

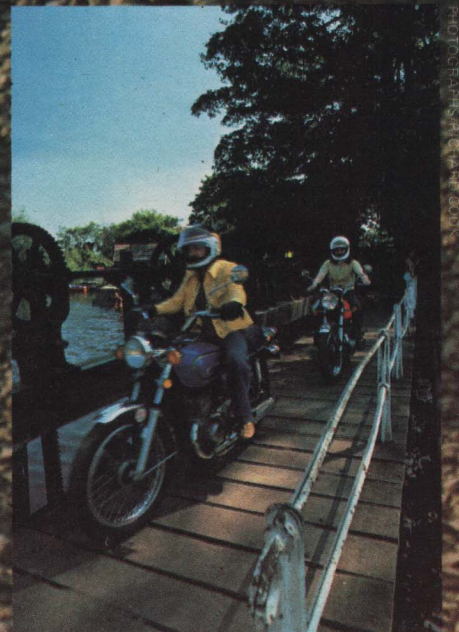


HONDA CB500T  
& SUZUKI GT500

## THE HALF LITRE CLASS WAKES ITSELF UP, DUSTS ITSELF

Just like the Fab Four, James Dean and Jo Grimmond revivals, the latest trend in motorcycling had its roots more than a decade ago. Despite recipes for more sophistication (i.e. complication), the lads from Japan have gradually become aware of their own shortcomings. 'Bikes that were brilliant on the dyno and impressive in the showrooms, were nearly always pretty horrible on the road. The glitter wore thin, the engines broke and folks started noticing things like poor brakes and atrocious handling. And when that was more or less put right with disc brakes and improvements to frame and suspension design, we almost had some nice bikes. But, of course, while all this was going on, someone looked up 'ecology' in Webster's and spread the word to Japan.

A couple of 'bikes from the old days, the 500 Suzuki and the then 450 Honda, were always lurking behind the more sophisticated multis and big-cube muthas that wooed the public into spending the kind of money BMW were asking. As Triumph phased out the Daytona, there was very little else in the 500cc range for the man who didn't want, or couldn't afford, one of the larger bikes in the other capacities.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY GARY HILL 0001

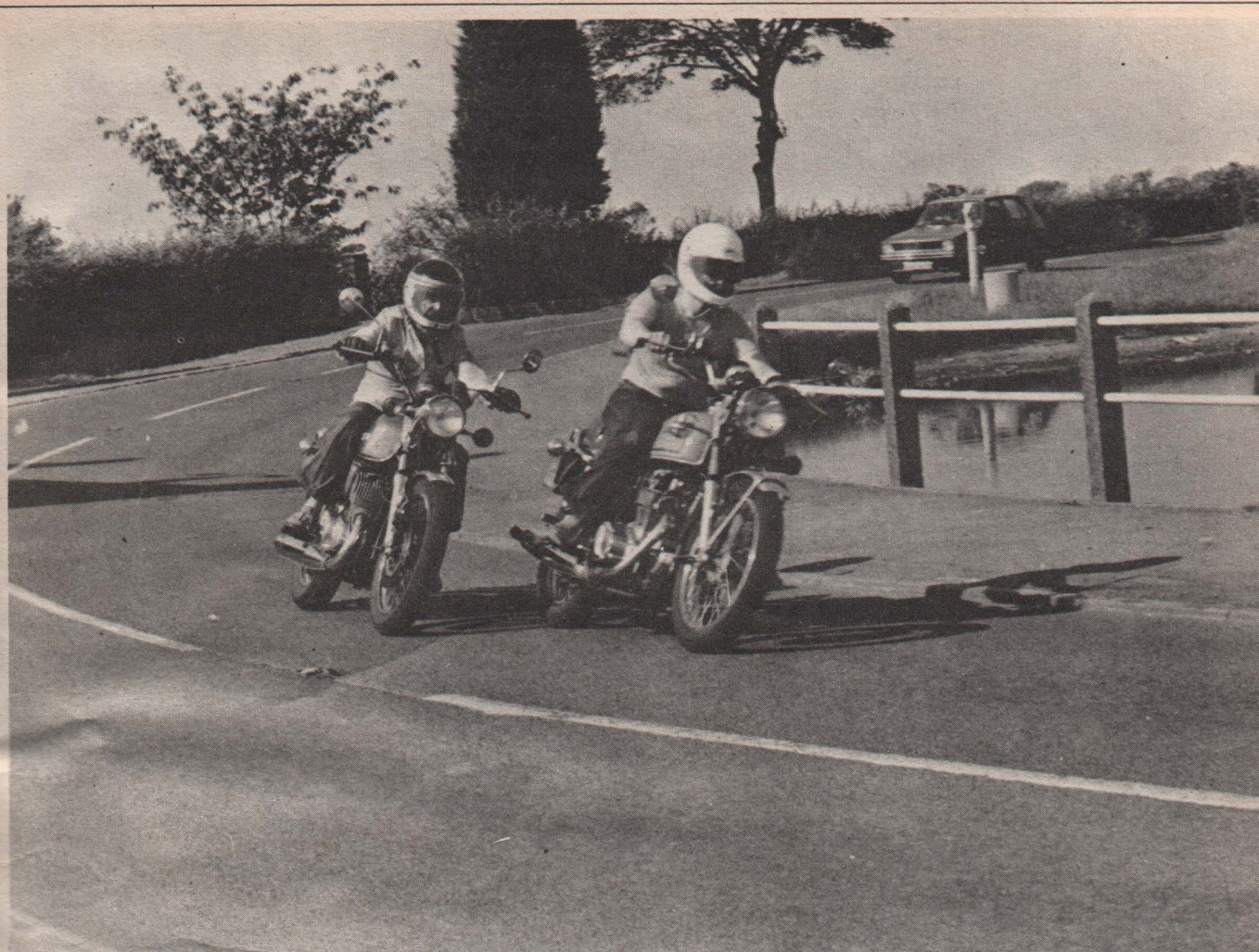
To make it even more difficult, the 450 Honda was never readily available on these shores, and so the Suzuki was about the only low-priced 'cycle to be had that could provide enough beer and stamina for the touring gent with an eye for reliability.

