Fantic 50RC Caballero

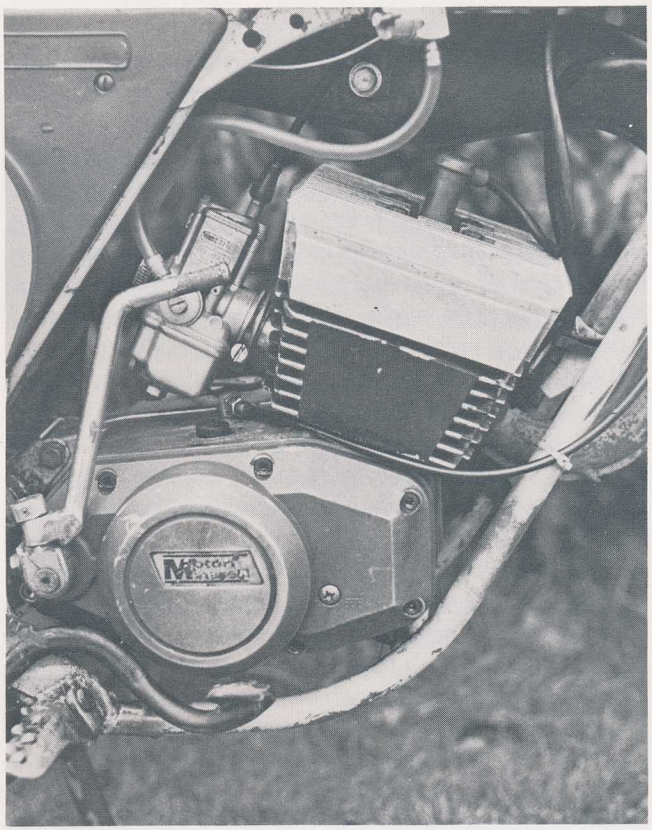
IN SOME WAYS this first chapter exemplifies all the trials and tribulations of testing. When editor Tim Parker and I were planning the book, we both agreed that it was essential to have the biggest and smallest bikes in the enduro world included in it. Unfortunately, neither end of the spectrum was very accessible. As things turned out, I was the only journalist ever to ride the 870cc ISDT BMW and then only after considerable negotiations. By comparison, the Fantic 50 should have been little problem: things are not often as simple as they seem!

Fantic 50s had a brief burst of popularity in the mid-1970s, when they were sold as 'super mopeds'. They were genuine little enduro bikes with pedals tacked on somewhere to keep within the law. In moped form, the Minarelli motor knocked out some 7.2bhp and could manage over 55mph, even on enduro gearing. The full race version was even more impressive than this.

However, after this surge of interest, only a very few Fantics were imported, and these bikes, by their very nature, had been worked hard and had quite simply worn out.

Not that this apparent lack of potential test bikes worried me. Someone, somewhere, just had to have a Fantic 50. I searched high and low but in vain until one day, whilst I was visiting the home of Moto-Gori importer Jim Jones, I saw his teenage son Michael burning around the back garden on a Fantic 50. Immediately, I arranged to borrow the bike.

Not only was Michael's runabout a genuine racing Fantic 50 but it was an ex-works one too – in fact, the bike on which Alan Brick had done so much winning in the 1978 season. This made the bike all the more interesting, since Alan was, and



The Minarelli engine produced exclusively for Fantic was an excellent little power plant, but needed constant maintenance to produce peak power.

is at the time of writing, the only British rider to have produced anything like consistently encouraging results on a 50.

I was lucky to find the 50 at the Jones household at all since Michael was about to sell the bike, but he did agree to lend it to me for a short time.

Fantic rear end looks very dated by today's standards, but still produced pleasant handling when the author tested the bike in the winter of 1981. Tiny silencer produced a genuine insect drone.

This posed another problem, for the day we went to photograph the bike was one of the worst I have ever seen for light conditions.

As we arrived at the test track, the clouds came sweeping in from the Irish Sea and sleet came arrowing down from the black sky, driven by the gale-force winds. Not the most pleasing of conditions in which to go riding and something of a challenge to my wife Carolyn, who is my regular (and best) photographer.

Despite the appalling conditions, the tiny Fantic fired up immediately and its engine note – one of the few motorcycles actually to make a noise like a bee in a jam jar – reminded me I was riding a 50 again for the first time in many years.

