

1970s | Moto Guzzi 850 Le Mans

The game-changer that proved Italy could combine performance and handling with reliability – in a package that looked fast at a standstill

By Mick Phillips, Guzzi fan and owner

Like most 16-year-olds, I was a sensory sponge. Many things made a big impression, but one summer evening in 1981 left a memory that remains clearer even than that of a certain busty girl who worked at the local chippy.

A few mates and I would torture our mopeds on the short ride to the Cedar Tree pub in Aldridge, a nondescript town on the edge of the Black Country. The air hung heavy with patchouli, Golden Virginia and two-stroke exhaust as spannie-toting RD250s and 400s, GT380s, 750s and X7s, KH250s and 400s would scream along the Walsall Wood Road and park up behind the pub to ping, ting and be admired. The pint-clutching throng was all denim cut-offs, tasselled leather jackets and Adidas trainers or high boots with white socks. And there was a hell of a lot of hair. Almost nothing had changed from the mid-70s.

And it was a visitor from that decade that made my stomach flutter with, well, love actually. I was at the pub's side door ready to get another round and heard a mighty bass-drone in the distance. I paused and waited. Deliberate, throttle-blip down—changes told me the bike was taking the tight turn off Northgate. Up it went through the gears, not wailing like the strokers, but with an insistence that built to a thrilling, urgent thrum before each hook-up. Louder, faster, closer... What the hell was this going to be?

That was my first meeting with a Moto Guzzi Le Mans. It swept past me and parked up, spreading its aura of exotic, expensive wonder and rendering all around it suddenly mundane. Its red and black presence expanded inside my teenage brain to fill every waking moment. I'd read excited reviews about the Le Mans when it first appeared in road tests – I'd been reading bike mags since I was about 10 years old – but had never seen one in its bewitching alloy and matt-black magnificence.

The Le Mans had been turning heads since its launch in November 1975 and went on to be Guzzi's most successful model over an 18-year run in various

GB v ITALY

Meanwhile in GB, the end in sight for our beleaguered bike industry, though the newly-formed Meriden workers' cooperative manages the odd Triumph.



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guises, but it almost didn't happen at all. In 1973, Argentinian Alejandro de Tomaso, with a background in sports cars, took over Guzzi and Benelli. The V7 Sport had already been in production for a couple of years, a breakthrough model bred on the race track by chief designer Lino Tonti and his team. Tonti had reworked the engine from the tall, heavy V7 tourer and put it in his all-new low-slung frame to create 1971's fast, glamorous and expensive 748cc road-burner. That same year, an 844cc development version was being campaigned in 24-hour endurance races such as the Bol d'Or, but De Tomaso wasn't interested in either racing or V-twins and focussed instead on Benelli's six-

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cylinder 750 Sei. Thankfully, Tonti talked him round and development continued on what would become the Le Mans.

It's amazing that the Le Mans sold at all. Brought in by Luton-based Coburn and Hughes, it wrung wallets dry at £1999, when you could get the ultra-hot 130mph Kawasaki 7900 for a little over £1350 (ironically, the Z900's black mirrors were a favourite add-on for the mirror-less Le Mans). So what was the hook? Well, there was still a lot of snobbishness about Japanese 'rice burners', especially from those who couldn't let go of the dying British bike industry. Want a fast, reliable, oil-tight twin? The Guzzi appealed because at least it was European, right? And its reliability certainly gave it an edge over the equally pricey and desirable

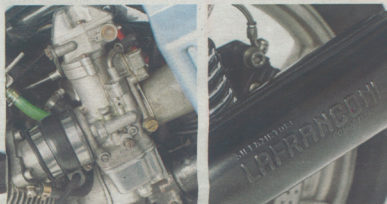


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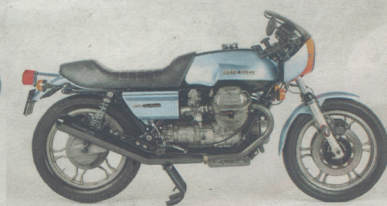
The race number on the Le Mans taken to victory by Roy Armstrong in the 1977 Avon Production Championship (Le Mans' also took third and fourth places).



Just so Guzzi: raw, brutal patina finish on seductively curved cylinder heads



Fuel tap for each Dellorto carb; Lafrancoini megaphone plays Sounds of the 70s



So many wonderful details to pore over: that screen, the paint, the lines, the seat

but fragile Ducati 900SS, so long as your Guzzi's switchgear didn't short the electrics and you enjoyed it before these fell to bits, the exhausts rotted off or the corroded frame was replaced under warranty.

And there's little doubt that the styling is a winner. The bike looks fast and purposeful and is reassuringly low. It feels tiny, in fact a bit cramped for anyone over about five foot ten. Liberal use of matt black was distinctive in an era of blingy chrome and a headlight-flanking Day-Glo 'sea flare orange' stripe was sheer Italian audacity. Having a flyscreen at all was unusual (and what a low-raked tinted gem it is), though the 900SS did have its bikini fairing. And, at a time when many bikes had frankly shocking chassis and awful brakes, this Tonti-framed, Brembo-equipped speedster oozed refinement. The truly committed could even buy a factory race kit including, among other things, 40mm carbs, a hot camshaft, straight-cut close-ratio gears and megaphone pipes.

