

PICCOLA BELLEZZA



time. In addition, John has a 1936 350 AJS – so a nice pair of good old Blighty singles to keep him amused. Then one day, a friend, Neil Cowan from Perthshire persuaded John to join him on the Motogiro d'Italia (see sidebar) on a 175 CSS "big head" MV that Neil kindly lent. The Giro that year (2005) was in central Italy, and John admits it made a big impression on him. He was keen to give it a go again, but this time it would be on his own machine. Now, it is possible to participate in the Giro on larger machines, but the real spirit of the thing is to ride a lightweight. So the search for a small MV was, ultimately leading to the purchase of the 125 Turismo Rapido you see here.



Of course, few machines of this little beauty's age have been preserved in such good condition, so it was no surprise to discover that John had had to do a top-to-bottom restoration job on the TR. The MV's history both before and after John bought it is interesting. We'll come to the recent part later, but when John found it in a railway arch in Glasgow in September 2005, it had never been registered or used in the UK at all. The motorcycle had been in its native Italy from birth, and had been bought up by a chap importing some scooters to Britain, with a view to sorting it up and riding it. The optimistic - or maybe just hard-bargaining - seller declared that it just needed a little bit of work to get it going. John wasn't daft enough to buy the story entirely, but he did buy the motorcycle, primarily because it was basically straight and, above all, complete. But the best classic motorcycle purchases are made with the heart as well as the head, and in John's words "sitting there in Glasgow, it just cried out 'save me, save me...'"

The restoration of a small machine is just as much

work – more or less – as that of a larger one. One benefit though, is that it's easier to handle the smaller pieces. As far as the cycle parts went, it was the usual metal preparation and paint that took the time. Like so many manufacturers, MV had offered a number of paint schemes, and for some reason that pervades the industry, thought that a selection of their road machines would look better mainly in black. Strange, when their iconic fire-engine red machines were kicking ass all over the world's racetracks. So, out went the Fordesque colour scheme, to be replaced by a paint job redder than an old-style Kremlin march-past. And boy does it look good, including the lovely matching handlebar grips. The simplicity of the TR's lines really shows the lustrous finish to best advantage. As many of you will know, tank condition can really affect restoration time, quality and costs quite dramatically. Fortunately, the only marks on this one were from the shopping that a legion of previous owners in Italy had carried around on top. John nevertheless had a bit of a fight with it, since applying the transfer the first time caused a paint reaction that meant doing the tank all over again. We've all faced that sort of situation, and it characterises John's determination that he calmly redid it until it was right. Now then, when we were out having some fun on the MV, John asked me to "spot the only Japanese part on the machine" – well, I reckoned the spotlight switch was a pattern Brit part, but I couldn't clock any oriental bits. John eventually satisfied my curiosity by pointing to the fork slider covers – modified Kawasaki parts. Well modified, my friend.

The ancillary items were pretty basic on this machine. There was no speedo fitted to home-market Italian models, so John just fitted a standard cycle computer. One restoration job less. The electrics are also somewhat straightforward – just a normal direct lighting set, spotlight and horn. The ignition side couldn't be simpler either, a minimalist setup of points and an external coil – replaced with a modern component to aid reliability. Both lighting and coil primary are fed from a simple alternator on the end of the crank. The simplicity of all these parts fits in so well with the stripped-down demeanour of the MV. In the interests of safety, John fitted a spotlight powered from a small total-loss battery.

So, we turn to the engine. Mirroring the machine as a whole, its number one attribute was to be complete and in one piece – a premium quality in any restora-

Page 14

tion project. Now, the MV singles are interesting little animals. Let's start with the styling. So clean, so pure, a real feast. The crankcase and its covers are like an art deco appliance – almost devoid of the steps, junctions and crevices you find elsewhere. There are a minimum of visible fasteners. Its wet-sump design further cleans things up – both aesthetically and in the oil-retention stakes. Out of this silver egg, sprouts a cylinder of such symmetry and simplicity, you have to think initially "2-stroke". It's even more marked than the similar impression from the NSU Supermax I reported on some months ago. But "quattro tempi" it certainly is. Some MV singles are chain-driven OHC, some pushrod. The 125 TR is of the pushrod variety, with some interesting details. For a start, the integral rocker pillars in the head – allowing just a finned lid on top – are quite advanced and support the ultraclean design. But the really audacious move in all the MV singles – even the OHC ones – is in the top-end oiling system. While our Brit-iron typically goes in for positive feed to the spindles through umpteen costly oilways and messy external plumbing, the Italian design just pumps lots of oil up an integral gallery in the cylinder and squirts it all over the inside of the rocker cover. Much simpler, cleaner and easier to build. Now, the real stroke of inspired design is in a few grammes of aluminium. The inside of the rocker cover has 4 little stalactites cast inside it. These form drip points for the oil above little cups drilled in the rocker pillars – makes sure the oil gets to where it should. Who cares what happens under heavy lateral and longitudinal acceleration. A machine spends 90% of its time more-or-less upright and in steady motion. Just brilliant.

