roads early this year.

The modifications that have taken place have totally transformed the original bike into something that at Goodwood recently embarrassed many 916 and GSXR owners.

Starting with the engine, the capacity has been taken out to 950cc courtesy of a Raceco big bore kit. The same manufacturer's fast road cam

replaces the Dr. John fast road cam that disintegrated. Push rods are chrome moly and the motor as a whole has been converted to run on unleaded fuel. Where there used to be a single spark plug there are now two which gives better combustion, aided by an electronic ignition with a modified advance curve.

The rods and bottom end have come in for some major work, too. The crankshaft has been balanced and the flywheel and ring gear have been lightened to the tune of 2.2kg! The original rods were binned in favour of a pair of Carillos, absolutely essential given the overall state of





**Main:**  
Engine is  
angled down at  
the back as  
can be seen in  
this picture  
**Bottom Left**  
Steering  
damper is  
highest quality  
Ohlins unit  
**Bottom Right**  
Large Dell  
Ortos pump the  
juice for the  
near half litre  
cylinders

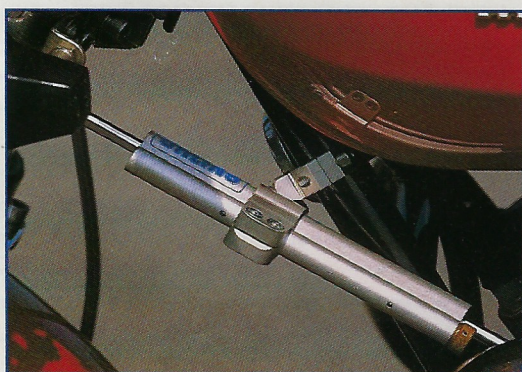
tune. Induction duties are taken care of by two 40mm Del'Orto carburetors which have had the pump mechanism removed. The original machine would have had those gorgeous sounding Lanfranconi silencers but Tony wanted something resembling a more modern Guzzi. What he ended up with was a one-off big-bore stainless steel exhaust system that is not unlike a Termignoni.

The real development however has taken place in the chassis department. Tony wanted to make the bike steer and perform like a modern bike - something Guzzis are not exactly renowned for. So, out went the original forks and in came a set of 43mm Suzuki GSXR 750J forks

and yokes, generally accepted to be the best available without resorting to expensive upside downers. Enormous PFM discs and Ducati 916 Brembo 4 pot calipers and Lockheed master cylinder make sure the whole plot is stopped double quick whilst even the rear brake has been uprated courtesy of a 245mm Brembo disc with a 2 pot Brembo caliper and master cylinder. The master cylinder and its tiny reservoir sit neatly out of the way under the seat. It will come as no surprise to hear that rear shock and adjustable steering damper are state of the art Ohlins kit, while even Wheels

are the terribly exotic Technomagnesio, a 17 inch at the sharp end and an 18 inch out the back.

You'd be forgiven for thinking that this could be just a bolt on special, but you'd be totally wrong. Tony, a design draughtsman, not only designed many of the ancillary parts he made them as well. For instance, he designed and built the gorgeous box section aluminium rear swinging arm and floating final drive kit, the front and rear caliper mounting plates and disc carriers were also down to Tony as were various brackets,

