

DIRTY WEEKENDS

*Pete Plummer and
Yamaha's XT500
show you how*

can be fun.



WHEN advance news of the single cylinder Yamaha four stroke filtered through, life changed. It took on a fresh expectancy. In my local dealers, other riders no longer merely nodded — they stopped to talk. At the club the lads worried me for a technical spec. Ron bought me two pints for a discarded press release.

Out on the tracks it was just the same. Turning up at an event with a sophisticated enduro bike, which is always good for a spectacular entrance, did nothing. Barely looking up from changing a plug, my mate in broad north country asked 'Oh Ai, very nairce lad. What abart big Yam then?'

So the world has gone full circle. Motorcyclists are a fickle lot. A few years ago we were getting shot of old 500s by the shipload, now we wish them back — and more besides. A big British banger is still very acceptable on the road today but on the rough it is an entirely different matter. What was pleasant and economical becomes an unwieldy overweight mass in difficult conditions. Have we really gone soft? Are we less like the men of previous generations? No, the situation is different. Standards in machinery have changed, bikes are better, faster. We are as good, probably better, definitely faster.

To the relative newcomer the XT 500 will be an excitement, a tremendous challenge. Older, more experienced men must also be suitably impressed, but those who go for the Yamaha looking for a return to old style motorcycling must feel subtly cheated. The Yamaha may have valves and one cylinder but that is where the similarity ends.

What Japan has done to the simple two stroke, Yamaha has done to the four stroke. Once a purely British tradition, that lusty punch, that long legged gait has been tidied up and perfected. The XT is a sports 500 but it is civilised, almost tame. No-one can dispute it, 'made in Japan' is written bold and clear right through the middle.

To the traveller on the Brighton road we must have looked an odd lot. In a field just off the busy highway everybody and his friends seemed to be playing with bikes. I had been invited to test the new 500 but the whole Yamaha range had been brought along and fuelled up. Obviously possessing a sense of humour, David Lincoln had also invited along the national and car press to try their hand at motorcycling.

Ignoring the antics and entertainment I made my way through the crowds to the 'big un'. In my haste to blast the bike round the circuit I had jammed the film in my SLR. Seeing me occupied, Frank Diamond leapt on the bike, fired up and



Mick Andrews pushes the XT500

got away. A matter of minutes later he was round. A subdued roar, knee out, foot hovering. The Yam was on a tight line with the back end out, scrabbling for grip, his weight well forward. What a sight. There is just nothing like an expert on a big 500.

For a moment I was fooled. Frank was grinning, 'AJS handles better' was printed across his scramble jersey. Then he pulled in, I noticed the winkers, heard the motor ticking like a watch. The fins stood out sharp, not blurred with vibration. We have progressed.

