

COLLECTIN' BIG BRUISES UP ON T'MOORS

THE MORNING AFTER A HEAVY NIGHT on Theakston's Old Peculiar isn't exactly the best time to reacquaint yourself with the joys of trail riding after a two-year lay off. I sat on the Honda XL500R — feet just touching the ground, guts shifting about uncomfortably — and watched Calderwood leaping the Yamaha XT550 in and out of a stream bed for the benefit of Ian Dawson's camera. *Bike's* travelling circus was about to launch itself at the North Yorkshire Moors under the guidance of John Bloomfield, the local Trail Riders Fellowship rep.

It's hard to believe that you're only 20-odd miles from the massive ICI complex at Middlesbrough when you're up on the hills. The North Yorks moors aren't the highest or most extensive range of hills in the country but they offer a varied selection of going. Because the high ground in that part of the world tends to rise somewhat abruptly out of the surrounding countryside, the trails are the same way. A steep section, generally fairly rocky, is followed by a level stretch across the tops, either unmade road or track, and then you drop down again over rocks. Some of it's easy, some of it's tricky but it's all fun.

That's what I kept telling myself anyway as Calderwood attempted to beat the basics of off-road riding into me. This learned discourse came in two parts: if in doubt gas it, and if you intend to use the brake, get your weight over the wheel and squeeze the lever like you mean it.

Fine, I thought, act like the brain's been taken out and you'll be okay. Once the camera had stopped clicking John led the way, hopping his Honda XL250S up the rock slabs in a manner that didn't make me feel a lot better. Dave got the Yam up with a fair amount of footing and I didn't give it enough welly and stalled the Honda. The ensuing gymnastics involved in getting into a position where it was possible to start the bloody thing without falling over nearly gave me a coronary. Twenty a day for years tend to make themselves felt on occasions like this.

Bloody great thumpers, I decided, are not the thing for dirt novices.

Still, tooling along a section of fairly smooth lane surfaced with loose stones proved one thing to me. The faster you go the safer it feels and, what's more, the suspension can cope with the small streams that cross the route leaving alarming-looking miniature valleys.

Then we came to the river. The first law of trail riding is that you are going to get wet. It doesn't matter if there's been a drought for months — you'll get wet. So when we came across a stretch of road marked 'Unfit for motor vehicles' that followed a river bed for 30 or 40 metres it was inevitable that common sense would disappear fairly rapidly. Once we'd decided to plough back and forth a few times for the benefit of the camera silly behaviour was guaranteed. It all went fairly sanely until it was decided that there wasn't enough spray to make a good pic. So Calderwood broke formation, gunned the Yam and damn nearly drowned me. The next few passes turned into a who-can-soak-who competition. I'm glad to report that the first time I succeeded in drenching Dave he had his gob open and nearly choked and fell off simultaneously. This is all part of the hard life we lead as searchers after the truth, you understand.

After a light lunch (Theakston's again) I started feeling a little more confident, I should have known better. Following John across a grass track in the heather we came across some suspiciously black and nasty swamp water. Calderwood dropped back a little to figure his line out, I went for an innocent patch of water. The front wheel disappeared up to axle level, stopped dead and I executed my first Flying W.

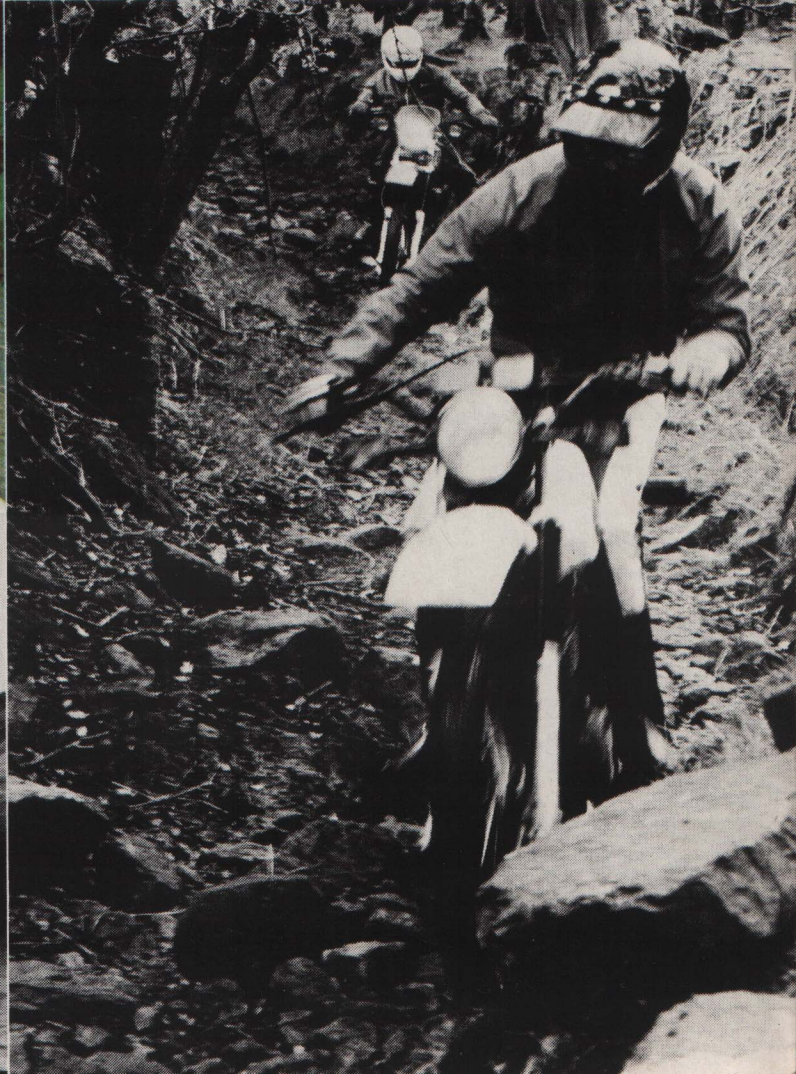
For the uninitiated, the classic Flying W involves the rider pivoting round the handlebar and landing in front of the bike. People have been known to achieve the ultimate goal of the off-road rider — running yourself over — using this technique.

