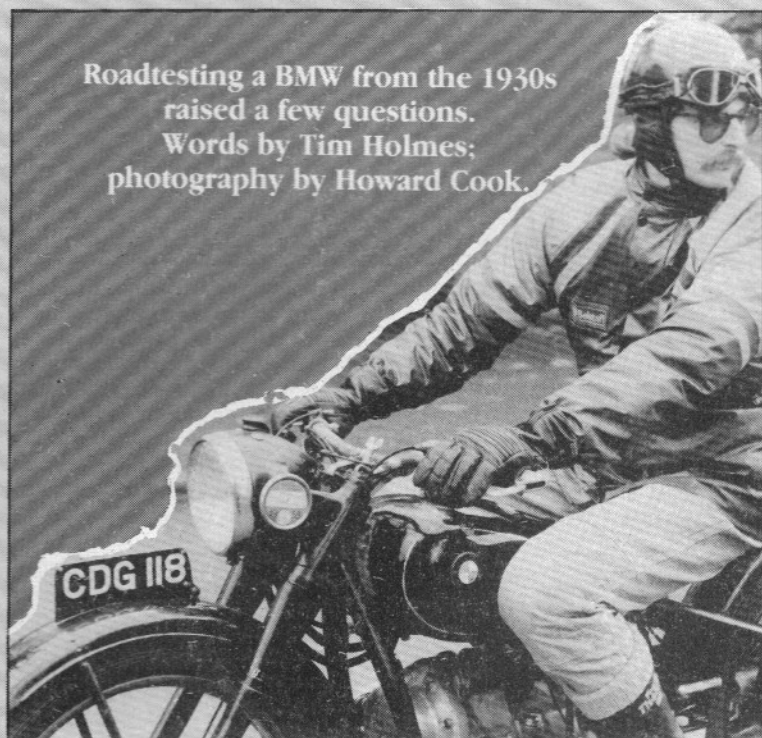


THE BENEFIT OF HINDSIGHT



Roadtesting a BMW from the 1930s raised a few questions.
Words by Tim Holmes;
photography by Howard Cook.

The R5 is smooth, powerful and comfortable. For a machine designed in 1936 it is little short of astonishing.

Fifty years ago, the motor cycling world was still buzzing with excitement about Edward Turner's Triumph Speed Twin. He hadn't invented the parallel twin, of course, but he had somehow invested the design with the right combination of flair, attractiveness and acceptability to create an enormous stir. Moreover, he virtually forced all the other major British manufacturers to get a similar machine onto the drawing board and into production, for, it seemed, the side-by-side concept was it.

In Germany, however, they did things differently in 1937. Not only socially and politically, but also in the sphere of motor cycling. In particular BMW did things differently, and whilst England revelled in Turner's twin, the German factory continued with the production of a sophisticated two-cylinder layout which, with the benefit of hindsight, offered a much broader avenue of development than the, in the end, blind alley of the large capacity parallel twin.

BMW were, and still are, famous for their flat twins. Again, they did not invent the layout, and it is common knowledge that ABC produced a transverse flat twin (to Granville Bradshaw's design) some years before the Bavarians.

