

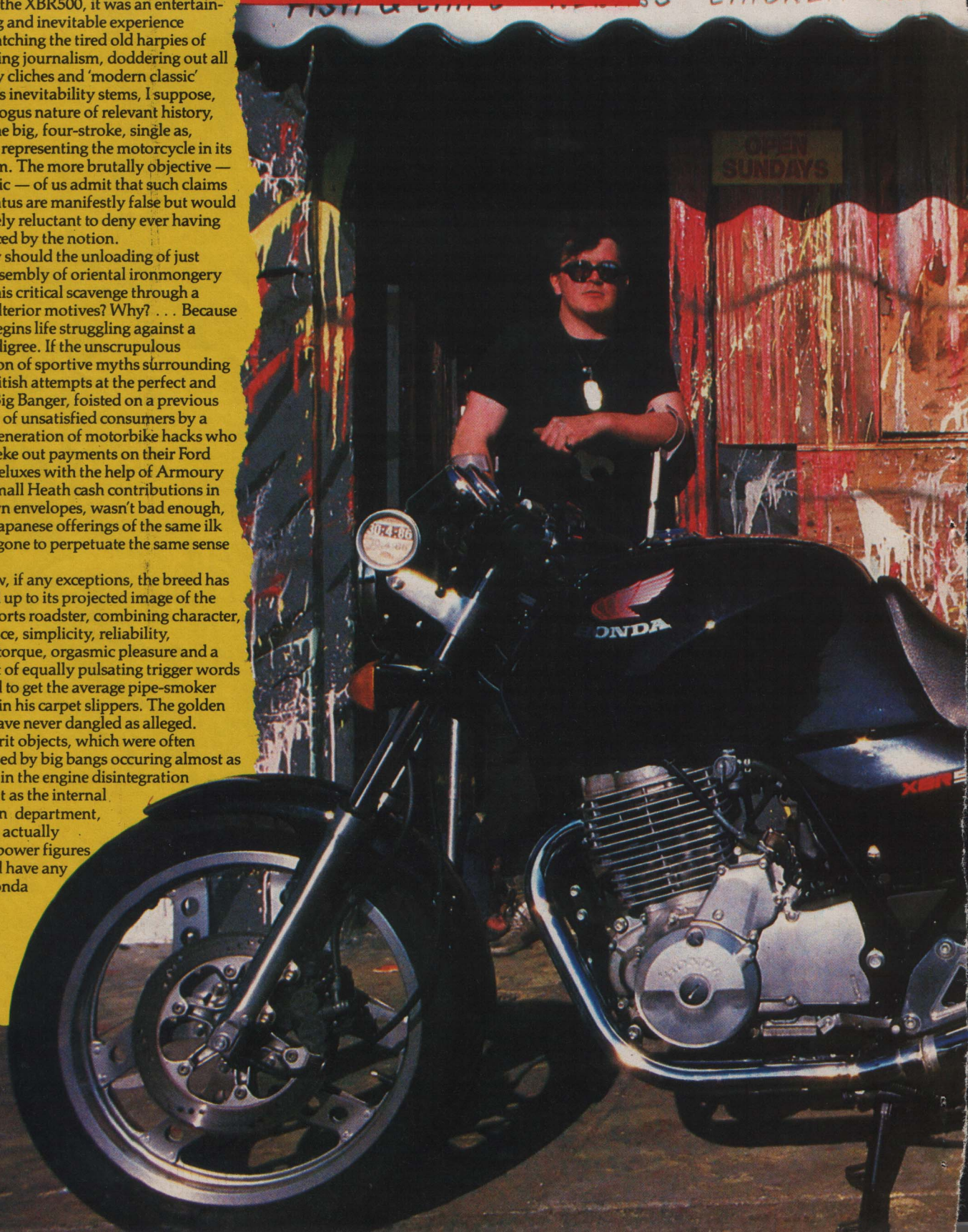
# Singular Obsession

Willis uses Honda's XBR500 to explode the Big Bang theory

Subsequent to Honda's UK launch of the XBR500, it was an entertaining and inevitable experience watching the tired old harpies of motorcycling journalism, doddering out all their hoary clichés and 'modern classic' labels. This inevitability stems, I suppose, from the bogus nature of relevant history, defining the big, four-stroke, single as, somehow, representing the motorcycle in its purest form. The more brutally objective — and realistic — of us admit that such claims of regal status are manifestly false but would be extremely reluctant to deny ever having been seduced by the notion.

