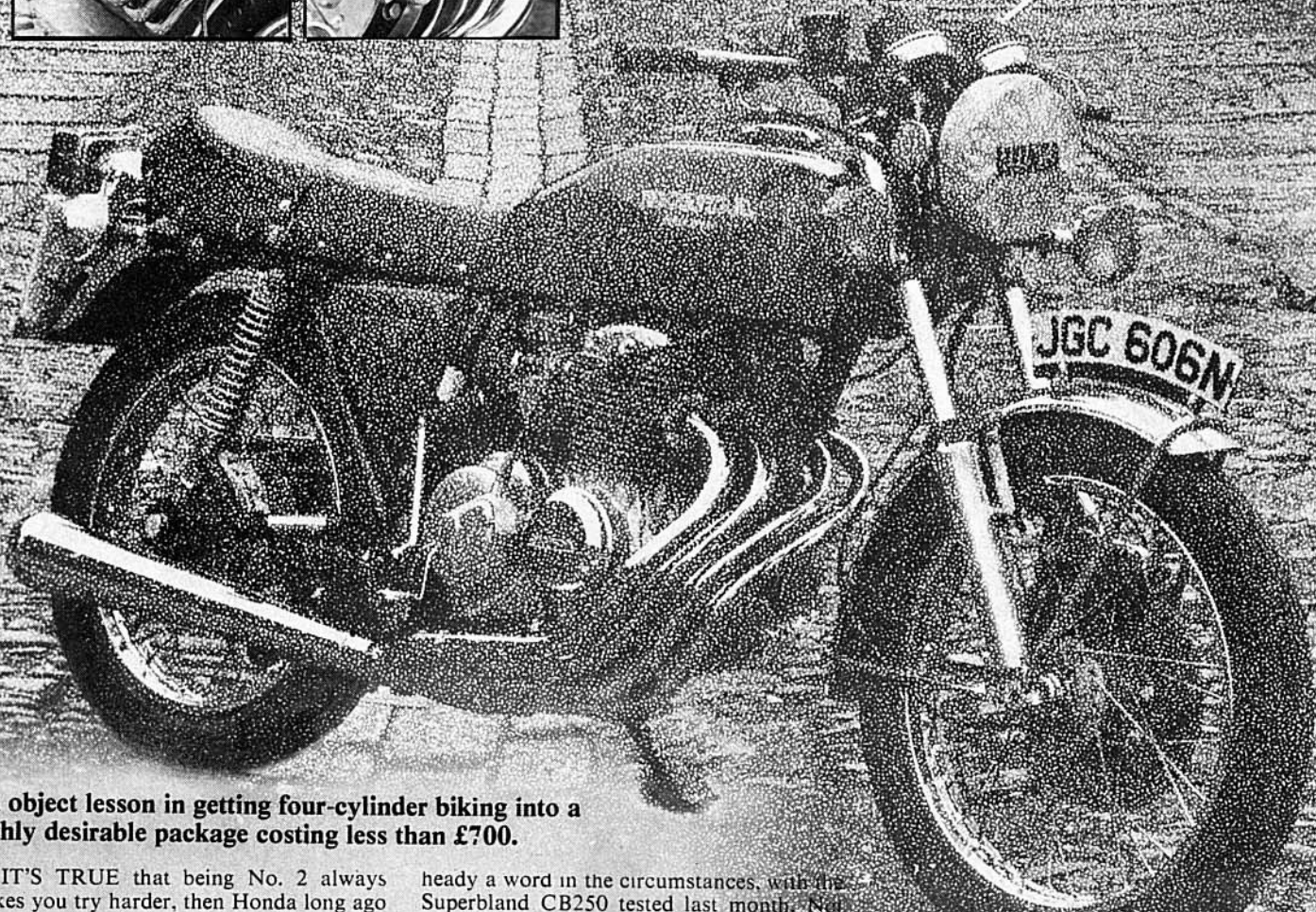
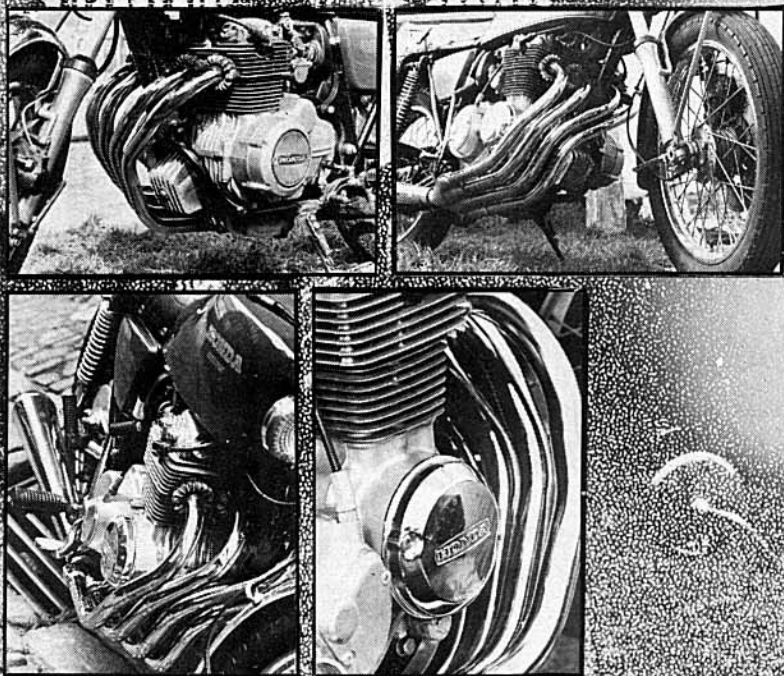