The great thing about trail riding — apart from being able to crash and not hurt yourself — is that you go places that very few others do and get to see views that are nothing short of stunning. Late in the afternoon we came to a trail that winds along a ridge along the edge of one of the Cleveland Hills. On the left was heather covered moorland, on the right a very, very, steep drop. John, who'd had no problem picking me out as the rabbit of the expedition, patted me on the back and said 'Whatever you do lad, I'd keep to the left.' But my natural cowardly instincts were overcome by the view. A few miles to the east was another ridge of this beautiful range of hills with Captain Cook's Monument, a large column, and on the northern edge of the ridge was the weird shape of Roseberry Topping, an almost conical peak that rises over 1000 feet above sea level. Looking further north we saw the industrial complex of Billingham hiding under a permanent haze.

It's the sort of view that makes you wonder why anyone lives in cities voluntarily. After that anything would have been an anticlimax, so we retreated to base for more Theakston's.

Is it too much to expect grown men to behave like adults when they're on the trail? Yes.

Julian Ryder confesses.



DIRT GIANT TEST



Honda's XL and Yamaha's XT are the heavy league trailsters: wet wimps needn't bother. The XL's got a new long travel suspension set-up and the XT's a whole new bike, engine and frame. Testers Julian Ryder and Dave Calderwood



Photography Ian Dawson

HONDA XL500R

YAMAHA XT550





GGF
713X

550

HONDA

500R

PRO-LINK

Honda XL500R

'HEE, HEE' GRINNED THE MECHANIC at Honda's HQ as I surveyed the awe inspiring 800mm seat height (over 34.5 inches) of the XL500R, 'last time we gave one of these to *Bike*, Calderwood broke a collarbone.' As a confirmed tarmac rider whose forays on to the dirt have generally been by accident rather than design there was no way I could deny it: the idea of off-roading Honda's dual purpose giant put the wind up me. Something small that I could drag out of trouble when the going got rough — like a DT175 — yes; but nearly 140kg (over 300lb) of mean looking thumper? — I'd rather not if you don't mind.

After all, the thing looks just like a real moto crosser apart from the obviously four-stroke engine. Long travel front and rear suspension, bags of ground clearance, enormous saddle height, tiny brakes, knobby tyres, fire engine red finish, they're all there just like on the bikes Graham and Andre ride. Only on this year's model, Honda have managed to blur the distinction between trail bike, pukka enduro machine and moto crosser. The XL500R may look just like the XR models sold in Europe and the States as a competition enduro bike but is significantly different. The XL is most definitely a trail bike, in fact it's probably a better road bike than it is a dirt machine.

What Honda have done is take the old, conventional XL500S with its twin shock absorbers and give it the full treatment. Now the R looks like it's just escaped from a race track. The most obvious addition is the Pro-Link rear suspension. This system feeds stresses into the frame much nearer the front of the bike than is the case with the usual twin shock absorber set up so that in turn means a new frame. Outwardly it still looks like the old diamond pattern with the front downtube clamping to the front of the crank cases but it's been beefed up in the middle to cope with Pro-Link. All the rear of the frame has to do now is support the saddle and rear mudguard.

Honda's rising rate rear suspension system is described fully elsewhere in this issue so I'll just tell you that it has adjustable spring pre-load but the damping is fixed and it has a theoretical full travel of 190mm (7.5in). It's theoretical because the main point of rising rate is that it should be impossible to bottom it out. Up front the fork stanchions have grown by 2mm to 37mm diameter with air assisted springing. Unfortunately the legs aren't linked but as air assistance is actually of some use off road I don't suppose we should complain too much. I've experienced the horrible sickening clunk of a front fork bottoming out on the rough — normally followed by the equally horrible sound of helmet contacting terra firma.

