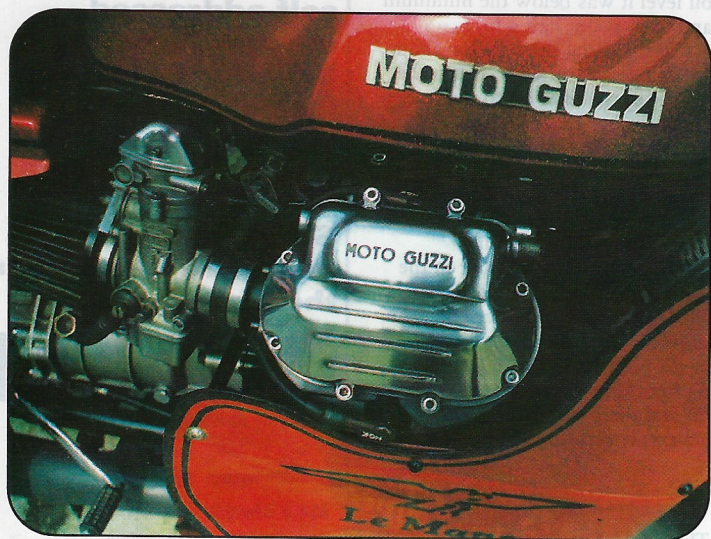


# GUZZI STREET



Twin plug heads and 40mm carbs.

**John Benham's Le Mans works for a living and wins trophies. He rides it to drag strips around the country, bags a proddie trophy, and rides it home again! Alan Turner investigates.**

**R**EMEMBER the good old days? Times when bikes were ridden to meetings, raced, then (hopefully) ridden home again? Well, it still happens and John Benham doesn't turn up on his Moto Guzzi Le Mans special just to make up the numbers - at home there is a clutch of drag race trophies to prove it.

To the casual observer the bike might appear to be a Mk 1 Le Mans in a party frock but Guzzi cognoscenti will spot the clues that all is not as Mandello del Lario intended. John gets a certain satisfaction from this, as he relishes the idea of riding a 'street sleeper'.

The bike is the result of 19 years' steady development - and he's not finished yet. First and foremost it is

a road bike but the effectiveness of his self-imposed engineering problems and solutions are judged by the timing clocks at the drag strips. Like any long-term relationship there have been highs and lows.

But first, some background.

**G**RADUATING through BSA singles John saw, in a local dealer's window, one of the first Moto Guzzi V50s to be imported. At £1300 it was more expensive than the Honda CX500 - but he had to have it.

After a few years with the V50 John was convinced that V-twins were the best motors but bigger would be even better. He bought his first Le Mans and warmed to the extra power. The bike also warmed to him - in the form of an electrical fire! Out in the country, far from help, John could only watch as his dream was turned to ashes.

With the insurance money he bought a second Le Mans and spent three years riding it to work and on touring holidays. Impressed with the bullet-proof engine he wondered how much tuning potential there was. A pair of 40 mm carbs and mildly ported heads was his first step. The cam was replaced by an SS item, the timing chain by gears.

