

GOOD, BAD & UGLY

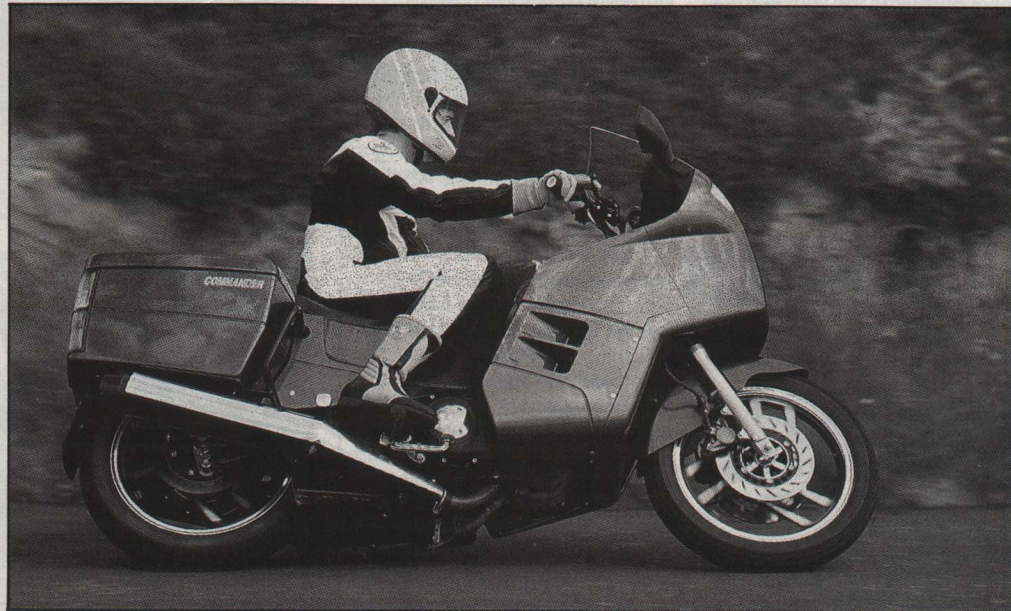
NORTON COMMANDER

Are you all right, mate? Yes, fine, I replied. 'It hasn't broken down, has it? I mean, it wouldn't look very good, would it?' he continued. I could see his point. We were miles from anywhere, virtually on top of the highest road the Isle of Man has to offer. And here was the new water-cooled Norton Commander at the side of the road with its seat off, both of the vast side-covers on the ground and the tool-kit spread across the tarmac. When I explained that it was all in the cause of photography he looked relieved. Judging by his expensive technoflash race-replica and matching designer leathers, he looked about as capable of repairing his bike by the side of the road as I would be of sorting out the Norton if there *had* been a problem.

I knew that the next question was going to be the difficult one, and it was. 'What's it really like, then?' At that moment I wished he would disappear and leave me to catch the last rays of light before what was left plunged into the Irish Sea. No such luck. Why do I always get the 'What'll it do, misters?' In this case the reason was very simple. The Norton Commander was making its first public appearance.

Norton were provoking keen interest on the Isle of Man again. The Rotary racer, ridden by Messrs Nation and Buckmaster, was flying the Norton flag, after the company's 12 year absence from the TT. A high-profile display of Norton Rotaries could be seen at the Villa Marina, but although the show bikes and display were completed in time for practice week, the Commander was only finished at 9pm on the Sunday evening of race week. It was then ridden straight from the factory to Heysham, put on the ferry and ridden from the terminal to the Villa Marina. When I picked it up a couple of days later, it had done less than 500 miles.

At first sight the Commander



Engine and frame by Norton, front end by Yamaha, styling by Armitage Shanks

looks large, a bit like a BMW K100RT. Some people like the fully enclosed bodywork, others hate it. Either way, with noise regs getting tighter, more fully enclosed bodywork is likely to become the norm in the future. The seat is quite high and anyone smaller than 5ft 9in may have a problem getting the bike off its stand. Once off the stand though, my 5ft 10in could readily paddle it about at slow speeds. At one of the Island's five (or is it now six?) sets of traffic lights I could easily put both feet down, and despite its 518lb dry weight, the bike doesn't feel at all heavy. It

is designated as a sports-tourer and the seating arrangements, wide fairing and high screen do an excellent job of shielding the rider from most of the weather. The riding position was comfortable, for me at any rate.

All the switchgear is stock stuff from Yamaha (which means it all works properly), as is the front end. The forks are 37mm ex-XJ900 but with substantially stiffer springs – Norton got Kayaba to rework them especially for the Commander. The comprehensive instrumentation, including digital clock, rev counter, fuel

gauge, is also courtesy of Yamaha. Suffice it to say, everything does its job well. The integrated panniers hold 25 litres each (a lot of wine, that) and later on larger ones will also be offered. During the action photography there was a terrific downpour but the panniers showed no sign of leaks, although the rubber seals worked themselves loose.

