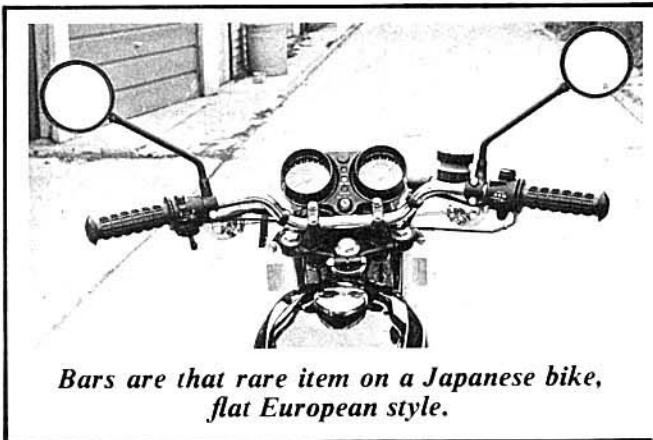




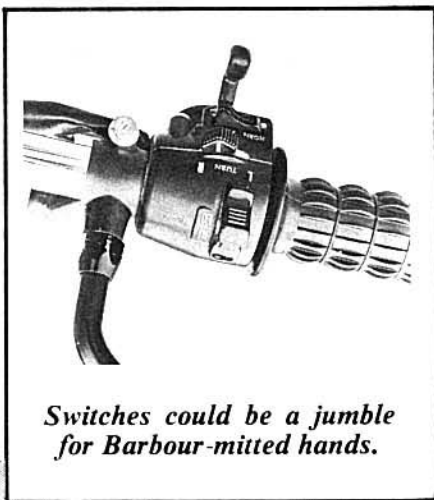
Very plezzy styling job can't be faulted.



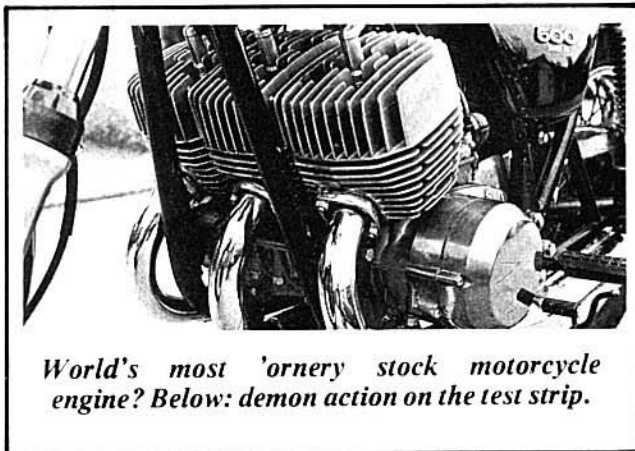
Bars are that rare item on a Japanese bike, flat European style.



Fat tyre is needed to cope with power from those exhausts.



Switches could be a jumble for Barbour-mitted hands.



World's most 'ornery stock motorcycle engine? Below: demon action on the test strip.

THANATOID MACH III MAKES GOOD

More nasty business with 2-stroke triples, in which *Mike Nicks* collects a 500 Kawasaki intending to hate it and gets back a thousand miles later just luvving it (PS — But it still doesn't handle).

THE FIRST TIME I rode a 500 Kawasaki I found it hard to believe that even the notoriously gullible motorcycling public could be taken that much for granted. The bike was an early H1B version of the Mach III, and the fast and rough sweeps that lead south from Davicks' through Pie City (Melton Mowbray) and the Welland Valley couldn't have served better for exposing its raw failings. The thing pitched and yawed all over the road, and the motor was so pipey that at 70 mph in top you had to change down before it could manage to accelerate the bike.

Even the cynically laid back minds of journalists can occasionally be stirred to emotions of incredulity: here it was happening to me. There was only one way to describe the Kawa — thanatoid, a chill and sinister word that the dictionary will tell you means "resembling death, poisonous, deadly." A bit melodramatic? Well, anyone who'd tried to hustle that particular piece of two-wheeled demonry along that same tar mac switchback wouldn't have disagreed that much.

On that occasion, somebody else got lumbered with what then seemed the hazard prone task of testing the Mach III, so my experience of the breed was limited to those few fetch-and-deliver miles. But it seemed I wasn't alone in sharing feelings of some outrage at the bike, because around that

time this very mag headlined it as "The Fastest Camel in the World."

Even those publications most fearful of the advertiser's £ found they had to criticise the Mach III, and eventually even hell-bike builders Kawasaki had to take notice, for they later brought out modified versions that were alleged to handle better and to have had the razor edge taken off the power band, without actually losing any top end performance.