# Honda CB400 Poor Boy's Musclebike



**An object lesson in getting four-cylinder biking into a highly desirable package costing less than £700.**

IF IT'S TRUE that being No. 2 always makes you try harder, then Honda long ago had an excuse for wasting away to flabby complacency. They've been the world's biggest bike makers for as long as most folk now batting about on two wheels can remember, and judging by the road test bikes we'd been sampling recently, the jaded underside of success was beginning to show.

These feelings climaxed, if that's not too

heady a word in the circumstances, with the Superbland CB250 tested last month. Not much poke, even less character.

Were Honda really getting that out of touch with the grass roots of biking? Multi-national operations now in 24 countries, able to knock a bike every ten seconds off the line in Japan, a target of 2½ million units a year by 1980 — must size inevitably lead to a mellowing of the creative spirit? ▶

**Words Mike Nicks  
Photography Tony Scrivens and  
Charles Parsons**

# Honda CB400

Probably yes, but at least with the new CB400F Honda have gone a long way towards gathering up the threads of what biking's really about. The 400 is intended to be a European motorcycle, and coincident with the time we collected the test machine, we also picked up a few significant rumours explaining just why the numero uno bike builders should condescend to give serious attention to demands from riders outside the hallowed US of A.

It seems the expansion of the American market has peaked, for the time being at least. So Japan's had time to realise that there's still an awful lot of bikes to be sold in shoddy old Europe. Also, a mammoth car development programme within Honda has recently been completed, allowing more scope for attention to the motorcycle range.

Genuine Europeanized motorcycles is the end product of it all, and if there are more on the way like the CB400, it's alright by us. Here is a bike that seems as though it really has been thought out by someone who actually rides — and it's quite amazing just how many bikes these days feel like they've dropped out of a computer programmed to design 55 mph San Diego Freeway cruisers.

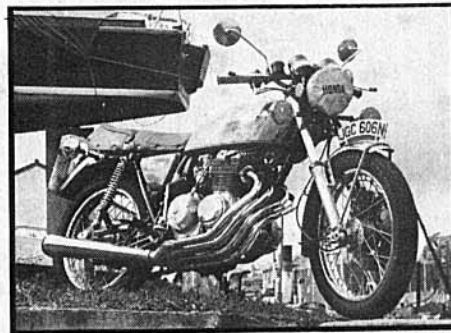
I wasn't exactly sorry to see the back of the 250 when I returned it to Messrs Tip-petts of Surbiton, who've been given the happy task of servicing the press with test bikes this year now that Honda HQ have grown tired of us ill-mannered scribes barking down the phone at them. Inside the workshop, the 400 ticked over with a slinky rustle of pistons and overhead cam valve gear, and it seemed to promise something so much better.

