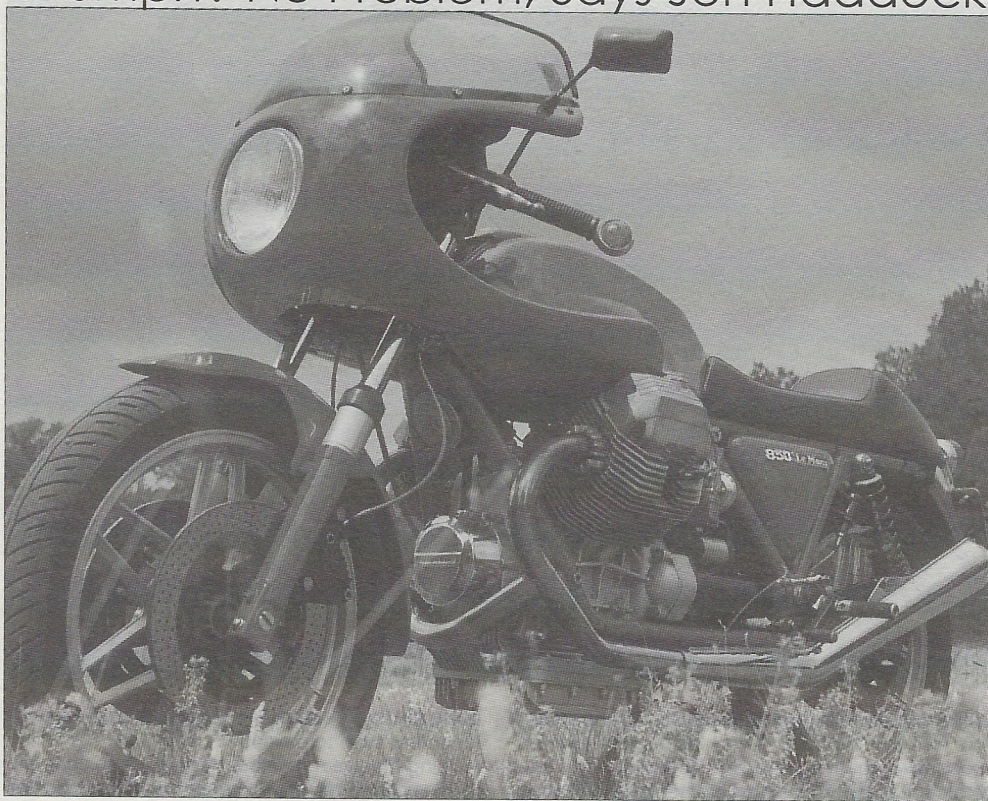


# LE MANS

## AND OTHER ACE ITALIANS

140mph? No Problem, Says Jon Haddock



A Le Mans... Hmm.... Yeah, I've got a Le Mans. It sounded good. I could definitely imagine myself saying that, letting it drop into the conversation, when someone else brought it up, of course. I looked again at the advert in the local Free Ads. 1980 Moto Guzzi 850 Le Mans Mk2, low miles, excellent condition, £1500. I nearly had enough money; he was bound to do a deal.

The guy actually rode it up from Bournemouth. I heard it arrive, a deep rumbling which was killed almost immediately, almost as if he was embar-

