

SINGLE MIN

Often passed over by lovers of classic motorcycles, 250cc BMWs are nonetheless fine machines. One West Country enthusiast has enjoyed a lifetime affinity with the little Beemers. Roy Poynting pays him a visit.

When it comes to motorcycle development, evolution beats revolution nearly every time. Just consider how Velocette's attempt to switch production to the radical LE nearly brought financial disaster. Conversely, steady development of the long established ohv singles enabled the Hall Green company to survive for years after bigger manufacturers had gone bust.

Across in mainland Europe, there was at least one company that needed no convincing that cautious step-by-step development was a good thing. From their first R32 in 1923, right up to the present day, BMW have remained faithful to the flat twin layout. Flirtations with pressed steel frames and different fork designs, even excursions into triples and fours, have never overshadowed the German firm's determination to have a proven design at the heart of its production range. So, when BMW wanted to expand that range in 1925, it typically avoided

technological risks. After all, if you have a perfectly good horizontally opposed twin, why not just amputate one of the cylinders and make a half-sized single? That is what they did with the R39 in 1925, and it is what they were doing with the R27 when they finally stopped making small capacity machines in 1966/7.

Fans of bigger examples of the German marque often call the little singles half-BMWs, intending it as an insult rather than a statement of fact. These detractors have often either not ridden one of the singles, or have a hard and fast style of riding which no lightweight could cope with, whatever its make or engine layout. If you want an unbiased opinion, you need to speak to somebody like West Country septuagenarian Vic (who prefers not to have his surname published); he has owned many BMW twins and singles over a very long period.

Vic's education was interrupted by WWII. It did not stop his motorcycling



Neat and functional instruments, note the warning lights.



however; he used his own 250cc BSA for despatch duties with the local Fire Brigade, and rode War-Department motorcycles in the Far East. Returning to Britain after being wounded, Vic had a succession of old machines, starting with a 350cc Panther and culminating in a 1939 bronze-head Triumph Tiger 100. At the same time he completed his studies with a degree in French, and became employed by a tour company with offices in France and Switzerland.

This is when the obsession with BMWs began. "I still had the T100," recalls Vic, "and while it was a super machine, I couldn't help comparing it with the BMW twins I saw whispering around Paris. I rode the T100 over to Munich, where I was equally impressed by a tour of the factory." In 1954, Vic became the proud owner of an R67, the first post-war 600cc twin.

Dubious about his long-term prospects in the travel business, Vic returned to England in 1956 and swapped the R67 for a 250cc R26 single from MLG in Shepherds Bush. "Wasn't that a backward step?" I ask. "Ah, it depends whether you compare the R20 series with their bigger brothers, or with their same-sized competitors," considers Vic. "It was streets ahead of any British lightweight."

This is where the critics snort, "huh, call that a lightweight? You can see that it's massive, that is why it's so sluggish." The facts do not really justify either insult. Only a couple of contemporary ohv 250cc British competitors spring to mind, and of these the BSA C12 was just 33lbs lighter – hardly an earth shattering difference – while the Royal Enfield Clipper enjoyed only half that weight advantage. As for speed, neither could compete with the German offering. Vic claims that: "at that time the only faster 250 on the British market was NSU's Max."

Vic's first R26 does not, however,



BMW were keen on telescopic forks, strange then that they should have changed them for Earles type forks on the later single.

feature here. He swapped back to a twin after a while, but in 1962 he returned to MLG to buy the test R26, which had been built the same year as his first one.

