

It is also a bike of great character. Engine and frame are shared with the Guzzi tourers: the 850T3 and V1000 Convert. Turning it into the sporting Le Mans involved building in a few quirks. Although the camshaft is not madly wild, the carburetion is. Two fat 36mm Dell 'Orto pumper carbs gasp through open trumpet intakes, making hungry sucking noises all the time the engine is running. Basically, though, it's over-carbed. It's fine when the revs get up, but a tiny bit touchy about starting (it insists on full choke even when it's hot . . . and Guzzis get very hot). It's also kinda delicate about how wide you open the slides at lower revs. Give it too much gasp before it's ready, and it waffles and slurps, spits back and gasses up.

The other modification from the touring mode – apart from an ultra-low profile and a semi-racer riding crouch – is to gearing. The cogs on the Le Mans are high: its legs are very long indeed. Combine a touchy low-rev throttle with a tall first gear, and you see that the standard bike, while quite capable of whuffling around, demands skill and care around town. More important, it also doesn't step off the line as fast as the top speed would suggest (around 130mph, remember?).

Enter the big-bore kit, developed from modified Guzzi parts by the Italian Centre of Wandsworth. As I write this, it's still in the prototype stage: by March they hope to have it on sale at between £250 and £300. Like I said, it's a dead simple nut-and-bolt operation. A matter of stripping the barrels off, swapping the pistons, and putting the barrels back on, with a bit of backroom work in the middle. Simple spannerwork, even for a klutz. Jet up the

rewards part of the kit and you're suddenly the owner of the first one-litre Guzzi Le Mans on the block.

The bike was waiting for me at the London Motorcycle Centre when I dropped the staff Ducati Darmah off for its second service (nearly run in . . . good news). Hunched and tiny over its huge alloy engine with its jutting finned cylinders, red and black with a dashing dayglo panel on the front of the silly cowling, it was almost shockingly beautiful. Workshop man John Elliot tweaked the little plastic over-centre switch that serves as the universal Italian choke lever, and thumbed the button. The bike spluttered once, then caught with a gigantic booming throbb that echoed in the alleyway like an earthquake. Yeah . . . forgot to mention that the final mod in the kit is drilling out most of the exhaust baffles as well. The big-bore Guzzi is extravagantly, gloriously loud.

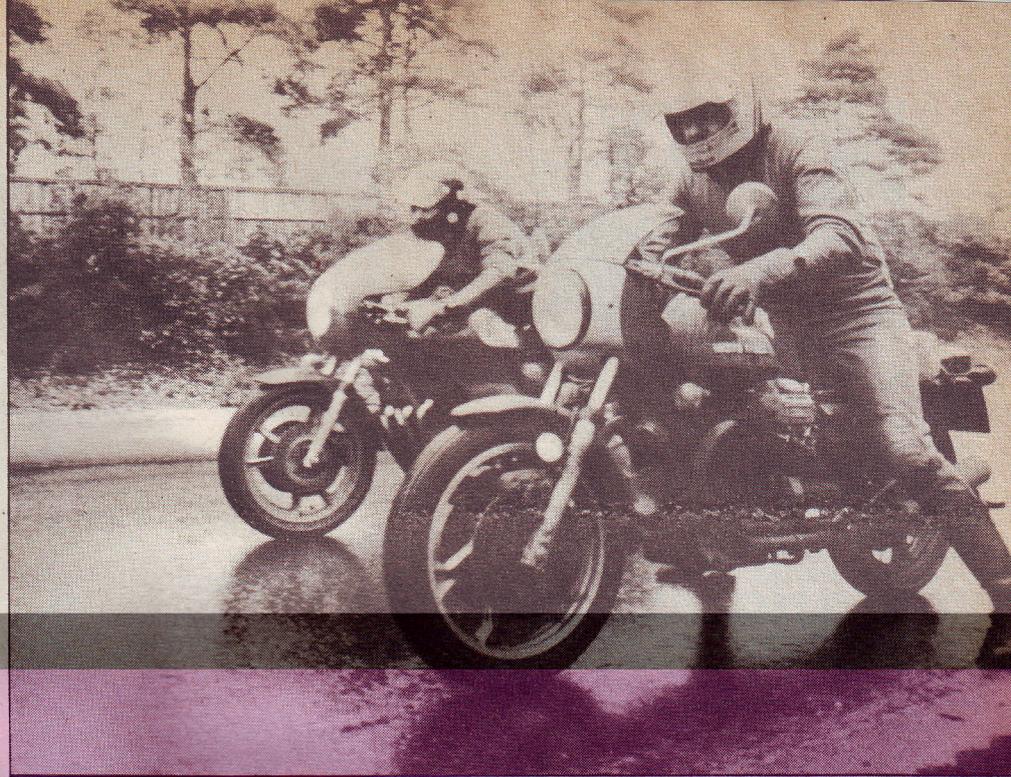
Off down the wet and traffic-strewn South Circular mincing machine in the rain, I simply stayed in first gear. The Guzzi's like that. It'll do over 50mph in first with ease, and still sound lazy and relaxed. The big-bore does it much much better than the standard machine. Torque feels like it's up a good 15 per cent, and no longer does it feel quite so generously over-carbed.

