



MIDNIGHT PROWLER



For sheer funk, Kawasaki's Z1 earned a formidable reputation. Now slightly improved and renamed Z900, big K's musclebike proves it's still boss of the street.

Words Bill Haylock. Photography John Wallace.

THE NAME of Kawasaki has been synonymous with dynamite performance ever since a fiery two stroke twin called the Samurai introduced the marque to British bikers. The kamikaze triples which followed consolidated Kawasaki's image by coining the Green Meanie label.

So when big K went into the four cylinder, four stroke musclebike market it just had to be bigger, faster and funkier than Honda's trend setting multi. In fact, the 1000cc pre-production prototype sent over to the States to gauge market reaction so frightened the soft bellied Yanks that it was detuned to the 903cc version which finally went into production.

Detuned or not, when finally launched in August '72, the Z1 was by far the fastest meat on the street. Public reaction was suitably overawed by reports of the 130 plus top whack and drag strip acceleration. It just became accepted that the Z1 was the boss bike.

Lotsa things have changed in three fast moving years, there's many more big, fast bikes on the market and Kawasaki decided it's time the Z1 was revamped. Now re-appearing with a few improvements and designated Z900 for '76, the best things about the big Kawasaki haven't changed. It still has enough balls to make the most jaded, glassy eyed speed freak feel a little tingle of fear and exhilaration. It's still boss of the street.

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Inevitably pollution and safety paranoia is catching up with Kawasaki, but they haven't let it cripple their uncompromising all-out performance philosophy. Perhaps the most amazing thing about the Z900 is that despite the meddling of the US Environmental Protection Agency, it still feels like a motorcycle, and one of the most exciting motorcycles around at that.

The Z900's manners are more socially acceptable than its predecessor's (not that the Z1 was particularly anti-social). Modified baffling inside the silencers muffles the lusty roar of four still potent cylinders, and smaller carburetors, together with redesigned combustion chambers, help make the exhaust cleaner.

You'd expect those changes to mean a considerable power reduction from the double overhead cam motor, but the claimed output is only one bhp down on the Z1 — 81 bhp instead of 82. The most noticeable change in the engine characteristics is that maximum torque has moved further up the rev range from 7,000 to 7,500 rpm, and the max figure is less than for the Z1. Despite that, the Z900 motor, with its mild 8.5:1 compression ratio, still has the amazing flexibility and massive torque that made the original Z1 so outstanding.

Although the Z900 is £120 dearer than its predecessor, it's still the best buy in horsepower you'll find if you want the maximum return in thrills for your money. What's more, the price rise isn't just due to inflation eroding the pound in your pocket, there's worthwhile improvements which to a large extent justify the price rise in themselves (the second front disc, for example, which used to be a £95 option on the Z1). Since the company set up shop over here Kawasaki have maintained extremely keen prices on all their models, and the Z900 is no exception. At £1,369 it really is tremendous value.

The most noticeable, and undoubtedly the most worthwhile improvement is that second disc on the front. The brake design has been modified too, with thinner discs and more compact calipers so the twin disc set-up is not much heavier than the single disc on the Z1. The Kawasaki four is a heavy bike (although not exceptionally so by recent trends) and the single disc was a little overworked. The addition of the second disc provides braking that is light and delicate in action, but superbly powerful — well in the dry at least, but more about that later.

Rear suspension units have been modified, making the ride firmer and more stable without sacrificing comfort, the seat upholstery is improved and there's a locking petrol cap. Some of the innovations are rather more doubtful. Kawasaki have not previously indulged in frivolous gadgetry, but they've seen fit to provide one of those irritating and embarrassing beepers to give an audible warning when the flashers are illuminated. And there's a hazard warning switch which flashes all four trafficators in unison — not a bad idea in itself, I suppose, but the switch is very obviously clamped

onto the handlebars as an afterthought.

But despite that, the Kawasaki is still an honest-to-goodness, no nonsense muscle-bike, and a very versatile one at that. Apart from the mind ripping power, the 900's greatest attribute is its even temperament. Certainly it's a very different animal to its mean and bitchy two-stroke triple stable-mates. Of course you can get yourself into trouble on the Z900, but only if you don't have the skill or respect demanded by the 80 odd horses your right hand can unleash. The Z900 can be ridden as sedately and slowly as any plodding commuter, or you can burn rubber all the way from traffic light to traffic light, or cruise at a steady ton-twenty. There aren't many roadburners that'll do all those things perfectly happily.

Despite the awesome performance, the Kawasaki is a relaxing bike to ride, largely due to the fact that the massive motor is so rarely stretched. At 90 mph in top the tachometer registers a leisurely 5,500 rpm — and there's another 3½ grand to go before the blood line. The speedo needle flicks round to the ton before you've reached the red in third. It feels unburstable. The four's achievements in long distance racing are not just down to luck.

