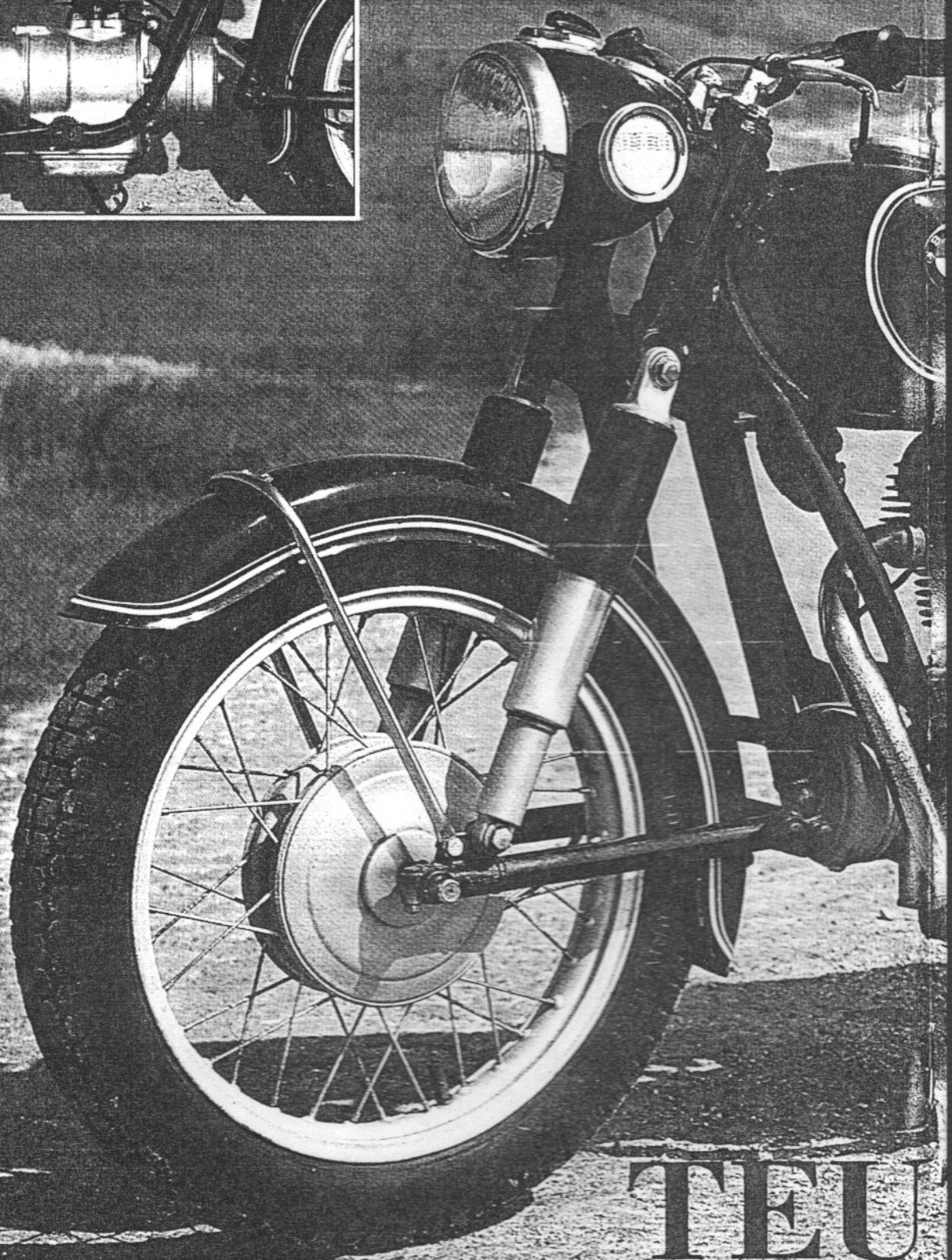
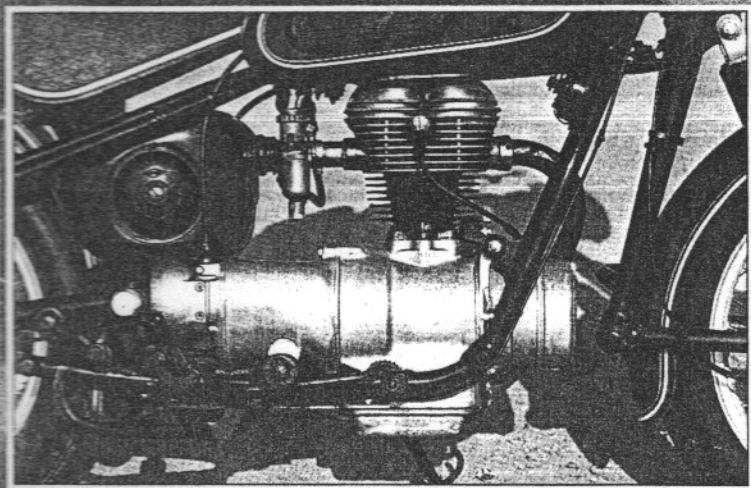