I was heading for a corner of far-flung Surrey, site of SuperBike's top-secret test track, where Mighty Mammal David Hamill was waiting for me with his pet Rickman Honda 812 (He wasn't waiting, actually, but I'll get him back.) Once the greasy confines of London trunk roads had magically metamorphosed into the tranquil trees and modest mansions of the stockbroker belt, I could start winding the slides of those Dell 'Ortos open through the gears, and red in my face, ready for Guzzi more of the go-juice it loves so much.

The rewards were noisy but lavish. It barely seems to matter where on the clock the rev counter lay: feed on the throttle and the low-slung Italian projectile launches itself with a rush that can only be described as inexorable. The ton comes up quickly on the clock (somewhere before a true 90, in fact, Guzzi instruments are as generous as the styling is stunning) and is soon forgotten. An indicated 130mph is within easy access (comes out at about 115 really), and the top speed I attained on the grassy short straight of the track was 129mph, with more to come in the long-legged top.

When Dave Hamill finally turned up, we were set for a battle royal on the tight (and wet and slippery) test track. In fact, it didn't really work like that. The emphasis of power on the Rickman Honda was so different from that of the big Guzzi that there was really no contest in side-by-side comparison. The Honda's a revvy beast and the gearing had been upped considerably for top speed. The Guzzi has it all much lower down and it's easier to use. So the acceleration test, for instance, was a walkover for the Guzzi. Yay, my bike won . . .

I explained earlier how the standard Le Mans



suffers a bit on step-off due to its high gearing. It is here that the major benefit of the 1000cc conversion becomes clear. Torque is abundant right through from 2000rpm and no longer does first feel too tall for a quick getaway. You can virtually dump the clutch, and on a wet track I recorded consistent 12.5-second standing quarters, with a best run of 12.35. That is very very fast for a street cycle.

On mid-range acceleration (and on bikes like these, mid-range is from 80 to around 100mph), there was little to choose between the two: the Guzzi tramping along with an exhaust boom some four octaves lower than the screaming, sizzling Honda. Top speed? Still about equal at some 130mph at the end of the test-track straight, but I'll allow the Honda probably had a handful of mph on the Le Mans.

The comparison showed, though, what diverse results you get by the different tuning approaches. The Guzzi relies on simply increasing the engine's size. Apart from exacerbating (no, that's *nothing* like wotsitbating) the Guzzi's already prolific tendency to shudder and thud below 3000rpm, it makes the engine just much much torquier than standard, though probably only a little more powerful at higher revs. The result is a very fast motorcycle that is very easy to ride fast. The Honda has usable torque, but the real power is concentrated between 6000 and 10,000rpm, and it comes in with a rush. To ride it fast, you must stir the gears, keep the revs sizzling:

much more like hard work than simply opening the chokes on the Guzzi.