Stalling the motor whilst trying to get under way also jogged my memory regarding riding techniques, for any manoeuvre with these miniscule motors had to be done at peak rpm.

The works motor revved on to an estimated 11,000rpm and produced, when it was crisp, about 12bhp. Since a fresh piston, or rings at least, is needed after each meeting in order to keep the motor on song, it is not surprising that our test bike had lost something of its edge during the time it was being used as a runabout by Michael Jones. Even so, it was amazingly fast for such a tiny bike and it could be rowed along with the gear lever in a quite astonishing fashion.

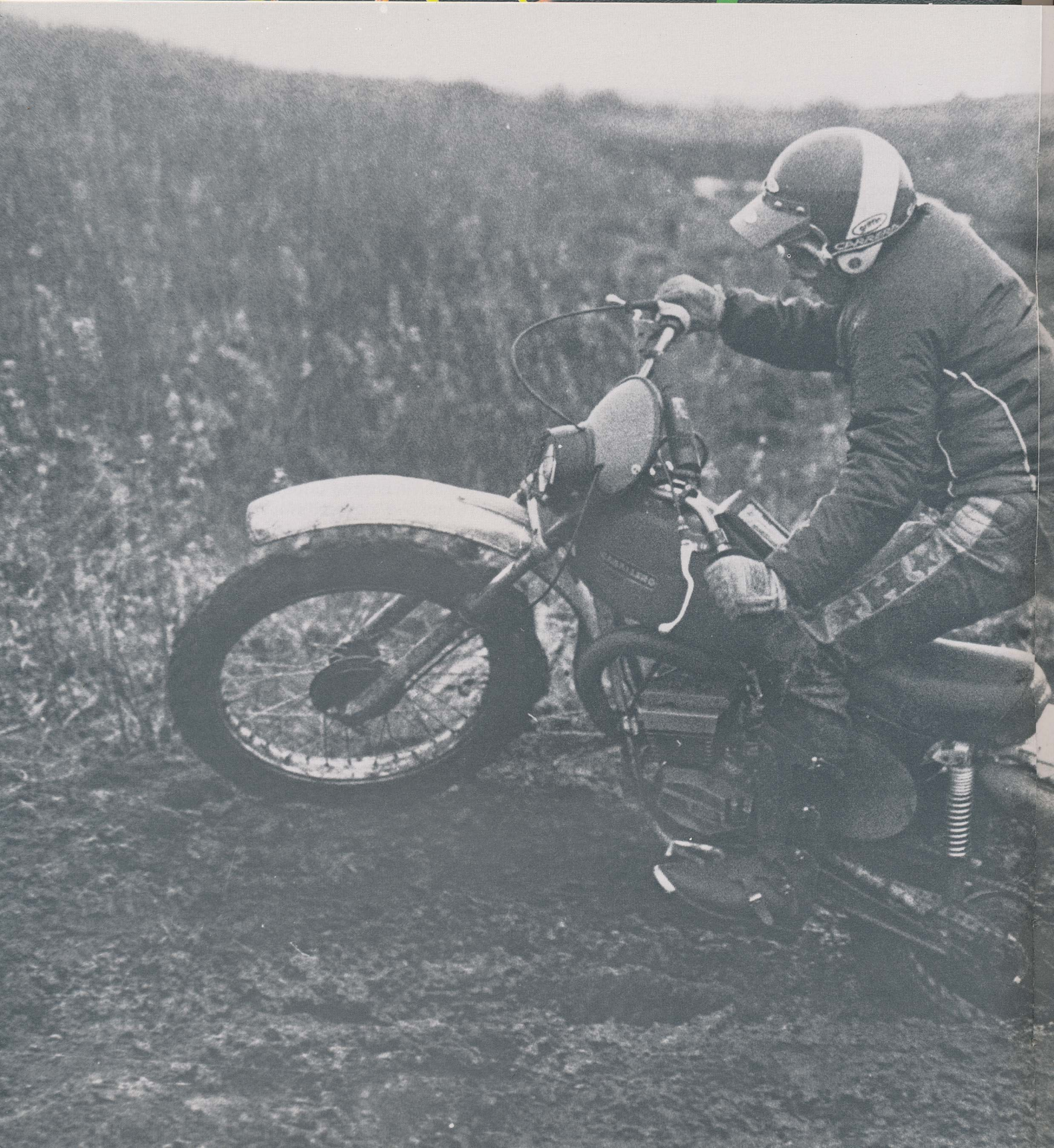
To make any decent progress required a riding style which made the most of the bike's light weight and the power which was available at peak revs. Despite the lack of weight – the bike weighed only 180lb fully fuelled – it was, like all 50s, a very 'physical' motorcycle to ride. This was because every obstacle has to be tackled without shutting off the throttle for even a moment.

