



HONDA CB400N SUPER DREAM

Peter Rae

FUNNY PLACES race tracks. Real eye-openers, too, especially for people like you and I who get to ride on them so infrequently, if at all. Faults that might never show up on the road can manifest themselves very quickly on the track, simply because you can ride a bike so much closer to its limit away from normal road hazards. Some excellent road machines become a real shambles on a racing circuit.

My first ride of any consequence on the Honda CB400T was on the Nogaro Grand Prix circuit in southwest France last December, at the European launch of the CX500. The little twin and the CB550 F2 were provided as yardsticks by which the merits of the new V-twin could be assessed. The 550 four had always impressed me on public roads, but at Nogaro it felt both slow and awkward.

The CX500, of course, was truly superb and has gone on to win widespread acclaim from Press and public alike. But the overall excellence of the CB400T on that wet and twisty track came as a big surprise to me. The bike looked stodgy, but it proved to be fast, punchy, stable, and smooth, with good suspension, excellent roadholding, and powerful brakes. It

could be thrown around with gay abandon and ridden right to the limit without any problems. A certain tester from a rival magazine, not noted for a lack of riding ability, even managed to run away from some of the new V-twins aboard the 400. The popular 400 four, it seemed, had found a worthy successor.

Given that the original package was so right, it seemed that when Honda introduced the CB400N Super Dream in the spring of 1978 nobody could fail to be impressed. The stocky, stubby look had been replaced by new styling specially for the European market; the saddle was a tad lower; twin discs like those fitted to the CX500 now graced the front end; and a whole host of internal changes were said to have further improved reliability and boost power.

The motorcycle Press liked the new styling, the dealers fell over one another to place orders for both the 250 and 400cc variants, and the only murmur of discontent came from those riders who had just bought a new 400T which would now be obsolete, despite having been launched only nine months earlier. And, almost inevitably, the new model cost £80 more than the twin it replaced.

New styling

What does the extra cash buy you, assuming that the Dream would have held its £869 price tag until now? The most obvious difference is the new styling, which certainly loses the bulky appearance of the first model and adds a touch of the 'hungry greyhound' appeal of the CBX. This is achieved by waisting the fuel tank where it meets the dualseat, and blending the tank into the snap-on plastic sidepanels, which in turn merge with the matching seat base and tailpiece. This clever design work gives the tank and seat combination an integrated look that is far removed from the bulbous lines of the Dream.

The slimmer, racier appearance is reinforced by the rakish tilt of the seat unit towards the rear, accentuated by pinstriping. The whole ensemble is set off by some very striking paintwork in silver, red, or a rather garish blue, with the Honda emblem emblazoned in large white letters on a broad blue stripe that deepens its shade as it moves from the front of the tank to the rear. It is certainly a machine that stands out in a crowd; in fact, when I first saw the silver version it struck me as one of the most beautiful middleweights ever to grace British roads. The blue paint

scheme on our test machine tended to detract, in my opinion, from the machine's inherent good looks.

Additional styling alterations give the new twin a narrower but deeper seat, a new integrated instrument pod, a CBX-style filler cap to replace the awful flap tacked onto the older model, new switchgear, rear-set footrests, and a double-disc front brake. The indicators are now rectangular and their stems covered by soft plastic shrouds.

