

AN ITALIAN BANGER

Think big single; think electric start; think eccentric styling; think great brakes... Frank Westworth did all of those things and ended up aboard a Moto Guzzi Nuovo Falcone!

Photos by Rowena Horseshorn



I was supping surprisingly decent coffee with Chris over at Venture. He had made the coffee and was plainly in a good mood, so politeness was called for.

'Hmmm...' I said. Warmly.

'I really don't like that thing,' he replied, mysteriously aiming a dismissive thumb at an odd creamish motorcycle in the driveway. It had been dragged from his store so I could take a spin on the Laverda GTL 750 which you might have seen, in all its Italian redness, in last month's magazine.

'Mmmm?' Said I, mouth filled with hot coffee. Dribbling is unseemly, and spitting it out would have been a touch Back Street Heroes rather than RealClassic, I felt. And of course I instantly needed to ride it, because, somehow and somewhat remarkably, I can't unearth a memory of riding one of those before.

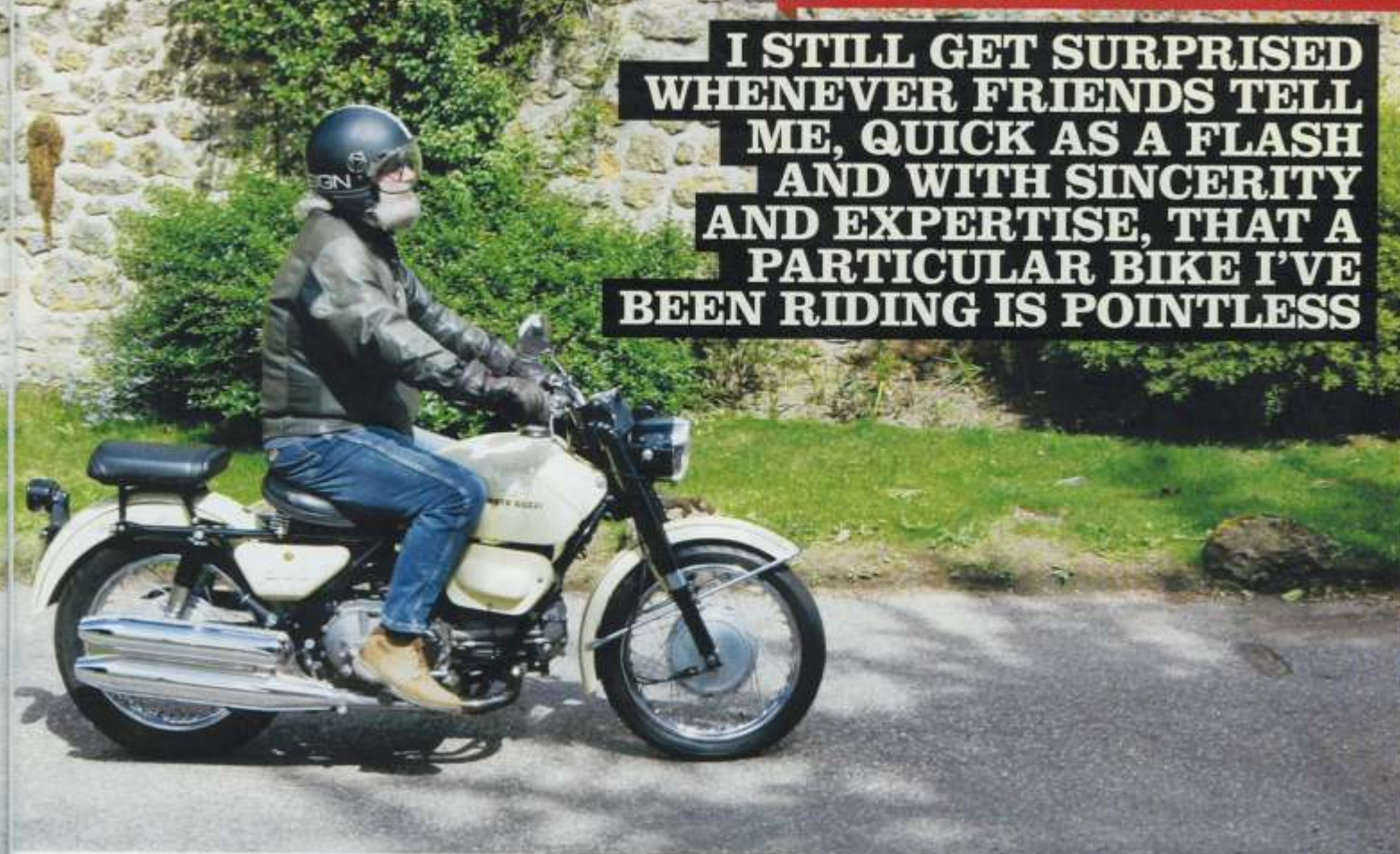
A couple of hours later, then. Bounding and booming along the tight lanes of the Somerset levels, feeling like that proverbial fish out of water aboard a machine which was about as different as possible from both that Laverda GTL and the Kawasaki Z750 I'd spent the rest of the day with.