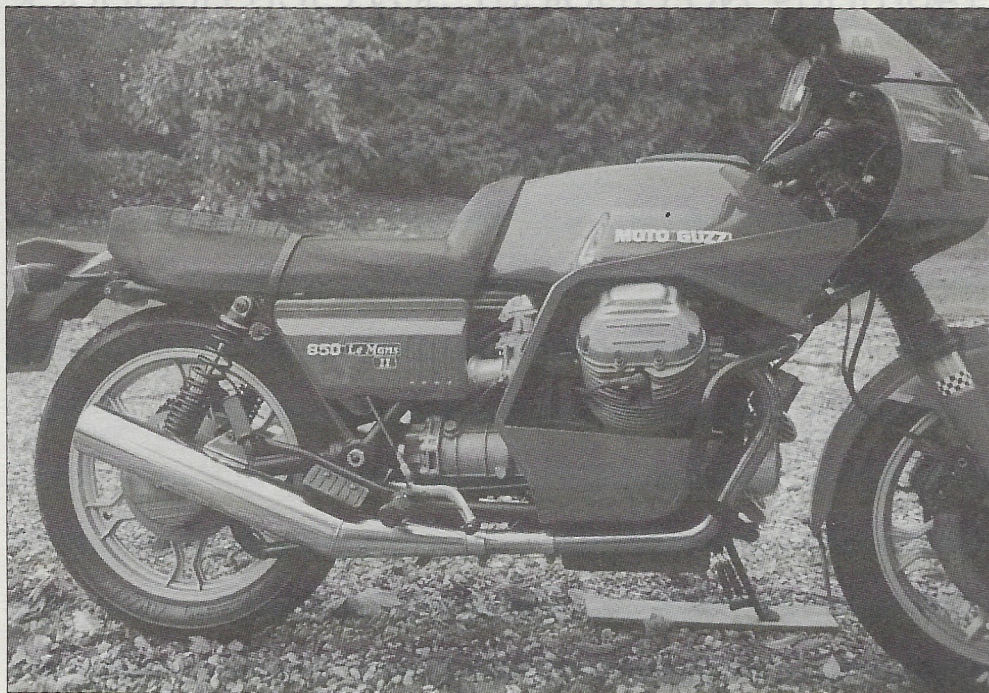
assed about the sound. I walked out to meet him to look over the bike and take it up the road. After the my old V65 Guzzi it felt gutless low down, and as I gingerly tipped it into a roundabout it felt like it was about to fall over. On the way back to the house I twisted the throttle that last few millimetres to see what all the fuss was about, and discovered that there was as much movement again as I had used up to that point. I reached over the bars, grabbed the twistgrip as far round as I could, and wound it all the way back to the stop.



As the Le Mans came on cam at 4700 I realised that this was a whole different beast from the little Guzzi. It had a raw, hewn from the bedrock feel, a kind of... well, put it like this: when I was about two years old my dad took me to a railway station. I can still vividly remember standing on the edge of the platform, my little arm stretched up to my dad's big hairy paw... and then the Mallard came through. For those of you who are thinking I had just seen a kind of aquatic bird, the Mallard was a streamlined steam locomotive. It holds the world record for a steam train at something like 122mph. I have no idea how fast it was going that day, but it didn't stop,

four years and although it had been the fastest and hardest bike you could buy in '76, it was somewhat eclipsed on paper by some of the larger Jap stuff and, of course, the Laverda Jota. Being, as always, skint, Moto Guzzi took the incredibly clever two-piece wind tunnel designed fairing from the 1000cc Spada, chopped down the high screen, nailed it onto the old Le Mans (not difficult as they share the same frame), and lo and behold... a sports-tourer.

Of course, being Moto Guzzi they left the rest of the bike completely alone, so it still had proper clip-ons, totally open 36mm Dell'Orto carbs, and a high compression motor with a hot cam – 'but hey,



was probably doing about 60mph, and was around four feet from my head. It was the biggest, loudest, most powerful thing ever in my world, and I was reminded of that kind of raw elemental power when I first opened up the Le Mans.

Leaning on its traditionally precarious sidestand, the Guzzi looked like it would punch you in the balls if you stood too close. This was a hard, loud, strong, motorbike. Needless to say I bought it.

The 850cc Mark 2 Moto Guzzi Le Mans was a cosmetic makeover. It was in essence a Mk1, that impossibly horny, long, slender, bright red rocket ship that had a dinky flyscreen with a strangely contrasting fluorescent orange stripe across the Plexiglas. By 1978 the Mk1 had been around for

eetsa Guzzi, jus' because eet have a clock, doesn't mean eet have to go slow...'

