

Single-cylinder BMWs may be regarded as poor relations of the larger twins, but they make a lot of sense for a rider who isn't in a hurry. Nicely made and finished, these 250cc shaft-drive machines are dignified and different.

But which is the better bet: the plunger framed tele-fork model, or the later one with swinging arm rear suspension and a leading-link front fork? We tried both.

Mike Anson, a one-time Vincent owner, paid £9 for his 1955 250cc BMW R25/3 in the early 1970s. It was in a sorry state, but ten years later he overhauled it, with a little outside help, and now uses it for club runs and rallies.

John Lawes, BMW marque specialist for the VMCC, and the vintage model expert of the BMW Club, acquired his 1956 R26 from a friend in London in 1981. Thought to have covered 120,000 miles, it is original, used almost every day, and receives only routine maintenance.

The BMW R25/3 stems from the pre-war R23 with telescopic forks and a bolt-together frame. That model reappeared in 1949 as the R24 but was modernised for 1950 to become the R25 with interchangeable wheels, a welded frame, and plunger rear suspension.

The R25/2 of 1951 was much the same, but the R25/3 introduced two years later was a great improvement with 18in diameter light-alloy rims on QD wheels, full-width hubs, and damping for the telescopic forks. The R26 of 1955 was considerably modified, having long leading-link forks, swinging arm suspension, and an all-enclosed shaft drive. The front fork was made under licence from the original patentee, Ernie Earles of Birmingham.

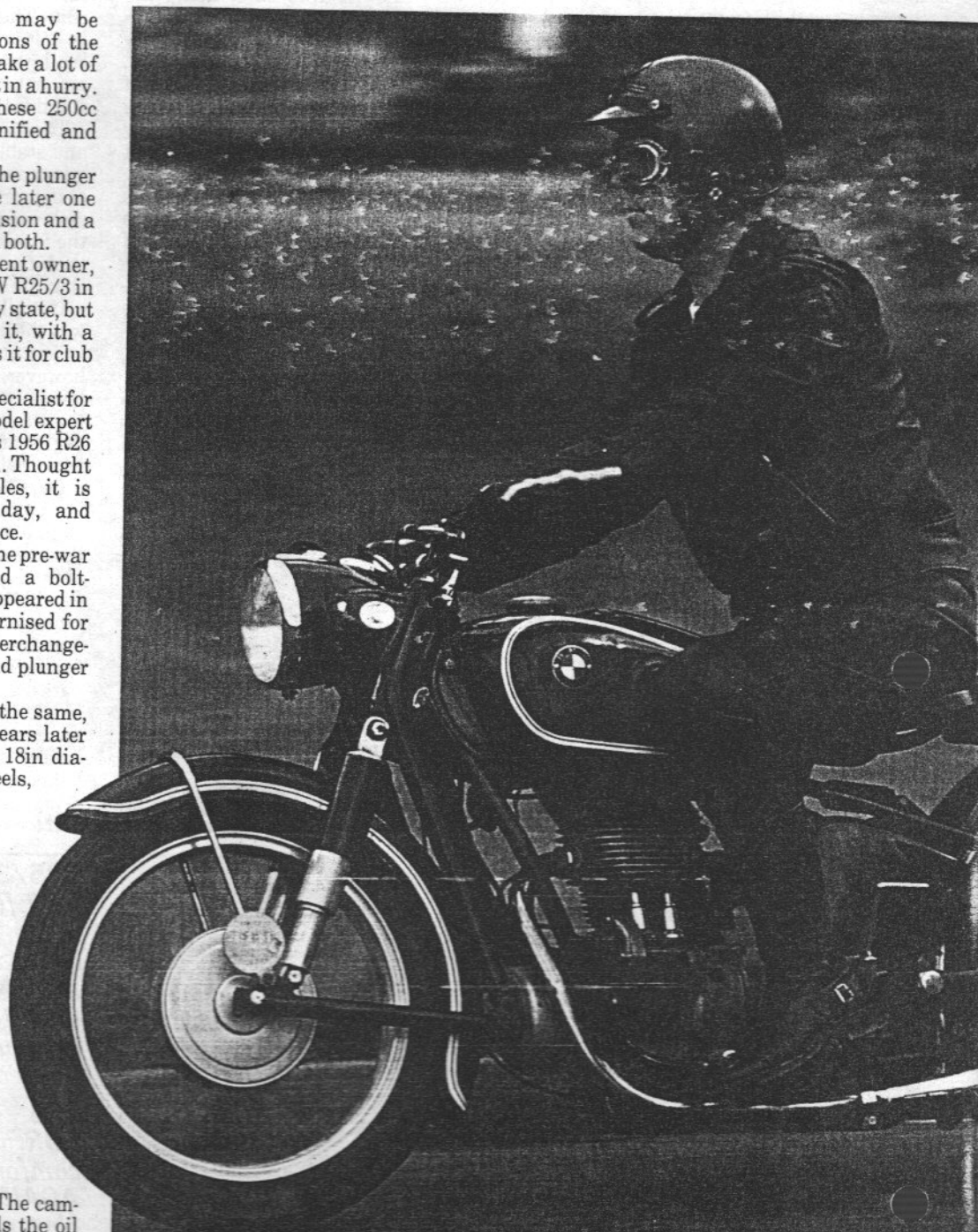
BMW's robust, wet-sump, ohv in-line power units used throughout were like half of the 494cc R50 horizontally-opposed twin, with a light alloy cylinder head, and a caged roller big-end on a three-bearing crankshaft driving a single-plate dry clutch and flywheel at the rear. The camshaft is chain driven and propels the oil pump via a skew gear and shaft. A dynamo drives off the front of the crank.

