

Red Blooded

Honda's XR200R fourstroke enduro goes straight to the heart.

Long-term test by Neil Millen

I fell in love with the XR200 long before my first ride. Being a biker is a choice of the heart, not the head, and there's a special feeling for four-strokes in the hearts of most of us. And riding enduros must be the ultimate expression of emotional eccentricity.

So strong is this feeling that British riders have struggled to buy the XR200 fourstroke enduro single despite Honda UK's reluctance to sell it. The original, twin-shock XRs were imported privately after Honda UK dropped the model from their range in 1979, and added an extra glow of satisfaction to the sweet pain of off-road competition for the few who could afford to be different. I well remember their distinctive bark as they flashed past the ageing and weary DT175 I had borrowed from a friend for one of my first outings.

When Japan came out with the Pro-Link XR200R in late 1981 Honda UK gave in and

started official imports. Their reluctance doesn't come from any lack of faith in the bike's ability, far from it. But enduro bikes hover in the grey area between pure competition and street legality, and Honda have a strong sense of responsibility about what they put on the road. Where other enduro bikes pay lip service to the law with tongues in cheeks, the XR200 obeys all the rules.

The process starts in Japan where the factory fit comprehensive trimmings as standard. The XR200 has a full-size speedometer instead of a fork-mounted joke. The lefthand switch cluster has a dipswitch as well as a lights on/off switch and, for Europe, a 12V alternator is fitted complete with 35/35W headlamp, 5/21W tail lamp with brake light switch, and a half decent electric horn.

Most enduro bikes are supplied with restrictor plates in the exhaust and/or induction system to get through the various government noise tests. But they decimate power output and nobody seriously expects



Photography by Andy Mills.



One cylinder, one wheel, one idiot. Neil got into trouble, the XR200 got out. Wassell MX shirt courtesy of Competition Plus, Poole.



them to be left in place after delivery. Again, Honda do it right by supplying as easily-inserted extra baffle for the silencer that muffles the engine to a bass woofle. Sure, power is reduced. But not so much that the bike can't still be ridden near its normal speed on the road and I've seen quite a few XR200s competing happily with the baffle in place.

There's also a carb restrictor plate which leaves only a tiny hole to breathe through. We weren't curious to find out what it does to the performance even just the once.

Honda UK complete the street-legal package by supplying each bike with a home-made steel fuel tank to replace the standard plastic tank, and a huge street bike rear light unit complete with regulation size registration number plate. British bikes are fitted with Japanese Dunlop Trials Champion tyres which are 100 percent road legal.

On *Motorcycling* we justified the luxury of buying ourselves an enduro bike by telling each other that the XR200 is so street legal it could double as an office hack, albeit strictly one-up. Hanhams Motorcycles of Ringwood, Dorset, knowing that we intended to commute, supplied the bike with the metal tank and big light unit fitted. The light unit worked well enough but its bulk looked ridiculous balanced on the end of the scimp plastic mudguard and the number plate lost an argument with the rear tyre on the first trail ride.

The British-made metal tank looked better - looked great, in fact - with its sharp lines and colour-matched, high-quality paint finish. We soon learned to curse it, though. The forward tank mounts don't match the original spacers, leaving the mounting bolts sticking out. The lefthand bolt snagged the speedo cable when the suspension compressed with the bars turned to the left, jamming the steering in a sudden and unhealthy way. For safety's sake we've had to tie the cable to the fork tube with a rubber strap, forcing a life-shortening tight loop.

The metal tank has another annoying inaccuracy - the internal diameter of the filler hole is a very tight fit around the inner sleeve of the original screw-on plastic cap. This makes it excruciatingly slow to get on and off.

Running in went smoothly. First gear is far too low for the road and even second gear

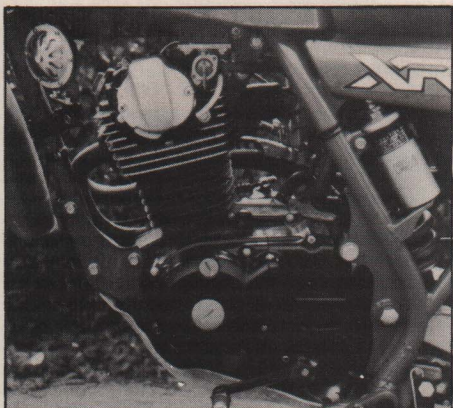


can save a lot of front tyre wear unless the throttle is used gently. But even so the XR200 was an instant favourite as a town bike with those of us gangly enough to get both sets of toes on the ground at traffic lights. Shorter riders can get accustomed to vaulting onto the Honda's 35in seat and tucking their right knees under their chins to get a good swing at the kickstart and, of course, the suspension sinks quite a lot under the rider's weight to make riding more manageable. But unless you're going to take the Pro-Link's off-road possibilities to their considerable limit the lower seat height of a trail bike makes more sense. Given a good swing, helped by the automatic decompressor, the XR200 usually starts first kick. A messy prod while balancing awkwardly on one toe guarantees failure.