A reassuring feeling of security also has a lot to do with the relaxation of riding the Z900. Those twin discs help, and the handling feels safe thanks to those modified rear shocks, which feel like they're damped by real hydraulic oil instead of the usual jelly most Jap bike dampers seem to be filled with. I've got a particular stretch of road for testing suspension. It's a washboard surfaced single track lane leading off the A1 to the godforsaken hamlet where I

live, and if you can take it at 70 and stay in the saddle the suspension can't be all that bad.

The ride feels firm without being harsh on the Z900, except when you hit a really big bump — that makes your dentures rattle a little — but the bike always stays on line. It's just a lightness of the front end that mars an otherwise good handling bike — not enough to make it feel unstable, but enough to make you cautious on roads you don't know too well. This characteristic is only displayed at high speed, I imagine it's because the front fork geometry is a compromise to make low speed handling easier, and high bars don't help. When it comes to trickling through congested streets the Z900 is as sweet and docile and easy to handle as many bikes half its capacity.

I found I was riding around town far more sedately on the Z900 than I usually do on my 450 Ducati, for example. In fact I began to take a perverse delight in trundling along in top gear at 2,000 rpm. Just the knowledge of the fact that that a twitch of wrist would leave the traffic standing is enough. S'funny, you don't feel inclined to cowboy antics when you know you're boss of the street.

The motor's flexibility has another strange psychological effect: you keep prodding the gearbox for another ratio when you're already in top. It's not just me either, the Ed found himself doing just the same. At 3,000 rpm the motor is pulling so strong it deceives you into thinking it must be spinning twice as fast. And the bike isn't undergeared, either. The Z900 pulls a higher overall gearing than the Z1, and, going by speedo and tach readings, you'd be doing something like 150 per if you could get the motor to its 9,000 rpm rev limit in top gear.

It's just as well the motor is so flexible, because with that sort of power the Z900 could be a pig, and in the wet it could be downright terrifying. As it is, the Z900 made me feel nervous in rain, not because of the fear of uncontrollable wheelspin, but the fact that the front discs just didn't work in the wet. You'll meet some folks, usually the types who believe that progress in the design of bikes ended in the 1950s, who categorically state that all disc brakes are lethal as soon as a cloud so much as obscures the sun. Well, I've only come across the disc-brakes-don't-work-in-the-wet bogey twice on the dozens of bikes I've tested. One was a '73 Harley FX1200 and the other is the Z900, and both times it was just a little frightening. I'm not talking about slight impairment of braking efficiency — that's an advantage in the wet if anything — I'm talking about an almost total lack of braking power until the lever has been held hard on for a couple of seconds.

Kawasaki's service manager, John Gravette, reckoned it was caused by a chamfer on the leading edge of the new pads which were fitted just before I col-

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lected the bike. The chamfer would tend to direct water under the pad, instead of wiping it off as a perpendicular edge would. Sounds feasible, specially as I've not come across this trouble on any other Kawasaki.

I discovered this unpleasant fact riding to North Wales along the rain lashed M6 and A5. What had started as a rapid journey out of London slowed to a crawl when the rain started. Trouble is, the slower I went, the longer the discs took to dry out, so in effect I was left with just the rear brake. This nastiness was compounded when I left

— just as well the motor is as economical as it is. A creditable average of 45 mpg means fuel stops every 140 miles, but at the rate the Z900 gobbles up the distance that seems far too frequent.

Bars are high, wide and uncomfortable at any decent speed, and the footpegs are set too far forward for my liking. I found the most comfortable riding position was feet back on the pillion pegs and body leaning forward into the 100 mph gale, but you can't do that two up, natch.

Despite the aforementioned faults, the Z900 is still a great cruiser, and you've got to take one on a long trip to really appreciate it. After the wet horrors of my trip to Wales, the return journey was entirely pleasurable. It's a nice start, a good thrash up the Nant Ffrancon valley from Bethesda along a snaking series of S bends on the A5. The Z900 is the sort of bike that deserves to be ridden well. If you think ahead and get the corners lined up correctly it's a real joy pushing through the curves. If you ride it badly, that power and that speed can get you in trouble really quick.

The handling isn't so totally forgiving as on some Italian sportsters, for example, but as long as you do it right, the Z900 will never betray your trust. Even the tyres — Japanese Dunlops — felt quite secure in the wet, although crossing white lines makes them squirm.

For once I wasn't fuming at the inevitable convoys of Sunday trippers who always congest the A5. A slight flick of the wrist in any gear left them as distant blurs in the mirror (yes, the anti-vibration mirrors still do). On that sort of road acceleration is more important than top speed, but fortunately the Z900 has both.