Race-replica kid was still around, and he was waiting for the answer to his question. I took a deep breath and plunged in. The engine is *superb*. Bags and bags of torque, all delivered smoothly, like a turbine in fact. The bike has got *grunt* with a capital G, and Norton say (like Rolls-Royce) that the power is adequate. This means about 85hp and 135mph but I could only manage about 110mph before brick walls, lamp posts and bumpy loM roads got in the way.

Although the engine is wonderful, the same cannot yet be said about the carburation. There were some nasty glitches, particularly round the 3000rpm mark, which made slow to medium speeds a problem. I spoke to the factory afterwards and the party line was that the Commander had



Water-cooled rotary engine has masses of grunt and is ultra-smooth

'Hopefully the feedback Norton get will mean that the niggles will be eliminated before the Commander goes into full production.'

been assembled in such a hurry that there had been no time to adjust the carbs properly beforehand. While on the subject of niggles, I found that I was getting some false neutrals when attempting to change gear. I was reminded of my old Guzzi gearbox, which has always required an authoritative stamp of the left foot. This time, when I queried



Ground clearance is severely limited, but the fairing is effective

the factory, the party line was that the man who set up the gearlever-footrest position has a size 11 boot – my boot is only size eight, so maybe that's why I had a problem. Or maybe there's something not quite right with the linkage itself.

I also did not have as much time to play around with the rear suspension as I would have done on a longer road-test. Certainly the Koni Dial-a-Rides were bottoming out with hard solo riding when set on number two out of three for preload, and gave an



Panniers are a decent size and don't appear to leak. Note the built-in leg protectors

NORTON COMMANDER

Engine	Twin-chamber liquid-cooled rotary
Capacity	588cc
Power	85hp @ 9000rpm
Torque	55ftlb @ 7000rpm
Carbs	2 x 38mm CV
Front tyre	100/90V18
Back tyre	110/90V18
Weight	518lb (dry)
Top speed	135mph (estimated)

uncomfortable ride two-up with a camera bag (*I'm not surprised. I've seen the size of his camera bag!* – Ed). The Commander is described as a sports-tourer, which assumes that two people will be travelling with luggage, so one of the greatest areas of concern will be the comfort of the ride over long distances. Also, the solo rider with luggage who likes travelling fast will want to tune the suspension to his own particular needs. The sports rider will soon find out that it is possible to ground the righthand silencer, and on the lefthand side the sidestand touches down very easily.

The fuel tank is good for about two hours' motorway-speed driving before it's time to stop for petrol. There is no reserve, so the maximum range according to the factory spokesperson, and my



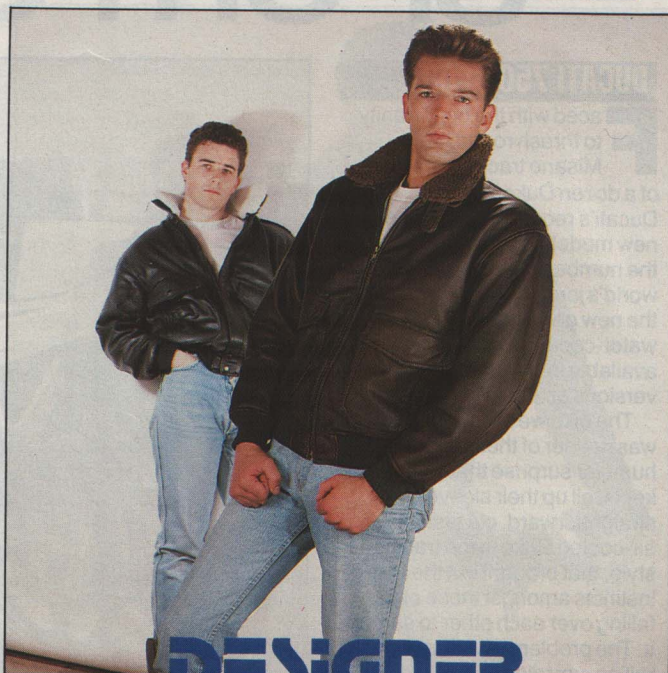
Uprated XJ900 forks make the front end behave better than the back

guesstimate, is about 170-200 miles depending on the heaviness of the right hand.

If some of the above sounds a little on the negative side, then what has to be remembered is that the bike I tested was a pre-production model assembled in a hurry to appear on the Island for people like myself to try out. Hopefully, the feedback Norton get will mean that the niggles will be eliminated before the production line is in full flow.

Certainly the person who pays £7000+ has the right to expect a high quality product that performs well. As a sports-tourer it will face stiff competition from the big BMWs, Gold Wings, GTRs, GSX1100Fs and FJ1200s of this world. In practical terms, the Commander buyer is probably looking for a unique motor cycle and may care more about the Norton tank badges than the competition. **Kel Edge**

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