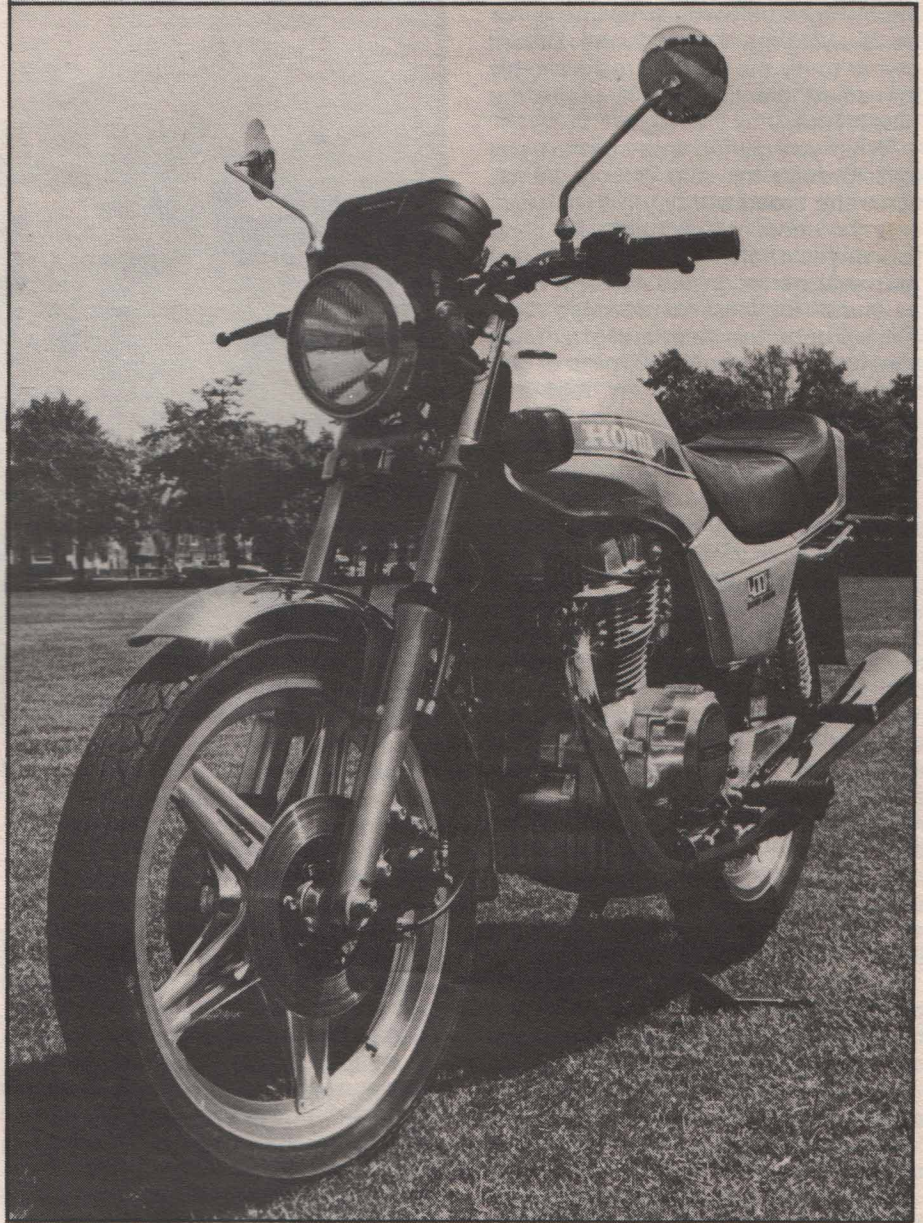
The engine and its ancillaries have also come in for their fair share of attention, with some 50 modifications claimed by the factory. Honda has altered the valve timing, modified the carburettor settings to give better breathing, and slotted in a six-speed gearbox in place of the five ratios employed in the Dream. Longer silencers are said to reduce noise slightly and produce better top-end power, and the points are replaced by electronic ignition for a more reliable spark and virtually no maintenance.

The basic engine formula remains unaltered, with a very over-square twin-cylinder motor relying on chain-driven counterweights to balance out most of the vibration inherent in a four-stroke twin. Honda's three-valve-per-cylinder layout, pioneered on the Civic car engine, is still retained, and the engine breathes through two 32mm Keihin constant vacuum carburettors to give a claimed 43bhp at 9,500rpm and 24.5ft-lb of torque 1,500rpm lower down the scale. Straight-cut gears transmit the power through a 14-plate clutch running in engine oil.

