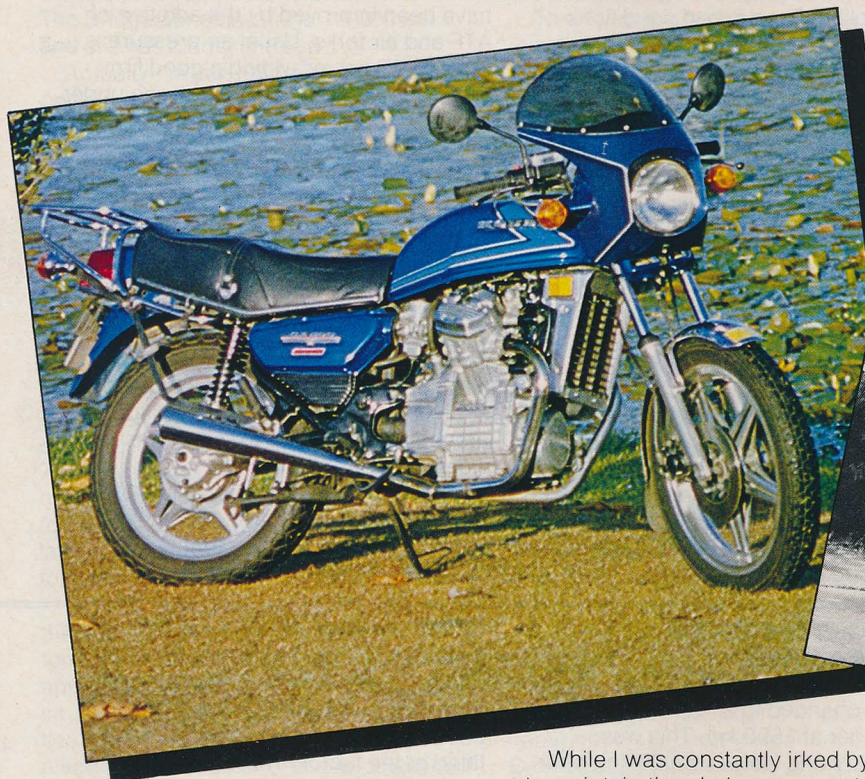


# Pride and Prejudice

## Honda CX500

# The Stone-Axe Twins



**Honda's CX500 has been called many things – ugly duckling, boring, bland, even gutless . . . But GRAEME McELLIGOTT and GRANT AISTHORPE weren't put off by name-calling; after a few suspension mods they rate their CXs as extremely competent all-rounders. Reliability and shaft drive were major attractions for these two Queensland riders; in fact McElligott went the CX path as a one-man protest until Kawasaki put a shaft on its 750!**

**I**N the eight years I have been riding motorcycles I've made an interesting discovery – I hate chains on road bikes. A long trip on a chain-equipped machine drives me crazy. Adjust it, oil it, adjust it, oil it . . . and so on. Fortunately motorcycling today offers an alternative – shaft drive – and I for one will never go back to chain.

While I was constantly irked by having to maintain the chain on my motorcycle, it took a Kawasaki Z750 to convince me to change to shaft. An unfortunate buy was that 750. An excellent machine in that it handled superbly in most conditions and had ample power, its big drawback was that it liked to do impersonations. Actually it was only successful in one guise – that of a Triumph. Every time I had something fixed, something else went wrong.

One day I found the clutch slipped, compression was right down, the rear tyre was stuffed and the chain and sprockets needed replacement. In a fit of pique I decided to rid myself of it, and began to cast around for a replacement. Naturally a prime requirement was reliability, closely followed by shaft drive and relatively light weight.

It had to be Japanese, as I really don't think BMWs offer value for money. The short list was the XV1000 Yamaha, GS1000 Suzuki and CX500 Honda. The XV750 would have been the one had it been styled differently – for practicality rather than pose.

Well, just about this time one of our

group decided to get married and sell his bike. The machine was a CX500 with 20,000 km up, mostly touring, and it had proven itself reliable. The owner was fastidious about his bike – it was in immaculate condition. As an added attraction the bike had air caps, Koni shocks, a carrier and brand new Continental tyres.

It felt pretty good on a test ride, although power was nothing to rave about. But the price was right and the sale completed.

I've now owned it for seven months and 16,000 km, and can easily see why CX500s are so popular. The bike has been reliable and willing to take anything thrown at it without complaint. It's even a reasonable sport bike.

### Early impressions confirmed

My first impressions of the CX were mixed. It sounded pleasant but didn't have a great deal of go. It handled well but felt a little "different" in some ways. My time with the bike has confirmed these early feelings.

# Pride and Prejudice

The little V-twin is a willing worker and does pump out good power, it just doesn't feel like it! The powerband is fairly flat up to about 6000-7000 rpm, then comes on a little stronger. Nothing spectacular, just enough to get things happening quickly.

