

Bahnstormers

The preserve of French cops and rich motor cyclists everywhere, were the Earles-forked BMWs of the '60s everything the high price tag suggested? To find out, we rode back to the Cold War Europe of Billion Dollar Babes and the Odessa File...

Story: **Part B** Pictures: **Frank Kletschkus**

THERE'S SOMETHING QUINTESSENTIALLY *French* about BMW flat-twins of the '60s. Perhaps it has something to do with all those doses of grainy *films noir*

where squadrons of white-gauntleted *flics* pursued Citroen-loads of Jean Gabin types through the impossibly narrow lanes of Frenchville at whatever speed the projector could be cranked up to.

Like our motorbike cops, the French *gendarmarie* rode BMWs but with rather more style and aplomb. Most French police BMWs were fitted with the leading-link front forks developed by Ernie Earles principally for sidecar use and criticised by saloon bar bikers for a wide range of dodgy handling characteristics when fitted to solo machines. If it seems odd that such xenophobes would buy their police bikes from the country that spanked them three times in seventy years, their decision has to be seen in the light of the absence of any credible motor-cycle industry in postwar France. The British police took a similar decision a few years later.

In any case, BMW machinery of the '50s and '60s was of extremely high quality as the extremely high prices

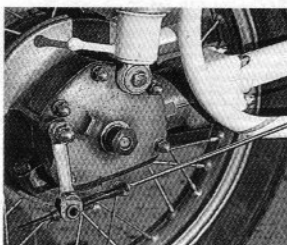
across their range indicate.

At £530 in 1960, a new sporting R69S cost nearly twice as much as *two* new Triumph Bonneville while the slightly humbler 500cc R50 would set you back £437, all of which was pretty academic for the average Joe. And it was hardly as if those aspiring to owning a new example of the Bavarian Motor Werke's finest could get a toe-hold with the baby of the range, anyway, the 250cc R27 vertical single costing a whopping £330 at a time when the BSA C15

could be had for around rather less than two hundred notes. There again, the latter's performance was more akin to its electric namesake of the '90s than the sturdy Teutonic thumper of the day.

Most pundits know that today's flat twins trace their lineage back through machines like the R50 to the BMWs of the '20s and some accede that BMW nicked the concept from the British Douglas design but few people know much about the single pot Beemers. In the aftermath of Germany's defeat

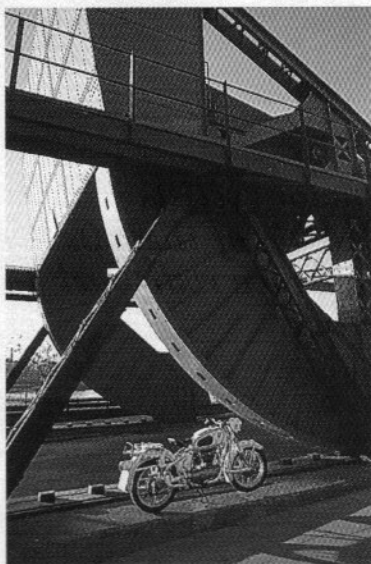
in 1945, the occupying powers sought to deprive the Germans of any means



Right:
though rarely seen
on British streets,
the single was very
popular in Germany.

Far right:
twin's clock shows
a higher km/h
potential.

Below:
think Cold War,
think Ingrid
what's'ername who
cut the Beatles'
hair...



with which to make war - no table
knives and so on - and motorcycles with
their potential and reputation for

marauding, obviously came under this
aegis with the result that their manu-
facture was proscribed.

The ban was gradually relaxed to allow
two-wheelers of up to 250cc and BMW -
who'd been making saucepans (despite
their potential for use as military hel-
mets...) - duly unveiled a 250cc machine
at the 1948 Geneva Show in the form of
the R24 from which the R27 was devel-
oped. In a sense, the engine is simply
half-a-twin turned on its side but so sim-
ple a description implies that the single
wasn't sophisticated.

Because of the vibration inherent in
one-lung layouts, the engine was rubber-
mounted along with the exhaust system.



By the '60s, the rigid frame had given
way to the sprung frame of the R27 and
Earles forks were offered as an alternative
to the prewar pattern telescopes. Fin-
ished in the usual white pinstriped black
livery, the singles and twins were also
available in negative form: white with
black pinstriping.

