

UNIDENTICAL TWINS

Chalk and cheese? Definitely!

But which is the fine Stilton, and which the 'finger nails down the blackboard' product?

This view is apparently out of date now, as the bikes seem to be bought by the Yuppie in search of street cred, and also by the richer middle-aged having a last fling ('making a statement') after not being able to afford one when they were in their youth.

The H-D in my photographs is my friend's new, paid for, 1200 Sportster. It is not a test bike but a long-awaited dream fulfilled (see "richer middle-aged," above). He is as biased in favour

former King and Queen seats, but passenger accommodations suffers.

The performance is pathetic. Back in 1963 my aged, secondhand Vincent, built in 1951, would have left it for dead anywhere. Roger is already talking about spending large sums on tuning parts to bring the performance up to par. This seems to be the usual thing with Harleys, a standard one going for show and real riders (like Roger) going for performance. After parting with close to



Chalk and cheese: "The Harley is my friend's new, paid-for 1200 Sportster; the Suzuki my five-year-old (and paid-for) VX800"

HARLEY-DAVIDSON, the oldest motorcycle manufacturer in existence, has become the Morgan of the motorcycle world. Their approach has been to flaunt "tradition" in the face of other makers' progress, and each new H-D model is only a refinement of the basic V-twin. Try to imagine a four-cylinder, water-cooled, four-valve machine with Harley-Davidson on the tank!

So, I have to admit that I am not a fan of "Harley-Davidson" motorcycles. They are so agricultural that I feel the name on the tank ought to read Massey Ferguson. In a country whose cultural icons include a Mouse with big ears, and McDonalds, I suppose a bike like a Harley fits right in. To me, Harley also have a huge image problem. When I think of Harley, my mind's eye sees the typical rider as a huge, bearded, 60-inch-waisted beer gut in a dirty tee shirt. I don't think of the great outdoors, rather of the great unwashed!

of Harley as I am against. He was happy to help with the comparison I cooked up, and enjoyed taking the mickey out of my Suzuki, as I have about his Harley!

Finished in black, the Harley certainly looks very fine, and I liked the solid look of the castings and the paint finish. Chrome quality is excellent; we are talking image here, after all. The have come a long way since AMF poked a nose in and tried to make motorcycles like they did ten-pin bowling equipment. The new Sportster features twin discs and stops rather better than Harleys have in the past. We both take this on trust, neither of us having had any experience of earlier models. The Harley is certainly well finished. It leaks no oil, starts well, and runs with that fart-sounding exhaust, noise that Harley owners love and which I always think sounds like something needs fixing! The seat is rather small and neat, and certainly looks more sporting than the

£8,000 for the bike in the first place, I would have expected it to be a real goer. But no. What you buy are image and style, not a flyer.

The instruments are small and tidy and quite clear; I liked the look of them far more than the Suzuki's but have to give plaudits to Suzuki for clarity, especially at night. The H-D engine pulls solidly and the clutch takes up well. Torque seems very good; but how strong it feels depends on what you have just stepped off. If a Japanese four, then the torque is terrific, if an arm-wrenching Commando, then it isn't!

Controls are easy to use but heavier than the Suzuki's – which are like lead compared with my Velo. The switch gear in particular seems well made and appears to be as good as the Suzuki. The small headlamp (a styling feature) gives a good beam. The polished alloy cowl over the top (another styling feature) is neat, and a Harley tradition; what does it

do? It looks different! That's what it does. The rear number plate, a fitting requirement in the States as well as here, is bent steel strip. Classic after-thought engineering, and very tacky. The indicators are, by contrast, neat and well fitted! Roger has already parted with extra money for the chrome battery box with gold eagle. *Show* is the thing!

With the classic Harley riding position, your feet forward and hands high, the Harley is quite leisurely at slow speeds and murder at higher. I felt somewhat nervous on it, not just because it was brand new and Roger's pride and joy, but because I use my knees to help heel a bike and the Harley was not that keen on heeling in the first place, and my knees were in a position where they seemed to have no relevance at all to control of a motorcycle. The forks *seem* more upright than on some of the full-dress Harleys; if so, it suggests that the handling is not quite so leisurely as on some others in the range.

