

Classic &
**MOTORCYCLE
MECHANICS**

No 125

March 1998

USA \$6.75

£2.75

Fettling inside: Honda K2, Yamaha flat tracker, GPz550...& much more!

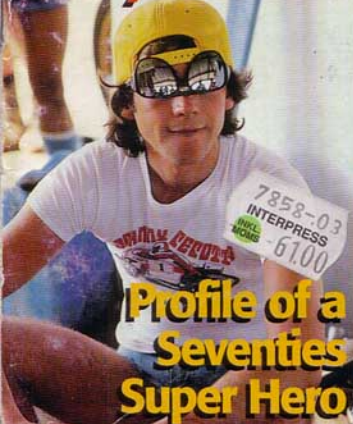
Great bikes



*of the
eighties*

Our choice from a decade of change

Barry Sheene



**Profile of a
Seventies
Super Hero**

Ignored...



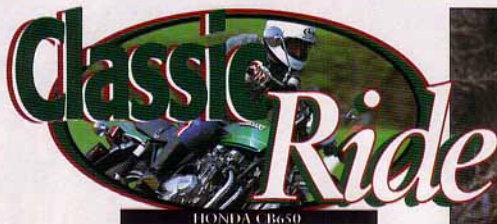
**under-estimated
we ride the
CB650
Honda - 4**



03 >

LAST OF AN ILL

The Honda CB650 was the last of their single-cam fours. Launched almost as a 'parts-bin special' along with the new dohc range, it attracted not even a second glance. Today, having bought a 17 year-old example, Neil Murray concludes that this bike is, indeed, worth much more than a second glance.



THIS is the Forgotten Four. The one that Honda released almost as an afterthought.

After years of sohc eight-valve fours in 350cc, 400cc, 500cc, 550cc and 750cc capacities, Honda finally went for twin cams and 16 valves with the new CB750KZ and CB900 fours. Paradoxically, they also launched the CB650 which was, er, a sohc eight-valve four.

Everybody looked at the spec and the plain Jane styling, and ignored it.

It was fairly obviously a

bored-out CB550 engine in a new chassis. The bore centres and stud spacings of the CB650 are identical to those of the 550.

Yes, it was reasonably quick - BIKE magazine wrung 119mph out of theirs, although most tests settled on 110mph or so. It handled reasonably well and it was certainly cheap, but it wasn't the sort of thing dreams (or even Dreams) were made of.

As BIKE pointed out, a Kawasaki Z650 was faster and had that hint of fun which the CB650 seemed to lack.

Some people were more thoughtful. Mark Williams, with unusual lucidity, opined that the CB650 steered better than the new CB900, handled much better than the CB750KZ, and was better value for money than either of them.

The CB650's reputation wasn't helped by extremely lean carb jetting, apparently due to the latest American pollution regulations. It took a long time to warm up, and if Dynojet kits had been around in 1979, it would have been a prime contender. Honda had fitted accelerator pumps to the carbs in an attempt to give the thing a bit of pep, but it really needed re-jetting.

The CB650 sold steadily if unexcitingly until 1982 when the Nighthawk semi-custom version was launched. This one got CV carbs which made it a hell of a lot more snappy, but unfortunately it also copied some revolting styling.

The stick-on chrome panels on the tank looked like they'd been dreamed up by the sort of people who clad window tints onto old Mk III Escorts. A crap riding position did no favours



Above: Many items of equipment are borrowed from other models in the Honda range but this is one 'parts bin special' that is still looking good for its age and seems to have more fans now than it did when it was launched. A cult classic.

for the handling, either. (Strangely enough, people seem to want the 'Shitehawk' these days.)

The CB650 had an early reputation for premature camshaft wear. This didn't seem to affect all bikes and to my knowledge no mods were ever introduced, but word got around.

With hindsight, it seems likely that some owners neglected the oil changes. The CB650 was in a fairly high state of tune for an old sohc four and needed regular and careful servicing. Its claimed 62 horsepower from its 626cc gave it a specific out-



Left: Neil reckons the CB650 is a better bike town bike than his own GT750 Kawasaki.

USTRIOUS LINE



put of as near as dammit 100hp per litre, which was quite a lot for those days.

