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Winning

MOTORCYCLISTS ARE NEVER GOING TO AGREE WHEN it comes to deciding how many cylinders are enough, or even ideal. But one thing's for sure. A classic twin can beat singles, triples and fours where it matters, through the twisty bits.

Little wider than a one lung wonder, the parallel twin has almost twice the acceleration. And even an across the frame V-twin makes a BMW Boxer look decidedly gawky. Only the latest anorexic Japanese fours can match a classic twin's weight-watcher outline.

If the price of high performance includes numb fingers and blurred vision, most of us back off. Here are two contenders for heaps of your hard earned cash that get smoother the harder you haul on that wire.

The Commando's Isolastic rubber engine and transmission mounts insulate a rider from that curse of the British twin, vibration. You're released from suffering to enjoy the full potential of a stunning performer with all the instant poke of a shotgun blast. This one's a Norvil proddie racer on the road, with an engine to match. It's bigger than all the old road Commandos, either 750 (745cc) or 850 (829cc) at a whopping 917cc. But it still has the roadsters' four speed box.

Moto Guzzi's Le Mans I comes with a 90-degree V-twin engine that's inherently smooth. The chunky 850 is torquey in a way that British designers used to dream about. Its high gearing and five speeds mean that the motor's hardly into its stride as you flash past the ton.

Will victory go to the V or can the battling Brit take top honours? Read on and find out.

Moto Guzzi Le Mans 850 MkI

We'd been waiting side by side at the traffic lights for ages. The geezer with the baseball cap on the back of his head leaned out of his window. The dog on the passenger seat looked over too, listening to the Guzzi's wubba wubba wubba as it rocked between my knees. I had a strange feeling the mutt would speak first.

High speed motorcycling is a drug and I hadn't quite come down from a little craziness that included creaming past a red van at 6000rpm in fourth gear, before shifting into top at the ton.

"That sounded nice as you come by me," said the bloke. His dog grinned. I smiled back. "Yeah, I'm really enjoying this," I replied. "Glad you liked it."

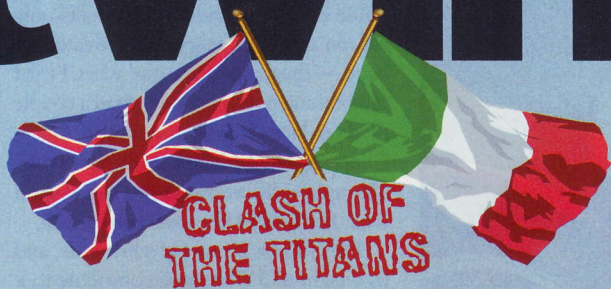
Two miles down the road I stopped for fuel. A truck driver came over and asked me if I'd really just put more than 17 litres of petrol in my bike. I explained that at 120 miles an hour the Guzzi's thirst was chronic. Hence the five gallon tank. "Someone should put a speed limiter on you," he grumbled good naturedly.

That pretty much sums up public reaction to Moto Guzzi's most satisfying product. Looks daringly fast, will top 130mph and, fitted with a pair of Lafranconi silencers stamped *Riservato Competizioni*, sounds just great. It didn't take much to make it a competitive proddie racer in the Seventies.

