

SUZUKI

ACTION REPLAY ACTION REPLAY

As a historical statement, the amazing Suzuki RE-5 has plenty to say for itself. So, without further ado...

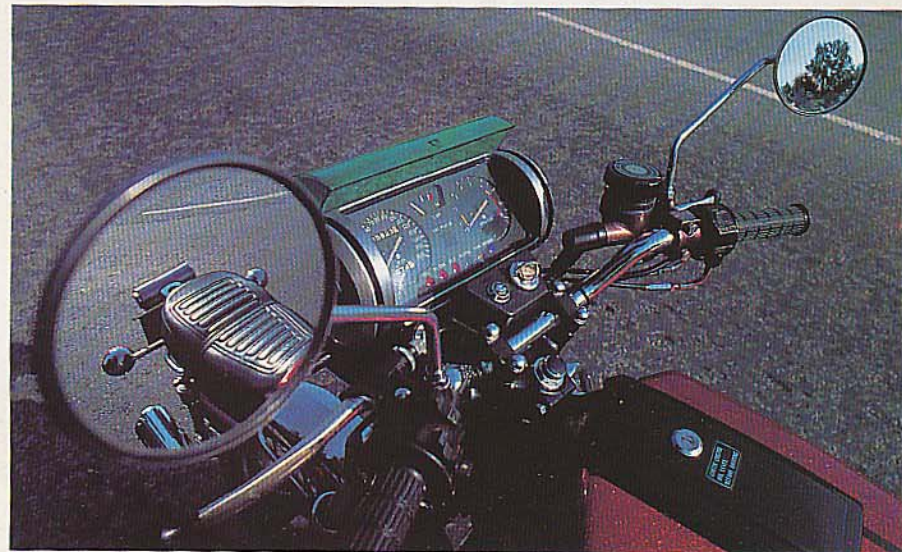
Thank God for the RE-5. Here is the bike that, according to Suzuki, provided a "welcome to the Rotary Age". It said cheerio to it, too, and remains the only Japanese rotary-engined bike ever to see the light of day here. It is an undeniable oddball and certainly one of the most interesting motor bikes ever made. Thank God for the RE-5.

David Jupp owns around 20 Japanese bikes of varying vintage, some of them even rarer than the RE-5. But nothing attracts curious onlookers - bikers or oth-

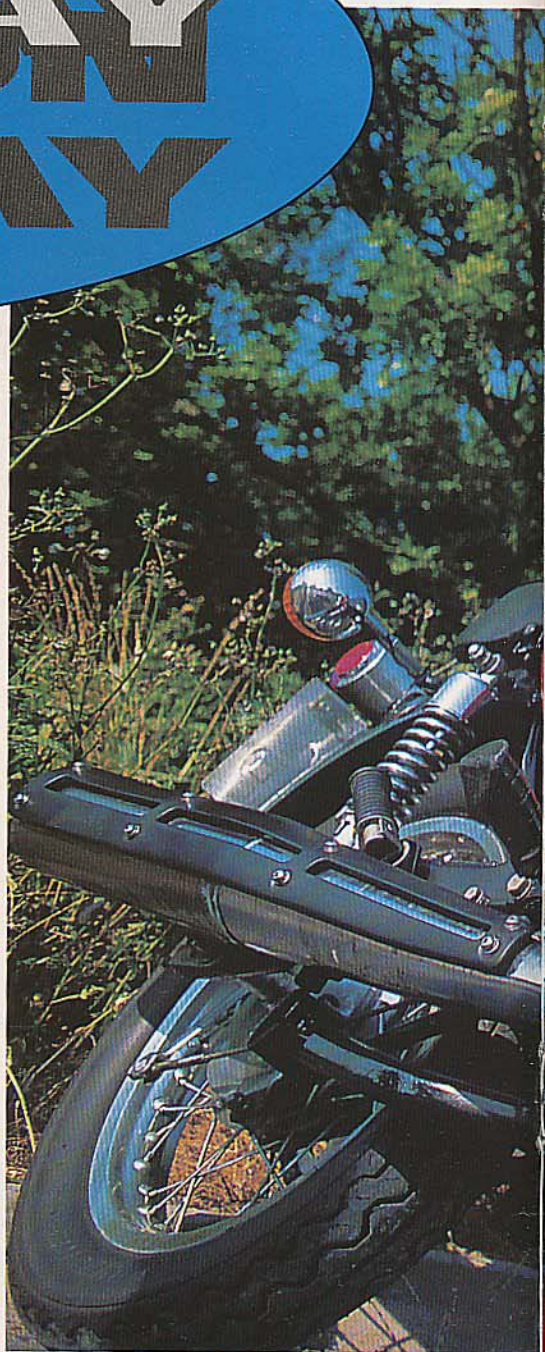
erwise - with the bees-to-honey regularity of this machine. Often, they're drawn to it by the vulgar tear-gas canister of a rear light cluster and then held there by the multitude of other delights the bike has to offer.