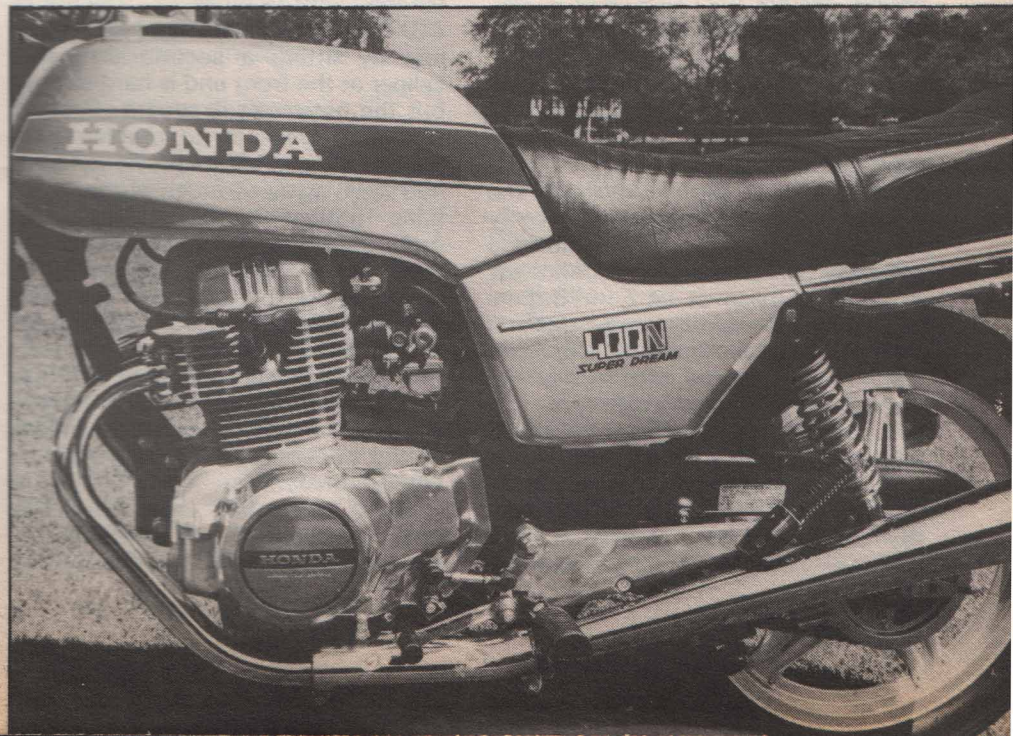
But why take a tried and tested popular design and revamp it so extensively only nine months after its introduction? Well, marketing obviously had a lot to do with it. After all, it is widely believed that the main reason for producing marvels like the CBX is to encourage people to go out and buy the affordable bikes in the range — like the 400. It helps if the 400 looks even faintly similar to the flagship, and the Super Dream fills this criterion more closely than the old Dream, fine motorcycle though it was.

Comfort

Nevertheless, there are more tangible benefits. Take the riding position. It suited me fine on the Dream, but the 400N has been tailored more than ever before to suit European tastes. The handlebars are 1.8in lower than before, seat height is down to 31.3in from 32in, and the footrests are almost four inches further rearward. This all adds up to a really comfortable riding position that



Hard to recognise the lines of the original Dream under the attractive new coachwork — a really successful piece of styling. Very neat gear linkage, and note the cast alloy plate carrying the footrests as per CBX 1000. Exhaust collector box hides below crankcases.



encourages effortless cruising or bend-swinging. I asked one Dream owner to try the Super Dream and his immediate reaction was to praise the new layout.

What you gain in limb comfort you lose through the seat of your pants, since the broad saddle on the Dream was far more comfortable for long journeys than the deeper but narrower perch on the 400N. It rates as one of the least comfortable seats I've sat upon this year, and after fairly short journeys of only 50 miles or so I was happy to stretch my legs and massage my tender backside.

Comfort was not enhanced either by vibration on the test model. The rider felt it most through the handlebars and footrests, and it was at its worst at 70mph. After only 30 miles on one trip at that speed I stopped to find my fingers and toes numb from the high-frequency shakes. Now this I have to put down to a problem with our particular test machine, because I recall no such complaint with either the 250T or 400T, and it is inconceivable that Honda has modified the bike sufficiently to make it vibrate. Rather, I would imagine that chain tension on the balancer drive was neglected at the previous service. The passenger had no such problems; the pillion position was most comfortable, and vibration conspicuous only by its absence.

Our test bike was obviously a rogue in other ways as well. Nobody can convince me that Hondas leak oil, but ours had a weep from the cylinder head/barrel joint that became progressively worse as the test continued. It was more likely to be a faulty seal at an oil well than a leaking head gasket. Either way, it is a very odd occurrence on any Honda and must not be regarded as typical of the breed.

Handling

If the riding position encouraged bend-swinging, the handling and braking virtually forced the rider to seek out twisty roads. That is not to say the Super Dream did not like straight roads; it behaved impeccably on them, being extremely stable for a machine with such a comparatively short wheelbase at 54.7 in. But its tyres, suspension, and general roadholding have been developed to such a high degree that to ride the main highways was to learn only half the story. Show the 400 a twisty road and it comes into its own.

