

# MIKE'S BIKES

## LE MANS

Number three of Mike Nicks' half-dozen favourite motorcycles, the 850cc V-twin-powered Moto Guzzi Le Mans MkIII

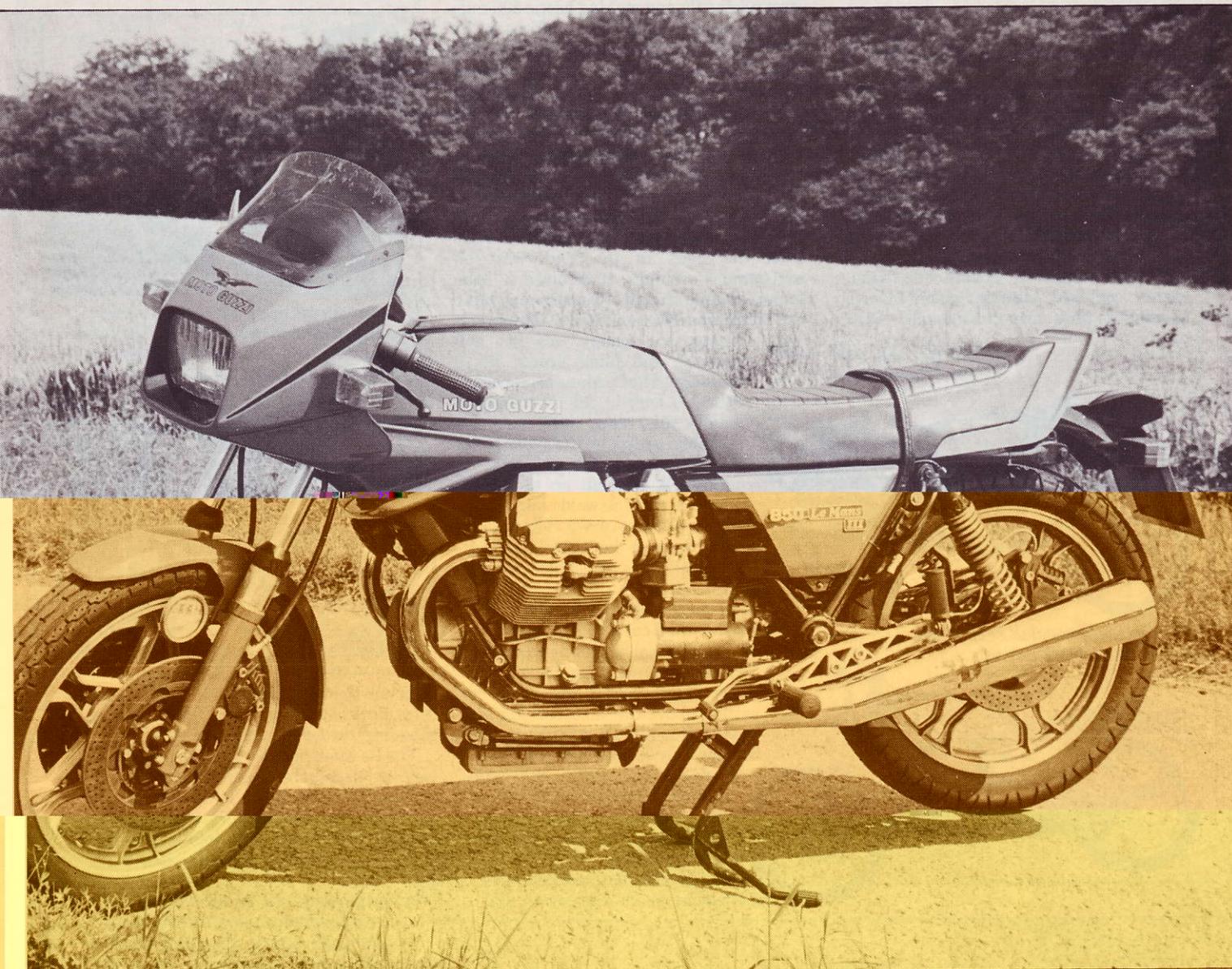
I'm an engine man. I don't build engines — not with my five-thumbed mechanical skills. I just get seriously excited by motorcycles with a big heart. And for me, that usually means big-capacity four-strokes: two-strokes just don't have enough metal in them to be taken seriously, and they make silly noises. I love the myriad ways in which

engines sound. So what's on my list of motorcycles with soul-stirring engines? Try this random selection:

- Ducati V-twins;
- BSA-Triumph triples;
- Honda sixes (the racing variety);
- BMW Rennsport flat twins (you didn't know BMWs could sound like that?);

What excites me about engines is not just their power. It's the vibrations put out by the good ones, their power pulses and their noises. Most especially their noises.

