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and the rebuild that's put it
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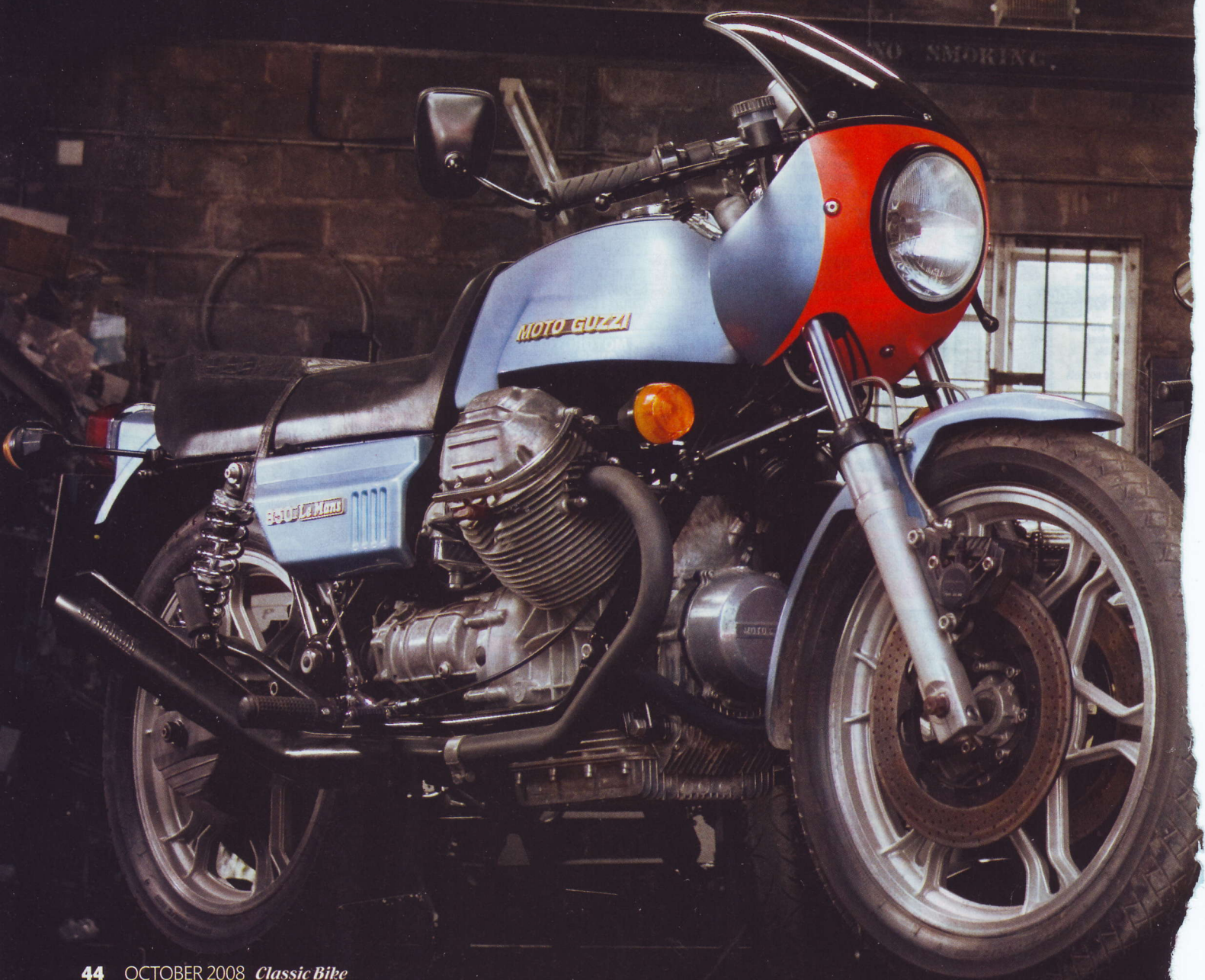
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MAIN Peter Norman's
Guzzi Le Mans in Nigel
Billingsley's workshop
INSET As found, the Guzzi
in an Essex lock-up



