



## BOXING THE COMPASS

**A marathon to encompass the major compass points of the British mainland. Two on a CB900; and the distance was 2,200 miles**

THE DAWN was cold and still and mist hung heavy in the air. The time was 4am and I was running up and down a lay-by just south of Kingussie on the A9 in Scotland attempting to restore life to frozen, unstable legs that had once belonged to me. Perhaps it is an overstatement to describe my activity as a run — more a stumble, with both ankles and knees threatening to give way at any moment.

I grunted steamily as I shuffled past A.W. who was standing quietly next to the big Honda, which was parked on its sidestand clicking with heat dissipation and relief. The motor was cooling from the thrashing it had just received at my hands since leaving Perth some 60 miles earlier. My progress along the verge (impeded by several layers of heavy clothing and very wet boots) was slow and painful, but after 10 minutes of strenuous exertion I had achieved the desired effect and felt sufficiently warm to continue our ride. I noticed with both interest and chagrin that A.W. did not require the same amount of physical effort to ready himself, but I reminded myself that I had always maintained him to be the fitter of the two of us.

At the touch of A.W.'s gloved thumb on the button, the bike cracked into life again and the satisfying bark from the exhausts split the silence of the valley. Although normally a Honda 900 in standard trim is acceptably quiet, this particular one has exhausts which have rotted inside and therefore allow a little more baritone than before.

I swung a leg over the pillion and plugged in my electric gloves. "Thank God for these!" I thought as the Honda surged forward once

more, this time with A.W. conducting the music. The next few miles were quite pleasant — relieved as I was from the intensity of concentration required to deal with fast night riding — and A.W. quickly settled into a nice 'n' easy bend-swinging rhythm. An S bend came into view and he laid the 900 over into the righthand section with smooth precision. The bike came upright again and just as he had chosen his line for the lefthander and started to crank it down, we saw the truck. It was halfway over our side of the road, slicing across the apex of the bend and rushing to meet us very fast.

I could see that we didn't have a chance and although A.W. had used up all the ground clearance on the left side of the bike, he tried to find some more, to the extent that it felt as if he was scraping the clutch lever. At 80 mph in the tranquil beauty of a Scottish dawn I braced myself for the impact. . . .

In order to make any sense of our little pilgrimage, it is necessary to backtrack some 1,550 miles and 38 hours to our starting point. Dumfries is the home town of A.W. and I had ridden up there for a motorcycling holiday, which was to have taken in the Western Isles of Scotland, but fate lent a hand in the form of R.P.

Yes, that R.P. whose initials grace the hallowed pages of "the book". According to one of the weeklies which A.W. was sifting through on the evening of my arrival, the celebrated scribe was discussing his intention of riding to the "four corners of England" in aid of charity. A.W. and I had also been contemplating — for some years, I might add — the tackling of a longish ride; our idea being to ride through the major compass points of the British mainland. These four extreme points are Dunnet Head in Scotland (north), Lizard Point in Cornwall (south), Lowestoft in East Anglia (east), and Ardnamurchan Point in Scotland (west). After rereading the information several times, we decided that the gauntlet had been inadvertently thrown.

Unfortunately our geographical position at

*Not much room for error through the bends on Scotland's coast road, A882, from Thurso*

this time was obviously nowhere near any of these places and so a journey of some distance would have to be undertaken to actually begin the marathon. The planning was further complicated by A.W.'s insistence that we include a Land's End to John O'Groats run, more I suspected for traditional reasons than any other. Once the decision had been made, the route, time and distance scheduling took all of five minutes, using the (reputedly) Einsteinian implements of a pencil and the back of an old envelope. This type of notation, especially when applied to precise calculation, is one of such quaint eccentricity that it has always appealed to the perverse side of my nature.

In our planning, total distance was projected to be in the region of 2,200 miles, while the total time Dumfries to Dumfries we calculated to be about 58 hours, which would include a proposed six-hour stop for sleep in Cornwall. Total hours of riding would therefore be only 52, including food, coffee and pit . . . I mean petrol . . . stops.

A little mental abstraction at this point would perhaps be appropriate and could hopefully assist in pigmenting the locale, if not actually adding local colour. Through financial considerations we had planned to "Box the Compass" (as A.W. referred to the ride) on one machine, and the toss was between his BMW R80/7 and my Honda CB 900FA. After much debate concerning the suitability of the BMW for a 2,000-mile run, it became clear that it was by no means ready for it. If you will excuse the expression, the "boxer" had become a bit of a dog. Problems included poor fuel consumption, excessive vibration, poor starting / idling and consistent misfiring in the rain — to name but a few! Not its fault; it needed a service.

