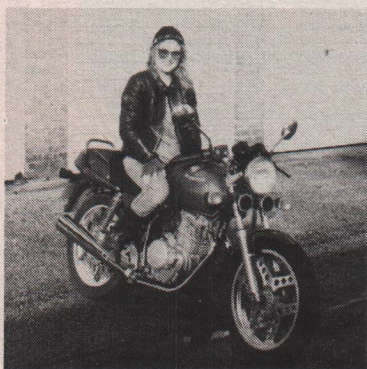




As tested by What Bike last year - the XBR was praised for precision handling.

Honda XBR500



Rosie Marston is well qualified

to talk about this

'classic style'

single - she owned one but

discovered that all that glistens

is not

necessarily gold

USED·BIKE·LOT



As launched in 1985... and no change in appearance since. Wire wheels can now be fitted as an option.

LAUNCHED in 1985 as a 'classic' and just dropped from Honda's range (see Consumer Guide), the single pot Honda XBR500 was designed to fill the hearts of motorcyclists with nostalgic fervour. With some design input from Honda UK, it was to be just what the British had been hankering for; a back to basics machine — something of a rarity in our technological world. However, I would hardly call a radial four valve head and twin exhaust pipes 'simple' but neither can you manufacture off-the-peg classics.

Following in the wake of the earlier, unsuccessful FT500 which, by all accounts, was slower than the trail bike on which it was based and suffered from a weak electric start, the XBR certainly had its work cut out to convince Joe Public it was different.

The XBR's styling ensured it was noticed at least and it soon became fiercely defended or despised. Many thought the petrol tank looked too large (albeit only apeing the profile of a cafe racer) and others that the Comstar wheels were out of place. It was unfortunate that Honda didn't import the Japanese-market equivalents, the GB500 Tourist Trophy with its wire wheels; or the GB400 Tourist Trophy Mk II, also with wire wheels as well as cafe racer-esque fairing. Perhaps these would have been more appealing to the British eye. Indeed, only recently was Honda beginning to get their act together with the XBR — seen at a show with spoked wheels, fairing and a more 1960's looking silver paint job. This not only makes it look the biz, but somehow takes the emphasis away from the bulky petrol tank.

WITH an engine specification borrowed from Honda's enduro XR500 but no interchangeable parts, the

498cc motor is definitely a product of the 1980s. The four valves (two inlet and two exhaust) are arranged radially in the combustion chamber with a centrally positioned spark plug, enabling a shallow head and large valves to be used. Also 'borrowed' from off road experience is the dry sump. This design enables the engine to be mounted lower in the frame reducing the centre of gravity. It does, however, mean those awful braided oil pipes which slither over the outside of the right side engine casing. It also causes time-consuming oil level checks as the engine has to be run for several minutes before the level can be checked. Internally, to dampen inherent vibration, the motor has a gear driven counterbalance shaft, located at the front of the engine.

Maximum power output varies from 35 to 44bhp — depending on whose report you read. Bottom end grunt is not quite what you may expect from a 500cc thumper and the XBR does seem reasonably high geared. Mind you, top end performance, though not remarkable for the 1980s, is certainly acceptable from a single pot machine. However, the XBR's charm does not lay in its high speed prowess, more so from its mid range pull and ability to cruise comfortably at a brisk pace.

The suspension is basic stuff, twin oil damped shocks and box section swinging arm at the rear and oil damped telescopic forks at the front. Opinion is divided 50/50 by owners and reports alike as to whether the front end is soggy or hard under braking, personally I found it a touch soft.

Similarly, the brakes are a simple drum brake rear, single disc front, which work superbly well, though at the expense of fast wear of both pads and disc.

THE XBR has not changed greatly in detail or spec over the past four years. In 1986 the 'F' model became the 'G' and sported a beefed up starter motor. Apparently, the gearing on the earlier imports had not proved quite so bullet proof as expected; shades of the FT500, perhaps?

It is easy to tell the difference between the two types of XBR starter, the 'F' has a flat end to the starter motor casing, whilst all subsequent models have a bulbous casing. Later in 1986, Honda discovered that as a result of vibration, the bottom bolt holding the oil tank in place had been known to fracture. A replacement was issued to all owners for fitting under warranty; a ten minute job.

The only other changes have been to colour scheme. Available originally in black, red or pale blue, the blue was discontinued after the first year to be replaced by a burgundy/brown shade. Red was discontinued at the end of 1987.

Back in 1985 the XBR was greeted with enthusiasm by the motorcycling press, myself included. Such was the interest in this single that Yamaha rushed out a competitor, the SRX600, a machine which succeeded (for some) in the styling stakes, but failed as a 'Honda beater', being more money for less sophistication, slower and also a bugger to start sometimes.

I quite fell in love with the XBR500F during a road test period. Living with the machine for two weeks I was impressed by the handling, its long distance capabilities and the fact that fuel stop intervals were well over 200 miles apart. It proved to be extremely versatile — on one occasion staying upright in the muddiest rally field I've ever seen... then as a commuter and long distance bike over the rest of the test. The bike only let me down once. After a week of standing out in the torrential rain of September 1985 water seeped into the switchgear 'killing' the electric start. Thankfully all that was needed was a quick dismantle and a spray of WD40 to get it working again.

I had been told by Honda UK that of the three XBRs on the press fleet, the blue model I was riding had proved to be the fastest, which was borne out when I took the XBR to an effortless 112mph when speed testing. On the road a fast non-stop run from Sheffield to Southampton was covered in record time, although I felt rather like Zeebadee from the vibes. Funny, since vibration hadn't been particularly noticeable on the journey.