As we said in our introduction, the wheel's turned full circle, the Suzuki's still here and is now joined by Honda's new 500 twin. Though the latter bears little resemblance to the old 450, it is part of a definite revival in mid-capacity motorcycles built with ecology and economy in mind. Further proof is in the production of a single cylinder 500 from Yamaha and the budget 400 Kawasaki available to Uncle Sam with drum brakes, even. Sad days for a red-blooded man who lived through the early '70s.

● **ENGINEERING** Despite the vibration problems present, if the Honda's power is used around its maximum output it can give an acceptably smooth ride when judged against other 4-stroke twins. As a rule, the faster they go the more they shake, but the Honda's roughest spot between 4,500 and 5,500 rpm is way under its maximum power output of 8,000. This is certainly not ideal for commuting. Unless you're in the habit of screaming around everywhere, which is something Honda twins have never really catered for, the engine characteristics of the 500T are not going to give too much pleasure in any lengthy use around town.

The Honda's crankshaft is built with a 180 degree piston throw and gives a fairly long stroke to the engine at 64.8 mm, which coupled to the 70mm bore gives an actual capacity of 498cc. Up top, the engine boasts a pair of cams, just so the bike needn't be any ordinary old 500 twin, chain driven from the four main bearing crank. Juice for the mill is fed through the usual constant-velocity Keihins, with the not exactly thrifty size of 35mm. With the engine's fairly light flywheel effect, the c/v carbs are well suited to the 500T, unlike some 'bikes that bonk the rider





forward when shutting off.

Using the available power up to nearly 10 grand through the 5-speed box, produces a helluva nice exhaust note through the rather tinny looking pipes — complete with ugly balance box. Trouble is, this not only brings the fuel-consumption down appreciably, it also makes short work of wearing out the 5/8 x 3/8 inch rear chain.

Suzuki's engine on the other hand, doesn't call for the same expensive treatment. Both 'bikes need to be ridden where vibration is at its minimum for any comfort over anything but the shortest distance. Whilst the Honda is bombing along at 85, guzzling fuel and wearing out chains, the Suzuki is at a more sedate (and legal) 70 or so, and far more economical to boot. Its power output of 44 bhp at 6,000 rpm, provides two more horses than the Honda and also a fairly limited number of revs for a 2-stroke twin, which in itself helps reliability. Like the ads say, which for once can be repeated as true, the Suzuki is an ideal balance between performance, economy and reliability. What it hasn't got is the guts of the Honda. Take your pick.

Presumably Honda tried using a twin downtube frame — it'd be interesting to discover the difference such a layout would make to vibration periods — but the 500T is built with the good old single tube branching to two under the front engine mounts. Handling wise, there were no complaints with this

set-up, but it must be right on the limit having to cope with the largish engine.

Likewise, the duplex frame of the Suzuki gave no real complaints, and if anything, gives a far neater appearance to the 'bike than the Honda's chassis, which does little to disguise its various protuberances.

Suspension on both was really good, giving both comfort as well as adequate handling, which, particularly with Hondas, has been somewhat lacking in the past, due mainly to the atrocious rear shock absorbers that helped put Koni where they are today.

