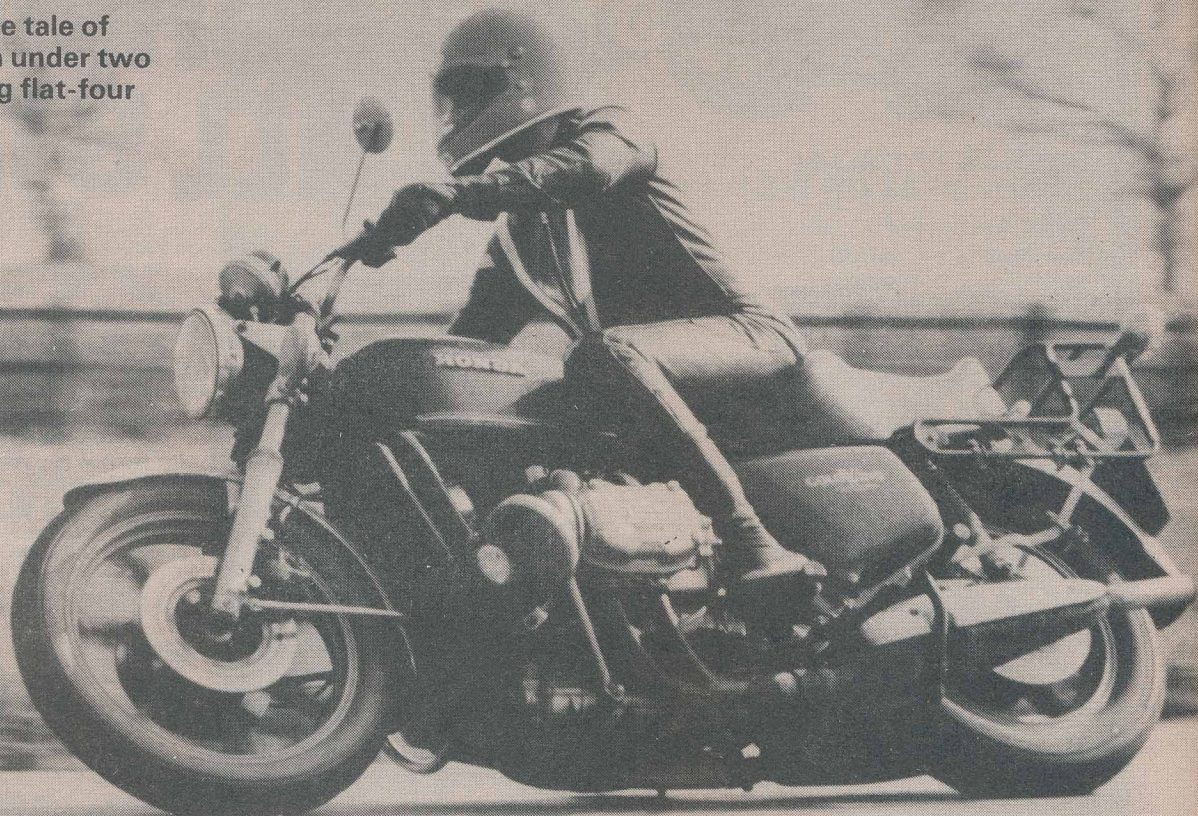


Supa-commuta!

John Thorpe tells the tale of over 25,000 miles in under two years on Honda's big flat-four 'Gold Wing'



FOLK are as cussed as a Japanese cross-head! Otherwise, how do you account for the 'Gold Wing' not selling in its tens of thousands here?

Right then. I'm biased. Of course I'm biased — since I've just had the considerable pleasure of completing 25,000 miles riding on the World's Best Bike — Honda's much-maligned, always-underestimated, magnificent 'Gold Wing'. Unfortunately, the best is not always properly appreciated. Seems to me, in fact, that the best is usually rejected in favour of the mediocre. And not just in bikes, either!