Check out the flip-top instrument panel. Dig the metalflake finish on the paintwork - pure 1970s. How about those quaint, round indicators. Look at the size of that radiator. And, hey - isn't that a...? Yes, it is. It has a rotary engine, too.

Putting up with open-mouthed curiosity (not to mention barely-concealed mirth)



Flipped lid: instrument console design, in keeping with the RE-5, is eccentric



at every stop is all part of the experience of owning an RE-5. Or, should I say, it's all part of one of the experiences of owning an RE-5. For a start, there aren't that many of them around. During its short lifespan following its introduction in 1974 only around 200 were ever imported to the UK and Dave Jupp reckons there are maybe only around 25 good ones left - including his. Some have, however, recently been shipped in from the USA, so that estimate

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PHIL MASTERS



could soon be revised upwards.

The fanatical collector bought his '75-vintage bike eight years ago, after being transfixed by the one he saw in the museum at Beaulieu. Even then, before prices had started to go through the roof, he had to fork out £750 for a machine that was in awful condition.

"It was pretty rusty when I got it," recalls David. "Both front and rear rims were damaged and the forks were bent. It

certainly wasn't roadworthy, but at least it was more or less complete. The mudguards were rusted right through, but a brand new pair was included in the price of the bike.

"I got it going fairly quickly and then tidied it up more as I went along; I bought better exhausts for it after a while, as well as other bits and pieces."

Suzuki started development work on a rotary-engined motor cycle in 1970, hav-

ing obtained a licence to do so from rotary inventors, NSU/Wankel. And they certainly can't be accused of not taking the project seriously. A massive R & D operation was conceived, including the setting-up of a totally new production line devoted entirely to the RE-5. Virtually all the machinery on it had to be designed, developed and built from new.

Why bother designing a rotary-engined bike in the first place? Well, Suzuki's bof-



SPECIFICATIONS

As listed in original RE-5 sales brochure

ENGINE NSU/Wankel-type rotary, single rotor, single chamber 497cc (30.3 cu.in), compression ratio 9.4:1, HHD 18-32 carburettor, CDI ignition, maximum power 62hp (SAE, NET) @ 6500rpm, maximum torque 54.9 ft-lb (7.60kg-m) @ 3500rpm

TRANSMISSION Five-speed constant mesh gearbox, wet multi-plate clutch

CYCLE PARTS Brakes: Hydraulic twin discs (front), drum (rear). Suspension: Telescopic forks with hydraulic damper (front), swinging arm with 5-way adjustable hydraulic damper (rear). Tyres: 3.25H 19-4PR (front), 4.00H 18-4PR (rear)

DIMENSIONS Overall length 87.4in (2200mm), overall width 34.3in (870mm), overall height 46.1in (1170mm), wheelbase 59.1in (1500mm), ground clearance 6.7in (170mm), dry weight 507lbs (230kg), fuel tank capacity 3.7 gallons (17 litres)

PERFORMANCE Maximum speed 110-115mph (176-184kph), standing quarter-mile 13.2 secs

fins saw tremendous benefits to be gained in a touring bike from the inherent smoothness of a rotary engine. Unlike a reciprocating engine, which relies on the up-and-down motion of the piston(s) to make the crankshaft rotate, the rotor itself does away with all that by getting straight on with the business of rotating itself. And it is smooth.