Unfortunately we didn't get round to putting the bike through the speed trap. Our road test schedule was running desperately late 'cos we had to wait our turn for the Z900, and we just didn't get round to the time consuming business of performance testing. But take my word for it, the Kawasaki's still plenty fast enough.

Battering against the airstream on the M6 had me wishing for clip-ons and fairing, but I still managed to maintain a steady — ah well, perhaps I'd better not incriminate myself any further.

Apart from going so well, the Z900 just looks so pretty. The styling is virtually identical to the Z1 (why change it anyway?) except for the paintwork. Our test bike was a tasteful dark metallflake green, and the standard of finish, apart from some of the chrome, was excellent. The engine appears to be cast out of real metal, the frame looks robust and tidy and the welds were definitely not deposited by pigeons. Yes, on looks alone the 900 is one of the class bikes of the 70s, none of your Tokyo tinsel.

So, it all adds up to a very desirable bike. Not only is it the fastest mass production motorcycle in the world (as if that wasn't enough), the Z900 is one of the few mass produced machines that has real class — boss class.

Bill Haylock

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Above: Instruments and switches are neat except for the hazard warning switch clamped to the bars.

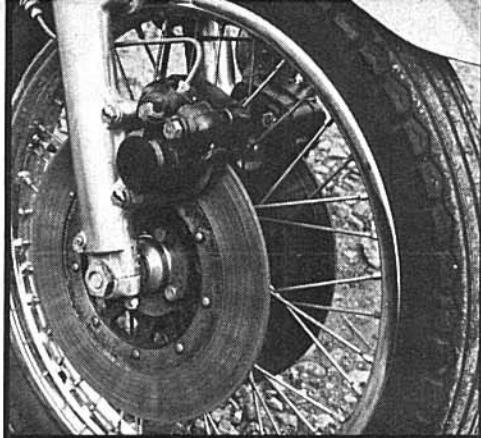
Right: Twin discs are the best new feature of the Z900.

the city lights behind, started negotiating the curves of the A5 as it wriggles its way into the land of the dragon, and discovered unpleasant fact number two. The headlight is diabolical.

Good ole UK is just about unique in its lighting requirements, what with left hand dipping and all that, and the Japanese won't bother to make a decent headlight to our specification unless they can churn them out a million at a time. There's just not the demand. Still, it wouldn't hurt Kawasaki UK to fit Lucas Halogen units — after all, Honda do on the Gold Wing — even if it meant a few quid on the price.

The standard light is not only feeble (45/40 watt), the lousy reflector scatters what light there is all over the countryside — anywhere but on the road in fact. With a machine of the Z900's performance potential, it's just not on. It makes an otherwise excellent machine a little queasy to ride at night.

Those are the only fundamental faults, and quite easy to rectify at that. I do have one or two other grumbles, like this bike has got to be a superb long distance cruiser with that tireless engine, so why not give it a fuel range and riding position to suit? The tank looks neat but holds only 3.7 gallons



Checkout

Engine	DOHC four cylinder
Bore & stroke	66 x 66 mm
Capacity	903 cc
Compression ratio	8.5 : 1
Carburation	4 x 26 mm Mikuni
BHP @ RPM	81 @ 8,500
Primary drive	Straight cut gear
Clutch	Multiplate, wet
Final drive	Self-lubricating chain
Gear ratios	
(1)	12.05:1
(2)	8.34:1
(3)	6.36:1
(4)	5.25:1
(5)	4.63:1
Electrical system	12v alternator, battery/coil ignition
Lighting	45/40w headlight, 5/21w tail/stoptlight

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase	59.3 ins
Seat height	32 ins
Ground clearance	6.5 ins
Handlebar height	45 ins
Kerb weight	548 lbs (with 1 gal fuel)
Fuel capacity	3.7 gal
Oil capacity	6.6 pints

EQUIPMENT

Trafficators	Yes
Electric starter	Yes
Trip mileometer	Yes
Steering lock	Yes
Helmet lock	Yes
Headlight flasher	Yes
Kill button	Yes
Toolkit	Yes
Spare parts	No
Others	Mirrors, locking fuel cap, hazard warning, audible indicator warning, grab rail

CYCLE PARTS

Tyres (front)	3.25 x 19 Dunlop
(rear)	4.00 x 18 Dunlop
Brakes (front)	twin 9.6 in dia discs
(rear)	7.9 in s/s drum

PERFORMANCE

Top speed	130+ mph (est)
Standing ¼ mile	12.8 secs (est)
0-60 mph	4.5 secs (est)
Fuel consumption	
Overall	44.90 mpg
Ridden hard	—

PRICE

GUARANTEE

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