

# Old, new and (possibly) the best

## Impressions of three very different trail bikes

LIQUID COOLING is a big sales point in the newly important eighth-litre class. If you cannot sell superior speed because you, like your competitors, are limited to a meagre 12 bhp then the message must be overtly hi-tech. Yamaha started the trend this time, with both 12 bhp and unthrottled versions of their RD125LC roadster and DT125LC trail bike, though just where the market for the fast(er) ones lie, I cannot imagine. Honda have followed with their new MTX125 and MTX200 two-stroke trailsters. I have no experience as yet of the 200, but as they claim 26 bhp and lots of mid-range grunt, I look forward to giving one a try. I can tell you, though, about the 125. If ever a bike stood with a wheel in each camp, road and trail, this is it. The day this one was conceived the computer must have been wearing the mask of Janus.

### HONDA MTX 125

It is a beauty to behold: red frame, black motor, white plastic work and tank, all standing almost vertically on a cranked propstand that tucks well in when not in use. I stand a fraction under six feet and weigh about 12½ stone in trials wellies and Stadium Aztec. As soon as you throw a leg over the saddle the initial impressions of height disappear, this is not a large, high motorcycle. As the Pro-Link rear end croaked and groaned down a couple of inches I could place both feet easily flat on the ground with a good "prodding allowance" of bend left in both knees. Here I must confess to not actually trying the MTX on a green road. I did, however, give it a good thrashing around mixed going on my neighbouring farmer's fell pastures, thus probably simulating far better the trail park and bomb site use to which the average MTX user would subject his bike.

The engine was warm when I came to it so I cannot comment as to cold performance or warm-up time, but it went first prod every time for me. One down in the six-speed box and away. The clutch is feather-light with no noticeable biting point and the bike pulls away smoothly at an indicated 3,000 rpm. A little more throttle and it reluctantly accelerates, the motor not protesting, just seemingly unwilling to go. Then the tach needle crosses the 6,000 rpm band. Talk about pulling the trigger! Those 12 ponies are hiding just behind the six grand gate and they come out as if auditioning for a remake of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Up comes the front wheel, to hover until rapid shutting of the throttle has us once more pobbly slowly across the field to regain breath. I am not used to this! In my well-ordered world, motorcycle engines go bonk-bonk and throttle response is progressive and predictable. We try again, hooking into second and leaning forward as the power band bites. All this does is bog the engine, necessitating a rapid change back into first to maintain any progress at all.

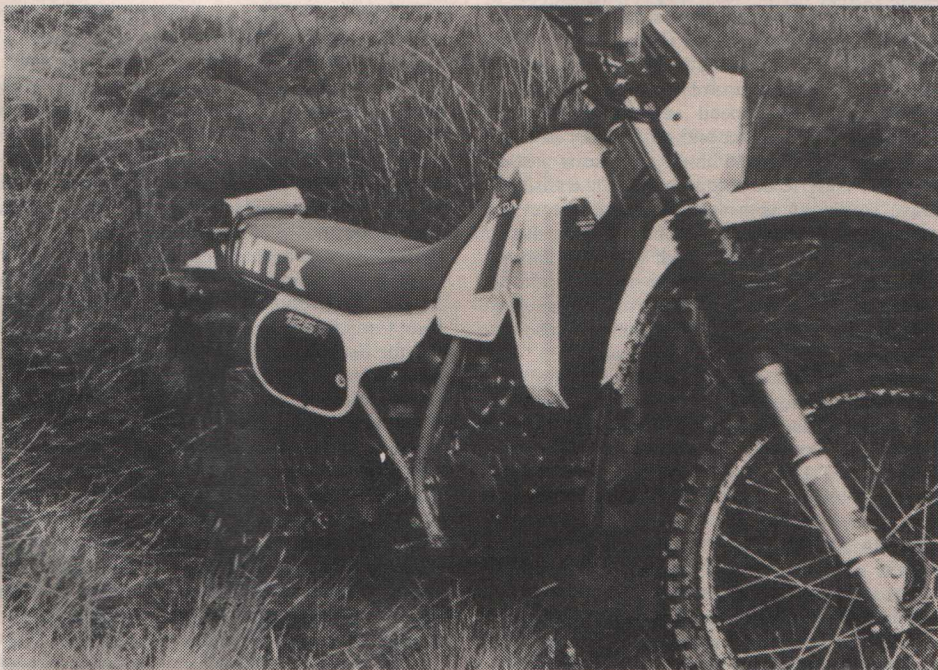
A clear, flat strip of field is located and experiments proceed. First gear brings the power band in at about 10 mph and you can ride it on up to the red line at 9,000 (15 mph) without any obvious sign of distress from the engine

room. Second is just too high for the rough as letting the revs drop below 6,000 totally kills the drive and requires a squirt in first to recover. It will ease along slowly in second on slight downgrades, but ask for the slightest pull, and the answer is no. "Bombhole" undulations provide fun. Drop in on a closed throttle and open up to drive out in the normal way. Nothing much happens until you reach the magic six grand, usually simultaneously with reaching the lip! You soon learn to keep the weight forward. Crossing bogs is ok if you have the speed to hit them hard and power over. Once the back wheel goes in and you ring down for some grunt it is time to get off and start lifting.