"You can feel the road shocks and occasionally the transmission, but you cannot feel the engine at all," confirms David Jupp. "If you rev it up and put your hand on the tank, you can't feel a thing. The metal rear number plate is a case in point: it's original and still in one piece, while on a normal bike it would have cracked within weeks. The smoothness doesn't lull you into going faster than you want, though, because you're sitting up into the wind - and then there's always the roar from the engine."

Ah, yes - the engine noise. Odd; very odd. You imagine that if ever they were to invent a five-cylinder three-stroke it would, somehow, sound like this. It's difficult to explain, really, but it's a weird mix of generator, council grass-cutter, big twin running on one cylinder and two-stroke (if you've never heard one, I can appreciate that you're still none the wiser). It would

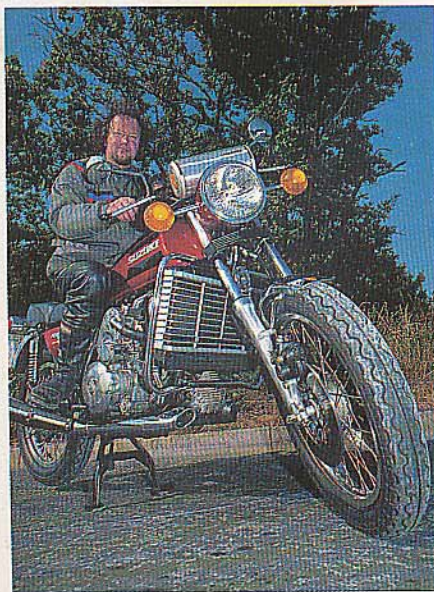
also stand as much chance of passing present-day noise regs as a Tornado on reheat. It is very loud. Also, as soon as the ignition is turned on, the CDI emits a piercing whistle that simply never goes away.

You'd think it would be enough to drive you around the bend, but not according to its owner. "I don't find the noise obtrusive at all. And while I wouldn't like to sit on a motorway with it all day, to me it's all part of the experience."

So there you have it, straight from the horse's mouth - you don't just own an RE-5, you experience it.

Reliability-wise, the experience hasn't been too bad. "I had a lot of problems with it when I first bought it," said David, "because the vacuum fuel tap used to leak. It used to seep into the carb, and because the manifold's all downhill it would fill the motor up with petrol. So if I laid it up, it would be a pig to start. I solved the problem two ways: I bought a new tap and now, every time I've finished using it, I just pull out the fuel pipe and let the carb dry out.

"I also had the CDI fail on me once, which a friend managed to fix, and so I carry a spare CDI unit with me everywhere now. It'll probably never happen again, but..."



RE-5 owner, Dave Jupp: "It's all part of the experience..."

Suzuki tried to make much of the bike's simplicity when it was launched (less moving parts=less to go wrong, etc). But it never turned out that way, and its complexity was one of the reasons why it was a sales flop. It has five throttle cables, for example - a 'pull' one each for the oil pump, the small choke on the carburettor and the port valve, and 'pull-off' ones to the port valve and the carb. It took David a year just to get the throttle settings right, because none of the manuals address that aspect of maintenance explicitly enough.

Running costs leave a lot to be desired, too. Oil disappears at the rate of a pint every 500 or so miles, while petrol consumption hovers around 22-25mpg. As a