Still, back to the 'Gold Wing'. If you're used to reading tests that cover a matter of ten days, and under a thousand miles, sit back and enjoy this — a test that covers twenty-four months and twenty-five thousand miles.

Our 'Gold Wing' joined us in April 1976, when it had just 250 miles on the clock. It was originally part of the Honda test fleet, but in a burst of over-enthusiasm our Phil 'Superseries' Mather motored it right into the stones during a test session. After rebuilding, we reckoned we had a duty towards it, so we bought it! Not before, however, it had done one of our tougher Marathon rides — 664 miles, two-up, at an average speed of 55mph.

We're talking about May '76, when the 'Wing' had only 500 miles on the clock. It took the Marathon in its thoroughbred stride, and went on to complete 'Motorcycling Monthly's' longest-ever Performance Test — 7,000 miles — by mid-1977.

A year later, the mileage on the 'Wing's' clock has risen to a massive

25,000 miles — giving something like 18,000 miles covered in the intervening year. That's probably more than any Press test bike has ever covered before here, or anywhere. How has it behaved?

Funny you should ask — 'cos I can tell you! In that year, Neil Millen has been introduced to the delights of 'Wing' riding, and Geoff Carless has done a longish stint too. Most of the mileage, though, has been down to me — my luck's changing at last! — and am I happy about it? Too right I am!

Last time I reported, in our June '77 issue, I was in the enviable position of having both a 'Gold Wing' and a BMW. In my case, the formidable 900cc R90. Greed I can understand, but this was ridiculous! Short of strapping one superbike to each foot, how the hell could I get the best out of either? And if I couldn't, which should I keep?

All right! So you envy me the chance of having to decide. So did I. The only way I could resolve it was to leave one in the garage, and ride the other. The one that I missed, hopefully, should be the one that I kept.

So I did — and inside a few weeks I had my answer. When I was riding the Bee Emm, I missed the 'Wing'. When I was riding the 'Wing', I was blithely happy and didn't miss anything. The Bee Emm went; the 'Wing' remained; and I've never regretted the choice I made.

When I took it over, our 'Wing' was based in London and had the job of ferrying me to and from a village in Sussex each day and every day. Distance, 52 miles give or take a whipsnitch. Journey, 32 miles of open

road and 20 miles of patience-breaking London traffic, give or take a jam or two. Performance, 100 minutes for the trip. Average speed, 31.2mph, at 48mpg. It had British Rail licked!

Come last autumn we moved to Poole, and the journey suddenly lengthened to 160 miles each day — two 80-mile legs. It was up to the 'Wing' to make up the difference, and it did. On the very first day, down the A27/M27 complex, it set a 'norm' that no other bike has yet been able to approach — 80 miles in 80 minutes, without even bending a law!

Now, a '60-per' average ain't hay, whatever way you look at it. True, the new run hasn't got the nadjery the old one had. Even so, it's no push-over. Motorway accounts for only 25 miles. On top of that, there's eight miles of very slow going round Southampton, and a dozen miles of 30- or 40-restricted areas once you leave 'the Liverpool of the South'.

Believe me, this bike flies! Speed is unimportant. What matters is sustainable speed — call it pace, if you like — and there's nothing, but *nothing*, to equal the 'Wing' on that. Tweak the throttle at 30mph — but gently, man; gently! — and with no effort at all she zooms oh so smoothly up to 70-per in a mite over 6½ seconds, using the gears. Result? She tramps on at a rate that would do credit to a sports bike.

But a sports bike the 'Wing' is not. This Honda is big, and heavy. Kerb weight is 631lb., and Thorpe's weight is 224lb. on top of that — damn! I've let my secret out! — making a laden weight nearing 900lb. You think that inhibits her? Then think again. This bike

is agile as a kitten. On country-road going — my favourite — when I've suffered a rush of blood to the head, the 'Wing' has proved perfectly capable of 'leaving' bikes as diverse as a Laverda 'Jota' and a BMW 800. Point is, the centre of gravity is so low — thanks to the flat-four engine and the under-seat 4.2-gallon fuel tank — that a really determined rider can lift 'er through the corners with little more than a shrug of the shoulders.

