

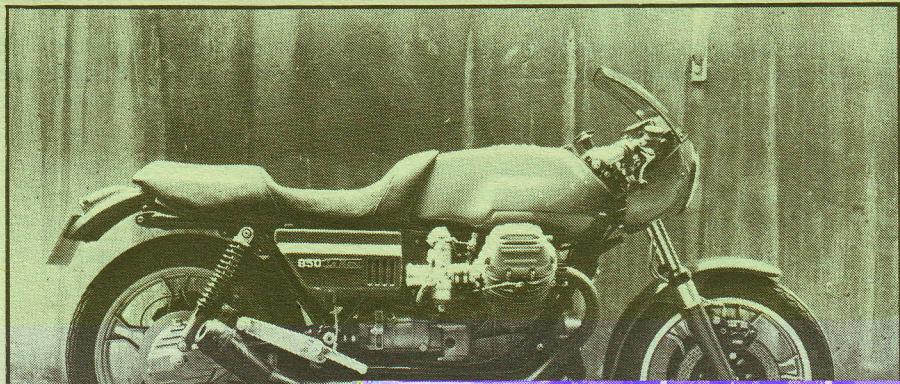
# Into 'the epoch' with a Guzzi Le Mans

FOR THE Italians 'l'epoca' means the 1950s. It was a period of considerable industrial fortune based on the plentiful labour of the south, quiescent unions and a natural design intuitiveness of the Italian industrialist. *L'epoca* lasted from about 1951 until 1963 as far as motorcycles were concerned, but extended in other industries for longer or shorter periods. For instance, Pininfarina's Dino Ferrari of 1965 is a reasonable benchmark for the end of 'classic' Italian cars, although some might add Zagato's Alfa Junior of '68.

During the fifties Italian factories developed innovative answers to the problems of valve gear, engine castings, suspension and brakes. But, most importantly, they paid attention to the shape, or style, of the complete machine. Today motorcycles have moved on. Exotic designs are commonplace and inexpensive, and thus disposable — and perhaps they should be.

But over the years the Italians, while pursuing the new angle of multi-cylinder technology, have occasionally relapsed. Then a rare touch of genius has drawn up a design so obviously of 'the epoch' that it becomes positively embarrassing to look

Patrick Uden reworks his Mk I Le Mans in a search for the essence of Italian motorcycle design.



The beast that lurked within the standard 850 Le Mans is revealed in all its glory.

machine. Their two silhouettes were not identical, but clearly of the same seed.

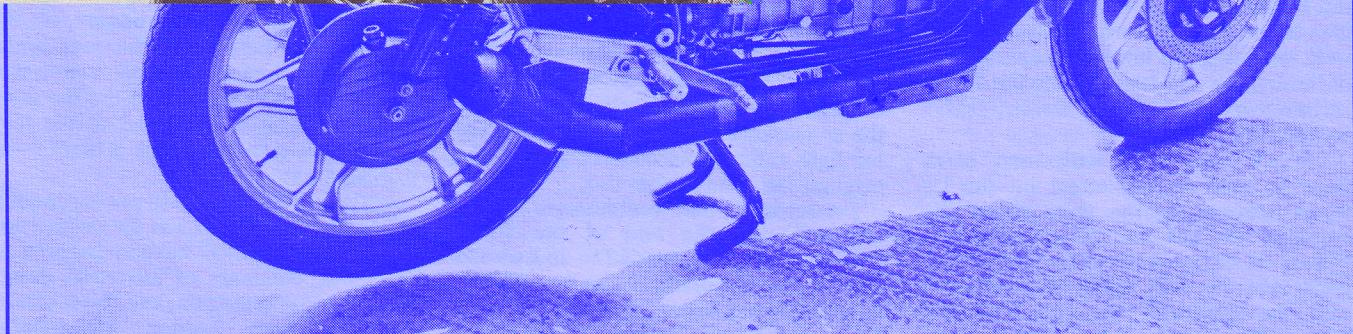
Last summer, after a crash wrecked the front and one side of my Le Mans, I decided to experiment on this hunk of metal.



greyhound on a tight leash, and yet it never really reached its ultimate. It was quickly tourer-sized, and in America had air filters and a soft saddle added. Some

unscathed components to labelled anonymity. Junked were the front forks, one slider, the front wheel and tyre, a rocker box and the silencer system. The

cap that was to be fitted into the top. A breather was added at the front of the tank to take a rubber tube. Then the



Inspiration came from the Falcone Sport seen in the background, a product of l'epoca.



Motorcycle electrical systems are always daunting, particularly modern ones, and the Le Mans' is no exception. It is compiled from a variety of components which, at a glance, seem to have come from a far-off Italian factory.

have the same curvature to its base as the rear mudguard of the Guzzi. It had brake and rear light terminals so it would, I thought, be legal and unobtrusive. Anyway, for £2.50 I could afford to make a mistake. It fitted and worked surprisingly well.

mudguards are, alas, of the 'threepenny-bit' late seventies hard-edged style, but with an endearing softness at the tips which saves them from complete ugliness.