In the engine department, very little has changed. There's the 89 x 80mm bore and stroke, 33bhp, ohc single finished totally in black with a tiny exhaust pipe exiting from each of the twin exhaust ports and sweeping round the right of the engine to meet and disappear

Left: Before the bruising began. Despite the Honda's professional good looks, it was the XT550 Yamaha which proved a better dirt tool when things get serious



under the side panel. But there is one significant addition. Just like in a two-stroke there's a reed valve between the carb and the inlet valves.

The idea is to stop the nasty big single habit of spitting back and stalling at low revs. Any mixture that tries to back-track out through the carb should be prevented from leaving by the reed valve's petals and then sucked into the combustion chamber by the next induction stroke. Basically it worked, the bike never stalled when the throttle was rolled off, kept closed for a while and then opened up again. Sometimes there was this odd feeling of the motor wanting to spit back but not being allowed to and the reed valve certainly isn't a guarantee against stalling the motor. I managed to stall it often, usually in the most inconvenient places.

The only other addition is a manual valve lifter hidden under the clutch lever. As there's already an automatic valve lifter working off the kickstart it seems a little surplus to requirements but people who know about these things tell me that it's handy for restarting on the rough. Head the bike downhill in gear with the lifter in operation then let go and the motor starts.

Using more conventional means — the kickstart — isn't difficult despite the height of the bike. Just adopt the time-honoured procedure of easing the piston over compression and then giving it a good hard downswing.

Wimpish prodding will get you precisely nowhere.

Starting the thing may not be a problem but getting on in the first place is, especially if you're under six feet tall. Once you're moving the Honda makes a surprisingly good road bike, the only worry is that feeling of being so far from the ground on such a skinny machine. That and the worry in the back of the brain about cornering hard on trail tyres.

Most of my worries were misplaced. The rear tyre only slipped under extreme provocation and both ends behaved exceptionally well in the wet. Likewise the puny looking twin leading shoe front brake turned out to be well up to the job. The only time I got it to fade was during top speed and quarter mile runs at MIRA.

Talking of MIRA, the flying top speed of 102mph was achieved in favourable conditions with yours truly sat well back on the seat, nose between the clocks and left hand on the fork stanchion. We don't normally go in for these sort of acrobatics but having got in the high nineties on the first run we decided that we'd try and get a ton out of it. The Honda did it with no bother, we didn't even remove the mirrors. More to the point the bike was totally and utterly stable during these antics. I've ridden quite a few straight road bikes that felt less steady than the XL at that sort of speed.

It's not uncommon to see French, German ▶

DIRT GIANT TEST

Right: Both big singles are excellent road bikes — light and fast, good handling though hairy on knobbly tyres in the wet. Both are also very quiet with massive exhausts

and Swiss riders touring abroad on big trail bikes and the XL is quite happy to bop along at 80 mph all day without leaving your arms feeling like they're about to be dislocated. But unfortunately your bum is liable to feel a bit numb 'cos the seat padding tends to compress just where you need it most. There's plenty of room for a pillion though, and those who travelled on the back of the XL were surprisingly complimentary about the comfort; there weren't even any complaints about the footrests being mounted on the swing arm.

It ain't quite the same story on the dirt though. The engine has enough grunt to pull you up or through anything, the rider's main problem is in staying with the bike. Even Calderwood at six foot two admitted to feeling a mite uncomfortable at times on the Honda. I'm at least six inches shorter than Dave and I was in real trouble.

I'd find I needed to get a foot down to steady things and find myself prodding at thin air on the downhill side of a hill, resulting usually in an undignified heap of cursing Ryder trapped under a large Honda. It's a heavy bugger when you try and pick it up, as well, and then you've got to go through the starting procedure.