Careful attention to tyre pressures proved vital for stability. The handbook has only one recommendation - 14psi both ends. But on tarmac this isn't enough. The bike felt squidgy in a straight line and very unstable in corners. After experimenting I feel happy with 20psi front, 25psi rear.

Theftproofing for road use was a simple matter of carrying a good padlock and chain in the spacious toolbag behind the seat. A cut-out button on the righthand bar substitutes for an ignition switch (you don't want any more water-sensitive electrical equipment than is essential in an enduro). There's no steering lock. The toolbag isn't waterproof and soon turned into the bike's armpit, growing mould and smelling unsavoury.

Enduro expert Frank Melling had advised lots of running in for the XR. We did our best, we think. Keeping an accurate mileage recorded wasn't easy, however, because the kph speedo has a tripmeter that runs back to zero after only 100km (about 62 miles). So, after anything from 200 to 500 miles it was time for a full service including an oil change and a bit of serious preparation for our bike's first competition. It and I were to be chucked in at the deep end of the Castrol Nant Yr Hwch two-day enduro, a British Enduro Championship round in forests on a Welsh mountain.



Motor is slim and strong, giving the Honda its character. Bash plate traps mud.



Tool pouch is handy and doesn't get in the way. But it lets in water and gets musty.



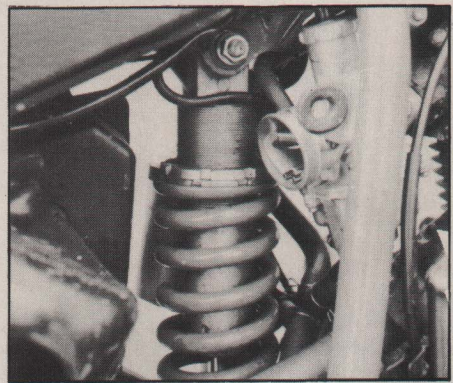
Servicing the Honda is straightforward as long as you have a good toolkit. Like so many Jap enduro bikes the XR comes with a one-piece, supposedly multi-purpose spanner that is useless for anything more complicated than adjusting the chain. You'd be an idiot to go out in an event with only this tool to get you through.

Having to take off the kickstart lever, brake pedal, clutch cable and righthand engine cover to clean the sludge out of the centrifugal oil filter rotor is a pain, but at least there aren't any expensive disposable paper elements to buy. This plus the washable air filter and mostly long-lasting O-ring gaskets make a liberal dose of TLC after every event attractive. The Pro-Link pivots have easily-accessible grease nipples.

We reclaimed the original competition rear light and plastic tank from Hanhams, who were happy to hand them over even though Honda don't make it clear to their dealers whether or not both sets of lamps and tanks are included in the price. The plastic tank slid into place like a precision Honda part should. The mounting bolts fit flush, a metal deflector plate brushes away the speedo cable if it threatens to hook itself over the lugs, and the filler cap spins on and off in seconds.

Dunlop came up with a set of knobblies to give the XR a competitive chance - K139 front and their latest K138 rear, at 4.10 x 18 promising a bigger footprint than the 3.50 trials tyre. The Honda's wheels are a long way from being quickly detachable despite the claims of the handbook. At the front, four axle clamp nuts, the axle nut, and two cables have to be released. The rear fork has open-ended slots instead of oval holes, the idea being that the wheel can be slid out backwards without having to remove the axle. A much more slick touch is the quick-release clip holding the brake cable on its operating arm. But since you still have to unhook the chain to get the wheel out and the brake, spacers, snail cams, and axle have to come off anyway to lay the wheel flat for a tyre change or puncture repair, it's all a bit pointless. All a bit awkward, too, without a centre stand - especially if you get the puncture miles from the pits.