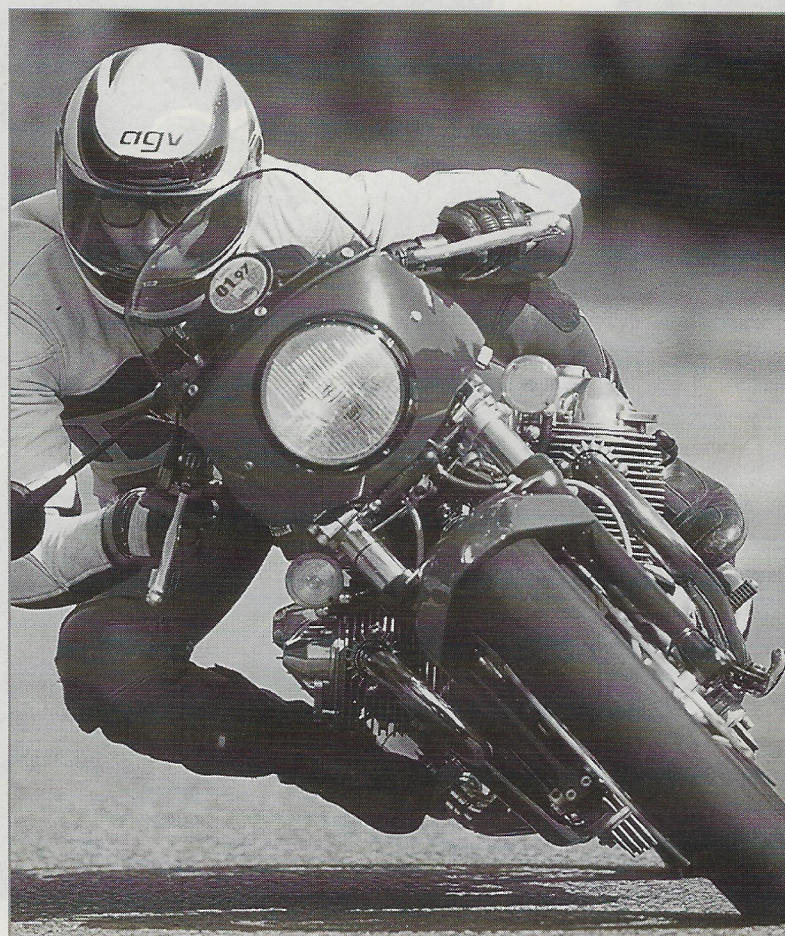




spacers, spindles, bar ends, indicator mountings, rear sets etc, etc.

Fitting a rear wheel that could take the required 160 section rubber meant that the whole engine has been moved 7.5mm to the right; it has also been tilted back slightly to keep the drive shaft straighter. Tony made up the new engine mountings himself and he also took out the bottom frame rails to utilise the engine as a stressed member and to reduce weight. To help with chassis rigidity he strengthened and braced the headstock.

I recently had the opportunity to ride an original '76 LeMans so comparing this to that would certainly show up any glaring differences. The first thing I noticed when riding the bike was how much smoother it was at low revs compared to an 850 and above 4,000rpm it was almost like a four, there was so little vibration. The owner, being a good sport, was very insistent on me giving it a thrashing, and who am I to argue? I duly set off down a particularly long and bendy and clear road and gave it a seriously large handful of the quick action Tommaselli twistgrip. The not inconsiderable torque pulled the Guzzi forward like an express train. I passed some guy on a Bonneville probably some 40mph quicker, he was doing around 70mph. I was only in 4th gear. An impending roundabout dictated that prodigious use of the

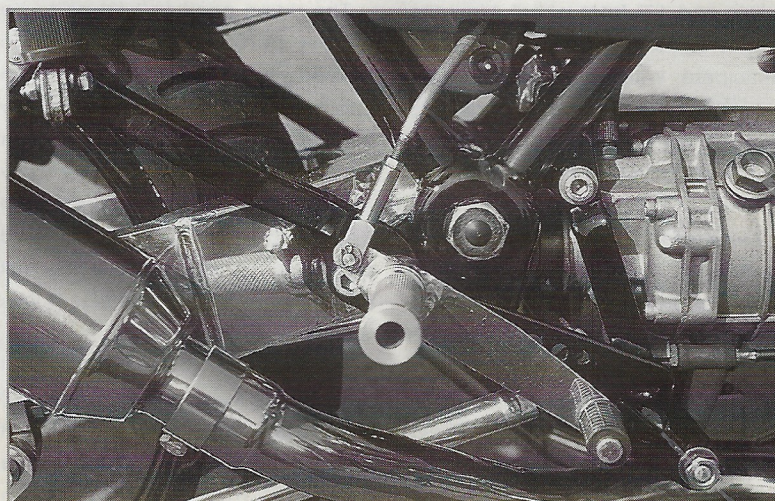
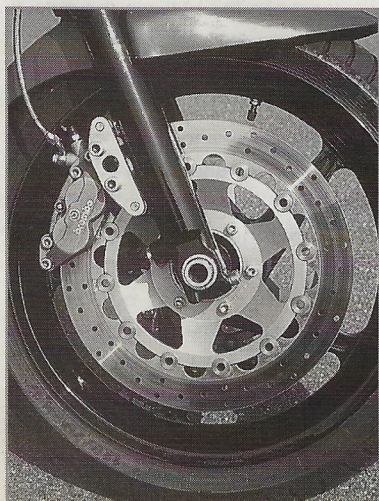


**Main:**  
Even at this angle of attack there's plenty more to play with. Try this on a standard Le Mans and you'd better have a liking for hospital food.