Just how often a rider normally eases the power for just a second or two is not appreciated until one rides a 50, where any reduction in fuel to the motor simply kills it dead and results in a desperate selection of the next gear, or two, lower in order to build up the revs to their necessary peak.

Thus, when the track was clear and hazards could be sorted out in one's mind before approaching them, the 50 was simplicity itself to ride, but when things were not so lucid it took a lot of courage to keep the throttle hard against the stop.

It also demanded a surprising degree of strength, since there was no time for finesse – one just hit everything flat out and trusted to the Fantic's excellent handling and light weight not to overcome the rider's strength.

Although the suspension movement at both



Forcing the Fantic through sections was the only way to maintain progress.

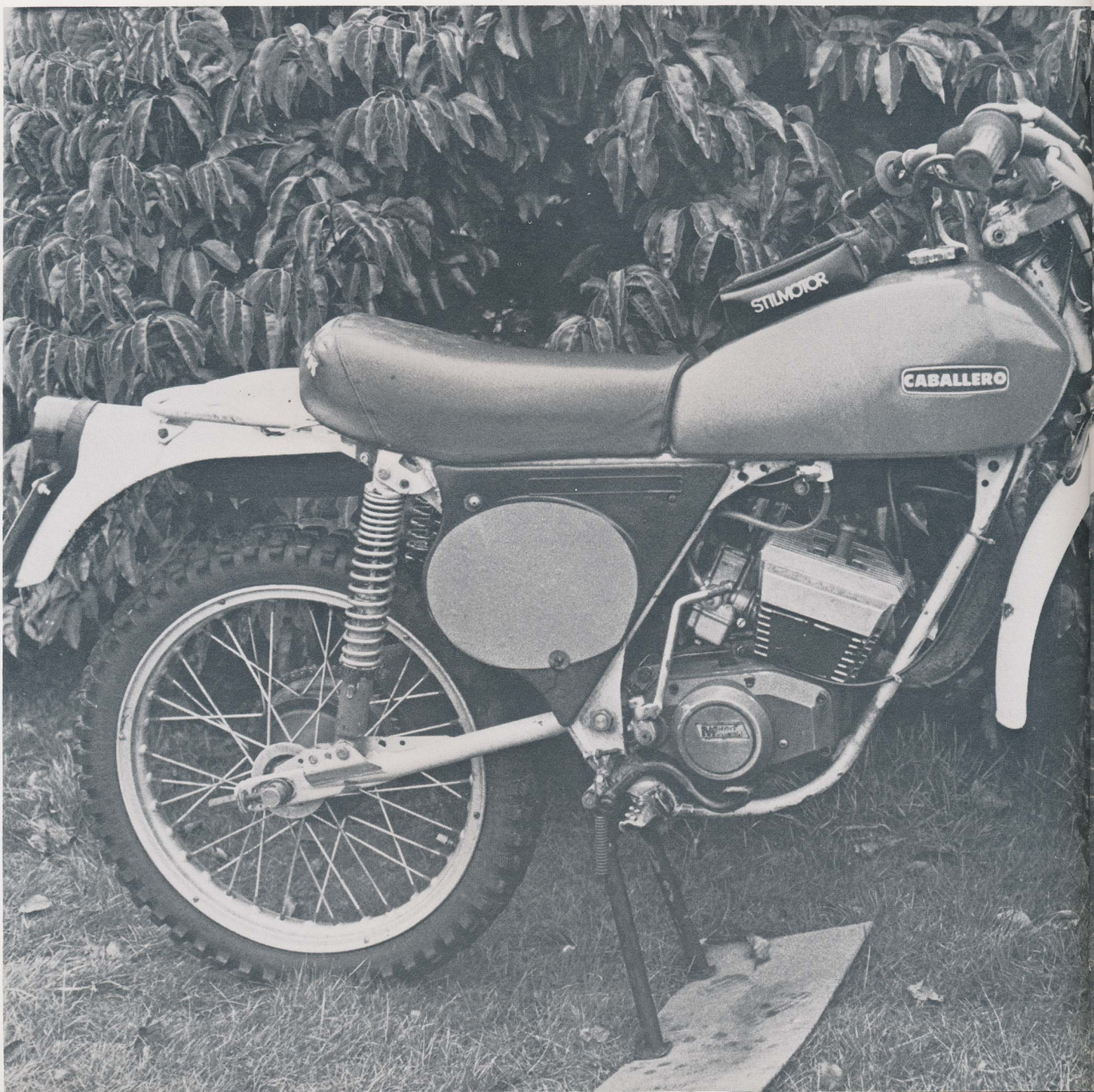
front and rear ends was limited, the handling was stable in a straight line and tolerable over the rough because of the bike's light weight. The Ceriani forks, looking very dated by modern standards, behaved very well and it is a great tribute to their high-quality construction that they were still in such good condition after many years of hard use.