If the above has made the bike sound like a total bummer, I hasten to show the other side of the coin. The rolling gear is brilliant. Hefty front forks with air assistance work for most of the time like any good set of telescopics, but when standard teles would be starting to bottom-out and pound the rider the Honda's forks go into a stiffer, but still active, phase. I dare say you could make them bottom unless they were blown-up to ridiculous pressures, but for press-on green laning they are a significant improvement. The back end is, of course, Honda's Pro-Link monoshock system, non-adjustable in this application. It is neat, it works well, but I cringe every time I think about having to re-bush it all after a few thousand gritty miles. Plenty of movement, good damping and a gentle accompaniment as you ride, vaguely reminiscent of a gibbet crepitating in the wind.

A little later, after a half-hour's hose work, I took the bike out on to the tarmac. This is where

MTX 125 at rest



the motor belongs. All the characteristics that make the little Honda such a drag on the rough make it supreme fun on the road. The tach is small and hard to read, but no matter. After a little familiarization you simply change up or down as necessary while holding the twistgrip wide open. I don't say that the bike cannot be over-revved, but as the needle touches eight-and-a-half the power tails away just as if a rev limiter were fitted. The front brake that caused me many an anxious moment on the loose was just right for tarmac (who really needs discs on a 125?) and it was fun to ease down to 20 in fifth, snick down to second gear, then run back through the box with the front wheel kicking up at each of the first two changes.

One-two-fives can be used for trail riding with every success, and of the new restricted range the four-strokes seem to be as good as their unfettered forebears. This bike is not a green lane machine. It is more suited to the high street enduro and coffee bar scramble, with an occasional bash around the bomb site. It is a very good road bike, though, and I expect they will sell well.

I liked:

The excellent silencing and low mechanical noise.

Full two-gallon tank with upturned seat front.

Air-assisted front forks.

Very tough rubber trafficators.

Wide front mudguard.

Folding tip brake and gear pedals.

I did not like:

Silly grab rail / carrier that smacks you every other bump.

Vulnerable radiator with lots and lots of external hoses.

Front mudflap that burns on the vulnerable silencer box.

Lots of hard-to-clean nooks and crannies.

Convolute rear chain run needing three slipper blocks.

Definite understeer on tarmac corners.

Enthusiasts might have noticed that these restricted machines are apparently as fast as their brothers of some years ago that laid claim to more than 12 bhp. This generosity of

specification now seems to have spread to the tyres: 4.10 x 18 Dunlop K500, proclaims the sidewall of the rear boot. My calipers size it at 4in dead across the widest blocks and a mere 3½in across the casing. A Michelin T61 4.00 x 18 measures 4½in over blocks and 4¼in over casing. Who is fooling who?

#### ISDT MZ

A short ride on a 10-year-old MZ 250 cc ISDT Replica served as a good reminder that the average Japanese trail bike still leaves a lot to be desired in the handling department, regardless of how good it might be in motor and ancillaries. At walking pace everything seemed normal, tees and rear end responding to the bumps satisfactorily, but once a brisk "press-on" speed was achieved the whole plot came together and handled like no run-of-the-mill trail bike ever will.

This machine really is the sum of its components: old fashioned, unassisted telescopics, short-travel swinging fork, typically MZ brake hubs, fabricated frame with dummy down tube. As Lucy once said in a Peanuts cartoon. "See these five fingers? Individually they are nothing, but clenched into a fist they form a weapon fearsome to behold." No, not fearsome. Formidable is the word.

It certainly has faults. Solid footrests just begging to snap shin or gouge calf. A high, wide exhaust that burns leg or boot.

The bike I tried belongs to Durham enthusiast Dave Pinder and, as a comparatively new addition to his stable of MZery, has yet to be fully sorted out. The motor was having a touch of the John McEnroes that day and was refusing to run cleanly unless given a real handful all the time. Flicking the changeover switch for the twin-plug cylinder head had little effect and progress was made in a series of furious leaps from tussock to bog and out again. Road behaviour was excellent, notwithstanding the knobbly tyres, apart from a clatter like a grasshopper on amphetamines every time the front brake was used hard.

