

LEAN, MEAN, CAFFEINE MACHINE

Reader John Purnell loved his British bikes, but wanted a change. He didn't turn Japanese though; he went for an espresso.

WORDS AND PHOTOS: PAUL BERRYMAN

We're probably all aware that the café racer scene has gotten a little out of hand of late. You must have seen them, the bikes I mean? Fifteen metres of ill-fitting exhaust wrap, a plank seat and turning the bars upside down cannot make every long-forgotten 1980s motorcycle model into a head-turner worth upwards of £5000. Oh no, despite what its creator says. But just because bikes like that are all too easily found on popular auction sites, it doesn't mean we should spurn the genre just yet.

CMM's foray into café culture with our event at the Super Sausage near Towcester was all the bait we needed to lure John Purnell's gorgeous Moto Guzzi into our grasp. As café racers go, this one is as punchy as a freshly drawn triple espresso.

It started life in 1982 as an 850 Le Mans Mk.3, although you'd never guess. Instead of the linear and clunky angles on the original bike, his beautiful machine has softened the original hard-edged styling with a combination of generous curves and minimal componentry. The look and feel of the bike is very organic; from the sweeping arc of the three spokes on the gorgeous period cast CMA wheels to the exquisite sculpting of the handmade aluminium tank, this bike arranges its lines in a way that is much easier on the eye than the original.

There is real flow in its form and it's all going in one simple direction – parallel to the ground along the length of the bike. It's very long with a wheelbase of 60in (1524mm) it's also very low, and yet has very good ground clearance. All this combines to make a bike that achieves the look of travelling incredibly fast, even standing still. In fact, it has the demeanour of a very pretty torpedo.

John is the kind of owner most of us will probably never be – rather than experiencing the world of motorcycling by constantly buying different bikes, he's doing it in a much more pragmatic way. He's had the Guzzi for 12 years and patiently whittles away almost constantly at making the changes he wants, so the bike adapts more and more to his tastes as time goes by. John was a serial British bike owner and when he eventually fancied a change he didn't look to Japan but to Italy.

He bought this bike when it had already been through a serious amount of modification. He says: "The engine had already been reworked to 950cc, the front end had been upgraded, the CMA wheels were



Prefer a fresh espresso to
dried instant from a jar?
This bike could be for you!



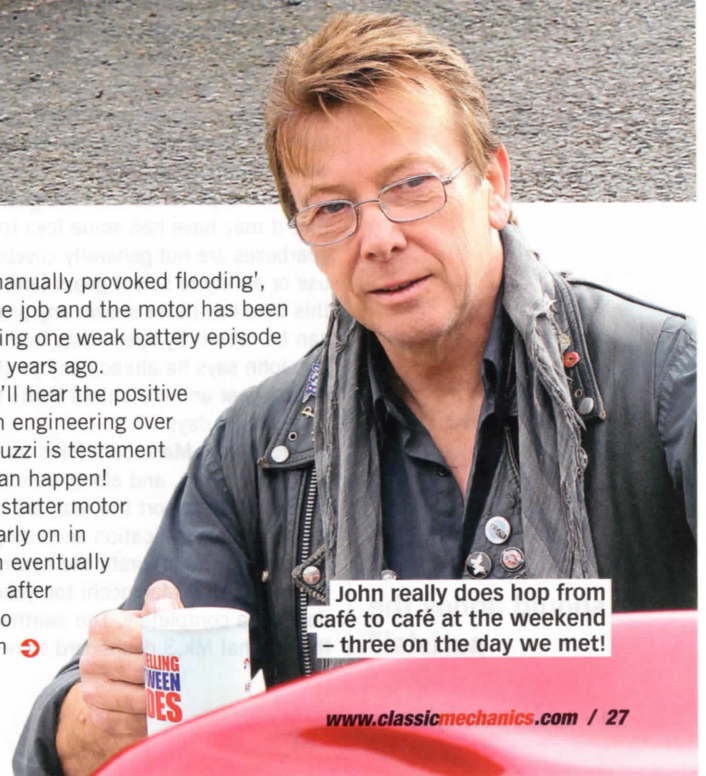
fitted and the aluminium tank was already on board. Because the guy I bought the bike from wasn't the guy that had done any of the work, the history of the bike was passed on in good faith, rather than being from the horse's mouth – but time has revealed that everything added up as originally relayed."

The engine was built by Guzzi stalwarts Raceco, and features barrels from a Spada 1000 model (which is actually 949cc) with Cosworth pistons and a lumpier camshaft. Carbs are Dell'Orto PHM40s from a 900SS Ducati, running through open alloy bell-mouths. The choke on these is the good old-fashioned 'tickler' type where the extra juice required to start the motor comes from something

we may well call 'manually provoked flooding', but they're up to the job and the motor has been 100% reliable barring one weak battery episode during winter many years ago.