Finally, the plastic side panels. These are made from a totally different material to the rest of the machine, a sort of no-

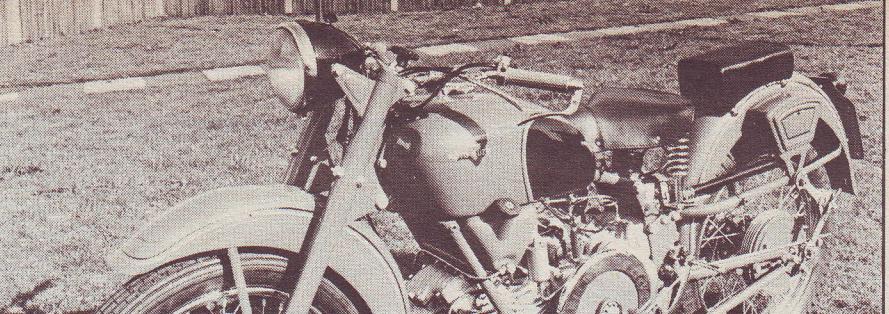
quality stiff polythene with metal tabs on the inside to clip them to the frame. I sat and looked at these items for some time, trying to fathom out why they jarred so badly with my sense of function. Overall they did a pretty good job of protecting the electrics and battery, but the way the carburettors hid behind them to gulp air from within the dark recesses of the frame didn't reflect the machine's image. The fluted mouldings on the panels seemed to suggest that something was going on inside, so I decided to fretsaw the flutes out and reveal the 'gulped-air' idea to the outside world. I think it works well, restoring the functional appearance of these parts and emphasising the 40mm carburettors with their 'works' BMW bellmouths.

Guzzi's love affair with matt black paint is used to full effect on the Le Mans, sharpening the lines hiding the curve of the tank and giving unity to a hybrid of components that clearly lean back into the past rather than forward into the seventies. My choice of red cellulose tipped the scales back into the fifties, and now the machine has a lean integrity, which does not come from styling but from each component being clearly delineated, its function clear and unsullied by matt paint or stick-on pin-stripes.

I admit that the Shaw aircraft filler-cap on the tank is definitely not of the fifties, or even Italian, but somehow it works as a feature, reflecting perhaps the busy nature of Guzzi racer tanks like those fitted to the 1948 250cc Albatros or the Dondolino 500 of the early fifties. Anyway, I like it.

The application of the original Guzzi logo on this tank was unquestionably correct in my opinion. In my eyes, those bas-relief badges so beloved of the car industry and the Japanese have no place on a motorcycle. In their purest state motorbikes are motorised bicycles and should retain their affinity to this functional form. Bicycles use transfers and loops to proclaim their origin, and so should motorcycles.

Guzzi's pushrod V-twin engine started life in 1960, and has been developed into the aggressive yet reliable unit that has powered all the factory's big bikes since the demise of the Nuovo Falcone in 1976. My engine remains standard apart from the race cam and widened exhaust and intake ports to take the Imola pipes and 40mm carburettors. The difference to performance, aided by Lucas Rita ignition, is stunning. There is nothing the six-cylinder torque so dissipative. In these big engines, but added is a top end of sheer roaring gaitor that just sings Italy.



Patrick Uden felt in the Le Mans a ghost of the Falcone's heavy-flywheel motor.

Over £120 worth of Aeroquip hosing keeps all the oil in the engine at these speeds, something that wasn't possible with the original rubber tubes that sweated oil at the first sight of an ignition key. These steel-braided hoses do the same for the brakes, and contribute to the appearance of the machine by reflecting light rather than absorbing it, as the original fat, black tubes did.

Presumably the rudimentary baffle screwed onto the end of the Imola exhaust system is intended to do a similar job to the Brooklands can by offering scrutineers a silencer in all but function. These pipes make a rather pleasant belch most of the time, but when the engine is 'on cam' or the overdrive a distinctive crackle and whistle reveals the Le Mans' racer heritage. To look at, the pipes might be homemade (perhaps they are in Italy). The seams are crudely brazed, but the fit is snug. The whole effect is one of rough-edged sophistication, which counterbalances the trim perfection of the Marzocchi rear suspension units and the dull casting of the final drive rather well.

Recently the Japanese have caught on to the aesthetic appeal of aluminium footpeg assemblies, but to my mind they have once again prostituted a good detail and turned it into a cheap gimmick. Their units often do no more than hide an appalling junction of tubes and gussets, having about as much to do with function as those pressed-fin covers that Triumph add to Bonneville brake calipers. Before the crash that heralded the beginning of this crusade to discover the real Le Mans, I had already fitted the magnesium footrest brackets and alloy pegs seen in the photos. I'd bought them in Milan when on business, but they were destroyed in the crash.

To my surprise, Bernie's Spares and Repairs had them at the motorcycle show at the same price that I'd paid in Italy. By using the footpeg ends from my original set, I was able to make an occasional (very) set of pillar pegs and fix the ethereal pipes at the same time. This formed a neat solution, and maintained a constant style throughout the bottom half of the machine.

On most of the aluminium components

I applied paint stripper to remove yet more matt-black paint. This paint obviously performed a weather proofing role, but disguised the true beauty of the castings, the best being the rear brake plate, which had really super cast-in ribs for strength and lightness. I did the same to the footpeg bracket and to the fork yokes. Now only the frame is black — as it should be.

No doubt someone will see my modifications to the Le Mans as the destruction of a classic, but I will have to disagree. In my view, elements of industrial design often get lost in fashion, and this is clearly different from fashion high-lighting industrial design. The demands of rational production methods and economy of materials will inevitably lead to the demise of man's inter-reaction with the machines he builds. At Mandello today, Guzzis are still built by hand, or at least the men that make them can see the finished machines not a stone's throw from where the components come in. It's a production line of sorts.

More important is the pressure on companies like Moto Guzzi to make their machines look as though they were made by machines, even when they are not. They are constantly amending their designs to fall into line with the big boys. They sometimes forget that they have the greatest attribute of the lot, and that it still lives in their machines, tucked away, under the paint and pin-stripes, sharp styling and gilded names. It's called legend, and the Germans, the British and the Japanese never had it.

#### PARTS AND SERVICE

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