

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.

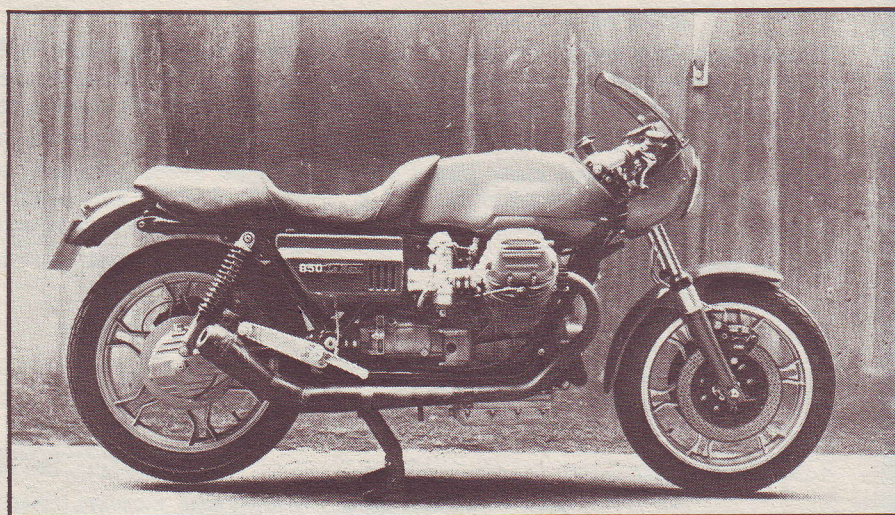
During the fifties Italian factories developed innovative answers to the problems of valve gear, engine castings, suspension and brakes. But, most importantly, they paid attention to the shape, or style, of the complete machine. Today motorcycles have moved on. Exotic designs are commonplace and inexpensive, 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 at. The latest example is the 500cc Montjuic dohc production racer from Laverda. Before that they built the SFC, and at about the same time Ducati gave deliverance to the astonishing 750 SS.

These were really racers, wolves in sheep's clothing, but just to one side and not far away in performance was the Moto Guzzi Le Mans 850 Mk 1. This machine looked as though someone had seen it in a dream. It was barely able to stand still without appearing like a 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 people were lucky enough to buy the production racer version, but even this didn't really match the visual explosion of the original Le Mans racers from 1971-72.

It became clear to me as I rode my own Le Mans that, on another level, it resembled greatly the Guzzi Falcone Sport that I also owned. It plodded, yet gave a surge of speed backed up by that mechanical dinosaur, the flywheel. It wheezed constantly through open carburettors, had a slick, if clunky, gearbox and a frame of unerring accuracy on corners. It was heavy perhaps, although spritely and reliable, too. But the most striking similarity with the Falcone was the shape — the design or style of the

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



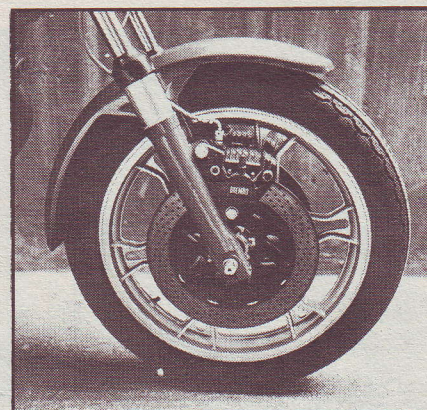
The beast that lurked within the standard 850 Le Mans is revealed in all its glory.

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 hunch that underneath the bike lurked a more potent and more visually exciting device. My machine was blue, an early one. There was a mere 3,000 miles on the clock in 1980 when a car turned in front of us. Five stitches fixed me, but £750 from his insurance company and a £1,000 of my own money turned a machine into a jewel that I believe reveals *l'epoca* from within the Le Mans.

It took a day of careful dismantling, logging and boxing to reduce the Guzzi's 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 frame was unbent, and all the cycle parts escaped damage apart from the cupola fairing which was repaired. I cut all the unnecessary tabs off the frame including the hopeless sidestand unit.

The frame was then taken to Heston Spray Company for a solid coat of epoxy black. The rear swinging arm and drive-shaft tunnel were done in epoxy Post Office red, as were the two front fork sliders. The new fork slider had been bought from John Blanchard Motorcycles together with a pair of Tomaselli bars to replace the crude Guzzi originals. The tank went to George Grou in Islington to have its badge 'dents' removed and filled. They also cut a hole for the Shaw filler