A Note. The Kawasaki and Laverda 750 twins both hit the streets in 1977. The Moto Guzzi a whole year earlier. Just the one year earlier, 1976. It would have been something of a task to follow the two twins with something which was at the same time contemporary yet more radically different than the ambling Guzzi. Whoever entitled the thing a Falcone plainly did have a sense of humour. Penguin felt like a more appropriate avian label.

At first. But not a little later.

Even after a thousand years of writing about bikes and being surrounded on all

This the engine. Some features are immediately obvious. Like it's fallen over forwards, because you're looking at the top of the engine, which is usually lost under the fuel tank...



I STILL GET SURPRISED WHENEVER FRIENDS TELL ME, QUICK AS A FLASH AND WITH SINCERITY AND EXPERTISE, THAT A PARTICULAR BIKE I'VE BEEN RIDING IS POINTLESS



LEFT: Same engine, slightly different view. The huge round cover covers the huge round flywheel. You can in fact see the bottom of that flywheel beneath the cover. The kickstart is on the left; it's very easy to operate, not that you need to, because the top of the flywheel cover covers the drive to the electric motor which starts the engine for you. That motor is also the generator. It's a multi-tasking motor...



The big cream thing beneath the big cream fuel tank is the air filter. Gaze at the gearlever in awe, and notice that the points are easy to access, as is the oil filler (the engine's wet sump, unlike earlier Guzzi singles) and the clutch lever



Is this not one of the more improbable silencers of all time? Moto Guzzi intended the Nuovo Falcone to work on all roads and off-road machines, and then



The beige colour is intended to invoke dark desert highways, hence the faux Arabic script. The Sahara was the last model of the Nuovo Falcone, but didn't sell well...

it twice, just to make sure. It ticks over with total plonk even at cold. No fussy pussy this one, then.

The kickstarter technique, the belt with the braces, is similarly simple. Pull in decompressor and kick. Do this twice, and the engine's huge (it is huge) flywheel twirls the engine along after you've stopped the kicking thing. Drop the lever and donk donk donk...

It's light. It has excellent steering lock, as old bikes almost always did. It is really very easy to wheel around. I get asked all the time to recommend bikes which are easy to wheel around. This is that bike. Climb aboard. Wonder at the comfort of it all. The Guzzi

has a normal (for a Guzzi) swinging arm at the rear, with a pair of normal hydraulically-damped spring units. It also has a most ergonomic, firm and spacious saddle. How very retro, especially by 1976. If there is a more comfortable seating arrangement than this, I have yet to try it.

The clutch is light. The gearshift is one of those once-familiar rocking pedals, and first gear engages with all the subtlety of a pair of big trains wrecking together. No doubts will linger about whether you've engaged a gear. You will know it for a fact. And the engine, donk-donk-donking away and chattering its own accompaniment, picks up speed as you



Love it or the other thing; this is an instantly recognisable motorcycle!

sides by their riders, I am still faintly amazed at the way some folk appear to need to hang onto misconceptions. Like Vincent riders never ride their bikes in the rain. Like Bonneville are boring. Like Commandos vibrate. Like everything was better yesterday... I still get surprised whenever friends tell me, quick as a flash and with sincerity and expertise, that a particular bike I've been riding is pointless. The purpose, they tell, me of motorcycling is to go everywhere at Top Speed, and the top speed of a Guzzi

should somehow be dismissed. Even Chris, the bike's temporary owner, really didn't like this, dismissing it with unusual certainty. Try this: It's a 500cc single. Every old bike rider on the planet claims to love big singles. The bigger and more singular, the better. Apparently. Try this: It has an electric start. In an unusual way, the huge dynamo, which sits atop the bottom end and gearbox, is wired in such a cunning way that it also functions as a starter. Try this: It has excellent brakes. What is not to like? This, just about the last

