

GOLDEN YEARS

There's a proud ancestral line of performance streetbikes which goes back nearly as far as motorcycles themselves. From Vincents and Velocettes, to Nortons, Triumphs and Tritons, there are a handful of marques which set the tone for what was to come.

It was well understood, in the grand old days of yesteryear, that Nortons had the frame – and, thus, the handling – while Triumph had the engine, and it was this fact, over a period, that eventually brought about the birth of the Triton, or Triumph-engined Norton. Variations on this theme then became more common as experimentalism – the birthplace of invention – brought a freedom to motorcycle construction not seen before, and it was in this environment that Norton embarked on its quest to correct the lowly public perception of its proud 750cc Commando.

Though the Commando was probably the marque's most famous model, it lacked the power of its rivals. Its Isolastic frame system – involving adjustable rubber mounts – on the other hand, was something of a revolution and led to many track victories due to its stability and predictability. Racing was in their blood, and Norton had a proud history of success on the circuit stretching from the CSI of 1927, to the Marx era of the '50s, and even to the two national victories and '92 TT win of the rotary twin F4 – first raced in the late '80s.

Eventually, under the weight of financial impropriety (ie company directors filching company assets and shafting a land-slurp in the process), Norton faded from view as a contemporary manufacturer, and many Norton's became either prized collectables, or dusty curios tucked away in the back shed.

In steps Brian 'Grank' Grant, ex-pres of the Norton Owner's Club, with his 1972 Gus Khun Norton Production Racer. Bought only two years ago in Grafton for \$7500, Brian finally got hold of a bike that he'd "always liked the look of..." and one that he felt "looked great, even when standing still."

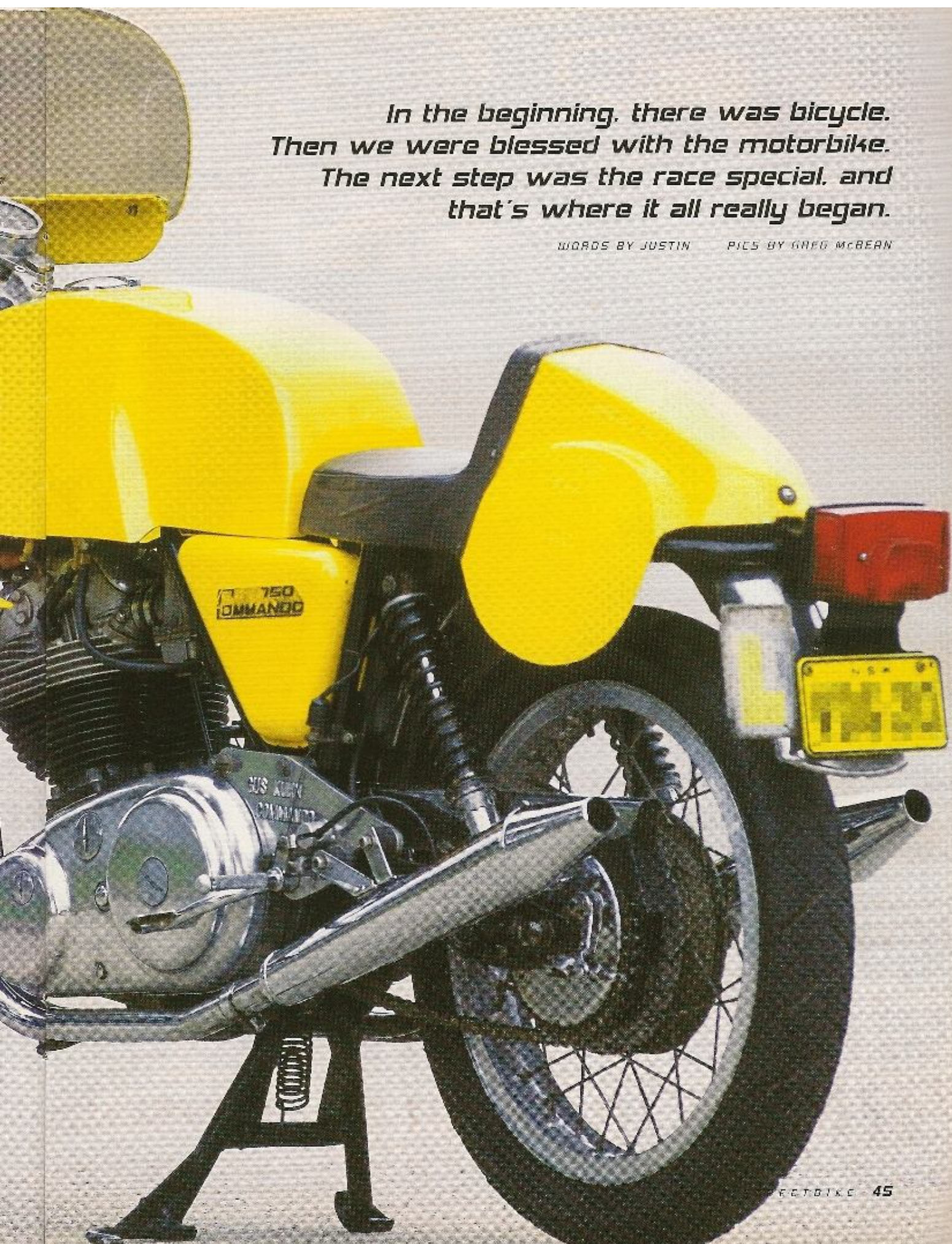
With a background in bikes, particular British bikes, this looked to be the perfect project. Brian had already owned an XS650 Yammy, several Nortons ranging from 750cc to overbored 920cc beasts, and a 1978 750cc Bonneville.