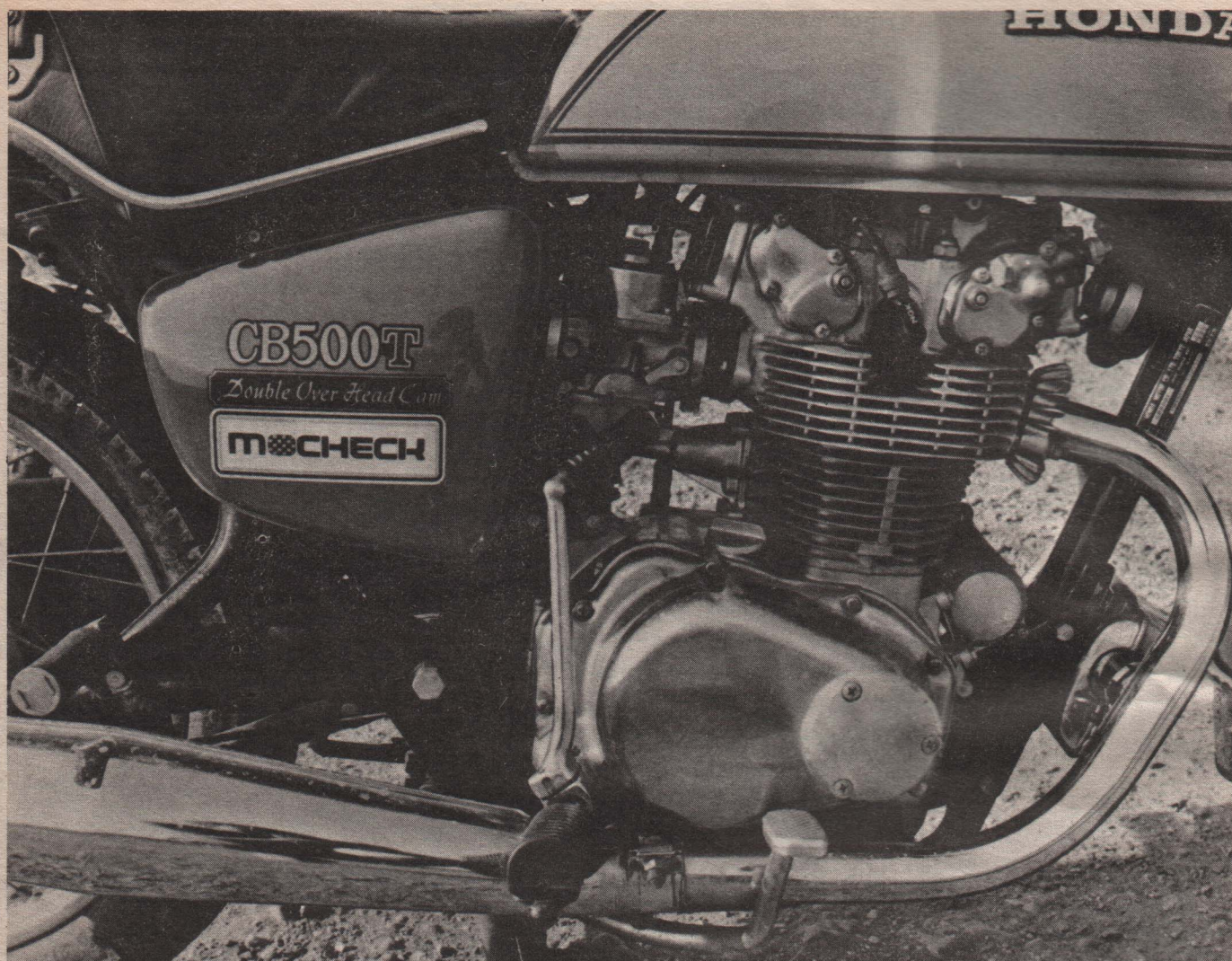
● **PERFORMANCE** Neither machine reaches its performance zenith in a particularly stunning fashion. Clearly these are in no way designed as cafe-racers anyway — in fact they're geared, literally, to the tastes of the weekend tripper. Neither 'bike has a clearly defined powerband and with fairly wide spread gear ratios, they both offer excellent characteristics for this type of riding. And with such a generous spread of power, both machines give the rider an easy time in congested traffic conditions, for despite the rather tall gearing, both powerplants provide enough torque to make gearchanging a pretty economical affair.