Anyway, the straight roadster CB650 was dropped in 1982 and the Nighthawk staggered on for a few years after that. Then the book was closed on Honda's sohc fours.

The startling thing is how many CB650s have survived. You know how it is; you buy a bike that you think is rare and all of a sudden you start seeing them everywhere.

It's a bike I've often thought vaguely about owning. I liked the CB750's engine but couldn't stand the diabolical handling and brakes. The CB400/4's engine came over to me as a bit fussy and gutless,

although I always loved its dinky dimensions, handling and styling.

My old CB550 was a good compromise between the two, but nice ones are now rare and/or expensive. The thought

It's like perpetual motion; once you start fiddling around with old bikes, buying them, selling them, fixing them, photographing them... the ball starts rolling and they just fall into your lap.

came with the original invoice, handbook and toolkit and all the MoTs.

Condition? Look at the photos and judge for yourselves. If there's a better CB650, I've yet to see it.

And the price: just £1100. I still can't believe it. The price of a used Honda CG125. The guy selling it wasn't prepared to haggle, and I wasn't bothered.

Look at the good points of the CB650. A coherent chassis, based on a new frame. Decent forks. Twin discs, seemingly robbed from the CX500. The same huge indicators as the CB750KZ. Simple clocks, and the same old warning light console as ever adorned every sohc Honda four.

'The CB650 was in a fairly high state of tune for an old sohc four and needed regular and careful servicing. Its claimed 62 horsepower from its 626cc gave it a specific output of as near as dammit 100hp per litre, which was quite a lot for those days'

of a CB550 with a bit more power was appealing. Used CB650s seemed cheapish as well.

I DON'T know why, but I've got a knack for turning up old Japanese bikes in really nice order for not a lot of money.

(Like that immaculate KH400 for £400. Or a really smart Suzuki GT380 for £300. Or the Honda CD175, that I've still got, that cost me £35.)

Anyway, I unearthed this CB650 in Maidstone. It had done just 12,000 miles from new, was 100% stock, and

ent chassis, based on a new frame. Decent forks. Twin discs, seemingly robbed from the CX500. The same huge indicators as the CB750KZ. Simple clocks, and the same old warning light console as ever adorned every sohc Honda four.

Classic Ride

HONDA CB650

The same tail light unit as fitted to the CX500 and CB750KZ. Alloy footrest brackets that may be the same as those found on the CB900 - I haven't checked. Standard issue levers, mirrors and switchgear. Standard issue Comstar wheels. You can see how the cost was kept down: this is a parts bin special.

To begin with, the damn thing wouldn't outrun a 250. Top speed was just 80mph and there was a huge flat spot between 5000 and 6000 rpm. It handled weirdly and the Nighthawk handlebars originally fitted (the guy I bought it from: had back trouble, but luckily he'd kept the standard bars and threw them in with the sale) meant a horrible light front end.

Into the Murray garage (a

Right: The engine is a poor cold starter and sounds like a spanner in a tumble dryer until it's warmed up but reports of cam wear problems appear to be unfounded.

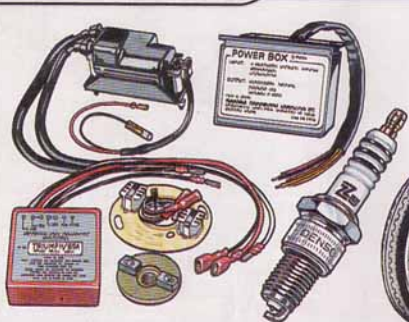
sort of elephants' graveyard of old Jap bikes) it went, and inspiration was sought in the form of a few cans of Kronenbourg.

Handling first. The tyre pressures turned out to be near atmospheric and the rear tyre was barely legal anyway. A new Avon AM21 and both tyres upped to the right pressure took care of that.