I apologise if I have offended hardline members of the Bayerische Supporters Club in the last sentence, but my comments refer only to one particular machine. On the other hand of slant eyes had been performing beautifully. It had just been serviced / tuned and did not



protest, even when subjected to the extremes of climatic incontinence which are so rarely experienced in these islands. Also, the significance of the CB 900's endurance racing heritage did not escape us and we decided that 2,000 hard miles would be the acid test. As we both have Norwich Union rider policies, there was no problem in sharing and insuring the driving.

The only modification to the machine was fitting an extra electric-glove socket, and in case there are readers who consider this to be a frivolous extravagance, may I say that the bike is unfair and that the weather conditions at the northern end of our country can be a mite unpleasant — especially when experienced while trundling along the motorway in the wee hours of morning. Considering the distance intended, our preparations were minimal and reflected our confidence in the Honda's reliability.

## Checking the chain

The rear chain was checked for tension and given a liberal dose of grease. The tyres (Pirelli Phantoms) were scrutinized and although they had done 6,400 miles it was decided that there was enough wear left in the rear for the trip. We chatted for a long time about the question of spares for the trip and eventually our list of items looked something like this:

- One spark plug
- One headlight bulb
- Five 1/2in drive sockets and a T bar
- Puncture repair outfit
- Pair of tyre levers
- Small tyre pump
- Half-gallon can for spare petrol

Hardly a comprehensive list you might think — and you'd be right.

The day of departure, Tuesday May 26, and we were up at the crack of noon; by 1.30 pm, we had our act together and were on the road. As we travelled the mile or so to the petrol station, the engine began to cough and splutter, and finally, 100 yards from the garage, died altogether. "Typical." I shouted "The first of 2,000 miles and we run out of petrol."

An ignominious start to the trip, in the finest traditions of Great British Failures. We found that it is surprisingly difficult to push 500lb of motorcycle while creased with laughter.

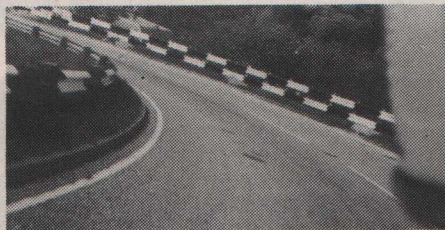
After tanking up we were finally moving in earnest and quickly traversed the A75 heading East. Turning south on to the M6, we looked for and found the turnoff for the A66 to Scotch Corner. We were about halfway to Scotch Corner when the heavens opened with a resounding celestial splash and we paused to don overtrousers, rarely to be removed subsequently. The rain over the top of the Pennines was as heavy as I've ever known it and could be seen bouncing off the road surface, but the Honda didn't notice it. It was in this particular thunderstorm that we caught up with and overtook a couple of bikes which were travelling together. The rear one was a small Kawasaki ridden by a delightfully curvaceous young blonde, while the leading rider was male, and rode a highly polished (albeit soaking wet) Commando. They waved back cheerfully.

After we had overtaken them, A.W. slowed down a little and lifted the visor of his Griffin. I leaned forward and heard his shout of, "He's riding her bike". This comment was in reference to an innocent little fantasy of mine regarding a tall blonde and a Norton Commando. To my disquietment, A. W. was clearly highly amused at this chance encounter and at yet

another opportunity for a little leg-pulling. Before I could reply he had closed his "lid", and I felt the Honda accelerate up to cruising speed again, rendering my reply inaudible.

At Scotch Corner we turned south again and cruised down the A1 at a nice steady, if illegal, lope. I was quite content, on the pillion, looking nosily in through the windows of the cars we passed, giving big waves to the kids, often to the clear embarrassment of their parents who looked away quickly in a self-conscious manner. The difference shown by the attitude of the children, compared with the majority of parents, was marked and, to my mind at least, highlighted the effect of social restraints that we all learn as we grow up. How many times do we hear parents telling children, "Never talk to strangers." You are free to draw your own conclusions with regard to my own exhibition of "learned behaviour". Ah! Civilization, how I love it!

Within what seemed a relatively short time of watching the Yorkshire scenery slide by, we reached our first coffee and refuelling stop at Bramham crossroads near Leeds, the scene of a battle in 1408 — we actually arrived there at 16.05. In typical style A.W. had finished his coffee in under a minute and was champing-at-the-bit, displaying his readiness to



*Kind of the authorities to mark the road edge so well . . . The A9 near Helmsdale*

get a wheel again. It is paradoxical that he has an overriding passion for coffee but, when it is actually served, he drinks it in a moment, not unlike an Irish wolfhound with an ice-cream. If I'd known that our next coffee stop was to be in London, some six or seven hours later. . . Why, I might even have had a second cup.