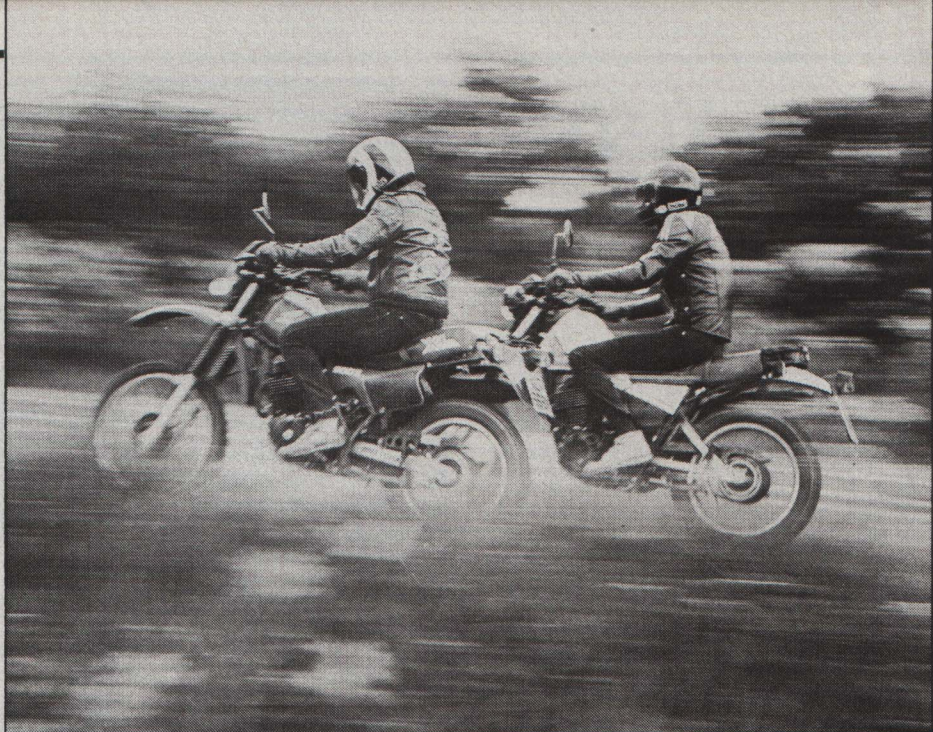
Not that the XL was useless on the dirt, far from it. On the more open stretches of track it worked fine and the suspension gave as smooth a ride as could reasonably be expected. The Showa front fork with its Syntallic bushing was superb, coping with any of the ludicrous situations I stuck it in to. I'd have liked the chance to play with the rear suspension settings a bit but a cursory squint at the rear shock revealed that it'd be the labour of a lifetime to get at the collar and its lock ring hidden up on the top of the Showa unit.

Similarly the tyres coped with everything except smooth rock on our North Yorks jaunt but when both bikes were taken down to Hampshire for a blat round some rutted chalk tracks the Honda started showing a few distressing tendencies. Instead of following the chosen line in rutted corners it'd try and climb out of the rut it'd been pointed at and dump more experienced riders than me on their ears. The other area where it lost out to the Yamaha on the fast, hard going was in the engine's inability to kick the back end out. The trouble is that the Honda's motor is just too civilised. Instead of the instant responsiveness that lets a good rider drift the back as much or little as he likes and then find grip coming out of a corner, the XL has a woolly, soft feel.

But I suppose that any arguments about the XL's dirt ability are somewhat academic. No one in their right mind is going to use one in an enduro, the thing is just too big and too heavy. And all the serious trail riders I know use small two-strokes or 250cc four-strokes.

Daft as it sounds, the XL does make a better road bike than dirt shifter. It's got lots of stomp for surprising people away from traffic lights, it sounds good, it'll cruise at 80mph in comfort, it's amazingly frugal on the petrol, its brakes work and it looks sharp. All I'd do is swop the original tyres for a set of Pirelli's on/off (but mainly on) road rubbers. At £1290 it's £60 cheaper than the FT500 which'll give you the same thrills in a different package. □

Julian Ryder



Yamaha XT550

IT'S A FAMILIAR SCENARIO WHICH I'M sure you've all experienced: turning up on someone's (usually not a biker) doorstep after you've ridden miles through what appears to be the end of the world, only instead of the fires of Armageddon it was the rains of North Yorkshire. You stand there expecting a little sympathy an' all you get is 'd'yer have a good ride up?' when it's patently obvious that you didn't, followed by a seemingly terminal case of giggles. This time as I stripped off layers of sodden red and black nylon only to discover damp patches everywhere underneath, provoking more giggles, I let rip a biker's lament . . . 'Soddin' bike's still running in, couldn't do more than 65, tyres give me the willies on roundabouts, gloves soaked through — couldn't feel me fingers, visor got covered in flies at dusk an' then it rained, couldn't see nuffin' for ages, pulled into a garage only to find half the bleedin' Army on its way to the Falklands, the ol' Bill wanted to know where the tax disc was . . . I don't know, do I? Ain't even my bike which of course really interested him . . .'

And so it went on and the XT550 which'd borne me all the way up to Darlington from London only a couple of hours after its PDI sat forlornly outside for the whole of the next day, getting only a quick spray of PJ chain lube for its efforts. Sunday came and with all my riding gear at last dried out, it was time to go and get wet again, fortunately only as far as Stokesley this time, a mere 15 or so miles from Darlington. This was the base for yet another *Bike* must-get-out-of-London project and along the narrow, twisty lanes I began to notice the improvements made to Yamaha's trail tank.

It was the old XT500 which really sprang the idea of a modern single cylinder four-stroke back into manufacturer's minds in 1976 and the way Yamaha went about it was a shrewd and bold move. After all, it was multis of all sizes which most riders were buying and the idea of a

500cc trail iron was completely at odds with what else was available. I've great memories of rides aboard that ol' thumper: trailing up in the Lake District (*Bike*, August '78: 'All Dressed Up And Nowhere To Go') and then down to Cornwall, stubble racing in Hampshire after the summer harvest . . . but also horrific flashbacks such as bouncing down the side of a steep rocky dale, just ahead of over 300lb of cartwheeling iron and alloy which after throwing me off was trying to mash me into the grit. In short, the old XT was a great road bike — it had everything from a torquey fast motor, good predictable handling with a high level of rider comfort, and it just oozed Big Single charm. One of those few Japanese bikes with Character, definitely prefixed with a cap C. It was also one pig off-road, the Laverda Jota of trail tools requiring muscles to heave around, nerve to gas it on, and a right thigh built like a Welsh prop-forward to kickstart the bugger.