Of course, the Mk1 moniker only came about when the MkII hit the streets, but the first Le Mans can be split into series one and two, the former having a one-and-a-half bum-stop seat (changed to twin seat), rounded rear light (oblong), no heel guards on the pipes and silver fork sliders (matt black). Series one ended some time in 1976, at frame number VE13040, though matters are confused by frames replaced under warranty and a typically Italian parts-bin tombola approach to assembly.

So, why is the Le Mans so special? Partly because it convinced a significant number of riders that Italian bikes could be fast and lovely yet practical and useable. Partly because it almost certainly saved Guzzi's skin at a time when the Mandello factory was struggling to compete. But for me, because it triggered something deep inside that is difficult to put into words, except to say that, for a while at least, it even edged aside the chipshop girl and her utterly magnificent battered specials.

ICONS TESTED: WHAT ARE THEY LIKE NOW
SENIOR EDITOR TIM THOMPSON REVEALS WHAT THESE ITALIAN ICONS ARE LIKE TO RIDE



‘It's as long as a barge and ridiculously evocative’

I meet this one, a thoroughly sorted 18,500-mile Mk1, and my knees buckle. The bike oozes rugged self-confidence and, now 37 years old, clearly has stories to tell. My eyes rest on its gunmetal engine then move to the Mk1's calling card, a fluoro-orange flyscreen that bursts out from the rest of the bike's subdued and classy pale blue paint. Owner Pete Norman says they originally fade like an old Dyno-Rod van, but not his.

The Le Mans is as long as a canal boat and – I'm easing it off its mainstand now – nearly as heavy. It's dense, all metal. It's so low even I can get feet flat on the ground. There's a fuel tap for each Dellorto carb. I open them and twist the throttle, which appears to be stuck. It's closed by a valve spring," they used to say, I man up and twist again.

Pete's starting procedure prescribes six twists and no choke. The 850 rumbles into life second prod and, pumping rich fumes into the air, leaves the station. There's a Boveri-like torque reaction to a blipped throttle and linked brakes to remember plus a panel of 1970s Italian warning lights to second guess, but it's all far easier than launching a computer-controlled 2013 Multistrada for the first time. We find a long, fast road and settle into a cruising speed of 80mph and 5000rpm. I'm stretched out to the clip-ons with elbows resting on knees and facing two Veglia clocks, their

rad-tip needles synchro-wobbling at 12 o'clock. There are no span adjusters for the wide-span levers because they haven't been invented yet. Just holding the throttle open makes my hand ache while up shifts and down shifts are measured and slow. It's ridiculously evocative.

‘The twin Lafrancoini pipes boom their bangs down country lane sweepers, me tucked in and dreaming of epic adventures’

MCN

A roundabout bursts the bubble. Anything that requires braking just irritates the Le Mans, which would rather just plough straight on. I pull on the lever, stamp on the linked pedal, and feel a judder from somewhere in the Brembo set up. I shift, blip, shift; set it up then drive through on a big handful of throttle. We head back onto open road, the twin Lafrancoini pipes booming their bangs down empty Northamptonshire sweepers, me tucked and dreaming of an epic adventure that would end with a beer on the beach at Bandol.

Verdict: Modern life suddenly feels rubbish, especially roundabouts.

Tim dreaming of a world without roundabouts, the Cote d'Azur and not returning the Le Mans



Thanks to Pete Norman, owner of this lovely Mk1.

BUYERS INFO

SPECIFICATION

YEAR INTRODUCED 1976
DESIGNER/PROJECT LEADER Lino Tonti
PRICE £1999
YEAR DELETED 1978
MODEL THAT FOLLOWED Le Mans MkII
ENGINE 844cc air-cooled OHV 90-degree V-twin
CHASSIS Duplex steel cradle
POWER AND TORQUE 71bhp@7300rpm; 58lbft@6000rpm
TOP SPEED 132.15mph (Bike magazine, August 1978)

Fast, great handling and braking, reliable and practical. Heavy throttle, cramped for the tall, split-happy seat, rot-prone exhausts.

TECH HIGHLIGHT

Highlight might be pushing it a little, but the linked brake system was certainly different and effective. The kit is Brembo, with cast-iron discs. The pedal operates the left front disc as well as the rear disc, which is right front disc is operated, as normal, by the bar lever.

ALTERNATIVES

Laverda Jota (1976-82)
Eponema of a man's bike. Tall, heavy, brutally handsome and very fast indeed, it was an instant classic but scored off as many as it attracted. The pre-82 180-degree crank models are the real deal.

Ducati 900SS (1975-82)
Wonderful incarnation of the bevel-driven, square-case, desmodromic Super Sport. Loping speed and arm-stretching length matched to achingly good looks, too often seen through the tears of another summer wasted while awaiting spares on order.

Benelli Sei 750 (1974-77)
Built the first mass-produced six-cylinder motorcycle then dress it up like a frumpy tourer complete with optional rack. Schizophrenic oddity that nonetheless has its fans. Six-into-six pipes do look good though.



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