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THE ULTIMATE TRIALS BIKE?

Martin Lampkin tests the last of the works four-stroke Hondas, as used by Eddy Lejeune towards the end of 1987. Thanks to the efforts of Derrick Edmondson – Lejeune's mechanic and minder in '87 – the RTL escaped the HRC crusher and is currently being campaigned by talented Derbyshire youngster John Shirt. Photos James Moorhouse.

I was really excited about the prospect of riding John Shirt's ex-Lejeune works Honda. As regular readers will know, I've ridden production RTLs in the Scottish and other events during the past couple of years and was consequently keen to find out the differences.

Glancing around the works bike, it's quickly apparent that although it looks similar to the production machine, there the similarity ends.

My own 1988 RTL is well made but it looks nothing compared with the hand-crafted works special. Not only is it superbly made from high quality materials, but Honda's engineers have produced what is an infinitely adjustable trials bike. You name it and it can be tuned exactly to the rider's requirements.

Okay, so lots of bikes have multi-adjustable rear shocks, but the front forks also have variable compression and rebound damping – and there's a range of fork springs for absolute fine-tuning. Still with the forks, the steering geometry can be altered by turning eccentric cams at the steering head.

Different footrests came with the bike to achieve the best possible riding position, and even the ignition timing has a huge range of adjustment. When delivered to Shirt the ignition timing was fully advanced, likewise the valve timing, making it very hard to ride. "The throttle was like a switch," explained dad Shirt, John senior. "The power was either on or off."



Martin Lampkin not surprisingly rates the works Honda as the best bike he's ever ridden.



Watching John Shirt putting the Honda through its paces during practice is quite an education...



It looks like a production RTL – but there the similarity ends.

But, with some fine-tuning to Shirt junior's requirements, the RTL now has considerably more usable power. In fact, it is a lot easier to ride than my own machine.

Power is a lot softer at the bottom-end, definitely not so harsh. My bike is quite stop-start; everything happens quickly, whereas this could be fed in smoothly, giving usable power right up through the range. And it revs a lot higher than the stock bike.

Carburation is really superb, generally being responsive, although the throttle did need blipping down hills or it would stall on occasions. In the sections, however, it was really smooth, superbly reliable when going for it. No hesitation or spitting back.

The gearbox feels pretty much the same as my bike's, although the internal ratios could be different. The gearing is quite low – I use a 10 tooth (one higher) gearbox sprocket. Consequently, I never rode it in bottom, using mainly second, occasionally third for some climbs.

Clutch action is quite a lot smoother; mine is either in or out with minimal feel, whereas this has excellent feel.

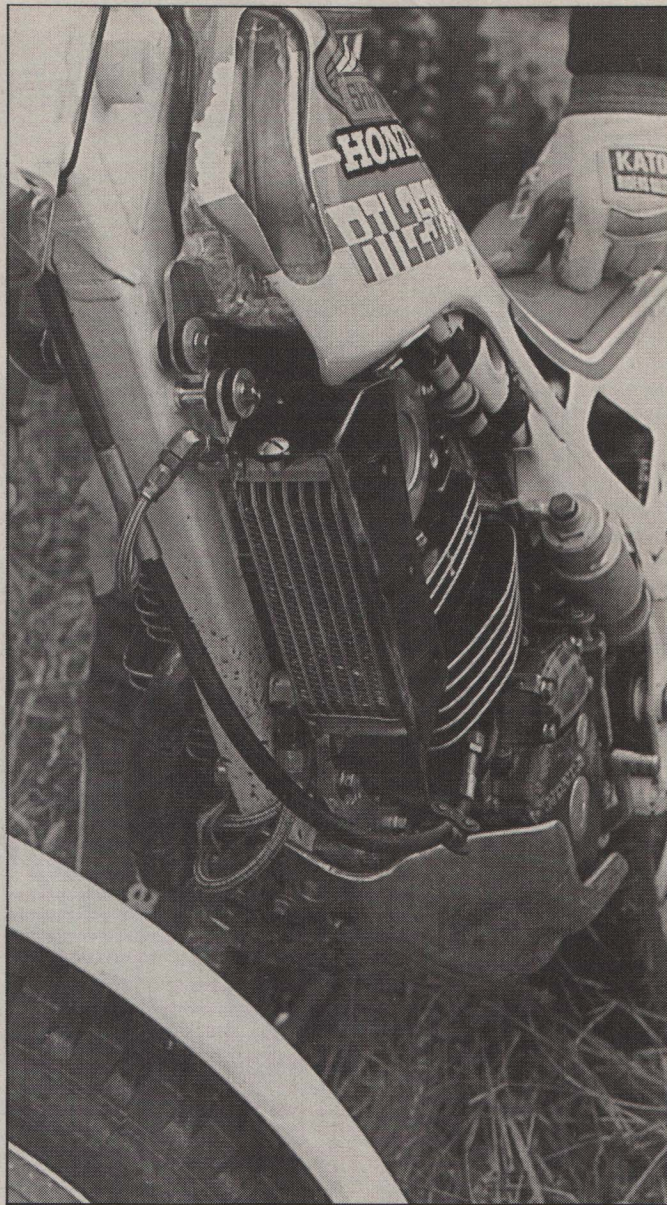
Moving to the rear, the suspension just has to be the ultimate. The stock RTL's is better than any other production bike's, but with extra travel and improved damping this is even better still.