Snail cams are usually a guarantee of quick and simple chain adjustment, but on the Honda the serrations were so shallow that the cams inevitably turned as the axle nut was tightened. But this was the lesser of the



Stepless spring pre-load adjuster is hard to get at and needs a special tool.

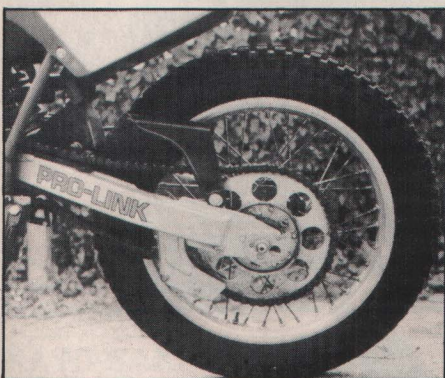
reasons why chain adjustment became a major preoccupation on the XR. With yards of rear fork forcing a long chain run round sprockets that are hopelessly out of line with the fork pivot at rest, the Honda needs a ridiculous amount of chain slack to allow for the tightening effect of ten inches of wheel movement.

Adjusted perfectly, the top chain run lies limp along the box-section swinging arm. There are lots of guides and guards to discourage the chain from jumping its sprockets but not one tensioner. So most of the time there's lots of thwacking and slapping and sliding and scraping going on. This was undoubtedly the bike's worst feature.

Back at the Nant Yr Hwch it was time for final preparation. The brake light switch and horn brackets were repositioned out of harm's way. After turning the white side-panel number plates to regulation yellow with Fablon, I thought I'd be clever and clip an oval plastic plate on the front. This not only gave a bigger number plate, but also covered the headlamp and therefore protected the lens from stones. What I didn't know was that Honda were ahead of me - the headlamp lens is made of tough plastic. During the event I inadvertently switched on the lights and, deprived of cooling air, the lens fused itself into a less-than-optimally-perfect lump. This didn't do much for night vision on country roads which had never been better than barely adequate. In the absence of a C-spanner to turn the



Steve takes on the traffic with the Honda in street-legal trim.



Pro-Link suspension is the Honda's best feature; long chain run is the worst.

well hidden, stepless rear spring pre-load adjuster I satisfied my need to feel that the suspension had been tuned by turning the rebound damping up to the third of its four options and by letting all the air out of the front forks as Honda recommend.

Things went well for my half of Team *Motorcycling* on the first day of the Nant. The Honda's best points were instantly obvious. With so much suspension travel and near perfect damping control it could soak up ditches, logs, deep ruts, and dizzy drops that shot out of the ground unexpectedly. Security bolts in both wheels allowed sub-10psi pressures without tyre slip so, as long as I didn't get bogged down and clog the treads, the tyres gripped the slimy hillsides. Steep climbs were a doddle for the strong engine, usually in third gear or higher. Above all the bike was slim, light, and easy to manhandle from any angle (most often from below) and still felt reasonably comfortable after two laps and over 100 miles. Where others were planning panic fuel stops in wild places, the XR breezed round with half a tank to spare - averaging 80mpg in road use and probably no less than 60mpg in a race.

Nothing's perfect, of course. The XR doesn't steer accurately at low speed without a lot of muscle input to the bars. But I'm a slow rider and others may consider this a minor fault. A tendency to cough and die unexpectedly when running downhill on a closed throttle cleared up in later events so we put it down to

insufficient running in. Less happily, the carb floods when the bike is dropped on its side, making restarting a long, tiring process. Miles of fast fire roads connecting the tricky Nant sections showed up the XR's ultra-low gearing - flat-out, valves bouncing in sixth gear at only 100kph (about 60mph) isn't fast enough to win. That's my excuse, anyway.

The only damage of the day was the loss of the metal tip from the big, rubber crankcase breather tube. Considering the toughness of the course and the quality of the competition I was thrilled to be among the finishers.

Then it rained all night. And it was still raining the following morning when I woke up to find that someone had been beating every muscle in my body with a rubber mallet. The Honda was ready to go through the whole thing again but my heart wasn't in it. I rode so slowly that I was out of time before the end of the first lap, all the excuse I needed to retire. It was some consolation to find out later that nobody went fast enough to get a Gold - not even Andy Robertson, the winner of that Championship round.

The Honda's next major outing was again in Wales, but this time a gentle weekend trail ride around Llandoverly. Here it excelled. It was good to know that the bike was neither illegal nor antisocial. On everything from steep, boulder-strewn climbs to open fields the XR was so comfortable, so easy to leave ticking over reliably while opening or closing gates, so easy to restart after stopping to read the map (without being dropped . . .) - it made every moment a pleasure. The only dark cloud was the need to adjust the chain a couple of notches every half day.