General standard of build and finish is typical MZ, ie not pretty but tough and durable. It has a nifty leatherette shield over the delicate bits behind the carburettor and a smashing toolbag firmly strapped to the deep, bulbous tank. Lights are minimal, mudguarding good, wheels QD (praise to the Lord for that) and the chain runs sweet, clean and oily in a larger version of the MZ-gaitered enclosure.

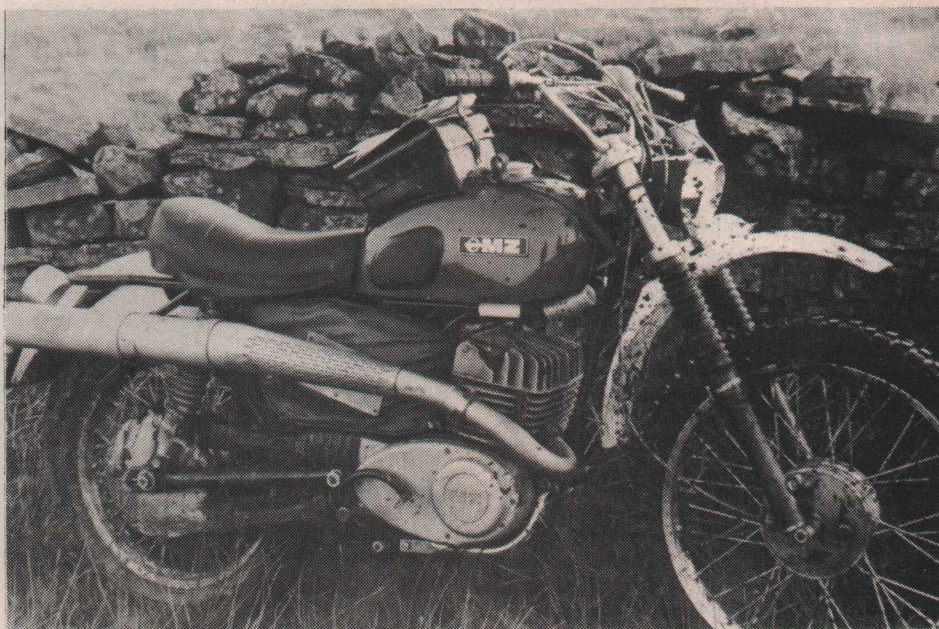
Motor is a five-speed version of the old four-speed 250 roadster and is reputedly fast (85 mph), bulletproof and thirsty. Noise is just a little too sharp to be acceptable on the trails and Dave is modifying a spare exhaust system to accommodate a clip-on tail box. I very much look forward to another bash when the motor has been sorted, the brake de-squeaked and a modicum of oil put into the front forks. The Japanese would do well to put one of these up above the drawing board (do computers use drawing boards?) and take a long hard look at the funny, crude, obsolete motorcycle with the wheels that drop out in minutes rather than hours and chains that do the opposite.

The more I think about it the more I want one.

#### HONDA XR200

Will this single pot 200 cc gem be the treasured classic 20 years hence?

Disregarding the TRF members who already own Honda XR200s, a quick opinion sample points to this bike as being currently the most



*The ISDT MZ: not pretty but pretty tough*

desirable green lane iron. Neither this model nor its twin-shocked immediate predecessor was ever imported in significant (by Honda standards) quantities, and many of both models were grey imports from Europe and the USA. Indeed, judging by the lack of official publicity given to the bike one has the impression that Honda were almost a little ashamed of it. Ashamed not because it is a bad motorcycle, far from it, but because it could never hope to win in open competition against vastly more powerful two-stroke enduro rockets. The name of the motorbike selling game is winning and being seen to win, which is why the new Honda two-stroke trail bikes are unashamedly styled after the works moto-crossers. No, the XR is not a winner except in segregated four-stroke and clubman classes. It is aimed at the American "serious fun bike" market where many thousands of them have been sold. Is it a practical proposition as a green laner for British conditions? Barring one major and a couple of minor problems, it is, with the loud caveat that the short in stature should apply elsewhere.

