

Remembering the Commando from it's launch in the '60s, MAC McDIARMID still holds the punchy V-twin in high regard nearly 40 years later.

INTRODUCTION

NORTON'S COMMANDO, in 745cc and later 829cc form, was the final development of the archetypal British vertical twin. In many ways it was the best of its type, offering vibration-free running unknown on any other twin of the time.

There was no doubt, however, that the CB750 was more refined, more user-friendly, more tailored to American ideas of what a motorcycle ought to be. The Commando, on the other hand, was a man's machine (nor were Norton above using an attractive woman, Vivienne Neves, the first woman to appear topless in The Times newspaper, to advertise the bike).



ENGINE/CHASSIS

CONSEQUENTLY STARTING a Commando was distinctly manual: tickle both carburettors, switch on the ignition down by the left-hand carb, and give a long lusty swing on the kickstart. A well-sorted Commando would usually fire up first or second kick. Click the right-side gear lever down into first, ease out the diaphragm clutch...and hang on.

Ain't no pony

Sixty or so horsepower sounds unimpressive now, but the Norton had big, solid horses. In 1965, the 52bhp Atlas had been promoted as able to accelerate from 10 to 100mph in top gear, and the Commando offered even more of the same. Cycle World magazine tested a 750 Fastback model at 117mph, with a standing quarter mile of just 13.13 seconds. Four years later Motorcycle Mechanics tested the 850 at 120mph, with a quarter mile in the twelves. Yet it wasn't just that the numbers were so impressive, but the twin's abundance of fat, juicy torque made it all so easy.

Then there is that uncanny – for anyone who'd stepped off a Bonneville or Atlas – and almost complete lack of vibration. Well, that isn't quite true: watch a Commando ticking over at a standstill, and all sorts of bits can be seen wildly shuddering back and forth. At certain revs the mudguards move so quickly as to be almost invisible. But, other than a mild rumble below 2500rpm, almost none of this syncopation gets

through to the rider. No parallel twin was ever so smooth.

Even the gearbox – inherited from AMC – was surprisingly slick. By modern standards lever travel is long and the action not the quickest, but it works well, apart from a false neutral sometimes encountered between third and top gears.

Inevitably, however, the handling is inferior to earlier Featherbed twins. All Commandos could feel vague crossing ridges and white lines. Curiously the 750 was slightly worse in this respect, perhaps because it carried less weight on its front end. Compared to any Japanese machine, however, the Commando's steering and handling was pin-sharp, providing the Isolastic bushes are correctly shimmed and not worn out (the rubber bushing tends to disappear over the years).

Although the hydraulic disc front brake was supposedly state-of-the-art, its performance was disappointing. The single piston Norton-Lockheed calliper not only lacks feels, but demands a hefty squeeze and even then is not hugely powerful.

*“The Norton
had big solid
horses”*

ERGONOMICS & STYLE

PART OF THE reason for this was surely that the Norton looked like British riders, at least, thought motorcycles ought to look. Even now, its lean, functional lines have an elegance which is timeless – and even coming back into fashion. With those rakishly forward-canted cylinders and upswept silencers, it was the bike many bikers dreamed of owning, at least until Kawasaki's Z1 came along.

A slightly rocky ride off into the sunset – dedication, that's what you need!

VERDICT

ALTHOUGH THE Commando years have sometimes been represented as a failure, Norton Villiers actually built more twins in their relatively brief existence at Andover than Norton and AMC had managed between them in the previous 20 years. That fact alone makes the Norton a real long standing success.

With hindsight it might be thought that the timing of the Commando's launch – just one year before Honda's supposedly all-conquering CB750 – doomed it to failure. Yet the facts tell us otherwise. In 1968 the British motorcycling public warmed to it to the extent of voting it Motor Cycle News 'Machine of the Year', a title it retained for five consecutive years. The Honda didn't win once.

Flawed as it was, in many ways the Commando was the best of the vertical twins, a handsome device with a strong, punchy power delivery which could humble theoretically more powerful machines.

RATINGS

Engine	✓✓✓✓
Transmission/Clutch	✓✓✓
Ergonomics	✓✓✓✓
Braking power	✓✓✓
Desirability	✓✓✓✓
Overall	✓✓✓✓