It was listening to the throb of a Moto Guzzi Le Mans that cost me £3,300 in 1983. I had ridden the Le



I preferred the harsher, angular lines of the III. But I would certainly agree that after producing the III Guzzi completely lost its way with subsequent versions. They are ugly bikes with swoopy, rising tail sections and grand prix-lookalike belly pans that just do not suit the Le Mans' classic image.

Guzzi handling has some people screaming about the appalling effects of shaft drive and

it properly it's one of the most stable and reassuring bikes you can find. Just do it like Surtees, Duke or Hailwood would have told you: finish your braking and gearchanging in a straight line, and match the engine revs to road speed on down-changes. It's surely not that difficult. People get in trouble with shaft-drive bikes when they fail to rev hard enough on the down-changes: then the rear tyre will chirp and the bike will lurch.

Guzzi's linked braking system is a wonderful safety feature that should probably be a standard fitting on all motorcycles. It would save a lot of accidents caused by riders applying too much front brake and losing the wheel on slippery roads. Using just the foot pedal on a Guzzi, it's very difficult to lock the wheels.

Guzzi critics also haven't figured out that linked braking helps you to ride faster and smoother as well as safer. The worst moment when cornering a motorcycle fast is the transition between braking hard and applying power. It usually has to happen just at the point that you pitch into the bend. For a split second the bike is caught in an unbalanced limbo-land.

You can eliminate that bad moment on Guzzis, because your throttle hand isn't also busy coping with a brake lever. What you do

*Beauty or beast? Some people love the lines of the Mk III, others think they're too angular and prefer the earlier models*

is to apply the throttle gently while your right boot is still pressing the brake lever. Then, as you release the lever, the bike undergoes a smooth, instead of rough and jerky, transition from braking to power. It's fluid, quicker,

*'Boôf, boôf, boôf, boôf: the beat of that big 850cc V-twin just rooted me to the spot; I swivelled round and watched it disappear'*

the bikes' linked braking system (depressing the foot pedal works one front disc as well as the rear brake; the handlebar lever controls the other front disc). Ignore them: they're talking total bullshit and don't know how to ride motorbikes. Or rather, they don't know how to empathise with a bike and satisfy its needs.

Of course a Le Mans is not as nimble as modern, quick-turn machines. But if you ride

*'I can tolerate a bike with bad handling, feeble brakes and sad styling as long as it has an engine that fires my adrenalin'*

superior. I wouldn't argue that the Guzzi system remains in a primitive state of development, and requires excessively high pedal pressures. But it's inherently the best braking system yet found on road-going motorcycles. And it would probably be even better if it were modified to incorporate that second front disc.

I also enjoyed how simple it is to carry out routine maintenance on a Le Mans: no rear