Being the great masters of styling and cool, the Italians chose red and blue as the colour choices for the new model. Just like Honda did with the F1 400 four – three years previously.

Strangely, my bike was neither red nor blue. Instead it was a sort of plum burgundy with gold pinstripes. The fairing had been edged with that curious leather-finish plastic beading that Mini owners seemed to love so much. It may have been classy once, but exuded a kind of 'Indian Restaurant in the harsh light of day' chic, which was frankly a bit sad. But, who cares? Underneath all that tat was a proper Le Mans. The owner (ha, not for much



longer!) told me it was a 'Three Cross Special', and I eventually gathered that Three Cross (the importers back then) had trouble shifting the last of the blue ones as a final batch of Mk2s, with Nicasil barrels and a tasty black and gold paintjob, were on their way from Italy – and Bike Magazine had already tested one and been surprisingly complimentary. Fairly understandably everyone was waiting for one of those; so they did a tarty paint job on the two blue ones they had left... whatever.

Other than the paint, the bike was bone stock. It still had the weird 'damper in a fork' arrangement at the front (damn!), the remote reservoir Marzocci at the back, and nothing was bent or scuffed. For those of you who care about such things, the front end had this mad system where instead of the fork working like a big shock absorber, they were simply undamped telescopic tubes, and a long damper, a bit like the struts that hold up the tailgate of a hatchback, sat inside. This had the advantage of allowing the front dampers to work normally even when the fork seals were shot to buggery, and the disadvantage of being absolutely rubbish even when they did work properly. Nowadays you can buy much better inserts to replace the stock ones, but it is hard to justify such an expense when the old ones do still function.

Most if not all of these V-twin Guzzis also have a three disc linked-braking system. This gave you a front and a rear disc under normal braking conditions using the footbrake, and an additional front disc for hill starts and emergency stops. It worked incredibly well, unless you were *really* going for it, when under heavy braking the rear would hop and the system would then lock the wheel and stop the motor. You would then find yourself unexpectedly bump-starting a high compression V-twin while attempting to apex a bend with a dead engine.

Anyhow, I'm getting ahead of myself; the little Guzzis I had owned previously hadn't done that, so that was an 'experience' for the future.

Well, I bought it, and rode down a week later with a mate on the back of his enormous GSX1100EFE (128bhp at the back wheel? Hello?) to get it. I am pretty sure I remember saying to him as we left Bournemouth: 'Take it easy, I haven't ridden for three months, and this bike is a bit different to the others,' before he disappeared in a cloud of rubber smoke up the bypass. As the Le Mans decked out at 120mph on the long curves coming in to Southampton, with the Suzook weaving and pitching in front of me, I can definitely remember calling him a c\*\*t, that's for sure!

Once I had settled into the bike a bit more I started to sort out the folklore from the facts. Despite having absolutely no air filtration whatsoever, apparently they will run past 100,000 miles with ease, They tend to need a replacement universal

joint where the gearbox meets the shaft drive at the swinging arm, every 25,000 or so, although some bikes have gone round the clock on the original (poofs!), and the huge single plate clutch lasts at least 50,000 miles but is an engine-out job to do.

Inevitably you tend to do both UJ and clutch at the same time, as they both need the motor out of the frame, and are both in the same place, so you don't even have to move your tools. Fortunately you don't need eight mates to get the motor out, as the frame comes apart and the bottom rails, the part supporting the motor, drops down, allowing access to the oily bits.

They also have a chain driving the camshaft, but

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unlike the BMW twins there is no tensioner, so this lasts until it gets rattly. At that point, if you leave it, it will eventually saw its way through the front of the block. The legend goes that the motor was originally intended for... well, the two versions I heard were a two-man light jeep for the Italian Army, or an unmanned (unstaffed?) aircraft for towing aerial targets. Either way, the motor was not going to be around long enough to need a tensioner. Of course this is all bollocks as the V7 Sport, the Le Mans' ancestor, had a set of gears in place of the chain, which were retrofittable... and very desirable.