Customarily, and more precisely to heap on the large pile already accumulated concerning Guzzi's masterly integral braking system. In slippery conditions, it's a lifesaver. For you two not familiar with the system: the brake pedal operates one front disc and the rear disc in a 70:30 proportion. The hand lever is a bonus, operating the other front disc. In normal riding, you need not even use your hand. Even in slippery wetness, you can stomp on the pedal and the Guzzi squats and stops. Be brutal, and you'll just manage to lock the back wheel for the last few inches. In a crisis, or pushing it on a track, a quick kiss of the pucks on the secondary front disc adds enough stopping power to make it a sensation. Cast-iron Brembo discs are superb: and wet or dry, the system has a combination of fantastic stopping power, real sensitivity and idiot-proof operation alien to any rider of Japanese machinery. Will the rest of the industry please catch up.

If you can live with the Guzzi Le Mans' (mostly minor) faults, if you can put up with crazy instruments, switchgear that doesn't inspire confidence, finish that chips off; and if your passenger can handle the insecurity of the tiniest seat on any big bike, I can recommend the bored-out Guzzi Italian Centre style. It's one of the easiest and most glamorous ways to go really fast.



HEAVY BREATHING

Honda Four. The engine that started it all; that tacked the word super on to what had previously been just plain old bike. The one which finally laid the ghost of the motorised bicycle. Honda Four. Sounds sort of right, doesn't it?

Remember what it was like in the days before multi cylinders, overhead cams and oil seals which do just that became the norm? Roadside repairs? Dismal little workshops where grubby mechanics coaxed, prodded and bullied equally grubby parallel twins and singles back to some semblance of life? The puddles of oil which marked the biker's lonely passage through a largely hostile world? Biking was a rather masochistic pursuit, confined to foolhardy, uh, "enthusiasts", or people who couldn't get the bread together for anything more upmarket.

In many ways 1969 was the beginning of the end of all that. Enter Honda Four, stage left in a blaze of lights. Enter the era of the mechanic as technician - with white coat that stays that way - stage right. The motorcycle as a high technology consumer durable; hardware to be marketed, merchandised and made socially acceptable, was born. Honda's brainchild gave biking something it had never had before; fashionable acceptability.