At the front I didn't notice any difference with the forks – as set up – it seeming very similar to mine. Likewise the disc brakes.

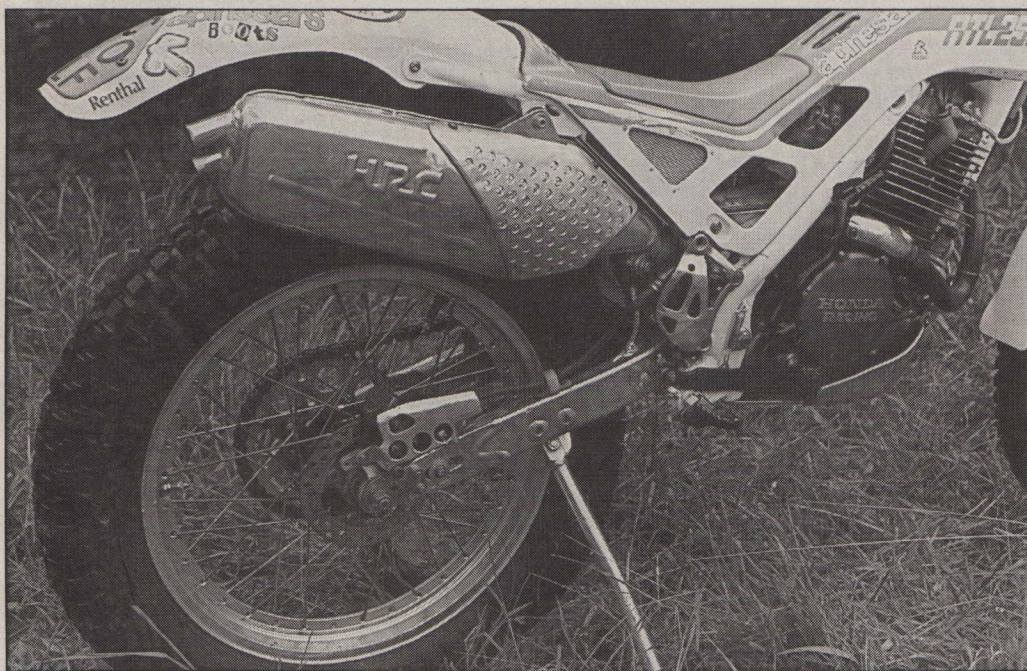
Unlike the production RTL,



Front forks are multi-adjustable – even the steering geometry can be altered.



Alloy tank can just be seen through slot in dummy tank cover. Oil cooler is a useful addition.



Martin Lampkin says the rear suspension is the ultimate. Disc brakes are smaller than those on '88 production model.

with its fairly small fuel capacity, this works machine has a large capacity alloy fuel tank. Pity that's not fitted as standard because I would have appreciated the peace of mind the extra pint or so would have given me in the Scottish!

Another excellent idea is the oil cooler. Both RTLs I've owned have run far too hot for comfort – and you burn your clothing on them. It can't be good for an engine to run that hot. A cooler might be too much of a complication for a production machine but it's a great idea. If it were available it's the first mod I'd have on mine.

And that's the story of the works RTL250 Honda – lots of refinements and improvements over the already excellent production model. It really is a superb machine; the best trials bike I've ever ridden – the ultimate.