Guzzi singles, is a paler shade of beige. It has strange arabesque script on its side panels. Read it; it says 'Sahara'. What a great name for a touring motorcycle. As I walked around it, I was intrigued. Chris wondered temptingly whether I fancied a ride. In fact, I was quite tired and had another hundred miles to travel before the day was done. But of course I wanted to ride it. But ... I enjoy qualifying these things ... only if I could start it.

Turn on fuel. Apply choke (it's not the same as the choke on an Amal). Pull in the huge decompressor lever beneath the clutch lever. Switch on. Press starter button. The engine spins over. So far, so civilised. Dump the



A single seat for a single. It's very comfortable, as it should be with proper rear suspension as well

open the throttle and feed in the clutch. And then you're going, which is where the fun begins.

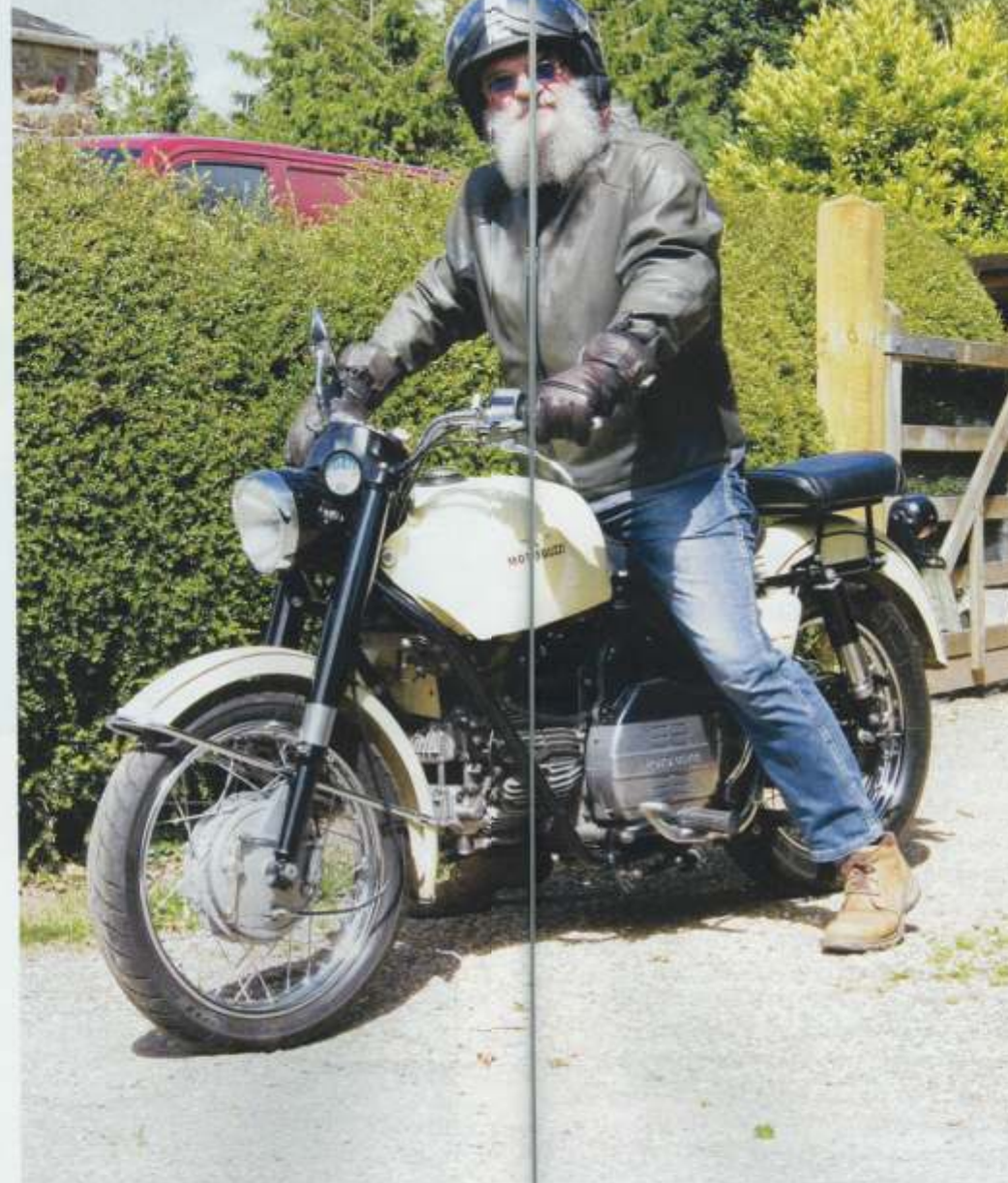
The ride is excellent. It's easy to forget, in these days of pattern approximate fork bushes and pattern approximate rear shocks, that motorcycle manufacturers' original specs are usually best. This is a great example of