But why should the unloading of just another assembly of oriental ironmongery generate this critical scavenge through a binful of ulterior motives? Why? . . . Because the XBR begins life struggling against a woeful pedigree. If the unscrupulous construction of sportive myths surrounding various British attempts at the perfect and desirable Big Banger, foisted on a previous generation of unsatisfied consumers by a previous generation of motorbike hacks who needed to eke out payments on their Ford Popular Deluxes with the help of Armoury Road or Small Heath cash contributions in plain brown envelopes, wasn't bad enough, then past Japanese offerings of the same ilk have only gone to perpetuate the same sense of *deja vu*.

With few, if any exceptions, the breed has never lived up to its projected image of the exciting sports roadster, combining character, performance, simplicity, reliability, unbridled torque, orgasmic pleasure and a whole host of equally pulsating trigger words guaranteed to get the average pipe-smoker throbbing in his carpet slippers. The golden bollocks have never dangled as alleged. Ignoring Brit objects, which were often characterised by big bangs occurring almost as frequently in the engine disintegration department as the internal combustion department, and which actually produced power figures that would have any CD175 Honda owner sniggering manfully into his





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Sufficient courage wasn't available for the establishment of cornering clearance . . .

glass of Barbican, the Jap revivals have been somewhat sad motorcycles, too.

Yamaha began the nervous glance backwards to apparently finer things by producing the SR500 in the late '70s. Needless to say, it was immediately hailed as having lots of virtues it didn't really possess. Anticlimax ensured that jerk-off press epithets swiftly turned into abuse. It was all a bit unfair, because the SR was actually quite a pleasant, unassuming motorcycle, even if it wasn't the slant-eyed Goldie of wordsmiths' wettest dreams. The next effort, launched in a soggy deluge of crypto-factual flannel from the style-hungry biking press was Honda's totally dreadful FT500, which hung 'flat track' imagery, possibly spawned by this magazine in one of its less imaginative moments, round a truly gutless and ill-conceived technical package. In the FT's case,

Honda made the mistake of taking lazily-expressed opinion far too literally.

Already in possession of a big-bore, single-pot, trail bike engine of reasonably torquy and satisfactory behaviour, the factory fell into a hole dug by the 'sports' category and tuned for top speed/standing quarter mile performance, ruining the lump in the process. No plonker in anybody's language, it was necessary to make the FT scream like a partially strangled wife to get the wretched thing really moving and even then a highly dubious claim of 35bhp wouldn't crack the magic ton, let alone catch up with a 1961 Velocette Venom Thruxton.

Honda, however, is not a global enterprise that gives up easily. The unlamented FT may have been discounted off to a mini-generation of bored despatch riders but the XBR was already on its way. *We* were introduced to it via Lady Lycra and free cocktails designed to maintain alcoholic haze during last year's Olympia press day and *you* may have noticed

it after paying money to get in, but none of us was any the wiser. It, or rather, they, finally arrived in midsummer, every one of the little darlings in Honda's first shipment being pre-sold through dealers. A few hundred XBRs wearing deposits in their buttonholes pushed themselves to the top of their relevant sales class for the month in question, before anybody had slung a critical leg over saddle.

Such smartarse marketing tactics compounded my natural scepticism until, horror of horrors, a test sample's behavioural traits began to suggest, for once, some truth in the glibberish of promotional smoothie-dom. Oh Lordy, Lordy, perfection is supposed to belong to God or Freddie Spencer or Bob Geldof, not Honda . . .