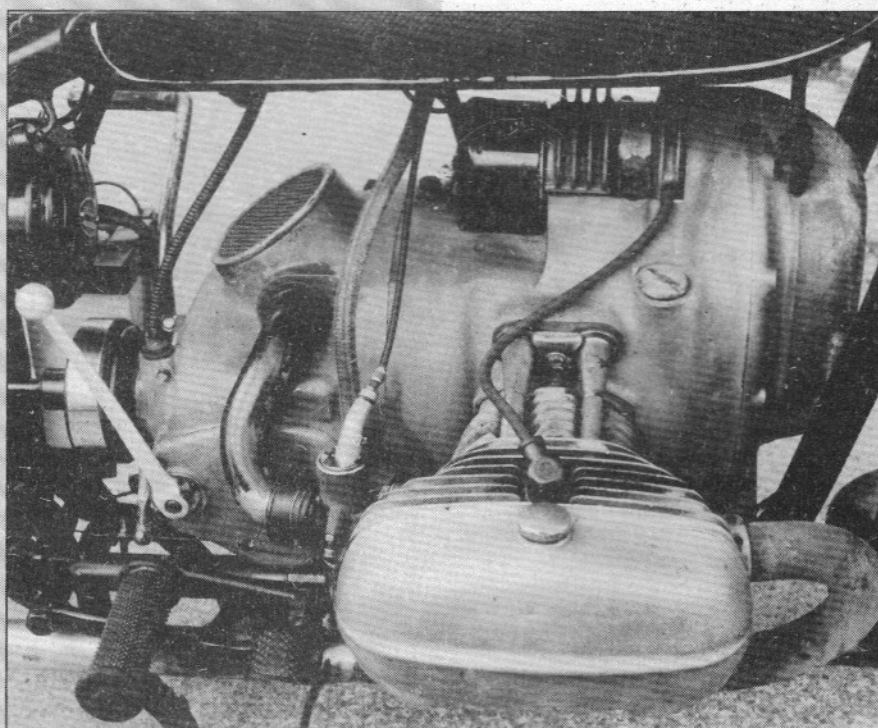
It can, however, be fairly said that BMW took the concept to a peak of success from which it has not been dislodged.

The flat twin story really starts when the company took on an engineer named Max Friz. Initially involved in the design of very successful aircraft engines, Friz turned his hand to a motor cycle unit when the terms of the 1918 Armistice prohibited the manufacture of aeroplanes in Germany. Friz's first motor cycle attempt was coded M2B15, and it was as much a tribute to Douglas as anything, for it was a horizontally-opposed twin designed to be mounted in line with the frame. It was used as a proprietary unit by a number of German companies, and in BMW's own Helios marque, but it did not really reach Friz's demanding standards, and so he set to work on another.

Retaining the essential dimensions of the motor, Friz turned the cylinder axis through 90 degrees and considerably refined the specification and engineering principles. The result was the R32, a 500cc, unit-construction, three-speed, shaft-driven power unit fitted into a duplex tubular frame with a rigid rear end and leaf-sprung front forks.

It was not a sporting machine exactly, but it was very well made, and it soon took the German racing championship with Franz Bieber, one of Friz's assistants, riding. In any event, it established a precedent which set BMW on the road to success.

1925 saw a couple of additions to the range, a 250cc single ("half" a twin turned upwards) and an overhead valve 500cc racer. Development continued along these lines, with various capacities and valve layouts, and if the twins were



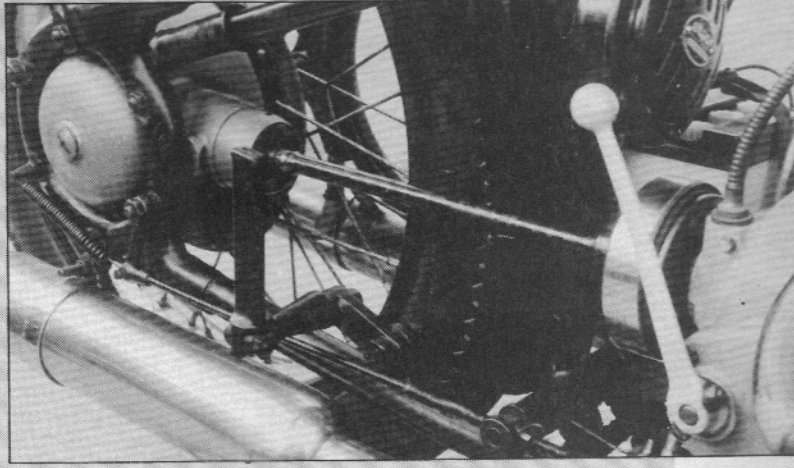
The compact motor has square bore and stroke dimensions of 68 x 68mm. Stubby lever is the hand-change, which proved essential.



A yuppie machine in yuppiedom –
the BMW R5 in London's dockland.



Note the full air filtering and the alloy valve cover (with oil filler cap) – signs that BMW were very conscious of long life and reliability.