Where the R27 engine was rubber-
mounted, BMW saw no need to isolate
the twin engines which, as long as they
were in good condition and with syn-
chronised carburettors, were as smooth

as ever. In these motors, the crank is
arranged so that the pistons move
towards and away from each other in
their bores, hence the 'boxer' moniker.
The theory is simple in that the inertia
forces as each piston reaches the extent of
its given travel in any direction cancel
one another out leading to a smoothness
and stability only disrupted by the rota-
tional effect of the flywheel. To have it
any other way would result in some pret-
ty lethal handling characteristics shut-
ting off, for instance, at speed on the
approach to a tightening bend.

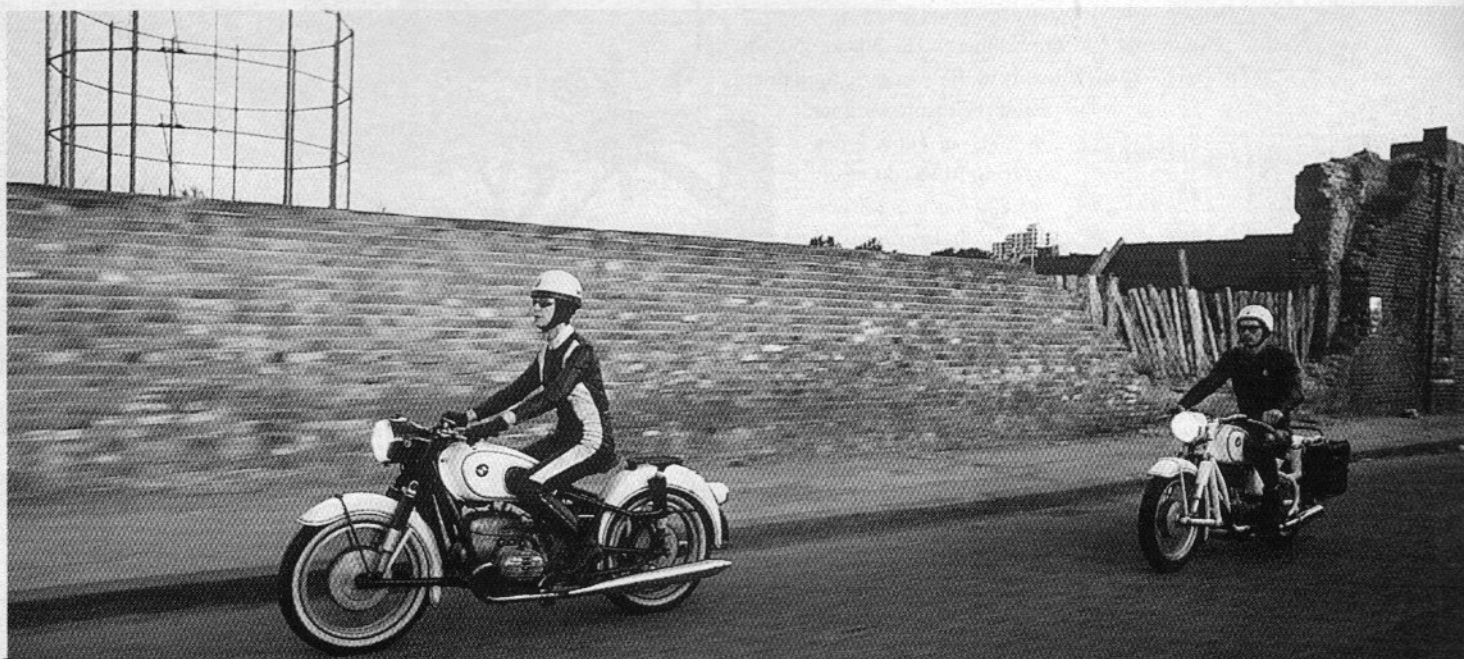
Our test R50/2 is a late example of the
breed dating from 1968 while the R27
dates from 1962. The 500 was found last
year in a barn in the South of France and
is an ex-Police machine although it bore
none of the hallmarks of careful mainte-
nance associated with BMWs but many
indications that it had spent years in the
Chimpanzees' Tea Party enclosure in
some zoo. The R27 had enjoyed an easier
life in relative terms although items such
as the silencer were well past their sell-by
date. Oddly enough, BMW silencers of
this general period were as prone to
Quick Rot Syndrome as anything turned
out by the Japanese.