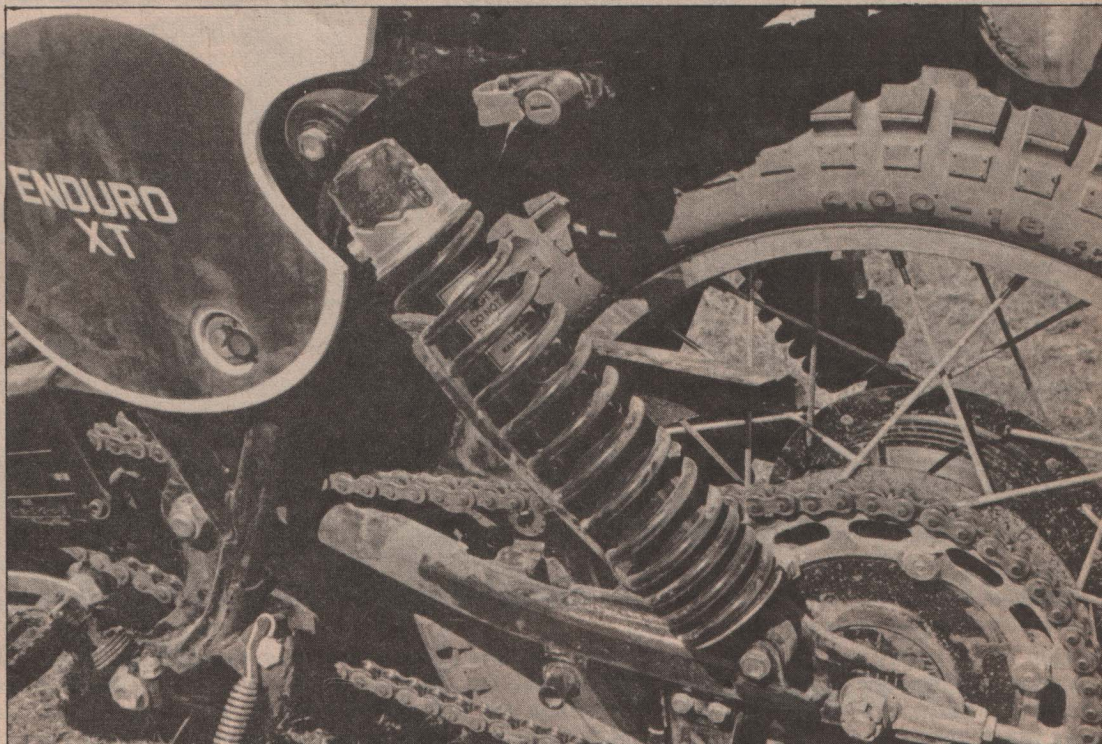
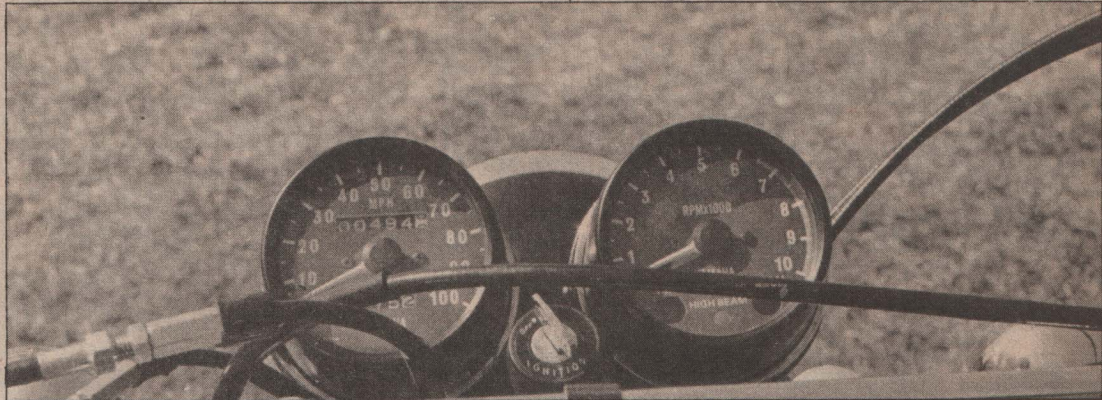
European enduro bikes are big, the 500 Yamaha looks bigger. I'm an eighteen stone six footer but it looked and felt tall and mean but not quite aggressive. The angled shocks were stiff and unyielding. Even when they are tired I can't see short, fat hairy legs reaching the ground. Seated on the saddle I liked it, it was just right. The controls fell readily to hand, it has to be said — everything was perfect. That's riding the bike

though — footing through deep mud and balancing on an adverse camber must make for a very different story.

Understandably the motor will create most interest in 'off road' circles. It was around 1956 that fans last saw a camshaft 500. Les Archer, a man with abundant talent rode a cammy Norton. Based on the Manx bottom half it had a single knocker head and cambox, and a very long stroke. Legend has it that power was around the top end. How times change — for the Yamaha is so different.

Right from nothing there is not just 'power' there is a surplus, an abundance just waiting to be released. Touch the throttle and 'boomp-boomp' you've been fired ten yards. As speed and revs rise the engine never seems to work hard. The exhaust never offends, it bangs out a mellow note, very pleasant.

To give such instant response the flywheels are exceptionally light and consequently torque is non-existent. Working the throttle makes slow speed



Laid-down shocks with an upside-down lip inside the springs — and that joke of a chainguard.

manoeuvres a stop-go affair as there is no weight to keep the motor spinning. On the motocross circuit there was little opportunity for trials type nadgery but here I can see a problem on the standard gearing. Lack of flywheel will make it necessary to *drive* the motor through hazards instead of allowing it to pull without fuss. Torque was once a valuable asset but the Yamaha will have to be ridden through on a live wire, just like any stroker.