The other thing the V7 had, which I would have loved to get my hands on, was a higher geared final



drive. Every one of the various 850 and 1000cc variants, including an Automatic called the Convert (and it worked too, you were soon converted to car ownership), used the same bevel gear ratios and on the Le Mans it meant a top speed at the red line of 140mph. Apparently the V7 ratios could raise that to 150mph. More importantly it raised the maximum touring speed from 120 to nearly 130 – and on a bike with a 200 mile-plus tank range, and bloody good high speed ergonomics (if you have a dwarf's legs, which I do), that was pretty relevant.

My Le Mans also benefited from an aftermarket electronic ignition system, which used an optical trigger fitted inside the distributor (!), which poked up between the cylinders. The other neat touch, which was probably part of the 'Special' package, was a pair of fork gaiters. Having seen the state of other Le Mans front ends (we are talking 140mph stone chip potential and Italian chrome here) they were a top choice.

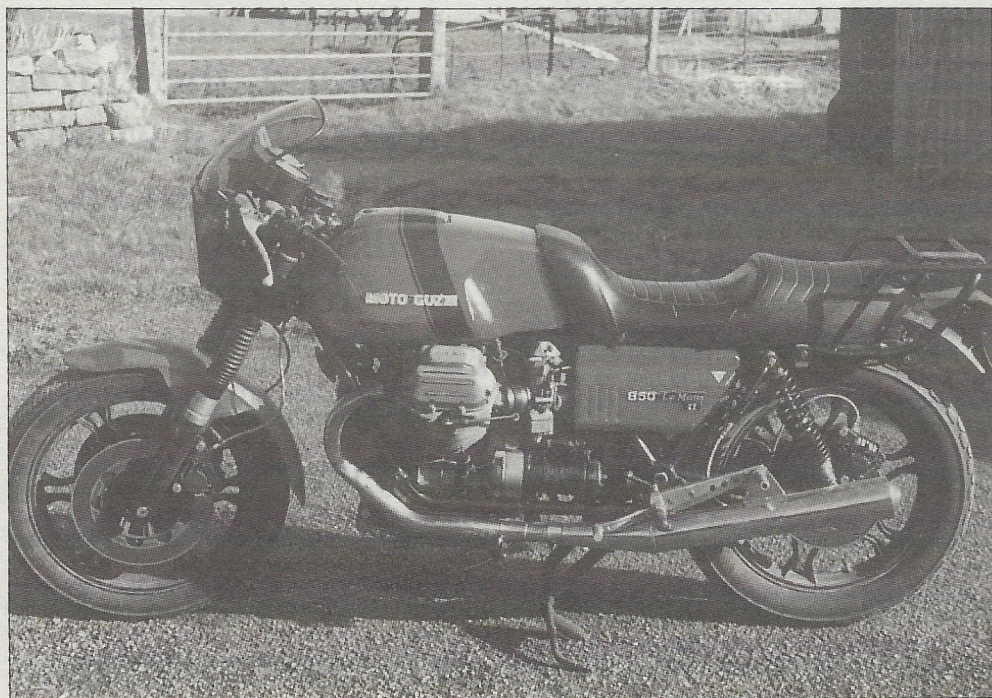
So, I hear you asking, this is all very well, but; 'What'll it do Mister?'

Well you notice several things straight away. The first is that it is very low. I mean low enough to bugger off on its own if you stood up with your feet on the ground and dropped the clutch. That makes you feel amazingly confident (about the height, that is, not the bugging off bit). The next thing you notice is the speed you can shift into second from

first. It is positively glacial. You know 19<sup>th</sup> century steam pumps in the tin mines, the ones where they had to stop them, and draw the fire before they could move a hide belt from one pulley to another? Well it's like that.

You get used to it though. You give it a big handful in first, clutch in, pause while everything caught up, shift into second, and nail it. Get it right, and the motor's revs would drop down from about 8000rpm to 5000rpm, smack on the start of the most glorious torque band known to two wheeled man. We are talking 70mph in second here, and acceleration good enough to obliterate most contemporary bikes and give a modern 600 a hard time, so it is worth the wait. On one memorable occasion it stayed with an Aston Martin Vantage in a straight top gear drag from 85 to 135, before we both ran out of clear motorway. Now THAT is going some!