At a glance, the two BMWs could be
identical although the difference
becomes clear pretty quickly and, in any
case, the 250's frame is slightly different
to that of its larger brother. Both models
originally ran on 18" alloy-rimmed wire
wheels but the R27 wore 3.25 profile
tyres while the R50 was fitted with 3.50
x 18 covers. This R50 has a combination
of 4.25 on the rear and 4.10 on the front

Specifications

BMW R50 1955-1969

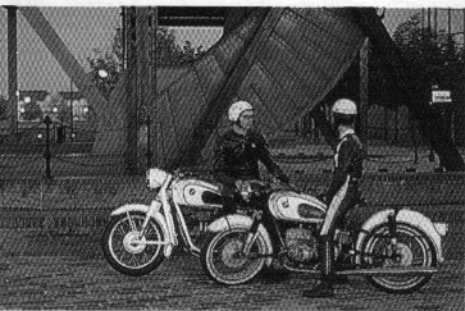
engine	ohv flat twin
bore	68mm
stroke	68mm
capacity	494cc
cr.	6.8:1
carb.	Bing 24mm x 2
power	26bhp @ 5800rpm
gearbox	4-speed
tyres	4.10 x 18in. front fitted 4.25 x 18in. rear fitted



which adds to the beefy appearance as well as making the steering a little heavier especially in low-speed manoeuvres. White Wall tyre paint looks great...for about a week no matter how careful your preparation and application.

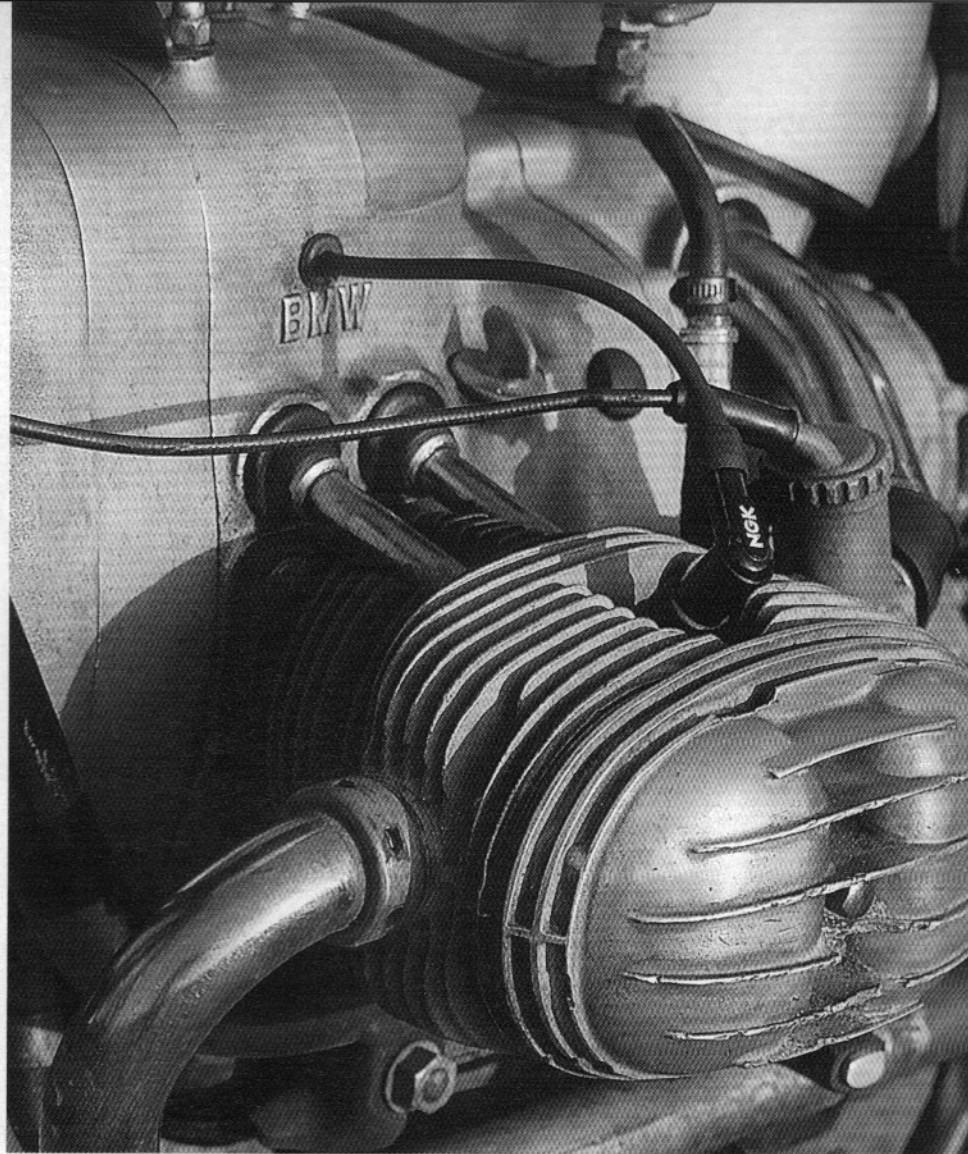
Both Beemers have shagged silencers as decent patterns are not only very expensive but also quite hard to obtain. The R25 silencer has been 'manxed' with a hacksaw in the approved manner, leaving a gaping black hole. The rider grins but the neighbours scowl. Straddling each one in turn, there isn't much difference - the R27's wider 'bars aside - as the low centre of gravity masks the obvious disparity in engine weights. Where the R50 uses rubber sorboblock springing for the cantilever saddle, the smaller model has a soft spring running up through the frame, a design inherited from prewar days.

