

Honda XR250

IN A WAY, I feel sorry for this bike. It had the misfortune to be bracketed by two extremely good brothers in the Honda range – the XR200 and the XR500. The 200 was probably the best four-stroke package in the world at the time, if one considered price as well as handling and power. The XR500 was equally good, or, to be more precise, its motor was a world beater and its chassis acceptable.

Unfortunately the XR250 did nothing with sparkling success. It did not handle nearly so well as the 200, nor was it as manageable, and its power was simply mediocre when one compared it with its big brother's arm-wrenching urge. Consequently most testers greeted the bike with little enthusiasm.

I had to restrain my personal dislike of the bike when I wrote the test, for what irked me was that the designers did not seem to have a firm objective in mind when they conceived the motorcycle.

The XR250 produced its power – what there was of it – at high rpm, in itself a questionable route to success with an off-road four-stroke. This meant that the gearbox had to be constantly used to maintain any decent progress in the same way one would ride a two-stroke, but without the benefit of 30 plus bhp on tap.

The handling was distinctly substandard, largely through the use of the dreadful 23in front wheel and resultant raising of the steering head. What the bike needed was a slimming course added to a shrinking of everything, so that the finished article looked like a slightly oversize XR200 rather than being virtually identical to the XR500.

Honda did respond to the general criticism and

produced a much sharper version for 1980, but still with questionable handling and still very free revving. The bike was made largely in response to pressure from American Honda, who needed a 250 in their enduro range, this being a very popular class in the States.

In Britain the 250 had flopped so heavily that it was not considered worth importing it again – a fact which caused few riders any tears.

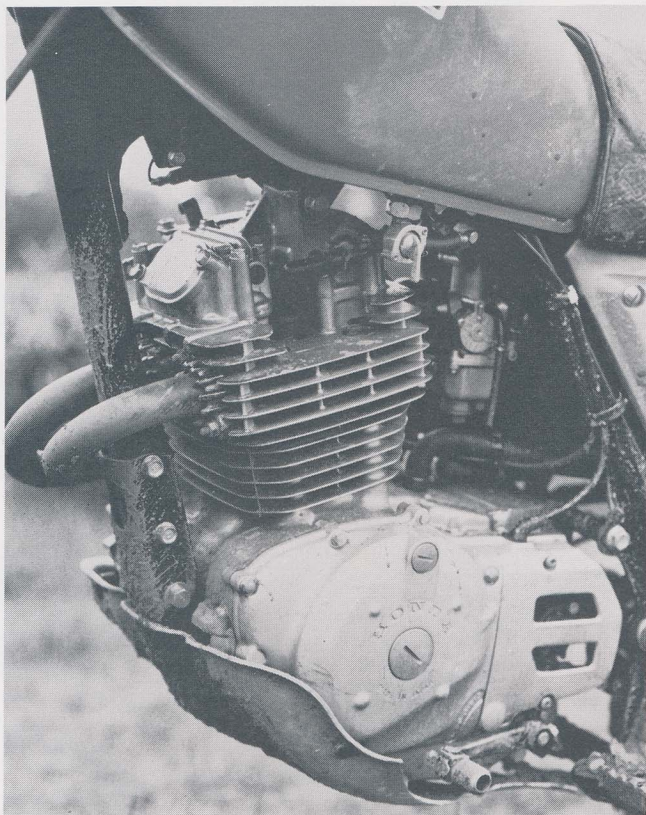
Gather a group of enduro riders together and one is immediately reminded of the old joke about the bunch of Irishmen fighting each other until the last survivor commits suicide out of sheer frustration! The difference is that enduro riders would NEVER agree about anything, not even who they were going to fight; except, it seems, when Honda's XR250 is being discussed.

All four of us were unanimous in thinking that the XR's motor was superb – a veritable masterpiece of engineering – and equally we were all solidly behind the idea of digging a large hole and burying the bike's cycle parts.

First, the good news. The 250cc version of the XR500 is, if anything, a more pleasant power plant than its bigger brother. It unfailingly fires up with one prod, from either hot or cold, and is turbine-smooth up to maximum revs.

The power delivery is very pleasing, particularly for riders who are less than ISDT standard, in that there is no discernible power surge throughout the whole rev range. Open the throttle to go, turn it a little more to go faster and screw it wide open to buzz along at quite a respectable speed.

Like the 500 the 250 has twin exhaust ports, partly because of the dreaded 23in front wheel, and enjoys an engine balancer for smoothness and a four-valve head – all the accoutrements one



The XR250 had a typically clever power plant with a 4-valve head and counterbalancers.

would expect from a modern four-stroke.

The result is a very smooth motor which will both rev well and pull heartily, and which should make a sensible challenger to less than top-line enduro bikes, particularly in view of the way any four-stroke motor finds drive on poor surfaces.

'Should' is the operative word, for the XR250's chassis is such a mess that the motor's virtues are effectively nullified. At this point I must confess to misinterpreting the XR500's handling when I tested the bike. Many of its problems are effectively masked by the amount of power which the big motor produces. For example, the front wheel is almost permanently light when the 500 is driven hard, and the rear end can be hung out in a power slide without any problems. However,



The dreaded 23in front wheel. One of the all-time great mistakes in Honda's design and marketing policies. The forks weren't too good either.

with a very similar chassis on the 250, all sorts of problems can occur. With the front wheel actually steering more often, instead of merely resting on the ground, the curse of the 23in front wheel becomes readily apparent. The extra stability which comes through increased gyroscopic effect means that the front wheel is reluctant to dig in on sharp turns, manifesting all the characteristics of an excessively shallow head angle – excellent straight-line stability and a camel on corners! Putting on opposite lock to correct a power slide is also noticeably more difficult than on a well-designed racing bike with a 21in wheel.