This 1977 Le Mans I is owned by *Classic Bike's* Latin ▶



twins

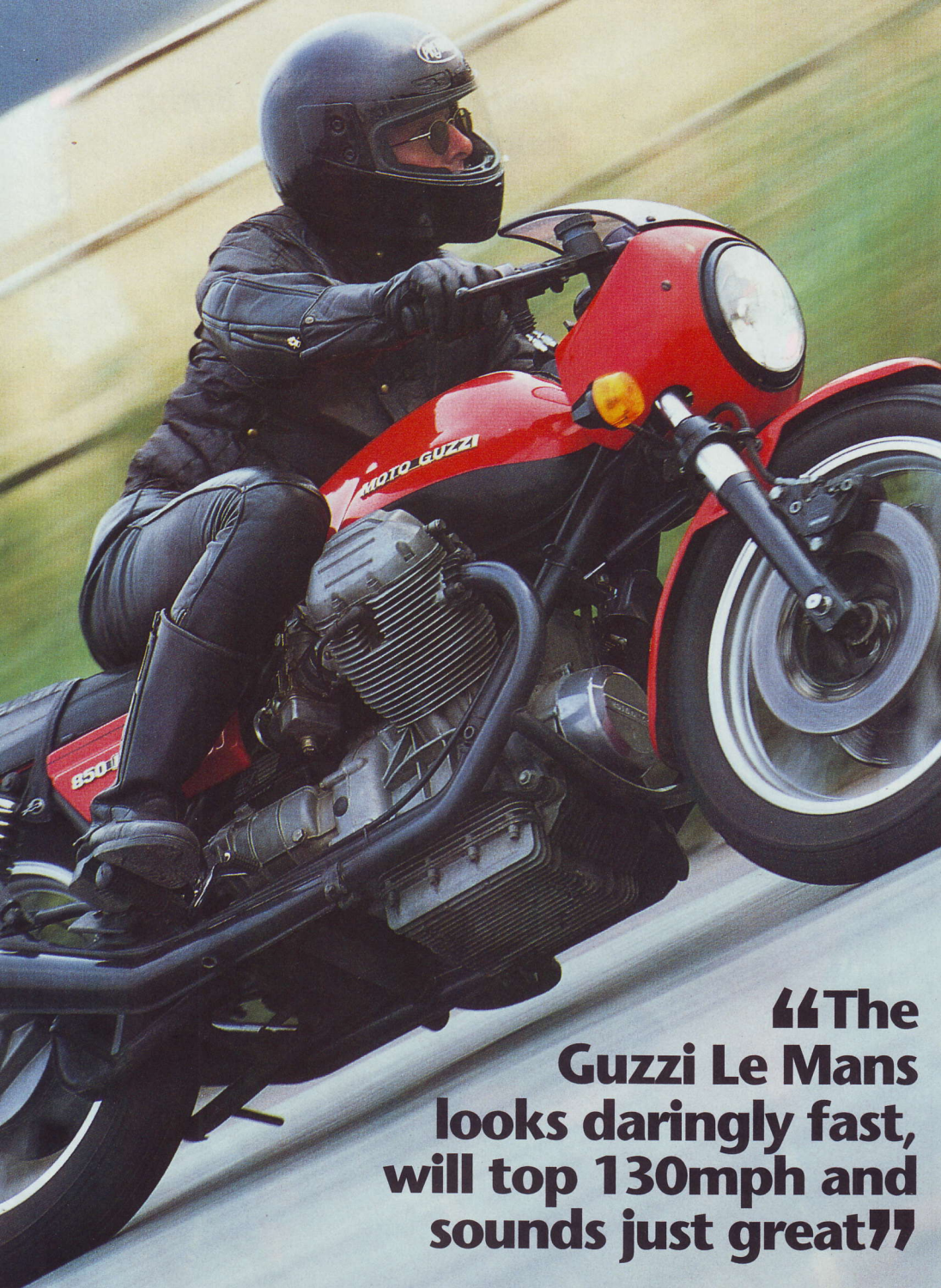


Scorching Italian and British
stunners with production
racing pedigree go head to
head on the road

PETER WATSON pics: Ray Archer

■ GUZZI LE MANS v NORVIL COMMANDO





“The Guzzi Le Mans looks daringly fast, will top 130mph and sounds just great”

◁ motorcycle loving editor, Phillip Tooth. Pippo recently bought the 850 as a replacement for his 750 Guzzi S3. The Le Mans cost £3250 and had covered just 11,800 miles. A bargain? I'll say.

Along with production racing silencers, the Guzzi's former owner had also fitted a Schrader oil pressure gauge and a Paolo Tarozzi front fork brace.

Straddle the Guzzi and you're already half in love with it, so seductive are its low, well-padded saddle and its clip-ons. Start the engine, and the deep V-twin beat is hypnotic. A heavy clutch and weighty throttle action are matched by a slow gearchange that gets faster and quieter as you play on the exhaust note near the 8000rpm redline. The Le Mans is nowhere near as slick a package as modern Japanese shaft-drive fours. But wind it on and the Guzzi lopes towards the

▲ **The riding position of editor Phillip Tooth's immaculate new 1977 Guzzi Le Mans Mk1 suits tester Peter Watson, but the heavy controls soon make for aching wrists**

horizon in seven league boots.

Although the riding position is not extreme, I soon found that the clutch and throttle were making my wrists ache. Phillip is considering a conversion to Mikuni carburettors after nylon-lined throttle cables failed to improve the Dell'Ortos' heavy twistgrip action.

My 200 mile journey home began in heavy rain and heavier traffic and ended after dark on familiar dry roads. I loved every minute of the trip, which says a lot about the competence of the Le Mans in all road conditions, for I swapped from A roads to B roads to unclassified and back to semi-motorway all the way. The lights are excellent.

The Guzzi's linked brake system had been disconnected by its former owner, which I think is a shame. In the West Midlands' rush hour I wanted to be able

to press the foot pedal and feel one front disc and the rear disc bring me to a perfectly balanced halt. At tricky road junctions the facility is even more of a boon.

With three 12in discs available to stop 650lb of bike and rider I'd normally only call on the third caliper — activated by hand — in emergencies. And when I tried full braking power on a dry road a couple of days later it was almost too much. Chopping the Le Mans down from over 100mph really set the wheels hopping on what had looked like a smooth surface.

