

Golden Oldies

There are a few genuine "classics" in the world of machinery. The DC-3, the Springfield Rifle, the Morris Minor and a few others somehow transcend mere machines. To my mind, the Harley Davidson WLA belongs in this exclusive little group.

When it began to look as though the United States would become involved in World War II, the Army decided to spend some of the vast allocation it suddenly found itself with on a motorcycle. This was to replace the confusion of different types and sizes then in service, and would do all the things the army might want a bike for.

Harley Davidson, as aware as everyone else of the profits to be made out of government contracts, produced a prototype in record time by modifying a civilian model.

The bike was powered by the tried and proven sidevalve V-twin, with a capacity of

Harley Davidson's WLA 750cc side-valve, vee-twin, built for American army use has transcended being a mere motorcycle. *Peter Theomng* reckons it ranks as the ultimate classic machine.

750cc. A very simple and sturdy carburettor fed the beast, and extensive finning on the heads and barrels cooled it. There was a dry clutch, operated by a foot pedal and a three-speed gearbox with a hand-operated gear lever on the left-hand side of the tank. The tank was split, one side containing petrol and the other oil.

Woe to those who mix up the caps. The oil cap is not vented, and if it's put on the petrol tank causes fuel starvation. Now if you're dumb enough to do this in the first place, you're also dumb enough to not think of the obvious answer when the bike stops. I have had the carburettor and fuel pipes off my WLA, looking for a blockage, before the light dawned. Very embarrassing!

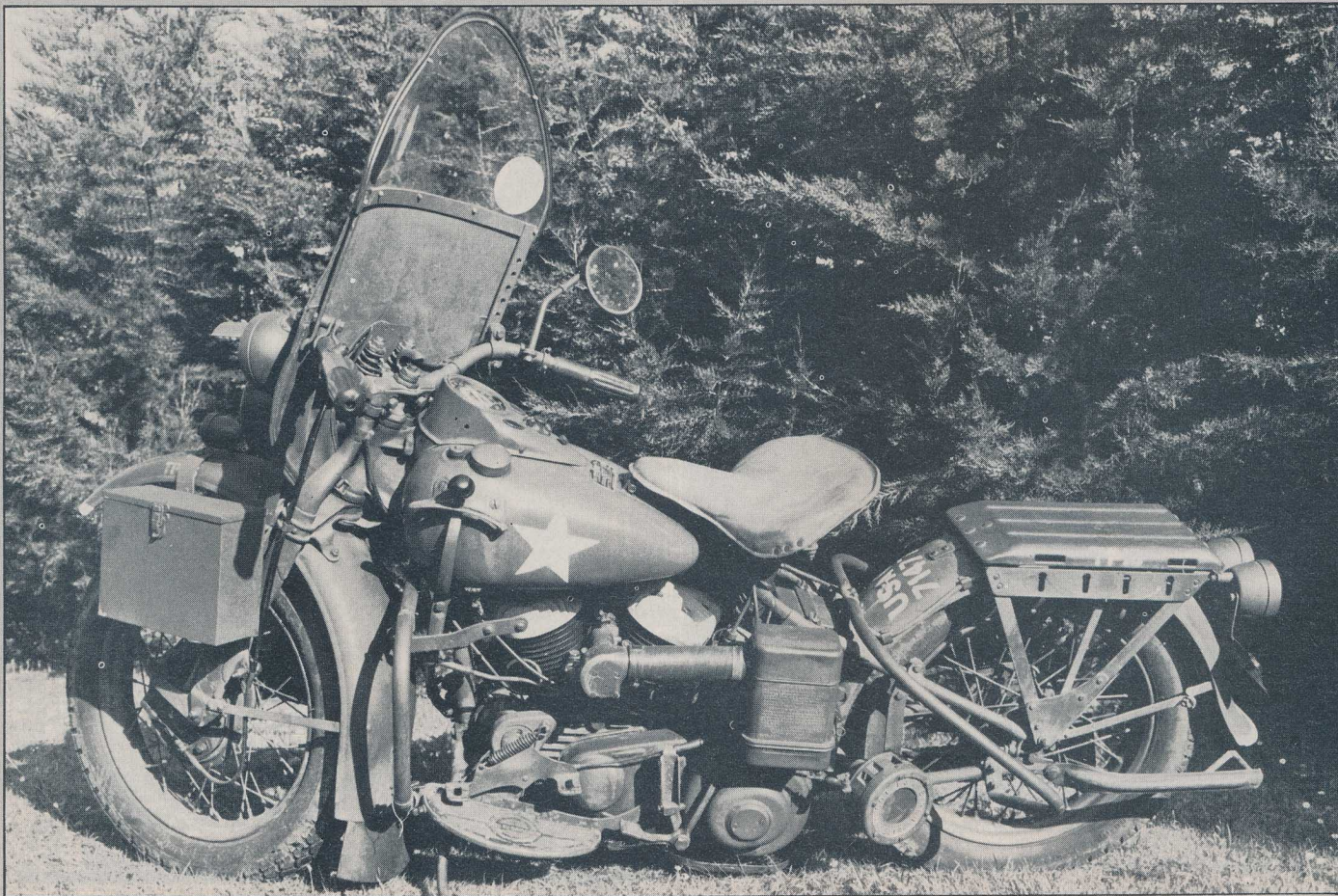
The bike had rigid suspension at the back and friction-damped springs at the front. There is a spring under the seat, to cushion the rider a little.