BMW's quarter-litre singles offer comfort rather than speed. R26 (left) has Earles forks, earlier R25/3 has teles.

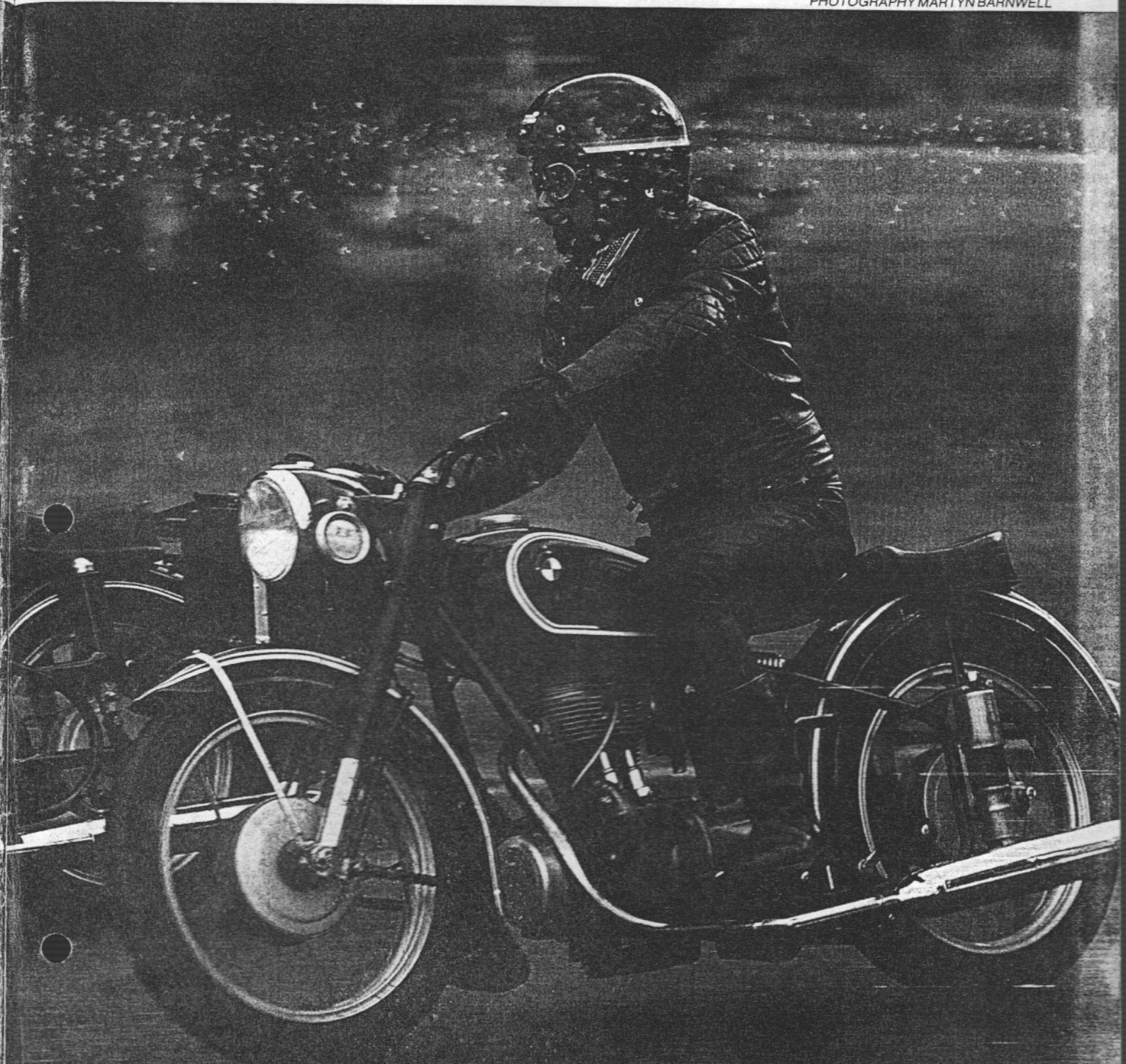
ROAD TEST

250cc BMW R26 and R25/3

by Peter Dobson



TWO HAL



LIVES OF A TWIN

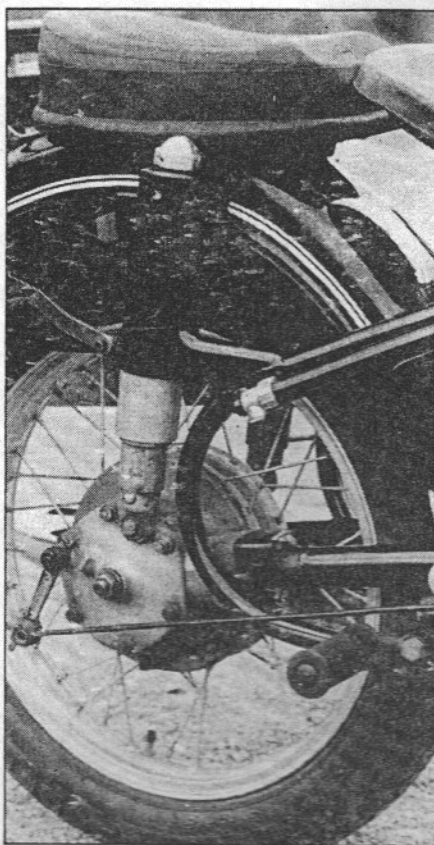
ROAD TEST

The design was gradually uprated to increase the revs and boost power from 12 to 15bhp, partly by raising the compression ratio from 7:1 to 7.5:1. Mike Anson's earlier single has a 24mm Bing carburettor which breathes via a 27in-long tunnel passing through the tank to a filter just behind the steering head. This arrangement was claimed to give extra