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The Classic MOTORCYCLE

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First and best

The iconic Moto Guzzi Le Mans



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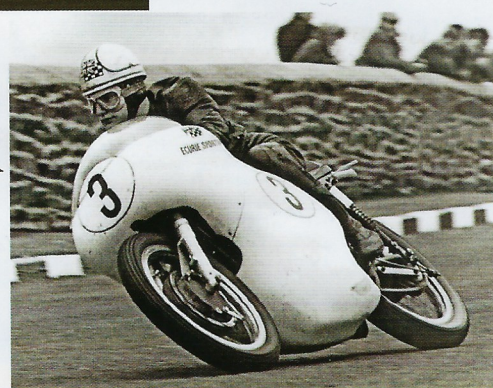
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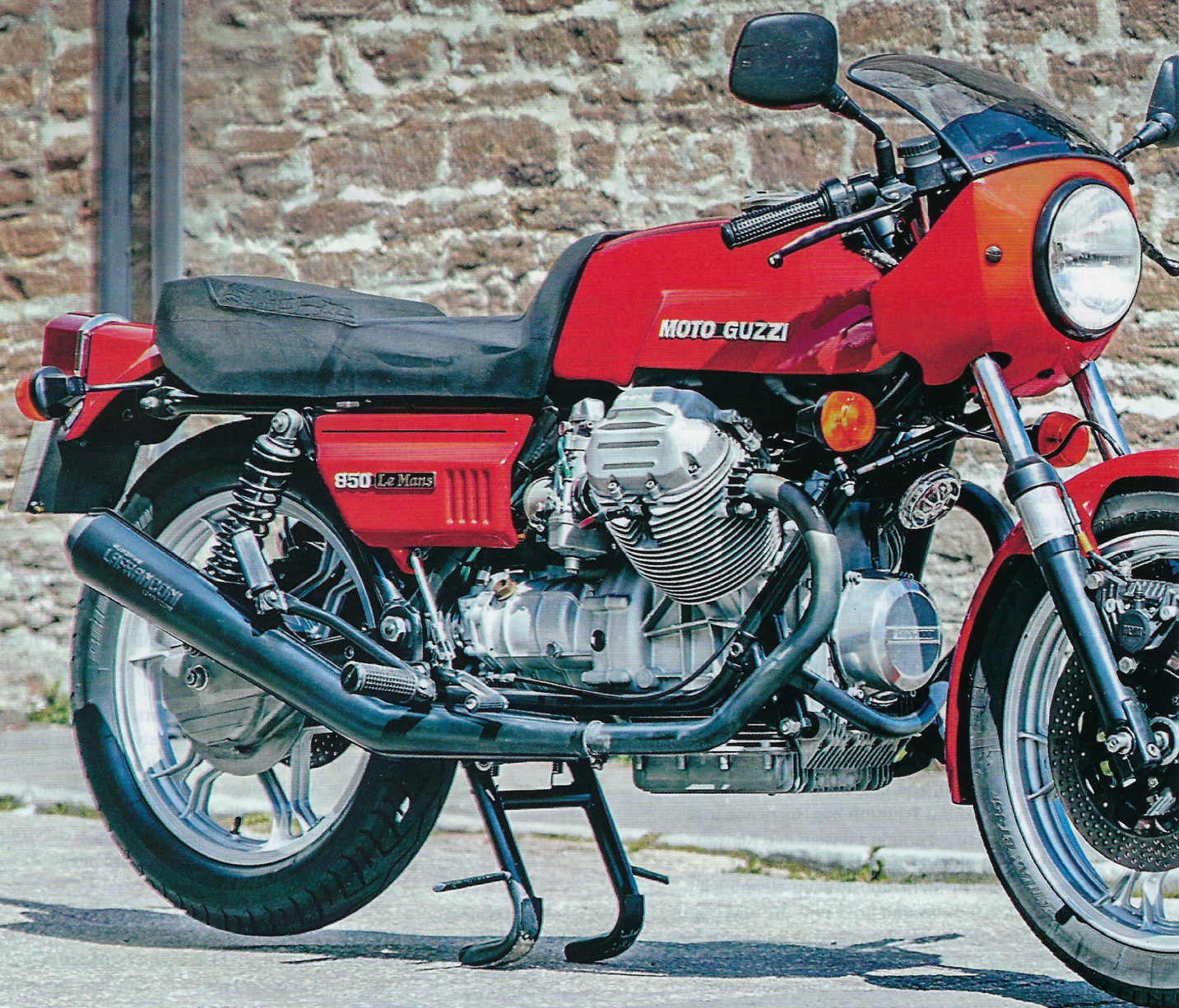
PLUS