To soften the power at low levels a manual retard lever or an ATD would help but the timing is fixed at 7 degrees BTDC. Like the two strokes in the Yamaha range the sparks are provided by a 6 volt Nippon Denso flywheel generator. Surprisingly the lighting side is also 6 volts. To be fair I didn't have a chance to try the lights in the dark but I sincerely hope illumination is superior to that fitted to the DTs. On the bike I rode the complete light unit kept falling out but no doubt this was due to some

earlier misadventure.

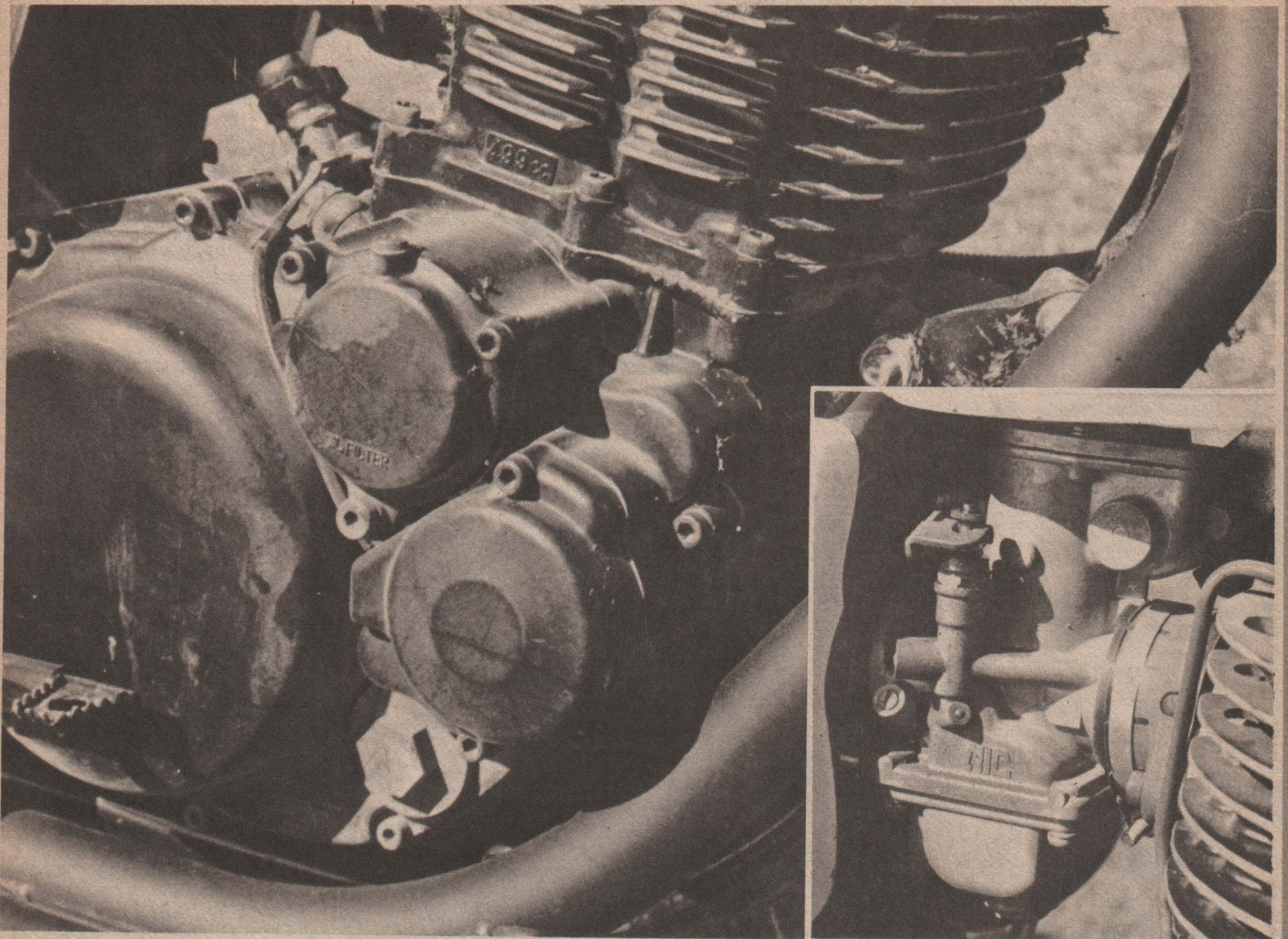
As you would expect of a Japanese motorcycle, there is a lot of wire and many switches but is all neat and well laid out. The main lighting/ignition switch is well out of harm's and water's way, being situated in the centre of the top yoke. As with the rest of the range there is a Stanley battery in the circuit.