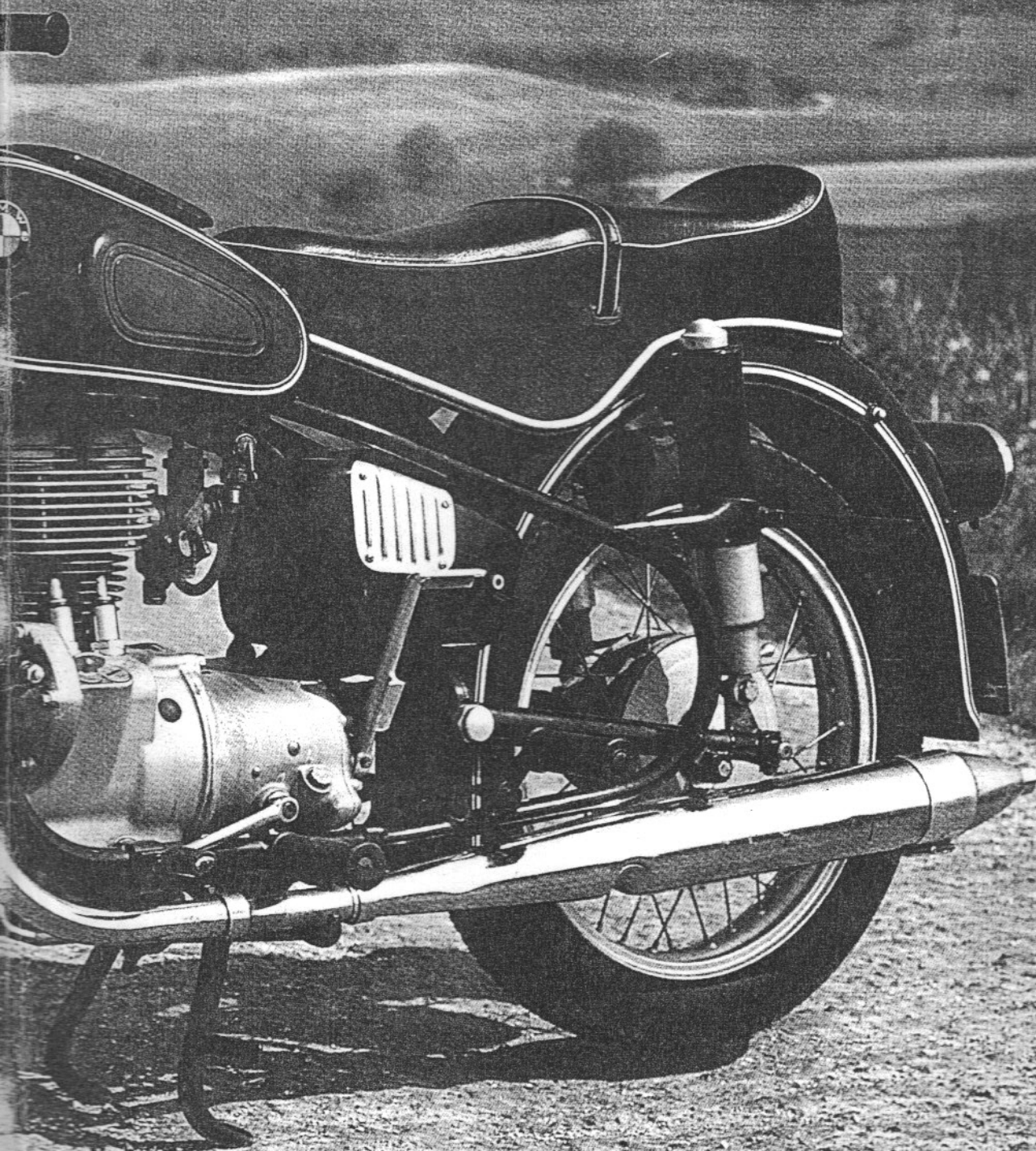