Smoothness is a virtue of the CX, and I find vibration isn't too obtrusive. In fact it's far smoother at 140-150 km/h than the Z750 Kawasaki ever was. Unfortunately at those speeds the engine is working a little too hard for my taste, so the usual touring speed is around 120-130 km/h.

Power isn't a great attribute of the CX, but it gets you there. Running at cruising revs (about 6000 rpm) there is sufficient go on tap to get you past any traffic without downshifting; as long as you don't expect to do so in the same manner as a GSX1100. For sport riding the lower end of the tach is hardly used.

An interesting aside here is the engine note. Standing away from the bike it's very uninspiring; however, from the seat it's reminiscent of — dare I say it? — a Ducati, especially when chopping the throttle or downshifting at high revs.

Strangely, while the bike performs best at high revs, it doesn't feel like a revver. Around town it feels happiest when shifted at 4500 revs. This encourages the rider to take it easy; one reason why most CXs seem to go forever.

Another aid to engine longevity is the water cooling. Even in bad conditions (like running at 140 km/h in 40 degree heat) the coolant temperature rarely gets too high. (But oil temperature under sustained high-speed running is another question. — Ed.)

Clutch action is very good, with a light feel at the lever and sudden take-up (typically Honda really). The gearbox is excellent (I've never missed a shift). While gear ratios are well suited to the bike, I would prefer higher overall gearing. Still it's a good compromise between zippy acceleration and comfortable touring.

As standard, the suspension of a CX is nothing to get excited about. Stock forks and shocks are set very soft, and this becomes worse as time goes by. The shocks in particular lose any vestige of damping control very quickly, contributing to the classical "boing,

boing" ride. Anybody who owns a CX and appreciates a well controlled ride and good handling would be well advised to modify the suspension.

The forks are too soft and too flimsy. They look as though they'd be more at home on a 100 cm<sup>3</sup> commuter than a mid-sized touring machine! My forks have been improved by the addition of ATF and air forks. Usual air pressure is from 10-13 psi, providing a good firm ride without excessive nose-diving under brakes. They still flex when punting hard through bumpy corners, but not too badly.

## Konis were the answer

Contributing to the overall package of my machine is a pair of Koni shock absorbers, they represent excellent value. After 20,000 km on the bike the Konis are only just showing signs of deteriorating. They offer a well-damped stroke and, coupled with stiffish springs, are the answer to the rear suspension woes.

Mine work best when travelling two-up particularly by preventing much of the grinding and graunching that accompanies a stock-suspended CX

## Second Opinion

On April Fool's Day 1980 I bought a Honda CX500. Although the date may seem portentous, the bike has proven anything but a joke. It has now covered 27,000 happy reliable kilometres, and I'm certain it will continue to provide similar service for years to come.

Although the CX initially appears to be somewhat different (less kind friends have referred to it as ugly, boring and gutless) it has grown on me. I will even go so far as saying it has a dash of character (Harley and Triumph riders needn't write in about this statement, I know what you're going to say).

Overall the machine is nice. A bland statement, but nevertheless true. While not shining in any one department, it performs most roles more than adequately and is very reliable and easy to maintain.

Modifications have taken place at

intervals over the past two years to the point where it now closely resembles the bike most suited to my needs. The front tyre was changed to a 4.10 x 19 Avon Roadrunner at 1500 km. This was satisfactory and lasted 22,000 km, after which it was replaced by a Metzeler C88.

The only noticeable difference with the Metzeler is a somewhat lighter feel to the steering. Tyre life at the rear seems to be around 10,000 km, with the types used being the standard Yokohama, an Avon Roadrunner, and currently a 4.25 x 18 Metzeler Perfect — the best so far. I have read that the 4.25 is too large for the rim, but have not any major problems. Maybe my relaxed riding style explains this. That's my story anyway.

Suspension as standard is not really worthy of comment. Air caps were added at 5000 km. Now 12 psi combined with the correct amount of 20 wt Bel Ray provide a considerable improvement. While on the subject of forks, Honda has seen fit not to equip the CX's forks with drain plugs, thereby necessitating the complete removal of the fork legs to change the oil. Good one!

I stayed with the original rear shocks until 15,000 km, then sprung for Konis. What a transformation! No longer did the bike wallow when striking undulations, and (wonder of wonders) I could even

get around corners without dragging the centrestand. The only further addition necessary is a fork brace to reduce the twitchiness in bumpy corners. A set of decent sized forks and triple clamps fitted at the factory would be the go, however.

## Stone-axe reliability

The CX is stone-axe reliable. My usual maintenance has consisted of an oil and filter change every 1500-2000 km, along with a check of the tappets and cam chain. The diff oil was changed at 5000 km, 15,000 km and 20,000 km, while engine coolant was replaced at 25,000 km.

