

The Benelli 654 is full of surprises. The handbook, in Italian, has a page headed *caratteristiche tecniche*. A-Level Italian or a moment's thought will give you the meaning. You may not grasp *alesaggio e corso*, which features on the same page, but the adjacent figures are self-explanatory: 60mm x 53.4mm. Now, four times  $\pi r^2 h$  where  $h$  equals 60mm. . .

Wait a minute, here's what I'm looking for, the *cilindrata totale* or engine size to you, Giacomo: 603.94cc. That is, *id est*, 604cc. It's not a 650 at all. And you thought the Japanese were cunning.

You may wonder, too, why Benelli want to enter the field of the middleweight transverse four at all, when there are already some 25 models in that range, more than half of which are four-cylinder machines. The answer, of course, is that Benelli produce the only range of transverse fours in Italy, where high import tariffs neutralise Japanese competition. The question should properly be directed towards TKM, the new Benelli Concessionaires' parent company. They've chosen to import Benellis into



a small space, a process not helped by the slightly restricted steering lock. The flimsy ignition key is inserted into the handlebar-mounted switch: a touch of the progressive choke and a dab on the starter button and the engine rustles and whispers into life. There's no need to check that the sidestand is up — it won't start if it's down — so I wait a moment to allow the last of a shower of rain to die away and then I'm out onto the road.

The day is hot and muggy, the road already dry after the shower. The bike feels tight, but the throttle is responsive and the engine zips punchily through the gears. I feel I'm going faster than I am, an illusion most fours create when they're kept in the lower half of the rev band but, with only 1,100, miles on the clock, I'm reluctant to use whatever acceleration lies above the 6,000rpm mark. Even so, I feel a little disappointed; there's still that sensation of weight, as though the bike has a hidden load somewhere.

Just as I think I might open it up a little, a cloud-burst forces me to take shelter. I don my lightweight

# PIZZA POWER!

**BENELLI** **654**

Britain, created 40 new dealerships to improve spares and servicing (and spares are already being dramatically reduced in price, though this probably has more to do with the strength of sterling) and mounted an aggressive campaign in the bike press to promote the new venture. You've probably seen the legend "The Benelli Brothers never made Pizzas" — I'm sure they didn't, but their bikes cost a lot of dough. At £1,999, the 654 is £450 more than the Honda 650Z, its nearest counterpart among the Jap fours, and £600 more than Kawasaki's 650B, which has a double overhead cam. So, what do you get for your money?

To start with, you get a motorcycle which, despite its effectively Japanese engine, looks and feels unmistakably

Okay, so the Benelli boys didn't make Pizzas. But they do make expensive motorcycles. The 654 is one of the depleted range being imported into the UK. Words by Mark Revelle. Photography by Ian Dobbie.