He'd known the previous owner for some years already, and had known of the bike since the early '80s. He also had a good degree of respect for the bike's aesthetic and its level of performance. Finally, in 2000, Brian got the fateful call informing him that the bike was for



*In the beginning, there was bicycle.
Then we were blessed with the motorbike.
The next step was the race special, and
that's where it all really began.*

WORDS BY JUSTIN PICS BY GREG McBEAN





sale. "When he rang me to put an advert in the (Norton) club mag," Brian recalls, "I snapped it up after about five seconds' careful consideration."

It had been sitting in a shed for several years by the time Brian got to it, but, although it had a broken gearbox, the worst of it was an inundation of dried mud wasp nests in every nook and cranny of the bike. The mufflers were also missing.

After a comprehensive clean up, a new second gear for the 'box and some replacement standard pipes, Brian decided to throw caution to the wind and took the beast out to Sydney's Eastern Creek for a ride day. While following the hapless Brian through turn three, though, mate Mal Cherland saw an explosion of dust come from under the bike. Panic ensued, but the plume of dust exploding off the track turned out to be the last wasp's nest, ejected from deep within the revived proddie racer.

A run through the bike's vital statistics reveals the subtle and focussed intent that went into its design.

Putting out between 65 and 70hp – as opposed to the 55hp of the standard Commando – the Norvil runs a 10.5:1 compression ratio (8.5-9:1 standard), so it'll kick back – hard – if you get the start wrong. The crank, cases and cylinders are all standard, though there are high-compression pistons and rings, and

a high-compression head. The cam shafts are of unknown origin, but are not standard – running a hot, Combat-derived 25 or 45 race cam is most common in upspeeded motors, but it's neither in this bike...

Dave Munroe can be credited with the engine rebuild, contributing a degree of bullet-proofing the troubled Norton 750 was much in need of.

A Boyer electronic ignition helps control power delivery to the plugs, while upspeeded Mikuni 32mm Amals with velocity stacks handle fuel flow (there are no filters on the Norvil as most of its rising is done at the track). In a further race-derived mod, Norvil exhaust headers have been utilised to increase ground clearance, as they tuck in closer to the frame than the standard units.

Tuning is handled by Brian at home, and he manages to get the Norton running hard on Avgas when he can get it – or running reliably on unleaded Super...

A 27-tooth gearbox sprocket transfers power from the final drive and, once again, it's the handwork of Gronk that saw the transmission make it back to fighting form.

Front suspension is the domain of original Norvil forks – including sliders with a suitable caliper attached – while a Kom has been conscripted into service up the back.

The Norvil struts are teamed with genuine AP underlines (Norvil front brakes – a 10in floating brake 12" rotor and Lockheed Racing caliper –

while at the rear is a more traditional drum set-up).

Wheels on the Norvil are not the standard heavy steel jobs, but rather they're slick 19 x 2.5 Akront alloy rims – both front and back – with Avon Supervenom 100X90/19s rounding out the package.

Up front, Magura clip-ons were sourced for something to hang on to and, being less steeply set, are considerably more comfortable than the standard Norton items.

A Gus Khun bikini fairing provides a modicum of wind protection, and Khun was the supplier of both the tank and tail units also. Fortunately for Gronk, the fairings had never been run on the bike, and so were in pristine condition – a rare find, indeed...

Gus Khun was a proddie Commando specialist in this golden era of British bikes and provided rearsets in keeping with the general theme of the bike.

It was in the late 1960s that the Commando reached the public, and one of the first dealers to offer custom parts for the machine was Gus Khun Motors of Elpham, who would prepare the machine exactly to customers' specifications.

Gus Khun Motors ran their own race team at the time, in both endurance and conventional racing, so it was both natural and necessary that they knew exactly what the bike needed. This eventually led to considerable involvement between

Norton and Gus Khun, and a series of heavily customised bikes being sold alongside the standard models under Khun's moniker.

In all, the bike's taken approximately 20-30 hours to complete and has cost in the vicinity of \$1100, on top of purchase price (this, however, can pretty much be accounted for by the new second gear, new mufflers and a new battery...).

Future mods include an adaptation to the front master cylinder to give better feel, and a close ratio gearbox for better performance at the track. A change which would probably glean good performance improvements would be a belt primary drive, which would allow for more latitude in gearing – changing pulley sizes is both easier and cheaper than fitting a new front cog and also avoids the various complications arising from the Triplex chain set up. "With the current gearing, it's actually a bit short for Eastern Creek," Brian admits. He speculates that the bike could be geared up from its current 110mph top to 120mph plus.

So, all in all, though its vintage puts it in the 'classic' category, the Norvil Norton is a streetbike in its essence. Horsepowers up from standard, the handling's been improved, and the styling is pure class – tell us, there's still in the mid 60s yet... **58**

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Brian Grant, above, was pretty lucky to find a classic Norton in reasonable condition, but with pristine unused fairings to boot, he must have been blessed. He managed to get the bike in damn near original condition with less than a working week's labour and a paltry \$1100 in parts...