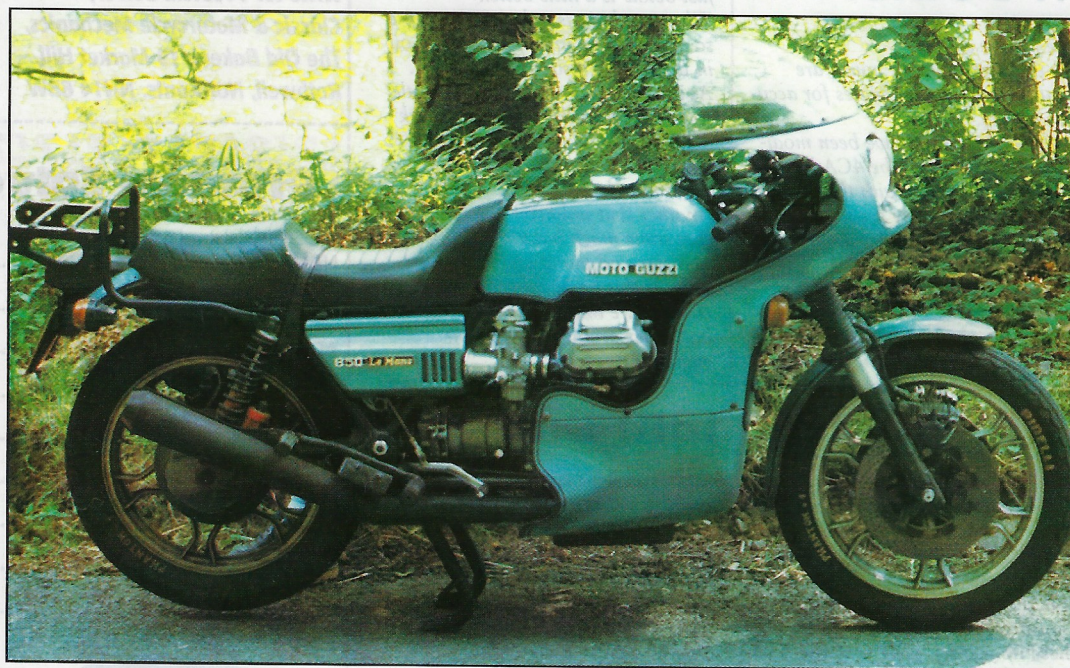
In 1984 he entered the 'Ultimate Street Bike' event at Santa Pod drag strip. His brother took his Ducati 900SS. An initial run of 12.5 seconds showed promise, and that improved to 12.37 by the end of the day. Then his brother clocked 12.36 and that 100th of a second has been the subject of fraternal rivalry ever since.

Confident that he and the bike were competitive John started to pursue the Championship. In those days events were held at a variety of venues around the country. For farther-flung meetings the Guzzi was piled with camping kit for the ride to the track.

In the 'Four Stroke Twin' class he usually managed a top three finish. His main rival used an XS650 Yamaha which had run 11.7s. More power had to be found...

1987 became a watershed year

## STREET SPECIALS



How the bike looked in the early Eighties.



# T DRAGSTER



*John gets the tyre sticky before the off.*

when he finally lifted the Four Stroke Twin Championship. Then Dame Misfortune appeared in the guise of a little old lady driving a car from a side turning...

Still rueful, John recalls: "I thought I'd done it all right. We made eye contact. I was sure she'd seen me..." The Guzzi was torpedoed into a ditch, the hapless rider into the adjoining field. John's collar bone was broken and the Guzzi an indisputable write-off.

When the insurance money came through John bought a new frame and started all over again to build today's bike.

**F**ront wheel is a VFR 750 item. It took a little persuasion to make it fit but the weight-saving made the effort worthwhile. Forks are Marzocchi with a brace made by John at work. Brake hoses



*The Le Mans has gone through 19 years of development and he's not finished yet.*

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# GUZZI DRAG BIKE

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are braided, naturally. Behind the forks is a Serck Marston oil cooler, a thermostatically controlled full-flow item. This replaces an earlier effort that only bypassed oil. To minimise oil-drag, 0-40 synthetic is used.

At the top of the engine is one of the more visible mods. The heads were converted to twin plugs in 1988, instantly making the bike modern-fuel friendly. The operation did not run smoothly. The engineering

company drilled the holes at 40 degrees to vertical, not horizontal. A session of alloy welding rectified this and the heads then received attention by Raceco (01728 602 1011) who fitted new valve seats to take 47mm inlet and 40mm exhaust valves.

This meant re-machining the combustion chambers and squish bands. Barrels were turned down, and even the push-rods are now five mm shorter.

A computer graph was created by John to assess the projected performance from his tuning work.

As the bike is still running-in the figures have yet to be verified. With the smaller valves the bike reliably gave 82 bhp at the rear wheel.

The 40mm carbs were bored out to 41½ mm a couple of years ago. The exhausts are modified Moto Mecca items with decorative end baffles that are the last remains of the Lafranconi production racing pipes he rescued from the crashed bike.

Cylinder barrels are original on the outside. They were once bored out to 87mm (950cc) with GPM pistons but the top cast-iron rings cracked on the way to the BMF Rally one year and the engine disgorged its oil.