► DR RALLY ► TRIUMPH TWIN REBUILD ► VARIOUS COTTON STARMAKERS
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First of the line

This year marks 100 years of the Mandello eagle, the Moto Guzzi. To celebrate and commemorate the occasion, featured is an early example of one of the most iconic models, the Le Mans.

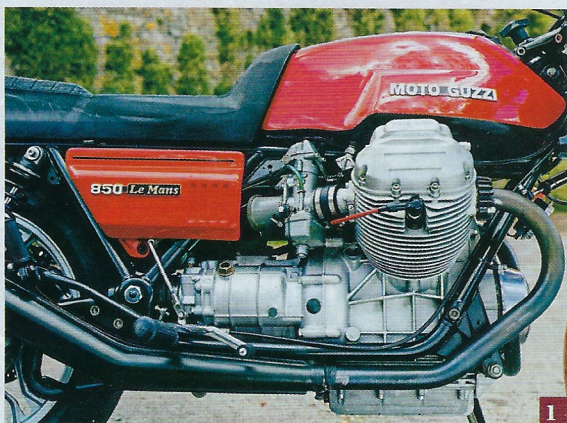
Words: ANDY WESTLAKE Photographs: GARY CHAPMAN





The first production machine to carry the now famous name of Moto Guzzi and its flying eagle on its petrol tank was produced in early 1921, so what better way to celebrate the iconic Italian manufacturer's centenary than a test ride on one of its most famous V-twins – the 850cc Mark I Le Mans.

Launched in November 1975 at that year's Milan show, the Le Mans was described by the period press as a 'remarkably aggressive and attractive motorcycle' and five decades on, it's now regarded as perhaps the most beautiful V-twin to ever emerge from the Mandello Del Lario production lines.



“Launched at the Milan show in 1975, the bright red V-twin Moto Guzzi Le Mans looked like it was doing 100mph on the centre stand.”

After covering over 250,000 miles on three of the Le Mans siblings – a Spada Royale and two Spada NTs – you can safely assume I love Guzzi tourers, but this was the first opportunity I’ve had to ride the drop dead gorgeous sporty version, a machine now belonging to West Country enthusiast Roger Chapman.

Roger will be known to regular readers of the magazine, as previously I’ve had the opportunity to test ride two other machines from his eclectic collection – a Guzzi Eldorado and an Italjet Grifon – so I needed little persuasion when he offered me the opportunity to sample his superbly restored Mark I Le Mans. With the sun shining on the bright red petrol tank, it took little imagination to picture myself on the shores of Lake Como sampling one of the delicious ice creams at the local gelateria, before donning my helmet and gloves and heading off for a 30 mile lap of the Circuito Del Lario – ‘the Italian TT’. But, sadly, we will have to keep that for another day, and I have to satisfy myself with the equally superb roads around my home in north Somerset.

However, before I fire up the 850cc V-twin into action and hear about the restoration of PHA 8R, we’ll turn the clock back over 100 years and reflect on the days during the bitterly contested air war – fought for three hard years with the neighbouring Austro-Hungarian empire – when three friends (Carlo Guzzi, Giorgio Parodi and Giovanni Ravelli) made the decision that, when peace returned, they would build their own new motorcycle.

Both Parodi and Ravelli – the latter who raced in the 1913 Isle of Man TT on a 500cc Premier – were pilots and Guzzi was their skilled and talented mechanic, who had a fertile mind with firm ideas as to what their dream machine would look like. Sadly, Ravelli would never see Guzzi’s handiwork come to fruition, as he lost his life

in a flying accident shortly after the end of the war in September 1918, leaving Guzzi and Parodi to carry their wartime dream into reality.