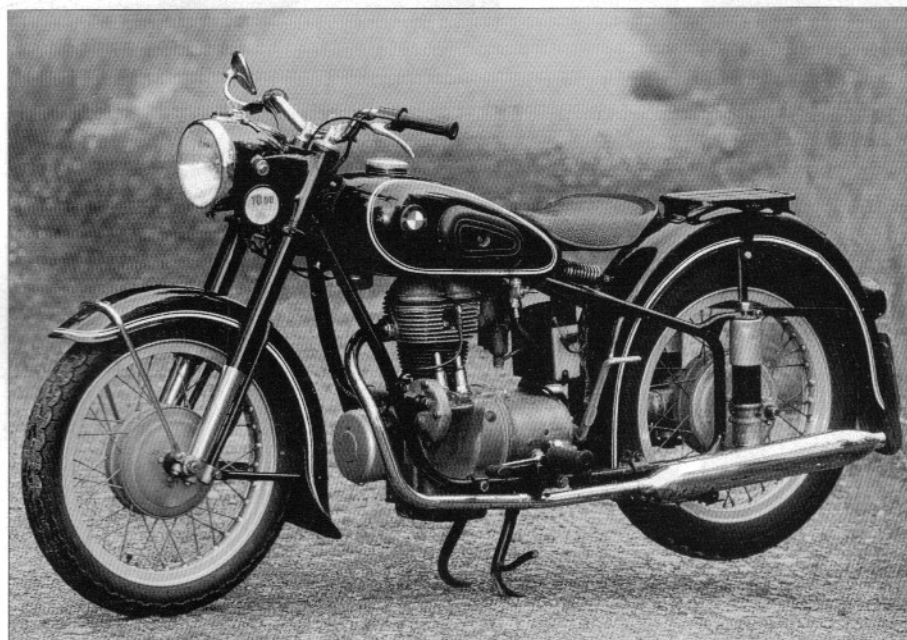
This is where the purists have to look away, because Vic did not leave well alone. He wanted to go long distance trialling, and set about making the R26 more suitable. He replaced the steel mudguards with aluminium ones, fitted a

Fact File

1954 BMW R25/3

Engine type	ohv single
Capacity	245cc
Bore x stroke	68mmx 68mm
Output	13hp at 5800rpm
Compression ratio	7:1
Lubrication	wet sump
Carburettor	Bing
Electrics	Noris
Gearbox	four speed in unit with engine
Transmission	shaft drive
Suspension	teles/plunger
Tyres	3.25 x 18in front and rear
Brakes	6in drums front and rear
Tank	12l
Seat height	28in
Wheelbase	54in
Weight	330lb
Top speed (est.)	70mph
Consumption (est.)	70 - 80mpg
Price new	£209
Price guide now	£1500 - £2500

Club contact BMW Owners Club, Membership Secretary, Keith Wills, Lough House, Berington Lough, Berwick upon Tweed, TD15 2PP. Vintage Motor Cycle Club, National Secretary Sharon Jones, Allen House, Wetmore Road, Burton upon Trent, Staffs DE14 1TR.



The oldest of Vic's three Beemers is this 1954 R25/3.



Vic fitted non-standard mudguards to his R26 to aid long distance trialling.

high level exhaust and fixed seat, and did away with the rubber mounting for the handlebars. Despite owning other BMWs, Vic used the 250 hard for many years. On it he did the MCC's Exeter and Lands End Runs, Sunbeam 200s, Stella Alpina Rallies and many more events. About the only thing that needed replacement during this period of hard use was the driveshaft.

His ownership has not been unbroken. Vic sold the R26 to an Oxford enthusiast in the early Eighties, found he missed it, and bought it back in 1986. He resumed long distance rallying, visiting Italy, France and Spain, but replaced the low level exhaust after deciding not to compete in any more trials on rocky terrain. After an enormous mileage, the bottom end had to be replaced in 1994, and at the same time the suspension units were replaced with Konis. The only

other mechanical bother was that a drive shaft coupling needed renewal last year.

Now, while many other BMWs have come and gone, Vic has managed to collect a full set of the true post-war 250s. He has not tried to find the rare R24 and R25 updates of rigid pre-war models, briefly made by BMW when it resumed production after WWII. In 1995, he obtained his R25/3 from a BMW Club Member in South Wales. He was lucky to find one so close to home, because a price tag matching that of a British 500cc twin ensured that very few early lightweights were imported. In contrast, today's values of these machines are quite modest, because of their specialised appeal. The cost of spares is significant though. Some cosmetic restoration had already been done, but replacing a few missing components added over 50 per

cent to the purchase price. Even so, total expenditure for this unusual and attractive machine was less than £2000.

Lately, Vic also managed to add one of the last 250s to his collection. This one has had a chequered past, to say the least. It was sold new in Kenya in 1961 and was apparently trundled about the African Veldt by various missionaries and even the novelist Wilbur Smith. It was eventually purchased by an English schoolteacher, who dismantled it and returned it to Britain in 1983. When Vic acquired it two years ago, it was still in pieces in the crate. It was rebuilt with help from BMW Club Secretary John Lawes, and spares from Ruhr-Motorrad Stemler in Germany.

Apart from Vic's visible modifications to the R26, the three machines have an obvious family resemblance to each other and to the better-known twins. Many of the riding details are the same too. A key inserted past a little waterproof cover over the lighting switch activates the battery/coil ignition. Unless you are a kickboxing expert you then have to stand facing the left of the machine to operate the sideways acting kickstart. Fortunately that is the near side in Britain, in the BMW's native country you would have to stand in the road!