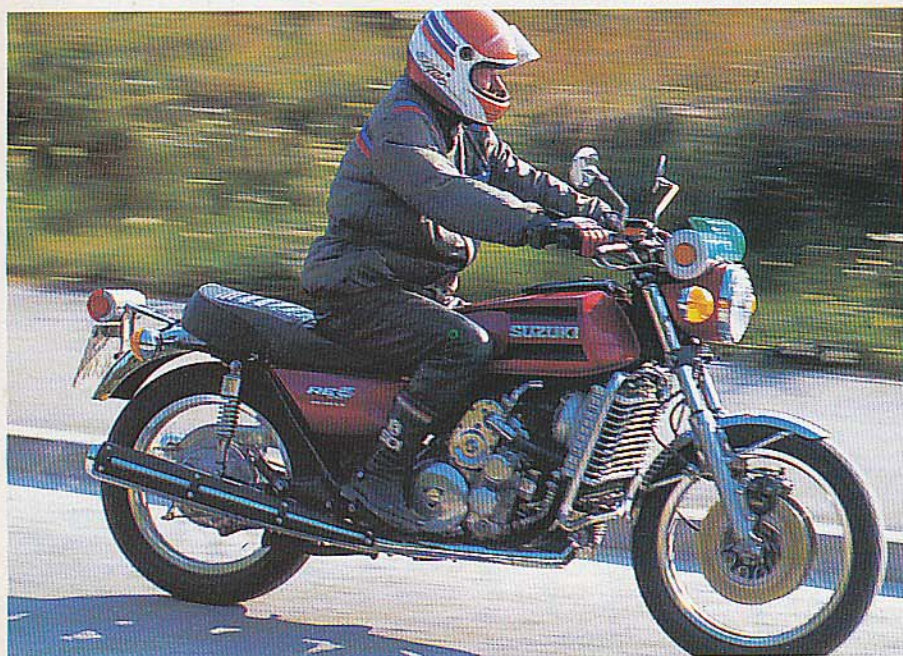
1990s collectable, used only occasionally, it matters not a lot, but you can see why long-distance touring johnnies in the mid '70s took their custom elsewhere.

As a bike that was always scarce, spare parts have never been exactly plentiful and they are now virtually non-existent. Dave Jupp twitches uncontrollably at the thought of that instrument console being damaged, for example, and certain parts for the twin-choke carburettor - manufactured exclusively for the RE-5 - just cannot be had. And the seat, while visually identical to those on all the big Suzuki two-strokes of the period, is just different enough to make it a cherished item. In common with most other RE-5 owners, you would imagine, Dave describes his riding style as "careful"...

As well as being smooth, it lollaps along at a fair old rate. David's never caned it, but he has had it up to around a ton, at which point a slight weave sets in. Suzuki's claimed top speed for the 62bhp machine in 1974 was 110-115mph, which is about right. But the massive torque (55ft/lb at a mere 3,500rpm) is its main performance characteristic, meaning that it can be left in top gear all day.

A lot of Suzuki's research and development work went into overcoming the problems posed by the extremely high operating temperatures of a rotary-engined bike. The RE-5 therefore features a unique double-skinned exhaust - the interior made of stainless steel - with two Dan Dare-style air ducts at the front of the down pipes. The housings for the rotor are cooled by water, while all engine internals are oil-cooled.

The bike runs so hot, it is impossible to touch the engine after a run of even around



1975

AND ALL THAT

WHILE RE-5s were being bought new in 1975 (for £1205), there were actually some other things going on the world at the same time.

THE CORONATION of King Juan Carlos in Spain heralded the end of the Franco era and the start of the long road towards democracy. Our PM was Harold Wilson, while the previous incumbent, Ted Heath, was replaced as Tory leader by one Margaret Thatcher.

A PINT OF BEER would set you back about 25p, although Drink of the Year was Cresta (it's frothy, man!). Allegros, Marinas and Maxis were the mainstay of the British motor industry. Radio 1 DJs like Noel Edmonds, Tony Blackburn, David Hamilton, Ed Stewart and Dave Lee Travis (yes, he was there even then) were playing such chart hits as 10cc's I'm Not In Love, Bohemian Rhapsody by Queen, John I'm Only Dancing (David Bowie), Make Me Smile (Come Up and See Me) by Steve Harley and Cockney Rebel and the Japanese Classics Record of the Year, I Do I Do I Do I Do I Do by Abba. Brilliant.

