

## RESTORATION REVEALED

WORDS GEZ KANE

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# MOTO GUZZI Le Mans 850

Booming V-twin urge and fine Italian handling make the Le Mans the best Guzzi sportsbike.

Here's how to get them up to scratch

**NOT ALL SPORTBIKES** are the same – and the Moto Guzzi Le Mans is certainly different. A transverse V-twin engine developed from the power plant of a military three-wheeler, and shaft-drive? Surely that's the stuff of leisurely touring bikes, isn't it? Not according to Moto Guzzi.

Launched at the Milan show in 1975 and based on Guzzi's V7 Sport, the new model had bags more power, thanks to bigger valves, 36mm Dell'Orto carbs and high compression pistons – 71bhp at the rear wheel, good enough to propel the new Le Mans to around 130mph and cement its reputation as a genuine sportsbike.

There are four versions of the original 850 – the most desirable Le Mans models. Predictably, the first production run of the MkI version of the bike – officially titled simply as the Le Mans, though often called the Series One MkI – is the most sought after. Only around 2000 – with round CEV tail-light – were made before the Series Two (with square tail-light, revised rear mudguard and a larger dual seat) took over.

The 1978 Le Mans MkII is basically the same bike with a more angular fairing with lower panels fitting around the cylinder heads, and the front brake calipers relocated behind the fork legs.

Later MkIIs also have 'Nigusil' cylinders, a nickel/silicone alloy similar to Nikasil. The 1982 MkIII was a serious redesign hinting at the 949cc version to come and was the most powerful of the 850s.

For 1984, a new Le Mans 1000 (actually 949cc) arrived, with 16in front wheel and bigger 40mm forks. But the Le Mans was morphing into a sports tourer. Bigger and heavier than the 850s, performance was only marginally better and some of the old Le Mans magic was lost. Post-87 bikes reverted to an 18in front wheel. The Le Mans 1000 ran until 1993 in various versions.

The 850s are the favourites of sporting riders. The MkIIIs are the fastest (just), MkIs the best looking – and certainly the most collectable. But the 1000s are rewarding rides on sweeping roads – and lots cheaper.

Four owners share Le Mans wisdom. ☺

## 1978 Le Mans 850 MkI Richard Creswell, Bromley

"I'VE BEEN afflicted by Moto Guzzis for years. I've owned eight Le Mans over the years and about 40 Guzzis in total. I've owned this MkI Le Mans for just over a year. I got into them because they are such competent machines.

"The Le Mans engine will cover serious mileage. If you do need to rebuild one, they are fairly straightforward to work on and the parts are readily available. Get a factory manual and stick to the recommended torque settings. A copy of the book, *Guzziology* by David Richardson will be a big help too. Copies come up on eBay (usually in the USA) for £30-40 or email parts@motointernational.

"On round-barrel engines (MkI and MkII) check for damage to the fins on the cylinder heads. They are easily damaged even in a minor crash. If damaged fins have been tidied up with a file, it can be hard to tell that they've been damaged. You can buy 950 round-barrel kits from Teo Lamers in the Netherlands (tlm.nl) if you need to replace the barrels. They cost about £300 each. Original, genuine Guzzi round barrels are like gold dust.

"People always go on about the universal joint on the shaft drive, but they rarely give trouble. Vibration when you're riding means there's a problem with it. The universal joint can spin in the sleeve of the inner race of its support bearing – it should be an interference fit. Fitting a new support bearing is easy, but it's best to invest in the factory tool that fits over the U/J to keep it straight as you drive it into the support bearing. It costs about £30-40, but makes the job so much easier.

"The electrics are not as bad as people say, though some parts are getting hard to find. I saw some MkI switchgear go for £300 on eBay last year. You can fit MkV-on switchgear though.

"Restore a Le Mans, get it back on the road and enjoy it."



## 1979 Le Mans 850 MkII

Andy Braimbridge, Beverley



**"I BOUGHT** my Le Mans on Christmas Eve 1981 from Cooper Kawasaki in Hull. I traded in a Honda CB400F and I was determined to get something big and Italian. I actually test-rode a Jota, but my inside leg measurement steered me towards the Le Mans. I used it every day for 15 years. It's part of my life. But it had been standing in the back of the garage since my wife became pregnant with our son James – he's 15 now.