Whilst having no advantage in either top speed or acceleration, the Honda is actually the nicer of the two 'bikes to ride. The needle can easily be pushed

into the red on the tachometer when coming up through the lower gears, and the engine gives off a pleasant howl in the process. The only drawback to this sort of spirited riding is the vibration through the handlebars that sets in above 5,000 rpm or so. Get off the CB500 after an hour or so of high speed cruising and you're left with pins and needles in your hands and wrists for quite some time. After 300 miles of this, a three quid watch that'd given seven years uninterrupted service, finally gave up the ghost.

In common with many other larger 2-strokes, the Suzuki feels rougher and rougher the higher you rev it. It's at its most comfortable if kept about a grand below the 8,000 red-line, which, in top gear, means a cruising speed of about 85 mph. Unlike the Honda's vibration which is reasonably subtle despite its effects, the Suzuki's vibes are all too apparent. Most of these are transmitted through the footrests which are mounted directly to the main frame. It seems odd that Suzuki engineers should carefully rubber mount the GT500's bars and mirrors yet leave out the footrests.

Maximum comfortable cruising speed on the Honda is a mite under 90, which is almost more than one might expect from a 500, and because, apart from breaking cheap Timex's, this sort of speed can be held for as long as it takes the tank to run dry, it must bear serious consideration to the tourist whose main aim is getting there, and never mind the

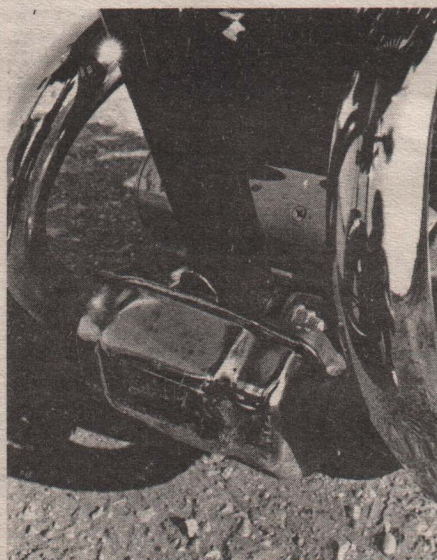


scenery on the way. 2-stroke fans may argue, but the 4-stroke surely has the advantage when considering rider fatigue over long distances, and with its relatively simple construction, the 500T has a lot going for it.

The chassis design of both bikes results in perfectly adequate performance for machines ridden in a fairly sedate manner. However, while the Suzuki can be tossed around through virtually any speed of corner, the Honda has a frightening habit of grounding the rear brake lever on right-handers. Fast men who like to have a little braking in reserve whilst cranked over, will not appreciate the rear stopper being released by pedal striking tarmac. The centrestand too, restricts one's cornering somewhat, but only at more acute angles than most potential buyers will dare entertain.

Our oriental friends have never built a 'bike that didn't benefit from suspension modifications, particularly the rear, but generally these two were okay. A bit of wallowing in fast sweepers never hurt anyone, and neither 'bike was ever thrown off line through any fault in suspension or tyres.

● **BRAKING AND SAFETY PERFORMANCE** Suzuki's addition of a front disc brak to the latest version of their 500 makes front stopping comparisons pointless. There was no noticeable