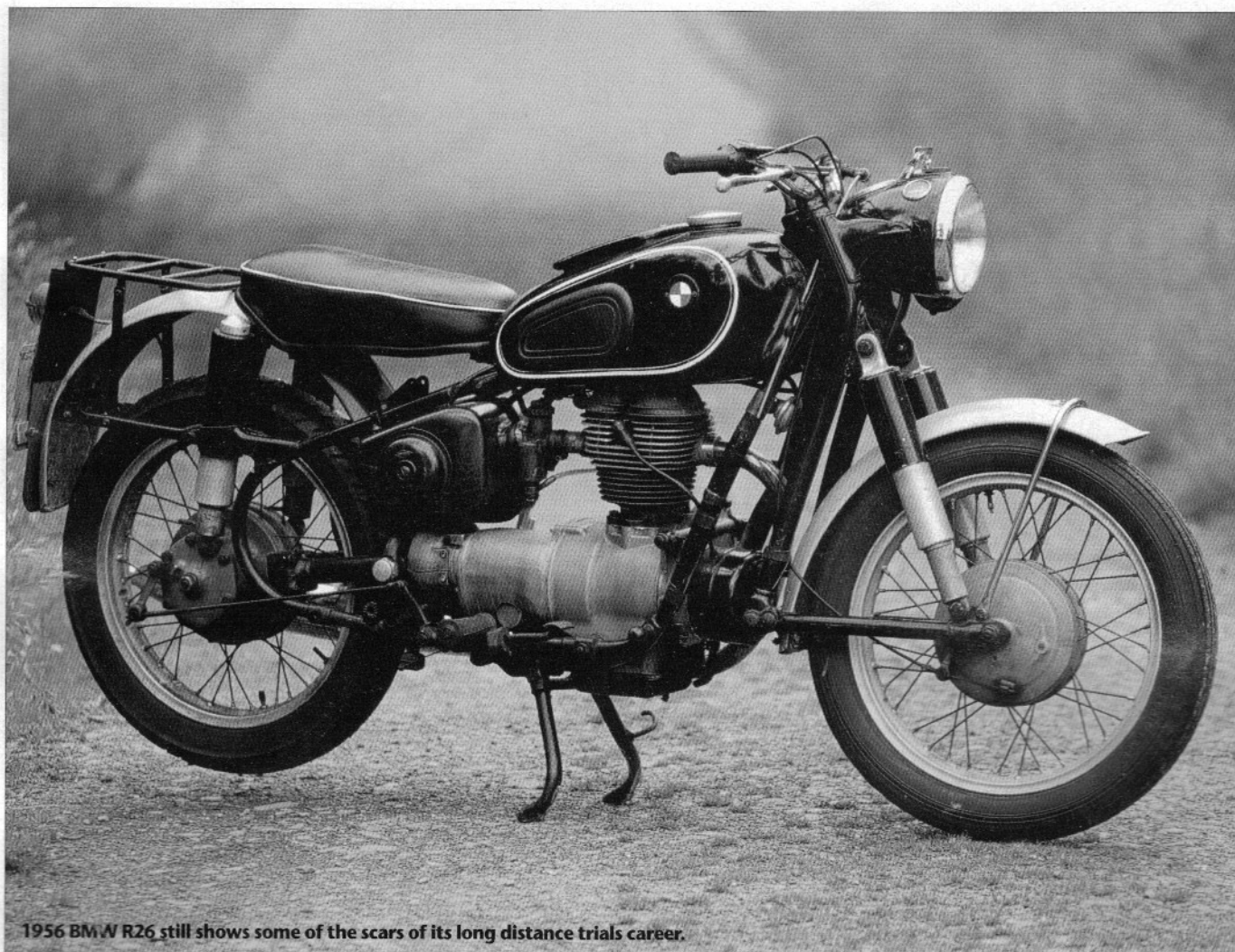
With fewer firing strokes than the twins, but what feels like an equally heavy flywheel, it's easy to spin the R25/3's engine over and feel it shudder into life. I use the word deliberately, because at tickover the machine mimics a jelly carried by a nervous waiter. One's first reaction is to



The R26 features Earles forks.



Small but perfectly formed sums up the BMW singles perfectly.