Sure, you've got to have the suspension set up for the job. Rack the the springs down to their softest settings — and Honda, bless 'em, *always* sent out test 'Wings' set on soft; and other testers, rot 'em, *never* bothered to harden them up! — and you can get the silencers graunching along the deck. But jack the springing up to 'hard' and it's a different story. You're set up to go scratchin', and I can think of only one bike in more than a thousand I've ridden I'd rather go scratchin' on. The 'Wing' really is the ultimate.

Mind you, I didn't do *all* the riding. There was Charlie Deane, for instance, who obtained our original performance figures and clocked over 125mph, at MIRA, flat on the tank and with a buckled front wheel. They don't come much tougher than that! Charlie, seventy pounds lighter, found the 'Wing' a bit heavier to handle on swervery, but regarded it as a superb main-road cruiser. This view was shared by the two other staff riders.

Trident-buff Neil Millen, handed the 'Wing' for a short run, described it as 'a magic carpet' and refused point-blank to go back to the Bee Emm he was riding till I pulled rank and *ordered* him to do it. Neil still contrived to wangle my 'Wing' for a trip to the Island to watch Mike the Bike in action . . .

Then there was Geoff Carless. On the pretext of having no transport, our Chief Tester first of all 'borrowed' my beloved 'Wing', and then (still on the pretext of having no transport!) refused to hand it back. Geoff's only criticism — a bit heavy on corners with a lightish rider.

So, we all liked the 'Wing', and as a result it was worked harder than any other bike we've ever had. It stood up to its thrashings well, but it did have some shortcomings. Like, the weave that set in after Phil Mather had contrived to loop it into the plastic marbles at MIRA. Phil misjudged his braking point after a flat-out run through the timing lights, and disappeared at speed into the run-off section at the end of the straight. Anticipating just such a replay of the Charge of the Light Brigade, MIRA had installed a 'slow-down' strip into which runaway vehicles would sink hub-deep. The 'Wing' looped, and bent its frame. That was just before we acquired it on the staff . . .

Problem Number Two was a weave at upwards of 90mph. This one puzzled us. We tried experiments with tyre pressures, and dampers, and springs. No joy. Above 90, the 'Wing' still weaved. Steve Hackett took it to MIRA for a second go at the test figures; got into a tank-slapper; and threw the bike up the road at a hundred miles an hour. Steve walked (well, limped!) away from

it. The bike needed a rebuild — but engine damage was confined to the valve covers and valve gear. The heads and barrels were unharmed.

Rebuild Number Two failed to isolate the problem. Brave like, I volunteered to investigate, and I too got a beaut of a weave at 90-per. For a few traumatic seconds, I had visions of joining Steve in the 'chuck-it-down-the-road' club. Then, sitting tight and riding it out, I let the 'Wing' snake on as — so slowly! — the speedo needle sank from 90, to 80, to 70, to 60. With me all prepared to take a header over the side, the weave stopped.

By now, I'd got ideas of my own about the trouble. Geoff Carless was called in to run a check too, and he traced it to loosening of the rear-wheel spokes allowing the rim to squirm under load. The spokes *felt* tight, but weren't.

A new rear wheel from Honda cured the weave, but to make sure it didn't come back we switched to Lester cast-alloy wheels when the bike had 18,700 miles on the clock. At the same time, we fitted Avon 'Road Runners' in place of the uneasy mix of British Dunlop at the front and Japanese Dunlop at the rear. Between times, I'd been using Continental tyres, and taken overall those are the covers I prefer. Luckily, they're now available in sizes to suit the Lester wheels, so I know what my next set of covers will be!