I thought the riding position was comfortable enough, but to niggle, I would have preferred the footpegs set further back to complement the low bars. The seat was a touch firm for your average bum, but being used to sports seats I found it comfortable enough. However, I came to dislike the removable seat hump which not only hampered access to the toolkit under the seat, but just what are you supposed to do with it if you suddenly want to take a pillion? Leaving it off left the bike with an unfinished look.

ANYWAY, 11 months after returning Honda's XBR I took delivery of my own XBR500G. Strange how this machine felt larger than I remembered, but I put it down to apprehension.

Running in procedures were strictly adhered to; no more than half revs for the first 500 miles with just a couple of short bursts of revs. By the first service though the front brake was squealing and the disc already scored and the tappets needed adjusting. I also lost count of the number of times the clutch cable needed adjusting but I was impressed at how smooth and

slick the gearchange was, even from new.

Over the next 1000 miles my XBR began to backfire on the overrun — at first occasionally, later, almost at will. 'All large singles sound like that, madam', seemed fair comment at the time, as most owners I met said the same about their XBRs. However, in January 1987, when the machine was just five months old, the complete exhaust system was replaced under warranty and I can only presume that the replacement was better fitted as the bike backfired much less. This was borne out by another owner who, suffering the same problem, found the exhaust header pipe had not been fitted properly on his machine.

It was the rusting and speed of general finish deterioration that tarnished my love affair with the XBR — at this rate it wouldn't be around long enough to even have a crack at being a classic! Regularly wax polished and garaged when not in use, only three months after the exhaust system was replaced another downpipe was needed under warranty. I also had to touch up the frame numerous times and dreaded having to wear over-trousers as these scuffed the sidepanels and tank cutouts as surely as if I'd used a pan scourer on them. Look

at any XBR and you'll find the paintwork has suffered the same in these areas.

It is also a pity that Honda left the engine unlacquered as after just one British winter the alloy was being eaten away — despite efforts to hose off any trace of salt after EVERY ride.

I came to the conclusion that in order to keep my XBR in 'A1' condition required meticulous attention to regular cleaning and polishing — a wax wash after every wet ride and a polish at least once a week. A bit excessive, even by my standards, but from then on I managed to keep the chrome intact and also the general paintwork bright. I suppose it's the old adage of 'you get what you pay for'. The XBR at under £1800 (Aug '86 prices) was a good few hundreds pounds cheaper than anything comparable.

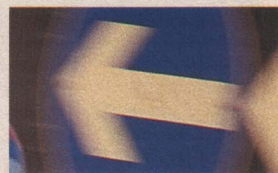
Whilst the finish is only adequate, the equipment is high quality. The XBR has a good electrical system affording excellent lights, a very loud double horn and controls/switchgear all up to Honda's usual high standard.

ON THE consumables side, the front brake pads wore down to nothing inside 4500 miles (which is actually



Engine specification is borrowed from Honda XR500 enduro bike but no parts are interchangeable.

Four years on and the 'G' model has changed from the 'F' with a beefed up starter motor only.



around the norm) but the disc too scores easily. By 5000 miles the rear tyre (Bridgestone Exedra) still looked fine but was beginning to 'white line' badly and detracted somewhat from the handling. The steering head bearings were also on their way out, despite the bike living a very cosseted life. Dealer serviced for the first 12 months, the cost averaged about £30 a service. Once the warranty had expired any servicing was done at home, which in the remaining timespan covered replacing brake pads, oil and filter changes and tappet adjustment.

Generally though I was pleased with the performance. Until the tyres wore the handling was excellent and even though the suspension may have been on the soft side at the pointed end, being only lightweight, I never had the suspension bottom out when braking. In common with the test machine, my XBR was severely affected by cross winds, giving the feeling that the wheels were about to be snatched from under you. Without these adverse factors the XBR proved stable at speed. Only at very low speeds did the steering feel at all vague.

Whilst impressed at the fuel tank range — over 200 miles to reserve and somewhere between 50 and 60mpg — I found the XBR had an annoying habit of cutting out under downhill braking when running low on fuel. Both mine and the test machine suffered the same. I was also unimpressed by the oil consumption. Where the oil went I did not know, but from new I had to meticulously check the oil level as it could all but disappear overnight, or so it seemed...

I always had to be careful not to leave a gap of more than two days between starting the bike or it would just not start on the electric thumb. And, as any XBR owners will tell you, the kick start is not particularly brilliant as you can't get a decent swing on it. But once started it never missed a beat, except on one exceedingly cold morning when it took about six miles before it would run properly. If the weather had continued to be as cold I think a hotter spark plug would have been the answer.

NEWER secondhand XBRs in good condition are still holding a reasonable price — I traded mine in for £1500 in 1988. However, it is possible to pick on up for as little as £800, although £1000-£1200 is a more realistic price for a decent example. The XBR is at least holding a better price/reputation on the second-hand circuit than many previous road going large singles... with the exception of, say, the Yamaha XT and SR500, which are sought after.

Unfortunately, I feel the XBR's advertising hype rather overshadowed the product. It should have been left to find its own market rather than have the 'classic' tag forced on it.

Take the XBR500 for what it is — a modern day single, and you won't be disappointed. It is still a reasonably priced new machine, falling in the under £2500 bracket, although there are also many low mileage nearly new XBR500s now on the market. I suppose for some people, the reality was just not like the dream... or rather the advertising build-up!