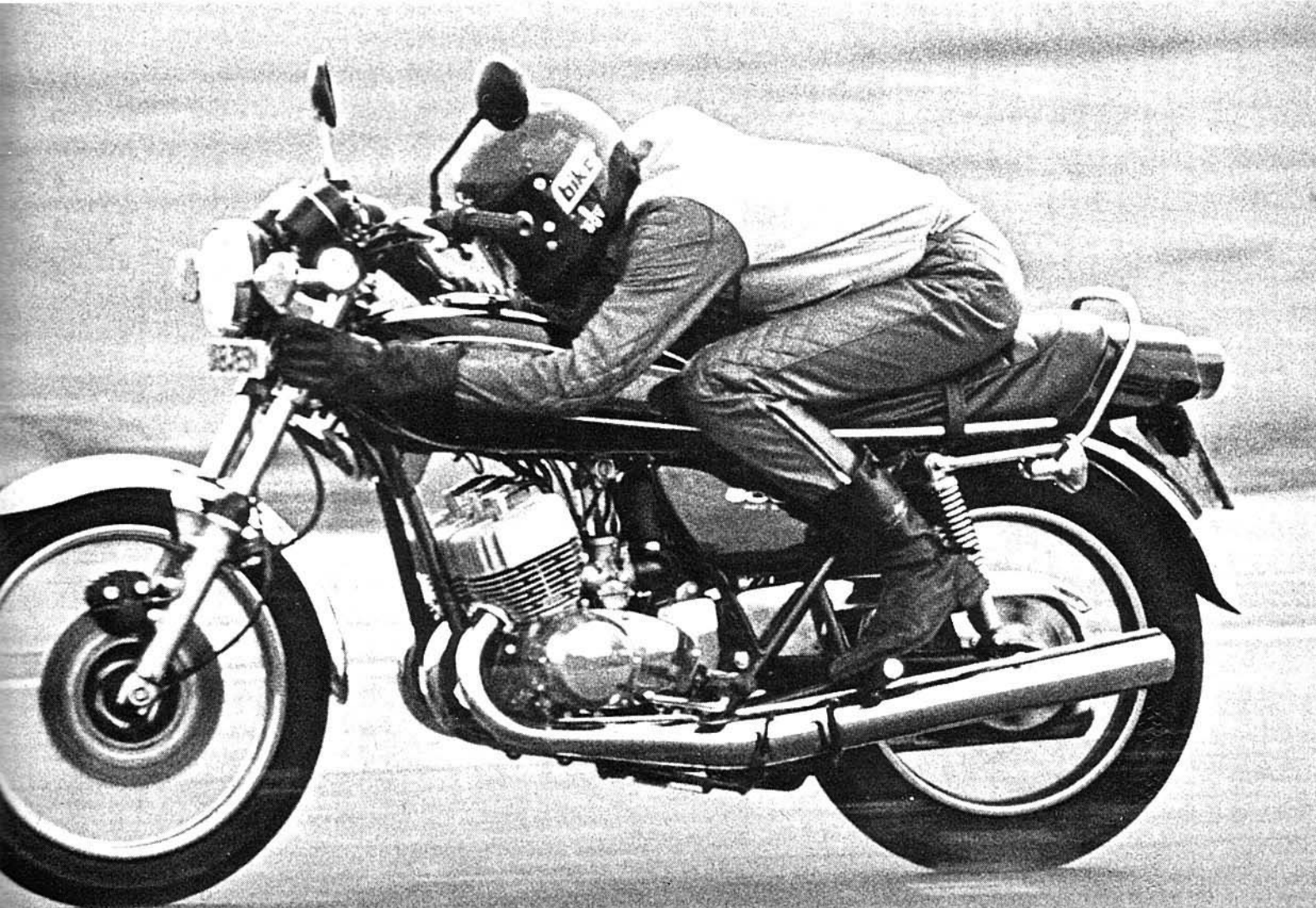
By this time the bike had reached model designation H1E and Davicks wanted us to try the thing again, so why not give it a chance? Accordingly we did, and sure enough the first point to be noted was a much improved riding position. The controls "fell readily to hand", to use a piece of hackneyed journalese much beloved of a certain weekly publication; the phrase does not mean that the 'bars are endowed with qualities magnetic to human flesh, merely that their spread is about shoulder width, and they have a flattish profile. Thus they're good for town trundles or fast highway work. Kawasaki have also refrained from falling into the well trodden Jap trap of placing the footrests too far forward, and all this, combined with a plushly padded seat, means that the sacrificial rider of an H1E at least feels he has a half-decent chance of retaining control, even if he does suspect that it'll handle like a paranoid serpent on

greased ice.