TEU

Tucked away in a Wiltshire valley is an R26 BMW that still looks like new. Phillip Tooth put it through its paces; photography by Martyn Barnwell.

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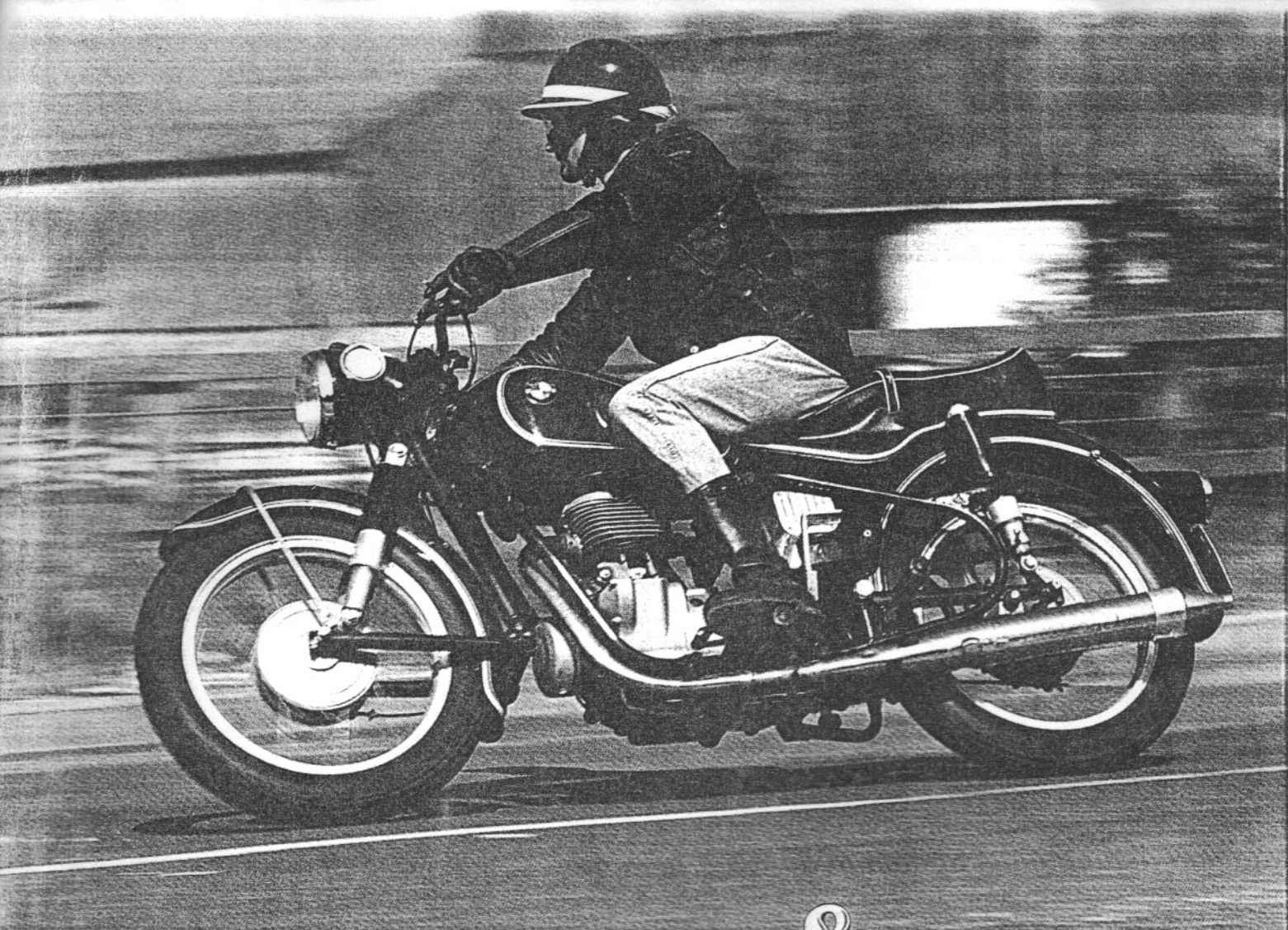