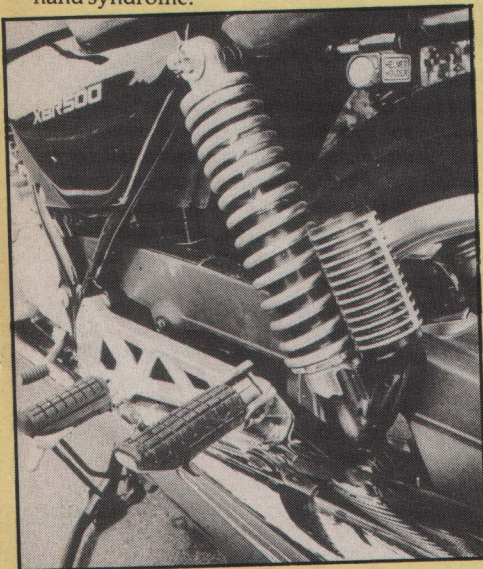
Fortunately, the XBR isn't perfect. It is, however, close to consummating the thumper fantasy. At its heart lies yet another trail bike engine but, this time, Honda's development technicians got their modification approach stunningly right. The cleverness is mainly concentrated upstairs in the head with a radial four-valve layout aspirated via a single

• CHUFF. CHUFF. CHUFF. CHU

39mm CV carb. Chucking away the twin 30mm slide Keihins that grace the motor in XL600 guise means that it stacks up the revs at a leisurely pace and will never impress anybody as a quarter-miler but the sum total is a fabulously flat torque curve that can be used to make the gearbox feel obsolete on occasion.

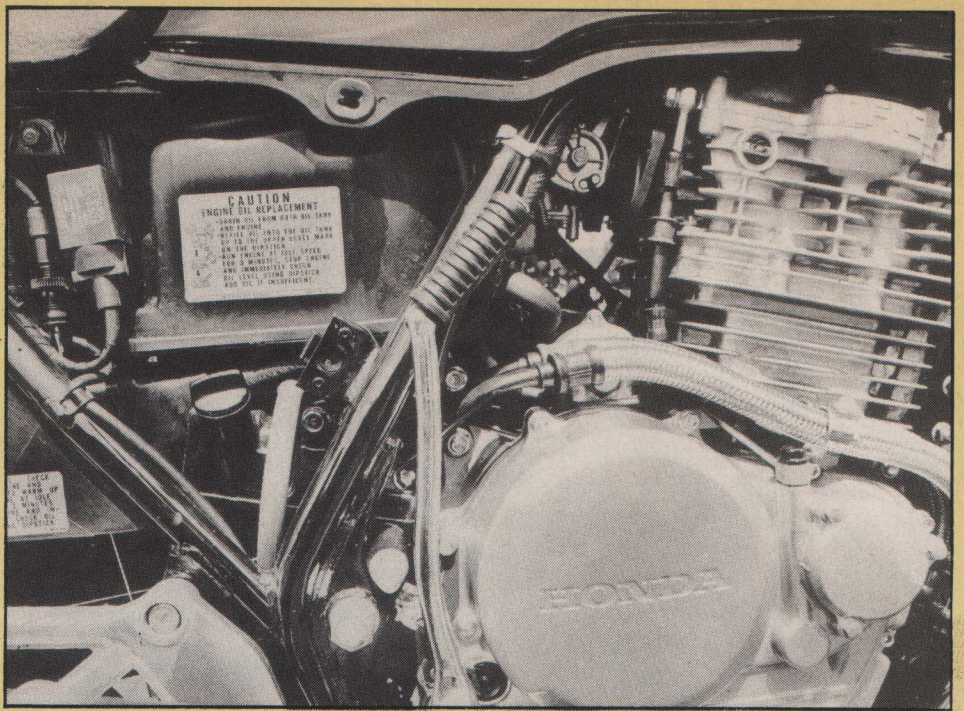
Maximum power, a claimed 44bhp standing against the 32 donkeys we actually discovered at the back wheel, is to be found at 7000rpm, though, which underlines the XBR's joyous flexibility. It'll either grunt up hills in a high gear, delivering a sledgehammer blow of combustion once every lamp post, or howl happily along up near the red line like a kiddie racer. That's precisely the sort of behaviour — or 'character' — the Big Banger fantasy demands and this is honestly the first road bike I've ever found to deliver it. Clever chap, Mr Honda . . .

There are detractions, which press harpies would no doubt write off with the limp variety of 'character' apologies. "Some vibration is apparent", as they used to say in the days of two-wheeled road drills. A single, contra-rotating balancer fails to eliminate a nasty buzz from about 4000rpm upwards and I found that a 150-mile tankful of gas spent on high-speed roadwork was plenty enough to whiten the pinkies with a dose of dead hand syndrome.