When collected, the bike had only a couple of hundred miles on the clock, and despite Mike Volans' confident call the "buzz it to six", it seemed prudent to keep to around 60 mph for a while yet, during which time it became apparent that the motor had indeed been softened up. It'll rustle 'round on a whiff of throttle (damn, I really must find something else to read on Wednesday mornings) at three to four grand in very gentle style, and what's more not one of the three spare plugs in the rack beneath the seat was needed during over a thousand miles of operation that changed gradually from light-fisted ambling to hard charging as the motor bedded in. Yup, it's fair to say that the Mach III does OK as a townie, with certain reservations.

First off, it's a very noisy machine, and unless you hold fast to a policy of deliberate urban pussyfooting, heads will turn and folk will stare. It's not just the raspy edge to the exhaust note, but more the jingle-jangle resonance from the cylinders that would have made the Mach III ideal transport for the original Tambourine Man. Then you've got the business of having to slip the clutch to keep revs from dying if you want to make a rapid streak from the lights; all in all, the Mach III rider sometimes feels an undue degree of attention bearing his way.

The somnolent ritual of the running-in



THANATOID MACH III MAKES GOOD

process spreads a calm over everything you do with a bike: if you can't lam along the straightaways at hotshoe speeds, you tend not to corner very hard either. So there was not too much to note about the Kawa's handling at first, except that despite a surprisingly high weight of 448 lbs., the bike was light to pitch around.

Now let's jump a few hundred miles to the point where the engine was almost run in, and the Kawa was wobbling fast enough for its qualities as a high performance sports machine to be appreciated, or otherwise. We'll start by saying that Mach III motorcycling remains by no means everyone's two-wheel dream set down in real life alloy, steel, rubber and plastic. There's a sizeable group of naive people, you see, that actually thinks motorcycles should take corners in predictable and stable manner. Let's, therefore, hope that the idealist souls of this market segment are not swayed by the admittedly finely styled lines of the Mach III. Once they've bought it, they really won't like it.

However, if you're of a cast of mind that allows you to admire an object as much for its quirky faults as for its qualities, read on. For although the 500 Kawasaki plainly just don't handle, it could be that you'll get highly excited indeed about an aura of fully committed total energy that hangs over the whole plot. For one thing, this is the world's fastest 500 cc production motorcycle, as is proved in no uncertain fashion by its dramatic speed trap figure of one-one-zero mph (yes, we know a good Goldie is supposed to do likewise, but a rider of that classic Big Single would still be slipping his clutch in bottom gear when the Mach III man would have accelerated into the next county. This is merely a fact, not an argument in favour of one or other of the motorcycling styles represented by these two very different bikes of similar capacity. Maybe we'll explore that in a future issue).

Not only does the Mach III have very great high speed potential, that amazing three-cylinder motor is more than willing for it to be used. The H1E will accelerate from 70 (5,000 rpm) in top, and at 90, a fair old cruising speed for any bike, the engine gives out a low moan of satisfaction that only tells you it's happy to accept more throttle yet. The real power still lies above six grand, but at last they've fled away that vicious step that was a very real hazard in riding an early Mach III if you happened to do something very unsmart like hitting it while accelerating out of a second gear bend.

Still on the thrillville engine qualities, when you have to slow from high speed for a tight bend, you can picture yourself as the fearless Von Du Hamel himself backshifting his works Green Meanie from a ton-seventy on the Daytona front straight for the bottom gear turn that leads to the infield.

But doubtless by now you want to know all the gory facts of the weirdo handling in every detail, and rightly so. In the first place, there are several very important things that you just DON'T DO when cornering on a 500 Kawasaki. Perhaps most important, you DO NOT shut off and brake when committed to a fast line in the middle of a bend. If you do, the machine will break into frenzied leaps and bounds in a way that can take you perilously close to the verge or central white line, while placing the rider in a rapidly mounting state of panic and terror.

Secondly, DO NOT take liberties on unfamiliar bumpy roads. Mach III handling is at its weakest on rough tarmac, although matters are not too bad if you know where the real crisis bits are and can moderate speed or angle of lean accordingly. If you tramp on regardless on unknown backways of uncertain surface quality, you're asking to be caught out sooner or later.

Also, DO NOT swoop over crests of hills when banked over. I unwittingly did this on one occasion, and was later informed by a pursuer that the ensuing gyrations would have gone down a treat if performed as the weave - through - the - cones bit of the RAC-ACU training scheme.

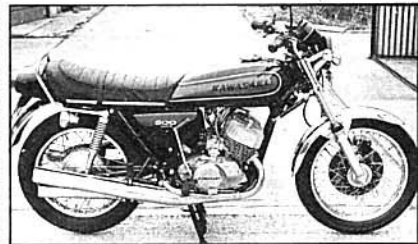
Like the 750 H2, the Mach III is provided with an hydraulic steering damper adjustable to a number of positions. But fiddling about with this and with different rear suspension settings made hardly any noticeable difference to the bike's ramblings, except that twisting the rear units to their hardest position did delay the onset of the wobbles somewhat.