While it was the only such bike available and its novelty was still attracting unsuspecting dirt novices, the bad points didn't matter too much of course. But with Honda's neat XL around, and the slightly smaller Suzuki DR400, it was time for Yamaha to digest all the lessons learnt from moto cross, rallies such as the Paris-Dakar, and accept the criticism levelled by road testers and riders alike. Thus the XT550, the extra 59cc being the least important of the changes and probably only there to emphasise that it's a new XT.

And it is a completely new and different machine. The engine has four valves, two carbs and a balancer shaft; the chassis has monoshock rear suspension and moto cross geometry. The styling is along the lines of current moto crossers with an abrupt, short petrol tank, narrow between your legs, wider at the front end and tall to the filler cap. This latest thinking in dirt ergonomics is to allow the rider to move around the centre of the bike using his weight — 'Body English' style — to balance the bike and find grip. It also helps to prevent pulverising your balls as you misjudge a jump, land awkwardly with both feet off the pegs and smack your groin onto the tank, leaving you gasping in bug-eyed agony shortly before slipping into a state of



Yamaha's XT550 bears little resemblance to the old, even bigger bruising XT500. The new motor vibrates less, pulls smoothly and revs harder. Handling off road is a revelation: not in true enduro class, of course, but at least the rider now has some say in his direction. Details are nice, pity about the 'orrible colour



higher geared than the Honda. First gear is good for 29mph on the Honda at 7000rpm, 37mph on the Yamaha which obviously means that on the slower trails we'd encountered in Yorkshire the Honda's gearing was an advantage. Once away from slow, nagery stuff the XT's reluctance to trickle along slowly on a mere whiff of throttle didn't matter so much. Of course, if you're a regular trail rider then it's a simple matter to experiment with larger rear sprockets.

While the XT has plenty of torque produced over a wide rev range, the other new addition of a rotating balancer shaft to counterweight the mass of the piston and con-rod eases the vibration usual with big singles. Honda's XL has had this all along and is a major reason for it feeling such a willing revver — not only because it does rev easily but because the horrendous shakes which'd otherwise afflict the whole bike at seven grand or so are absent. The XT's balancer shaft is driven off the back of the crankshaft via gears sandwiched between the primary drive to the clutch and the right hand flywheel. The balancer weight itself is a half-flywheel which resides in the 6 to 12 o'clock position when the piston is at TDC (viewed from the right side).

Drive to the single overhead cam is by a 'silent' chain, automatically tensioned, and the valves are individually operated by their own rocker. Tappet clearance is adjusted with the usual locknut and screw. Unlike the XL Honda but similar to the old XT, lubrication is by the dry sump method with almost four pints circulating between the gear driven oil pump in the crankcases, through a paper element oil filter and an external return feed to the frame integrated oil tank. There's a large bulge in the frame hidden by the fuel tank just below the steering head where the bulk of the oil is retained before continuing on the circuit down the front downtube to the crankcases.

Worst point of the XT550 is undoubtedly starting it, much more so than the XL Honda which feels like a weedy 125 two-stroke in comparison. Somewhere, someone hasn't correctly arranged the so-called auto decompressor cable linkage between kickstarter and exhaust rocker. Often, instead of easing over TDC it'd halt the kickstarter lever in full flow sending ripples of protest up yer right thigh. Then, in a complete anti-climax, as you're straining to push the piston past TDC (and 558cc at 8.5:1 compression ain't a doddle), it'd burst into life defying the laws of internal combustion, so it seemed. Usually the answer is to forget where the piston is and lunge at the kickstarter full blast. Don't do it in soft shoes though — choose the heaviest, toughest, thickest-soled boots you can find. Occasionally, after the bike'd been dropped and been laid on its side for a while (adjacent to the rider, also on his side waiting to be picked up), the 550 would develop a five minute dose of the old XT sulks and refuse to fire however hard you booted it. Put it on its sidestand, turn off the petrol and leave it . . .

Fable has it that the XT motor was redesigned because Yamaha recognised the need to uprate the chassis, and to incorporate their knowledge of monoshock rear suspension the motor had to be shorter (no room for the shock absorber otherwise). Whether that's the case or not, the XT's new chassis is a whole step forward off-road and it's pretty stable on tarmac too. The trouble with all these big single trail bikes is they're just so big and heavy: the 550 is 20-odd pounds lighter than the old XT500 but at 300lb it still tends to take charge of you if you're not careful. However, the weight distribution and

catatonic shock . . .

