

MOTO-MARTIN VENOM

ONCE BITTEN, TWICE FLY

Mike Scott takes off for Fantasy Island

The runway ahead of me was clear. Behind me, the dogs of destiny were clamouring for blood. My blood. I had to take off. Fast.

A quick pre-flight check. Kickstart? Bungeed to the frame. Speedo? Broken. Ancillary instruments? Gone. Footrests? Scuffed. Everything normal... clear to take off.

Snick, into first. Revs up. Ease the clutch home, raising and stowing the auxiliary undercarriage as the wheels start to roll. She's balancing perfectly now, tracking straight and true: paired yellow landing lights scorching a path ahead. The baying of hounds recedes.

Now the revs are rising, approaching 6000. Take-off speed is near. I wrench the four carburettors fully open, just as the gas-flow of the cylinder head comes together. Sweet as nuts, she starts to lift, the steering going light. Then, with a graceful surge, the nose wheel comes clear of the tarmac, and continues to rise.

I am free.

Yup: the Moto Martin Venom is conducive to fantasies. And it does feel like it's going to take off. Especially when it reaches an angle of 45 degrees. But I never got the back wheel far off the ground, thanks to the efficient cantilever back end. And the front invariably came back to earth as I changed to second, though only (sometimes) to rise again in that gear.

In fact, I'm not much of a wheelie merchant. I prefer sitting on the tank and keeping everything level: instinctive, really. Even so, the Venom could take me unawares. It's powerful,



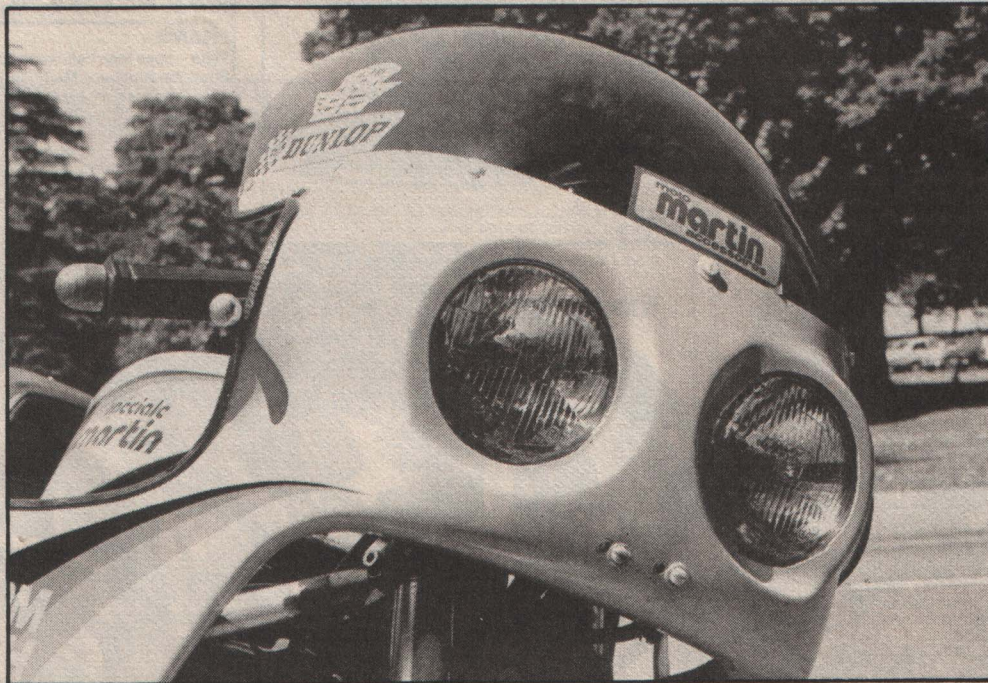
very powerful. And a certain clumsiness at low speeds encourages frequent applications of full throttle.