LEFT: A passenger fares less well in the comfort stakes than the rider. Many solo riders remove the bum pad from the rack, leaving just the rack. Wise...



'Golly. This is very strange...'



both reported that the clutches they used were normal. I've no idea what this strange action is ... but I'm not worrying about it.

Which brings me to the engine. I really like engines. I enjoy engines; the more quirky and unusual they are, the better. And this is an odd one. It dominates the character and the riding experience of the bike completely. Before you read any further, look at a side view of the machine. Observe where the engine's centre of mass is, how far back it is, then compare that to a conventional 500 single. If Moto Guzzi's designer had aimed to get the bike's centre of mass directly beneath the rider's posterior, I would think he succeeded pretty well. The weight doesn't lie under the tank, as on most machines; it really

that; the Falcone almost floats along. Very impressive.

As are the anchors. In fact, the brakes are truly remarkable; easily as good as a set of discs. Anyone using drum brakes as good as these would be excused for wondering why everyone shifted to discs. The answer's easy enough; cost and simplicity, but it's still a valid question.

The clutch is strange. Engagement is normal; let out the lever and the drive takes up. But then it does something unusual. It's as though there's some insane second clutch; things seem to slip for a fraction of a second before everything locks up as it should. It's not a worry in any sense, but it is odd. And it appears to be a feature of this particular machine. I asked two other Falcone fans (Hello Paul Friday, hello David Wiggins) and

must contribute to the excellent handling balance, to the floating I mentioned above.

And then there is the flywheel. There is no escaping the flywheel. Earlier Guzzi singles boasted an external flywheel; the famous 'bacon-slicer'. Instead of the flywheel being inside the engine's cases, this one lives outside. It's huge, and it's heavy, and its operation gives the engine its tremendous charm. In the Nuovo Falcone, which is the one seen here in blotchy RCcolor®, the flywheel lives inside a handsome (well...) cover of its own, but it is unsealed (look closely and you can watch the flywheel itself spinning while the engine runs), so the unique visuals of the earlier singles are diluted. But the effect, which is more important than the looks,



One big beige fuel tank. The handlebar furniture is nicely Seventies Italian, too



Under the beige tank live the carb, the coil and the great big starter motor / generator. There is plenty of room...



Simplicity. Big clear MPH speedo and a few idiot lights. Nicely individualised key fob, too

although I'd think that's academic for most Falcone riders. Some of the engine's power is inevitably absorbed by spinning up the flywheel, which does absolutely nothing for its acceleration. A Kawasaki 500 triple this is not, as is obvious the moment you make your first attempt at a rapid getaway. You will not win any GP, traffic light or otherwise. The Guzzi gathers speed. It is a perfectly acceptable sensation, and once you're used to it, it is charming indeed. It's a vintage feel, almost. Riders of pre-1960 big Brit bangers will recognise it instantly. It's the same monster flywheel effect that enables Panthers to haul a chair filled with family up the side of that fabled house of cliché.

It works like this. Engage gear, rev engine; there's no tedious tacho complication, so just make a bit more of the delightful boffing noise until you're feeling happy. Slip the clutch as you pull away. Keep the engine spinning and marvel as you gain speed deceptively quickly. Understand with delight that first gear is not a short, sweet thing intended to pop the front wheel into the air or similarly unseemly stuff. Carry on speeding up. You can do this for a while. Vibration begins.