Conventional stern suspension lacks the sophistication techno-groupies now demand but works well enough given the XBR's performance limits

Simplicity, too, may be visually apparent with one hole in the middle and cleanly engineered lines, but it's not really there. RFVC heads are high-tech objects, with all sorts of sub-rockers slapping the rockers about, and may turn out to be cans of worms if opened by the inexperienced. Likewise the carburation which, if previous Honda CV efforts are anything to go by, should prove to be delicate and definitely not a thing to prat about with. Also, I find it difficult to understand why a dual exhaust system was necessary. Apart from blowing single-pot imagery by kidding the ignorant that it's a twin, this could be interpreted as Honda planning to flog twice as many replacement



Lube plumbing from crankcase to alloy oil tank is an artistic disgrace

components after the inevitable rot has set in. A single pipe, siamesed from the pair of exhaust outlets would have looked nicer, saved weight and been obviously cheaper. More styling weirdness and error creeps in with the braided-steel, external oil lines squirming over the top of the offside crankcase. They look ugly and will harbour irremovable filth after a relatively short time. One can only assume that the decision to put them there, instead of tucked tidily under the motor, was a misguided stab at more 'character' in the sense that, to establish 'classic' credentials, it's vital to make a motorcycle look as if it's been slung together at Amateur Night in the Meccano Institute or maybe on a bad day at Meriden. (And they were *all* bad days . . .)

Subjective engineering also afflicts the chassis design, but in a way that I didn't mind too much. The semi-duplex cradle frame is satisfactorily rigid and it carries a steel box-section swinger that resembles some British aftermarket accessory, suspended by a pair of Fade Very Quicklies with separate reservoirs.

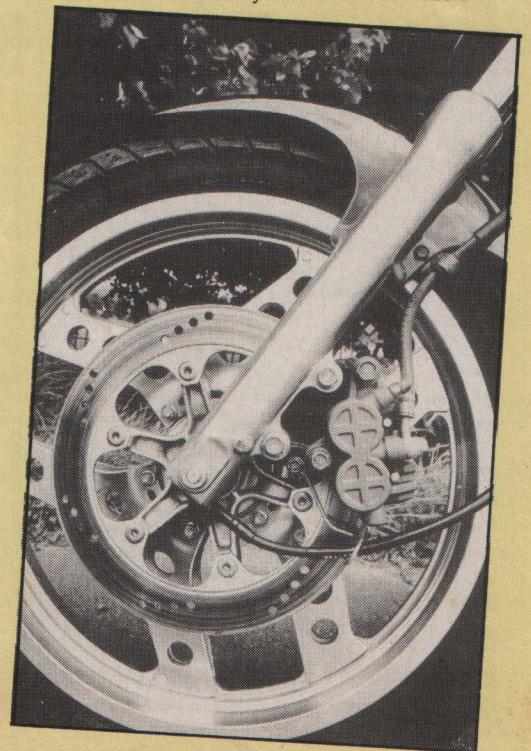
At first glance, one assumes that the inclusion of an 'old-fashioned' rear end is another styling exercise but it's probably just to save money. Pro-Link is no two-bob job. The suspension works relatively well, given a lack of damping adjustment, the back wheel only skipping on the more vicious of fast bumps and ripples. The sharp end, on the other hand, is deliberately 'dated' by the rake at which an efficacious fork with 35mm stanchions has been nailed on. A 29-degree castor angle and 115mm of trail produces steering that would shock all you young boys who've grown up with steep headstocks and silly little front wheels. 'Slow' isn't a strong enough word.

So, handling is in 'character'. Straight-line stability is triff, but getting through the turns involves forgetting all about such niceties as tiller action or flicking the thing around. The XBR requires physically pushing down into a corner and lifts itself out once the effort is removed. Personally, I find such handling

solidity just fine, being a great picker of nose/scratcher of arse through fast curves, but it feels a bit like working for a living in town. It also means careful selection of racing line because changing your mind is as strenuous as unpaid overtime.

The brakes, being a combination of rear drum and a single front disc with dual-piston caliper, work as well as they should, although fierce application of that front anchor causes some fork deflection despite the pressed-steel brace concealed beneath the mudguard. 'Character' didn't stretch to wheels, or more likely the purse-strings didn't, though, because the XBR is disgraced by ally 'boomerang' Comstars rather than the wire spokes you'd expect.