French Moto Martins, while not actually commonplace, are becoming a less unusual sight on the roads of Britain, thanks to the good offices (though cramped showroom) of Moto Martin (UK) Ltd, who arose out of Cobra Road and Racing to handle Martin frames exclusively. Under control of loonie Caldwell Smythe (who was today ejected from Buckingham Palace's front road while doing wheelie photographs to celebrate the Royal Wedding), Moto Martin offer the full range of frames for most Jap biggies (including a chain-drive-conversion XS1100 unit). Coming soon, an interesting £400 kit to take Yamaha RD250/350/400 bits.

I'd had a brief blat on the CBX-engined Martin we tested last winter, and my appetite was whetted. So when chief hooligan Smythe offered us his own personal Kawasaki-engined Moto Martin Venom, I seized the keys and sped away before anyone else got the chance.

The Venom is an English bike: a unique variant that mates the tuning skills of Jim Wells with the Froggie tubes and hoops. Kawasaki based, it includes an 1100cc engine, substantially tuned and pumping in the region of 110bhp.

The burning question: does it really do the 163mph that is emblazoned so boldly on the side? Well, I did say the Martin elicited flights of fantasy. This one is borne of a rev-counter cross calculation on the Isle of Man (and that was just



HIGH-PERFORMANCE HOE-DOWN

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on the ferry ramp). No, but seriously... the figure came up on the run down to Creg ny Baa, with Caldwell Smythe aboard. And to back it up, a 1000cc Jim-Wells-engined bike has previously recorded 164mph. Our own time with the bike didn't include speed testing, so I can't say for sure. It certainly felt at least as fast, and better streamlined, than the P&M 1100 we tested to 147mph before running out of space last year.

Martins share a common theme of frame design, an elaborate open-cradle affair, with regional variations in locations of tubes and brackets from one kit to another. On the CBX, the engine sticks out on each side. The four-cylinder bikes, though, have a frame tube outside of the cam covers, giving generous protection in a minor spill. The test bike had already used this facility in a minor loM prang.

I'd say the frame defies description, but has two tubes on each side, meeting under the tail of the tank to join a large triangulating rear sub-frame. There are no tubes beneath or above the engine: it's like a cradle turned through 90 degrees.

The bike sits very low, but wide: the ironmongery shifting dimensions out to the sides. Space is tight: this bike had a single seat though, a cramped and less elegant dual seat is available. For a big rider (me), the width of the frame splayed my legs, though not as drastically as a Moto Guzzi does, and my knees kept bumping the glassfibre (easily remedied with a hacksaw... who needs kneecaps anyway?).

It sits on Martin forks up front, firm and very beefy 42mm items, carrying a pair of Brembo's finest, and offering 4.75inches of travel. They are not designed for comfort. At the back, a de Carbon unit cooperates to the hilt with a cantilever swing-arm, to provide compliant yet accurate suspension. It made up for the harsh front forks by combining a reasonable ride with good control even at ridiculous speeds.

A pair of Dunlop racing tyres - KR124 front/Endurance Racing rear - keep the five-spoke Martin wheels together, sticking incredibly well in the dry after a short warm-up, though one of our number felt some disquiet (including skidding) on cold tyres on a wet road. Probably the worst penalty of racing rubber on the road is rapid wear. Sure, when the going gets tough, they get going.

The engine is your actual old dog, originally a Z900, given more than just a breath of fresh life by ace tuner Jim Wells.

The list of modifications goes some way to explaining the good spread and huge quantities of power. Take a Moriwaki 1100cc big-bore kit, with 12.5:1 pistons. Bolt Action Four cams to the heads, operating stainless steel valves. Add four 29mm Mikuni smooth-bore carburetors and a

Martin exhaust. Then set Jim Wells to work on the head, where he will gas-flow the ports, building in a Venturi effect to the inlet that ensures low-speed tractability to 6000rpm, and then a whopping powerband. The results are excellent. It is a very well-behaved engine up to six grand. From there on, hold tight. It pulls like it has the dogs of destiny on its tail.