This enterprise would involve a substantial amount of money but luckily Parodi was from a wealthy family and his father (Emanuele) was a rich shipping line owner from Genoa. On January 3, 1919, he sent a three-page letter – which can still be seen in the Guzzi museum – confirming that he would help with the construction of the first prototype, the G/P (for Guzzi and Parodi), a 500cc horizontal four-stroke single with a distinctive ‘bacon slicer’ outside flywheel, this made in the basement of Guzzi’s house and then in Ripamonti’s smithy. By December 1920, production commenced but by then the G/P motive had disappeared and in its place on the petrol tank was a new trademark of an eagle with its wings spread in flight – this selected by Guzzi and Parodi to record the memories of their dead friend Giovanni Ravelli and the air service in which they all served.

This first production offering was called the ‘Tipo Normale’ and in the first year the small team of 10 employees turned out 17 motorcycles from the new factory at Mandello Del Lario, then a small fishing village 10 miles north of Lecco on the eastern bank of Lake Como. At the time, little could the founders have imagined that the 88x82mm engine would remain in production – albeit updated from time to time – until late 1976, or that 100 years later the motorcycle world would be celebrating the Italian giant’s centenary.

From the start, Guzzi had realised that there was no better publicity than participating in racing and in 1921, to launch the first production machines, the factory entered Aldo Finzi and Gino Cavendini in

1: Over 70bhp was produced by the 844cc V-twin engine.

2: The handlebar fairing was one of the only disappointments about the whole package for Andy Westlake.

3: Shaft drive was another of the ‘upmarket’ fitments on the Guzzi. Silencers from Lanfranconi.

4: There’s a single, drilled disc at the rear.

5: When it was new, it cost £1 under £2000.

6: Long-legged and easy to live with, that’s the Moto Guzzi. And perhaps what many of us dream of.



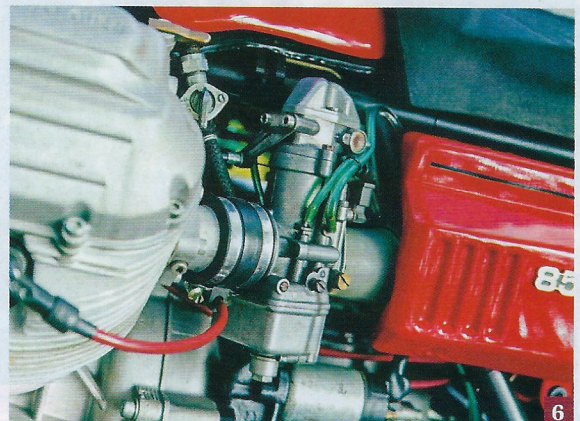
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“The Le Mans had the performance to take on all comers in the mid-1970s superbike stakes.”



1: It caused a sensation in 1976. And it still looks awesome.

2: The sticking out cylinders are perhaps not the friendliest for taller riders.

3: When he'd perhaps rather be skirting Lake Como, Andy Westlake makes do with the Mendips.

4: When two famous racetracks collide... Monza cap, on a Le Mans.

5: Seat height is surprisingly low.

6: Carburation is via a pair of 36mm Dell'Ortos.

7: Switchgear is chunky-looking, but a bit fiddly.

the Milano/Napoli long distance race on a pair of the 500cc singles. Finzi took 20th place and Cavendini was 22nd, but the new bikes quickly proved their reliability, a feature which would play such an important role in Guzzi's racing success over the next four decades. This was achieved on machines sporting every imaginable numbers of engine capacity in an era when Guzzi ruled the world race tracks, but it's outside the parameters of this article, so we will now fast forward to the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the seeds of producing the company's first big V-twin motorcycle were being germinated.

As many enthusiasts know, the motor used in the new twin first saw service from a most unlikely source, propelling a strange-looking, three-wheeled military of defence vehicle called the 3x3 or 'mechanical mule.' Designed by Guzzi's greatest engineer Giulio Cesare Carcano, the first prototype of what was to eventually emerge as the V7 began in 1964 and went on public display at the following year's 39th Milan show, where it was immediately described as the star exhibit. With a top speed estimated at 106mph, the air-cooled, shaft-driven twin offered an air of quality and comfort equal to that of BMW. But by the late 1960s it was time for the legendary Carcano to retire and in his place came a man who would fill his shoes and take Guzzi on to greater things – Lino Tonti.