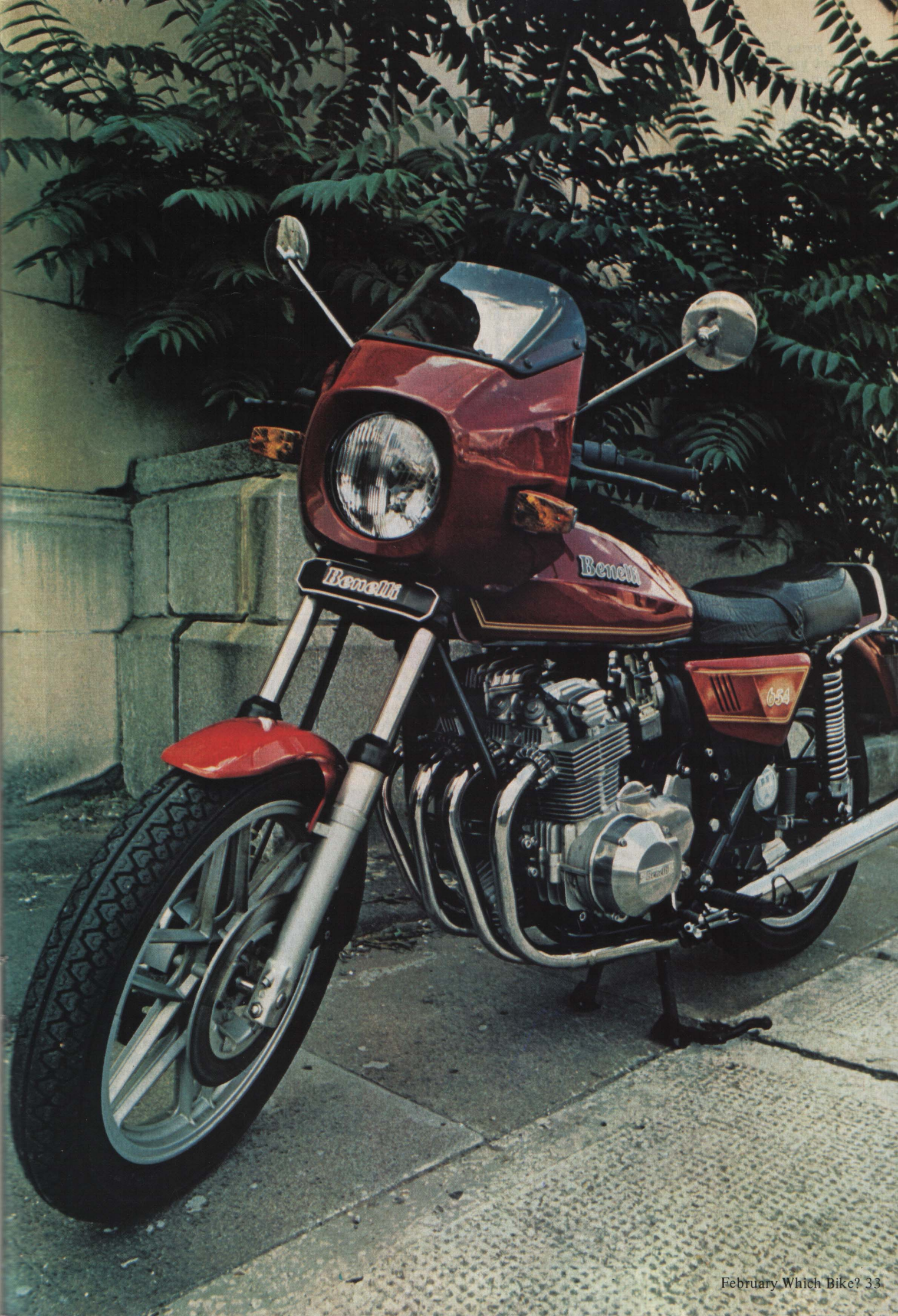
Italian. Where the 504 has definite sporting tendencies, the 654, with its higher bars and footrests mounted slightly forward, offers more of a touring position, but the square styling, small flyscreen and cast wheels emphasise the sports breeding. The finish is excellent and the attention to detail reassuring (the colour has been described by one road-tester as a 'dull, brick-red' — the handbook calls it 'Amaranth'; either way, it drew many favourable comments). The seat is broad but rather shallow, as is the tank, so at first the bike feels bigger than it looks. The switches, while

sensibly laid out, look like rejects from an Italian Monopoly game in shape and colours. The designers have also chosen to cap the rear wheel nuts with a rubber, a fanciful idea which serves no purpose other than to complicate the chain-adjustment procedure; to get the caps off you have to remove the silencers. . .

The 654's compactness gives it, for me, a heavyweight look despite its clean lines. Certainly it feels heavier than the 400lb dry weight claimed by the manual, but this initial reaction may well be caused by the problems of manoeuvring the bike in

oversuit and set off into the gloom and the Benelli, suddenly and surprisingly, becomes a joy to ride. I sweep into roundabouts, cross white lines with abandon, brake firmly without problems and roll at less than walking pace between lines of cars to the head of traffic queues. The roadholding, steering and balance are exceptional. I reach home in sunshine again, and take a closer, less dismissive look at the 654.