Two carbs on what's supposed to be a simple single cylinder engine may seem over-the-top technology and certainly the system wasn't faultless during our test. Winding open the throttle quickly more often than not resulted in a sudden flat-spot of power, a halting spit-back which seemed to clear the motor's reluctance to go then whammo, it'd take-off but fast, often aviating the front wheel if in one of the first three gears. I was hoping this glitch would be sorted out during the bike's first service back at Mitsui HQ — I'd run the bike in according to the handbook much to my surprise — but even though it ran much smoother and quieter the hiccupping was still apparent. Only on tarmac, mind you, since great gobs of throttle when the wire's connected to 558cc of motor are a sure way to find yourself on yer ear on the dirt.

Yamaha's current predilection for fancy titles and initials has come up with YDIS for the two carbs: Yamaha Duo Intake System. The idea is that the left cable-operated slide carb operates on its own from tickover to about half-throttle. Each carb has its own inlet tract and valve so virtually all the gas flows into the combustion chamber through this left port at this stage, producing a strong swirl and thus enhanced combustion. Also, since the inlets of a four valve head are narrower the gas velocity is higher which helps overcome the usual problem with big singles of keeping the flow even at low to mid range rpm.

As the throttle is turned from half to wide

open, a linkage gradually opens the right hand CV carb's butterfly valve, bringing that into play. The more the butterfly turns, the higher the vacuum-controlled slide rises allowing more mixture to flow in through its own inlet and valve. With both slides fully open the engine, say Yamaha, receives more mixture and thus produces more power than with a regular single carb. They claim that the combined area of two inlet valves is 32% greater than one single valve. The hiccup experienced on the test bike when snapping open the throttle is a typical CV carb trait — they take a fraction of a second to react to the sudden pressure change in the venturi.

This doesn't stop the XT producing real stomp when you want it, there's just an annoying lurch before it gets going. While we were up on t'moors and the engine was still running in — though, quite honestly, the sort of terrain we were on didn't want handfuls of throttle — the XT didn't feel as pokey as the Honda XL or as smooth at low speed. Neither big singles could be called a 'plonker' in the British sense and it was easy to stall the XT when trying to pick a route through stones and rocky paths, particularly when going uphill. After its service, we went for a faster trail session down in Hampshire on ground we knew well and here the XT550 astounded us with a clear superiority over the Honda, not only with more precise handling but with its smoothness of power delivery. Then when we track tested the bikes through the MIRA electronic timing lights, it became apparent that the Yamaha is much

CHECKOUT

HONDA XL500R-C

YAMAHA XT550

| | | |
|-------------------------------|---|---|
| Price (inc VAT and Sales Tax) | £1290 | £1333 |
| Guarantee | 12 months/unlimited mileage | 12 months/unlimited mileage |
| Engine | sohc single | sohc single |
| Bore x stroke | 89 x 84mm | 92 x 84mm |
| Capacity | 498cc | 558cc |
| Compression ratio | 8.6:1 | 8.5:1 |
| Carburation | 32mm Keihin | 26mm slide Keihin plus supplementary CV |
| Ignition | CDI with electronic advance | CDI with electronic advance |
| Air filter | Foam element, washable | Foam element, washable |
| Oil filter | Gauze strainer | Paper element |
| Oil capacity | 2 litres (3.5 pints) | 2.2 litres (3.9 pints) |
| Max power @ rpm | 24.6kW (33bhp) @ 6500 | 28kW (38bhp) @ 6500 |
| Max torque @ rpm | 4kgm (29ftlb) @ 5000 | 4.5kgm (32.7ftlb) @ 5500 |
| Power per litre | 49.4kW (66.3bhp) | 50.2kW (68.1bhp) |
| Power to weight | 5.5kg per kW (9.1bhp per lb) | 4.9kg per kW (8bhp per lb) |
| Clutch | Multiplate, wet | Multiplate, wet |
| Primary drive | Gear | Gear |
| Gearbox | 5 speed | 5 speed |
| Electrical system | 169W alternator, 12V 3Ah battery, 35/35W headlamp | 12V 5Ah battery, 60/55W QH headlamp |

CYCLE PARTS

| | | |
|------------|--|---|
| Tyres | Yokohama | Bridgestone Trail Wings |
| Front | 3.00 x 21in | 3.00 x 21in |
| Rear | 4.60 x 17in | 4.60 x 18in |
| Brakes | | |
| Front | 2LS 130mm (5.1in) drum | SLS drum |
| Rear | SLS 130mm drum | SLS drum |
| Suspension | | |
| Front | Air-assisted coil spring | Air-assisted coil spring |
| Rear | Single shock Pro-Link with adjustable spring preload | Single shock with adjustable spring preload |

EQUIPMENT

| | | |
|----------------|----------------------------------|--|
| Indicators | Yes | Yes |
| Electric start | No | No |
| Trip odometer | Yes | Yes |
| Steering lock | Yes | Yes |
| Helmet lock | Yes | Yes |
| Others | Rear carrier, decompressor lever | Rear pouch, chain tensioner, bendy mudguards |