**ABOVE: Honda 'cocoa tin' exhaust balancer is unsightly and hard to clean.**

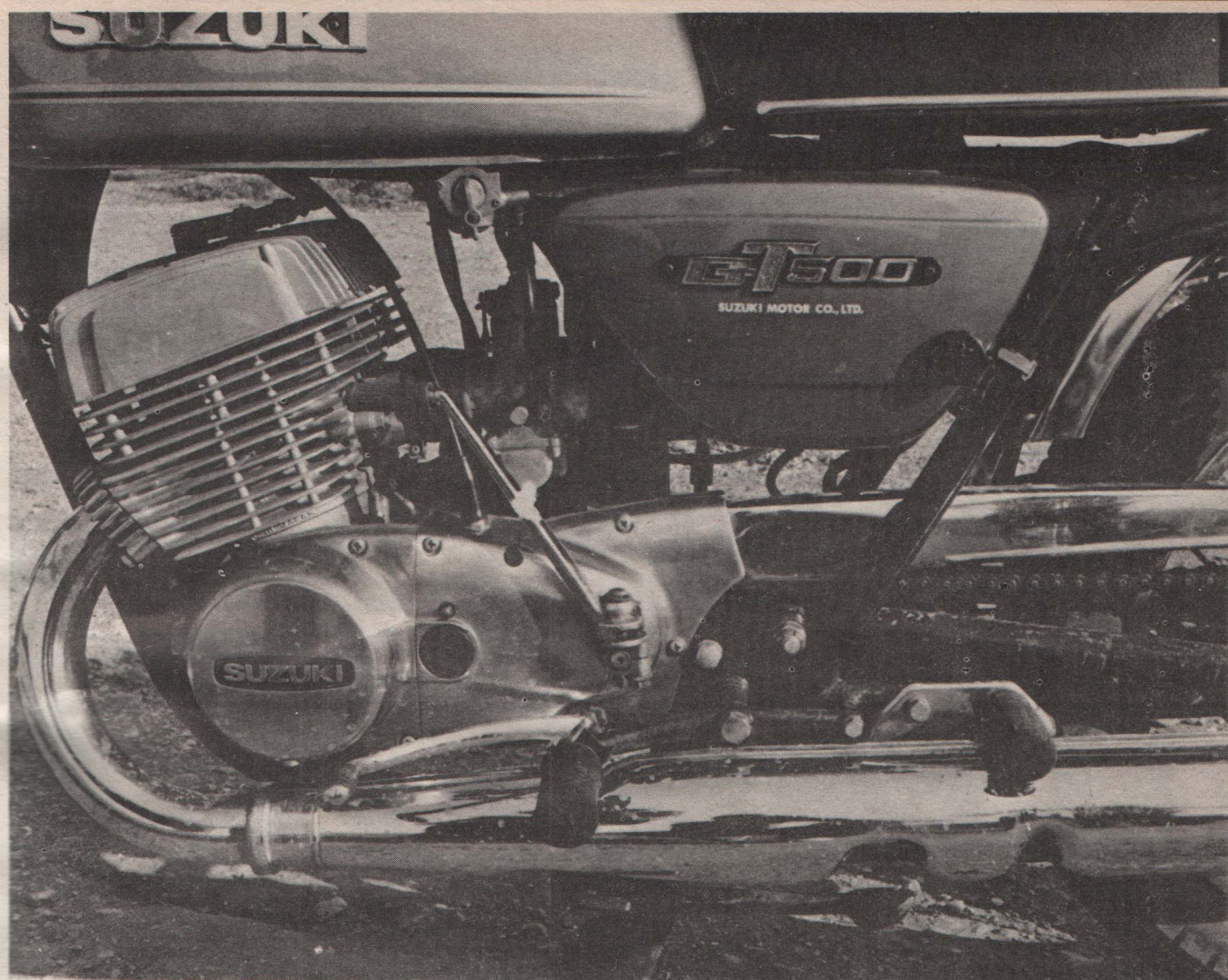
difference in braking power when changing from one 'bike to the other, and in fact both stopped very well under maximum use of both front and rear units. Both rears are of course drum, and despite the usual insensitivity inherent in cable operation, were not of the usual off-or-lock type. Though the Inove front tyre on the Suzuki could be made to squal under vicious use of the front disc, this was probably more due to the tyre than any tendency for the

wheel to lock. Under hard use like this, neither 'bike showed any willingness to twist its front end away from a straight line.

For 'bikes capable of high-speed cruising, neither was equipped with a lightning system worthy of any particular merit. With specifications similar to many 'bikes of half their size, the front lamps would certainly need replacing for any hard riding after dark. Such nightwork may not be common place to anyone but the ardent rallyist, but even the occasional blast down an unlit country road can be made very scary by inadequate lighting. Only the Honda is equipped with headlamp flasher, operated by pushing the horn-button to the right.

The remainder of the switchgear is common to the rest of each manufacturer's range, the Honda's lights being fired from the right hand and dipped from the left, while the Suzuki has both switches incorporated on the left. Of the two, perhaps the Honda is better, avoiding any confusion between the dip and the on/off switches. Its trafficator switch is certainly the better, giving a definite "click" when cancelling. Both machines come with ignition kill switches on the right, and keyholes 'twixt speed-and-tachos for switching the whole works on or off.

The electric start of the Honda does its bit for safety by being inoperable



unless the bike is in neutral.

Although the Honda's ground clearance was mentioned earlier, it ought to be brought up again here. If you can't lean a 'bike over any further in an emergency without the tyres breaking loose, all well and hard luck, you're probably going too fast anyway. When bits of protruding 'bike stop you well before that angle, it isn't funny.

#### ● ECONOMY AND MAINTENANCE

Contrary to what you might imagine from a medium size 4-stroke twin, the Honda is by no means economical. When its performance is used to the full, it'll guta a gallon of petrol in little over 30 miles. This means the 3½ gallon tank is going to be on reserve every time you go a hundred miles, which is both expensive and tedious. The reserve capacity is at least more generous than often found, with over 20 miles available through prudent use of the right hand.

Even the man with less furious riding habits will be pushed to get much over 45mpg on the CB, which rather diminishes the attractions of a 'bike competing for economy of price.