The Michelin M38s are an obvious contribution to the roadholding; they've replaced the less rain-worthy Pirellis. The Brembo brakes are linked *a la* Guzzi, and I found no difficulty in adapting to using the rear brake pedal only (for those who don't know, the pedal operates the front left disc and the rear disc simultane-



ously, giving 70 per cent of the load to the front and 30 per cent to the rear; the right-hand disc is operated traditionally, and is used for heavy braking or extra control). They worked perfectly in the wet but the discs, being cast-iron, left the front of the bike covered in a solution of rust and water.

The duplex frame and tubular swing arm offered no clues as to why the Benelli handled so well, though Marzocchi suspension helped. But if it handled so well in the wet, I thought, what would it do in the dry?

Using the Benelli as a commuter bike, there was little opportunity for me to stretch the motor's claimed 60bhp. Around town, fuel consumption averaged 46mpg, though a leaking petrol tap gave one reading of 38mpg. The pilot bulb failed after 200 miles. The mirrors remained vibration-free up to 50mph, and were still more than useful above that speed. The light clutch and precise steering gave an easy ride in traffic, though the steering was slightly heavy on corners. Acceleration was always smooth and, as you would expect, gear changing was unnecessary for most overtaking in town. The oil warning light flickered capriciously and the indicator warning light showed "on" after the left-side indicators packed in

at 1,350 miles: the idiot light panel is theatrically pointless anyway.

The toolkit, in its nasty plastic roll, is reasonably inadequate – the screwdriver is a bad joke and there are no allen keys – but then it's hidden under the seat after all. There's no helmet lock, and the rear indicators are integral with the grab rail, demanding a complete rethink for the fitting of carriers. However, these problems didn't affect town riding which was always pleasant, although towards the end of the 400 miles I covered in and around London two faults developed. One was disconcerting, but not serious: the motor began cutting out on the overrun, especially on corners. The second, while only a nuisance, suggested future problems: the gear lever required two hooks of the left foot to change up. No amount of clutch adjustment improved matters, and though clutchless gear changes were easily effected from third gear up at speed, second to third needed the clutch and some

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care if the inevitable false neutral were to be avoided.

A motorway dash to a cricket match in Bath gave me the opportunity to test

the engine, which was now spinning freely, and the whole machine to the limits.

A couple of blasts down the A3 had already indicated a

pair of potential trouble-spots: the centre stand grounded much too easily, and the front suspension seemed a little soft. Two up on the M3, however, the suspension caused no problems whatever the speed, as the broad bends demanded little ground clearance.

What motorways *do* show up, though, is top end performance. And in that respect the Benelli 654S is lacking.

Acceleration was steady up to an indicated 85-90mph. From there the bike gained speed – you could hardly term it "accelerated" – to an indicated 110. And that was as far as it would go. Not very impressive, even if we were driving into a strong headwind on an exposed road, because the usually-generous speedometer error hid a top speed of just under the ton.