The Guzzi is set up for a firm ride, and its weight and wheelbase contribute to a feeling that you are firmly planted on the road. Cornering calls for nothing more considered than the right gear. It's easy to move your weight around, and Phillip's choice of Metzlers allows full lean to the point at which you're dragging the edge of your boot along the tarmac.

Excess weight, very noticeable when using the centrestand, is one of the Guzzi's few flaws. Its immense power and high gearing present the only other hazard. I've never broken so many speed limits in one day. Watch your licence, Phillip. It won't be that clean again.

FOR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Looks to die for in a smooth, tireless mile-eater with shaft drive, linked brakes and a heavenly exhaust note
AGAINST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Harsh suspension, heavy controls, lousy switchgear and she's a bit of a porker, Phillip, old chap

Norvil 920 Commando

If you get all embarrassed when people point at the bright red Guzzi, don't worry. There's a guy on a canary yellow Norvil Commando right up your Lafranconis. Look out, he's spotted that bend coming up, tucked his head under the screen and gone. Better get cracking. He's got the legs of your V-twin on acceleration. You might just catch him on the next straight. But I wouldn't bet on it.

In 1971 Norton Villiers boasted: "The Commando is one of those rare bikes that is almost a pure racer in standard form." Now anyone who fancied a 750 production class racer could buy a 70bhp "selectively assembled" high compression engine, a high lift camshaft, disc brake, clip-on handlebars, racing footrests, alloy rims, a choice of fuel tanks, a racing seat and a half fairing. Optional extras: electronic ignition and a five-speed gearbox.

All these Norvil goodies came from the Norton Villiers Performance Shop Ltd at Thrupton. What sounded like a high-tech

research facility was housed in two ex-RAF Nissen huts. A subsidiary of Norton Villiers, Norvil was run by gifted development engineer and racer Peter Inchley. Helping him was a 13-man team including Peter Williams.

If, like me, your teenage heroes were Williams, Dave Croxford and Charlie Sanby, you won't need reminding how successful the Commandos proved to be against nominally superior triples and fours. But a fledgling enterprise like Norvil couldn't prosper in the icy wind blowing through Britain's motorcycle industry in the early Seventies. Especially when its product line was confined to a model whose replacement was consistently predicted, year after year, by Norton Villiers' chairman.

Today's Norvil comes from a location just as surprising as two old Nissen huts. Wander into the workshops of Les Emery's Norvil Motorcycle Company in Staffordshire (01543 278008) and you can see Commandos that no-one ever dreamed of 25 years ago taking shape. There's nothing surprising about a prodigal racer with lights, but these have new frames, new engine and gearbox castings, new glassfibre, new capacities. You can order an 1140cc Commando thanks to a Nourish crankshaft. Or if insurance is a problem they'll fit a 500cc Dominator 88 or 600cc 99 engine. To a Commando. Fancy Roadster trim, Norvil PR, or a Long Range

► **Lockheed racing caliper grips drilled 12in Norvil disc to give the Commando the stopping power to match its performance. Neat front mudguard completes superbly stylish bodywork**

▼ **Smaller riders like editor Tooth fit neatly on to the stylish Commando, but the knee cutouts on the Norvil petrol tank mean longer legged pilots can find it hard to get comfortable**



tank? No problem. Colour? No problem. Matchless G15 with Commando chaincase, belt drive and Commando clutch? No problem.

The 920 is a Commando, only more so. This particular bike is worth £6500, while a new one will cost you £8695. Starting advice includes air lever fully open, Concentric carbs flooded, a little throttle and leap on the kickstart with the bike on its centrestand. A healthy roar from twin peashooter silencers and the half fairing becomes a blur on its rubber washers as the engine and gear-

box gently jiggle in their Isolastic mounts.

At around 3000rpm the 920 smoothes out without giving way to blandness. After all, says Emery, you wouldn't expect 81mm pistons that weigh slightly less than a standard 750's 73mm slugs to prejudice the Commando's reputation for a comfy ride. And although maximum power is developed at under 6000rpm, there's no feeling that you're being short changed.

Straight off the line, the four speed Norvil is all torque, with a power surge in mid-range that made me want to shout with joy. This is a real sprint special, with a light clutch and a slick shift to match its free revving nature. A quick glance at the Norton Triumph logo Smiths clocks as we approached the first roundabout — 90 at 5000. I squeezed the brake lever hard and felt that 12in Norvil floating disc gripped by a Lockheed racing caliper. Down a gear, brake again, peel off smoothly, saw the road clear and changed up with 5500 revs on the clock. Every brain cell was buzzing.

When I tried to squeeze under the screen I discovered that I was too tall to get my knees into the tank cutouts without sitting on glassfibre. Phillip fits the Norvil, but at 6ft I need a John Player dual seat. I'd felt uncomfortable at low speed in traffic, but once we got shifting the wind held me up, perfectly balanced.