The standard bars were refitted and the Nighthawk bars, as luck would have it, were



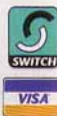
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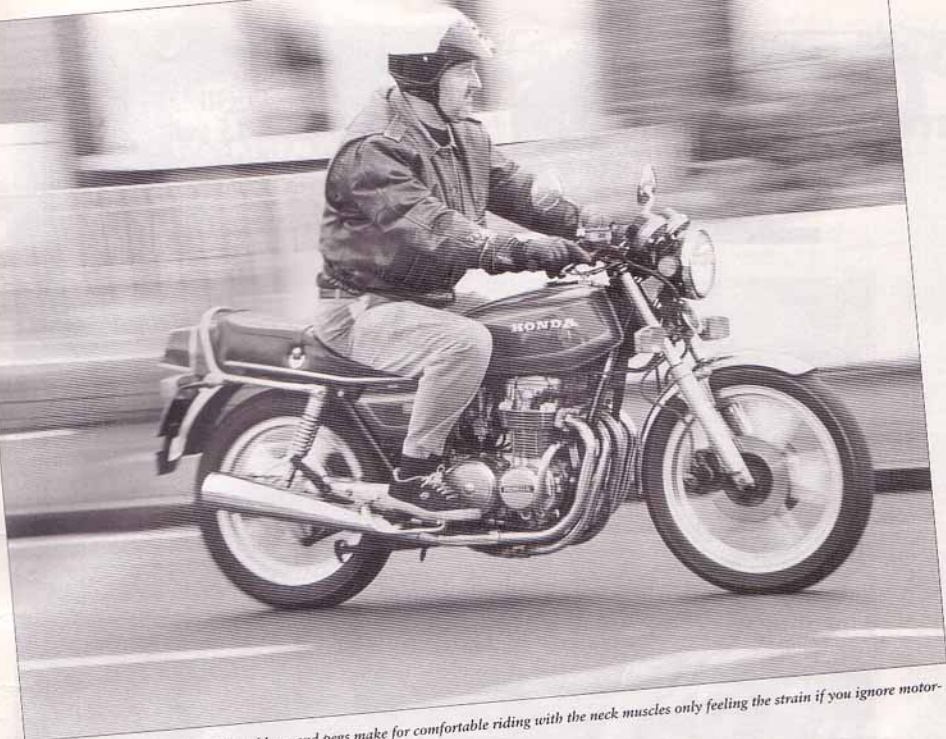
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Good plush seat and well positioned bars and pegs make for comfortable riding with the neck muscles only feeling the strain if you ignore motorway speed limits.

sold for £10 to a bloke who just happened to be looking for a set for his Gold Wing. Instant result; positive steering, much steadier in bends, no white-lining.

Now for the missing horsepower. The air filter proved to be a rest home for spiders, and that went into the bin. The knackered cheapo chain was also binned and an O-ring chain fitted. An oil change, filter change, camchain adjustment and carb balance followed.

The pack of Kronenbourg was finished. Hic.

Once sobriety had returned I could assess the results of my fettling. Not a huge improvement but some improvement at least. It would pull 90, but no more. It felt like it was running really lean at the top end and the mid-range flat spot was still present.

You had to back off the throttle to get it up to 90, and then if you opened it any more it just started slowing down. Mindful of burned pistons, I didn't try, but just ran it gently for a few weeks, thinking.

Checking with a bloke in the VJMC revealed that in standard trim it should be a lot faster, but I knew that. I was certain it was running

appallingly weak but couldn't figure out why.

It ticked over like an electric motor at 1200rpm, so the pilot jetting was fine. Everywhere else in the rev range it behaved itself. The exhaust and air filter were in fine order, and the inlet rubbers weren't perished. There were no air leaks that I could see.

I did a plug chop at 90mph and the plug insulators were white. In the end I decided to see what main jets were in the carbs. They were standard 92 size. I view of how lean it was running I went up two sizes on the main jets, to 98s.

And that fixed it. Top speed instantly went up to 110-plus and the mid-range flat spot virtually vanished. Sometimes there's a hesitancy if you yank open the slides from 5000rpm but acceleration beyond 6000rpm improved beyond all recognition.

If anyone can explain why it was running super-lean on standard settings I'd love to know. I can't figure it out. The main thing is that it's sorted.

THE more I've ridden this thing the more I've grown to feel that the CB650's dowdy reputation is unjustified. The riding position is brilliant; flat bars, well rear-set pegs, and a

superb bar/seat/pegs relationship that reminds me of the old 400/4 or maybe a naked old boxer BMW.