Potholes, sleeping policemen or, indeed wide-awake (are there any?)



policemen can be taken at quite high speeds with a *boing-boing* rather than a spine-compressing *crunch-crunch*. Rear shock units on both models have a convenient knob for easy hand adjustment although the units fitted to the Earles forks are non-adjustable. As with any leading link design, the front end rises slightly under heaving braking while the front brake can be applied with relative safety when canted over in a bend. Donkey-like grunts and squeaks from the suspension on the move have a vaguely lulling effect...especially on anyone with Latin blood in their veins.

Both machines were extremely easy to start; the approved drill involves approaching the machine on its centre-stand from the lefthand side, tickling the Bing float or floats and prodding the transverse pedal firmly, following the arc through with about a quarter-throttle. It helps immensely if the ignition is turned on beforehand. Compression is so soft on both engines that they can be fired up by



hand from the saddle (*check for dog deposits first, though - Ed*). With practice, you can kickstart astride the bike but the described ways are somewhat more dignified and in keeping with the whole '60s Cool Stu Sutcliffe image. For real system types, there's a window in the engine casing for checking the optimum position of the flywheel prior to starting up.

It's usually rather optimistic to try for an as-new impression when road-testing old bikes nowadays because of differences in spec, whether due to improvements or just plain cack-handed maintenance over the years. Compared to a contemporary British bike of similar power and status - BSA C15 and Triumph 5T for instance - neither BMW is exactly lively away from the lights nor, indeed, anywhere for that matter but they are far smoother and quieter.

Rather wooden in action, the twin-leading shoe front brake fitted to the 500 is unexpectedly effective while the single's front stopper has more 'feel'. At moderate speeds under normal braking, the front end gives the impression of immobility although the suspension is of

course working away quite happily as riding alongside and watching will show. Under heavy braking, the headstock rises visibly which is a new experience for many people.

Cornering on these bikes is a joy because of the low centre of gravity which affords a pendulum effect as the mass shifts out from underneath the rider...but at the expense of scuff marks

Above: 68x68mm sq. dimensions make for an enviably smooth ride.

Left: both models shown are still used for daily transport.

Specifications

BMW R27 1960-1967

engine	single ohv vertical
bore	68mm
stroke	68mm
capacity	247cc
cr.	8.2:1
carb.	Bing 26mm
power	18bhp @ 7400rpm
gearbox	4-speed
tyres	3.25 x 18in. front ribbed 3.25 z 18in. rear block



Above: £2,500 should get you an R27 in good condition.