Both the front forks and rear dampers were also much too soft for fast going, and were under-



Finding the limits of the XR was all too easy.

damped for their spring rates. When pressing on, one became very conscious of an elastic feeling in the frame as it floated up and down on its suspension like a Cadillac.

Our test bike is normally ridden by Russell Foulkes, an excellent rider who has made expert status on the XR. Russell's method is simply to force the bike round corners, mastering its vagaries by sheer physical strength. Treated in this way, the XR does respond, but not all of us can match Russell's impressive 6ft 3in, 14-stone physique. Even he admits that the motor is the bike's main virtue.

As with the 500, I am almost embarrassed to slam the bike so hard, for, like the 500, it will make a superb trail bike. Take it out of a competition context and it becomes an excellent off-road machine. It is quiet, extremely economical, with a petrol consumption no two-stroke can match, and offers impeccable reliability.

Its standard specification is also very encouraging, with reliable lights and a sensibly low riding position, making it ideal for the serious trail rider. I would have no hesitation in taking

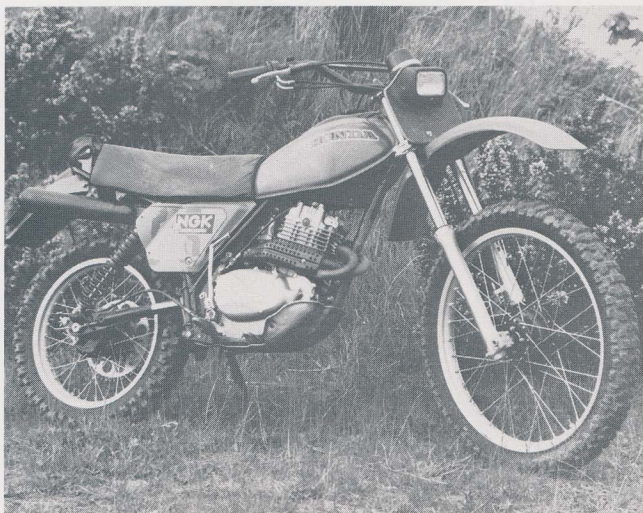
the XR250 on any trail in Britain and be confident that it would give a trouble-free ride. Only the air filter box, which is inadequately shielded, gives any real cause for concern.

On the road the little Honda is equally trouble-free. It is more pleasant to ride in many ways than the 500 in that it does not lunge about with so much enthusiasm, and is therefore more relaxing. The relative docility also makes it a nicer trail bike in the opinion of many riders. Certainly it is the sort of bike which would make an ideal commuter machine with the potential to be used hard at weekends.

The only problem with this scenario is Honda's marketing policy. The company insists that the XR is a racing machine. This is reflected in the lack of warranty and the premium asking price. Whilst I would concede that it is possible to win medals on the bike – as Russell proves – it seems to me a hard way of going about the task.

As it stands the XR250 is a far less attractive package than the 500, whose abundance of power

The XR250 – technically very interesting but a flop in practice.



makes up for its other weaknesses. The 250 is one of the two weakest enduro machines in the 250cc class. Honda have two choices. Firstly, get organized and produce a proper racing chassis (without the 23in front wheel and grotty Bridgestone tyres) and then we could have some real fun with this motor. Secondly, keep things as they are and market this bike with a full Honda warranty and a price tag of about that of the XL250. In this guise, as a super sports trail bike, the XR would sell well and Honda would be relieved of the problem of having nasty racing journalists making unfavourable comparisons with real enduro bikes.

Finally, let me say that if someone does build a real chassis for the bike, will they please let me know. I could win medals with the XR motor housed in a sensible frame!

Honda XR250

Engine: Single-cylinder four-stroke with counterbalancers and four-valve head, SOHC

Capacity: 249cc (74 × 57.8mm)

Compression ratio: 9.6:1

Carburation: 32mm Keihin. Handlebar-mounted choke for cold starting. Oil-soaked foam air filter

Transmission: Wet multi-plate clutch with common lubrication for engine and gearbox

Ratios: 1 – 2.800; 2 – 1.850; 3 – 1.375; 4 – 1.111; 5 – 0.900

Electrical equipment: Pointless electronic ignition driven from flywheel generator

25W front headlamp; 3W rear lamp

Fuel capacity: 10 litres (2.2 imp gal)

Oil capacity: 3½ pints

Suspension: Leading axle front forks with 8.8in of travel; 7.8in rear

Frame: Single-tube main frame with engine as stressed member.

Unbraced swinging arm

Wheels: WM2 × 23in front; WM3 × 18in rear. Shoulderless

aluminium alloy rims

Tyres: Bridgestone Claw Action enduro pattern 3.00 × 21in front;

4.60 × 18in rear

Brakes: 5in sls front and rear

Wheelbase: 55.1in

Ground clearance: 11.2in

Handlebar width: 33in

Saddle height: 34.6in

Dry weight: 250lb