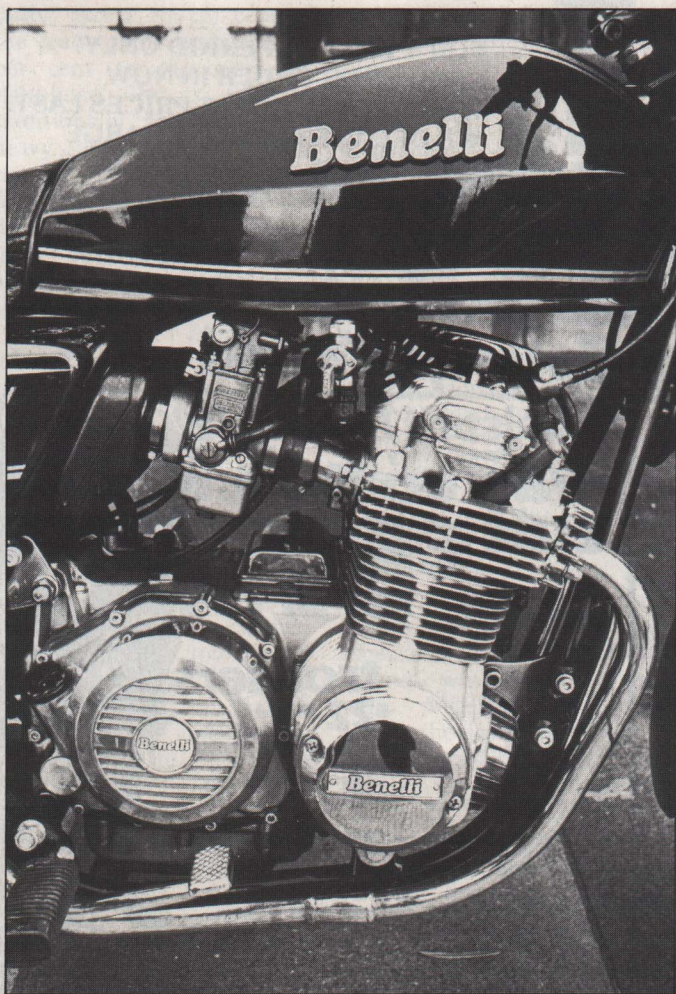
The engine seemed under no strain, however. Petrol consumption worked out at exactly 50mpg, and no oil was used. During a break in the cricket I took our six foot, 12 stone wicket keeper for a run up half a mile of private road alongside the ground. Here, too, the Benelli accelerated smoothly up to 95 but no further. My passen-

*Nice to ride but the 654's prop stand gets in the way on left-handers.*



*Benelli's single overhead camshaft 604cc four is an example of Japanese-inspired design and Italian flair – an odd combination.*





Benelli's 654 owes its appearance to Honda, but the 604cc (60x53.4mm (60x53.4mm) four has an Italian heart and soul.

# PIZZA POWER!

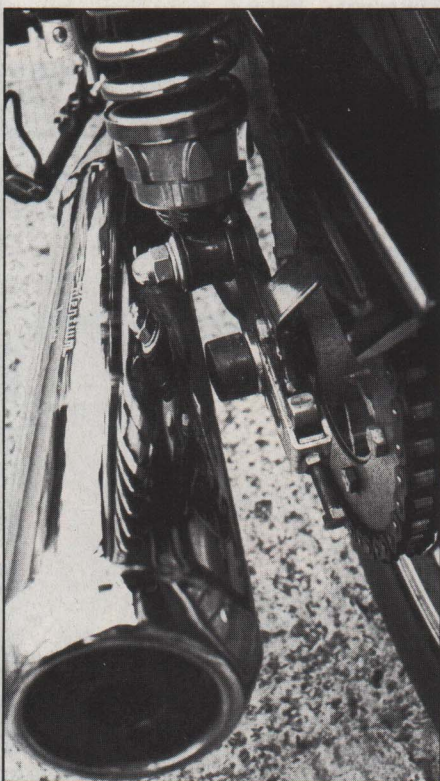
BENELLI 654

ger was impressed with the machine's stability which, it's true, was scarcely affected by his weight.

I took the A4 back to London. The conditions were perfect; a late summer's afternoon, warm and sunny, with a light tail wind, and female pillion passenger. We were in no hurry, but the empty roads invited high speeds and the Benelli's precise handling and bedrock road-holding helped make the run pure joy. The engine's power characteristics allowed effortless 90mph cruising on the open roads as well as coping with walking-pace speeds in the centres of villages and towns. Where the motorway had been a slog, the journey back felt like flying.