The army liked what they saw, and the bike went into production in 1938. Various configurations were built until 1942, when the bike was finally standardised. Hence the description "42 WLA". There was a new model in 1944, but the vast majority of the bikes built were 42's. Most of these, once again, were WLA's, but there were also a significant number of WLC's for the Canadian armed forces. All other Allies who received bikes on lend lease, like Britain, Australia and India, got WLA's.

Differences between

WLA's and C's are minor, and derive from the different uses made of the bikes. The Canadians used them almost exclusively for despatch riding, and they were therefore suitably stripped. Early inspiration for the Chopper, maybe? The US Army fitted them with a submachine-gun rack, ammunition and grenade boxes, windscreens and canvas "fairings" as well as more comfortable saddles. These bikes were used for marshalling, sometimes in front of the armour, for scouting, the Military Police and many other purposes. They often fought along with the foot soldiers.

According to the best records available, the HD factory in Milwaukee turned out some 90,000 of these bikes, with as many again for spares. Most of the people who know their way around ex-army iron insist that this figure is far too low. There is





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Unfortunately no way of checking, as HD themselves don't want to know anything about these machines. Too busy launching lawsuits against the Japanese?

The last WLA was built in 1952. They were in service with the Australian Army until the early seventies, and saw service in Vietnam. In India, they provide a taxi service for Delhi to this day — converted to three-wheelers, they haul a rider and up to six passengers. The story of the WLA is far from over.

Incidentally, the WLA saddle is to this day one of the most comfortable bike seats ever designed. I've ridden a WLA for a thousand miles, with only petrol stops, and I could still walk when I got off.

Iain Cottrell's WLA

Iain's bike actually saw service in the War. It had service numbers painted on the rear mudguard when he bought it, although they were covered by several other coats of paint. Like most of the other WLA's around, it was bought from Marble Arch Motor Sales in 1948. It probably fetched rather less than the £75 that mint examples went for. The proud new owner then rode it until it dropped. It is a testament to the bike's endurance that this didn't happen until 1957.

The bike sat patiently in a scrapyard in Portland for 15 years, until Iain found it and bought it for £10. He stripped what was left of it to the bone and the long, loving process of restoration began.

This was his second WLA. He'd bought the first in 1969, and hadn't realised the bike was a military model until the spares he'd ordered arrived in olive drab. Then, in 1972, he went to a rally arranged by the American Motorcycle Register and met the Military Vehicle Conservation Group.

He was inspired to do a "proper" restoration job.

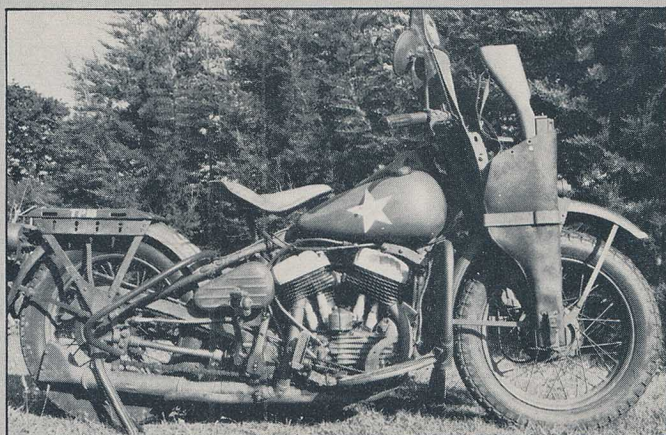
The frame, wheels, forks and handlebars were basically sound, though they needed to be stripped back, cleaned and repainted. A new wiring frame was required, as were saddle, tanks, guards and lights. Iain can't really say how long the job he started in 1972 took, because it's still going on. Whenever he finds a really good bit, it goes onto this bike.


He finds quite a few bits, because restoration has become his full-time occupation. Mainly ex-army Harleys, but he does other bikes too if they're interesting enough. He also makes superb copies of ammo boxes, racks and windscreens and imports machine-gun scabbards from the US.

Engine parts, even wiring harnesses, can still be found. Iain smiles: "Of course you need to know where to look." He is beginning to have difficulties finding things like mufflers, speedometers and leather saddlebags.

Iain's bike is as close to the "real thing" as it's possible to get. It's dressed up as an MP machine, attached to the 6th Armoured Corps, "Hell On Wheels". The "Police" sign on the bike is normally covered to avoid offending the local law. The bike can often be seen at military vehicle rallies, as Iain marshals or rides escort.

The bike is for sale, by the way, as are a couple of others Iain has in stock. He grins again: "If the price is right..." The price would have to be very right indeed. The number of manhours that have been spent on it... Iain Cottrell can be contacted at 125 Preston Road, Weymouth, Dorset DT3 6BG. So if you have an unidentifiable mass of iron at the bottom of your garden...





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