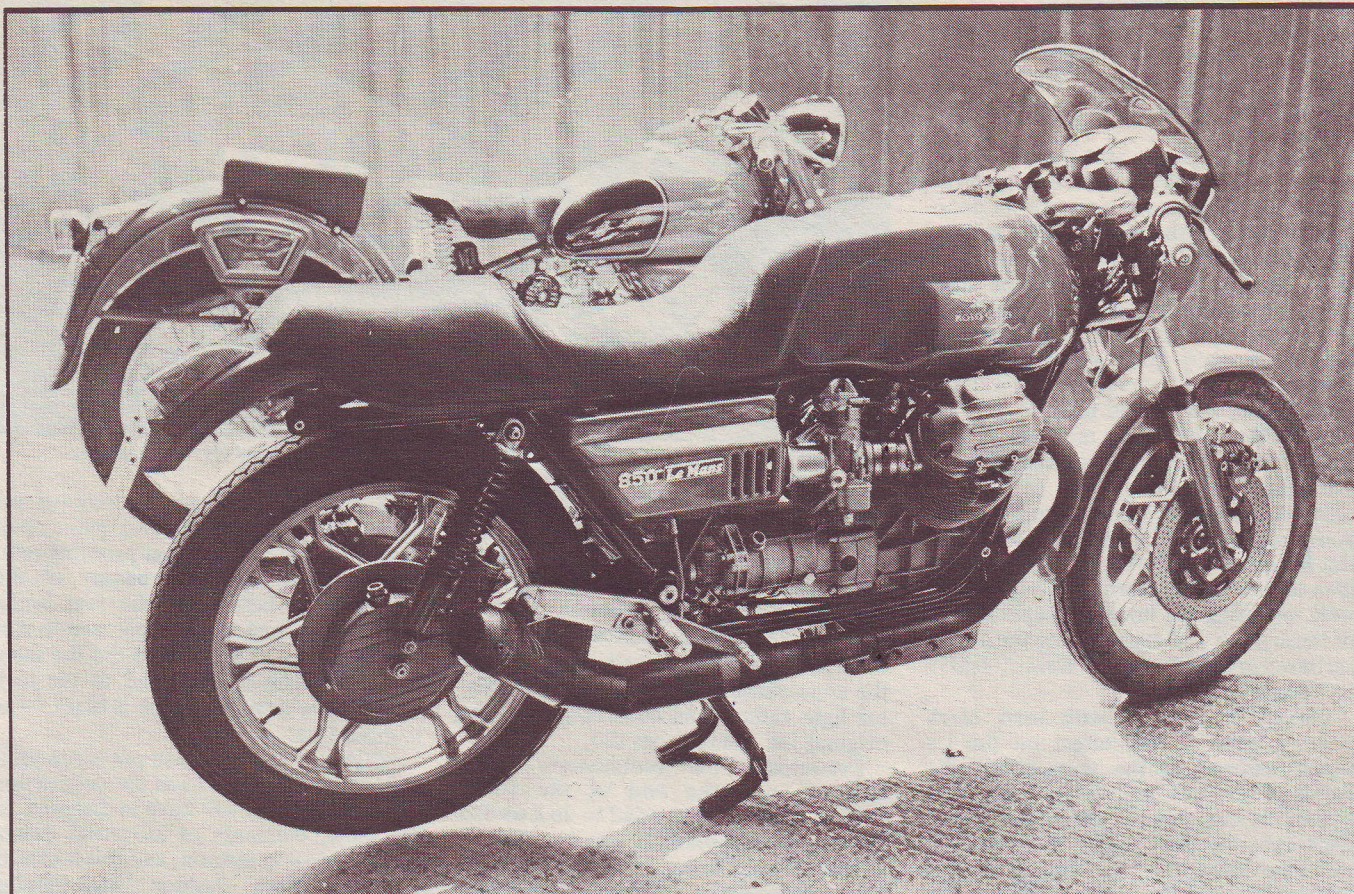


Fork sliders were sprayed red.

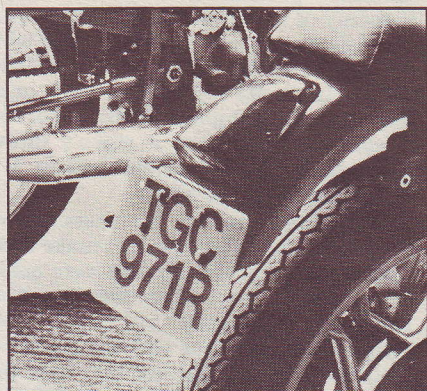
cap that was to be fitted into the top. A breather was added at the front of the tank to take a rubber tube. Then the tank, side panels, mudguards, repaired fairing and seatpan were sent to Heston Spray for a cellulose Post Office red gloss.

The new wheel was ordered from Jack Lilley, together with a production racing gearbox, Imola pipes, a racing cam, new rocker cover, two 40mm carburettors, a deep sump and a new saddle in stitched plastic. This last item was then given to Graham Keeley at last year's motorcycle show to be covered in best hide and suede at his factory in Worksop. He mailed it back about six weeks later, and what a beautiful job it was.

It took about an hour and a half to drop the racing cam into the engine. By



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



Rear light comes from an Italian trail bike.

standing the engine, less gearbox, on the flywheel, and after removing the timing gears and so on, it is quite easy to jiggle the cam into its bearings without removing the pushrods, cam followers and cylinders. The racing gearboxes come in two sets of ratios, a short-circuit set and a long-circuit cluster of the 'slip it in first or stall' variety. I opted for the shorter ratios in the hope that I might at least be able to get out of second before breaking the law. It took me three goes to get everything right in the gearbox. The third try had to be undertaken after I had reassembled the bike when oil started to drip from the clutch housing owing to a nicked oil seal. The whole bike had to be stripped to fix it, so one useful tip I can pass on is to always fill the gearbox *before* you install it into the frame.