Overall, the bike's chassis is slim, stiff and boasts a lowish centre of gravity thanks to the relative shortness of its dry-sump motor. These factors, added into an equation including the tolerable legs and cornering clearance that defied my timid efforts to deck



A brace of pistons bite hungrily into the single front disc with confidence but the stanchions could do with a meatier brace **bike 23**

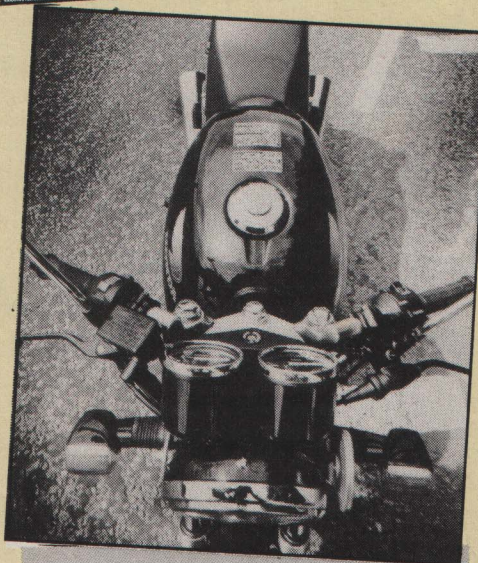
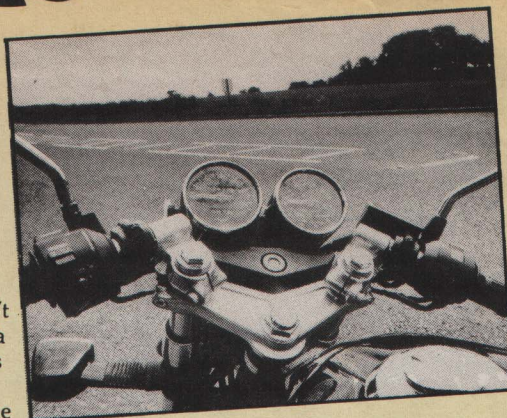
**UFF. CHUFF. BANG!**

## Singular Obsession

basement fixtures and fittings, keep the promise of sporty manners even if they don't approach the dizzy excellence of race-replica stuff like Honda's NS. The motor's gorgeous in as much as it translates your daydreams into usefulness and, By Jove, it's even got one of those electric feet so us wimps can crank the big old slug up against 9.2 to 1 compression without being crippled. (The compression ratio's substantially up on the XL trail iron's 8.6 to 1) It goes well and goes fast. Okay?

The cosmetic styling is, er, a matter of taste. A big and awfully Brit halogen headlamp, bracketed by a pair of horns that toot like a rockstar with his nose in a bag of white stuff, hangs on dainty alloy lugs that belie the obvious cost-cutting that's gone on elsewhere. At a glance, the clocks look vaguely like Smiths Chronometrics, 'cept they don't tick. "Terribly character-ful" as Honda's public relations persons are wont to gush . . .

I think that the tank profile came straight off a poster trying to 'Save The Whale' but at least it holds a respectable quantity of juice and the knee dents are ergonomically tickerty-boo for staying tucked in and turned on. The bolt-on seat hump, in my view, is a waste of time like all such devices unless, of course, you actually need an excuse not to



Clock an' clip-ons are quasi-period furniture but that bulbous tank shape would be happier swimming around the Atlantic than being stuck on his cycle

