



TERRY CARDEW PAINTER AND DECORATOR

'I love the Commando for all its eccentricities'

“British motorcycles from the Commando era are renowned for their tendency to break down. Sadly, this has been the case with my beloved '74 example but, bear in mind the fact that this was what I expected and, all things considered, it was the best British buy of the era. A Triumph 750 would have me shaking several days after a jaunt and the BSA Spitfire was surely the biggest consumer of parts since Hannibal Lecteur.

"I love the Commando for all its eccentricities. I bought a version (for £3,500 notes I hasten to add) which had had the Vernier shim conversion and this made Norton's legendary Isolastic system very much easier to set up. The frame was in a sorry state however and much love and care was dedicated to it's rehabilitation. At least when purchased there were no visible oil leaks, she started first time and had the acceleration to 120mph that would shame a great number of modern machines.

"Because early on, I managed to tame the Isolastics, my machine is amazingly vibration free even when cruising at 90-100mph. I have finally worked out that I am running a Mk3 with a few bits and bobs from earlier machines and the engine has almost certainly had a rebuild, in its time. The engine was labelled an exploder, and this used to happen in a big way if the bike was used in a harsh manner or was overtuned, but the problems could be alleviated using later model engine parts and I found a fair few of these during my routine inspections.

"Going back to those breakdowns, only six weeks ago I was rather alarmed at a deluge of smoke and a top end sound that would have pleased Siouxi and the Banshees (for those of us old enough to remember them and young enough not to gripe about the good old days). It transpired that the noise was coming from a loose exhaust valve guide and having removed the head it seemed only right and proper to gas flow it, upgrade the valves and seats to enable unleaded use and add the desperately needed valve guides. This I carried out, for a pretty reasonable £130, ending up doing most of the work myself, but alas, to no avail. The engine pinked so badly due to the high compression pistons that the valve replacement was a complete waste of time and wonga.

"With my gas-flowed head I did have one compensatory event. The fuel consumption dropped and I was now achieving nearly 50mpg as opposed to my previous 44mpg. Performance was sadly unaltered though. A small increase in power is always useful except on a naked machine, the results usually show themselves in greater reliability rather than greater performance so I am hopeful.

"Anyhow, I have now run the Norton for over 20,000 miles and, in that time have suffered four major breakdowns, the last of which I have documented above. A friend of mine reckons that it will soon be time to sort out the worn out bores – a few hasty calls to local Norton dealers should be my salvation. I have noticed that the bike is becoming less easy to start (and boy, its a man's kickstart in the first place) and that power seems a little down. It may be the electronic ignition but I doubt it – I have now become acquainted with people who actually know about these machines so I think a trip to the bank and a rebore may be in order!!

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'the true beauty of the 850 is its performance and fun factor'

“To own a British bike (and a classic at that) after years of blipping around on Japanese hardware was a dream that I had been nurturing for years. I had looked around at some of the brilliant, modern Triumphs and had a goggle at some old BSA motors but when push comes to shove, in my opinion, the true Brit bike is the Norton and the Commando has got everything.

“Why did I buy a Norton Commando 850? Because its there, that's why. And also because I think they are stunning machines, representing everything good and bad about British bikes and have the sort of performance associated with modern Japanese machines. They are also unreliable, poorly constructed, inefficient and eccentric. They have no idea about sociability (in that they conk out at the least convenient times) and they are always likely to blow up big time given the slightest mishandling. I can testify to this in that, only six days ago, I managed to pop a con rod through the crank case and sprawl down the road in an extremely undignified manner. My leathers are now, officially, spent and a new helmet is in order, together with a major engine project. Oh joy!

“I first got hold of my Commando (and this is not to be misinterpreted) in July 1997 as a semi rebuilt Mk3. The paint work was atrocious and the engine sounded as if it had been twelve rounds with Mike Tyson. So I undertook a serious and costly (in time and money) restoration. I am no great shakes mechanically and often had to call in the assistance of wiser (and generally older) friends who put me right, and I am grateful to them for it (they know who they are). The Norton engine is a fragile object, its origins were that of a mild and docile 500 so its no wonder that they show signs of over engineering.

“To keep a Norton on the road is a wonderful thing, requiring tenacity, endless patience and a great deal of luck. But I don't want to harp on about the frailties. The true beauty of the 850 Commando is its performance and fun factor. There are many red-faced people out there who have been surprised by the ferocity of torque and top end speed of my machine. It is light and slim, handles extremely well for its age and has that luxurious note to the exhaust. I have, post-rebuild, clocked up about 5,000 miles of fun and experience, on one occasion going the width of the country in one glorious sunny day and that without a single hiccup or complaining murmur. And that is the joy and pleasure of owning such a singularly English machine.

“I am contemplating getting a professional in to respray her as she is looking a bit the worse for wear these days. British winters are not great for old Nortons (or any bikes for that matter). I am also thinking about getting the Vernier shim conversion as the Isolastics are very tricky and I am told this will help matters in terms of set up. Vibration has not really been too much of a problem though so I may just grin and bare it as they say.

“A final thought, and something that is worth keeping hold of, change the oil, in fact change all lubricants as often as you can afford. It will be worth the effort. I promise.