Words **Peter Norman** Photography **Simon Hipperson**

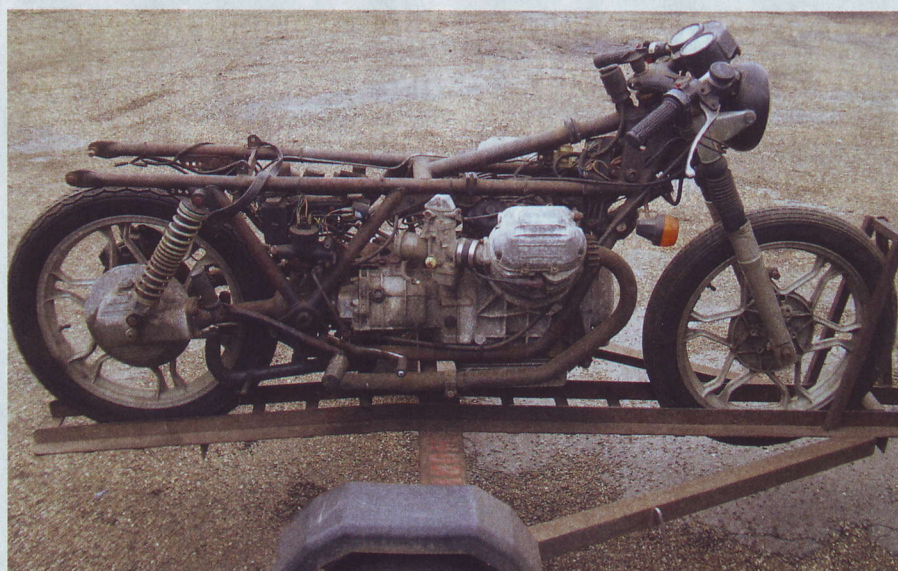
FINDING MY TEENAGE DREAM



As a Seventies teenager, Peter Norman lusted after a Moto Guzzi Le Mans. Three decades later he found the bike of his dreams, rotting in an Essex lock-up. But after a year-long restoration the reality matches the expectation...



Top: The seller, John Norman, opens his lock-up to reveal the grungy Guzzi
Middle: Restorer Nigel Billingsley assesses the project watched by John Norman and Clem
Bottom: Decision made, the bodywork was removed for the trip to Staffordshire



A

s I drag open the half-rotten door of an Essex lock-up the sun shines in on a bike that looks a mess. Its chrome and frame are masked with rust and the V-twin's alloy is thick in corrosion blooms. An enticing 9,031 miles show through the dusty glass of the clocks but what really excites me is the gaping hole in the rear fibreglass mudguard. Am I staring at a 1976 Moto Guzzi 850 Le Mans still shod with original tyres? Is this ice-blue maiden about to bring three decades of unrequited desire to an end? I've wanted one ever since my sister's boyfriend roared into our driveway aboard his dealer-fresh red Le Mans. I was 16 years old and its stunning looks made my jaw drop. It dropped a bit more when I worked out it would take 80 weeks of my lowly apprentice wages to buy one.

This is one of the sexiest superbikes of all time. With its sinister matt-black paint, moulded rubber seat and bikini fairing it looks fast even perched on its centrestand.

Lino Tonti designed the hefty, long and low-slung frame to outwit Laverda's Jota, Ducati's 900SS and Kawasaki's Z-1. The low-tech OHV pushrod 844cc engine was torquey and easier to maintain than those of the opposition. First shown in late 1975 at Milan the Le Mans was launched with the straight sided CEV tail-light carried on most Italian makes. On the next year's Series 2 it was rectangular. The rarity of the round tail Series 1 means buyers should beware of fakes. The Mark II was introduced in 1978 and by the end of the Mark III's run in 1985 about 22,000 bikes had been made. It continued as a litre bike until 1993; by then more than 30,000 units had rolled out of the factory.

Although my weekly wage has improved I am now also wari-er of committing to a restoration. After talking to a couple of specialist Guzzi restorers in the south of England I call Nigel Billingsley of NBS Motorcycle Servicing in Staffordshire. I hear a mellow voice of reason. He allays my fears and I trust his judgment.

"Provided there is no water ingress not a lot can go wrong inside an 850 engine sitting unused, even for such a long period," he tells me. "They are full of plain bearings. Don't worry too much."

Trading as NBS for 16-years, Nigel, who is 49, has a quarter-century of Guzzi experience. He owned a Le Mans I in the early 1980s. "There is something enticing about them. They don't compare to modern bikes in performance but it was quick in its day, it handled well and braked really well," he says. "I liked them then and I still do."