**Bottom Left:** Dinner plate sized PFM discs and Brembo 4-pots make sure the big Guzzi stops as well as it goes.  
**Bottom Right:** Neat footrest controls also act as exhaust hanger. Rod goes into side panel where rear master cylinder resides.

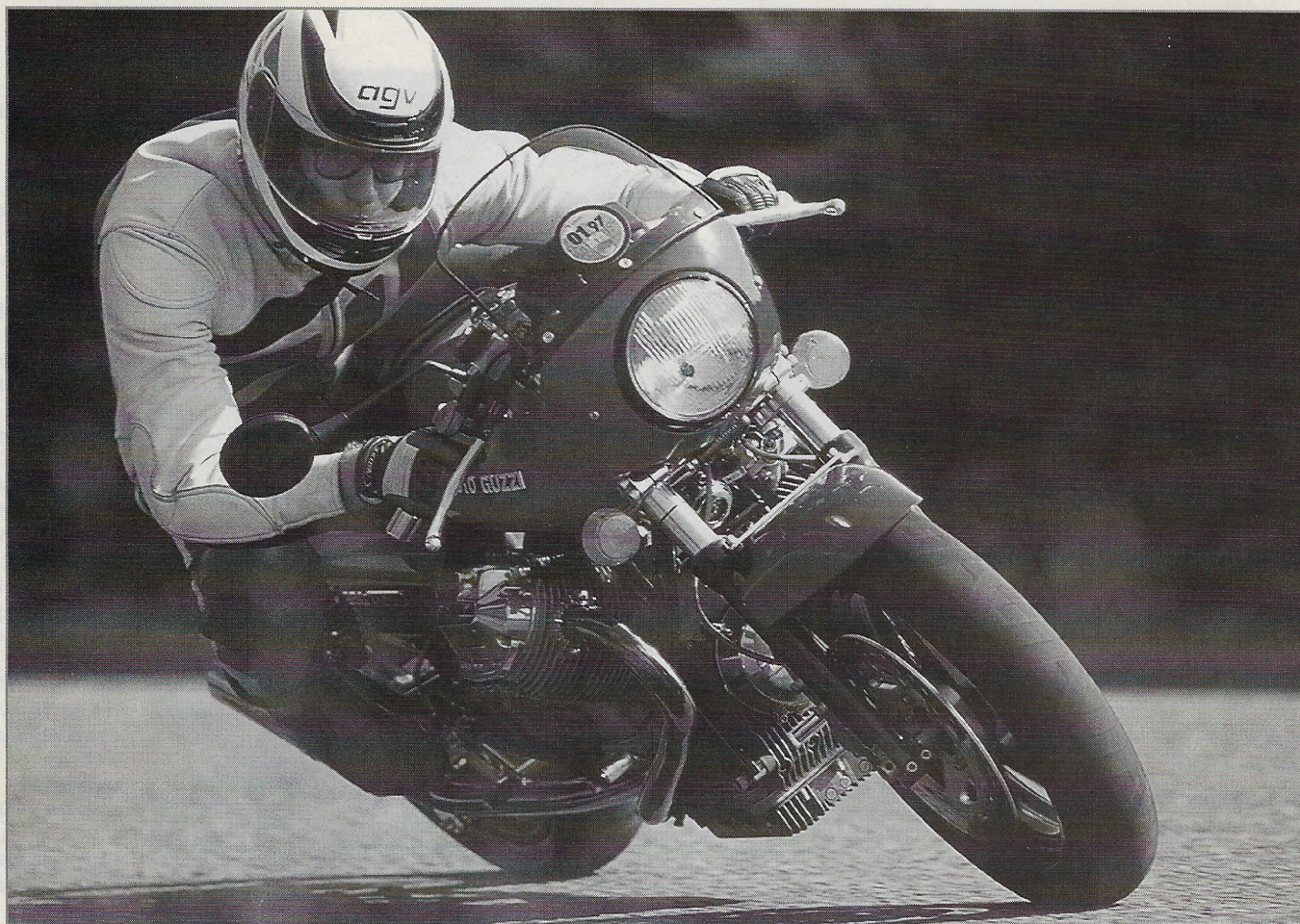
brakes would be called for if a successful negotiation was to take place. I duly gave it three fingers on the brake lever and those big old PFM discs hauled the Guzzi down rapidly. The ex-Suzuki 43mm forks did not suffer from even a hint of the dive that was characteristic of anything from