From Bramham it was my stint at the bars as we continued south on the Great North Road, until turning east on to the A17 towards Sleaford and ultimately Norwich and Lowestoft. I was pleased to find that there was very little traffic on this splendid piece of A road and we made rapid progress. For an hour or so the sun put in an appearance and helped to make charging through long sweeping bends a perfect pleasure.

It was a while back now that Fred O'Track was discussing the real pleasures of motorcycling, and if my memory is correct, bend swinging was one of the sport's attractions that he considered. I think he was attempting to define (or attempting not to define) the reasons which underlie the enjoyment of motorcycling. Why is it so gratifying? What makes it such an experience? Why do we do it? Those were the sort of questions that he included in his rhetoric and he eventually ended with a conclusion on these lines — "To define the whys and wherefores would be too clinical and would successfully denature the pleasure".

For my part, I agree that one shouldn't attempt a definition when discussing the reasons behind the experience, but that still doesn't satisfy me, insofar as the question continues to arise often after riding through a set of bends, free of traffic, on a beautifully sunny day. The question which begs an answer is, basically "Why does this make you feel so good"? I hope

not to sound too elitist when I say that we all have this feeling, from time to time, and that it occurs most forcibly when rider and machine have blended to move as one in a sort of . . . well . . . symbiotic harmony. For me this happens, in normal riding, on an infrequent basis, probably because I am not that good. Or is it because most of one's riding time is spent trying to calculate, concentrate on, and manoeuvre round or with other traffic? I suppose that when your head is full of largely unconscious time / distance computations it is perhaps difficult to take time out to consider just how much you're really enjoying yourself!

However I have sidetracked from my story, which left us on the A17 zipping through Lincoln on a sunny evening in May. The point of my meandering was to indicate what a good time we were having. As we rode through the village of Swineshead it became clear that although R.P. wasn't actually with us in the flesh he certainly was there in spirit — of a petroleum kind. We were so taken aback at the sight of a garage selling "R.P." petrol that we just had to stop for a photograph.

On the road once more, we by-passed King's Lynn and turned on to A47. Another 15 miles passed under the wheels and we drove through Swaffham — what a lovely name. Further on towards Norwich we met up with a RD350 which accelerated in a haze of two-stroke, as soon as the pilot saw us in his mirrors. Rising to the bait (I'm sure that I have too little self-control), we caught him up during the next series of bends and overtook him on the exit of the last one — not without effort, I might add, as those things really do motor. . . Doubtless with his superior knowledge of the twisting road ahead, he would soon have re-passed us, but thankfully he turned off with a cheery salute and saved me from embarrassment plus a bout of mickey-taking from A.W. About 10 miles short of Norwich we stopped for petrol once more and as A.W. filled the tank I recorded figures in the petrol book.

An immaculate leather-clad rider aboard a Honda 750 F2, in mint condition, rolled on to the forecourt and pulled up at the opposite pump. By comparison I felt like a poor relative standing in my filthy waxed cotton suit alongside my equally ill-groomed horse.

## Uncharitable thought

"How do." he greeted in a rolling 'Broads accent. I had the uncharitable thought that I was "doing" obviously less well than him, but replied civilly, "Can't complain".

"What happened to the tank"? He enquired, referring to my souvenir from Amsterdam, earlier in the year. Due to lack of finance, and intended only as a temporary measure, I had had the shape restored professionally by Alastair Laurie in Dumfries (whose exploits in the art of cosmetic surgery are legendary), and then I spoiled the ship for a ha'porth of paint by covering the tank with a couple of aerosols of BL red. As may be imagined, the finished result is less than perfect, and I promise myself to finish the job properly, some day when I have the time . . . some day.

This was the first time that anyone had asked about the cause of the red knees of my thorn proofs, and I was happy to give a lengthy explanation. Since then, however, I have heard the same question literally hundreds of times and now resort to the psychologically disabling riposte of saying in a proud voice, "All me own work, Squire!"

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By this time the owner of the 750 had become curious as to the reason for our presence in East Anglia.

"Touring, then, are you?" He probed and I watched him remove and put away his mirror-finished shades into an inside pocket of his leather jacket.

"You could say that" I replied in a sort of non-committal tone, thinking — perhaps a chance of a little one-upmanship here.

"Come far, then, 'ave you?" He asked, putting a gallon into his tank.

"Scotland" I said with indifference while trying not to look too covetously at his matching leathers and boots.

"Mmmm . . . quite a way then." He appeared visibly impressed and was probably trying not to.