I don't want a concours bike. I want patina not polish and I want to ride rain or shine. Nigel is on my wavelength. "It is easy to get carried away on a restoration and before you



ABOVE Restorer (left) and owner with the finished bike
LEFT Speedo had notched up a few more miles by the time the bike left Nigel's workshop
RIGHT Original switchgear controls relays that actually direct the electrical current



HOW TO FIND THE PREVIOUS OWNERS OF YOUR BIKE

With a bit of luck and some perseverance you can unlock the history of your wheels. The Data Protection Act seems to work against you, but it also prevents others finding out your home address simply by knowing your numberplate.

Provided you have a legitimate reason (and tracing the previous owners of your bike is considered to be one) the DVLA will send you the "full keeper history" once you have completed form V888 and paid £5. (www.direct.gov.uk/en/Diol1/DoltOnline/DG_10016794) or 0870 240 0010.

A mix of new technology and old-fashioned letter writing helped with finding both the first and second owners of this bike. The further back in time you go the less effective the internet becomes.

THE GUZZI'S OWNERS

First owner Henri Ducommun, then a 58-year-old ex-RAF pilot, bought the bike new on 3 October 1977. "I saw it at Birmingham Motor Cycles and that was it, I was in love. I did a part exchange on a Honda Four I had bought from them previously," says Henri, now 89 years old and still a licensed driver. "I didn't do a lot of miles on it. I looked after it, ran it in carefully and never went over 60mph. I was a director of an aircraft company and my co-directors found out I used a bike and thought it not the best idea for safety reasons so that's why I sold it. It was my prized possession," he recalls. "The gearbox was excellent. The exhaust note was like calico ripping! I bought it out of love more than anything. I treated it like a lady."

The next owner was at the other end of the spectrum. "When I purchased the bike it was in top condition – only a slight discoloration in the black exhausts," says Malcolm Pretty, who was then a 22-year-old draughtsman working for Rolls-Royce in Coventry.

"I had crashed my Ducati Darmah a few months previously – when I got the insurance money I bought the Guzzi, much to my parents' horror," says Malcolm, who paid £1600 for it. "I can still vividly remember riding the bike now. I used to love roaring down the slip road onto the Warwick bypass and thundering up to 120 mph plus – you could get away with it in those days – the Le Mans makes a great noise at higher revs." He owned the Guzzi for about six months before he crashed it. "I wasn't going that fast but I came off, breaking my wrist. That was the last I ever saw of it. My dad sorted it out and got rid of the bike," says Malcolm, who emigrated shortly afterwards to South Australia with a Harris Magnum in his suitcase.

Third owner John Norman (no relation to Peter) spent a lifetime in the motor trade. He picked up the Guzzi after spotting it in storage, post-crash. Making the decision to sell was difficult – he is an habitual hoarder. "I finally realised that I wouldn't get around to restoring it myself. That's why I advertised it in *Classic Bike*," says John. "Time got away from me – I didn't realise I had kept the bike so long. But I'm glad it finally got the love and attention it needs."

know it the bills are enormous," he says.

Surprisingly little was altered from Guzzi's earlier S3 and the cooking T3 to create the Le Mans. Modified heads with high-domed pistons in cast iron liners give compression of 10.2:1. A reduced squish band and oversized valves make for easier breathing through the Dell'Orto 36mm racing pumper carbs with meshed velocity stacks.

Gentle throttle is needed at low revs because neat fuel is squirted straight into the inlet tracts. "They're sluggish down low but get to around 4 or 5000 revs and they come alive. I have had bikes wound open, lying flat on the tank, nudging the eight grand redline – calculated out that gives 135mph," Nigel says. "The joy of them is that at speed there is no shaking, it's ultra smooth and surprisingly quiet. It is mildly tuned compared to a lot of sports bikes so it isn't too stressed."

I'm not feeling so stressed either as we roll the bike onto Nigel's trailer for the trip from

bores are without marks. I strip and clean one at a time to make sure I don't end up defeated. Eurocarb provide the washer and O-ring overhaul kits and fuel needle valves. I order medium throttle springs to ease the notoriously heavy wrist action and Nigel orders Venhill's nylon-lined cables. He also orders a PTFE-line clutch cable.

The feeling of inclusion in the restoration is great. The rear shocks are rusty wrecks and many owners replaced the original LISPAs with Koni Dial-a-Rides. Koni is now kaput, but the shocks are still made under licence in Australia as Ikon.