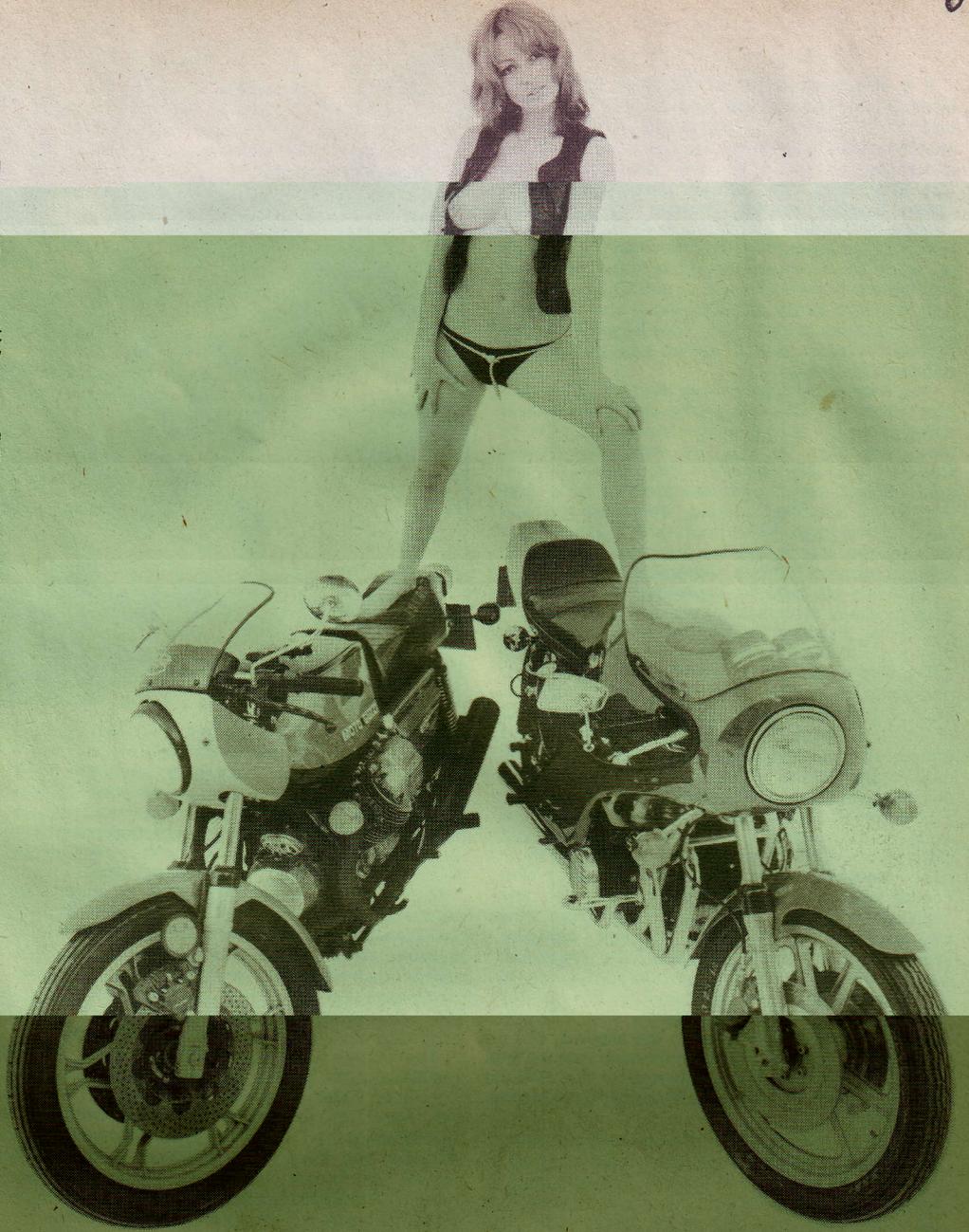
Since those heady days, a lot of four star petrol has flowed through a lot of quad Keihin carbs, and the Four has become something of a commonplace. I mean, you don't see gaggles of awestruck onlookers gawping reverentially at them as if they'd seen the Second Coming these days, do you? In short, the Four ain't no spring chicken nor, come to that, is it even a summer chicken. The pace of Japbike development has speeded up with such Jason's army like '78's winner is '78's also ran. Double overhead cams, watercooling, four valves per cylinder, shaft drive; these are the new technological status symbols, and one litre is just the starting point for superbike status.

The foregoing doesn't necessarily mean that the Four is about to curl up and die. Even in stock form it can push F2 and K series bikes to speeds well in excess of the ton; showing a clean pair of heels to many more modern, more expensive machines into the bargain. And then, if you want more, why you could always arrange for chassis and engine to part company, truck the latter along to your friendly local tuning shop, have them work a touch of mechanical magic and drop the resulting sizzler of a motor into a chassis that can keep all that muscle where it belongs - on the road!

That's exactly how the second of our demon duo of ultrabikes came into being. The plot goes something like this: Ken Dunmall, 31 and doing quite nicely - thank you in the transport business, has this hankering after being King of the Street. Fine, we all have daydreams about that sort of thing at some time or other. Difference between you and me and Ken, is that Ken actually goes out and does something about it. A list of the class motorcycles he's had the pleasure of owning in his time is impressive. He began with a Beeza C11G, somewhere back in the mists of time, and then progressed up to a

one in pink and green, with copper plated detailing, no less. After a Triton - with racing cams, an ARE big bore conversion, a four plug head and 32mm carbs - the big changeover came; a Japanese bike.