## LE MANS

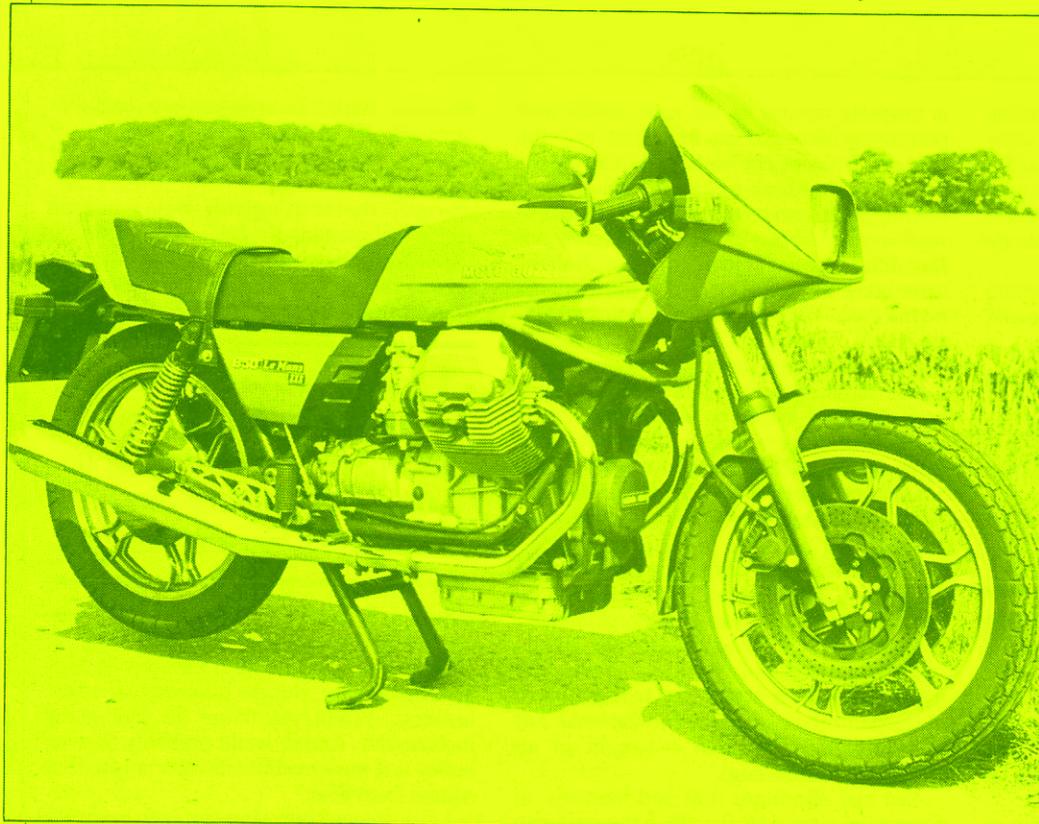
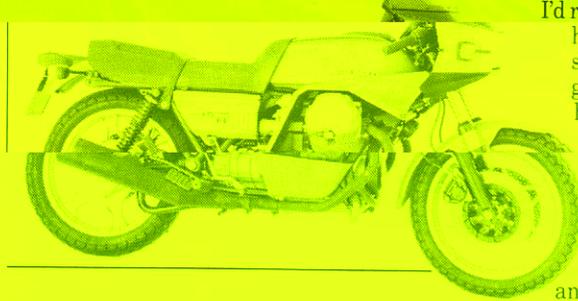
chain to worry about, easy screw-and-locknut valve adjustment beneath the instantly accessible rocker covers. It's true that there are something like 18 screws to remove before you can drop the sump pan, but that's a once-a-year operation. It also has points ignition, which will please the mend-everything-with-a-fag-paper brigade, but I would prefer a set-and-forget electronic system.

When I bought the Guzzi I was living a rather confused lifestyle which involved residing in bliss deep in England's south-

*Mk I single seat, round rocker covers, black exhausts*



*Mk II 3-piece fairing, dual seat, round rocker covers, black exhausts*



*Mk III spoiler fairing, square finning, chromed exhausts*

west peninsula and making about 500-mile return trips to Classic Bike's offices in the Fen country and various racetracks and rally sites. With a tankbag and a pair of throwover panniers for my gear, the Le Mans was perfect for this job. It would throb along motorways at a steady hundred, swoop through the green-lined Cotswold curves at eighty or ninety, and just boof-boof patiently through towns until it got the chance to unwind again on the open road.

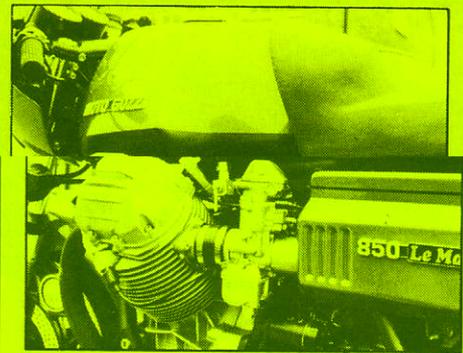
The best journeys were the return runs from the Fens to the south-west on midsummer evenings. It involved a little-known 20-mile stretch of motorcycling bliss, the B4525 from Northampton to Banbury. It twists, it's bumpy, it's got evil cambers and blind brows: it's a challenge. The Le Mans is probably a little too long in the wheelbase to handle this really well, but that probably added to the pleasure of wrestling the bike along there.

Then it was out on to the big swoops of the Cotswolds and those long, fast TT-like curves. Somewhere around Stow-on-the-Wold I'd stop for fuel, a leak and a can of fizz, and get going again.

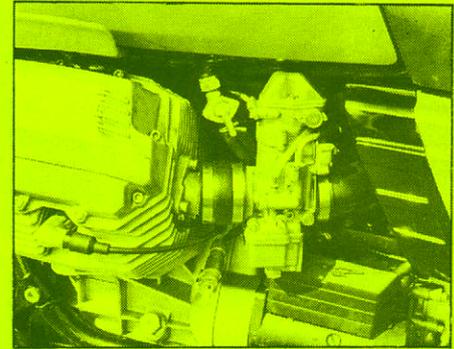
I'd use the M4 and M5 to get round Bristol, then cut on to the noble old A38 for the final lap. If I timed it right I'd reach a pub about eight miles from

home where the red sun would be setting above the shoulder of a big green Devon hill. I'd stop, release the helmet, buy a pint, and step back outside to watch the sun disappear, while the Le Mans' engine cracked and tinkled as it cooled down after four hours of non-stop running.

