

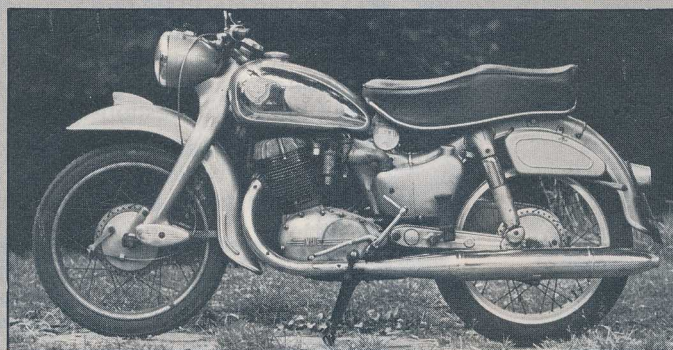
Golden Oldies

Can we ever define what is the 'best' motorcycle of any given era or class? Is a simple 250 of 50 years ago better than a sophisticated one today? How about a sophisticated 250 of 25 years ago? If it is possible to say, with any confidence, this is the best then, just perhaps, the NSU 250cc single qualifies for that title in the context of the era in which it was made. That was the period in the early fifties when motorcycling was booming and great strides were being made in suspension and comfort but not many in engine design. If any manufacturer made a 250 it was either a low-powered pushrod four-stroke or an even lower-powered two-stroke. But one manufacturer stood out like a beacon – NSU.

This German manufacturer had already established an enviable reputation in pre-war years with a series of potent racers and had been offering road bikes to the general public, usually based on these, for some time. Like all German manufacturers, they needed a little while to get going again after the war and it was 1953 before they were able to offer their handsome 250 for sale in this country. It was a winner right from the start. The single cylinder four-stroke engine had its valves operated by an overhead camshaft, until then almost exclusively the province of the racers and neo-racers. The drive from crankshaft to valve gear was by eccentric rods, for the period a complex system that *had* to work – once set up you were stuck with it unless another major engine strip was envisaged.

The capacity of the NSU was 247cc with a bore and stroke of 69 x 66mm and a modest 7.4 to 1 compression ratio. It was enough to produce 17 hp at 7,000rpm, not quite up to the 25/27hp that today's quicker 250s can manage

The unusual German overhead-cam 250cc NSU Supermax was more important in the history of motorcycles than most people think – for Honda copied it in the early fifties and offered it as their first Dream. Bruce Preston takes up the tale. Photography by Philip Sayer.



but, curiously, the NSU managed to go almost as fast with a top speed, when new, of well into the eighties.

Lubrication was dry sump, as was the fashion of the time, with a 3½ pint oil tank supplying freshly filtered lubricant to the caged roller big ends. The NSU was built to keep on going and in the case of the main bearings the outer race was left in the crankcase and, when rebuilding the motor, it was necessary to shim it to get the required crankshaft end float, one of those nice little touches that made the NSU something special. There was also a smaller outrigger bearing on the driving side. The clutch was dry multi-plate and primary drive was by helical gear. Final gearing was always a little on the

high side and the NSU never really got into its stride until it was doing 60mph or so. It wasn't really a town bike but, in fact, that is the use our 'sample' bike gets, so it is not all that inflexible.

The rest of the bike was just as innovative as the engine. Wheels were interchangeable, which mattered in the days when it was possible to have front and rear tyres with the same tread pattern. The chain was totally enclosed. How often today do we hear the cry for the same 'extra'? The frame was a spine type with the engine underslung, a feature that more and more modern bikes are changing to. Front fork was leading link, also something that is no longer in fashion, more's the pity, as was the massive

deeply valanced front mudguard. Once upon a time mudguards were intended to keep the mud off.

When the NSU 250 was introduced in 1953 it was known as the Max and had cantilever rear suspension, a bolted-on assembly that was quite sturdy. Yes, that's right, cantilever, just like some of today's racers. Is nothing new? Mind you, NSU would not claim to have invented the idea – that would probably be claimed by the HRD-Vincent of the thirties. By 1957 swinging arm rear suspension was adopted and it was called the Supermax. There were, of course, some things that were in keeping with the times. Lighting was six volt and barely adequate in spite of the very good Bosch equipment. The brakes were single leading shoe drums and were good for the period but not for today's roads.

The NSU was finished in a distinctive light blue and will go down in history of one of the great unsung bikes of the time. A quick version, the Sports Max, made a name for itself on the race tracks but don't be fooled into thinking that the bike that won the world's 250 championship in the fifties was the same. That used a twin cylinder engine and, in the hands of Bill Lomas, Werner Haas and Sammy Miller (who had preceded his trials world dominance by no mean eminence on the race tracks), blasted just about everything in sight off the race tracks. Mind you it still had the NSU badge on the tank and that, to NSU owners, was enough.

TED HARDCASTLE'S
NSU MAX/SUPERMAX

Ted makes no bones about it. He is an NSU freak. He's owned NSUs for the past 22 years. 14 of 'em, as far as he can recall. He's toured on them, raced them and, especially after

he's raced them, rebuilt them. You learn a lot about a marque in 22 years and acquire a lot of bits and pieces. A few years back he strayed briefly from the fold after he stopped racing and actually bought Japanese. Worse still, he sold his last NSU. Naturally he wasn't going to be cured of the bug all that easily and, three years ago, started gathering in the necessary bits to build himself a roadster. He already had the frame from the early sixties and, by religiously studying the classifieds every week, slowly found himself the owner of a more or less complete NSU. It is a matter of debate whether it is the plain Max or a Super, depending which bit you are looking at. The engine is from the Max — had it been a Super it would have had an extra stud between the head and barrel. The suspension is swinging arm, so that bit is Supermax, and the rest came from wherever he could find it.



Smaller parts are the hard bits to get and, these days, it is more a matter of bartering rather than buying. Money is no substitute for an all-but-unobtainable part and those involved in restoring and reclaiming old bikes almost always prefer to swop. The rear light came from a guy in the north east who had bought up all the NSU spares from the old stockists, Roy Smith Motors. The seat came from a friend in Luton. That is the way the search goes and, inevitably, one or two bits just weren't available so Ted doesn't claim that the NSU is 100 per cent original. He didn't intend that it should be.

This NSU was built as a working bike and covers 8,000 miles a year carrying its owner and his wife to their jobs in London. It looks good



without being concours and because it is such a smooth design it is not difficult to keep clean, although I believe it did have a bucket of water thrown over it in honour of our visit. It is treated with the respect that its advancing years deserve, of course, and is not thrashed, but it will still top 70mph and gives a steady 70/75 mpg on the commuter run. Best of all it gives people like us a real thrill to come up alongside at the traffic lights and say "Hey, I haven't seen one of them for ages — can I write about it?"

Times aren't getting any easier for people like Ted Hardcastle, who is trying to keep something from what was an exciting era for the rest of us to enjoy. Right now he's working on his



next project, building a Sports Max just like the one he used to race. Bits are hard to find and if, perchance, you happen to have any lying

around for the NSU, or for that matter and other rare bike, let us know and we'll try and find them a good home.