the period and even hard on the anchors the front wheel felt planted. I took the roundabout in 2nd gear on barely a whiff of throttle and leaned over yard arms further than you would a standard LeMans, the Metzlers biting into the blacktop. Coming of the roundabout necessitated



FAST 520 442  
Rear and  
twisting  
engine  
vibrating  
to make  
cabinets  
shower to  
with a 100  
the body and  
the 71 foot  
beam





**Main:**  
The 950 Guzzi  
has much  
quicker  
steering  
geometry  
aided by  
redistribution  
of weight,  
GSX-R forks  
and yokes and  
that 17" front  
wheel

changing direction quickly and the Guzzi shocked me again with its ability to be chucked from one side to the other without upsetting the chassis, suffering from none of the nervousness of some of the modern sports bikes. Tony has definitely got the plot sorted. The wheelbase at 1470mm is shorter than it looks, and this and the revised steering head angle and 17" front wheel allow the bike to turn much quicker than you'd anticipate. Without a doubt another contributory factor in the handling is the fact that the bike is, at 185kgs, about 80lbs lighter than a standard LeMans.

I was warned that the rear end was suffering from some damping problems and that I might find the ride a bit hard, but with my 15 stone bulk on board the 'piggy back' Ohlins could not have been more aptly named or felt more right. Tony, incidentally, is at least 3 stone lighter than me.

One thing that never seems to change with Guzzis is the rather agricultural gearbox. This 5 speeder was no exception. Upwards changes had to be deliberate to take into account the incredibly long lever travel whilst downward changes seemed less bothersome though allowances do have to be made for the direct axle drive.

The riding position I found to be almost perfect. The machine is inclined slightly forward in the modern sports idiom but not uncomfortably so. The handlebar, footrest equation again for me was nigh on ideal. Tony moved the foot controls upwards and backwards for extra ground clearance. For taller riders it may feel cramped but for my little legs it was just fine.

I'm not a lover of Italian twins but I have to say I was mighty impressed with Tony's bike. A hell of a lot of thought has gone into it and Tony's execution in completing is an

indictment of his superb workmanship. Definitely the best Guzzi special I've seen or had the privilege of riding.

## Second Opinion

The last time I rode a Guzzi LeMans it was pissing with rain and I was in an indecent hurry. I'd already done 100 miles or so and was well into the groove when the traffic in the outside lane of the M1 stopped without warning. I applied the, vastly superior linked, brakes and BANG the bike tripped itself up and I was on my arse in the outside lane doing 80 per and watching the brake lights of those cars inviting me to an early appointment with the grim reaper. Unbelievably, I sailed between the lines of traffic just as did the aptly nicknamed Lemon, and then plunged unceremoniously into the back of the waiting Peugeot. The next time I read about some unlikely development in braking technology I shall enquire first



if they have been developed on the race track. Linked brakes my sore arse.