power and improved torque, probably due to its still-air-box effect. But the Earles-fork model, which inhales from a filter box immediately behind the engine through a 26mm instrument, revs more freely.

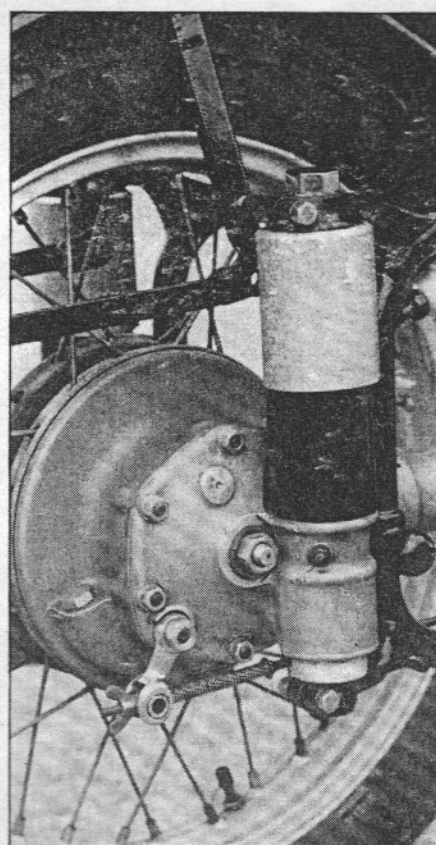
Both machines have four-speed gearboxes bolted to a clutch housing integral with the crankcase and, as usual for a BMW two-wheeler, the final drive is by shaft and helical bevel gears. Sidecar outfits powered by 250cc machines were not unusual on the Continent. The frames have sidecar fittings, and the makers offered an alternative low-ratio final drive, but both test machines have solo gearing.