Next serious event was Pathfinder V, an Army-organised enduro on Salisbury Plain. It would have been a very fast ride if rain hadn't turned the clay-surfaced tracks into miles of slime. The rules insisted on trials tyres but no matter - Dunlop's Trials Champions found as much grip as anyone else's, undoubtedly helped no end by the Pro-Link's ability to keep the rear wheel pushed hard into the surface. I could even get enough grip to lift the front wheel over the logs that lay in tight corners waiting to send other riders over the bars. Having a power band that starts at tickover and just keeps building up also helped because the XR is rarely caught with its torque down.

Once again the gearing was far too low for

the flat out stretches and trying to restart the flooded engine after the bike had lain on its side for a few seconds lost valuable minutes every lap. Wading through a flooded tank trap the CDI ignited engine never missed a beat even though the silencer was exhaling below the surface. Watery mud got into the rear brake, however, and it stopped working completely. Amazingly, servicing the bike later revealed that none of the water and mud had got past the air filter. Both ends of the suspension bottomed through the faster sections but this could easily have been cured by tuning.

By the half-way stage I was knackered and out of time again so I decided that it was too risky to ride on without a rear brake. I don't know, maybe I'm just too old for enduros.

But I'm not too old to know when I ride something that I like. *Motorcycling* is now selling the Honda and I'm madly scheming to raise the money to buy it. I can't offer higher praise than that. At £1261 new and ready to ride on the road it seems expensive when compared with, say, Honda's XL250S £991 trail bike. But competition machinery isn't cheap and the XR's price is only about £25 higher than the Yamaha IT175 enduro. Kawasaki's fourstroke KLV250 enduro at £1126 is much cheaper, but softer.

The chain run will continue to offend my sense of what is right and the flooding carb will continue to make me want to scream just when I have the least spare breath available. So why buy? Because the engine has so much soul and the suspension is so clever that I'm prepared to put up with the faults. When I finally trade in the XR it will probably be for a bike with better low-speed steering. Maybe that'll be the next generation XR.

STOP PRESS. Late last year Honda UK decided to stop supplying XR200Rs with the road-legal kit. Metal tanks will still be available on order at extra cost, but individual owners will have to battle with the registration authorities to get the V55 document essential before applying for road tax. Shame. □

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE

Type: Air-cooled, OHC, single-cylinder fourstroke. **Bore x stroke:** 65.5 x 57.8mm. **Displacement:** 195cc. **Compression ratio:** 10.0:1. **Carburettor:** 26mm slide type. **Max bhp:** 19 @ 9000rpm. **Max torque:** 12lb.ft @ 7000rpm.

TRANSMISSION

Overall gear ratios: 1st 35.50, 2nd 24.88, 3rd 18.59, 4th 14.49, 5th 11.83, 6th (top) 10.06:1. **Clutch:** Wet multiplate. **Final drive:** Chain.

FRAME AND FORKS

Frame: Diamond type with engine as structural member. **Front suspension:** Leading axle, telescopic forks with air-assisted coil springs and oil damping. **Rear suspension:** Box-section swinging fork with Pro-Link rising-rate geometry. Single coil-sprung shock absorber. Nitrogen/oil damping with remote reservoir and four rebound settings. Stepless spring pre-load adjuster. **Front travel:** 9.8in at wheel. **Rear travel:** 9.7in at wheel. **Trail length:** 4.9in. **Castor angle:** 61 degrees 20 minutes.

WHEELS & BRAKES

Front tyre: 3.00 x 21 Dunlop Trials Champion. **Rear tyre:** 3.50 x 18 Dunlop Trials Champion. **Front brake:** Cable-operated SLS drum, 4.3in diameter. **Rear brake:** Cable-operated SLS drum, 4.3in diameter.

ELECTRICS

Ignition: CDI. **Generator:** 50W max @ 5000rpm, direct lighting. **Headlight:** 12V, 35/35W. **Tail/stop lamp:** 5/21W.

DIMENSIONS

Seat height: 35.0in. **Length:** 81.9in. **Width:** 32.1in. **Height:** 47.6in. **Wheelbase:** 53.3in. **Ground clearance:** 13.4in. **Dry weight:** 223lb. **Fuel tank:** 1.6 gal inc 0.3 gal reserve.