Its handling is probably unsurpassed in the 400cc class, even by the two-stroke Yamaha. The original Dream could be hustled



Comstar wheels now feature all alloy construction. Handling is first class although machine is far from being a lightweight: tyres performed well in wet or dry.

through bends with amazing *elan* as we proved at Nogaro, but the new model features detail improvements to the suspension and running gear while retaining the same single down-tube frame that uses the engine as a load-bearing member.

The 400N has slightly altered and uprated front suspension with improved damping and slightly more movement at 5½ in. The damper rod of the FVQ rear shock absorbers has had its diameter increased from 9mm to 10mm, and that is the sort of small but obviously significant change that typifies the Japanese approach to engineering. The rear shocks have dual-phase damping with varying loads. Spring pre-load is five-way adjustable, and I found the best results came with the fourth position.

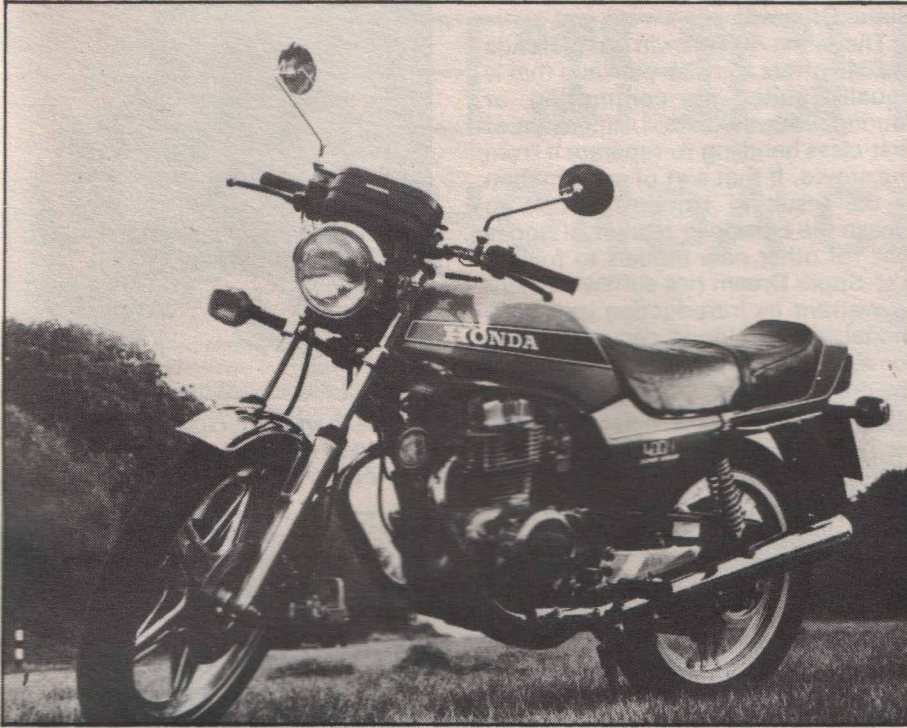
To make the suspension more responsive to road irregularities the unsprung weight has been reduced by changing to all-alloy construction for the Comstar wheels — again *à la* CBX. How much of this advantage is lost by fitting a second disc and caliper at the front end is hard to say, but the net result is superb. Ground clearance presents no problems on public roads; in fact, a previous tester had worn away so much of the right-hand footrest that I was unable to ground it no matter how hard I tried. And the Yokohama tyres take advantage of the generous clearance by providing first-class grip at all angles of lean on wet roads or dry. The 3.60 S19 front and 4.10 S18 rear covers have an abundance of tread climbing up the sidewalls, providing all the traction a hard rider needs in any circumstances.

Being lighter than some other 400s at a claimed 377lb dry, the Super Dream can be flung into bends with

great ease. Laid right over for a fast corner, you see a badly filled trench running right across your line where the council workmen have left a 2in deficit to be made by the bike's suspension. The Honda sweeps over it without any attempt to move off line, and the rear suspension barely transmits any feeling of the hazard to the rider. In the same way, the bike sails over bumps without any bucking, nodding, or weaving. The whole machine seems finely balanced, and even the handlebars fail to twitch as the bike copes with the worst excesses of our road menders.