Actually, I was rather hoping that things would turn out that way, as the bike was to be used for what promised to be a highly entertaining bizniz (oops, that word again) cum pleasure jaunt to distant points west. First, I was curious to learn more of Michael Martin's vision of building an all-British off-road bike (see Ride On for info on Mickmar developments in uptown Yeovil), then the learned biking society of Exeter University were clamouring to know all the tasty details of how the motorcycle press operates (well, we dunno why they asked us either). And finally, there was the Honda itself to test.

It seems the CB400 is basically an over-bored version of the CB350 that was never imported into Britain, and which one gathers was somewhat gutless. At first I feared that the 400 version might be similarly short of steam, as somehow it didn't seem likely that making the holes where the pistons go four millimetres wider would make that much difference. Wrong again, as the 400 turned out to be a very adequate performer, more of which later.

The dominant feature of the CB400 is its styling, and in particular the four - into - one exhaust system. Doing it this way

makes things lighter, and cheaper to replace when the infamous rot sets in (although at about £80 for the entire works, it's still only £20 less than the equivalent parts for the four - into - four CB500). Such is the ever-changing fickleness of fashion, a four - into - one job now seems to look a lot more tasteful than the jungle of pipes at the rear end we all used to swoon over not so long ago. The focal point of the Honda's exhausts is the way the four pipes flow down and across the front of the engine to meet at the collector box below the right footrest. I suppose the mess of welds and retaining rings in this area could have been made a lot neater, or at least less obtrusive, but then this is a mass production motorcycle and not a creation of one of the specialist cafe racer houses, with an equally exotic price tag.



The four - into - one business makes it look as though something's fallen off the barren left hand side of the bike, but that's the same with any motorcycle that doesn't have at least one exhaust pipe on each side. Check Ducati singles and even the legendary Vincent for confirmation.

Fitting in with the theme of no gadgets, everything earning its place on *this* bike, is the plain maroon of the tank and side panels — no stripes, no two-tones, not a metal badge in sight. In fact plain old transfers are left to tell the non-biking world that this is indeed a Honda.

The finishing touch in the European theme is the flat handlebar, an item that every motorcycle with pretensions to sporty performance ought to have. Not only are flat bars the perfect compromise for city/country use, I think they look better than

the monstrous tillers fitted to all too many of today's high horsepower land cruisers.

The 400 has the usual high quality Japanese instruments, with the ignition switch sited between the two dials, an improvement on so many Hondas on which you have to fumble about somewhere on the front frame tube. As if to underline that the 400 really is intended for European use and the spirited riding that can involve, the flat bars actually work and mate up with slightly rearset footrests and an expertly contoured seat.

The ride out of London proved that the 400 wasn't a powerband special, the kind of thing that ups and dies if you open the throttle anywhere below several thousand rpm. Although the rev counter isn't red-lined until the dizzy 10,000 mark, there's plenty of power from way down the scale, which makes urban travel more manageable than on most multi-cylinder bikes.

However, London biking and the A1 buzz back to Peterborough, elegant city of bricks, sugar beet and diesel engines, doesn't really indicate how a bike will handle out in the sticks, so it was left to the Westcountry session to sort out that rather important side of the Honda. This is supposed to be a European bike, remember, added to which you may have gathered from recent issues of this journal that we've been getting a bit impatient about the handling qualities of many otherwise excellent Japanese products which just don't want to be pitched into corners in the manner to which British bikers are accustomed.

Everyone has their favourite stretch of road for assessing handling, and mine happens to be about 50 miles of assorted B roads and unclassified stuff that runs in a vaguely south westerly direction the length of Northamptonshire. Most B roads are twisty, but this also has a plethora of long straights and fast bends, plus it's *bumpy*. It was on this same stretch of road that Bill Haylock and I headed westwards and back again with the two-stroke triples tested in the November '74 issue, and if you've ever had cause to ask whether it's possible to get 115 mph on the clocks of a 500 Kawasaki and a 750 Suzuki on a straight but very bumpy minor road that leads to an obscure village named Orlingbury, we'd obviously have to shake our heads and say Dunno, although it's perhaps as well that no VASCAR-equipped citizens were passing in the opposite direction at that certain time and place!