"Aye, quite a way." This spoken with as much nonchalance as I could inflect. I was beginning to sense his next question and mentally prepared the presentation of my answer.

"Much further to go this evening"? Ah! Gotcha, I thought.

"I reckon we'll be in Cornwall by tonight".

"Oh!" He said with evident surprise. He had paid for his fuel and was ready to go.

"Cheerio." He called from under his full-face helmet, yet above the noise of his gleaming four-into-one exhaust system.

"Yes . . . Goodbye". I murmured absentmindedly as I watched him accelerate away from the garage on a doppler of sound.

A.W. had finished buying petrol and returned to where I stood surveying the Honda advertisement, fast moving into the distance.

"What did he say?"

"Not much. Asked where we'd been and where we're going."

"And you told him?"

"Yeah . . . I suppose he thinks we're lost."

We were still chuckling when we took a wrong turning in Norwich, and actually got lost. It took us some time to fight our way out of Norwich's ridiculous one-way system which complements the perfect boredom of the Norfolk countryside so well. Once in Lowestoft, however, and thanks to prior revision of the OS map, it took no time at all to find the coastguard station that actually sits upon Britain's most easterly point and we took turns at standing on the sea wall and being, for a couple of seconds, Britain's most easterly person.

### Irritating

An irritating 15 minutes were spent finding a few postcards to send (one of which being for R.P., care of *Motorcycle Sport*). At 9.30 pm precisely we left Lowestoft heading south on the A12 for the capital. With A.W. on the pillion, and darkness having fallen, this was one of the sections of the run that I enjoyed most and really got the bit between my teeth as we cruised towards London at speeds perhaps more consistent with inter-stellar travel.

From what I can remember of it, the A12 is a glorious piece of tarmac at that time of night, especially with so little traffic to get in the way, and we were soon in the outskirts of London, where we picked up a Honda 400/4 in café racer mode. He was travelling in our direction so we tagged along behind, intending to cross the river at London Bridge, but lost our way and found Tower Bridge instead. As we trundled across, I was impressed by the fact that it seemed much

smaller than I remembered. I shouted back to A.W.

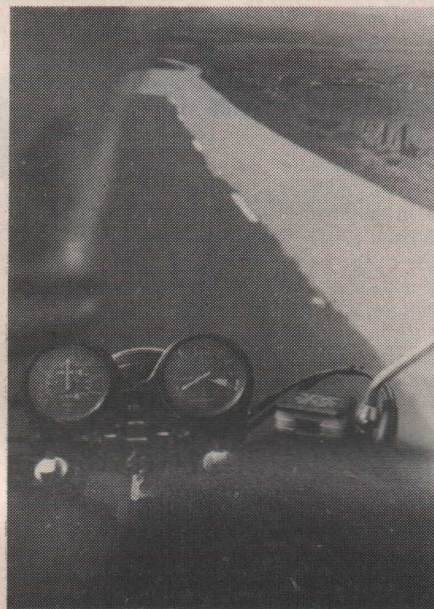
"Did you really fly through here.?"

"Yes. I really did." He replied with immense pragmatism and as we continued our rush along the A3 towards Walton-on-Thames, his simple comment left me wondering just what sort of person I was travelling with. "You meet the nicest people on a Honda."

We arrived at Walton at around 11.30 pm, and were revived by A.W.'s mother . . . thanks again, Mrs G. — your coffee's great! The main purpose of our visit was to collect the keys for the family cottage in Cornwall where we had planned to get four hours' sleep. It transpired, however, that the keys had been left with the neighbours who, understandably, would not appreciate being woken in the middle of the night. We would have to wait until 8 am, at least.

Electing not to spend the intervening time standing idle, and reckoning that Walton was too early to sleep, we left after about an hour's stop. On the road again, this time on a short section of M25, and then turning onto M3 towards the South-west. A.W. was twisting the grip for the next stretch and I was quite pleased to leave him to the possible hallucinations that we had predicted before the run.

When asked about the 50-mile section afterwards, he commented that his main complaint was not of hallucinations but of the sheer tedium that is the nature of deserted motorway riding. At least he only had to endure the boredom for 35m or so, and *that* is perhaps



Another rev-counter cable failed . . . no traffic on Scottish roads

indicative of the true nature of the 900. Honda have categorised it as a "sportster" but I think they have got it wrong. I feel a more fitting label would be the "journey-shrinker", because of the deceptive ease with which it covers great distances at high average speeds — a bit like an express train, really.