The next thing you notice is the immense return springs trying to slam the carb slides back down. This is because the inrush of air into the carbs is enough to stick the alloy slides to the carb body, jamming them open, with entertaining results to say the least. Apparently they made a limited edition GT version with 40mm Dell'Ortos... ulp. You can always spot a hard-riding Le Mans owner in the pub. He's the one who can't pick up a pint without accidentally crushing the handle of his tankard. It has its benefits though. In a business meeting the





handshake you offer your adversary will reduce him to a malleable and docile wreck within seconds...

Finally, after about ten miles you will be aware that you have lost the use of your wrists as you have been simultaneously been bearing the entire weight of your upper body on your hands while keeping the throttle open. In time, both these 'quirks' will disappear as your body adapts and the only problem you will have is trying to buy off-the-peg clothes when you have forearms like Popeye.

The bike itself is awesome though. With the right tyres on, it has a stability which has to be experienced to be believed. Mine ran on Pirelli Phantom Blue Spot racing compound rubber, and even with the header pipes levering the bike off the road in a 120mph bend, it had so much integrity you felt you had all the time in the world to pick a line between the two side-by-side 40mph trucks which suddenly materialised in front of you... ahem. How good is it really? Well I'm still here and I didn't drop it!

It was bloody economical too. On my regular commute up to Basingstoke on the M3 I used to cruise at 120, and take it up to the redline at 140mph every day. It never did less than 200 miles to the tank, which worked out to a round 50mpg. Not bad at all. The only time it ever did worse was when I went into Southampton two-up about five times in one weekend, and the heavy hot summers day's traffic congestion meant that I was using first and second all the time. It didn't help that the carbs had very powerful accelerator pumps, capable of shooting a jet of petrol about six feet when off the bike, and the end result was 22 mpg – very much

a one-off experience for me.

Weirdly, despite the low seat and high pillion pegs, various female passengers said it was the most comfortable bike they had been on the back of. Considering that my previous three bikes had been a squishy Yam SR500, and two roadster Guzzis, that was fairly impressive.

It sounded gorgeous. At 120mph, all you could hear was the snuffsuffsuff of the carbs. At those speeds it was also remarkably comfortable with the superb fairing allowing just enough air past to balance your body, and your knees (well, my knees, anyway) tucked against little rubber pads at the back of the fairing, just behind the cylinders.

The handling was on the slow side of slow. The bike was very long, with a near 60-inch wheelbase which coupled with the old fashioned 18-inch wheel sizes meant that you had to pick your line and stick to it. The bike simply would not deviate once committed, which was good, but any sudden desperate need to alter a line took quite a heave. Having said that, the adrenaline rush caning through your brain when you *did* meet something untoward made it easier than it would appear.

My Moto Guzzi Le Mans was a top bike. You'll get around 70bhp or more at the back wheel from a good one (and careful attention to timing, carbs and valve clearances made the difference between 130 and 140mph), and I still bitterly regret having to sell mine due to a failing business. It's the only bike I would actively seek out and buy again if money was no object. I think that says it all.



## LE MANS 850 TEC

Model Life: 1975-85

Insurance Group: Classic rates

Engine: 844cc OHV air-cooled V-twin

Power: 78bhp

Transmission: 5-speed, shaft drive

Frame: Tubular cradle

Brakes: Twin front 300mm discs, single rear 242mm disc, linked

Suspension: Guzzi teleforks, twin rear shocks

Wheels: 18-inch cast alloy

Bodywork: Handlebar-mounted headlamp fairing

Wheelbase: 1505mm

Fuel Consumption: 45mpg

Dry weight: 205kg

Similar Models: Replaced by 950cc version, 1985. Shared many parts with T4 roadster.

Prices: £1400 to £3000

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