It's not often you'll hear the positive attributes of French engineering over German, but this Guzzi is testament to the fact that it can happen! The original Bosch starter motor needed a rebuild early on in his tenure and then eventually became tired again after a few more years, so a French Valeo item →

John really does hop from
café to café at the weekend
– three on the day we met!





Better than a chiropractor? John's bad back gets 'corrected' by the Guzzi's tailor-made seating position.

"The V1000 badges came with the bike. They're from an auto-transmission tourer. That should annoy the purists!"

replaced it. At 1.9kg lighter it's surprising to hear that it does a better job of cranking the big V-twin over than the Bosch did, but it does. Vive la France!

Feeding the carbs is that tank – that gorgeous tank. Painted the most beautiful candy coated deep red, the colour is evocative of passion and of Italy. It immerses you in so much sparkling red it's like drowning in a glass-sided vat of Chianti Classico on a sunny day in Tuscany (can you tell I like it?). The tank itself is hand-crafted from aluminium, with an endurance type alloy filler cap. Its curves, although quite complex, are pure and very attractive. It looks good enough to be an example of the finest Italian design, but it was actually made many years ago by a very clever gentleman called John 'Taff' Williams from the Tankshop (who are still trading and on www.thetankshop.com).

John's experience with the gearbox suggests that it may have had some love too – Moto Guzzi gearboxes are not generally coveted for their ease of use or ability to select gears (and stay in them) but this bike has never shown any problems – the boxes can be rebuilt by specialists to make them slicker, but John says he already enjoys silent engagement of first gear and clutchless shifts to third, fourth and fifth: happy days.

The 38mm Marzocchi forks up front sit in their own alloy yokes, and along with the Koni dial-a-ride shocks that support the rear, are a popular period suspension modification according to John. He's managed to incorporate the neutral and oil warning lights into that Marzocchi top yoke, decluttering the dash area completely. The swathes of grey plastic on the original Mk.3 dashboard were, I'm sorry to say,

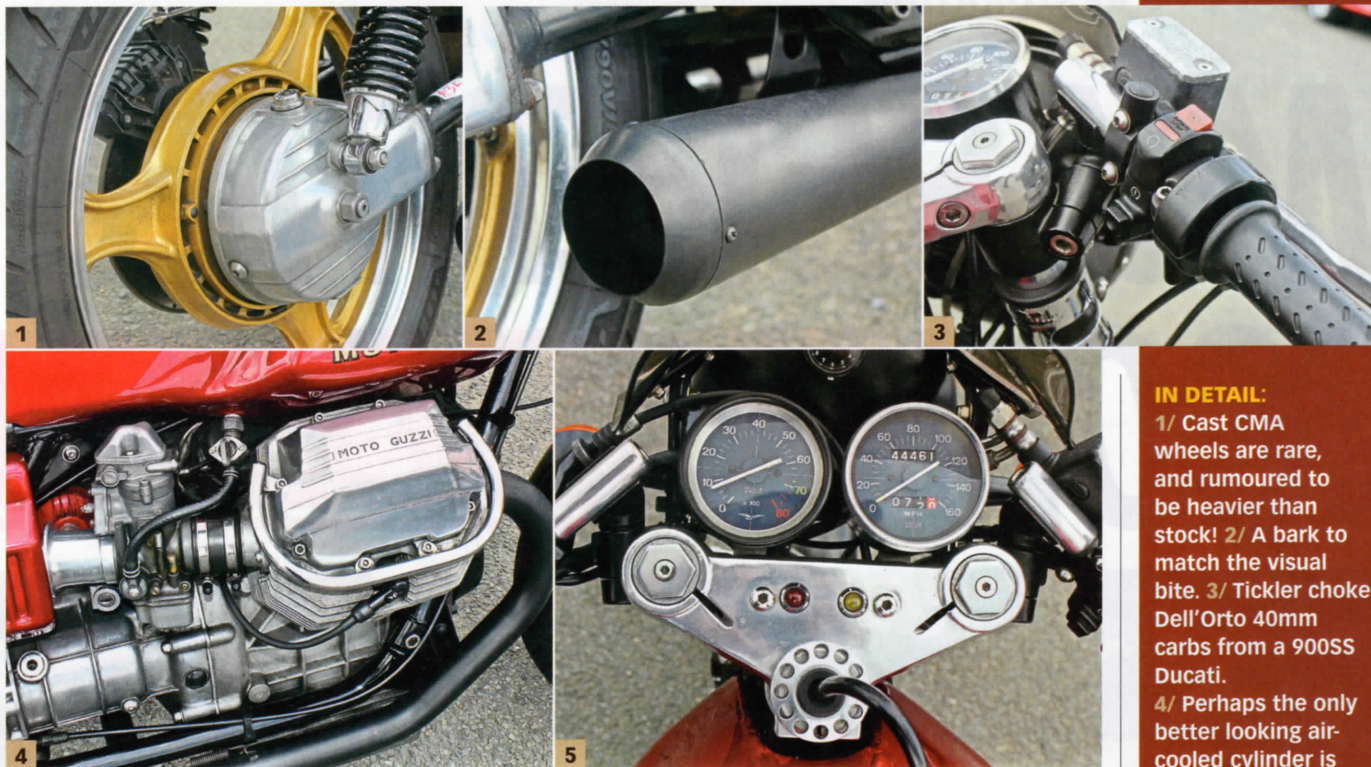
just plain ugly. His bike had already lost this when he got it, but it only offered a speedo. John wanted a tacho too, so he had some well-hidden brackets made to support both Veglia clocks.