On a pre-planned trip there I pick up a factory fresh pair. Aiming for an original look I get chrome, not black, springs. The only difference between original Konis and modern Ikon replacements is that the upper spring holders are no longer name-embossed. I mention this as I order a pair of original Koni emblazoned holders is found on a shelf

"Idle for three decades, every component needs grime, dust or rust removed. Years of gunk make it impossible to clean the alloy"

Essex back to his workshop. The date: March 24, 2007. Nigel agrees a target date for completion of spring, 2008.

In the meantime I am eager to uncover the bike's history. I discover it was retired from the road after a crash in early 1980. Nigel reassures me again, "I wouldn't worry. The Tonti frame is so strong. I've gone over it from every angle. That bike is sound."

Meanwhile, Nigel is on the forensic trail of the bike's mileage. "There are two telltale signs of mileage. Wear on the flywheel ring-gear and carbon dust in the alternator. This bike has neither," he says. "I think you've got yourself a barely run-in bike."

I take four boxes of parts to get cleaned, blasted, painted or chromed while Nigel does the rest – drive train, cycle gear, frame and paint. The chrome is still holding up on the headlight brackets. I saved £60 by polishing them instead of re-chroming. The clip-ons, gear lever and footbrake levers all came back sparkling from London Chroming.

Over the short winter days my dining room table becomes the perfect parts bench. Idle for three decades every component needs grime, dust or rust removed. Years of oxidised gunk make it impossible to clean the alloy. John Andrew of I Cleenz Macheenz worked ultrasonic magic on the carbs before blasting the rusted matt-black metal components and the three cast-iron discs.

John also got his painters to work on the freshened metalwork. He buffed the floatbowls and bellhousings to replicate the polished originals. The pedal rubbers and wiring harness were transformed in the tank too. The rusty terminals, a big obstacle for a meagre 12 volts, came out pristine so I dipped them in melted Vaseline to preserve them.

The Dell'Orto carburettors also reveal how little use the bike has had. The slides and

and fitted. Brilliant.

Back home I impulse buy the last set of dyno-designed Lafranconi Competizione silencers in stock at Spares GB. Nigel tells me this is a good move. "Production is pretty random, a batch will come out and then no more for a long time."

Nigel's engine overhaul has required the replacement of shell bearings, seals and gaskets. It's sound apart from pitting on a single cam follower caused by surface hardening problems they had in the factory.

Guzzi, like many Italian manufacturers, came under fire for erratic quality control that simply didn't match the riceburners. A key lapse was the use of OEM Aprilia 40/45W headlights, rightly described as woeful. I substituted an H4 halogen unit from Spares GB. It's a tight juggle inside the original shell. I didn't trust the toy town switchgear to handle the increased headlight current so I used Durite micro relays from Vehicle Wiring Products to switch the current. The relays fit under the headstock.

With no kickstarter I decide not to scrimp on a battery that will sit idle during winter and choose a sealed AGM Odyssey battery which offers plenty of amps. An internet find, Active Robots (a robotic parts supplier) sells the batteries at 25 per cent less than the motor trade with next day delivery.