DIMENSIONS

| | | |
|------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Wheelbase | 1400mm (55.1in) | 1405mm (55.3in) |
| Overall width | 865mm (34in) | 860mm (33.8in) |
| Seat height | 880mm (34.6in) | 860mm (33.8in) |
| Ground clearance | 280mm (11in) | 250mm (9.8in) |
| Weight (inc 1gal fuel) | 136kg (300lb) | 138kg (305lb) |
| Fuel capacity | 10 litres (2.2 gals) | 11.4 litres (2.5gals) |

PERFORMANCE

| | | |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| Top speed | | |
| Prone | 101.25mph | 100.89mph |
| Sitting up | 94.19mph | 91.19mph |
| Standing ¼ mile | 14.81secs/90.5mph | 14.43secs/89.09mph |
| Speeds in gears @ redline | (1) 29 (2) 43 (3) 59mph (4) 71 (5) 89mph | (1) 37 (2) 53 (3) 71 (4) 85 (5) 103mph |
| Fuel consumption | | |
| Overall | 68mpg (4.15 lit per 100km) | 59mpg (4.8 lit per 100km) |
| Ridden hard | 60mpg (4.7 lit per 100 km) | 52mpg (5.4 lit per 100km) |
| Speedometer accuracy | | |
| At indicated 30mph | 28.14mph | 29.78mph |
| At indicated 50mph | 49.73mph | 49.09mph |
| At indicated 70mph | 67.42mph | 68.15mph |
| Supplied by | Honda UK Ltd., Power Road, Chiswick, London W4 | Mitsui Machinery Sales Ltd., Oakcroft Road, Chessington, Surrey |

Honda XL500R

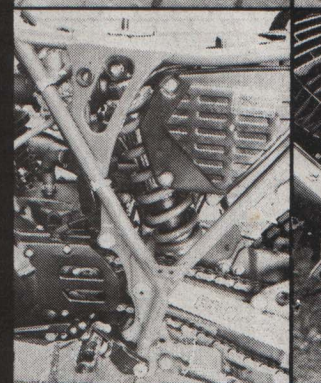
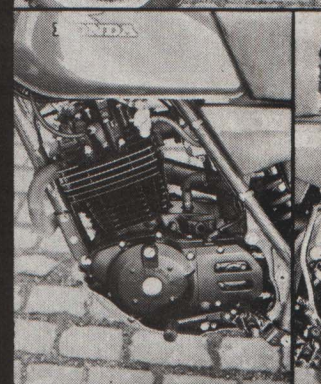
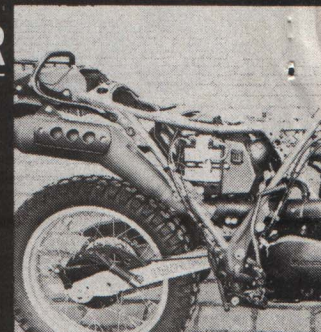
Right: Honda Pro-link shock absorber hides behind airbox and other gubbins and is difficult to reach to adjust. Frame is also new but long suspension makes seat height a whopping 34½in

Right: XL500R motor has few minor changes from old bike but is still v. quick. Auto decompressor plus manual lever makes motor easy to kickstart. Cleated footpegs are spring loaded but tips of gearlever and foot brake are fixed and vulnerable. Motor is all black

Right: Access to rear shock is better from left but adjustment of spring preload collar at top is fiddly. There's no chain tensioner but relies upon nylon slipper blocks to stop slop against frame. Bash plate is strong alloy plate extending right under crankcases

Right: Long travel suspension or!right! Honda's Showa forks and rear single shock provide comfy ride and superb traction over bumpy trails. Front brake is a cunning twin leading shoe drum borrowed from latest moto crossers. Note rear carrier and flexy stalk indicators

Right: Pseudo enduro number plate over headlamp protects clocks. Forks have air caps but aren't linked. Note neat details such as cable traps, indicators tucked under bars, easily used choke knob and trip meter. Lots of plastic