After what seemed an age the "end of motorway" signs appeared, and four miles of A30 later we were on to A303. Somewhere near Andover we stopped at a 24-hour garage with a £1 note petrol dispenser. Although the bike hadn't yet gone on to reserve, a glance at the map advised us that to fill up now would be a prudent move. With hindsight, we made a wise

decision, because the A303 after that was bereft of fuel all the way to Exeter. Shortly afterwards we halted for a few seconds to observe a very moody looking Stonehenge silhouetted on the skyline — an awe-inspiring sight at 2.30 am on a dark and windy night.

In the log that he kept of the trip A.W. describes this section to Exeter with a certain brevity that has a charm all of its own. I quote: "Lovely bends — cat's eyes — a real cat — then a fox — a rabbit — Exeter services on the M5." It was around 3.30 am and we both felt numb from lack of sleep. While planning the trip we had discussed sleeping accommodation for our proposed four-hour period of unconsciousness. I had talked in terms of bed and breakfast, while my companion had suggested bus shelters, railway stations and the like. I was horrified at the idea, partly because he had always claimed to have led a "sheltered" life — I know knew just what sort of shelter he meant.

Anyway, my friend the "tramp" and I were now at Exeter services — he trying to obtain sleep at a table in the restaurant while I happily let myself go on the Space Invader machines. Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end and his slumber was prevented by a brusque lady with a very noisy vacuum cleaner just as I returned from intergalactic war, having spent the last of my change. I lost the war anyway and the little green men took over the earth — but that's another story.

Ah! . . . Dawn, or as some say, the birth of a new day. It's strange but we felt like we'd just *died*. We trudged wearily across the carpark to where the dirty red thing stood waiting for us. While I rode it round to the pumps, A.W. decided to jog and thereby restore himself to a wakeful state. I had just heaved the Honda on to its centrestand when he appeared round the corner, quietly pursued by the Old Bill, in the form of a patrol car. I suppose it is only natural that they would be curious about his behaviour; after all, a motorway service area at 5 am is not really the place one expects to find loonies running around in green Derriboots, red Belstaff jacket, and custard yellow overtrousers. I was content to let him explain his way out of the situation to the two officers, who seemed most interested in his story, while I tanked up, washed the lights and mirrors and checked the tyres.

### Uneventful ride

After an uneventful ride we found ourselves to be the most southerly people on the British mainland, at 7 am. It is perhaps the best time to visit Lizard point . . . not at all crowded — although the newsagent did appear surprised when we went to buy our postcards.

Nine am — Land's End. I am now feeling my worst ever, and am in a foul mood. A.W. seems to be quite enjoying himself, which depresses me further and I am virtually uncommunicative as we tramp across the rock."

"What a damned stupid idea", I think to myself. "We ride hundreds of miles to see a stupid tourist trap."

Perhaps I had imagined that Land's End would be something special. After all, it's one of the UK's most famous tourist attractions, and I was more than a little amused, later on, when the tabloids were carrying the shock-horror story that the owner of Land's End might be selling out to . . . an American. In my opinion, a lot of fuss over nothing; after all, the prospective buyer would be unlikely to transport it all to the States. Perhaps I'm just not patriotic enough.



As we left the place with nary a backward glance I shuddered involuntarily at the sudden realisation of the distance still to go . . . 800 miles to John O'Groats. The first 40 were spent trundling along narrow lanes through grey drizzle to the cottage somewhere on Bodmin Moor. I was so tired that I still don't know exactly where we spent our six hour stop. I am told that we had a snack before sleeping and I have a dim recollection of putting liquids and solids into my mouth, but I've no idea what they were. When I lay down the world crashed about my ears and it only seemed a minute before the alarm went off after a sleep that was to prove too short.

Probably one of the most interesting things about our endurance ride was the effect on normal thought processes brought on by lack of rest, both mental and physical. I found myself so completely disorientated regarding time that I consistently doubted the accuracy of my wristwatch and insistently believed that we left the cottage during mid-morning, when it was actually evening. The illusion persisted as I steered the Honda towards Exeter along the A30. The road was clogged with slow-moving traffic and our progress was disappointing. The dearth of decent straight stretches of black-top with which to overtake called for the use of the 900's muscles in conjunction with the lower ratios, and the smooth flow of accelerative power exemplified the virtues which elevate motorcycling above all other forms of transport.

## At Exeter

On the outskirts of Exeter we decided to drop in on a couple of friends, Brian and Anne, who were more than a little surprised to see us. Even after we had completed our brief explanation of route and reason they appeared confused. I suppose I didn't help by saying "Good morning", as we arrived and even in the face of evidence to the contrary continued to state that "we were going to have lunch soon."

They probably thought we were nuts, because only half an hour after our arrival we proceeded to depart in as abrupt a manner as we had walked in. We were awheel once more and soon on to M5 cruising northward at a rock steady 6,500 rpm.