"James got interested in bikes and it's he who has driven the restoration, which we started in summer 2011. The bike looked a real mess, but Guzzis are pretty durable. Most of the mechanical parts are readily available, but fairing panels and the like are very hard to find in decent condition.

"The right side-panel is almost always broken on MkII Le Mans, because it's very awkward to refit. It breaks at the bottom fixing lug. Mine was already broken when I bought the bike in 1981. I haven't been able to find a good replacement and I've tried everything to repair broken panels over the years. I got a sample of Loctite 3090 adhesive. It's water-based, not epoxy and it can fill gaps and cracks up to 5mm wide. The sidepanel is almost as good as new now.

"I use Gutsibits, near Huddersfield and Moto Mecca for spares. Between them, they can supply almost anything you'll need. Gutsibits put me on to the Odyssey PC925L battery I've fitted to my bike. It's a gel type battery. With a standard battery, I was charging it every few weeks. It just wasn't up to the high-comp Le Mans engine. It cost £132, but it's well worth it.

"Mechanically, my engine has only needed one small-end bearing in 136,000 miles. Strip and clean every connector and get the carbs immaculately clean – I got mine ultrasonically cleaned for £120. With a healthy wallet and a good battery, you won't go far wrong with a Le Mans."

## 1978 Le Mans 850 Mkl

Kate Wain, Stoke

**"I'VE OWNED** my Series Two Mkl for five years and started getting it up to scratch about a year later. My husband, Guy, and I own eight Guzzis between us.

"When you strip the frame for refinishing – I prefer powdercoat to 'original' paint because it's tougher – make sure you mask off the threads for the swingarm pivots. There are a pair of plugs that screw in from the outside to locate the swingarm (which also carries the drive shaft, of course) and the threads are very fine and easily damaged. We use Cambrian Powder Paints (01691 610596).

"The motors are pretty tough, though we had to replace the valve guide, clutch and universal joint. If you're stripping the engine, replace the gear-lever return spring as a matter of course. It's an engine out and split job to replace it.

"The Mkl Le Mans has chrome bores and you should replace pistons and bores



together. Later MkIIs have Guzzi's Nigusil bores. These days, both types can be re-plated by specialists.

"Parts are easy to source. I use Corsa Italiana (01932 252255). Some genuine parts for the Mkl are rare – steering damper knobs, Lafranconi silencers and clocks. I found a new MKI damper at Gutsibits (01484 841395). They have big stocks of used parts as do Reboot in France (rebootguzzispares.com).

"I've twin-plugged the heads on my Mkl. NBS converted my heads for around £250 plus the twin output Dyna coils and gaskets on top of that. I fitted a Dyna electronic ignition too. The bike is much better from low down.

"Don't over restore. You'll be afraid to ride the bike – what's the point in that?"

## 1979 Le Mans 850 Mkl

Neil Ridgewell, Newmarket

**"I BOUGHT** the bike as an unfinished project from a mate of mine. Initially, I thought it was a converted MkII because of the build date stamped on the plate on the headstock. But it has only had two owners from new and the original owner bought it as a Mkl. If you're paying Mkl money, you want to get a Mkl. The factory has a website for dating machines and for €30 they will check your details against their records. I've got an application in, but a friend visited the factory in person a few weeks back and it looks like mine could be the fourth-last Mkl built.

"When you're considering updating a Mkl, it pays to keep all the original parts. I've replaced the original points ignition with a Dyna 3 electronic ignition system. I've also replaced the original regulator/rectifier set up with a modern conversion from Elektronis Sachse (€149), which fits in front of the alternator under the cover.

"Getting the right finish on a Mkl is vital. The exhausts are finished in a matt/satin black. Camcoat (01925 445003) in Warrington re-finished mine. Their ceramic coating is much more durable than paint and looks just right. It cost about £250, but I won't need to keep doing it again. The frame and black panels on the tank should be in the same finish, not gloss.

"If you've got the engine out, replace the rear crankshaft oil seal (behind the clutch) and the clutch itself as a matter of course. You have to pull the whole bike apart to do it, so you might as well do it while the engine is out. The two clutch plates are about £70 each and the springs (there are eight of them) are only £3 each.

"If you're planning on clocking up a bit of mileage, it's worth considering a sump extension. Moto Guzzi fitted them on later models at the factory. Fitting just entails removing the existing sump and fitting the extension casting like the filling in a sandwich between the original sump pan and the bottom of the crankcases. It's not cheap at around £350, but what price peace of mind?"