Flicking from side to side through a series of bends is no problem due to the low weight and the bike's agility, and one of life's pleasures is picking the Honda up from a left-hand bend, leaning hard into a right-hander and changing up through the gearbox. The engine is strong enough to pull a high gear through most bends, but the top three ratios in the six-speeder are close enough to make their efficient use a source of real satisfaction. The gearbox itself is smooth and the ratios fast and easy to select, with no risk of missing a change, but because of the relatively modest power output of the engine you need to avail yourself of the 'box' to get the best out of the machine.

Braking is superb at the front and pretty awful at the rear. The twin front discs have their calipers behind the fork legs in the current fashion, and the pads are similar to those fitted to the CX500. One finger is all that is needed to produce tyre-howling stops, although using four fingers gives more sensitive control. But the rear drum, although rod-operated, offered no feel whatsoever



Headlamp is now, thankfully, a quartz-halogen unit. Front dual disc brakes are excellent, but the rear drum is not in the same class.

on the test bike. Great pressure was needed to achieve any retardation from the back brake, and there was no telling at what point the wheel would lock up — which it would do, often unexpectedly. The front discs deserve to be backed up by an efficient rear drum. Wet braking caused no bothers.

Problems

The Honda's 395cc short-stroke engine feels immensely strong and robust, and the test machine would whistle up to 80 or 85mph at any time and hold that speed indefinitely. Unfortunately, our particular machine suffered one other sad fault: it would not pull more than 7,500rpm in sixth gear, even though maximum power is produced at 9,500rpm and the redline begins at 10,000rpm. Every time I tried to sneak above this figure the motor would die instantly on both pots, just as effectively as if I had turned off the ignition or run completely out of fuel. Trying to exceed 7,500rpm through the gears usually produced the same effect, or occasionally would just cause a bad misfire on both cylinders.

The most obvious cause was spark plugs breaking down at high revs, but it seemed unlikely that both would do so at the same time. Since the otherwise comprehensive toolkit failed to yield a plug spanner I was unable to investigate further. Another possibility is that the electronic ignition system was faulty, but this is

unlikely because it performed so well at all other engine speeds. Or perhaps some strange carburettor malady was to blame. In any event it put paid to any attempt to find out the true top speed. Honda claims 108 mph, and from the general feel of the motor at 7,500rpm I believe that a rider trying hard might achieve about 105mph.

Fuel consumption was remarkably consistent at 53mpg and a best of 59mpg. About 65 or 70mpg should be well within reach for the rider who does not ride everywhere at 75mph. The 3.1 gallon fuel tank, which incorporates a 0.77 gallon reserve, should take you 135 miles before it is time to start looking around for a petrol station. This sort of fuel consumption is highly creditable considering very little of my mileage was undertaken in town or at low speeds.

Practicalities

One of the boons of bikes like the Super Dream is that they make ideal commuting transport while still retaining the ability to take in a Continental tour or rally without fuss. In town traffic the Honda has light and quick steering, a feather-like clutch action, great braking, and a docile disposition. Yet it has all the urge it needs to stay ahead of most traffic, excluding riders of larger motorcycles. Neutral is easy to find at a standstill, although six gears seems a real overkill when you have to change down five times approaching a red traffic light. My ankle never

became quite convinced that so much frenzied activity should be necessary.

The switchgear is similar to that fitted to the CX500 and it all works very well, except that the indicator switch is easy to overcancel. Roll on self-cancelling indicators, although it is understood that Honda engineers have yet to be satisfied with any of the methods they have tried so far. Lighting and instrumentation is as good as you would expect. The 400 has now sprung a quartz halogen headlight with 60/55W beams which should take care of the darkest roads, but our test bike for some reason was fitted with an ordinary light that was of very little use.

Quality of finish is unlikely to cause owners any problems, except in two areas. Our bike, although only 1500 miles old on collection, had heavy rusting inside the ends of the attractive tapered silencers. And while rust had yet to attack the under-belly balance pipe between the two exhausts, most older Hondas that have faced a salty winter have rusted up badly in that spot. I believe some dealers offer rust-proofing on that large balance pod free of charge — it's worth asking. Otherwise the paint, chrome, and alloy look very durable. Plastic is used for the rear mudguard, chainguard, and sidepanels.