TONIC TIDDLER

Motor cycles built for covering high mileages with a minimum of fuss are often bought for the wrong reasons,

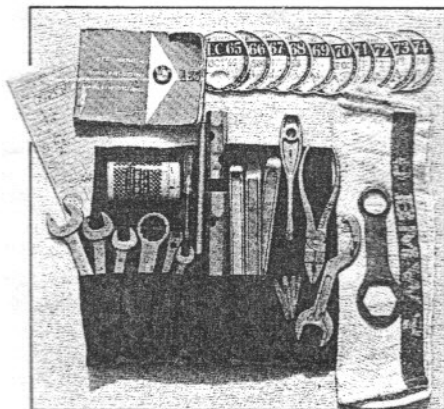
prestige or an excess of wealth amongst them. Thus we find BSA Bantams that have been round the clock carrying their

owners to work, or side-valve singles still pulling the family outfit, while at the back of some suburban garage rests an



Instead of diving, the front forks lift on braking. You soon get used to it.

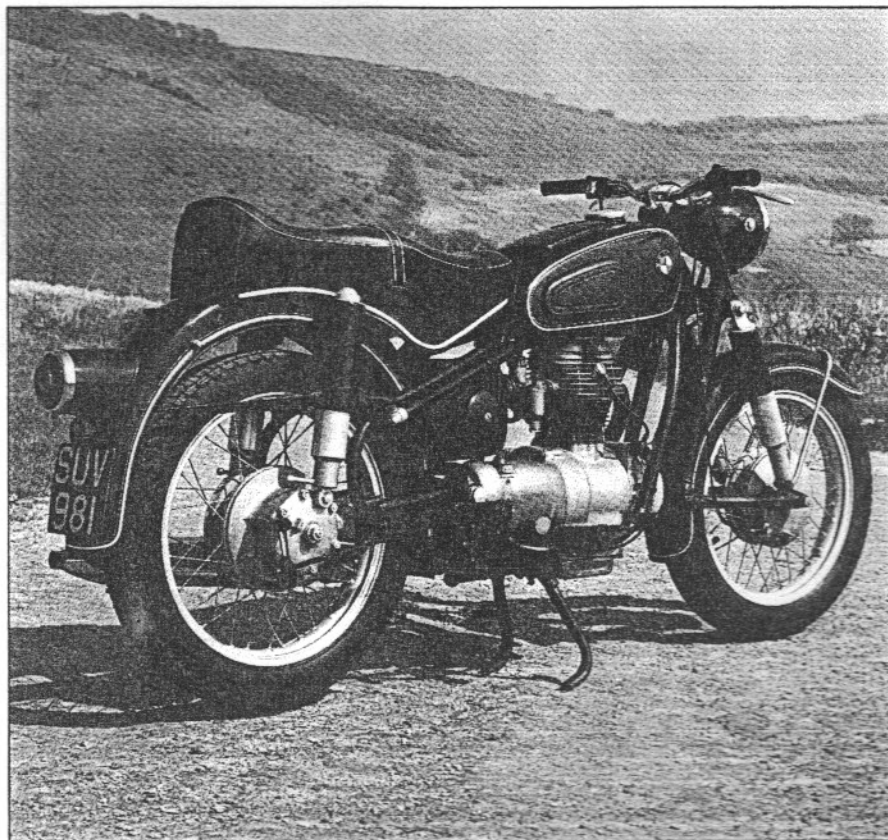
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A sign of a cherished motor cycle: toolkit, handbook and all tax discs survive.