Slightly reckless no doubt, but infinitely less socially damaging than Minister for Lethargy Eric Variey's blanket speed limits, which are just one example of the gathering trend towards 1984-ish legislation which abrogates an individual's judgement and responsibility and transfers it to a central authority. Ah well, off my soapbox and back to the bike.

The Honda took this country road stuff well, although without the constant shadow of Haylock at my back wheel there wasn't the urge to travel at such demonic speeds.

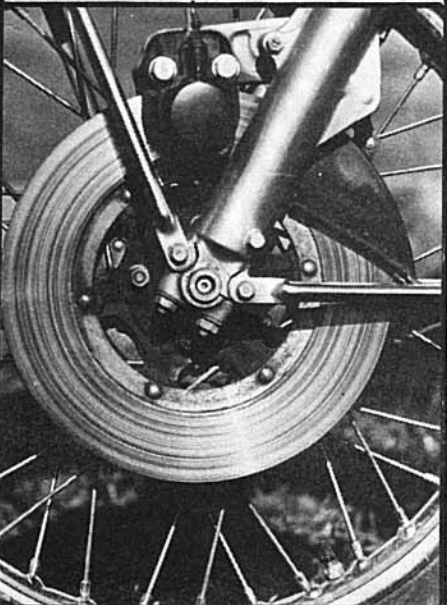
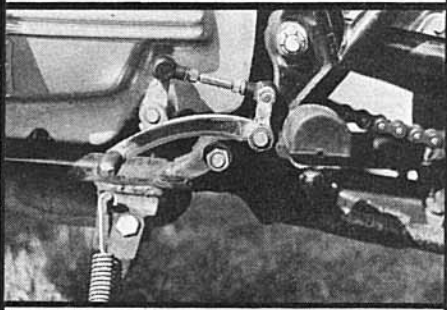
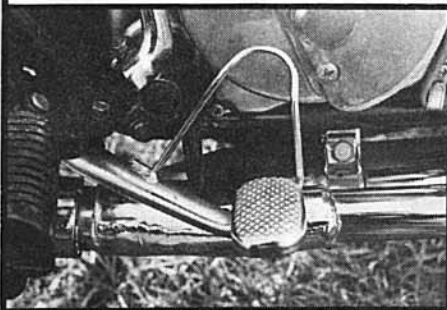
Swiftly enough, though, to prove that the 400's cornering is in line with its sporty looks. It's a very compact motorcycle, both in styling and handling, so you have no trouble dropping it into corners or making rapid line changes in S-bend sections. What helps considerably is that for once here's a Japanese bike that's got its rear suspension properly sorted. It neither wallows in customary Japanese fashion, nor does it rattle your spine like many an Italian bike; the 400's ride is more like the better German or Italian roadsters.

After the Northamptonshire shuffles, the route west breaks out into the Cotswolds, ideal territory for assessing a bike's long distance cruising abilities. Here the Honda ran well in the seventies and eighties, acceptable speeds for a 400 no matter how many cylinders it's got. At eighty, it's revving at a casual seven grand in top, which is 1,500 rpm below the power peak and 3,000 rpm away from the red zone. We were unable to check performance figures on the test strip because for once time ran out before we could get up there, but the estimated flat-out figures in the Checkout panel are hopefully pretty accurate.

Out on the M4 heading towards Bristol, big head winds were blowing, yet the motor still slugged on at 70 to 80 in top, only occasionally needing a change down to fifth on the longer gradients. I thought it handled this type of work rather better than a two-stroke of similar capacity would have done.

Having battled the winds all the way to Bristol, on to the southbound M5 and over the motorway bridge that crosses the Avon so dramatically, it was time to give best and head off for the relative cover of the A38. Now that the M5 takes the caravaning hordes all the way into Devon, the A38 is strangely deserted these days, and therefore makes a good biking road. Opening up out of roundabouts along here showed another of the Honda's pleasures — the exhaust note. It's the kind of gritty wail people complain they don't hear enough of at the TT races any more, and the Honda's wide power band makes the most of it. Remember that a rev ceiling of ten grand is still very heady territory even in these sophisticated times, so it becomes almost a child-like pleasure to keep the motor in a relatively high gear from a slow turn and just listen to it working up onto the peak of its power curve. What with the reputation of the existing four-cylinder Honda models for a reassuring level of longevity, intelligent treatment of this kind isn't going to do any harm.