DERBY COUNTY won the First Division Championship. Scottish champions were Rangers, for whom Derek Parlane scored five goals in a league match against hapless Dunfermline. Other big-name players around at the time included Malcolm Macdonald (Newcastle), Francis Lee (Manchester City), Emlyn Hughes (Liverpool) and Stan Bowles (QPR).

GIACOMO AGOSTINI won his last 500cc world championship on a Yamaha. You could buy the RE-5's stablemate, the GT 750, for £969 (a tenner less than the Honda CB 750). An XS 500 Yamaha would set you back £825, a Honda CB 200 £429. The H2 750 Kawasaki cost £849. Two-wheeler sales for the year topped out at a whopping 270,500.

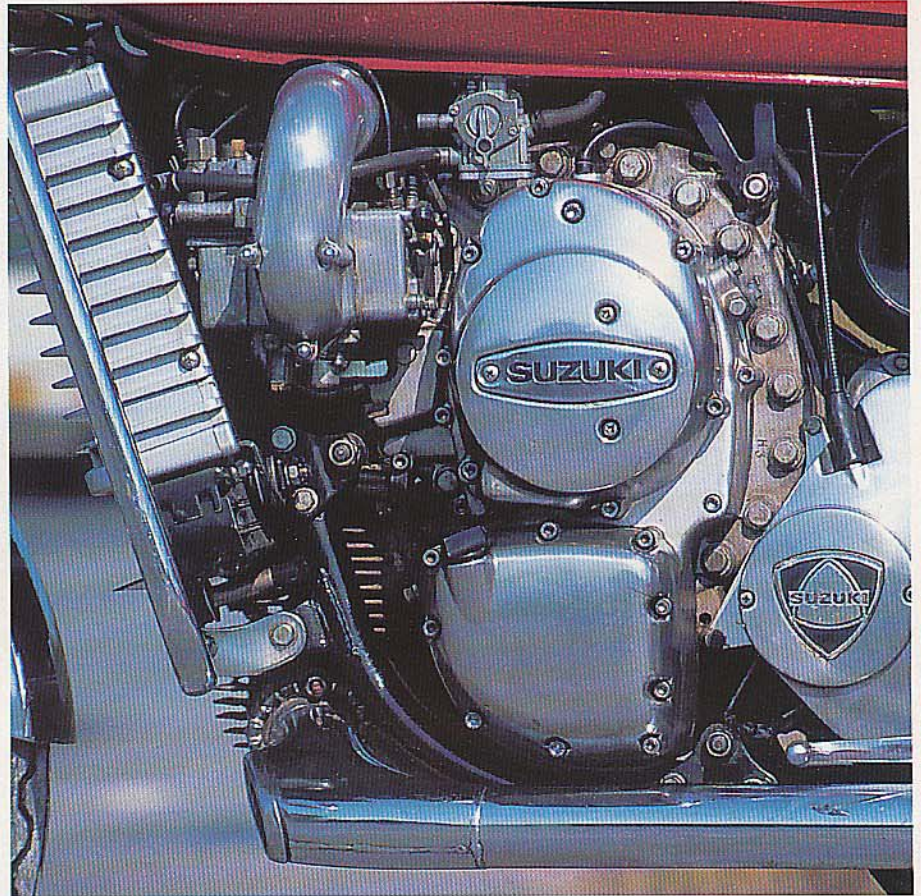
a mile (I know - I was that soldier). Those distinctive heat shields on the silencers are definitely not just cosmetic.

The huge radiator and crash bar that dominate the front of the bike give it a deceptively bulky appearance; it doesn't feel so huge sitting astride it. The massive castings of the engine - which looks as though it was built to Forth Bridge-type tolerances - also give an impression of weight, although at 507 lbs it's lighter than, say, a GPZ900.