The dualseat is retained by two catches and secured by a loop around the helmet lock. Once these are released the seat lifts right off the machine, revealing the toolkit, access to the air filter, and a small plastic box under the tailpiece that holds the owner's manual and very little else. The major electrical components and the battery live behind the sidepanels. The air filter is a washable polyurethane foam type, which should cut servicing costs. Being a single overhead cam engine, tappet adjustment should present few problems (the whole rocker box comes away with two bolts), while the electronic ignition removes yet another chore. That leaves just changing the oil and balancing the carbs as regular service items, and the oil drain plug is readily accessible. The test bike used a negligible amount of oil during the 800-mile evaluation.

The upswept silencers emit a pleasant burble that sounds good without being offensive, and the silencers themselves are well clear of the wheel spindle for speedy rear wheel removal. I had a sudden and unexpected puncture while overtaking a car in Knightsbridge the evening I was taking the 400 back to Chiswick, but thanks to the prompt

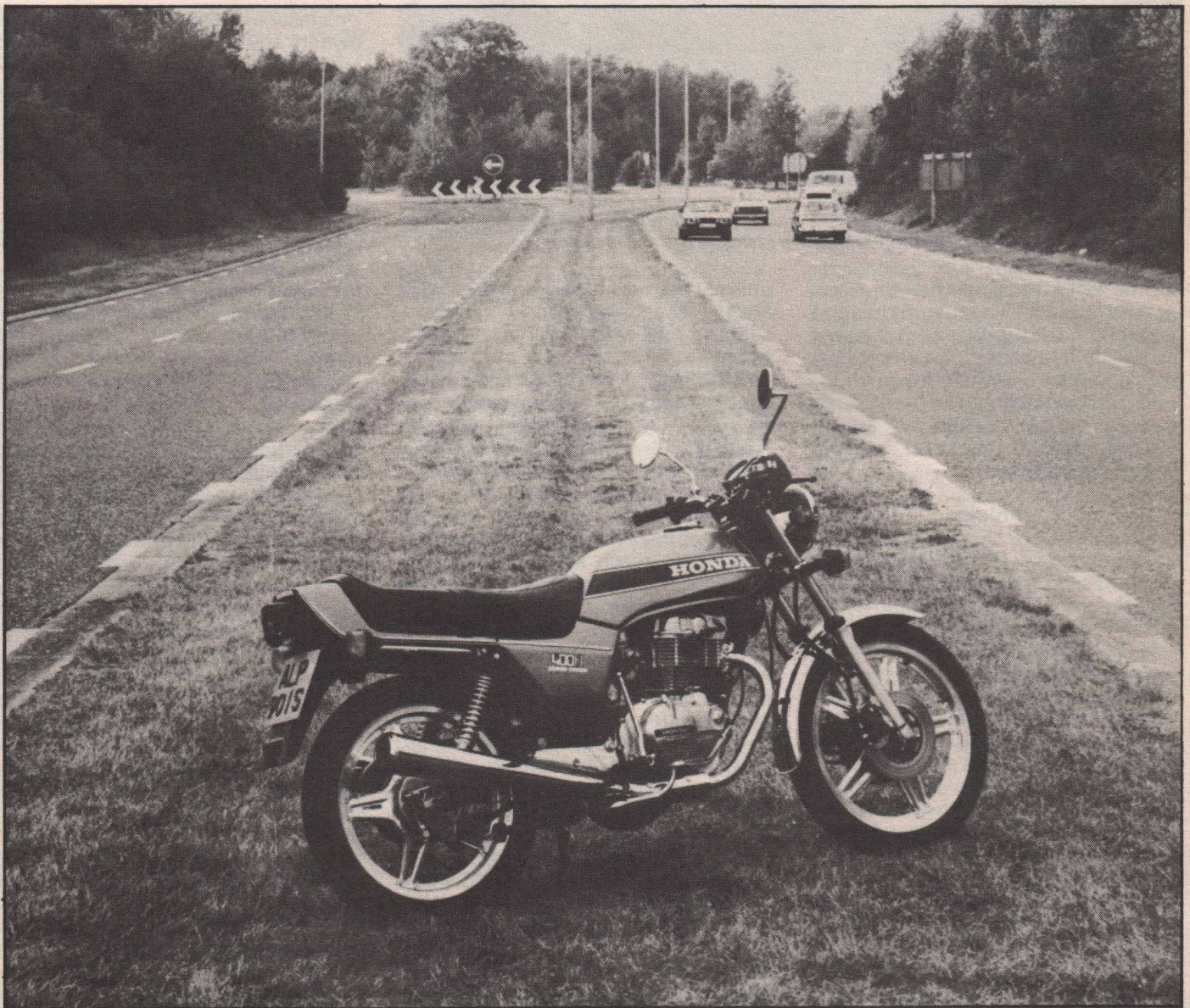
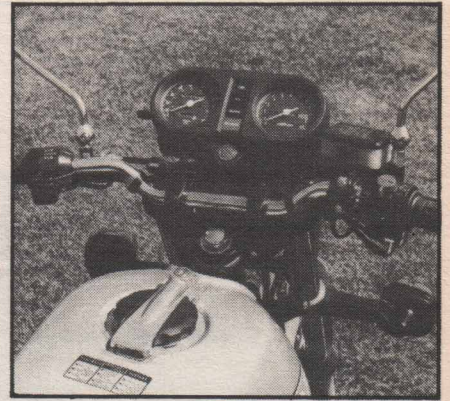
arrival of help in the form of a Honda van I didn't have to actually change the wheel. It shouldn't present any problems, though.