By comparison, the Suzuki achieves up to around 50mpg, and in fact a young lady messenger we know claims an average of 53 and as much as 60mpg when cruising at 70. These figures are quite an increase from those obtained during the running-in period, so don't



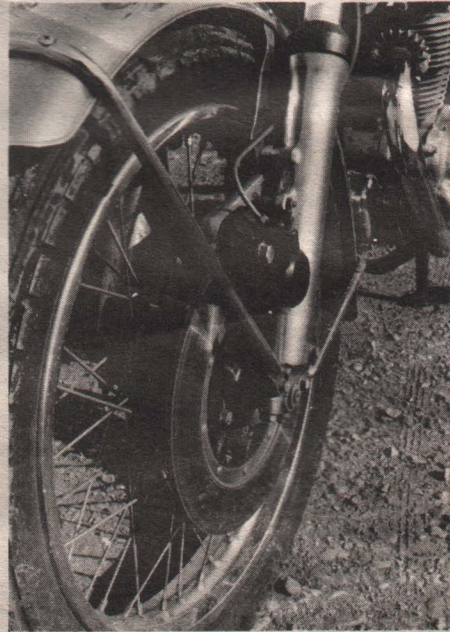
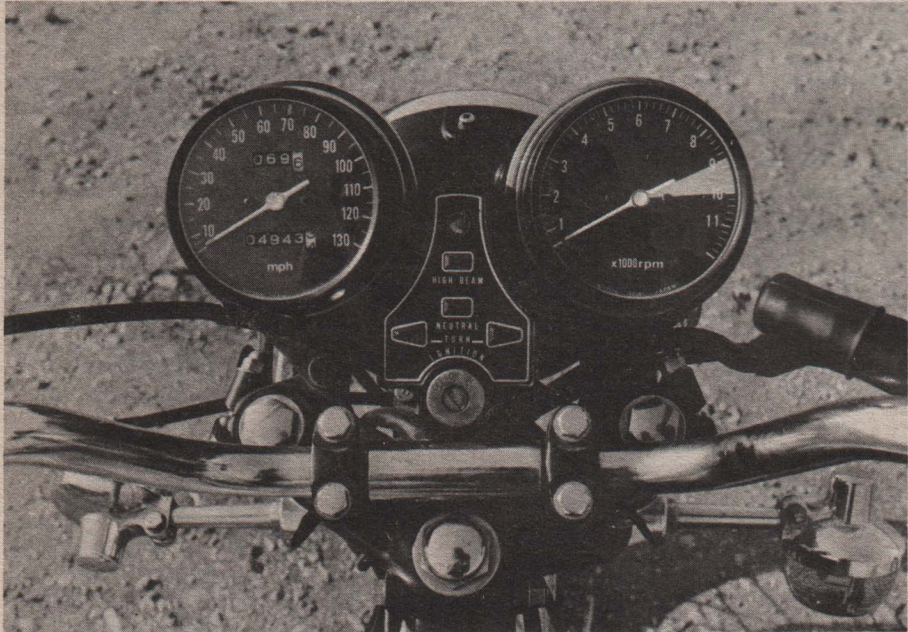
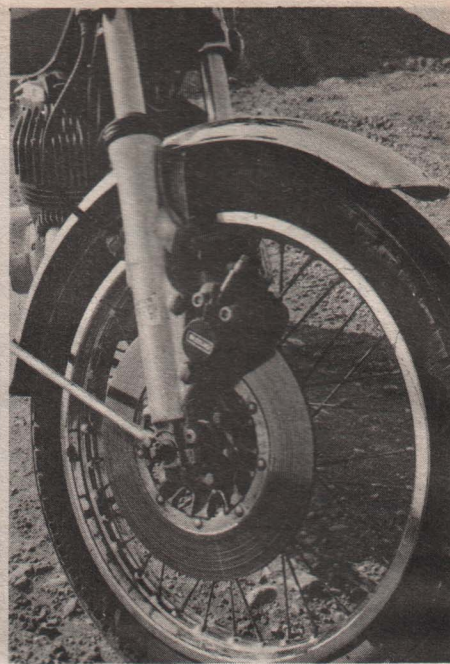
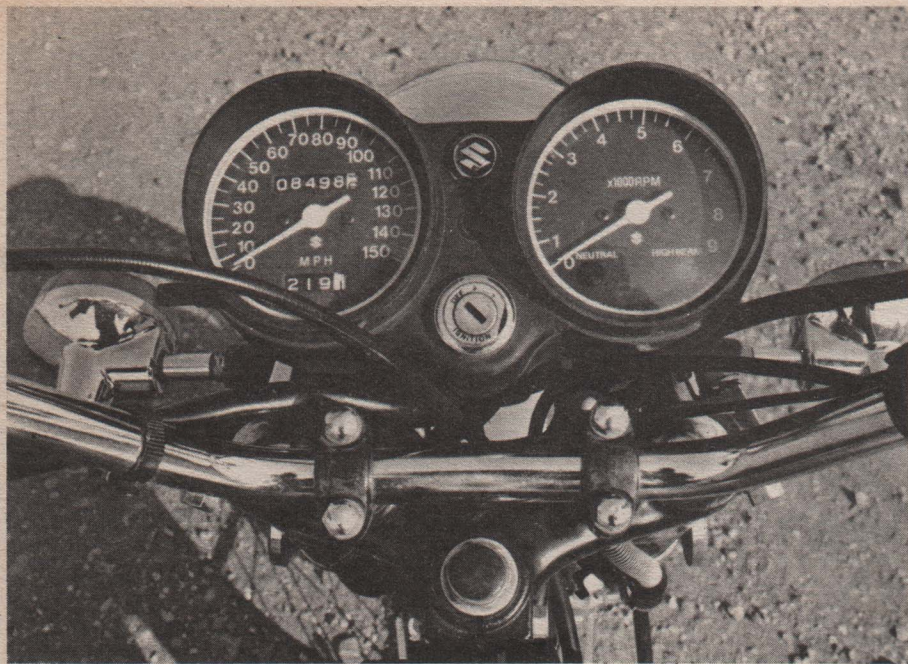
shout if your new Suzy is doing a lot less.