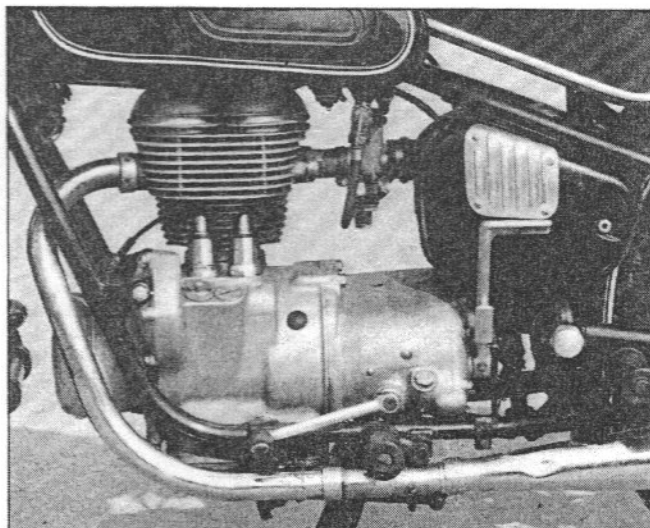
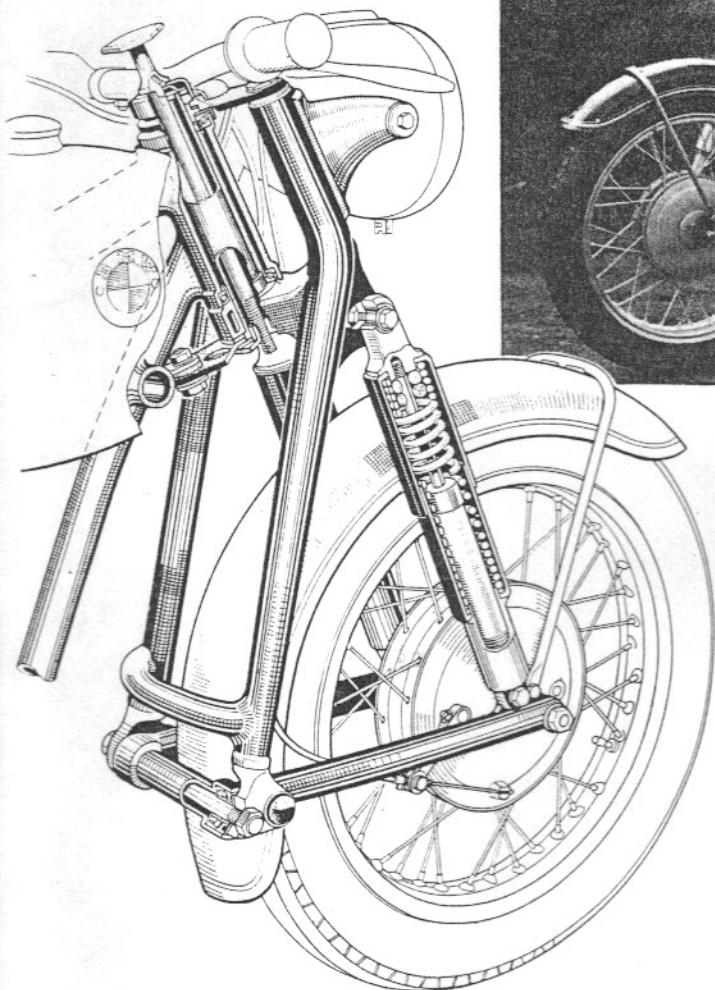
expensive machine with the odometer barely into five figures after 10 years or more.

The BMW R26 that Brian White has just bought was originally sold by the concessionaires AFN Ltd, of Falcon Works, Isleworth in April, 1956. At a time when the 1000cc all-alloy, four pipe Ariel Square Four, with its top gear performance of 10 to 102mph, would cost you £260 plus purchase tax, the 250cc Bee-em would set you back just £3 6s 5d less. But the first owner paid extra for a Schorsch Meier dual seat in



Right: Photographed with 1000 miles on the clock, the 250cc single wears a silencer from one of the twins.