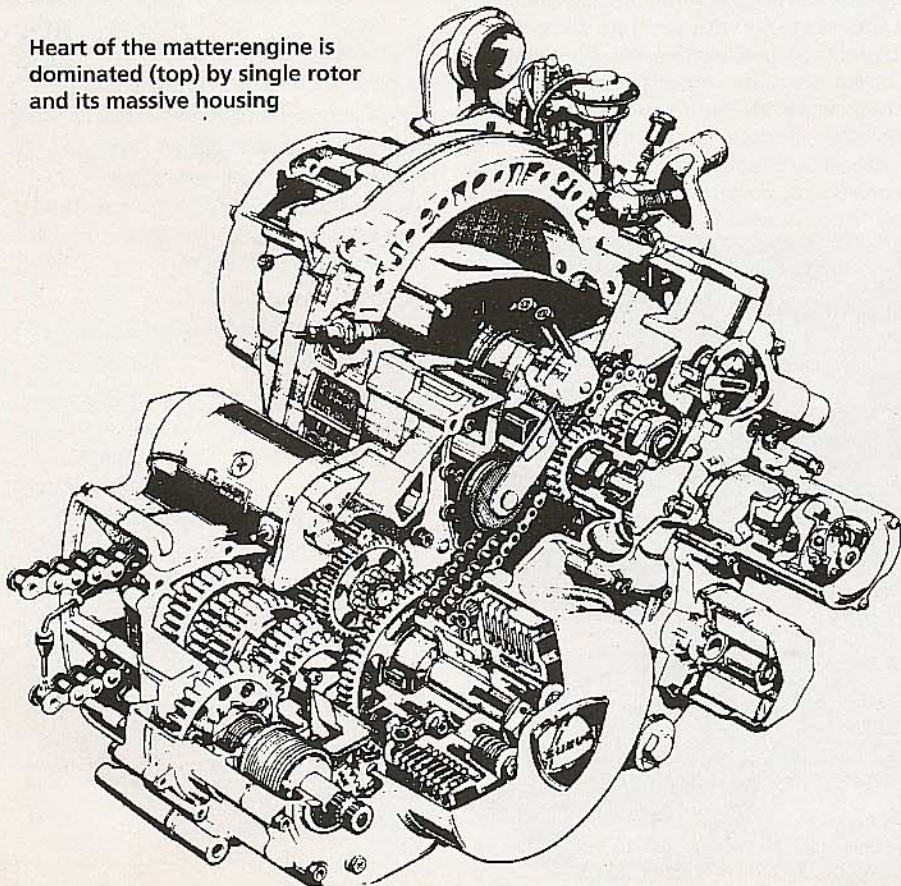
Hauling it on the centre stand, though, is a different matter. Dave Jupp puts it down to the weight distribution - but whatever you want to put it down to, it takes an almighty lunge and a sturdy boot. You'd never manage it in trainers. At least the stand and its mountings are, like most of the RE-5, solidly put-together.

Talking of never managing things brings us nicely to the kickstart, which proves that even inscrutable Japanese engineers have a sense of humour. The mightiest of swings results in a feeble "phutt" that terminates about third-distance. It certainly makes you burst into fits of laughter, but never in a million years would it make the motor burst into life. It's yet another part of the experience, I suppose.

Dave's RE-5 is, to the best of his knowledge, totally standard. The only mod he's



Heart of the matter: engine is dominated (top) by single rotor and its massive housing



made is to fit an O-ring chain and blank off the oil feed, which is a recommended modification, anyway.

His meticulous approach to servicing and maintaining service histories on all his bikes means the RE-5 is kept running sweetly at all times. But maintenance doesn't extend to the single rotor itself, which is a sealed unit. As he explains: "The rotor on my bike still has a lead seal on it - it's never been opened. With those the simple rule is: if it works, leave alone!"

Routine maintenance does involve keeping an eye on the spark plug, though, because it can oil up. And you'd want to look after the plug, anyway - with its special flush-fitting head to clear the rotor - at £8 a go!

Other motor cycles in David's impressive collection may come and go, but this is one that's staying put. As well as being of outstanding interest, RE-5s aren't half worth a lot nowadays. A ball park figure for a good one like this might be two grand, probably more.

The Suzuki company motto is "To Make Products of Value". How ironic it should be the failure of the RE-5 as a successful, mass-production machine that has made the bike exactly that.

Robert McCabe