At this point, close throttle and pull in clutch. Relax and think of England (other countries are available). The revs will fall, slowly. Change gear using the big double pedal. If you are concerned about the polish on your brogues then you can use the heel of the heel'n'toe device to suit. Changing gear is a relaxing and leisurely process on a Falcone. You will know when it's happened. Drop clutch and repeat the cycle. There are only four gears. You will waste time but no effort looking for a fifth. If there was a fifth gear this thing would – eventually – cruise at 90. But only downhill and on the M5, where it's all downhill from Birmingham. Or something.

The flywheel effect dictates the entire riding experience, and it's addictive – at least to this rider. When you close the throttle the engine speed falls ... but gently. When you open it again the reverse happens ... but gently. The bike is not actually slow, despite what this reads like, but it is leisurely. It is all in the mind.

So, you're in top, wafting along familiar roads at around 55mph. A perfect speed for a Falcone. A bend looms. Ignore all that gear-changing nonsense and that braking nonsense; simply shut the throttle. Your speed falls, you zap around the corner as though on rails (the 1973 Big Boys' Book Of Biking's Handy Hints For Writers in use there), and then you open the throttle again. This is enormously satisfying. Maintaining a

Flywheels are a means of storing energy, it said in a book I once read. I may have fallen asleep at that point. In the main, their effect is to smooth the engine's operation in between the bangs of combustion; they try to keep on spinning when there is no internal combustion to power them. This is what makes a bike with a big heavy flywheel such an individualist machine to ride. It is central to its character in the road, and if you like that character you will like the Falcone, and if you don't, you won't.

The engine is not wildly powerful. If you want more power – as many do – then ride a more powerful bike. Easy. What the Falcone offers is something else. It develops, in Sahara form, a quoted 27bhp, and that feels

He liked it so much that he bought it. Again. Will he ever learn?



exhilarating. It's not the same exhilaration as popping gigantic wheelies at 130mph on a Hayabusa, but...

And all the while the all-alloy engine chatters away beneath you. It is very well silenced. Moto Guzzi intended their Nuovo Falcone to be primarily a Police and fleet machine, so it's quiet. Look at the silencer if you want evidence of their intent. The fuel tank shrouds the engine, so little mechanical noise gets to disturb the relaxed rider. But there is valvegear chatter; it's all a little steam engine-like. This is like a vintage fake, as we once referred to later Velocettes – and for much the same reason. All of the 'classic' virtues are there; simplicity, low-down weight, big flywheel, great brakes

electric hoof, good lights and big, effective drum brakes. What is not to like, to coin the vernacular?

Think back to the beginning of this short story. Chris didn't like it. I asked him why – after I'd returned and admitted to falling for the anachronistic charm of the thing. This is what he said, lawyers get ready: 'What didn't I like about the Moto Grotti? Where do I start? Everything! It would be easier to say what I liked about it and that is the way it starts and the way it ticks over. Everything else is pretty dreadful. I'd heard that they were ponderous but nothing prepared me for the traction engine feel of the thing. It is even hideous to look at... If you quote me on that, I'll probably need a bodyguard 'cause the Moto Guzzi Fan



One excellent twin leading-shoe brake. It is indeed excellent, and suits the bike very well indeed



On the opposite side of the front wheel to the brakeplate is the speedo drive. Almost modern. As is the front fork, which works very well indeed

really like them. Am I right in assuming that you still do too?'

Note two things. Firstly that what I personally value highly, another rider really dislikes. Secondly that final sentence, the question. He is indeed right. I liked this strange machine so much that we did a deal. I was struck by the notion of a big banger with individual looks, traction engine performance, an electric start, great comfort, brakes and handling. Something about it makes me smile, and makes me want to grab a coat, grab a hat and ride off. It's obvious why so many other riders like them so much. And it's equally obvious why others feel the opposite way: Paul 'Ace Tester' Miles of this magazine had a Nuovo Falcone of his very own, a very rare true civilian model, rather than a factory-pimped fleet bike like the Sahara. I believe that he disposed of it, too, because he, like Chris Spaett, likes to ride rather more rapidly than I do. Horses for courses, as they say. Who could ask for more? **Rc**

FURTHER READING

There is a wealth of information about most motorcycles out in the ethers. If you want to read more about the Nuovo Falcone, try these:

www.phpbber.com/phpbb/index.php?sid=43f7996de238d893e39c17cc32205d80&forum=nuovofalcone
www.devce.demon.co.uk/falcone.htm
www.advrider.com/forums/showthread