Cautious riding and copious top-ups got John back home but the engine strip revealed the big-end bearing liberally creamed around the crank pin. Amazingly, after a clean-up, the crank was still serviceable!

**T**HE search for more performance led to the purchase of another overbore kit with impressive Arias forged pistons but

the stresses of racing caused these to crack eventually and they were replaced by heavier, but stronger, Wiseco items. Cracks also appeared in the Moto Guzzi conrods so a pair of Carillo items are now used.

The crank and the cases are still the originals. The crank has been re-balanced when the bore or pistons have been changed. An unexpected cause of trouble was the housing for the rear main which bolts on to stiffen the crankcases. The original was cracked so John made his own from a large piece of alloy bar. With the clutch abuse inherent to drag racing the oil seal was being roasted. A temperature-resistant Viton item now does the honours.

The SS camshaft was replaced with one John made himself. Careful machining enabled him to cut the gears from an old shaft and interference-fit them to his home-made camshaft.

A lightened flywheel and clutch transfer the power to the standard transmission. Second gear is the weak link. Missed changes usually herald another gearbox strip and much expense. A discarded piston bears the clear mark of a touched valve. Blue-printing the gearbox clearances and tweaking the gearchange mechanism has made changes more reliable.

Marzocchi shocks are used at the back because they work and can be rebuilt. The wheel is from a VFR which only fitted after John skimmed the hub as close as he dared. He still had to remove metal from the bottom of the caliper and more metal had to be removed from the swingarm to get the tyre in.

Honda VFR front wheel, Marzocchi forks and John's home-made fork brace.



At the rear, another VFR wheel - a very tight fit.



The lights have turned green and John leaves the line.



# STREET SPECIALS

The VFR wheels allow a greater choice of tyre. On Guzzi wheels he was slaughtering Pirelli Phantoms in 2500 miles.

**A**FTER 500 miles of running-in John rode to North Weald to start the defence of the Four Stroke Twin Championship he won last year.

A best of 11.66s was his quickest run at North Weald. One furious race against Dave Jones's Harley had John keeping it nailed in third and crossing the line at 116 mph with the rev-counter beyond the red zone. This was calculated to be a true 8800 rpm. Impressive stuff for a push-rod V-twin with 81,000 miles on the clock.

John lost the final to a Suzuki TL1000 ridden by someone born the year the Guzzi was built.

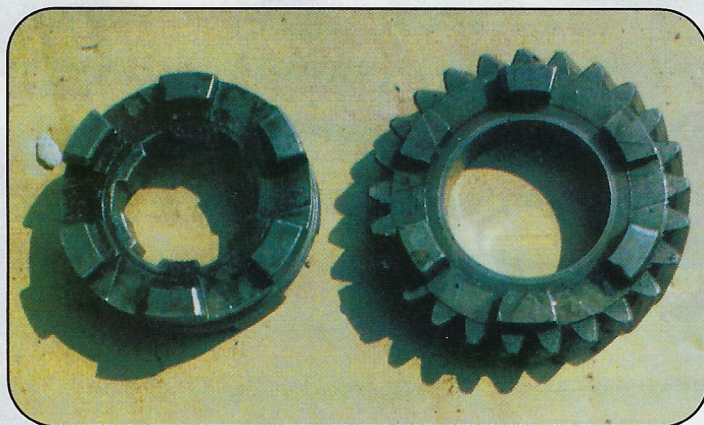
Plans for the Guzzi's future are uncertain. A longer stroke crank was rejected because the computer forecasted a power loss. There's the possibility of another overbore if the cylinder studs permit.

But there's a summer of riding to be enjoyed and if his engineering skills improve the bike, that is satisfaction enough. Twin ambitions achieved, the drag racing trophies are a bonus.

Emphatically, the bike is not for sale.



Extra gauges are fitted for oil pressure and temperature.



Worn second gear. Note chamfer on dogs.

**The VFR wheels allow a greater choice of tyre. On Guzzi wheels he was slaughtering Pirelli Phantoms in 2500 miles.**

BELOW: Extraneous items are removed when the competition gets tight.