I'm trying desperately hard to fault the 400 in some major way, but I can't, which will doubtless dismay still further the reader who wrote the other day to suggest that *Bike* must be taking bribes because he'd actually read one or two almost totally favourable road tests in these pages of late. Which I thought was more than a little ironic, as from his address the man was obviously enjoying the enforced hospitality of Her Majesty for misdemeanours of his



# Checkout

Engine .....	sohc 4-cyl. 4-stroke
Bore and stroke	51 x 50 mm
Capacity .....	408 cc
Comp ratio .....	9.4:1
Carburettors ...	4 x 20 mm Keihin
BHP @ RPM ...	37 @ 8,500
Primary drive ...	Inverted tooth chain
Clutch .....	Multi-plate, wet
Gear ratios overall	
(1) .....	20.9:1
(2) .....	13.8:1
(3) .....	10.5:1
(4) .....	8.50:1
(5) .....	7.38:1
(6) .....	6.62:1
Electrical system	156w generator battery/coil ignt.
Lighting .....	50/35w headlight 23/8w tail/stoptlgt.

<b>DIMENSIONS</b>	
Wheelbase .....	53.5 ins
Seat height .....	31.0 ins
Ground clearance	6.0 ins
Handlebar height	38.0 ins
Kerb weight ...	392 lbs (with 1 gal fuel)
Oil capacity .....	6.2 pints
Fuel capacity ...	3.1 gals

<b>EQUIPMENT</b>	
Trafficators .....	Yes
Electric starter ..	Yes
Trip mileometer ..	Yes
Steering lock ...	Yes
Helmet lock ...	Two
Headlight flasher	No
Kill button .....	Yes
Toolkit .....	Yes
Spare parts .....	No
Others .....	2 mirrors

<b>CYCLE PARTS</b>	
Tyres (front) ...	Bridgestone 3.00 x 18
(rear) ...	Bridgestone 3.50 x 18
Brakes (front) ..	10.5 in disc
(rear) ..	6.3 in s/s drum

<b>PERFORMANCE</b>	
Top speed .....	100-105 mph (est)
Standing ¼ mile	15.0 secs (est)
Fuel consumption (average) ...	50-55 mpg (est)
(ridden hard)	46 mpg

PRICE .....

£669 inc VAT

GUARANTEE ... 6 months/4,000 miles parts and labour  
Supplied by ..... Honda (UK) Ltd., Power Road, Chiswick, London W4 5YT.

*From top pic: Plenty of space 'neath the seat for the toolkit; every bike's got its gimmick, the 400 has this weird loop on the brake pedal whose real purpose we never discovered; gearchange linkage is adjustable; 10.5 in. front disc is just what the rider ordered.*

own! But no hard feelings, and maybe it'll help his days slide by if I say that the 400's Japanese rubber wasn't up to much. Two weeks of good weather avoided the perils of assessing the tyres' wet weather lack of grip, but even under heavy braking on a dry road the front one squealed and gave the disconcerting feeling that it was almost on the point of breakaway.

However, the brakes themselves are excellent, the gearbox action is crisp and there are many other neat points. You don't need a thumb like a baby's arm to work the indicators; the tools are stored in a mercifully spacious tray beneath the seat; unburnt fuel is re-cycled, giving a free con-

science to those few who haven't forgotten about pollution; for the benefit of dummies, the electric starter won't work if the bike's in gear and the clutch is engaged; and the steering lock can probably be operated simply by pressing down and twisting the key when it's inserted in the ignition switch, saving fumbling around the steering head. I say probably about this last point, because it's a feature on American specification bikes which Honda were hoping at the time of the test would be preserved on UK-bound bikes.

One of the Honda's best features I haven't yet mentioned — the price. At £670, it's only £115 more than the highest

priced of the 250s tested in last month's issue, and I know which I'd sooner hoard my money for. Such are the mysteries of motorcycle pricing, the list price of the 400 is nearly £200 less than they're asking for the CB500, and is there really that much difference? At the risk of sounding like a Hepworth-suited motorcycle salesman, I would merely say this: if you've ever wanted one of the big multis but could never quite afford it, consider the CB400. What Honda have done is to get some of the feel and style of musclebike riding into a very competitively priced package that'll hold its own in any gathering of biking *cognoscenti*.