Equally impressive was the Fantic's chassis, which had remained undamaged despite all the hard work it had seen. The baby Fantic had a very similar configuration to its duplex-framed bigger brothers, with similar large areas of gussetting at the swinging arm pivot and steering head. These Fantic duplex frames are expensive to produce and are somewhat over-engineered for their intended engine capacity, but they are always extremely strong.

In the manner of all Fantics, past and present, the finish was superb. The factory uses a baked enamel finish which can literally be bashed by a hammer and not suffer any damage. Certainly I would guarantee that there are very few other comp bikes which could go through the years of use that the Fantic endured and still stay in such good condition.

Slowing the bike was really no problem, since once off the power band the six-speed Minarelli engine, which Fantic use on an exclusive basis, just stops working. But, surprisingly, stopping the bike quickly was much harder, because the miniature motor provides virtually no engine braking. For this reason, it was pleasing to see a pair of Grimeca hubs fitted to the bike, which did an excellent job of slowing down the plot.

In the hands of Alan Brick the Fantic 50 proved a formidable tool, winning many 50cc and even


STILMOTOR
CABALLERO

125cc awards in major enduros. He remembers the bike fondly. 'It was a great little bike which was really fast downhill and a disaster uphill. I learnt a lot on that bike because to keep on time you had to go flat out on sections where other blokes were having a rest. I used to pass dozens of blokes downhill – no problem at all.

'I used to get a bit fed up with the maintenance because after every meeting you'd have to strip the bike. Once it lost its edge it was useless.

'The problem was that you had to be a real headbanger to ride it. At the time, I didn't have enough sense to be frightened, so I just rode flat out. Now I have learned a bit I wouldn't do that.

'It's the same with the continental riders who do well with 50s. They are always the head-bangers. Really skilful riders, but real hard men too. I think a 50 is too hard work for me nowadays, but I wouldn't have missed my season on the little Fantic for anything.'

And I wouldn't have missed testing it either.

The ex-works Fantic 50.

Fantic 50RC Caballero
Engine: Two-stroke piston port induction with petroil lubrication
Capacity: 49.9cc (38.8 × 42mm)
Compression ratio: 14:1 (geometric)
Claimed maximum power: 12bhp at 10,000rpm
Carburation: 24mm Dell'Orto with enrichening lever for cold starting
Transmission: Six-speed gearbox with wet multiplate clutch
Ratios: 1 – 3.30:1; 2 – 2.30:1; 3 – 1.68:1; 4 – 1.38:1; 5 – 1.26:1; 6 – 1.15:1
Flywheel generator driving DC lighting and pointless electronic ignition
Fuel capacity: 8 litres (1.75 imp gal)
Suspension: Ceriani straight leg front forks giving 6in of travel.
Twin damper swinging arm with Marzocchi dampers giving 4.5in of travel
Frame: Full duplex
Tyres: 2.75 × 21in front Metzeler; 3.50 × 18in rear Metzeler
Brakes: 5in sls front and rear by Grimeca. Rear q.d.
Wheelbase: 50in
Ground clearance: 9.5in
Saddle height: 30in
Weight ready to race: 180lb