Mechanical noise on the twin is very low, and generally it has all the appearances of being very easy to live with. One annoying trait that seems characteristic of these models is a high degree of drive-train lash which is compounded by the sudden on/off action of the CV carbs. The mirrors give a reasonable view of following traffic, even if the vibration did continually upset the images and occasionally knock the offside mirror out of adjustment. Again, that sort of problem should not occur on other

Super Dreams.

The latest 400cc twin from Honda at £949 offers a stylish package that is equally suited to commuting or touring, with the added dimension of first-class handling to separate it from the crowd. If that sort of combination is the result of Honda's efforts to please the European market, it bodes well for other new models to follow. The Super Dream has sufficient merit to warrant its introduction as a new model, and if Honda can leave it be for a few months it must be one of the great all-rounders of 1979.

Instrumentation is neat and clear and the handlebar-mounted choke much appreciated. Switch gear is typical Honda, i.e. good, and indicator stalks neatly styled in plastic. Fuel filler cap is, er, secure.



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SPECIFICATIONS

HONDA CB400N

ENGINE

Type: Aircooled parallel twin-cylinder four-stroke with single overhead camshaft, chain-driven from 360° one piece forged crankshaft running on three plain bearings. Chain-driven balancers are included to reduce vibration. Each pentroof combustion chamber features two inlet and one exhaust valve. Threaded tappet adjusters.

Capacity: 395cc

Bore and stroke: 70.5 × 50.6mm

Compression ratio: 9.3:1

Carburation: Two 32mm Keihin constant vacuum units, with choke mounted on handlebar. Oiled polyurethane filter.

Lubrication: Wet sump containing 5.2 pints. Trochoid pump.

Electrics: 12V 12Ah battery charged by 170 watt alternator, with "pointless" electronic ignition.

Claimed power: 43bhp at 9,500rpm; 24.5ft-lb of torque at 8,000rpm.

TRANSMISSION

Primary: Straight-cut gears.

Clutch: Wet multi-plate.

Gears: Six-speed, selected by one down, five up left-side foot lever. Overall ratios of 19.2, 13.7, 10.9, 9.0, 7.6 and top 6.5:1

Final drive: Exposed unlubricated 5/8 × 3/8 chain.

FRAME

Single down-tube tubular steel "diamond-type" frame, with engine as a load-bearing member.

SUSPENSION

Front: Oil-damped telescopic fork giving 5 1/2 in of movement.

Rear: Pivoted arm fork controlled by FVQ variable damping shock absorbers with five-way pre-load adjustment.

WHEELS

Front: All-alloy pressed-spoke Comstar wheel carrying 3.60 × 19 Yokohama tyre. Twin 9 1/2 in diameter disc brakes with rear-mounted floating calipers.

Rear: All-alloy to pressed spoke Comstar wheel carrying 4.10 × 18 Yokohama tyre. Single, 6in diameter leading-shoe rod-operated drum brake.

INSTRUMENTATION

Matched speedometer and tachometer with warning lights for main beam, neutral, oil and indicators.