Below: Earles pattern front fork can be adjusted for sidecar use by moving the spindle forward, thus reducing the trail.



Alloy bash plate prevents scuffing the enamel when using the kickstart. Single disc dry clutch operates inside flywheel.

place of the standard sprung saddle (adjustable to cater for riders between 132 and 220lb) and a side stand. Having stumped up that much, you'd expect him to have got his money's worth, but no. It was sold to George Robinson in 1966 with less than 1000 miles on the clock.

George never rode the R26 to work, but used it on the weekends and for holidays with his wife. A larger machine might have seemed a better bet for carrying two people and luggage but he was short in the leg and so the 30in seat height suited him. George liked the look of the little BMW, and besides, he was not in a hurry. He never rode it flat out, preferring to enjoy the views as he headed for the West Country or the Isle of Wight.

The R26 was taxed every year until 1974, during which time all servicing was entrusted to a motor cycle shop in Caversham, near Reading. And in those years, the recorded mileage crept up towards the 10,000 mark. Now in his late eighties, George accepted that he

wouldn't be throwing his leg over the Bee-em for ever, and decided to pass it on for someone else to enjoy.

When Brian took delivery he simply cleaned out the carburettor and re-set the ignition timing: "It was too advanced, and it would let you know," he says, smarting at the thought of a healthy kick-back. "The tyres are original, and I didn't need to adjust the handlebars or foot-rests. Everything falls nicely to hand."

Twenty-three years after the last model rolled off the production line, spares for the singles are still available from the factory — if you can afford them. But Brian will not be rushing to replace the silencer. It has a cut-away for a stand: "It is off an R60, but that is the one it left the factory with. A photograph of the bike just after George bought it shows it in place."

The Bayerische Motoren Werke AG were in trouble in 1956, in spite of considerable success on the race tracks of Europe. In September, the Munich factory had dismissed 600 workers because of falling sales. Total production had

slumped to 15,500 machines, barely half the previous year's output, despite the introduction of revised models throughout the range. It is not surprising that if there was a shortage of correct silencers, one from the twins would be used instead.

The 250cc BMW suffers the same ignominy as the Vincent Comet: with one cylinder less than their illustrious bigger brothers, both are often labelled as somehow only half a motor cycle. But Brian White doesn't see it that way. He has one of the 600cc models in his garage, and feels that the R26 complements the twin. Both have the quality build the German marque is renowned for.

A factory policy to use single cylinder engines for all motor cycles under 500cc had been in operation since 1925. The first single, fitted to the model R39, produced 6.5hp at 4000rpm from the 250cc overhead-valve engine. With 30 years of development behind it, the R26 boasted 15hp, about as much as a contemporary 350cc Royal Enfield.



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Mechanically, the R26 engine is quite straightforward. The extended crankshaft of the in-line engine carries the dynamo armature at the front, and the large diameter single plate dry clutch at the rear. A chain drives the camshaft on the left of the engine, with the oil pump driven by a long shaft and skew gear from the camshaft. The crankshaft assembly runs on hardened journals in ball races, and there are 'carefully balanced counterweights to ensure vibration-less operation'.

A four speed gearbox is bolted to the clutch housing — an integral part of the crankcase — and final drive is by the well-proven cardan shaft running in the right hand swinging arm. If the R26 BMW looks much larger than your average 250, it is hardly surprising as most of the cycle parts and the gearbox come straight from its twin cylinder brothers. It should be unburstable.

The 250 single starts easily. There is no choke fitted, so for cold starts the Bing carburettor needs to be flooded. Then the kickstarter is depressed a couple of times with the throttle slightly open — the 7.5:1 compression ratio doesn't need a heavy boot, and the outward arc of the lever discourages speedy swings — before the ignition is switched on. A green light indicates neutral; a red one that the charging system is not yet functioning. One more sweep of the kickstarter and it settles down to a reliable tickover.

First gear goes in with the distinctive clonk associated with an engine speed clutch. The ratios are not well chosen; bottom is much too low for anything other than starting off on the steepest hills, and although second will take you up to around 40mph, it is not a gear that it is easy to pull away in without high revs and slipping the clutch.