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 range of obsolete Italian cars. The rectifier and the starter motor are German, but the wires that join them to the rest of the harness change colour at uneven (and unexpected) intervals so that, for instance, where the service manual says the purple wire goes to the starter solenoid it actually goes to the neutral selector nearby. A red wire (logically enough) goes to the solenoid.

Despite this, the harness is not at all badly made, and can be unplugged so that it breaks down into three main chunks. I had decided that indicators were not of 'the epoch', so this entire section of harness was stripped out and junked, along with the indicators themselves and their switch mechanism. I found other redundant wires in the system as well — probably from the Convert model, or perhaps to fill some foreign specification. These were also stripped out.

One electrical feature that I really hated on the Le Mans was the tail light. It is about the size of a pocket tape recorder, with reflectors, bulbs and wires occupying about a fifth of the total space. The rest is pure indulgent styling of the worst nasty plastic modern Italian type. But while dithering around the motorcycle show last year I spotted a little Italian trail bike tail lamp. It appeared to

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 works surprisingly well.

The odd thing about modern Italian stylists is their obsession with the hard edge. Giving motorcycles hard corners is, if you stop to consider it, a rather daft idea. A motorcycle is supposed to fit the human form. Sharp edges get scuffed easily and dig into shins, bottoms and elbows. The Italians, and now the Japanese, have become obsessed by these 'lines' that run, dart-like, from every corner of the machine over saddle, tank, panel and fairing as though the bike's function depended on them.

It doesn't. In fact the opposite is true. Ironically, the Le Mans has a bit of both styling schools. The frame itself is a legitimate straight-tube affair with no curves at all. Like the frame, the tank is a direct descendent of the 750 Sport models from 1971, with functional curves built into its form for knees. The standard rubber saddle is a pure anatomical fantasy — hard, sharp and slippery. But it has one super feature. The way it folds over the rear of the tank is a simple touch of genius from both the functional and aesthetic points of view.

The original cupola, or, as the Americans call it, 'bikini' fairing, is pure fifties — round, smooth, tight-fitting and well-built, with not a hard edge in sight. The

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.

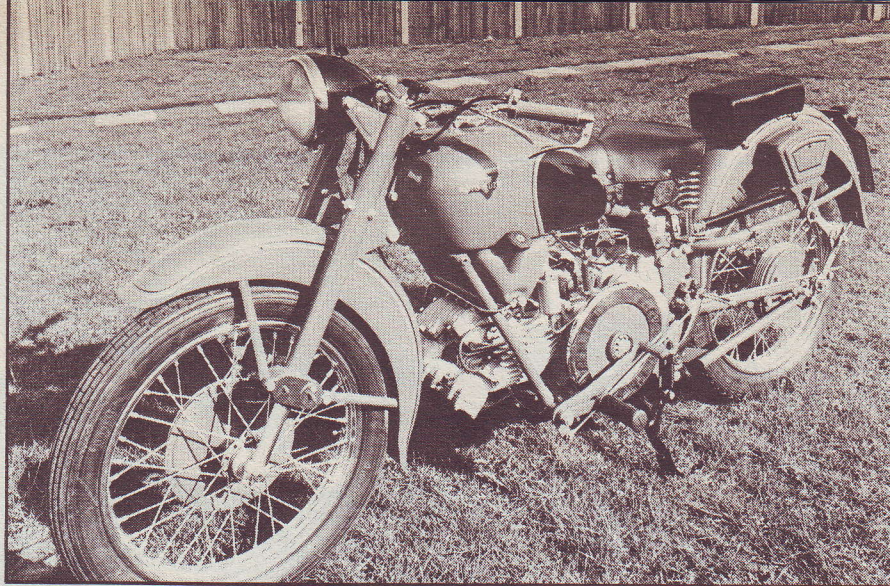
Finally, the plastic side panels. These are made from a totally different material to the rest of the machine, a sort of poor-quality stiff polythene with metal tabs on the inside to clip them to the frame. I sat and looked at these items for some time, trying to fathom out why they jarred so badly with 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 motorcycles are motorised bicycles, and should retain their affinity to this functional form. Bicycles use transfers and lacquer 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 remains the steam-engine torque so distinctive in these big V-twins, but added is a top end of sheer roaring gallop 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 bel-low most of the time, but when the engine is 'on cam' or the overrun 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-tin 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 foot-rest 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 pillion pegs and fix the exhaust 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 *l'epoca*, and the Germans, the British and the Japanese never had it.

PARTS AND SERVICE

George Grou and Sons, 341 Goswell Rd, London EC1.

Motoso (Graham Keeley), Unit 4, Kilton Tce, Worksop, Notts.

Heston Spray Co, 307 Norwood Rd, Heston nr Hounslow, Middlesex.

Jack Lilley Ltd, 109-111 High St, Shepperton, Middlesex.

John Blanchard Motorcycles, 156 Well Hall Rd, Eltham, London SE9.

Bernie's Spares 'n' Repairs, 52 Woodford Rd, Watford, Herts WD1 1PA.