I was lucky enough to be offered a lengthy ride on a new XR recently when a group from the Northumbria TRF took a reporter from the local evening paper out to sample the delights of trail riding. It being necessary for the scribe to be provided with a bike, I let him use my old KL250 on the grounds that it was tough enough to take the knocks and flexible enough for a long time rusty rider to safely get his eye back in. My steed for the trip was to be a well used Honda XL185, courtesy of Hexham arch-enthusiast Ken Canham. Ken, his wife and brother can muster between them two Honda XL185s, two XL250s, an XR200A, and a KDX175, and that is not counting the roadsters! Ken, riding the XR200, led us through the Hexhamshire lanes in a steady, depressing downpour. My XL185 was shod with moto-cross knobbles front and back, a combination I was not familiar with as the KL always wears trials covers. I found the XL very small and stiff in comparison with the soft, easy-going Kwacker. If the KL were likened to an early '50s Matchless G3C, then the XL is its BSA contemporary; probably better in the extremes but so much harder to ride well. I just couldn't get on with the XL — a combination of

worn, sticky clutch and big, clumsy plastic moto-cross boots that couldn't work the gear lever combined to invert the bike and rider in the mud while the novice trailster sailed merrily on. Ken, desiring the lesser of two evils, asked if I would like to swap for the XR200 for a while. Would I! I was on it before you could say Rambler's Association or any other profanity. It is a tall bike by any standards with a 35in saddle height, but a few of those inches disappear as you load up the fancy, multi-adjustable Pro Link rear suspension. A period of readjustment is necessary before you can be sure of finding the ground with a foot during stops and you soon learn to use the uphill limb when stopping cross-camber.

The motor has a rather businesslike compression ratio but starting was never any problem thanks, in part, to a nifty kickstarter-linked decompressor unit. It is not the sort of bike to stall very often, anyway. There is nothing as frivolous as an ignition key, only a panic button to kill the motor, and the usual fuel tap to forget to turn on. Exhaust noise is deep and powerful sounding from on the bike and never offensive by the bystander. It is not the sort of noise that carries very far, either. The motor is the antithesis of the little MTX stroker; it pulls well from zero revs almost regardless of which of the six gears is engaged and the revs just rise and rise till you fear for its life and your wallet. With the gearing as supplied I think 60-ish would be a sympathetic road maximum, but the choice of ratios makes them all useable on rough and smooth, with the bike being as fast, point to point, as anything of a similar size.

The XR was shod with knobbles similar to the XL's but there the comparison ends. On smooth, wet tarmac where they are supposed to be tricky to handle, the tyres held line as competently as run-of-the-mill road covers. How much of this was due to the suspension design I cannot say, but I suspect the long-travel springing is the main reason for the superb feeling of security. On the roughest going the springing soaks up bumps without a trace of bottoming or bounce; a magic carpet ride to those used to conventional trail bikes. The lighting system is adequate to see you safe through daytime hill fog but with a meagre 50



*Honda's XR: a classic?*

watts total from the flywheel generator a couple of pounds of carrots would be a pre-night ride necessity. No battery, of course, so there is no way you can up the candlepower. As supplied the bike is barely legal as regards lights and speedometer and definitely against the rules with the thermoplastic fuel tank.

Some riders have changed to metal tanks but most seem willing to take their chances with the standard item, as do the vast majority of trials bike owners these days. It is rumoured that these plastic tanks, acceptable in ultra-strict West Germany, are to be made legal over here and, if they are safe to use, why ever not?

My aforementioned big criticism regards the drive chain. It is big, loose, long, and short lived . . . The incredible travel of the rear spindle describes a quite different arc to that of the chain, thus demanding so much slack that slipper blocks are fitted to stop the swinging arm

being worn through. On this run the chain started well greased, correctly adjusted and clean. It finished the 80-odd miles oil-dry, clanking loose and polished where the side plates were fouling something. And this on a light 200! How the chain must suffer on the formidable XR500!

Would I want one? On balance, no. If my everyday bike were solely used for green laning and toted around on a trailer I should really appreciate the thoroughbred, go-anywhere nature of the bike, its toughness and reliability and superb fuel consumption. In my real world a trail bike must be competent to be used on the tarmac road as much as on the green, sometimes with a passenger, often at night. When I find that crock of gold I shall have one to carry on a rack behind my turbo-charged Range Rover and one to hang on the study wall to send shivers down my back at every glance. A.D.K.

## Howdy, neighbours!

### Name a US President who's ridden a motorcycle

WOMEN gather the children among their skirts and huddle in horrified clusters offering incantations to the goddess of maternity. Men pause from their alfresco labours to glare with a confusion of derision and envy. Dogs snarl and cats scurry. Terror stalks the little neighbourhood.

Once again I am treating my three-year-old son to a round-the-road motorcycle excursion. It would seem only my boy and I derive delight from this occasional exercise. Observers view it as an atrocity. For instance, my mother-in-law has advised me to equip my machine with pontoons. All the better to effect a transatlantic getaway should I fall down with her grandchild aboard, she says.