Australia, where we met a large number of classic motorcycle enthusiasts. Hearing that we were en-route to California, one of them was kind enough to introduce me to one of his friends based there, Barry Porter. Barry soon became a firm friend – and by an amazing coincidence had spent a spell based in Scotland's Silicon Glen. Barry described returning to his house in Dunblane on his BSA A70 after a run one day, and being tailed by a chap on a Panther, interested to meet any fellow classic enthusiast. The Panther rider was John Gallagher. Fast forward to a rather wet VMCC run at Crieff in 2007 that Barry and I had entered on our BSA twins, and I was introduced to John. I'm sure many of you have had similar experiences of the international currency that is the shared passion for old motorcycles. On the Sunday after the Crieff run, Elaine and I found ourselves at John's house near Stirling and out came the MV. John kindly pointed me down the road for a little spin on the machine – and that was that.

John himself had had a similar evolution of his taste in motorcycles. His first machine was a BSA Dandy moped, but it rather stereotypically self destructed after a rather short period. So he moved rapidly onto the aforementioned '51 Panther model 100, which is still his regular road bike to this day – and one that I'll explore in much more detail some other

Page 13

the rod eye, as well as making up a custom crankpin to allow the top-spec Japanese bearing to fit. SEP did a first-class job on the crank, and John highly recommends them. See www.sep-kegworth.co.uk for more details of what they can do for a whole host of engineering jobs. A phone call to Alistair at SEP further confirmed a confident and competent little engineering company. With a view to long-distance reliability rather than out-and-out power, John kept the standard MV piston and compression ratio. This machine was reconstructed for a purpose.

John at last had his own functioning MV, and once again set his sights on the Motogiro. The 2007 event was in Sicily, a brilliant venue for the MV's renaissance run. What lay ahead was 1500km of pretty rough roads, and a real shakedown for the little red machine – and its rider. One of John's companions remarked "I knew the road was slippery when I could see the reflection of your rear plate in it".



The time trial aspect was hard enough, but on top of that many checkpoints have riding skill tests. John described his constant balancing act between determinism to push on and sympathy for the machine and the conditions. An underscoring of the mantra "in order to win, first you have to finish", and a test of John's decision to go for a soft, durable tune on the engine. So, how did man and machine fare in the Giro – well, how about 3rd place in the 125 class, an absolutely outstanding result for a such a novice. John surely earned his self-styled "Gir Scozzezi Volante" (the Flying Scotsman) soubriquet.

Anyway, back to the machine itself. The whole riding experience of the 125 MV is so much more than the sum of its lovingly-restored, diminutive parts. I'm not

Page 15

exactly tiny, but I didn't feel in any way oversized sitting on the neat little red seat. John did tell me from his personal experience however that its rather narrow dimensions inevitably make it a bit hard on the posterior after several hundred kms in the saddle.



But it's so easy – and inviting – to throw a leg over. Once installed in the pilot's seat, you are treated to a delight of simplicity – no ignition switch, just a simple air lever on the carb and a tickler. It takes more effort to turn the key on a GoldWing than to kick over the little lump beneath, and yet again it's strange (for Brit-bikers like me) to find the kickstart on the left. There's no ignition switch, just a little cutout button under the headlamp shell, so there's no complicated procedure to figure out. The sound from the sci-fi-styled silencer is urgent and encouraging – so let's get underway. The clutch is light and forgiving, so no stalling dramas. Now, no Italian would stand for his or her best Guccis getting a bad case of gearchange toe-mark, so naturally there's a rocking pedal on the right to allow heel-driven upshifts. To be honest, I didn't pursue that technique since my size 11s already proudly carry the scars of umpteen shifts, but I'm sure the technique works just fine. On paper, this is not a powerful machine – 7bhp is much the same as the power of your average electric kettle and toaster combined. And yet, it picks up well and we're soon zooming along the back roads grand-style. If you were trying to wring every ounce out of a machine like this, you'd want more than 2 ratios (and you'd choose a slightly more svelter rider than me), but the fun-factor is just fine the way it is. Handling is similarly more than adequate – neither wobbles, hesitation nor drama. The rather small brakes are well set up, and bleed off speed effectively, but then again the secret of riding a lightweight properly is to maintain speed whenever you safely can. You find yourself rather rapidly imagining that you're skipping along on the Giro, bit between the teeth. For me, falling in love with just about every machine I've had the privilege to try out is becoming the norm – but believe me there's something extra in this MV.