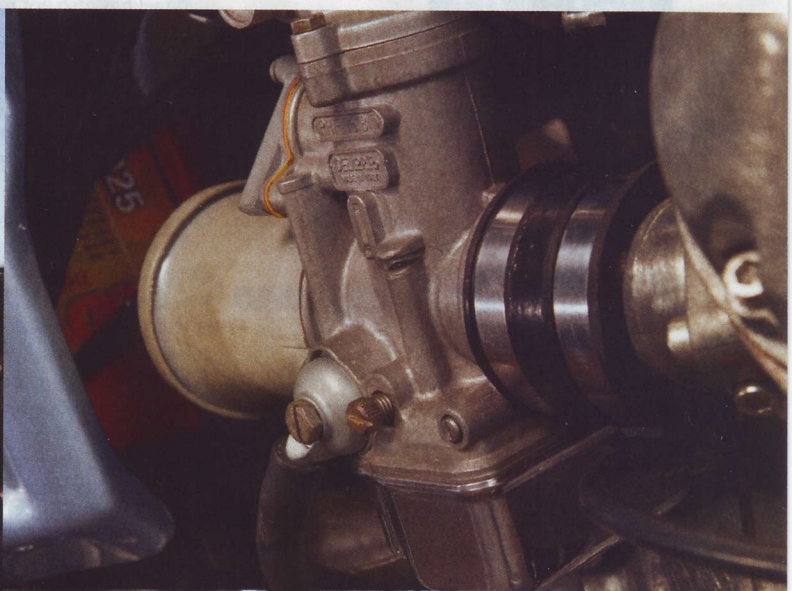
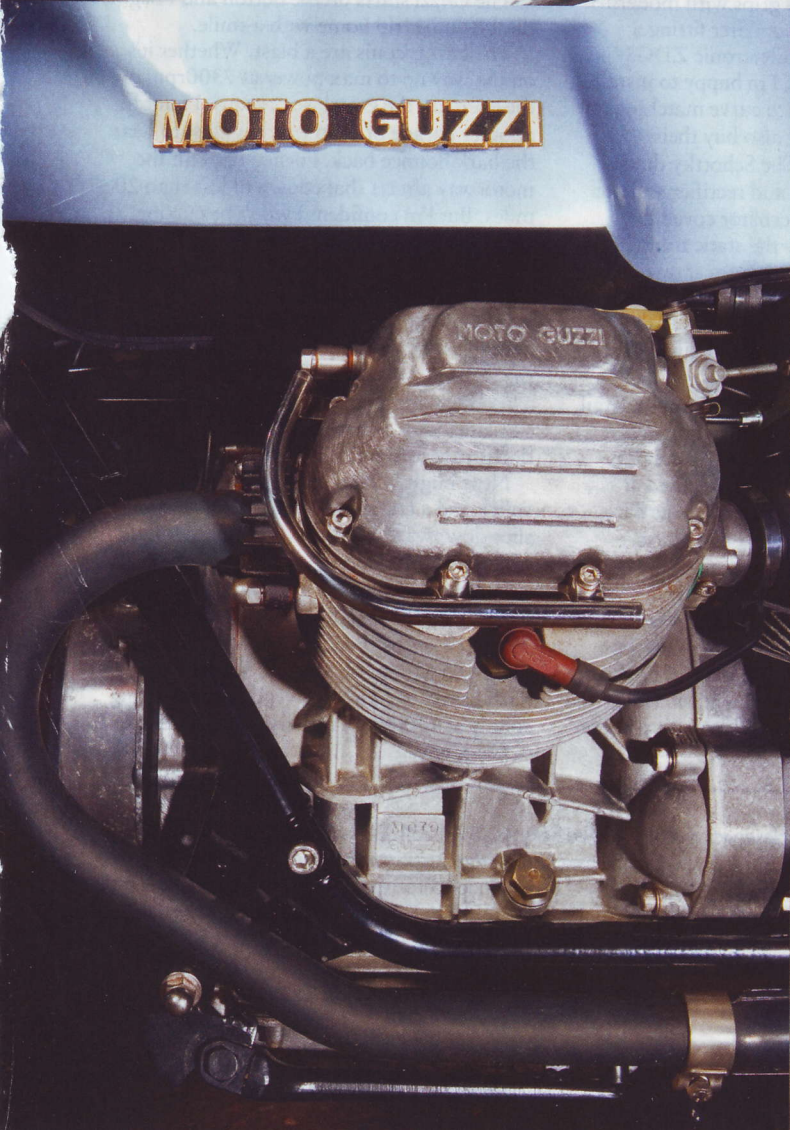
The Metzeler tyres were good at the time. Now, Nigel recommends Bridgestone BT-45s. He resprayed the 12-spoke FPS cast wheels, excluding the rim edges which were always bare, with silver (the same paint was used on Series 1 fork sliders).

Nigel replaced the OEM checker pattern grips with softer, stickier, designs. "A big part of the heavy throttle problem was the original grips. The rubber was so hard; it took a lot of effort. It was like twisting hosepipe," he says.

MAIN This was only Peter's second time on the bike
BELOW Stainless crash protector bars are custom made for NBS. To you, £36.00 plus P&P. Carbs were ultrasonically cleaned, then got new seals and gaskets. Brand new Lanfranconi production race pipes



MOTO GUZZI



THE MARK 1 MYSTERY

Around 5000 Series 2 bikes (Mark I) were made but several authorities on the marque have erroneously branded them as Mark II bikes and the error has spread on the internet.