Right: single pot version was rubber-mounted, but if the twin's carbs. are kept balanced, a smooth ride should result.

Below: more realistic km/h figures on the BMW R27.

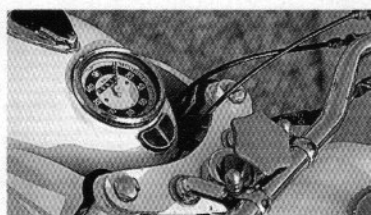
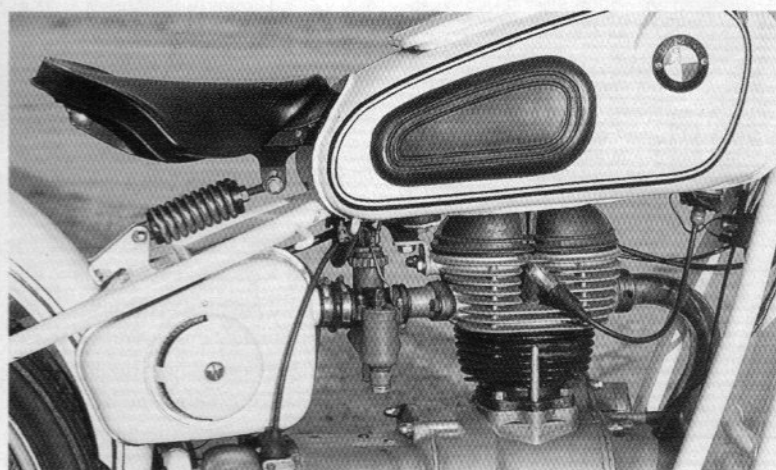
on the rocker covers in the case of the twins. If only today's BMWs exuded such characteristics.

One feature which provokes thought is the offset of the rider's footrests in relation to the cylinders which are, of course, staggered to accommodate the diametrically opposed crankpins, the left rest being forward of its counterpart, the toes tucked in behind the leaky carbs. BMW S riders, like Guzzi men, never extinguish cigarettes underfoot for this reason. Steel toe-caps are out unless you have size three feet as there just isn't enough space.

Gearchanges tend to be on the clunky side in best BMW tradition but missed gears are very uncommon as a result. A question of swings and roundabouts. With an engine speed clutch, the take-up through the shaft drive, introduced on the R32 back in 1923, can be quite sudden with indelicate

posh-looking gents' mounts are, it's worth remembering the successes achieved by works riders like Georg Meier in the 1930s on what were, in the case of the R50, essentially the same machines. In 1937, a blown 493cc

Dutch onanist Mijneer Gatsonides - Ed), others get their kicks from whirring across the Alps or the Pyrenees on a '60s Bee-Em, fully-laden with camping equipment and happy in the knowledge that, once sorted, the engine will get



throttle control resulting in slight skidding of the rear wheel until the novice gets to know how to apply the *one-tup-three-one* shift sequence.

Clutch action on the R27 was a little soft and the motor needs to be spinning before the horses can take the rear wheel by storm. Mild though these rather

BMW achieved 173mph (279kph) along one of Adolf's autobahns, setting a record not outdone until 1951 while the works team blew the opposition into no man's land in the 1939 Isle of Man TT with their blown racers, instigating an FIM ban on superchargers immediately after the War.

But BMW will always be thought of as sensible, respectable, polite mounts for the discerning rider rather than relics of the Rock'n'Roll Age. Where some get their jollies howling around the North Circular under Stonebridge on a souped up Brit twin with rearsets and clip-ons (*Not any more thanks to that*

them where they're going...which is more than you can claim for British machinery of the period.

Around town, imagine the looks from stereo-blasting drug dealers as they click that the enamel badge - a throwback to aircraft-making days in the Kaiser's War - on your very stylish motorbike is the same as the one on the front of their travelling emporiums! Unlike BMW cars, owned these days by gangsters and city dealers - which comes down to the same thing in the end, the old BMW tourers of the Golden Years maintain the image so carefully nurtured by the style-conscious Bavarian family firm.