Not just any old Japanese bike mind you. Come to that, a Dresda Honda 900cc cafe racer's got more British parts than the current, ahem, 50cc flagship of our sole surviving manufacturer, so I guess it gets in under the tape as an honorary native of these shores. Anyway, I digress. The Dresda "didn't have very pleasant brakes", so it was sold and replaced by the Rickman. Inasmuch as any Rickman can be considered bog standard, this one was. Tired of



building his own bikes from the ground up, Ken bought a brand new rolling chassis and engine, fully set up, courtesy of Read Titan in Leytonstone.

Trouble was, it didn't quite have the performance to match those handsomely menacing looks because the engine was completely stock, just the way it came off the production line at Hammamatsu. A remedy to this dilemma was soon found via the pages of that weekly biking rag, which only ever gets read for the small ads. Turned out that someone was interested in selling a very hot Rickman CR, and splits, part exchanges or what-have-yous were welcomed. A few telephone calls and a somewhat lightened wallet later, Ken was the proud owner of 900ccs of gung-ho Honda power, the result of a PX deal with his original engine.

OK, enough of this everyday-story-of-biking-folk shit. Let's move on to the bit where I roll up at Ken's

me, and the Rickman was certainly no exception.

Just keeping the thing going was a chore until the engine warmed up properly, and then there was the down-for-up reversed gearchange to master. When you're used to riding touring bikes most of the time getting on a cafe racer is like relearning a language that you've all but forgotten. Nice thing is though, you soon become fluent. After a day or so of banging your shins on the fairing, feeling like an asshole in city traffic and cocking up gearchanges, the whole thing suddenly falls into place and you become almost a part of the machine. Riding stops being a series of disconnected jerks and starts, and you, the rider, are the dominant voice in a fluid dialogue between man and bike.

Hold on, Sorry to interrupt my own reverie, but why do I suddenly find myself getting hot, sweaty and had tapered in the middle of the

large quantities, confined in an amazingly compact frame and gift-wrapped in slim, streamlined glass-fibre, is invariably what lingers on in people's minds the first time that they see one.

Sitting on such an uncompromising cafe racer for the first time's a trifle disconcerting though. You feel as if you're all arms and legs, a simple turn in the street becomes a six point effort with the restricted steering lock, your throttle hand begins to feel like lead after a while because clip-ons strain your arms, and 50 miles is enough to make your back feel as if a red hot poker's been thrust between the vertebrae. Least that's the way the things always hit

a none too healthy battery, that's bad news buddy. Sho'nuff I managed to stall, and God, is it a hassle trying to look cool and kickstart a Rickman with a circle of inanely grinning schoolkids ogling.

I highlight this incident because: A) it shows that living with a high performance engine isn't all wine and roses; and B) it turned our expected battle of the giants on the test track into something of a non-event. Whatever the reason, from that moment on, the clutch was on its way out, and under anything stronger than gentle acceleration it slipped hopelessly. Hence, no acceleration figures.

Before we move on to the test session, a brief

look at the internals of the engine that was to be pitted against Italy's finest. Hadleigh Custom in Brighton were the people responsible for the package, and for starters, they hogged out the

Especially culpable was the rear brake, which locked up at the slightest excuse but didn't seem to do much else. Definitely a big minus there, especially up against the Guzzi's superlative linked

make the most of its potential. With close ratio gears, this is no problem, and you can scream your way around at 8500 revs the whole day long if you want to. The restrictive size of the carbs might be the

bore to give a capacity of 900 meaty centimetres. Work on the head was farmed out to S&S Performance, whose ability to extract every last ounce of power from multi-cylinder Jap engines is nigh-on legendary (for the lowdown on S&S, cop a load of Steve Brennan's feature on their Turbo Suzuki on page 30). If Ken's engine ever suffered from blocked nasal passages, it doesn't now, thanks to the Stevenitt and Savory patent miracle cure. The head was given a complete porting and polishing job, with the inlet tracts opened up from 28 to 32mm diameter. Filling the holes are a set of oversize valves with special guides, and racing springs to ward off valve bounce until well after the 10,000 rev mark. Ken describes the cam as "semi-racing; a fairly sharp grind", and it's driven by a racing cam chain. According to Hadleigh though, that cam's the real, pukka racing item.