But the engine is a willing worker, carrying two adults weighing a combined 20 stones, up a 14 per cent hill in third gear at an indicated 40mph. The BMW factory offered the R26 with a higher final drive ratio for sidecar use, the Standard sidecar coming complete with a hydraulically braked wheel. Three up on a 250cc single? It's possible, but cruel.

Top speed for the solo was claimed to be 72mph. A bad vibration period at around 45mph encourages you to ride through it, but in spite of the counterbalance weights on the crank assembly there was another at about 60. It was a problem common to all the 250cc singles, finally cured when the factory mounted the engine and gearbox unit on rubber bushes in 1960.

In spite of those 15 horses, the engine seems sluggish. It may be due to the power sapping shaft drive, but is more likely because of the twistgrip. "There are two chains on the BMW," says Brian, "one on the camshaft, the other in the twistgrip." Designed once more for long life, it has bevel gears and a cam, while the bowden cable slips into a fine pitched chain in the drum. The initial opening is commendably slow, making



for ease of control at low speeds, but although it is geared to open quicker after about one-third throttle, it still takes a couple of handfuls to get it wide open. George Robinson must have loved it.

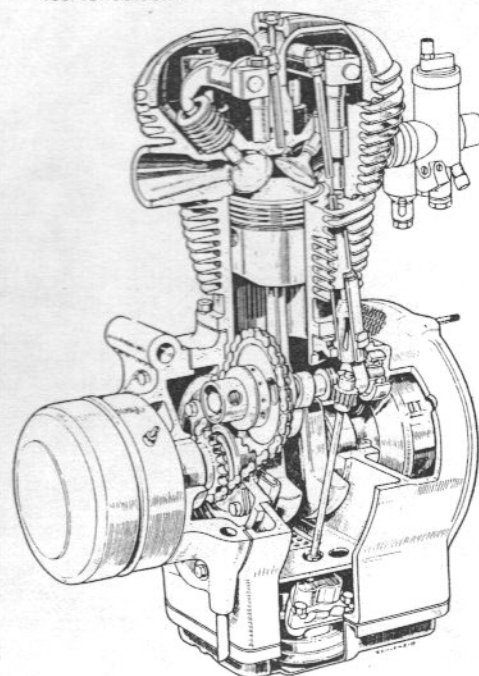
That engine speed clutch and the widely spaced ratios do not make for the best in gear changing, but a pause in pedal movement before letting in the clutch helped matters considerably. A faster change produced a noticeable clonk as the cogs went home, but as Brian points out, the R26 is not meant to be a racer.

It is most at home in hilly country and narrow lanes, where out-and-out performance takes second place to manoeuvrability and handling. Over rough ground, thanks to that low bottom gear and the slow action of the twistgrip, the Bee-em will let you trickle along, picking your way around obstacles with the clutch fully engaged. With the rear suspension units set on the lowest position the soft springing soaks up the bumps, but for fast road work it pays to jack them up to the position recommended for carrying a passenger. The steering damper is unnecessary on a solo, although it would stop an outfit from shaking its head.

One of my pet hates is struggling to pull a machine onto its centre stand, but here the two-fifty gets full marks. There is a peg on the stand so that it is easy to hook it out with your boot, and it rolls the 346lb of Teutonic engineering up as gently as a soufflé rises. Which begs the question, why are the modern boxer twins such hernia-inducers?

After a morning's ride through the byways of Wiltshire, the R26 would still tick over with the same metronome beat of a cold engine. Not a drop of oil sullied the outside of the casings, and the enamel looked as good as the day it left the factory, but on lifting the clutch a

Petrol tank holds 3.3 gallons in spite of space lost to toolbox.



There are two chains on the BMW: one drives the camshaft.

squeal could be heard from the engine unit. The clutch pushrod was running dry after so many years standing, and will have to be whipped out and greased.

Not much to do after nearly 30 years storage. But then, the BMW people thought of everything: the handbook includes comprehensive instructions on laying up the motor cycle for long periods of storage. So next time you pass those suburban garages, stop and think. There may be a low mileage motor cycle built for riding long distances, just waiting for someone to blow away the cobwebs.