Tonti had joined Guzzi in 1967 following a decade of assignments with Aermacchi, Bianchi, Gilera and Paton and almost single handedly he turned the rather cumbersome V7 into the range of drop-dead gorgeous sports bikes, that led, ultimately, to the Le Mans. Launched at the Milan show in 1975, the bright red V-twin looked like it was doing 100mph on the centre

stand and its sporting stance was reflected in every detail. With clip-ons, rearset footrests, a racing style saddle, bikini fairing, drilled discs, matt black frame, Lafranconi exhaust system and silver cast alloy wheels, this was a machine whose every line shouted 'speed'.

If the factory statistics were to be believed, the 844cc engine was reported as giving out 81bhp at 7600rpm, good for a maximum top speed of 134mph – but in reality, an early test on the dyno revealed 71bhp at 7300rpm, and a top speed of just over 120mph, still impressive numbers. Not only did the Le Mans have performance equal to most of the period opposition, the sure-footed handling, excellent braking and aggressive styling gave the Italian firm a motorcycle that could take on all comers in the mid-1970s superbike stakes.

I can recall drooling when I saw my first Le Mans at the 1976 motorcycle show, and, five decades on, I had the same feeling when our test subject's owner Roger wheeled his identical Mark I out of his workshop for my much anticipated ride around the Mendip Hills. Roger bought the Guzzi very much 'as is' from Chris Cotton, who runs Grand Prix Legends – the automobile and die cast model company – in 2015, but prior to that it was brought back to life by Mike Russell de Clifford – of Moto Corsa Motorcycles in Dorset – who told me a little about the big twin's restoration.

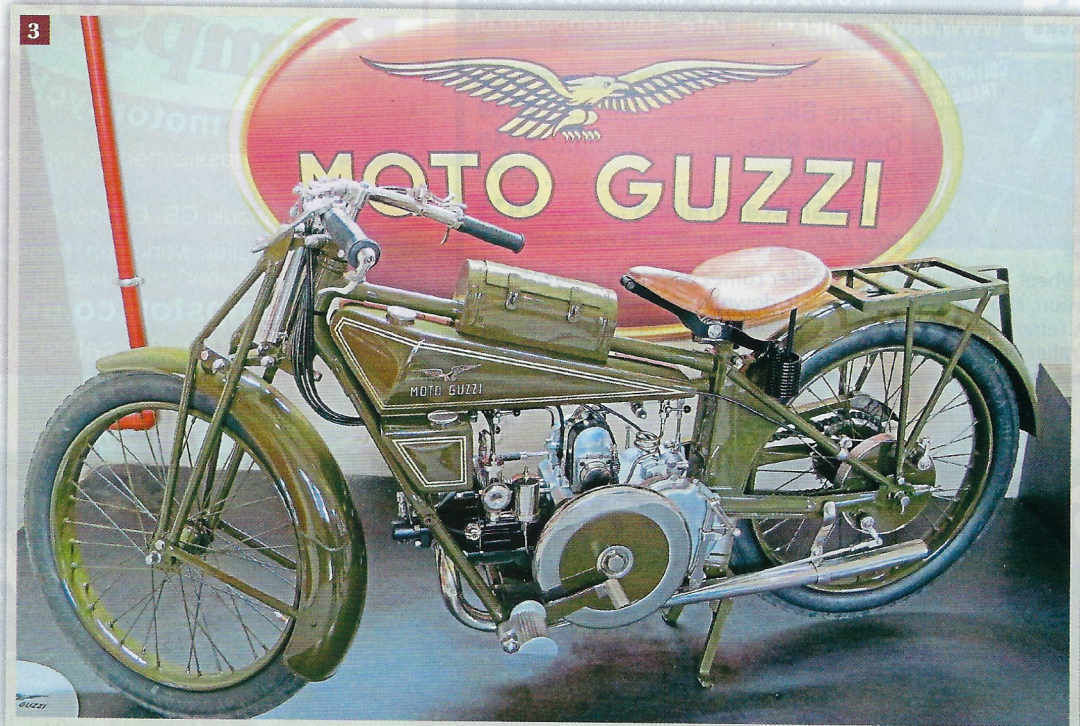
"I bought the bike from a man in Wales who had owned it for many years. It was located in a garage built over a river waterfall and was so badly corroded and rusty he thought it was only fit for scrapping. However, I could see it was one of the original 'round rear light' Mark Is and paid him £1600 and took it away. I wanted to use it as an advert to show what I could do for a



1: This is a Mark I, Series I – witness the round rear light.