Phillip thinks that the Norton needs a hydraulic steering damper like his Guzzi's. He took his hands off the bars at low speed and the Commando shook its head. I disagree, because the parallel twin feels so secure at speed. And although I normally loathe bikes with a restricted lock, this one gives me the confi- ►





Different colours, capacities and engine configurations, but the Le Mans and Norvil Commando are blood brothers

ence to hold it balanced at walking pace on the rear brake, and crank over under power for a tight turn back up to Ray Archer's cameras.

After the 920 kicked back as I tried to start it, my right foot felt crushed. Phillip responded by starting the Norvil from the saddle. He got back on the Le Mans and before long we were belting each other on the elbow, hammering down the road side by side. It was getting far too much like real production racing.

▼ Hefty Le Mans has double the fuel tank capacity of the nimbler Norton, but both are capable of tackling long trips



FOR

■ Warp speed thrust, low weight, smooth power, race track handling and a sound that says yeeehah!

AGAINST

■ Leap on the kickstart and watch everything wobble and judder at tickover. Awful Lucas switchgear, tight steering lock

And the winner is...

This looks like a genuine case of horses for courses. But it's not quite so clear cut.

I could say that if you intend to do lots of long distance touring, buy the Le Mans instead of a BMW. And if you're looking for a back roads racer with the thrust of a rapier, the Norvil 920 will satisfy all your more selfish desires.

But add a dual seat to the Norvil and you can share the fun and go touring. That fairing works well in the rain, and the 920 engine is remarkably flexible.

And don't think of the Guzzi as just a tourer — it becomes a slaving beast once you wind it on past 5000rpm.

It was tough decision, but I opted for the Le Mans because it's lighter, more agile, with lighter controls, and better suited to my favourite roads.

I also know that if I ever wanted to change the Commando, there are more options available in the Norvil Motorcycle Company's catalogue than I'll ever have time to investigate. But it would be fun trying.

	1977 Moto Guzzi Le Mans 850 Mk1	1972 Norvil Commando 920
Engine	ohv 90 degree V-twin	ohv parallel twin
Capacity	844cc	917cc
Bore x stroke	83 x 78mm	81 x 89mm
Compression	10.2:1	9:1
Carburation	two 36mm Dell'Orto	two 32mm Amal
Output	81bhp @ 7600rpm	62bhp @ 5800rpm
Torque	not available	63ft/lb @ 5800rpm
Electrical	12v coil ignition	12v electronic ignition
Clutch	multiplate, dry	multiplate, dry
Primary drive	direct	toothed belt
Final drive	shaft	chain
Gearbox	five speed	four speed
Frame	tubular steel full cradle	tubular steel full cradle
Front tyres	100/90 x 18in Metzeler RE33	100/90 x 19in Avon AM20
Rear tyres	120/90 x 18in Metzeler ME99	110/90 x 18in Avon AM21
Front brakes	two 11.8in (300mm) discs	12in (305mm) disc
Rear brakes	11.8in (300mm) disc	8in (203mm) s/s drum
Fuel capacity	5 gallons (23 litres)	2½ gallons (12 litres)
Wheelbase	59in (1499mm)	58in (1473mm)
Seat height	29½in (750mm)	30½in (775mm)
Kerb weight	479lb (217kg)	364lb (165kg)
Consumption	38mpg	40mpg
SS ¼ mile	13s @ 105mph	12.5s @ 110mph
Top speed	130mph	120mph

Extra info

Photocopies available from the Classic Bike archive include:

Moto Guzzi Le Mans 1976 *Motor Cycle Mechanics* road test, £2.50

Moto Guzzi Le Mans 1976 *Motor Cycle* road test, £2.50

Norton 750 Commando 1968 riders handbook, 36 pages, £4.00

Norton Commando 750 and 850 1970 on workshop manual, 170 pages, £17.50

Norton 750 Commando 1971 spares list, 58 pages, £6.00

Norton 850

Commando 1973 spares list, 66 pages, £7.00

Norton 850

Commando 1973 *Motor Cycle* road test, £2.50

Write to *Classic Bike*, 20-22 Station Road, Kettering, Northamptonshire, NN15 7HH, or fax 01536 386782.

Make cheques payable to *Classic Bike* or quote your Visa or Mastercard details.



Useful contacts

Norton Owners Club: Dave Fenner, Beeches, Durlay Brook Road, Durlay, Southampton, Hampshire, SO32 2AR

Moto Guzzi Club (GB): Paulette Foyle, 43 Poplar Avenue, Bedworth, Nuneaton, Warwickshire, CV12 9EW.

Italian Motorcycle Owners Club:

R Marston, 14 Rufford Close, Barton Seagrave, Northamptonshire, NN15 6RF

Send an SAE or IRC for a membership form