1956 BMW R26 still shows some of the scars of its long distance trials career.

ask why BMW did not balance the engine better, but I am sure that they tried. They were up against the fact that while a conventional single's out-of-balance forces are lined up with the mass of the frame, there is really nothing to curb the shakes caused by a longitudinal crank.

Still, the tickover characteristic is just a curiosity, because once I got under way, the motor smoothed out acceptably and is inaudible. The seating position is compact, but the resilient, centrally sprung Pagusa saddle provides excellent comfort. Handling and brakes inspire confidence, too, and a cruising speed of 45-50mph is easily reached and effortlessly maintained. The R25/3 may not be the svelt tourer of BMW folklore, but neither is it the vibratory slug of malign gossip. In a nutshell, it is just like a BSA C11G could have been if it were made regardless of cost.

For an indication of where the money went, you have only to consider how rare full width alloy hubs and alloy rims were on a 250 in the early Fifties. And just study what appears to be a perfectly ordinary petrol tank. A keyhole on the left knee grip is the clue that it hinges out to reveal a toolbox. On the other side, the rubber hose from the carburettor disappears into an internal tube leading right through the tank to an inlet in the cool air at the front. I

doubt if it contributed much to BMW's claimed increase of 1hp over the R24, but you have to give them top marks for effort.

In 1956, BMW introduced the R26 with a slightly modified engine and greatly revised frame. This is the one that critics of BMW singles especially love to hate. They claim that its boost in performance was only gained at the expense of an unacceptable increase in vibration. To be honest, I find it hard to detect a change in either characteristic compared with the earlier model. There is more difference in the handling. In the mid Fifties, BMW – having pioneered telescopic forks before WWII – had a change of heart and fitted Earles-type leading link forks. At the same time, they fitted swinging arm rear suspension. The latter change was hardly necessary with the softly sprung saddle but became an advantage when a dual seat was made available. Vic feels the benefit with the large fixed seat, which he finds more secure during long distance trials. As for the front fork, it gives greater travel, but only at the expense of a slightly more ponderous feeling than its predecessor.

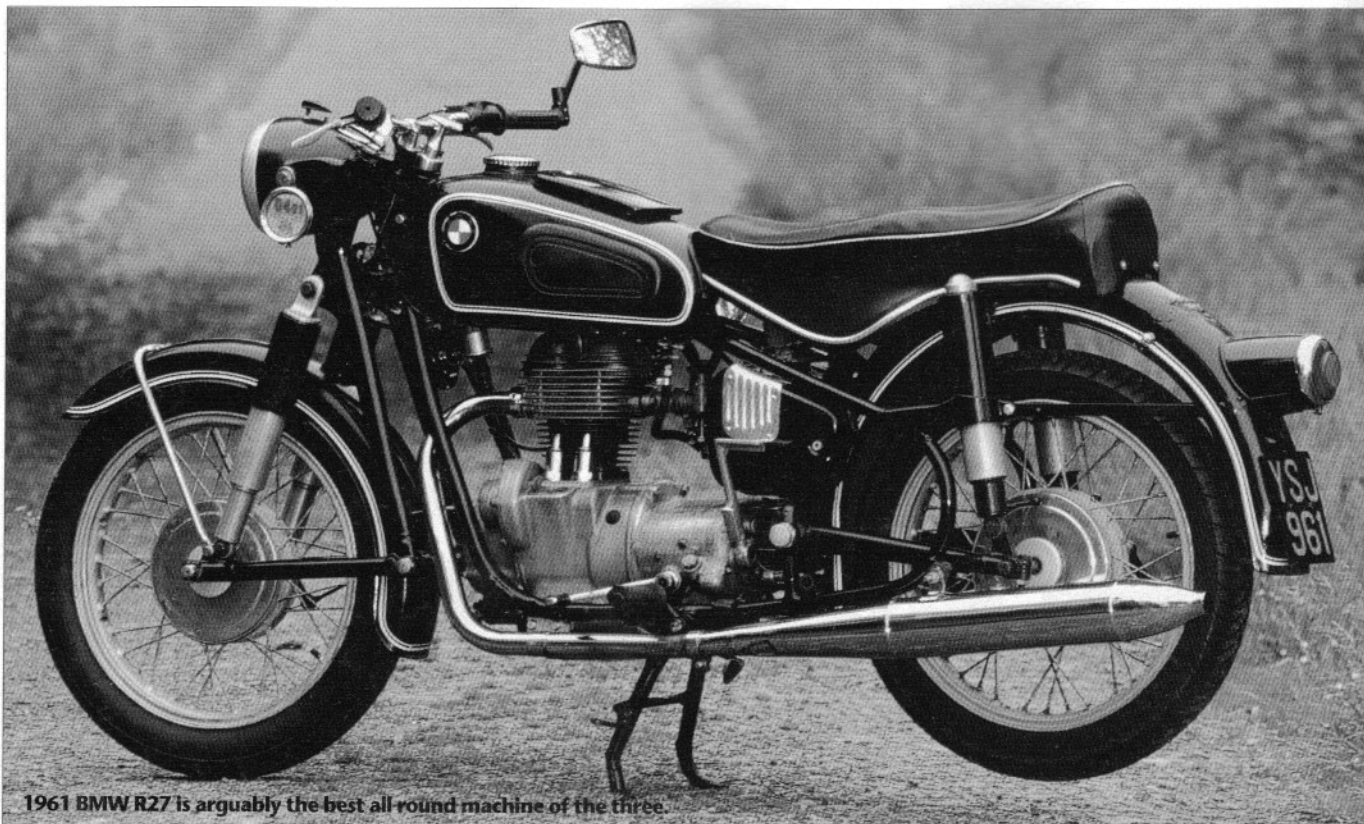
The R27, introduced in 1960, was the last of the line. This time, BMW's plodding development programme led them to leave the frame alone while upgrading the engine. A higher compression