It's always nice to have evidence of reliability when attempting to evaluate a certain 'bike — something that's not easy during the short spell a test bike is available. The young messengeress provides us with that, having covered 12,000 miles in six months without an iota of trouble, (other than being knocked to the ground by old ladies).

Another young lady, Andrea O'Reilly, (who worked on the last issue of

WHICH BIKE? as well as serving time on our editor's previous creation, *Bike*) also owns a CB500 and can attest to that 'bike's reliability. With over 10,000 miles including much continental commuting under its belt, the only trouble she had was crashing it. Guess why? Well she reckons the footbrake centre-stand grounded whilst she was cornering rather enthusiastically!

#### ● STYLING, COMFORT AND FINISH



Both 500s are relatively free from gimmicks and could be more so, especially the Honda which is not so conspicuously built down to a price as the Suzuki. What immediately springs to mind when comparing styling and comfort, is the way the Suzuki loses heavily on both counts simply because of its petrol tank. Nothing to do with economy in production either. Basically, the thing's just too big. It's also fairly ugly and, because of its width, puts your legs in a rather awkward position. Without using your thigh muscles, your legs tend to fall outwards. It's not exactly uncomfortable, but neither is it as relaxing as resting one's pins against a tank that's naturally gripped by their weight.

Only other point against comfort is the Suzuki's handlebars, which are too high for riding comfortable at speeds of over 65, but could be changed by the most inept person for a couple of quid, so are hardly a major design fault.

Despite the high look of the Honda's 'bars, and were it not for the vibrations

through them, it proved one of the most comfortable 'bikes in memory. A trip which lasted 4¾ hours, only stopping for petrol, at an average of over 70mph, brought instant comparisons to 'biking a BMW. Nothing else leaves the rider with such a lack of fatigue after a few hundred hard miles. One can stay rock-still on the Honda between fuel stops because the riding position lets you, there's no need to bow into the wind or shift about on an uncomfortable seat.

The Suzuki wasn't so good, with its tank, 'bars and vibration already mentioned, and a harder saddle than the Honda, but is equally capable of all-day riding providing you take it a little slower. Both 'bikes can be loped along in top gear quite comfortably through most bends and roundabouts on A roads, and if you're not in a racing mood, can give you a good relaxing ride.

Further comparisons with BMW stem from the Honda's rear cush-drive. If you do need to change down, it's made apparent by the same lumping and snatching of the rear wheel that the

shaft-driven 'bike gives you. Going up through the gears produces this too, particularly when pulling away in first. On the whole, it's a typical Honda gearbox, sharing the common and rather boring trait of being difficult to get into first if you've had to stop in top.

On aesthetic styling, the Honda must presumably be the better of the two to most people because it's obviously more design conscious, and didn't come out of the late 'sixties like the Suzuki. When the 500T first appeared, its styling was instantly branded 'classic', or by the less literate, "pinched off of Royal Enfield mate". Whatever, it's certainly more likely to get in the Design Centre than the Suzuki.

Overall finish is good, particularly on the Suzuki, bearing in mind its price. What doesn't look so lasting, is the exhaust system of the Honda which could be patched unnoticeably with baked-bean tins if the occasion arose. Unfortunately, one thing a road-test can't do, is simulate two years' riding, but neither 'bike looks as if it'll suffer

unduly from the passage of time.