The 654 redlines at 10,000 rpm, which would give 120mph. It also has a yellow line at 8,000 which no-one could explain. Maximum power is a claimed 60bhp at 8,700, or 105mph, and the top gear will pull cleanly from 2,000 revs (25mph). As the frame far exceeds the engine's demands on it, all the Benelli's broad spread of power is useable. We did see almost 120 on the clock coming back and I'd guess that, when the motor's fully run in, a true 110mph would be quite possible without recourse to a dry track, racing leathers, etc.

The bike again returned 50



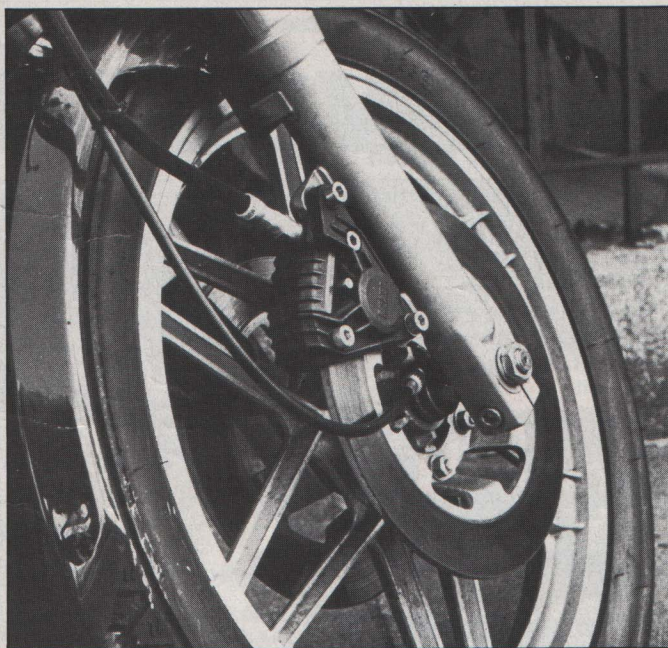
Wheel spindle runs close to the silencer but rubber cap stops any damage.



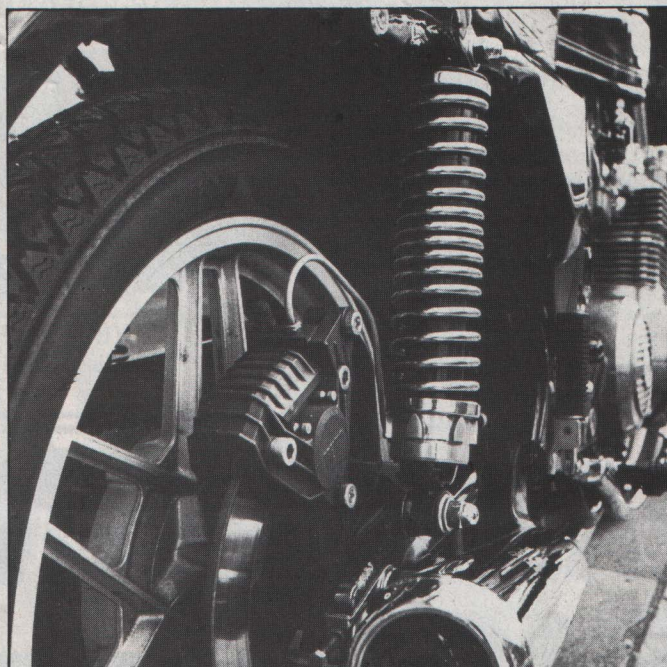
Instrumentation is good and the fairing is better suited to keeping the weather off that.



These Dellorto carbs have a progressive choke. Gear lever works better than it looks.



The two front Brembo discs are operated separately — the right by the hand lever, the left by the foot lever connected to the rear disc.



Marzocchi rear units work well and are easy to adjust.