Mick Walker warned would-be owners not to buy a frame number above VE13040 in his 1995 *Buyers' Guide*. So too did Moto Guzzi Club (GB) secretary Serena Powis in Brookland Books' *Le Mans 1976-1989 Performance Portfolio*. Ian Falloon's *Sport & Le Mans Bible* brings some accuracy to the controversy, but still lacks a definitive answer. His frame number count is 7036 bikes but he admits some US bikes are probably missing. Mick Walker pointed out that some poorly primed frames were replaced under warranty.

As for this bike? It falls within the last 200 of the Series 1 production and the Guzzi 'Historical Office' (call the factory, but you'll need to speak Italian) tells us it was built in September 1976.

Mark I Series 1 bikes (1975-76)

Frames VE1111-13040, engines starting circa 70000

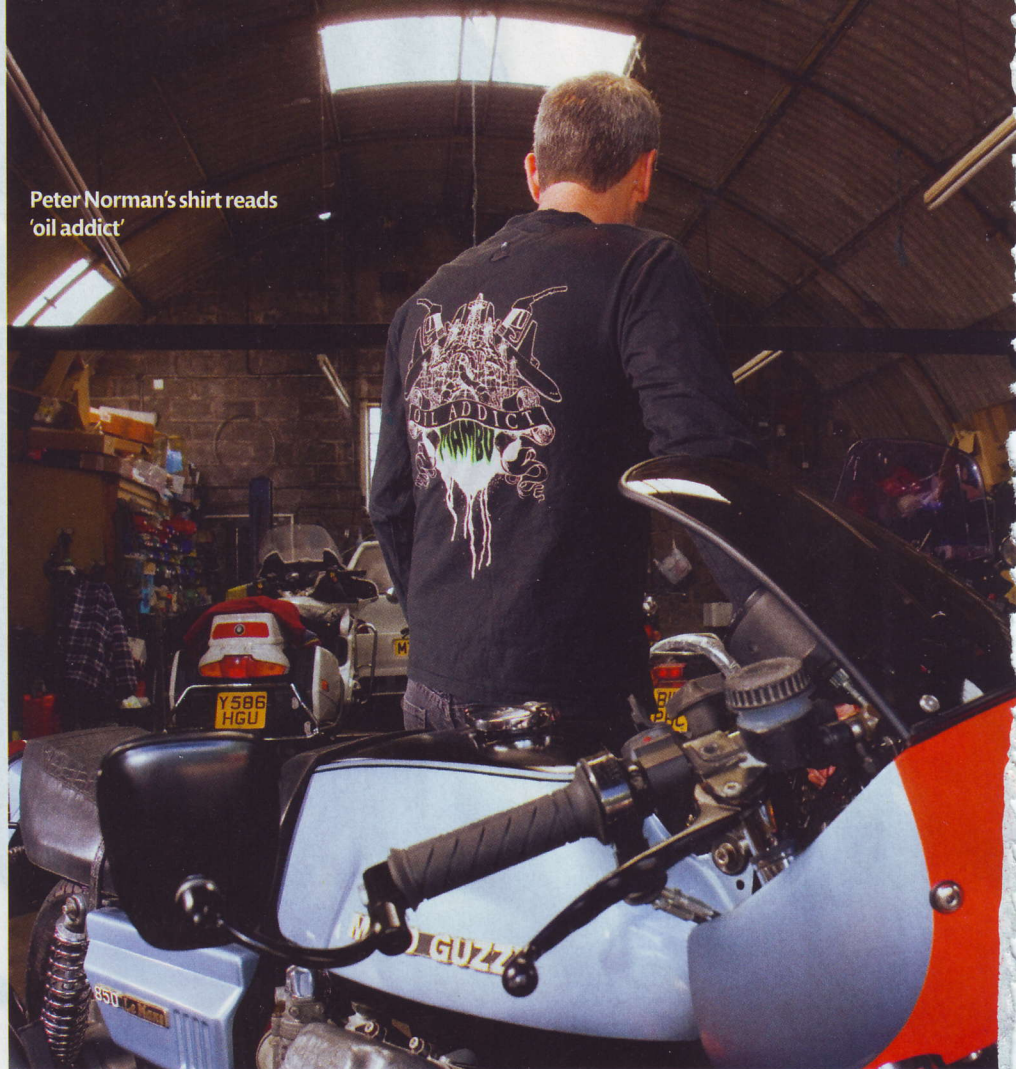
Mark I Series 2 bikes (1976-78)