Coil ignition is standard to both models, with automatic advance/retard mechanisms mounted on the 60W Noris dynamos which supply 6-volt current for the lights and horns, as well as the points-triggered ignition. Headlamps are by Bosch, and by all accounts good enough to make night riding practical and safe: not always the case with other 6½in, six-volt

Below: owner John Lawes on his R26. Steering is slow, but precise



Later singles have swinging arm rear end with fully enclosed shaft drive



R25/3's plungers have no hydraulic damping: they gave a choppy ride



ROAD TEST

depending on which way the wind is blowing. The makers claimed a top speed of 70mph, and pressing on downhill the needle of the headlamp-mounted speedo would hover in that region. At this speed, another hazard caused by the slow-action twistgrip presented itself. Until you are used to it, there is a danger of going into bends rather faster than intended.

The brakes (as I discovered!) are both pretty effective. The rear brake pedal was nicely placed beneath the offside boot, but very near a protruding engine bolt, which I mistakenly jabbed with my foot at first. The large, full-width alloy hubs may give an impression that the brakes are of generous proportions but the central drums are only 6¼in in diameter.

What are they worth? £750-£1500

The brakes and wheels of the R25/3 are identical to those of the R26, which is nicer to ride in many ways. The suspension especially is superb at both ends. The wheels may go up and down but the ride is firm and level, even under heavy braking, for the Earles-type forks have an inbuilt anti-dive effect in this situation.

Although a little higher off the road than the 25/3, the later machine was not designed to be thrown about either. The steering is both accurate and positive, although the fork felt noticeably 'slow',

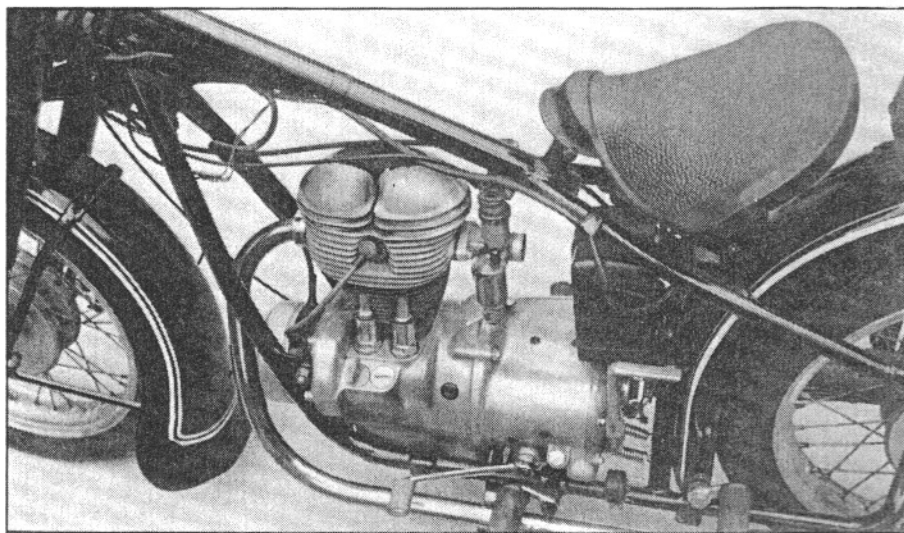
and the general handling is steady and predictable. You have to beware of the stand and silencer scraping the ground if you are too enthusiastic in bends.

I was instantly at home on the supremely comfortable R26. With narrowish 'bars', a narrow tank, and well placed footrests, the riding position is ideal. The Pagusa saddle is a marvellous device, perfect for long distance touring. Spares for it are still available in Germany; or you can buy a complete seat for £100. Later BMW singles had a dualseat which is considered nowhere near as good.