The shaft drive looks incredibly spindly, but is not known to break in service. The housing castings exude quality.

not naturally attuned to the ducking and diving of the race track, Ernst Henne soon showed that they could do their stuff in a straight line – he started breaking speed records in 1929 and continued to do so until 1937. The 173.57mph he set in that year stood for 14 years (and was the record which Bob Berry vowed to beat when his shop was bombed).

It was not just the engines which benefited from continuous development, for in 1935 BMWs were fitted with hydraulically damped telescopic forks, the first production machines to be so equipped. That same year saw the entry of the magnificent double-overhead-cam, supercharged 500cc racer – the model which took the European championship in 1938 and dominated the 1939 Senior TT in the hands of Georg Meier (1st) and Jock West (2nd).

It was in 1936, however, that one of the most significant models BMW ever made was launched. The R5 was a 500cc overhead valve machine, as others had been, but it was a completely new design. The engine was fitted with two chain-driven camshafts, mounted high in the crankcase to keep the pushrods short, and the cylinder head featured hairpin valve springs. With a compression ratio of 6.7:1, the motor made 24bhp at 5,800rpm and drove through a four-speed, foot-change gearbox (though a vestigial hand-change was retained for many years).

The frame, too, was new, departing from BMW's tradition of using pressed steel in favour of a tubular structure which was lighter and more elegant. In essence, the modern BMW had arrived, a year before the modern Triumph.

Road tests of the time raved quietly about this superb new machine. *The Motor Cycle*, in its test of May 21st 1936, was moved to comment; "To ride the R5 BMW is to experience the real thrill of motor cycling ... The riding position is just right for fast touring ... The maximum speeds attained in the various gears are, like the acceleration figures, an eye-opener ... On the open road almost any speed up to 80mph

could be maintained indefinitely."

There were some criticisms too, of course, but the worst of these was; "Practically the only criticism that can be made against this interesting and attractive example of the modern German motor cycle is that the gear change was apt to be a trifle fierce." Well, some things don't change much, and road testers were turning in much the same kind of copy – with speed, acceleration, braking and fuel consumption figures suitably altered – for the next fifty years.

The question which inevitably arises in the mind of a motor cyclist with more than a passing interest in the history of the machines we all enjoy riding must be, "Was it really like that? Was all that praise really justified at the time, and if so, how has that particular motor cycle's reputation survived the passage of time?"

The difficulty lies in finding a suitable machine to re-test. It would be hard enough to find an original Speed Twin – one not subject to rebuilding or tweaking – let alone a rarity like a BMW R5.

Or so you would think. Actually, it was remarkably simple to find one, because photographer Howard Cook located it in the showroom of Bob Porecha, the BMW specialist of Sydenham, London. It was definitely original, but it was also very low mileage, and though it looks rough on the outside, it was (with one exception) perfectly preserved.

According to what Bob had been able to find out, it was found under a blanket in a garage after the owner's death. The owner, and there had only been one, was a Mr. Alistair Charles Parsons of Harrow Weald, who had registered the BMW on November 11th 1938. He had used it between then and the outbreak of war, but had hidden it away "for the duration". This was not just because of petrol rationing, but also because anti-German feeling was running high and to have been seen riding a German-made machine at that time would have been an act of great daring – or great folly. (This was a feature of the Great War,

too, a fact which was borne home to me very forcibly by, of all things, the purchase of a job lot of old music scores. One piece, entitled *The German Band*, had a charming coloured lithograph on the cover – spoiled only by the fact that someone had scored through the word "German" very heavily and very thoroughly!)

After the war, Mr. Parsons bought a car and only used the R5 occasionally, with the result that a grand total of 29,261 miles, as registered on the Viegell speedometer, had rolled beneath its wheels.