One hundred and fifty of the most boring miles later we arrived at the Frankley services just south of Birmingham. We climbed stiffly off the bike and walked into the cafeteria. Our mood was not good and it had been raining hard for the last hour of motorway. While we sat drinking coffee at a table near the window, another motorcyclist approached us.

"Do you mind if I take a photograph of your bike?" He asked in a Brummy accent. I was incredulous at the thought and glanced out of the window at my depressingly filthy machine. The rain was sweeping the car park in sheets and someone wanted to photograph my bike! I think that perhaps I offended him with my reply.

"Is this some sort of a joke?" But no, it wasn't; he was quite serious and to my amazement crouched in the rain wielding his SLR like film was going out of fashion. "You meet the nicest people . . ." etc.

More petrol in (this was getting to be a bit of a habit) and we were moving north again in an expeditious manner. It was at about this time that the tachometer cable broke, much to my annoyance as I had replaced it just prior to the run.

The cable route on the 900 is particularly tortuous, which is no doubt the main cause of the frequent failure and subsequent need for

## While on the pillion I began to experience the phenomenon of "micro-sleep". You wake up to find your vehicle in the wrong lane, and your mind a blank



*Bends winging on Wick A9 near Wick*

replacement. Sadly, no matter how one tries, it is impossible to increase the radii of the bends in the cable as they pass round the frame and headstock. I think the problem is really one of design. The cable exits the cam-box from the top, on the left side of the engine, and then passes across the front of the steering head to the tachometer, the righthand instrument.

As an owner there is nothing one can do about this route, because even if the two main instruments are swapped over, the speedometer drive then has to cross from left to right . . . a Catch 22 situation. My own attempt at a solution has been to liberally massage the inner with grease and the most recent one has lasted 10,000 miles.

Darkness was with us again as we rode through Spaghetti Junction — sinking, you know, by a couple of inches per year. It was something of a shock to encounter a Rover 3500 which had just stuffed itself into the Armo barrier in the fast lane. Steam was pouring from under the concertina'd bonnet and all the lights were out, but as we passed it a police Rover arrived, so there was no point in stopping. After leaving Lancashire on M6 (it was still raining) traffic was virtually non-existent and we took turns at every petrol stop to change places.

It must be said of the 900 that the riding position is one of the most comfortable that I have ever found. Even BMW's laudable ergonomics are not in the same class in my opinion; mainly due to the fact that the shape of the nose of the seat induces a tendency to sit with knees away from the sides of the tank.

On the Honda, everything just feels right. The rider leans well forward, the footrests are set well down and back and the slight dip in the

saddle ensures that one feels very much a part of the machine. Believe me, when you are in the same posture for 50-odd hours, you learn absolutely everything about riding positions. Thankfully, apart from the stiffness that one would expect from such a ride, we experienced neither muscular pain nor cramp.

The M6 motorway that night was as wet and windy as I had ever known it, and attempting to keep a respectable cruising speed became a drudge; but life is full of surprises and just when I felt that my spirits could sink no lower, I made the enlightening discovery that my boots leaked!

I was still squelching my pinkies an hour or so later as we thundered across the Scottish border. Although stiff with cold, I marvelled at the way in which the Honda had just covered 1,200 miles without complaint or maintenance. Once into Scotland and the early hours of morning I began to feel the effects of travel more acutely than at any time before.

While on the pillion, I began to experience the phenomenon of "micro-sleep". Briefly, this is the buzzword for those periods of time — mere seconds — when you wake up with a start to find your vehicle is in the wrong lane of a motorway and you have no recollection of the last few miles. Your eyes may only have closed for a split-second (which is normally the warning which wakes you up) but your brain has been out to lunch for some time prior to this.

In driving the predisposing factors to this state of mind are acute languor, warmth, constant cruising speed and monotonous stretches of motorway. Obviously the simple remedy is to stop driving / riding and sleep for three or four hours, because that is what the body is telling you it needs. Unfortunately, if you have that certain combination of assiduity and stupidity, or are involved in an endurance event of some kind, then micro-sleep becomes just another problem.