● **CONCLUSIONS** Most of the good or bad points of each 'bike have already been outlined and we can only really make a summary, rather than a final comparison, due to the fact that one's a two-stroke and the other's a four and therefore, depending on personal choice of stroke, you're probably only interested in one of them anyway.

A choice of the Suzuki must really be one of economy, as it is almost £200 cheaper than most 'bikes of similar capacity. Unlike many budget priced goods, its cheapness isn't reflected in its overall quality. The basic design has been with us nearly ten years, and

without much radical change at that, which speaks for itself.

The Honda, at £160 more, is about the right price in comparison, but should perhaps have been built a little cheaper to compete with the Suzuki. Doing without the electric start and perhaps simplifying production by using a single cam would have hurt no-one and made the Honda far more competitive. As it is, there's no denying it's a great 'bike. Whether it lasts as well as the Suzuki in the hands of high-mileage freaks remains to be seen.

Honda's introduction of the 500 twin is rather timely considering the general state of the motorcycle market. Following a period of rapid strides in

sophistication, more cc's, more cylinders, higher cruising speeds and so on, a lot more people have been drawn to motorcycling. Out of them, there must be an awful lot who are not that interested in high-performance gimmickry and to whom this kind of 'bike is very attractive. Now we've all been through a million new designs and seem to be settling down a little, the Suzuki too can be looked at in a new light and perhaps appreciated a bit more than in the late 'sixties, when its economics and performance were no match for other 'bikes with more exhaust pipes.

James Dean lives!

Martin Harrison



**SUZUKI GT500**

2 stroke twin  
492cc  
n/a  
44 @ 6,000  
Multi-plate, wet  
Gear  
n/a  
n/a  
n/a  
n/a  
n/a

**12v Battery & Coil**

n/a  
56.5 ins.  
395 lbs.  
3.25 x 19  
4.00 x 18  
Single disc, drum  
3.7 galls.  
45 mpg  
n/a  
n/a  
n/a  
n/a  
n/a  
6 ins.  
31 ins.  
YES  
YES  
NO  
YES  
YES  
NO  
YES  
NO  
NO

£678.50

£9.95 inc Surcharge & VAT

£56.83  
£27.68  
£3.05  
Suzuki (GB)  
Beddington Lane  
Croydon  
Surrey CR0 4TD

**Engine Type**  
**Capacity**  
**Comp. Ratio**  
**BHP @ RPM (Claimed)**  
**Clutch**

**Primary Drive**  
**Gear Ratios (1)**  
**Gear Ratios (2)**  
**Gear Ratios (3)**  
**Gear Ratios (4)**  
**Gear Ratios (5)**

**Carburation**  
**Ignition**  
**Lighting**  
**Wheelbase**  
**Kerb Weight**

**Wheels & Tyres (F)**  
**Wheels & Tyres (R)**  
**Brakes (F & R)**

**Fuel Tank Capacity**  
**Fuel Consumption Overall**

**Speedo Correction Actual & indicated 60mph**

**Top Speed**  
**0-60 mph**  
**Standing ¼ mile**  
**Braking distance**  
**from 30 mph**  
**from 60 mph**

**Ground Clearance**  
**Seat Height**  
**Tachometer**  
**Trip Mileometer**  
**Electric Starter**  
**Trafficators**  
**Steering Lock**  
**Headlamp Flasher**

**Toolkit**  
**Carrier**  
**Fairing**  
**Others**

**Cost (inc. Taxes)**  
**Cost of Spares**

**Std. Piston without rings**  
**Points set**  
**Fork Assembly including sliders**

**Front Fender**  
**Clutch Cable**  
**Importer/Manufacturer**

**HONDA CB500T**

Double OHC 4 str. twin  
498cc  
8.5 : 1  
42 @ 8,000  
Multi-plate, wet  
Spur gears  
16.5 : 1  
11.1 : 1  
8.94 : 1  
7.27 : 1  
6.13 : 1

2 x 35mm Keihin  
12v Battery & Coil  
120 watt alternator  
57 ins.  
440 lbs.

3.25 x 19  
3.75 x 18  
Single disc, drum

3½ galls.  
40 mph

n/a  
n/a  
n/a  
n/a  
n/a  
5½ ins.  
31 ins.

YES  
YES  
YES  
YES  
YES  
YES  
YES  
NO  
NO

£699.00

£5.76 + VAT  
£396 pair + VAT  
£58.80 + VAT  
£18.91 + VAT  
£1.56 + VAT  
Honda (UK) Ltd  
Power Road  
Chiswick  
London W4