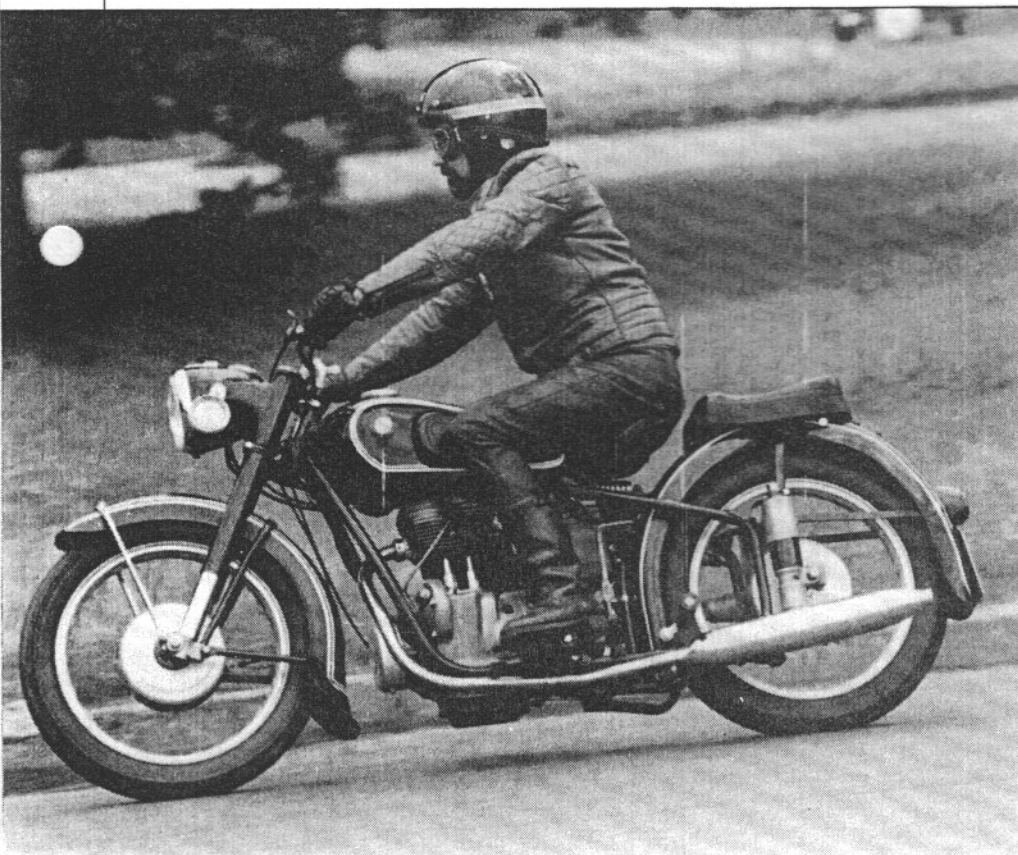
The engine performance of both machines was much the same. The later model should theoretically be slightly faster through the gears, but the vibration from the test example was discouraging. The engine, not surprisingly, is tired: that it goes reasonably well unrestored at such high mileage is a tribute to its sturdy construction.

Like most classic enthusiasts, neither owner cares too much about fuel consumption, but 1950s' roadtests quoted 80mpg at 50mph. Most maintenance is simple, although if the fuel tank is removed it must be drained first, as the two sides of the tank are connected by a balance pipe.

Reliable, oiltight and cheap to run, the 'baby' BMWs are increasingly sought after, but hard to find in the UK. Few were imported, as prices in Britain were so high. For example, in 1956 the R26 cost £257, only £3 less than a 500cc BSA Gold Star. People buy BMW singles for comfort more than speed, and the later Earles-fork type excels in this respect. I think it is the most comfortable motorcycle I have ever ridden □



BMW's in-line engine: like half of the better-known twin. This is the R25/3



Mike Anson on his R25/3. Seat and footrests are mounted low

specifications

BMW R26 (R25/3)

ENGINE

Type: ohv single **Bore and stroke:** 68 x 68mm **Capacity:** 245cc **Compression ratio:** 7.5:1 (7:1) **Carburation:** 26mm Bing (24mm Bing) **Output:** 15bhp @ 6400rpm (13bhp @ 5800) **Electrical:** Noris 60W dynamo, 6v battery, coil ignition.

TRANSMISSION

Clutch: single-plate, dry **Gearbox:** 4-speed.

CYCLE PARTS

Frame: tubular, duplex **Suspension (front):** long leading-link fork (telescopic fork) **(rear):** swinging arm, adjustable units (plungers, undamped) **Tyres:** (front): 3.25 x 18in Continental **(rear):** 3.25 x 18in Dunlop (Pirelli) **Brakes (front):** 6.25in (160mm) s/s drum **(rear):** 6.25in (160mm) drum **Seat height:** 30in (762mm) (28.75in) **Ground clearance:** 4.5in (4in) **Dry weight:** 348lb (330lb) **Fuel capacity:** 3.3 gal (2.65gal) **Oil capacity:** 2.2 pints

PERFORMANCE

Top speed: 73mph (70mph) (est) **Fuel consumption:** 80mpg