## Short-term solution

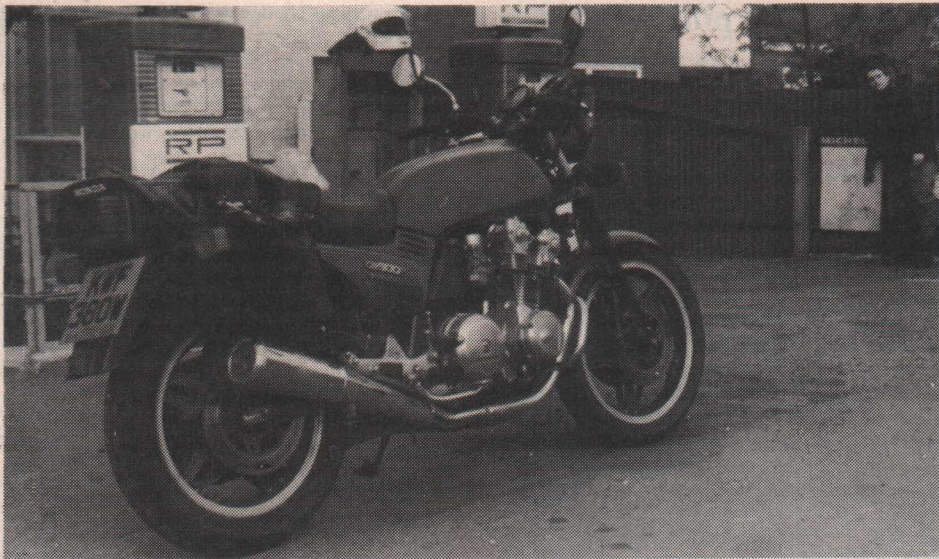
The short-term solution is affected with the aid of one of human nature's most potent weapons, will power. Basically you can fight back the feeling of sleepiness by varying your cruising speed; singing at the top of your voice, while slapping your left thigh as painfully as possible with your left hand. Yes, folks, stimulation is the name of the game!

Perhaps this all sounds rather silly but if you need to carry out such desperate measures to restore your concentration then it is a matter of absolute seriousness. I can imagine that the majority of readers would consider our behaviour to be the height of irresponsibility — I couldn't agree more!

The clock in Perth said 3 am, as we passed it on the way out of town to find petrol en route to Inverness. Sure enough, a couple of miles north of the centre was the same 24-hour garage that I had remembered from four years previously. Things don't change quickly in Scotland. We filled the tank, paid the attendant, and then proceeded to entertain him with our warming-up procedure. I think our double act of star jumps, press ups, and sprinting across the forecourt (all performed in heavy bike garb) took him quite by surprise.

It was my turn at the front and I pushed the Honda off its stand in gleeful anticipation. From experience, I knew that the A9 between Perth and Inverness is a terrific piece of road, even with the improvements which have sadly removed some of the more testing bends. I was damned sure I wasn't going to be a passenger on this lap.





R.P. petrol station at Swineshead, Lincs, J.M. points out Britain on the map

What a treat! 116 miles of smooth, twisting deserted asphalt! All traces of my earlier attack of micro-sleep had left me and I banished all other thoughts from my mind as we hurtled through the night. It was with irrepressible euphoria that I spotted the "consecutive bends for next mile" road signs and the bike's fine handling qualities were exploited to the full as we swung and flicked our way through successive S bends.

We came howling down through the Pass of Killiecrankie to where I knew there was a be-a-u-tiful 90-degree smooth lefthander. Dipping through the gears; fourth, then third and while reverberating music from the valley walls at the rate of about 7,000 beats per minute, a quick squeeze of the brakes while slotting second gear, and then over on to the left footrest with A.W. close in behind me.

The apex is coming up just as I start to wind open the throttle and the surge of power self-rights the bike on to the straight. The engine redlines almost as quickly as I can change up through the box and finally we're cruising once more at a mile and a half a minute; about 6,500 in fifth. Make no mistake, Honda's CB900 is quick in its standard form, but it must be said that none of the abovementioned would have occurred on the standard Bridgestones . . . Pirelli Phantoms are the tyres. Having had earlier potentially life-shortening moments with standard Japanese tyres, I made certain that I would not repeat the experience, by fitting the Phantoms from new. Although it was no mean expense, I was quite happy to junk the originals in the interests of longevity . . . mine, not the tyres. The Japs can make motorcycles but they certainly don't make tyres of the same class.

I confidently predict, however, that within 10 years they will have virtually cornered the tyre market, manufacturing the most desirable rubberwear in the world. With the amount of investment they put into R and D they won't fail — after all, rubber trees are indigenous neither to Italy nor England.

Fifty miles of all-out performance were getting through to me and the cold was inducing seizure of the knees and ankles. I just wanted to keep going till dawn and then stop and hand over the controls to A.W. Dawn, experienced while on the road, holds a special sort of magic for me. My final sprint was through Dalnacardoch Forest and bloodlining the motor through the cogs on the last straight from the

pinnes produced a most satisfying echoing wail from the dense woods abutting the road.

