



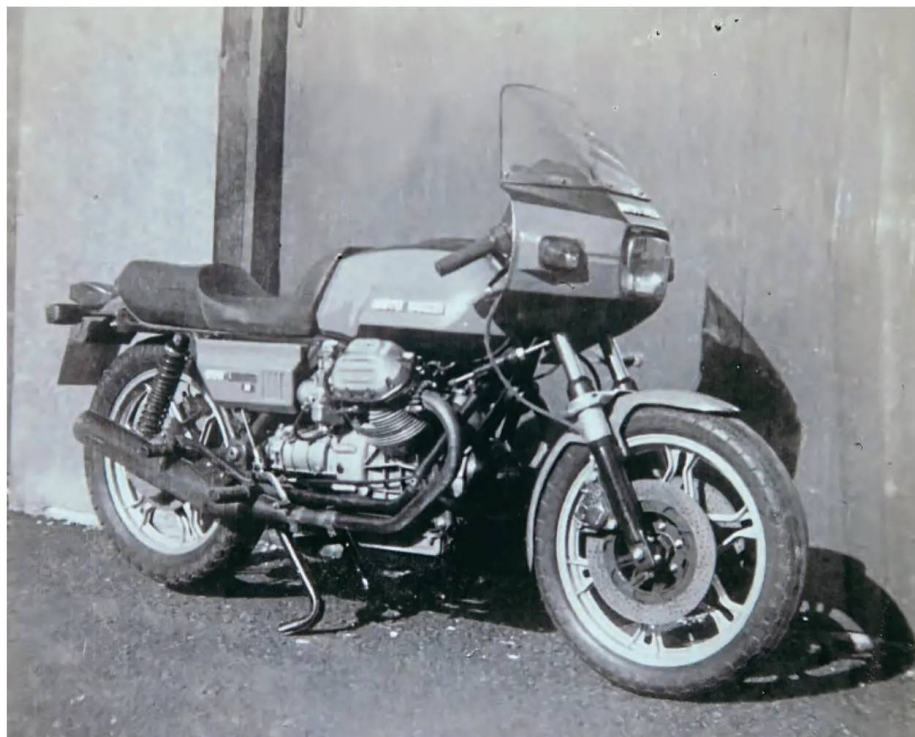
Still looking good. The Moto Guzzi as it stands today.

Long-term relationship

For fast approaching 40 years, this Moto Guzzi has served as everything from transport to weekend toy – though these days it's the latter function it mostly fulfils.

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At the end of a birthday visit to Oxford in 1987, my wife Susannah left town with a pair of small candlesticks. I left with a Moto Guzzi Le Mans. It wasn't my birthday.


I'd spotted this fine example of Italian sculpture perched artfully in the front window of Oxford Motorcycle Engineers. A mix of bright red, matt black and bare metal, with only the most fleeting touch of chrome, the bike almost exactly mirrored the Coburn and Hughes advertisement I'd had Blu-tacked to a wall through early adolescence. There should be a law against such cunning and underhand sales tactics.

I couldn't afford the Le Mans of course, at least not quite, but a quick visit to a local phone box to call my bank manager (you could do that in those days) allowed me to make my case (you had to do that then too). I'd explained that with a new job, 20 miles from home, I needed a younger bike for the commute,

Top: Tim Gent in the saddle of his Guzzi; roads not exactly what the original designers had in mind!

Above: As bought, in 1987, back at home having been bought from Oxford Motorcycle Engineers.

something more reliable than my ageing Royal Enfield Constellation. Had this banker known anything about motorcycles he might have spotted the gaping flaw in my argument, but as the Connie was 27 years old at the time, and the Guzzi only eight (I thought), my reasoning evidently sounded plausible. Loan arranged, I'd returned to Hythe Bridge Street.

In the end, the transaction wasn't nearly as straightforward as I'd hoped. Having bought each of my previous bikes privately, I was more than a little disconcerted to discover that the Le Mans couldn't just be ridden away. With a hollow feeling, and a slight sense that I'd been cheated, I learnt that the bike needed preparation: a careful check, a service, an MoT. The 



following week turned out to be one of the longest in my then relatively limited experience.

Finally, the day came. Having covered the 60-mile return to the university city, perched on the extremely uncomfortable rear seat of my friend Chris Down's bike, my enthusiasm for that first proper ride back can probably be imagined. This was only heightened as we arrived to find my Le Mans perched by the kerb, the engine still tinkering gently as it cooled.