Side stand operates ignition cut out but starter motor will still spin.

mpg and used no oil. The lights proved poor, which was only to be expected from the low-rated electrics, while the low ground clearance restricted the scratching that the handling could offer. Yet, for all that, the ride was immensely enjoyable.

It would be tempting at this point to make out a case for a comparatively low-performance spec machine such as this, especially as I liked it, but it would cloud the issue. Put at its simplest the Benelli is, like most motorcycles, a collection of compromises. Unfortunately, more than most, it falls between several stools. With its outmoded sohc engine, it's clearly not a sports bike. Nor is it a tourer: its light weight and chain

drive are evidence of that, as are the smallish capacity tank, giving 150 miles between stops, and the general sporty styling.

At 600cc it's no town bike. It will probably be considered as a sports tourer, but in the light of Suzuki's shaft-driven 16-valve 650 the Benelli's lack of a positive designation is cruelly highlighted. I'm afraid that, between them, Italy's Alessandro de Tomaso and our own TKM are backing a loser.

Mr de Tomaso may not be too worried; the 654 could sell well in Italy where it's protected from competition and, besides, he's also Mr Ducati and Mr Moto-Guzzi, among other things. But TKM have a struggle on their hands with this model.

Benelli's 250 and 350 fours at least have the cachet of exclusivity to compensate for their necessarily high purchase price. At £2,000 the Benelli 654S is an expensive way of remaining anonymous. **WB?**

<b>Model:</b>	<b>BENELLI 654</b>
<b>Price inc. VAT:</b>	£1,999
<b>Warranty:</b>	12 months/unlimited mileage
<b>Engine:</b>	Ohc in-line four
<b>Capacity:</b>	604cc (60x53.4mm)
<b>Lubrication:</b>	Wet sump
<b>Comp ratio:</b>	9.3 to 1
<b>Carburetion:</b>	Four 22mm Dellortos
<b>Ignition:</b>	Contact breakers and coils
<b>Max. power:</b>	60bhp @ 8,700rpm
<b>Max. torque:</b>	37lb-ft @ 7,000rpm
<b>Primary drive:</b>	Hy-vo chain and gears
<b>Clutch:</b>	Wet multiplate
<b>Gearbox:</b>	Five-speed
<b>Final drive:</b>	5/8 x 3/8in chain
<b>Mph/1,000rpm:</b>	13.1 in top
<b>Fuel capacity:</b>	3.3 gallons
<b>Electrics:</b>	12v 16ah battery, 280w alternator, 45/40w headlamp
<b>Frame:</b>	Duplex cradle
<b>Suspension:</b>	Telescopic fork (f) Swing arm with 3-pos spring preload adj (r)
<b>Brakes:</b>	Brembo dual 10.2in discs (f) single 10.2in disc (r) connected.
<b>Tyres:</b>	Michelin M385 3.25 S 18 (f) 3.50 S 18 (r)

#### DIMENSIONS

<b>Wheelbase:</b>	55.5in
<b>Seat height:</b>	31.5in
<b>H'bar width:</b>	27in
<b>Grnd clmce:</b>	6.5in
<b>Rake/trail:</b>	61½deg/na
<b>Dry weight:</b>	400lb

#### EQUIPMENT

Electric start, mirror, turn signals, prop stand, handlebar fairing, seat lock, tank lock, toolkit, speedo, trip meter, rev meter, inconnected brakes from foot pedal.

#### PERFORMANCE

<b>Top speed:</b>	110mph
<b>Speeds in gears at max. power revs.:</b>	39mph, 58mph, 75mph, 92mph and 107mph.
<b>St. ¼-mile:</b>	13.9 secs
<b>0-to-60mph:</b>	5.5 secs
<b>Actual speed at ind. 60mph:</b>	59mph
<b>Av. fuel consumption:</b>	46mpg
<b>Tank range:</b>	150-160 miles
<b>Importer/Manufacturer:</b>	Benelli Concessionaires Ltd, 361/365 Chiswick High Rd, London W4 4HS