I have had soft spot for the big Vee twin ever since seeing pictures of the 750 S3 when I was still at school, but by the time I'd got myself together enough to afford one, the MkII LeMans was the ultimate Guzzi and I bought one brand new. As is always the case, fantasy is better than reality, and I only hope Tommy Lee is more satisfied with what he's got.... The finish of my pride and joy was crap in almost every department, from the paint on the frame tubes (ha ha ) to the tuti fruti electrics. I loved the bike though, and it occupied the front room of my house in the years that I kept it. I'd fitted rear sets, Lafranconi racing silencers, electronic ignition and Koni rear shocks but basically the bike remained standard and I was happy enough with the handling. The LeMans was always a 'long' bike, by which I mean it showed its strengths on long journeys, the relatively lazy delivery and massive torque of the Vee-twin motor being ideally suited to long A road blasting. Drawbacks were the heavy strain on arms and wrists imposed by the leant forward riding position, the hard ride and the knowledge that if it rained something electrical would probably fail.

After my embarrassing dive on the M1, I spent some time and considerable amounts of money re-building the bike but my heart wasn't in it and the LeMans was returned to fantasy land. When I was offered a ride on Tony Hill's '76 Mk I LeMans I'd said yes even before hearing about the mods he had built into it.

Reading the specs it struck me that this was the incarnation of my fantasy LeMans. There is no area of the bike untouched by Tony's mods yet the bike still has the feel and look of the original. Astride the bike the seat is low and the rear set pegs are high meaning that the bend at the knee is too tight for comfort over a long distance. One stab of the starter and no noticeable torque reaction and a nice take up from the clutch. One problem on the original LeMans was that it required two handfuls of throttle to get the dell Ortos fully opened, though closing them was never a problem - the return springs are as strong as the side stand return. Tony has fitted his special with a quick action throttle which works very nicely but coupled with the aforementioned return spring holding the throttle open soon becomes hard work followed shortly after by cramps in the wrist. No matter, the response to the slightest twist of the wrist is immediate and direct - twist and go. Tony's work on the engine has inspired new life into the Vee and with the rear suspension set up as it was with rather too much

damping the rear was having trouble maintaining grip under acceleration and over bumps. It's not just that the engine is more powerful than standard, it seems more flexible and responsive. I felt at home on the bike almost immediately and taking it through a favourite series of bends it was stable and the steering sharp and accurate, the replacement forks working in tune with the Ohlins rear shocks. The revised steering geometry and the use of a smaller 17in front wheel obviously helps with the turn rate because the bike was easy to drop into bends and eager to change line, unlike the original which needs to be set up well in advance and moved off line at your peril. Brakes, too, are superb, Brembo 4 pot calipers off a 916 biting fully floating PFM discs give the front brakes the power and feel that was always lacking from the original and its contemporaries. The gearbox, unfortunately, remains standard Guzzi; s-l-o-w gear changes with l-o-n-g pedal travel are the order of the day. Luckily, the torque of the engine means that changes are less

frequent than usual but the performance of the engine is restricted by the short comings of the box. My test ride was cut short by a mystery problem at the rear drive but if I get the chance I'll definitely be in queue for another spin on Tony's spotless Mk I. This is a classic special that has been improved by its mods but retains the best qualities of the original. It is the fantasy LeMans. In other words, far better than a real one.

## 1976 MOTO GUZZI 950 LE MANS SPECIAL

ENGINE:	950cc air-cooled V-twin with twin plug heads, Carrillo rods, Raceco cam.
TRANSMISSION:	5 speed gearbox to shaft final drive
WHEELBASE:	1470mm
FRAME:	Le Mans frame with revised gearbox mountings (bottom frame rails removed & engine used as a stressed member), additional bracing at headstock
WEIGHT:	185kg (51% front -49% rear)
POWER:	76 bhp @ 6800rpm
TORQUE:	65 ft. lbs @ 3300rpm
SUSPENSION FRONT:	Suzuki 43mm adjustable for pre-load, rebound and compression damping
SUSPENSION REAR:	Ohlins twin shocks, alloy rear swinging arm with floating drive box
BRAKES FRONT:	2 X PFM fully floating discs with Brembo 4 pot calipers & Lockheed adjustable master cylinder
BRAKES REAR:	245mm Brembo disc with Brembo 2 pot caliper and Brembo master cylinder
WHEELS:	Technomagnesio front & rear
TYRES FRONT:	120/70 X 17" Metzeler MEZ1
TYRES REAR:	160/60 X 18" Metzeler MEZ1