No doubt contributing greatly to the overall smoothness and lack of vibration the crankcases are relatively small and narrow. Externally they look complicated with all sorts of nooks and crannies where crud might collect. On the offside, round the filter this is especially noticeable. Some might consider it a minor point but I like to see smooth and rounded engine castings on a cross country model because that way there is little likelihood of collecting 10lb of mud in the first leg of an enduro. Do not believe it cannot happen. On the Bultaco Frontera, I found vegetation growing in the sump plate under the motor. Clean-

ing the big Yam after an event will call for a poke around with scwdriver, and the matt black finish on the motor will surely flake and chip.

The cases do not please me but inside lurks the most 'bootiful' transmission. Primary drive is by reduction gear to a pleasantly light 8 plate clutch. The five ratios are evenly spaced and ideal for both road and rough. Pedal travel is short and it slides the gears in smoothly and without fuss every time. Easing the throttle makes clutchless changes smoother and quicker. There is no primary gear ring or transmission whine — what else can be said?

By present day standards the frame lacks appeal. The single downtube design with bottom cradle adheres to convention but what does not show up of course is the geometry. On compromise machines, of which this Yam undoubtedly is, we have come to accept less than perfect handling. Steering and handleability have in the past (quite



Too many dirt-collecting nooks and crannies.

wrongly in my book) had to fight with cosmetics and ancillary equipment. We are all aware of that other Japanese four stroke which until just recently had that awful dead feel at the bars, something that never seemed quite right. The Yamaha has none of these traits. It has that taut, alive feel. Without doubt it is the best handling road/trail bike ever to leave Japan.

As with the new generation of motocross ware, the rear end boasts the latest layed-down shocks. The upside down legs have a mixture of nitrogen and oil damping and full length multirate springs. The springs are exposed in true sports fashion but as Frank pointed out the tin shroud inside the spring, open end uppermost, must catch water and grit. On the softest setting the dampers still gave an over firm ride, this is an unusual event for me, I can normally bottom any setup. However, the bike was factory fresh so I am prepared to accept that given time, it would all loosen up.

At any speed the bike felt safe and right. Trickling in and out across ruts the front fork worked smoothly and never bottomed out. Blasting over

ridges and undulations the bike flew straight and true. Backing off the throttle coming up to hazards transferred weight forward but the fork still worked. There was no loading up on the front end, the sliders moved freely and damping soaked the bumps. Stability has been found with extra wheelbase. Like the Greeves Griffon, a superb handler, the Yamaha has a full 56 inches. Bringing it all together it really works, it's right, the complete package.

With the Japanese's almost fanatical approach for attention to detail I find it difficult to understand why the final drive has been so obviously neglected. The chain runs dry and exposed on the sprockets. The guard is a puny affair, will damage easily and does nothing to keep mud from the chain. A fully enclosed case may not appear sporty but on a supposedly high mileage dual purpose machine with tremendous punch, something should have been done. At the very least an oiler or tensioner would give peace of mind.

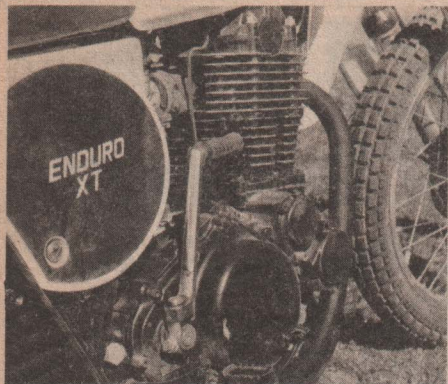
Unfortunately we seem to over-classify everything today. A motorcycle is no longer just that, it has to be 'trail-superbike-sports'. Not surprisingly the

The XT is equipped with a Mikuni carburettor.

'enduro' tag has been hung on the Yamaha. There is now tremendous interest in 'off road' sports but I would question Yamaha's decision to label the XT, 'enduro'. The Americans may have miles of sand and open tracks but our terrain is very different. In the main our enduros are over forestry areas with virtually no road work. Speed averages are around 24mph, sections always include rivers, bog, sunken track, bog and more bog.