As if to echo that sentiment, John and I decide to take a turn round by the local Italian restaurant on the way back to base. Though we were completely unannounced, Claudio, the owner, welcomed us with open arms and was all over the little beauty. It wasn't long before a small ex-pat Latin crowd had gathered to peek, poke and reminisce over times gone by on similar – or the very same – machines. It was in a way like a staging post on the Giro, a feast of goodwill and encouragement.

The Turismo Rapido punches so far above its weight that it will stop you in your tracks. It demands attention, engenders affection and delivers satisfaction out of all proportion to its size. But for all its fire-red pedigree, not only could you ride it every day, you'd jump at the chance. MV's lexicon contains many mediocre nor mundane are amongst them.

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Though it started as early as 1914, the real heyday of the Giro was in the '50s. It's a proper marathon event, covering in its original form over 3,000km in 8 days. Public interest in the Giro in Italy has always been characterised by the kind of passion Italians bring to just about everything. Focused on lightweight, the annual competition encouraged not only MV to produce machines like the Turismo Rapido, but also of course Ducati, Gilera, Moto Guzzi, Rumi and lots of other marques. Apart from the sheer prestige and satisfaction, the manufacturers knew that a win in the Giro would have an instant and significant effect on sales. The Giro's inspiration was also almost its downfall. Its parent, car-oriented Milla Miglia race had some really serious accidents in 1957, resulting in all open-road competition being banned in Italy. But you can't keep such a spirit down forever and eventually in 2001 a more subtle non-racing version of the Giro was resurrected. Now 1500km's day, the Giro remains an extremely tough challenge for man or woman, and machine. It has gone from strength to strength, with keen competition for the 120 places in the core classes of up to 175s. Entry isn't cheap at about 1500 euro (including hotels and some grub), plus you have to get yourself and your machine over there. But, just give up a few weeks and you'll soon be able to finance it. If you haven't got any vices, then get some now so you can give 'em up later on. It's not the kind of thing you'd ever forget...

Page 16

Size, of all things, is relative. When out on Sunday runs with the AMCA classic Indian and Harley guys in California, Elaine and I were known as the "Scottish couple on the little English twin". And the machine in question was a 650 BSA. So, what are we to make of one that displaces around five times less down in the engine room, and that you could almost pick up and carry? You might catalogue us in many ways, but for our purposes here, there are three kinds of classic motorcycles: those who love lightweight, those who have yet to discover that they do, and those who have no soul. I speak from the self-righteous platform of the recent convert, having of late moved into the camp of the aficionados of the quarter-pin class. Let's start with the story of that journey of enlightenment.

There is a kind of "bigger is better" presumption running through many things in life. And with their smaller margins in so many departments compared to larger motorcycles, many of us have perhaps had a rather jaded experience of these diminutive machines on which we often were forced to start out. Well, that's me, anyway. So, it was with some surprise that I found myself standing by this little beauty, drooling away. How I met this MV 125 Turismo Rapido and its owner, John Gallagher involves a connection literally around the world. It started in

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Downstairs, everything is similarly simple and sturdy with the crank and gearbox sharing common oil and not screened from each other much. With mostly roller and ball bearings – all standard stuff and easy to replace – the oil system is likewise simple down here. The cam-driven, spring return pump just serves to feed the top end. John wisely didn't go overboard in the polishing stakes down here. The cases retain their marvellous patina – but fortunately not the huge amounts of Italian grime with which they passed into his hands. If you look closely, you can see the marks where the original legshields fitted around them. The crank needed some attention, and John sent it to Service Exchange Parts in Kegworth, Derbyshire for a new big end and small end bush. The big end job included honing and re-hardening