The rev counter was just a tenner from eBay and needed a little work on the bezel before fitting. They look great but John admits they're only loosely functional: "These Veglia clocks all require that you watch them closely as the needle waves around, and then take an average reading!"

Shrouding the clocks from the wind is a screen that looks custom made for the bike, but which started life on a V-Max! The 7in Honda headlight on John's bike didn't match the arc of the V-Max screen's 6in headlamp cut-out, so one of the three clever engineering folk John credits for the majority of the metalwork he's had made, took the alloy V-Max screen support and machined it to suit.

The bike is full of such little touches that make it very sweet. From the top yoke nut which looks nothing like a top yoke nut, being perfectly round and drilled, to the chamfered and domed heads of the bolts holding the shocks on, which blend into a smooth cone of alloy, there are lots of little touches which he's added, at considerable accumulative expense, to make the bike just as he wants it.

A more pressing issue than the pleasing addition of trinketry was the need to modify the aftermarket 'comfort' seat that came with it. An ugly thing, it used to enshroud the entire back of the tank like all early Le Mans model seats do. And ignore the name – John said it was 'like sitting on a stale loaf' so it clearly needed some attention. He had the foam shaved from the seat and replaced, concurrently



IN DETAIL:

1/ Cast CMA wheels are rare, and rumoured to be heavier than stock! 2/ A bark to match the visual bite. 3/ Tickler choke Dell'Orto 40mm carbs from a 900SS Ducati. 4/ Perhaps the only better looking air-cooled cylinder is the round version on earlier Guzzis. Lovely. 5/ Compared to the mess of clocks and yokes on the original, this is a heavenly view.

The torpedo look – long, low, component lines parallel to the floor.

altering the line of the saddle and thus improving the line of the bike. Gone was the seat's bulky enclosure to the rear of the tank too, and something slimmer and more appropriate for this espresso torpedo was crafted.

Although the riding position looks more than a little awkward for a bloke with a bad back, it seems another benefit of the bike being made to measure is that he describes it's influence on his condition as 'corrective!' It's surprising; the Telefix adjustable clip-ons grip under the yokes and are quite low, while the Tarozzi rear-sets are set a long way back. But once sat on the bike, you can see it fits John like a glove. It's been as far as the Lake District (from Stevenage) without creating the need for orthopaedic surgery to the rider, so it can't be at all bad.

John summed up his early ownership of the bike: "Fundamentally, when I got it the major parts of the bike had been well built – but the finishing details, the things that make it 'nice' – it felt like they'd been rushed. Those are the things I concentrated on changing, and I spent a lot of money on what sometimes looks like not very much!" Binning the late 1980s Suzuki switchgear and wiring in much more aesthetically pleasing first generation FireBlade items is just such an example of this improvement, as is the modification to the Tarozzi rearsets.

This involved replacing the ugly brackets and connecting linkages of an aftermarket master cylinder that did nothing to add appeal. Harris exhaust pipes were fitted, but had rotted through, so John took the original Guzzi double skinned headers and had an 'H' section link pipe made to accept copies of Wassell reverse megaphone silencers. John had the cones turned down (which are steel, not aluminium on these) to look more Italian. Like lots of parts on this bike, they point straight backwards, without any upsweep or angle. The bark of the engine through these is just as it should be – impressive but not offensive.

What remains of the original Guzzi? John's answer isn't the longest "The frame is completely unaltered, the discs and calipers although now on

different rims are also from a stock bike. The sidepanels are stock, but not from this model – they are either Mk.1 or 2 Le Mans." I ask about the V1000 badges on the sidepanels. "They came to me like that, and they're an interesting choice as they're from the V1000 Convert, which was an automatic transmission tourer – I suspect that will upset the purists!" he rightly chuckles.

I have had my faith reaffirmed in café racer culture by both John Purnell himself, and his stunning Moto Guzzi – it's such a perfect incarnation of a café racer, it may as well run on caffeine instead of petrol. John's 12 year ownership and perpetual cycle of improvements are testament to an owner who isn't into quick and tacky mods, but well thought out and well-engineered solutions to things he personally wants to improve; I get the feeling this bike isn't built for anyone else to like but himself. That single-minded sense of purpose exudes a uniformity and style that, perhaps paradoxically, may just make this bike very attractive to everyone. I for one absolutely love it.

Top job John, and although I believed you when you said you'd never sell it – if you change your mind, can I get first refusal? **cm**