To be fair, the H1E does not handle as badly as I remember the H1B did, but it's still a pretty vicious creation. Surely then, the marvels of its speed-lusting engine can't overshadow the bike's handling problems so much that it becomes a great machine? But that's just what does happen, or something like it anyway, because there's no doubt that the Mach III is a very exciting motorcycle to ride, and not at all the disgusting heap that you'd expect it to be from reading a description of its handling qualities.

It took me a while to figure out exactly why (not everyone has the nimble mind of a Wedgie Benn), but here's how the theory goes: to ride a Mach III fast, especially on any kind of sub-standard road surface, demands total concentration and effort of a kind not needed on more predictable machines. But if you do it well you get a lot of satisfaction, because not only are you getting the familiar blurred scenery sensations of rapid riding, but you're achieving it on a machine that's difficult to master under those circumstances. The net result, therefore, is More Thrills Per Mile.

This latter benefit, however, only goes part way to offsetting the Notoriously Few Miles Per Gallon one gets when wing-dinging on Kawasaki triples. The Mach III is about as thirsty as the 750, giving a figure in the low twenties under hard riding.

CHECKOUT



KAWASAKI 500 H1-E

Engine type	three-cylinder two-stroke
Bore & stroke	60 x 58.8 mm
Capacity	498 cc
Comp ratio	6.8:1
Carburettors	3 x 28 mm Mikunis
Bhp @ rpm	59 @ 8,000
Primary drive	gear
Clutch	wet, multi-plate
Gear ratios overall	
(1)	12.08:1
(2)	7.69:1
(3)	5.98:1
(4)	5.05:1
(5)	4.45:1
Electrical system	CDI electronic ignition, alternator
Lighting	35/35W headlight, 5/21W tail/stoplight
Tyres (front)	Japanese Dunlop 3.25 x 19
(rear)	Japanese Dunlop 4.00 x 18
Brakes (front)	11.6 in. disc
(rear)	7 in. s/s drum

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase	56.5 ins
Seat height	31.5 ins
Ground clearance	6.0 ins
Handlebar height	41.0 ins
Kerb weight	448 lbs (with 1 gall fuel)
Oil capacity	4.9 pts
Fuel capacity	3.5 galls

EQUIPMENT

Trafficators	Yes
Electric starter	No
Trip mileometer	Yes
Steering lock	Yes
Helmet lock	Yes
Headlamp flasher	Yes
Kill button	Yes
Toolkit	Yes
Spare parts	3 spark plugs
Other	Mirrors

PERFORMANCE

Top speed	110.7 mph
Standing ¼ mile	14.02 secs
0-30 mph	3.2 secs
0-60 mph	6.4 secs
Speedometer error:	
At indicated 30 mph	27.9 mph
At indicated 60 mph	56.5 mph
Fuel consumption	
(average)	28 mpg
(driven hard)	23 mpg
Braking distance	
from 30 mph	41 ft
from 60 mph	137 ft

PRICE £712 inc VAT

GUARANTEE 6 months/6,000 miles parts and labour

Even during the running-in spell we never got more than 30 mpg. Equally infamous is the minute size of Kawasaki triple fuel tanks, in relation to their prodigious thirst for the stuff. On the Mach III, fuel stops every 60 to 70 miles are the order of the ride.

Other Mach III mutterings: the front brake requires a lot of pressure, but otherwise stopping powers of the single front disc/rear drum set-up are good; there is no vibration, due in part to the rubber engine mounts on the new model; the gearbox has a light and close action, although having neutral at the bottom doesn't appeal because you can get confused and tread through to it when you really wanted bottom gear; the Japanese Dunlops, particularly that squat 4.00 section rear cover, feel reassuring in the dry, though the kindly English summer meant we couldn't test them in the wet (sighs of relief); and finally, it really is a good looking motorcycle.

Back in the August issue, you may recall, we waxed very lyrical over the 400 cc S3 triple, which is almost as fast as the 500, has none of the latter's handling hang-ups, and, it transpires, is £162 cheaper at a very reasonable £549.

So is there any room for the 500? Well, there are people who prefer to live at the outer limits *all* of the time. These are the hardy souls who could be tempted into Mach III ownership, always providing they could afford the fuel bills. The difference between riding a Mach III and, shall we say, more *sensible* motorcycles such as the 500 Suzuki twin or the 500 Honda, is the difference between . . . well, if you can't think of one or two very sensuous comparisons there's no point in you exploring further than the practical ironware. ●