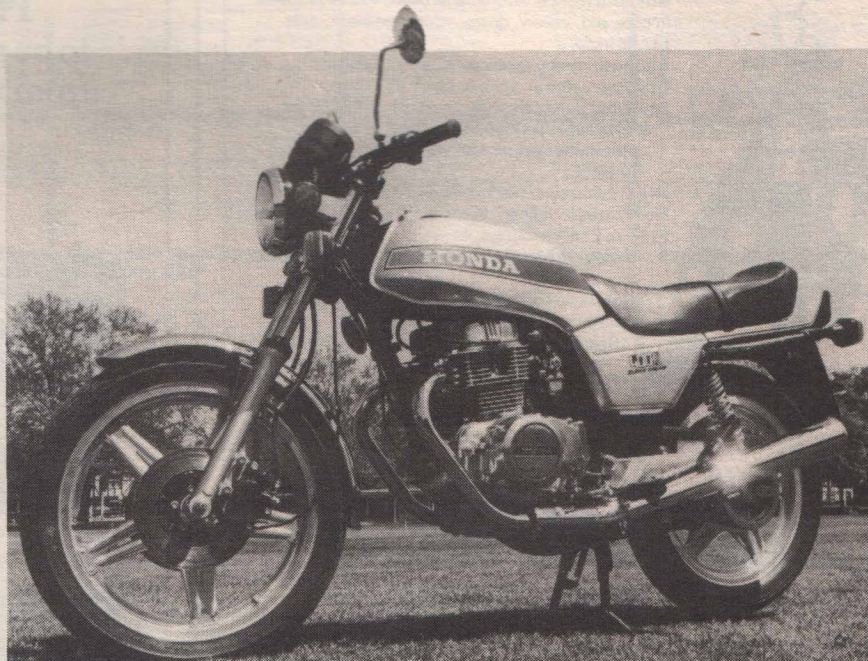
EQUIPMENT

3.1 gallon (14 litre) steel petrol tank incorporating 0.77 gallon (3.5 litre) reserve; toolkit; helmet lock; twin mirrors; lockable and detachable dualseat; 60/55W quartz halogen headlight; odometer and tripmeter; centre and prop stands; turn signals; small storage space under seat.

DIMENSIONS

Weight claimed dry: 377lb (170kg)

Wheelbase: 54.7in (1389mm)



Ground clearance: 6 1/2 in (165mm)

Seat height: 31.3in (795mm)

Colour: Red, Blue or Silver

Price: £949 inc. VAT. Delivery charge additional £11.50

Warranty: 12 months parts and labour

PERFORMANCE

Top speed: 108mph (estimated — see text)

Speedometer accuracy: Indicated 60mph equals an actual 62.8mph

Fuel quality: Two star used for test

Fuel consumption: 53mpg average; best 59mpg; worst 50mpg

CUSTOMER INFORMATION

Importer: Honda (UK) Ltd, Power Road, Chiswick, London

SPARE PARTS (inc. VAT)

| | |
|---------------------|--------|
| Exhaust valve | £ 7.52 |
| Inlet valve | £ 3.47 |
| Piston | £ 9.33 |
| Ring set | £ 5.37 |
| Con-rod | £16.76 |
| Exhaust pipe | £18.66 |
| Silencer only | £38.14 |
| Speedo cable | £ 2.76 |
| CDI unit | £62.32 |
| Brake pads | £7.57 |

THE COMPETITORS

| | Price £ | Max mph | Overall mpg | Fuel tank (gals) | Claimed bhp | Dry weight (lbs) | Type | Warranty |
|----------------|------------|--------------|----------------|------------------------|----------------|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| Honda CB400N | 949 | 108 (est) | 53 | 3.1 | 43 | 377 | SOHC 2 cylinder | 12 months P & L |
| Kawasaki Z400B | 849 | 104 | 55 | 3.1 | n/a | 370 | SOHC 2 cylinder | 6 months P & L |
| Kawasaki KH400 | 789 | 102 | 38 | 3.1 | n/a | 364 | 2 stroke 3 cylinder | 6 months P & L |
| Suzuki GS400 | 850 | 105 | 57 | 3.1 | 36 | 379 | SOHC 2 cylinder | 6 months P & L |
| Suzuki GT380 | 795 | 98 | 42 | 3.3 | 37 | 399 | 2 stroke 3 cylinder | 6 months P & L |
| Yamaha XS400 | 870 | 100 | 57 | 2.4 | 38 | 375 | SOHC 2 cylinder | 6 months P & L |
| Yamaha RD400 | 815 | 104 | 44 | 2.9 | 40 | 345 | 2 stroke 2 cylinder | 6 months P & L |