2: After years of Guzzi-loving, this was Westlake's first try on an early Le Mans.

3: Where it all began. The Moto Guzzi Normale, from 1921.



FINER DETAILS

1975 Moto Guzzi Le Mans

ENGINE
OHV V-twin

CAPACITY
844cc

BORE
83mm

STROKE
78mm

COMP RATIO
10.2:1

CARBURATION
Two 36mm Dell'Ortos

MAX POWER
71bhp@7300rpm

TOP SPEED
124mph

CLUTCH
Dry twin plate

GEARBOX
Five-speed

FRAME
Duplex cradle

SUSPENSION
Front: Telescopic fork;
Rear: Twin shock

BRAKES
Front: Two 300mm
Brembo discs;
Rear: Single 300mm
Brembo disc

WHEELS
Cast alloy

TYRES
Front 3.50x18inch;
rear

4.00X18INCH
Price new
£1999

“From the start, Moto Guzzi had realised that there was no better publicity than participating in racing.”

customer if they wanted a restoration carried out by me, so it was a total nut and bolt strip and rebuild.

“The engine was very tired and required a crank regrind, new guides valves and seats, gearbox and clutch overhaul, rear drive box rebuild, bearings throughout, barrels and pistons and rewire. The frame and petrol tank were stripped and repainted and from start to finish it took 12 weeks to complete the restoration. I worked out that with parts, paint and chrome it cost me £6800 – but that's not including labour – though on completion it looked like new.”

After being pestered to sell it, the Guzzi was then used as part of a display in a large warehouse in Guildford, where the range of iconic bikes were attached to pallets and neatly lined up by fork lift trucks along the merchandise shelves. It was here that Roger bought the bike in 2015, although the trip home was not without incident...

“Prior to me picking the Guzzi up, it was prepared for my ride home by Phil Sharp. Phil is a regular Goodwood revival competitor and classic racer and he reckoned it was the best Le Mans he'd ever ridden. However, because it had not been ridden for such a long time, some of the engine gaskets had dried out allowing oil to leak over the rear tyre. Towards the end of my two hour ride home, the back end was sliding round all the corners and spinning up as I pulled away – it certainly made for quite an entertaining ride!

“Since then I have had the engine rebuilt by Ged at GCS motorcycles who replaced all of the gaskets and the bike is now oil-tight and rides like a dream.”

The Mendip roads – with plenty of corners and virtually traffic free – are the ideal environment for a long-legged Guzzi and I couldn't wait to fire PHA 8R

into action and do some miles. With the engine sitting low in the Tonti designed duplex frame, it means that the seat height is modest – Guzzi quote 28½ inches – and from every angle the Le Mans looks like a refugee from the racetrack. With ignition on, it just takes a press on the starter button – no kick-start – and a decent amount of throttle to bring the 844cc twin into life – the result is a glorious rumble through the pair of black Lafranconi silencers. Blipping the throttle at a standstill, you are aware of the torque reaction from the big 'V' but once underway, this disappears. The handling is solid and assured and at speed the phrase which came to mind was 'like a train on two wheels,' as if it's on rails.

Another of Tonti's new innovations was a linked brake system, a novel system which sees the conventional 'rear brake' arm sending brake fluid in a ratio of 75% to the front and 25% to the rear, and one which has lasted on all Guzzis to this day. The five-speed gearbox is particularly sweet although with the shaft drive it's best not to rush changes, especially on the downshift. The five gallon fuel tank makes it possible to go over 200 miles before refilling. Riding the Le Mans brought back so many happy memories of my own Spadas, with my only complaint regarding the bikini fairing, which, although it looks great, offers little or no protection to the rider and makes reading the instruments and warning lights almost impossible. Operating the very small indicator switch was also not an easy operation with a pair of padded gloves, but that aside, my ride on the 'long legged and easy to live with' Guzzi was one of the best from my long motorcycling career. It's a machine I would love to be riding those familiar, well-travelled 850 miles to Mandello for the centenary celebrations.

End