For a bike which has become the definitive V twin, surprisingly, the V-twin looks of the Harley are masked by the huge air filter and exhaust pipes wrapped all over one side and by the chromed cover over the electronics on the other side. By comparison, the Suzuki gives a clear sight of the V of the engine on both sides, unobscured by anything. The exhaust pipes are led forward and down alongside the frame tubes, where they help to hide the radiator tucked between the frame tubes, a far neater arrangement.

The VX 800 Suzuki is my own and I will not dwell too long on the mechanical details, after the bike was road-tested in these very pages only a few issues ago. It is five years old, new to me, and is the newest bike I have ever owned. The paint has stood up very well so far and the chrome and fittings are excellent. At present, it is living outside, and weather has been kind so far. I hope it will continue to fare well. The engine is painted grey, and whilst I admire the gleaming polished alloy of the Harley I have to be honest and admit that I would never get around to bulling it up regularly – so the grey paint, for me, is an excellent idea.

I bought the VX from a lady who used it for rally riding with the Federation of Women Motorcyclists. She has several Ariels and her purchase of the Suzuki may have been influenced by its registration number which is V N H, thus incorporating the model designations of two of the finest Ariel products. That's my theory, anyway.

My ownership did not start well! On

my way home after purchasing the bike, my 800 V-twin became a 400 single. I was to learn that the coil had gone. My new bike sat in the garage for three weeks whilst the parts suppliers provided pathetic service. I hope I don't need anything "major" in the foreseeable

.... Apart from basic engine layout, the VX800 has little in common with the Harley; that Suzuki was the Intruder. The Intruder engine formed the basis of the VX but the



Dials, levers and mirrors ...



Engine, plenty of engine ... and if you've got to carry a battery, well, make something of it! The H-D way!

differences are rather more than meet the eye. The crankshaft, for instance, has been redesigned to give almost 90 degrees. This makes for an engine far smoother than either the Intruder or the Harley. It sings up the rev range readily, is always willing, likes the gearbox, and is quite un-V twin-like. The gearbox is slick, after the thump of engaging first. The electrics work, the brakes are good. On my particular sample the front disc cracked and was replaced with an aftermarket cast iron one which has improved the braking, but the fine layer of rust left when it has been standing mars an otherwise perfect appearance. No blame to Suzuki for that.

The VX is a thoroughly modern bike. It is quickish and almost silent in operation, with watercooling, shaft drive, and ohc, with four valves per cyl. The seating position is totally European. I have always considered the Yamaha TR1 to be the equivalent of the series E Vincent and now feel the Suzuki VX to be the series F. I suspect that P. C. Vincent, who wrote frequently in this magazine, would have been pleased to have seen his name on such a refined bike.

My VX has a windscreen supplied by Oxford Fairings, and this has proved an excellent way of raising cruising speed, taking all the strain out of travelling quickly, at the expense of a high top speed, which I never use. Disappointing are the handlebar clamps. These are of thin folded steel strip, cheaply chrome plated, and spoil an otherwise smart front end which Suzuki obviously designed with some care. This has been a common fault on many screens, fairings, panniers and the like for years, and it really is time that the fittings were as well made as the rest of the product. That these screens can, these days, be fitted to bikes costing over £10,000 must surely mean that they need to be of higher quality. I hate the bent strip of steel, badly plated, attitude! Perhaps there is a market for a quality product from Japan, where all these details will be considered! We lost our motorcycle industry over just such slipshod products. Perhaps our *aftermarket* industry has not learned this lesson?

Meanwhile Roger and I are out there riding our twins and enjoying ourselves. The Harley arouses interest wherever it is ridden. Whilst the Suzuki was received with enthusiasm at the Velo club, it otherwise passes unnoticed. I would not swap, and nor would Roger.

Chalk and cheese – both have gentlemen's relish!

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