On the road, this uncompromising motorcycle is at first also unpromising. Much neater than the wide CBX version, it felt nonetheless clumsy and unwieldy, a tiring handful round town.

Part of this is riding position, which leans more to the endurance racer's crouch than the sporting road-rider's compromise. There's a lot of weight on your arms and hands, and just operating the controls gets to be heavy work. Another part is the steering geometry, which is on the slow side to ensure stability at top speeds. A reasonable trade-off, but yet another drawback to Commuter Man.

The Moto Martin exhaust, snaking economically round beneath the engine and emerging fatly and well tucked away, was much quieter than the paintwork, so at least my uncomfortable progress through London traffic was not marked by fruitless bellowing.

But I was not happy, and eager for the journey's end.

This disdain lasted only until the first oppor-

tunity came to open the bike out. Suddenly, it all started to work together. Even the riding position made sense... fierce acceleration lifting your weight off the bars until, at 70mph and above, the wind takes over. The splayed-legs position even worked to advantage: I found myself sliding round the seat and sticking knees out in stylish sympathy with the brazen paint.

The brakes displayed the expected Brembo-ness: massive power and superb control, with fairly heavy lever pressures. The low build of the bike cuts nose-dive under braking: the racing tyre gripped remorselessly.

And the engine...

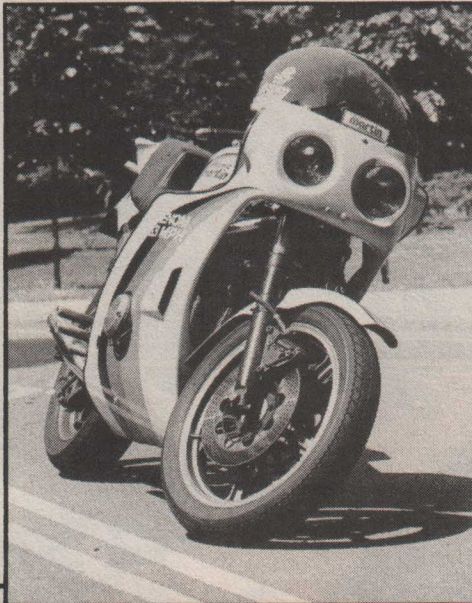
It felt at least as fast as the P&M Formula One bike I rode last year, with plenty of bottom end tractability but a pronounced powerband at 6000rpm. The Martin accelerates ridiculously fast once you hit the 6000-9000rpm powerband, and it is geared so you need never leave that he-man's territory. Eleven-second quarter-miles and 150-plus top speeds are well on the cards.

That elaborate jumble of tubes holds everything together good and tight. The frame is well up to hyper power outputs and warp speeds.

Ridden fast, the Martin stays tight as only a specialised machine can. And while it remains a low-speed oaf, the trade-off with high-speed confidence is plain to see.

Only an individual can decide whether the price of agonised commuting is worth the high-speed excellence. On the one hand, there is the immense speed and safety of a single-minded motorbike. On the other hand, aching wrists.

Then if they survived dragging £4400 from your wallet, they should be up to the task.



Moto Martin Kawasaki Venom £4400 complete

PERFORMANCE

Maximum Speed - 150mph plus (see text)

ENGINE

Type - air-cooled DOHC Kawasaki four-cylinder
Displacement - 1100cc
Power - 110bhp at 9000rpm
Compression Ratio - 12.5:1
Induction - four 29mm Mikuni smoothbores
Exhaust - four-into-one Martin
Gearbox - five-speed constant mesh

FRAME

Type - open loop half-cradle, of 25 CD4S tubing
Front Suspension - Martin forks
Rear Suspension - cantilever monoshock, de Carbon unit
Wheelbase - 57in
Tyres - front: Dunlop KR124; rear: Endurance Racing
Brakes - Brembo triple discs

Test bike supplied by Moto Martin (UK) Limited, 24 Fortess Road, Kentish Town, London NW5