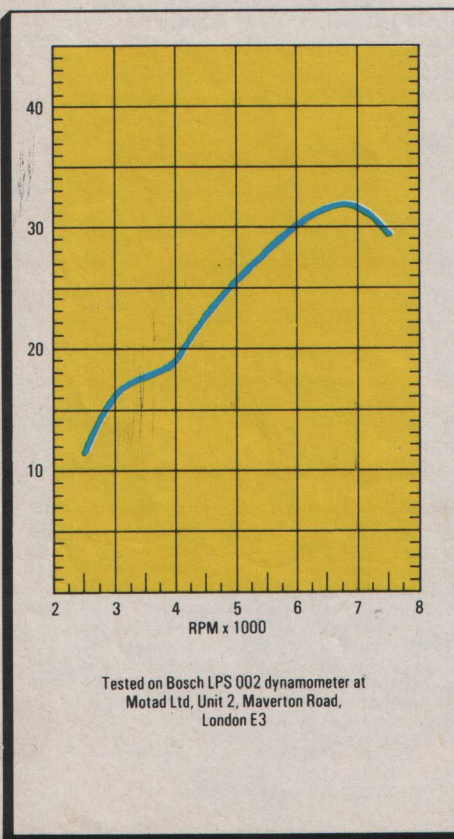
carry a passenger. The paint is thankfully restrained and our test bike came in the only 'proper' motorcycle colour. Visually, I don't believe the stylists quite worked out whether they were crafting a 'clubman' throwback or not, because it's a mixed bag, although they at least got the riding position right. It's a successful compromise between chin-down sports stance and practicality.

I put lots of miles on the XBR500 and enjoyed them all. Its excitement isn't instant but something closer to lust than gentle affection definitely creeps up on you the more it's ridden. Calling it 'modern' is ridiculous when certain features of the XBR concept and practice obviously aren't. Calling it a 'classic' is plain stupid, long before we've had time to stand back and watch for any deluge of warranty claims that might seriously sour its reputation.

What worries me the most about the XBR is how it dragged me into the hack rabble. Sure, I liked it. Sure, I didn't want to give it back. Sure, it's the sort of tool that I might actually buy. (Gulp!) One could almost think that it was born as an answer to the collective delirious waffling of motorcycle journalists, and that's dangerous. At the opposite extreme stands the CX500, a bike savagely hated by the entire press and loved by you lot. We worry about that, too. The XBR could just represent Honda's indulgence of us. The Big Bangs have finally got where we want them. Whether further Big Bangs will occur as wads of money crash down on dealers' desks in exchange for lots of XBR500s is open to conjecture. Fulfillments of fantasies come and go. They don't hang on as regular chart-toppers. Perhaps fortunately, the XBR is also a bloody fine motorcycle at a damned economical price . . .

# bike

# CHECKOUT



### HONDA XBR500

Price (inc taxes).....	£1749
Guarantee.....	24 months/unlimited mileage
Engine.....	DHC 4-stroke, 4-valve RFVC single
Bore x stroke.....	92.0 x 75.0mm
Capacity.....	499cc
Comp. ratio.....	9.2:1
Carburation.....	39mm CV
Oil capacity.....	2.4 litres
Clutch.....	Wet multiplate
Primary drive.....	gear
Gearbox.....	5-speed
Electrics.....	Alternator/12V-12Ah Battery

Supplied by..... Honda UK Ltd, Power Road, Chiswick, London W4.

### CYCLE PARTS

Tyres.....	Bridgestone GS32 Exedra
Front.....	100/90-18
Rear.....	110/90-18
Brakes	
Front.....	Single disc with dual-piston caliper
Rear.....	Leading/trailing drum
Suspension	
Front.....	35mm fork, 140mm travel
Rear.....	Twin hydraulic shocks 100mm travel

### SPARE PARTS

Air filter.....	£11.50
Oil filter.....	£3.09
Front mudguard.....	£43.99
Front indicator.....	£13.49
Brake lever and master cylinder.....	£84.21
One side panel.....	£29.15
Total.....	£185.43

### DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase.....	1400mm (55in)
Overall width.....	685mm (27in)
Seat height.....	780mm (30in)
Weight (inc 1 gal fuel).....	176kg (392lb)
Fuel capacity.....	20 litres (4.4 gal)

### PERFORMANCE

Top speed in 1/2 mile, prone.....	99.49 mph
Upright.....	93.58 mph
Best one way.....	104.25 mph
Standing 1/4 mile (mean).....	14.58 sec/89.78 mph
(One way).....	14.3 sec/92.49 mph
1/4 mile roll on from 50 mph.....	
(Mean).....	80.68 mph
(One way).....	87.60 mph
Top gear.....	69.03 mph
Fuel consumption, overall.....	58 mpg
Ridden hard.....	46 mpg
Speedo accuracy	
At ind. 70 mph.....	64 mph
At ind. 50 mph.....	46 mph
At ind. 30 mph.....	30 mph