I suppose part of the image problem is with the bike. It's not a placidly plodding little ring-a-ding-ding two-stroke trailing a cute curl of chimney-cozy smoke. No, my father and son conveyance is a big, brutish, oily, noisy, nasty, snortin' Norton. Black, yet! Both sidecovers, for the benefit of terrified folks on both sides of the street, clearly read "Commando". This, without doubt, conjures images of a face-blackened

khaki-swathed trained killer heaving a barbarous grappling hook on to the rock raked top of a cliff somewhere East of Suez. Never mind that my lovingly restored motor bicycle (as my beautiful boy adoringly calls it) is scrupulously scrubbed. That, to my neighbours, is as comforting as a hangman with a manicure.

Still, I will bear the slings and arrows of outraged porch loons for the sake of my son. For, believe what they will, I do this thing for my child. OK, maybe I'm a little hasty putting him astride the tank at the age of three, but he loves it. Besides, it just might keep him from tumbling on the tarmac as often as I did as a lad. That's my theory, anyway.

My early years were without benefit of a motorcycling education. But, to be fair, my parents' only truck with bikes was a half-century ago when Dad planted his cousin's HRD in a hedge not 50 feet away from the start of his first and only motorcycle journey. My mother watched. Consequently, motorcycles, as a dinner table talk topic, were catalogued with opium and social disease. Intimate knowledge of the beasts was effectively delayed for the entire

term of my pre-adolescence. Yet, innocence, however well refrigerated, cannot be preserved forever. Vehicular virginity was violated on a crisp Autumn evening in the twilight of my 14th year. If this seems laughingly late in life, please remember the episode here recorded occurred back in the naive 1950s. Hoppy Homaro, the tough old neighbourhood thug, aged 16, invited me to accompany him on a jaunt upon his parents' latest device to keep him on the streets at night, a BSA Bantam. For a moment, I thought better of the offer since, historically, Hoppy had spent the greater part of his waking hours considering how to make my existence miserable. But the sense of adventure prevailed and, since Hoppy could strike fear in the heart of Heinrich Himmler, I figured I ought to do as he said.

It is clear that Franklin D. Roosevelt never rode a motorbike in tandem with Hoppy Homaro. Otherwise, the garrulous President could not have uttered that "nothing to fear but fear itself" rubbish. By the time the Bantam's speedo needle staggered past the quarter-century mark, I was fearing, in ascending order: permanent psychic warpage, quintoplegia (paralysis from the hair follicles down) and a first name relationship with the Grim Reaper. Hoppy, you see, had taken his nom de kid from American cowboy movie star Hopalong Cassidy. Mr Cassidy, in common with others of his ilk, often thrilled his juvenile audience with an equine version of a wheelie. Young Mr Homaro thought it just peachy to emulate his idol by practising the real thing . . . often. So while Hoppy's end of the mini-Beeza was reaching heroically heavenward, my allotted portion was dipping precariously close to the asphalt. Survival instinct overruled good taste and I clutched my host's waist in an embrace lovers reuniting after 10-year separation would have found unseemly. This was not Hoppy's style. In one grand gesture he blipped the throttle, stood the scooter on its tail, swept his reinforced concrete left arm around and clipped me clean off the bike. Brother Grim licked his lips.

Let's take this cowboy analogy one step further. Ever see the good guy leap from his saddle on to the back of the bad guy's horse, wrest the nasty piece of work from his seat and tumble with his foe down a steep hill into a stream? Looks easy, even fun, doesn't it? Wrong! Mr Homaro, you see, had sent me upon a similar solo downhill dive as he unseated me. Only difference was, instead of a crystalline creek at the bottom, there lay a festering open sewer. En route to the moldering mess I acquired a collection of cuts and contusions . . . at least one for every size bandage the Band-Aid people peddle. Medieval medics are said to have poulticed injuries with great gobs of dog dung and the like. Unwitting tribute was paid to those pioneering sons of Hippocrates as I soothed my wounds in the gently flowing filth at journey's end.

One might think I would be a bit wary of motor-driven cycles after such an effluvial experience, but, there I was, a fleeting four years later, back in the saddle again. If the horse throws you, pick yourself up and climb right back on, I always say. The inspiration for this mounting interest was a little filly named Sheree. She was as blonde and bouncy as her frothy name suggests; just the ticket for a youth in full hormonal flower. Sheree was the cousin of a friend. My chum, alarmed at the flaccid state of my social life, arranged a date. For my part, at least, it was love at first drool. Her eyes were