"We've just given it a test run," the shop's mechanic, told me, his face unexpectedly grim. "The clutch is slipping."

"Badly?" I asked, heart sinking, but still quite prepared to put up with anything short of complete failure.

"You can hardly pull away."

We headed back to Wiltshire, the cramped pillion set-up the least part of my anguish.

Following the eventual collection of my Le Mans, complete with its brand-new clutch, I really did use the Guzzi for my 40-mile daily work run. Life was tough back then: an early morning gallop along twisty and almost empty Wiltshire roads, a day of varied conservation projects in the woods, and a blast back. I used the Guzzi year-round, through two winters.

Being made redundant resulted in a slight Le Mans-riding hiatus, but not immediately. Making the most of my unexpected jobless state. I'd gained a place at university, and during the first term I would ride up for the day's lectures, returning again in the evening. That was from Salisbury to Cardiff, a 190-mile autumn round trip I'd probably find hard work just once today.

Surprisingly, considering the no doubt justified reputation of 1970s Italian bikes, my red 850 never missed a beat. Admittedly, it did go through wheel bearings on what sometimes felt like a weekly basis, but these were easily changed. Attempts to cajole the bike into life also involved a worrying tendency to flatten the battery, usually

at the outward end of a journey of course. But then the Guzzi always seemed able to splutter into life, eventually, even if regular kickbacks would often chuck fuel out of the bellmouths, not infrequently setting light to things, including trouser legs. It was a Le Mans after all.

Lack of money, and lack of space (I wasn't leaving it on the street), meant that when we moved up to the Welsh capital, the Guzzi had to stay behind. It probably needed the rest.

Graduated, with a move to Devon and a new job, the Le Mans could be pulled once more from its shed. Dusted down, it was straight back to commuting duties again. The distance had altered though, and this already quite hard-pressed Italian bike, now had 70 miles to cover each day. She managed another winter at that distance, then a couple more dealing with a mere 50-mile return journey. Then one day, and probably quite reasonably, she decided to object.

Leaving Exeter's 30mph limit, and after being forced to tarry a moment behind a slow-moving Saab, I'd dropped a gear as the corner straightened. With the road clear ahead, I'd opened her up. Aiming for third, I hit a false neutral. Pulling in the clutch, I tried again. Nothing. My next attempt was for a return to second. The engine span again, and as I tapped up and down through the gearbox, failing to find any useful connection with the free-revving engine, the Guzzi drifted slowly to a halt at the side of the road. I recall the Saab driver giving me an encouraging pip on his horn as he repassed.

Fortunately, a local resident let me leave my Guzzi in his garden, and I hitched the rest of the way home. It took quite a while. Bike collected by van the next day, I soon discovered that the layshaft had sheared off clean against the back of the gearbox. Out with the spanners again.

Other bikes came and went over the years, giving my fast tractor a commuting break for a while. This now intermittent relationship meant that it wasn't always certain the association would continue. I suspect I made at least three serious forays towards selling my Le Mans, each time pulling out at the very last minute. In around 2007, and after realising just how tatty my old Le Mans

Top left: Susannah and the Le Mans, in a field somewhere in the late 1980s.

Above: From 1989... Off to a meeting soon, but time for a little dreaming with daughter Hayley on the back.

Above left: That advert, which created such an impression.



had become, I took it off the road for a while, letting a 1200 Buell take the strain (it didn't really notice) while I made amends.

A repainted frame, new fork tubes and Ikon rear shocks all made a big difference to its looks, but I wanted this makeover to be a little more than skin deep. A clear metallic tink from the nearside pot had now become a touch too loud to ignore, and after a little exploration, I replaced the little end. Considering the mileage covered over the years, this sole demand from the engine seemed pretty minimal. Mind you, I had no real idea what that mileage might be. The cable to the speedometer has always seemed pre-set to break not more than a few hundred miles after fitting. I seem to recall about 7000 miles displayed on the clock when the Le Mans was collected from Oxford. The 26,000 total indicated by



Left: Mid-1990s, during the Guzzi's 50 miles a day commuting period.

Above: Refitting, as the Moto Guzzi gets a refresh.

this point was certainly not to be trusted.

There was some success on the electrical front too, prompted by finally discovering that this very early Mk.II Le Mans (I now had a dating letter from Mandello) possessed a Mk.I loom, presumably used in the Guzzi factory spirit of 'let's use up what we have first.' I'd always assumed the complete lack of correspondence between diagram and wire reality was just another very Italian quirk (which it was of course). I took the newfound opportunity to make amends for the various wire-melting shorts and more than occasional, and often very dubious, roadside repairs.