The Lesters were a great improvement, though the stiff alloy spokes introduced a slight roughness into the transmission that had not been there with the more forgiving wire-spoked wheels. We also fitted Koni dampers and springs in place of the standard-equipment Kowas, and a superb 'ride in armchair comfort' American seat from John Ward, at Cobra, in place of Honda's board-hard original.

We never regretted the changes. The Lester wheels were trouble-free — or would have been, had somebody not forgotten to grease the rear wheel bearings before fitting them! — and the Konis provided the well-controlled damping that a bike of the 'Wing's' potential needs.

As for that Cobra seat — well, words fail us. Yes, those Stateside specials are pricey (over £90), but the comfort they offer, and the positive location under heavy acceleration, are worth every penny. Thoroughly recommended!

A Craven 'Clipper' fairing and Craven luggage carrier and panniers completed the equipment of the 'Wing'. Supa-Commuta was complete, and ready to start work.

All through the wet and cold winter of 1977/78, the 'Wing' took me from Bognor to Poole and back, every day, without missing a beat. The journey took on the inexorability of a scheduled airline service. Leave Bognor just before eight. Refuel. Arrive Poole by half-nine. Ride back that evening, still taking no more than 90 minutes for 80 miles. Refuel next morning, using just over 3¼ gallons of two-star, to give an average of around 48mpg.

It needed only one thing to make the 'Wing' near-perfect. The standard

lighting set doesn't include a head-lamp really up to 70mph cruising on a dirty night. We found the answer with a Cibie quartz-halogen conversion, which was so powerful that it virtually burned a hole through the darkness. What a lamp!

If ever a biker was happy, it was me. I could see where I was going. The 'Wing' was fast, stable, and a real scratcher when it came to taking on a bit of opposition. It was fast, comfortable, economical. The 'Clipper' fairing seemed to have no ill effects on handling at legal road speeds, gave almost one hundred per cent protection 'gainst the icy blast, and deflected the winter wind downwards, away from the vulnerable thigh area. Meantime, the cylinders were keeping my feet warm.

Yes, the front discs *did* have a lag in the wet. They were modified to have ARC slots, which caused a graunch when the brakes were applied in the dry, but otherwise had no effect at all! We soon discovered that the complete answer to wet front discs is simply to lightly apply the brakes whenever you close the throttle. Result? Immediate brake response when needed — and a useful flash of the rear stop lamp whenever you slow. Hard going, some folk make of simple things . . . !

Meantime, the *rear* disc proved completely weatherproof, and lock-free. The rear pads were renewed after 18,700 miles, the front ones having been changed a couple of thousand miles earlier. The original-equipment Dunlop rear tyres had lasted, on average, no more than 6,000 miles. The Continentals and 'Road Runners' that replaced them managed nearly 7,500 miles on the rear wheel before the centre groove disappeared.

A couple of oil filters; a couple of sets of plugs; two new fork seals; two tail bulbs. That completes the list of replacements.

Would you believe it — we dropped the 'Wing' yet again. Riding home on a foul wet February night, I was completely caught out by mud on the road where the M3 roadworks have led to a diversion of the A27, south of Havant. One moment I was purring happily along. The next, I was on the deck, and the 'Wing' was skating ahead of me!

It's a sad fact, but dropping a 'Wing' usually means trouble. That's why ours now — belatedly — sports a set of Hondastyle crash bars . . .

Snag is, when the 'Wing' goes down the valve cover rapidly wears through. A tappet touches, and the belt cam drive jumps a tooth or two. That alters the timing, and the valves kiss the pistons. Result? Mechanical chaos!

For the third time, Tippetts, at Surbiton, found themselves rebuilding our 'Wing' engine. This time, there was a difference. We were there to see it stripped, and to find out how much wear had taken place in 25,000 hard miles on the road.

Bit by bit, foreman Ray Watson dismantled this mighty motor. Bit by bit, each component was passed through