No other bike has had quite such an effect on me on that mystic ride



*Guzzi purists prefer the 'round' rocker covers and cylinder finning of the Mk I and II models to the 'square' MkIII style*



back into the west. It was the Guzzi's engine that did it: 250 high-speed miles of that thudding, throbbing, pulsing V-twin.

The Le Mans was a good touring bike as well as a deeply thrilling roadburner. I took my son, then 12, to the Isle of Man TT in 1984, and it gave us comfortable, reliable transport. Under those more gentle running conditions, fuel consumption approached 60 mpg.

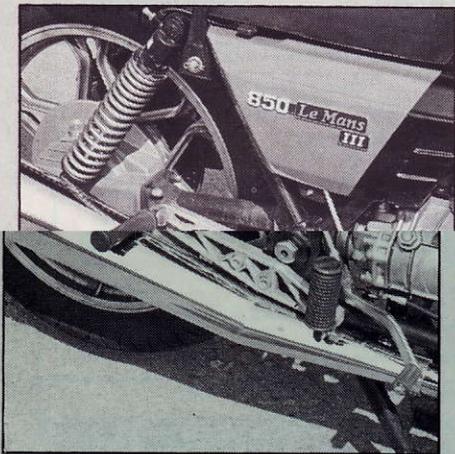
The one problem with the Le Mans is that it is dreadfully uncomfortable to ride at legal speeds. The semi-racing riding position puts just too much weight on the wrists at anything under 80mph. This didn't bother me — I just rode at eighty or more. It did turn the law a bit hysterical, though.

My first speeding ticket on the Le Mans came on the M5 in Somerset while I was on a 300-mile run to the Classic Race of the Year at Snetterton — fair cop, no problem.

A month later I was following a well-driven hot hatchback up the outside lane of the same stretch of motorway. He was flying until he slowed on a gradient and eased into the middle lane. Naively, I took the bait.

'Bloody car's got no power — let's show him what a real motorcycle can do,' I thought. I opened up the Le Mans, and she soared over the crest of the hill. But when I looked in the mirror to check the fate of the car, all I saw was flashing blue lights: with his superior mirrors, Hatchback Man had spotted the law and pulled over.

The cop was really miffed. 'My Rover V8 was indicating 115mph and you were still pulling away from me on that climb,' he whined. I felt



*Handsome latticework footrest support appeared on the Mk III*

SPECIFICATION	Mk1	Mk11	Mk111
---------------	-----	------	-------

Produced	1976-78	1978-80	1981-84
Capacity	844cc	844cc	844cc
Bore x stroke	83 x 78mm	83 x 78mm	83 x 78mm
Compression	10.2:1	10.2:1	9.8:1
Carburettors	2 x 36mm	2 x 36mm	2 x 36mm
Output	71bhp/7300rpm	71bhp/7300rpm	76bhp/7700rpm
Torque	56lb-ft/6660rpm	56lb-ft/6660rpm	54.9lb-ft/6200rpm
Battery	12v/20amp-hr	12v/32amp-hr	12v/32amp-hr
Tyres	3.50 x 18in	100/90 x 18in	100/90 x 18in
	4.00 x 18in	110/90 x 18in	110/90 x 18in
Brakes	2 x 300mm disc	2 x 300mm disc	2 x 300mm disc
	1 x 242mm disc	1 x 242mm disc	1 x 242mm disc
Dry Weight	436lb	444lb	453lb
Wheelbase	57.3in	57.3in	58.7in

like saying, 'Well buy a Le Mans, dickhead, and solve your problem,' but thought better of it. And just as well for he gave me a ticket for a mere 102mph. (Those were the days when a 100mph speeding conviction did not earn British motorcyclists an automatic driving ban).

My licence now carried nine penalty points — just three away from a ban. Something

speedometer. The silencers are fatter and more efficient, and the wheelbase is two inches longer.

With more torque and slightly more power — despite a lower compression ratio — the Mk III is the most practical of the early Le Mans models. After the Mk III, Guzzi's stylists lost their reason and the bikes that classic look

Le Mans Guzzis will never achieve the prices set by the better Ducati V-twins. But they do offer a unique and exciting motorcycling experience in a fairly tough package at affordable prices.

The Mk 1 is the most sought-after bike; even cosmetically tatty examples fetch £1500-£2000 if they've got an MoT. In immaculate condition