The steering is amazingly positive for such an old design. It's nimble, light, small, and yet comfortable and roomy. True, the rear suspension is nothing to write home about, but that can be easily fixed.

It's remarkably noisy when you start it up. A lot of whizzing, rattling and zizzing reminds you that there are plenty of old-fashioned rockers and tappets jiggling away under the tank. As it warms up the noise diminishes, and once at operating temperature it just hums quietly.

This takes a while, mind. Even in summer it won't run cleanly with the choke off until you've covered several miles, so the old reputation for being cold-blooded is fair.

Like most so-be Honda fours, the real power lies above 6000rpm. It's flexible enough to allow you to run around town in top gear but if you want to make decent progress you really have to buzz it to 7000rpm or more.

It's geared for about 120 at the 9500rpm red line. If anything slows it down, it's the typical early Honda throttle which needs two handfuls to get the slides all the way open.

I also own a Kawasaki GT750 shafty, and the Honda



Clocks and warning lights are all they need to be.

Classic Ride

HONDA CB650

'Ground clearance isn't great, but compared to, say, the Honda CB750F1 I owned 15 years ago, it's astonishing. In fact, it's a much better bike all round'



Honda were late coming up with an answer to the Z650 and it never sold well, but it was one of their best sohc fours.

makes a far better town and suburbs bike than the GT. It's lighter and smaller, its gearchange and clutch are far superior, it steers better, and it's much more nimble and manoeuvrable.

The GT beats it on outright performance, brakes, range and the fact that it's got a shaft, and none of those is really relevant in urban motorcycling.

The CB650 will cruise at 80 happily, leaving another 10mph or so of useful acceleration in reserve. The riding position ensures you don't do the human parachute act, but as with any unfaired bike, it's still tiring. In terms of overall performance it's on a par with a Kawasaki 550 Zephyr or a Yamaha 600 Diversion.

When it comes to twisty roads, both modern bikes would see it off, but not by much. The CB650 holds a line with a steadiness that my old 550 never possessed. The original-equipment rear shocks set

it bouncing on bumpy bends and the ground clearance isn't great, but compared to, say, a Honda CB750F1 I owned 15 years ago, it's astonishing. In fact, it's a much better bike all round.

Touring on the CB650 would be quite feasible. The huge seat gives plenty of room for two, and the pillion footpegs are well placed. Solo, it runs onto reserve at about 140 miles, with maybe another 20 in reserve, which is a useful improvement on my old CB750F1. The CB650 isn't that economical (about 44mpg) but the tank holds some four gallons.

The other day I took it for a swift blitz down to the south coast and back - 150 miles for the round trip.

On main roads it whizzed along at 80-90, touched the ton a couple of times and generally made me feel good, which I suppose is what counts.

MAINTENANCE, like all sohc Honda fours, is simple. The CB650's circular tappet cover caps were ditched in favour of large rocker covers which, when removed, expose all the valve train, so access is easier. Timing is electronic.

The camchain adjustment is a bit fiddly. You have to turn the engine over backwards (!) while tightening the tensioner nut. The oil filter is the same jobbie as you find on all old Honda fours. A full service is maybe a couple of hours' work.

A nice touch is the use of removable fillers in the end of the swinging arm so you can pull the wheel out backwards without having to dismantle any of the exhaust system.

Parts availability seems fine. Tippets, my local specialist, sourced the rubber gaskets for the tappet covers in 24 hours and confirmed that Honda still lists new exhausts for the CB650. In fact, Honda recent-

ly dropped the price to around £350 for a complete system - low enough to make you think twice about buying a Motard or similar.

I rather like the CB650. In the late 1970s it was declared a touch dull. Curiously, these days it seems to have a tad more character than some fours.

It's partly due to the distinctive sohc top-end noise and partly due to touches like the large period clocks. It also has something to do with its practicality and do-anything nature and, to be honest, that it's something out of the ordinary these days.

'Overtuned and considerably less reliable', I put in this mag's buyers' guide some time ago. Unfair on both counts, and I stand corrected.

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