To make sure the bottom end's as bulletproof as the top end, Hadleigh replaced the stock conrods which have something of a reputation for breaking, with Honda's own steel racing specials. The pistons themselves are fairly modest 8.5:1 compression ratio jobs, machined to clear those oversize valves.

The equation adds up to one mammoth job lot of potential power. In addition, there's a five-speed gearbox, and a drivetrain at the other. OK, we'll take it from the top, where the stock Keihin carburetors - admittedly upjetted with the needles set on notch number five, and breathing easy through racing bellmouths - are entrusted with pouring fuel into the cylinders. With those widened inlet tracts, 28mm is a bit on the restrictive side, which probably accounts for an occasional and very slight hesitancy on the

braking system of which Mike has sung praises.

Which was the faster of the two? Hard to say, given the restrictive straights of our test track and the lousy condition of the tarmac surface, plus of course that shot-to-pieces clutch. I've got to admit too that my courage and skill tend to run out some time before Mike's, so in actuality, the Guzzi had a winning edge. All things being equal though, I reckon that the Rickman could have just pipped the Le Mans, by a nose. Fact, while we're on the subject of anatomy, I'll stick my neck out and opine that an all-out banzai run on a long, straight road would take the needle up to between 138 and 142 mph.

The engine had a fairly wide spread of power and torque, but it definitely had to be revved hard to

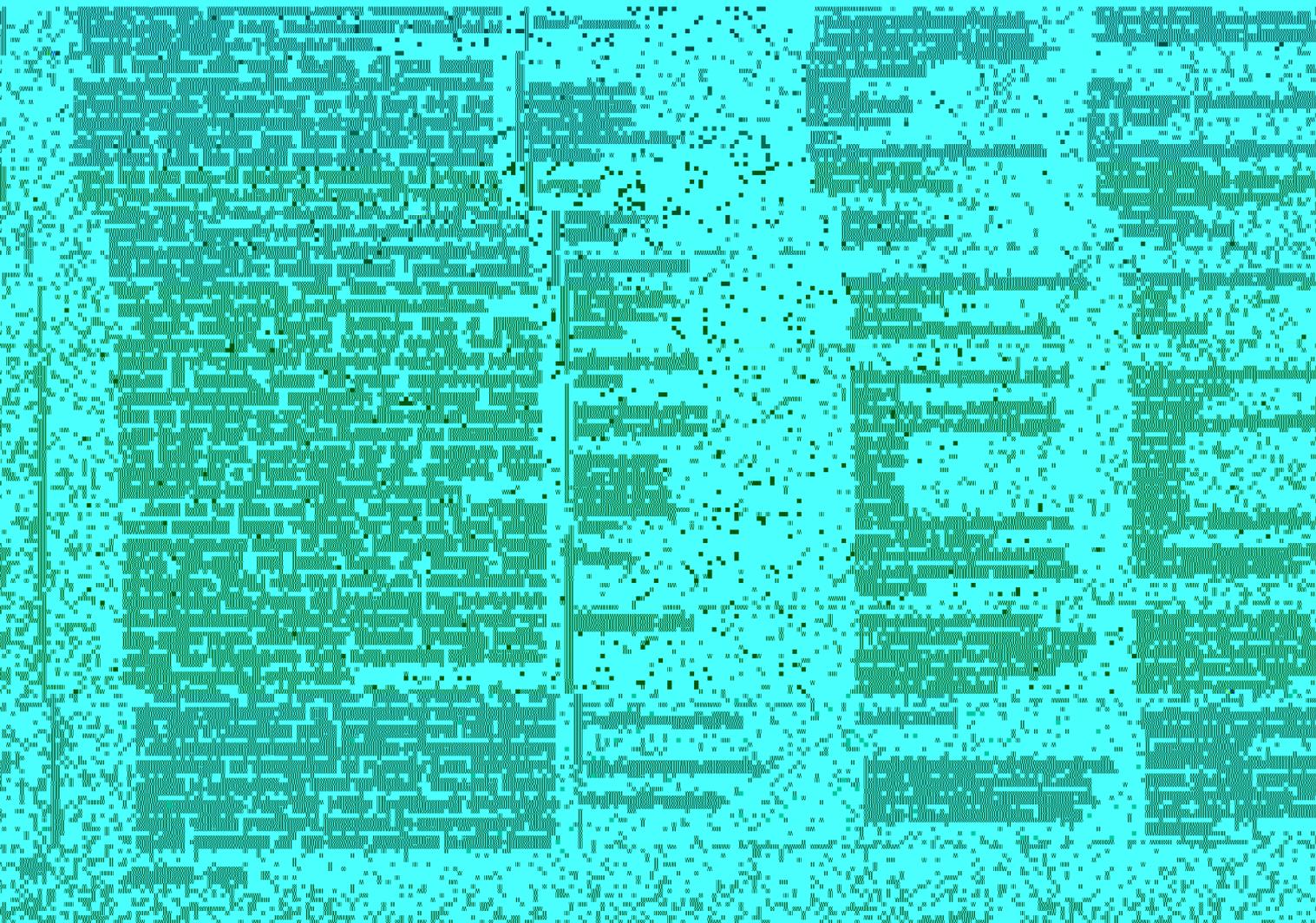
reason why that's the effective red-line, even though the rest of the engine should be capable of making solid power right up to the 10,000 mark. With uprated carburation though, God only knows how fast Ken could tool around the North Circular.