There have only been two component failures to date. The mufflers which completely rusted out at 12,000 km. In my opinion this was due to both low quality materials and the bike only being used for short town hops up to that time. The entire exhaust system was replaced with a Hanco two-into-one, which has been quite satisfactory and is still hanging in there.

The second failure was something I've not heard of before. Leaving Albury one morning during my holidays, the bike began to run very roughly. At first I thought the choke was jammed on, but this idea was soon discounted. The problem slowly worsened. I pulled in to

through corners. Standard CXs lack good ground clearance, but this is easily rectified by stiffer suspension and the removal of the offending stands.

The current tyre combination is a Continental front and a Bridgestone 4.00 x 18 Mag Mopus rear. I did have a 4.25 Conti on the rear, but it died at 8000 km. The Bridgestone has gone 10,000 km and still has plenty of tread.

Actually I'm very impressed by the performance of this tyre. In the dry it gives good traction right up to the point when things drag, only getting skittery when it encounters sudden variations in the road surface. In the wet it's not terrific — especially under brakes — but treated with caution it does the job. Tyre pressures are 30 psi front and 35 rear.

Comfort-wise the CX500 has always been touted as very good, what with its broad seat and well placed controls. However, I must say I'm not overly impressed: For those 1200 km-before-supper days I'd prefer my old Kawasaki Z750 (although the model was never hailed for its comfort). The seat and footpegs are my main complaints, the latter being too far forward while the former is simply a pain. At least its

the nearest service station and, in torrential rain, began to pull the machine apart. Much searching later, I found the cause — a leaking float assembly. The floats on the CX are plastic and two piece. This particular one had developed a leak at the join, causing it to fill with petrol. Naturally the float level changed, and the right cylinder ran richer and richer until the engine stopped altogether.

### **The parts nobody stocked**

Next move was to check out all the bike dealers I could find. But as was to be expected, nobody stocked such a commonly used part. Once again it was left up to the trusty Araldite to save the day. And that's it for problems. Pretty good, although I was not too impressed by the mufflers.

Ergonomics of the CX are very good. Comfort is a strong point, even for me at 1.98 metres and 82 kg — like I'm not exactly average. The seat is broad and comfortable and is easily the best I have ridden on. My pillion supports this opinion and has even nodded off on the not-so-odd occasion. Handlebars are just the right height and width, and are an important contribution to the excellent riding position. My only complaint in this department is the footpegs are a little too far forward.

generous size allows you to vary your position. Don't get the idea I think it's lousy, it's not as good as I was led to believe.

Controls are good, well placed and easy to operate. The instruments, although standard fare, look good in their nacelle and are easily read.

The headlight is woeful. I've replaced mine with a twin-bulb Marchal insert. It's vastly superior and fitted straight in. The huge twin bulb tail-light is excellent.

The horn is of the old generation and pathetic. I find indecent gestures more effective! Brakes are good, the rear having good feel and adequate power. The dual disc set-up at the front is strong but lacks feel, locking up without as much warning as I'd like. The machine stands up very noticeably when braking hard in a corner and there is also evidence of torque reaction from the forks.

### **No sweat in the dirt**

A big drawback to the otherwise good brakes is their lack of bite in the wet. It takes some time for the discs to dry out and begin to work. At least the drum rear works regardless of weather conditions.

I should comment on the brakes and headlight, because they do not perform as they should. The brakes are good in the dry, but as is so often the case with Japanese bikes, non-existent in the wet. Definitely a case for some change by the factory. Perhaps a different pad compound (like Kawasaki) would be worthwhile.

The headlight on the other hand needs more than a change, it needs complete replacement. I swear I see more at night by using the blinkers. A QH spotlight

An interesting aspect of the CX is its dirt road performance, which I consider above average for a road bike. I've run mine on everything from gravel to clay, both wet and dry, and have nothing but praise for the way it handled itself. Certainly it has never given me any bad moments, even if I don't push hard enough to give Kel Wearne any cause for worry.

All this proves what is already evident — the CX500 is a top mid-range touring machine and one that's immensely popular, at least in Queensland. Since I've owned mine I've been perfectly satisfied, especially as the only running cost (aside from fuel and oil) has been \$45 for a rear tyre. The bike has never let me down, has been extremely easy to maintain and has performed very well indeed. Even my Katana-riding mate found it in himself to mutter "Orr, it's not bad."

But now I've noticed that my favourite road bike, the Z750 Kawasaki, is here with shaft, 24-litre tank and oil cooler . . . So "For Sale. CX500 Honda, v.g. cond'n . . ."

Yes goodbye CX and, hopefully, welcome GT750. \*

now helps out, although an insert is on the cards in the near future.

Would I recommend a CX500? Yes, and with no reservations. It has given me no real headaches, and after setting up is well up to the tasks required of it. The machine may not handle like a Duke, have the presence of a Harley or the power of a GSX1100, but as an easy to live with, competent all-rounder, it has no equal. \*