The road may have climbed gently for the next couple of miles but we certainly didn't and suddenly we burst over Drumochter summit — dawn broke simultaneously. If I never enjoy a motorcycle ride again, I will still feel privileged to have spent one hour of my life in near perfect synchrony with one of the very best motorcycles I have ridden. We coasted into the lay-by just south of Kingussie and I cut the engine with a sigh of satisfaction and a frozen hand.

I think it was Mark Williams in his column "Running out of Road", in *Bike* magazine, who said that for every long motorcycle run one undertakes there is always at least one anxious moment to be experienced. Of the three near misses that we had while Boxing the Compass, the potential collision with the truck was definitely the closest. The driver's expression, as he saw us approaching his front bumper, served to reflect my fears with incredible accuracy. In the final split second of disaster, the driver must have taken some sort of avoiding action, but by that time my courage had expired and my eyes were closed. I felt the blast of air as we passed each other rock my helmet. As I recovered from my temporary loss of vision, I remembered thinking in abstract fashion that this side-wind caused by a vehicle of large frontal area, forcing its way through still air, was called the Bernoulli effect. Perhaps it's a form of mental defence mechanism that makes one think of something totally different while experiencing a situation of great danger — not that I could have done an awful lot to avoid the truck from where I was, anyway.

Although A.W.'s enthusiasm for scratching through bends was noticeably reduced after our close encounter, the effect did not last long and we soon found ourselves racing a train which was running parallel to the road headed for Aviemore. The train lost the race and we arrived in Inverness at 6 am, a little sooner than I had anticipated.

Looking for fuel at that time of the morning took a few minutes, but finally with directions from a local policeman we found in Academy Street, the only garage open in a 100-miles radius. We also took this opportunity to fill our half-gallon can, as petrol stations north of Inverness are as sparsely distributed as the population.

From Inverness we took the coast road (A9

again) with me driving and A.W. trying to sleep on the pillion. After about 25 miles we turned off left on to A836 and short cut the A9 by about 13 miles. On rejoining A9 we travelled along the coast road and I was quite happy on the front, trying to ride smoothly so as not to wake up A.W. who, as I could see from the mirror, was busily inspecting the insides of his eyelids. It could not have been very pleasant for him when he eventually awoke with a start, while we were banked over in the middle of a bend, and I felt him suddenly grab my jacket, but I don't think there was any danger of his falling off. While I had my old 550 Honda, I recall that a girlfriend used to make a habit of sleeping on the pillion, and while we were hammering along the motorways at a steady 75 mph she would snooze for hours on end.

Eventually A9 took us through Wick and the last 17 miles to John O'Groats, which we reached at 9 am, just in time to see the Orkney ferry depart full of school kids on a day trip. I sat and watched the boat leave while A.W. sorted out repairs to the saddle bags which had partly burnt through on to the silencers. He mentioned in passing that when he removed the emergency petrol can it had been too hot to touch. . . .

At 10 am we were at Dunnet Head, the most northerly location, and by 10.30 we sat drinking insipid coffee in Thurso. It was only then that we realised that our last drink had been 19 hours before at Frankley on the M5. From Thurso we rode the 140 or so miles back to just before Inverness where we turned on to A833 and A82 to take us as far as Fort William. From there we rode along A830 and A861 heading to the west, stopping at a village called Salen where with good fortune we met the town drunk. It is strange, but irrespective of the nationality, and we've had them from France and Spain, we always end up being badgered by the local wino!

## Dangerous track

Eventually he directed us on to B8007 — one of the most dangerous tracks that I've ever experienced. We seemed to spend half our time in the air flying over the humps. Luckily the 900 is quite an easy bike to handle when it becomes airborne and is no problem to land, but the continual jarring on our spines took its toll. Finally Ardnamurchan Peninsula appeared. It was so bleak and remote that I had the same "What the hell are we doing here?" feeling as at Land's End.

We wasted no time returning to Fort William.

After tanking up again, A.W. had the controls along A82 going south and told me to look out for the especially picturesque scenery of Glen Coe. Little did he know but I was sick to the back teeth of the scenery. However while riding through the famous glen he gave me a nudge and I awoke. Looking at the rock face, I began to visually hallucinate. The rocks were transformed into the face of a cat, about 200 feet high carved in stone, and I knew that I could not believe my eyes, but there it was — smiling at me, whiskers and all.

We arrived back in Dumfries at close to midnight. A.W. was predictably exhausted, having piloted the Honda all the way from Fort William while I had perfected my snoozing technique.

The last words we said to each other before retiring to a solid 12-hour sleep probably sum it all up.

"That's one hell of a bike you've got there" he said.

"Aye". I replied. "It was a hell of a long way to go". J.M.