Fact File

1956 BMW R26

Engine type	ohv single
Capacity	245cc
Bore x stroke	68mm x 68mm
Output	15hp at 6400rpm
Compression ratio	7.5:1
Lubrication	wet sump
Carburettor	Bing
Electrics	Noris
Gearbox	four speed in unit with engine
Transmission	shaft drive
Suspension	Earles fork/swinging arm
Tyres	3.25 x 18in front and rear
Brakes	6in drums front and rear
Tank	15l
Seat height	31in
Wheelbase	54in
Weight	348lb
Top speed (est.)	75mph
Consumption (est.)	70 - 80mpg
Price new	£263
Price guide now	£1500 - £2500

Club contact BMW Owners Club, Membership Secretary, Keith Wills, Lough House, Berington Lough, Berwick upon Tweed, TD15 2PP.
Vintage Motor Cycle Club, National Secretary Sharon Jones, Allen House, Wetmore Road, Burton upon Trent, Staffs DE14 1TR.



1961 BMW R27 is arguably the best all round machine of the three.

ratio and other internal changes boosted output and peak revs. Happily, you cannot tell if the vibration also increased. Like Sunbeam before them, and Norton afterwards – Munich decided that if the vibes could not be eliminated, they could at least be disguised by rubber mountings for the motor and exhaust.

At tickover you can feel the power unit trying to escape from the frame, but as soon as you open the throttle, the joggling disappears – and does this model go! Top speed is around 80mph, and the motor is turbine smooth at engine speeds that were astronomical for a road-going single in the early Sixties. It

is reportedly possible to cruise an R27 at 70mph without overstressing it or yourself, and I can believe it. The stability of the leading link forks seems more suited to this faster machine, and when fitted with a dual seat it shakes off the old-fashioned look of the other singles. If the R25 is a perfected C11G, then the R27 is what the BSA C15 SS80 could have been in a parallel universe.

So, you pay your money and you take your choice. The earlier model is docile and nimble, the later model is fast and stable. I'm inclined to agree with critics that the in-between version has little to offer over either, but its owner

has been happy with it during two periods of ownership lasting over 30 years, and that says more than my brief ride. What is indisputable is that while none of the post-war R20s has the same character as their bigger brothers, they all offer a style and quality that was sadly lacking from their British competitors. ■

Fact File

1961 BMW R27

Engine type	ohv single
Capacity	245cc
Bore x stroke	68mm x 68mm
Output	18hp at 7400rpm
Compression ratio	8.2:1
Lubrication	wet sump
Carburettor	Bing
Electrics	Bosch
Gearbox	four speed in unit with engine
Transmission	shaft drive
Suspension	Earles fork/swinging arm
Tyres	3.25 x 18in front and rear
Brakes	6in drums front and rear
Tank	15l
Seat height	31in
Wheelbase	54in
Weight	356lb
Top speed (est.)	80mph
Consumption (est.)	70 - 80mpg
Price new	£330
Price guide now	£1500 - £2500

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The 250s were put together with every bit as much care and attention to detail as the larger twin cylinder models.