Frames VE13041-17311, engines ending circa 76000

Mark II bikes (1978-81)

Frames VE17312-24086

Peter Norman's shirt reads 'oil addict'



■ SPECIFICATION 1976 MOTO GUZZI LE MANS MK1 SERIES 1

ENGINE/TRANSMISSION

Type	OHV V-twin
Capacity	844cc
Bore x stroke	83x78mm
Compression ratio	10.2:1
Carburation	2 x 36mm Dell'Orto
Clutch	Dry twinplate
Gearbox	5-speed

CHASSIS

Frame	duplex cradle
Front suspension	telescopic fork
Rear suspension	twin shocks
Brakes front/rear	2x300mm Brembo discs /1x300mm Brembo disc
Wheels	cast alloy
Tyres	3.50Hx18/4.00x18

DIMENSIONS

Dry weight	476lb (216kg)
Wheelbase	59.5in (1470mm)
Seat height	29.25in (743mm)
Fuel capacity	5gal (22.5-litre)

PERFORMANCE

Top speed	132.15mph
Max power	71bhp @ 7300 rpm
Fuel consumption	37mpg
Price new	£1999

Nigel has also got to grips with modern digital ignitions. Me too. After fitting a German-made Sachse Electronic ZDG3 unit to a Morini Sport, I'm happy to install another with an advance curve matching the 8-34° Guzzi original. I also buy their alternator controller. The Schottky diodes replace both regulator and rectifier and are hidden beneath the alternator cover.

"I set the ignition by the static timing LED. Once I had the tank back from spraying it was fuel in, fuel on, choke on and the bike started on the button," says Nigel. "The timing was almost spot on with just a bit of fiddling with the strobe."

I begin to notice Nigel's attention to detail. The rear tyre's valve cover includes a valve remover, and the lengthy runs of stainless steel brakehose braiding are sheathed at frame contact points. All the fasteners are stainless and those gripping alloy have copperslip to stop them binding.

"It's a beautiful bike. If you take in the cost of the bike and the restoration, it is still better priced than the cheapest modern Guzzi on the market. And I know which will hold its value longer," says Nigel when I sit astride the completed bike for the first time. "If you ever decide to sell it, let me know."

The Guzzi starts on the button and I begin the 140-mile trip home with a smile.

The Lafranconis are a blast. Whether it's on the way up to max power at 7300rpm or the overrun, the growl is gorgeous. I hunt for another parade of shop windows just to hear the bark bounce back. Fuelled up, I hit the motorway after a shakedown of less than 20 miles. But I'm confident I won't be cursing Nigel from the hard shoulder.

My knees rest against the cylinders and with my elbows on my knees there's no weight on my wrists at a steady 80mph. Windblast hits the top half of my helmet but the miles just disappear.

A single modern bike ploughs past in the fast lane; with a stretch of his left leg the rider doffs respect to this middle-aged Italian.

Near High Wycombe the M40 drops into a valley and a couple of young hoons in a Golf slice downward across several lanes without care. I bide my time.

I reach the valley floor while they are still halfway up the long four-lane slope ahead. Then I twist the throttle wide in top gear and the Guzzi gallops obediently. Seconds later I flash past them with the Veglia needle sitting solidly at 120mph. I feel like a billion Lira.

Ciao, boys.

CONTACTS: NBS Motorcycle Servicing (07958 584889, www.motorcycleservicing.co.uk), Active Robots (01761 234 328, www.active-robots.com), Eurocarb Ltd (0118 943 1180, www.dellorto.co.uk), I Cleenz Macheenz (020 8766 7164, www.icmhome.org.uk), Ikon Suspension, (www.ikonsuspension.com - UK distributors MotoMecca, Norman Hyde and SRM Engineering), London Chroming (020 7639 6434, www.londonchroming.co.uk), Motomecca Spares (01202 823453, www.motomeccaspares.com), Sachse Electronics Digital Ignition & Alternator Controller (+49 57 416 1188, www.elektronik-sachse.de), Spares GB - Corsa Italiana (020 8540 7155, www.corsaitaliana.com), Vehicle Wiring Products (0115 9305454, www.vehicle-wiring-products.co.uk), Venhill Engineering (01306 885111, www.venhill.co.uk)