It takes a certain brand of dedication, not to mention a healthy bank balance, to own a Rickman, especially a projectile like Ken's. All that nickel plating and chromework wouldn't take too kindly to salty winter roads, and after our wet and muddy test session it took Ken two painstaking days to get it back into pristine condition. Not a bike for day to day use. But if it's ultimates you're after, and you aren't too bothered about the hassles, there ain't many better ways to fly than Rickman. **DH**



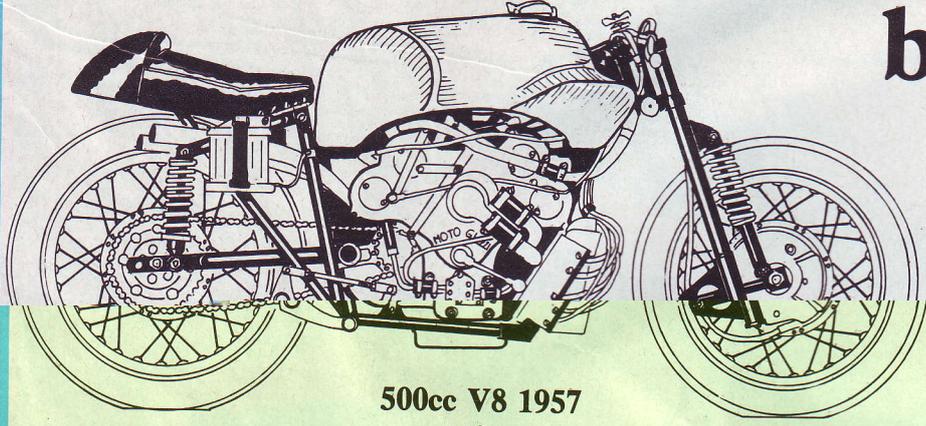
RICKMAN

MOTO GUZZI





It takes years of breeding to build the world's finest Thoro'-breds



500cc V8 1957



Castrol