Finding that the brake hose makers, Hel, inhabited premises only a couple of miles off my daily commute, I dropped in one day and bought a set of stainless braided replacements, also taking the chance to uncouple Guzzi's famous linked brakes. That meant an upgraded front

Guzzi's sports V-twin background

Moto Guzzi's enduring 90° V-twin engine was first fitted to a motorcycle, the 703cc V7, in 1967. The first sporting Guzzi V-twin was the V7 Sport, launched in 1971, then the 750S arrived on the road in 1973. This was soon followed by the 750 S3, complete with three disc brakes and Moto Guzzi's then rather revolutionary linked brake system.

After being shown to acclaim at the Milan Motorcycle Show in 1975, the iconic Le Mans, developed by Lino Toni, hit the roads in 1976. The pushrod engine had now been enlarged to 844cc, breathing through a pair of unfiltered, 36mm Dell'Orto carburetors. These were fitted with accelerator pumps that, when the twistgrip was wound open fast, literally squirted neat fuel into the inlet manifold. It really does work.

Forks and rear shocks for the Le Mans

came from Marzocchi, the brake calipers and discs from Brembo; all top notch racing kit. This five-speed, 75hp bike (Guzzi claimed 80hp), with its tiny bikini fairing ('just about big enough to keep the ignition keys out of the slipstream', as one reviewer put it at the time), could reach almost 130mph, quickly. With impeccable handling, at least for the period, a little over 2500 Mk.I Le Mans were built.

The Mk.II was introduced late in 1977, mine being built in December. Mechanically almost identical to the Mk.I, the engine now had Nickel/Silicon (Nigusil) lined cylinder bores, allowing the use of lighter pistons with tighter tolerances. The Mk.II also had the front brake calipers fitted behind the fork legs. The new Le Mans did look quite different though, now fitted with a wind-tunnel tested and figure-hugging fairing. While

losing a little of its purely sporting stance, this bike, assisted by that shaft drive, was now a supremely capable long-distance and fast sports tourer.

Mk.III and then 1000cc versions followed, but these had grown more angular and heavier-looking, leaving many to feel that the earlier models were the real deal, especially that bare original. Fortunately, as can be seen from the photos, the Mk.II need only lose its fairing to gain almost all the aesthetical appeal held by the 1976 version. I think the later De Tomaso designed tail-light is actually an improvement, although the loss of the sporty quick-release filler cap from the Mk.I does swing the balance the other way. Regardless, I expect you'll be able to see why that bike caught my eye in Oxford in 1987.



Above: In March 2020, back on the road. A week later we were in lockdown.

Left: On the road again. Gent and the Guzzi go way back.

Right: Have Guzzi, will travel.



master cylinder too, to cope with the additional work.

A phone call to Italian parts specialists Motomecca, revealed that they still had a single set of genuine Lafranconi silencers. The price seemed very fair, but I hesitated before finally acknowledging that funds were running short once again. The original exhaust system was still largely intact after all, and following a little welding to fill a few gaps, it went back on, minus the completely shot rear balance pipe... oh, and some of the overly enthusiastic silencer internals (these just fell out). Slightly larger main jets catered for the new-found free breathing. The remainder of the exhaust system is still largely original. As is much of the bike. The only real alterations, other than the more curvaceous seat that came with the bike, have involved the removal of what I either consider unnecessary fringe elements, such as the fairing, or bits that kept falling off.

I was then made redundant again, or in a bizarre twist on the theme in the eventual wake of the 2008 crash, I had to let

myself go. The Buell went too, for reasons that probably had more to do with the need to send an unmissable message to myself that times had changed. Fortunately, that old Guzzi stayed.

Back when I was a lad, I'd known an impressive and very outdoor couple with an open-top Morris 8. They'd owned this car since marrying in the 1930s. Not long after leaving school, I shared a house in Sussex with a group of fellow motorcycle enthusiasts. The residents included a chap who rode a Triumph TR6P, his first proper bike after losing his L-plates. He still has it. Pondering one day on how satisfying it must be to own a vehicle for such a long time, providing a chance to really get to know the machine, to forge a proper bond, I felt a little envious. Wondering how it must feel, the penny finally dropped. Without noticing it, that Le Mans had been in the family for well over 35 years.

Oh, and in case you were wondering, yes, Susannah still has those candlesticks too.