The Yamaha has reserves of power for any situation but if that mythical figure 'the average clubman' ever finds himself in a position to use it, I shall be agreeably surprised. You see the sheer size and weight of the thing will be a problem. At 303lb the XT is not heavy for a 500 but it's too ruddy heavy for an *enduro* bike. It is true there are a handful of aces who ride rings round us on Big Triumphs but they are men apart. Messrs Hobbs, Randall, Minskip and Kelly are brave and reputed to be slightly mad so they must not be used as your yardstick.

In any enduro event, riding is the easiest part. Flying through the air does not hurt. The pain and heartbreak starts with scraping yourself off the track, »



kicking the bike straight then getting cracking again. With 303lb to manhandle it would take a stout heart to try. No, once before we have seen the 500 enduro. The Triumph Adventurer had power, handling — everything except brakes. It was a good bike but there was nobody to ride it.

As a trail bike the Yamaha must fare better. Weight as always is a consideration but less important for leisure trail riding. The XT is not fast but will make riding on the roads to far off trails very pleasant. Here again the rider will set

the standards, if you are skilled and strong in the arm, green roads will be pure joy. If not you will suffer dented ego, damaged nerves.

The XT 500 is simply that, the 'XT 500'. It is a classless, indefinable motor-cycle. A 90 miles an hour machine with a promise of excellent fuel consumption. It is a big bike that will require a big man to ride it well on the rough. It is a challenge, fun and very different.

Yamaha say it is perfect for commuting, touring, off road adventure — I would not argue with it. **«**

SPECIFICATION ENGINE

Type: Inclined, air cooled, four stroke single. Ball and roller bearings throughout. Vertically split crankcase.

Valve operation: Single overhead camshaft driven by chain.

Capacity: 499cc.

Bore and stroke: 87 x 84mm.

Compression: 9:1.

Carburation: 1 x 34mm Mikuni with piston type throttle valve breathing through wet foam air filter.

Electrics: 6v x 6a/h battery charged by left side crank mounted alternator. Power n/a. Ignition by fixed, direct flywheel magneto.

Lubrication: 4.5 pint oil reser-

voir in frame, dry sump. Low pressure system without filter. **Claimed power:** 30bhp. 28.2 ft/lbs at 5400 rpm.

TRANSMISSION

Primary drive: Gear. 2.56:1 reduction.

Clutch: Wet multi-plate.

Gears: 16.63; 10.97; 8.39; 6.46; top 5.48:1. Selection by right side lever; one down and four up selection.

FRAME

All welded tube steel single loop cradle with triangulated rear sub frame.

SUSPENSION

Front: Two way damped telefork.

Rear: Two way damped, load adjustable pivoted fork.

WHEELS

Front: 3.00 enduro tyre on unshouldered aluminium WM2 x 21 spoked rim. 6.29in (160mm)sls drum brake. Cable operated.

Rear: 4.00 enduro tyre on unshouldered aluminium WM3 spoked rim. 5.90 (150mm) sls drum brake. Rod operated.

INSTRUMENTATION

Matched illuminated rev counter and speedometer. Turn signal, main beam warning lights.

EQUIPMENT

1.5 gallon steel fuel tank inc

reserve. Kick start. Brake light. Turn signals, long competition seat. Decompressor, Spark arrestor. Sprung from mudguard. 6in (152mm) 30/30w headlamp. Tool kit. Prop stand. Anti-spill fuel tank breather. Magnesium engine cases.

DIMENSIONS

Weight: (claimed dry) 303lb (138kg).

Wheelbase: 56in (1420mm).

Ground clearance: 8.7in (215mm).

Seat height: N/A.

PERFORMANCE DATA

Fuel consumption N/A.

Speed: 90mph (144 km/h) maximum.

Price: N/A.

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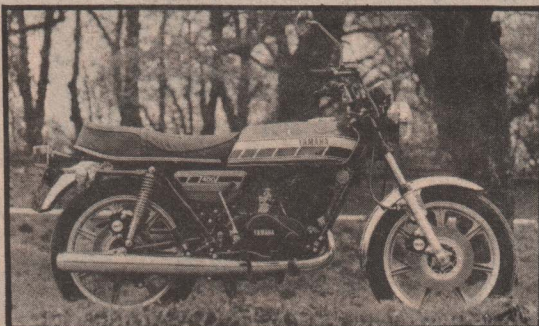
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