Yamaha XT550

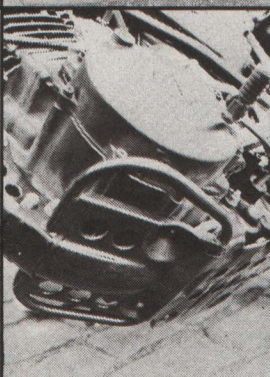
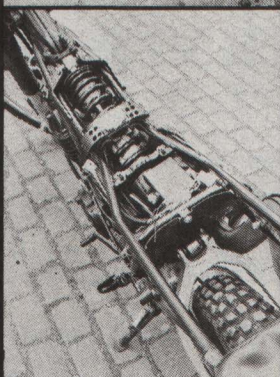
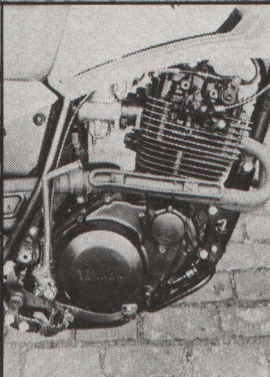
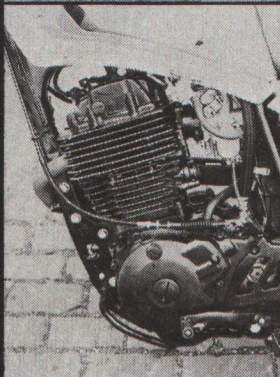
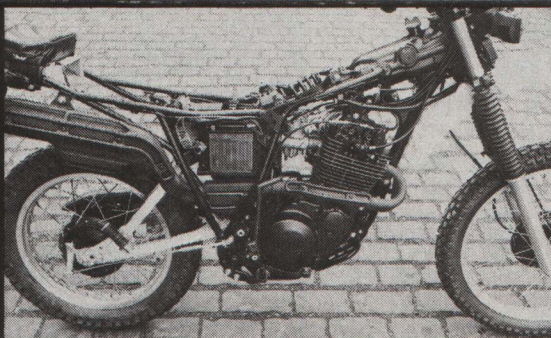
Right: Oil for dry sump XT motor is carried in the frame — see the filler cap near steering head. It's a big, heavy trail bike — note road essentials such as that big battery, 'normus zorst

Right: XT550 motor is sohc, four valver with two carbs — the left slide carb works alone at low rpm but is joined by the right inlet's supplementary CV carb to improve gas flow at mid to flat out engine speeds. Note folding tips on gearlever and brake pedal.

Right: No rising rate rear suspension for Yamaha — this is the system used on their early moto crossers. Firmer than the Honda, it nonetheless proved good on the rough and excellent on tarmac. Bash plate under engine is a joke — the old XT had the best ever

Right: Yamaha suspension isn't quite so plush as the XL's but since the bike's a good inch lower, it's less of a handful. Bendy, unbreakable 'guards are used, indicators are flexy mounted and there's a usefully located tool bag. Chain adjustment is by snail cams

Right: Again, attention to detail is superb. Air caps live under rubber bungs on fork tops but aren't linked, cables are all tidied out of the way. There's a trip meter (hidden by cable in this pic) and extensive use of plastic for lightness



steering geometry of the XT550 are far closer to that of 'real' enduro and moto crossers than before and quite rapid progress can be made provided you can hang on. It takes a lot of stopping at the end of a long dirt straight and because the moto: chugs out so much power over a wide rev band, you can be travelling at one hell of a rate very quickly.

The rear suspension was still a bit firm — okay for the road — when we took to our second trail test session and altering the spring preload on the shock proved impossible with the tools provided in the tool pouch, conveniently mounted at the end of the seat on the rear mudguard. While the forks were good enough to absorb anything we tried, the rear end would veer from side to side, especially under braking. With so much momentum picking the right rut is essential and if you do go off the beaten track into long grass, the only solution is to screw up your nerve, gas it on smoothly and haul it back.

The compromise of building a trail bike is still there though: serious off-roaders tempted by big singles should think long and hard about whether they really want to work this hard. And it's under-equipped in many areas to exploit either its road or trail potential to the full. First, the tyres. They're Bridgestone Trail Wings though it'd be easy to stick on alternatives since the sizes are conventional. To be fair to the Bridgestones, few knobby tyres would last long coping with all that stomp and the rear tyre had its knobs ripped to shreds after the faster off-roading. On the road, they cornered reasonably though with the usual wet weather slithers.

Brakes, too, are barely acceptable for road use and definitely not up to the job of two-up riding or fast 'n' loose street racing: they just don't have the power. Front brake is a mere single leading shoe drum.

Much of the excess weight could be trimmed by someone preparing an off-road special for the XT comes with all the trail compromise bits: Headlamp is a superb 12 volt 60/55 watt quartz-halogen item which survived all the usual trail riding incidents except the last. Just as we were taking it easy down the side of a field heading back to tarmac I got the thing cross-rutted and in my panic to control this wild sliding leg-breaker I stuffed the front end along a barbed wire fence and gatepost. Shit. Still, incidents like this are inevitable off-road and it was pure bad luck that the headlamp lens took the impact. The front mudguard bent double during the high-wire act but bounded back into shape when released unlike the Honda's which broke when similarly stressed.

That huge exhaust quietsens the motor acceptably and even a Womens' Institute tea party couldn't object to the XT's soft chug . . . could lose a bit of weight there. Then there's a large 12V battery which does at least make the flexy mounted indicators sufficiently bright. Nice touches are the spring-loaded, nylon-block slipper chain tensioner, snail cams on the rear axle and nylon moulded chain guard.

Just one thing is really lacking on the XT550 and which the Honda XL really scores on: a decent paint job. Some may scorn such an observation but the standard white with stripes looks tatty so quickly. It's rumoured in American mags that an SR version is on the way which would make sense, and that Yamaha will be taking the 'Modern old Brit single' image even further. I can't help thinking that on the road is where such behemoths belong, especially when fully equipped with decent brakes and tyres. □

Dave Calderwood