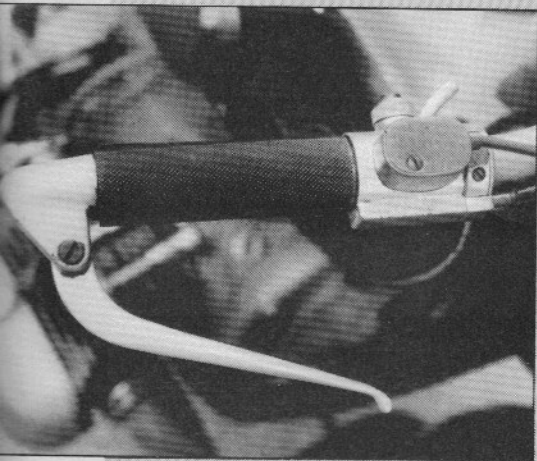
As found, the bike was smothered in grease, but after a wipe down, a new battery, new plugs and a new set of points, it ran perfectly. Even before the ignition had been attended to it fired, so Bob Porecha knew that he had got hold of something rather special.

Now, having said that it is original, I must modify that statement a little. The silencers are Burgess items, fitted by the owner but never tested, for there was no trace of carbon to be found in them; and the pillion seat and footrests, though of the correct appearance, are not factory fittings.

The R5 is not a heavy machine, and with a little manhandling it was easily taken off its plinth in Bob Porecha's

Petrol tank has a useful stowage compartment – handy for a small tool roll.





Handlebar controls are of a piece with the result of the design – inverted levers, integrated choke and one-unit horn/dip/twistgrip demonstrate attention to detail.

window and wheeled outside. With the petrol on, the Amal carbs (made in Frankfurt under licence) tickled, and the ignition switch *in* (the “key” is one of those knob-ended push-pull jobs), a good swing on the nearside mounted out-and-down kickstart lever brought the engine burbling to life.

And a very civilised life, too. It was quiet and smooth, with a rustle from the timing chain and a pleasant overall whirring. Just the kind of noise, in fact, which makes you want to jump on board and scoot off.

So I did.

Now, there is generally one immediate impression forced on you when you take to a new machine. On a 1903 Werner it may be a feeling of panic as you fumble for an unfamiliar lever on the crossbar, not quite sure if it's the one you need, as you try to control the twitching handlebar with one hand; on a 1959 Norton Dominator it may be a feeling of utter reassurance as you heel into the first bend. With the BMW R5, my first impression was of utter smoothness. Not the smoothness of a good Speed Twin, for by comparison that is but an absence of roughness; what I mean here is a positive, hot-knife-through-butter feeling.

The R5 accelerates rapidly, but it does need to be revved, and by the standards of the day, it must have seemed a very buzzy machine. By comparison with its contemporaries, it lacks what is generally defined as “torque”, but zip it through the gears and it will pull away from most other bikes of the period – and not a few which are considerably later.

Therein lies the rub, however, for the gearbox, which was criticised as being fierce in 1936, was on Bob's example both fierce and malfunctioning. Engaging first or second was no problem, though the change up was somewhat notchy, but second to third was patchy; sometimes the footchange mechanism would work, other times it wouldn't. When it didn't, the hand change could be utilised by reaching down with the right hand, and once third had been found manually, fourth would follow with the foot. It sounds complicated, but it was a lot simpler to do than to describe. The duplication of change mechanisms was also justified, though swapping cogs with the lever was even harsher than doing it with the pedal! The problem was obviously not a major one, and doubtless a small adjustment would solve it.

The ratios were very well chosen to make the most of the engine's characteristics, with intervals that were neither too great nor too close, and top gear gave a very relaxed cruising effect. The motor, if not torquey, was not peaky either and delivered power right through the range, so that it proved possible to putter along in top gear at a fast walking pace and then accelerate smoothly to 60 or 70mph.

All BMWs look solid, and it came as no surprise that the R5 handled most reassuringly, without a quiver or shake to upset the rider. It followed a line consistently, neither falling into nor standing up in corners, and alterations to a line could be made without fuss or drama. It was also exceptionally comfortable, partly because vibration levels are so low, but also thanks to the adjustable damping on the front forks, and the progressive action of the sprung saddle. Unlike some saddles fitted with pillar springs, this Pagusa model did not feel at all wobbly, nor did it crunch down to

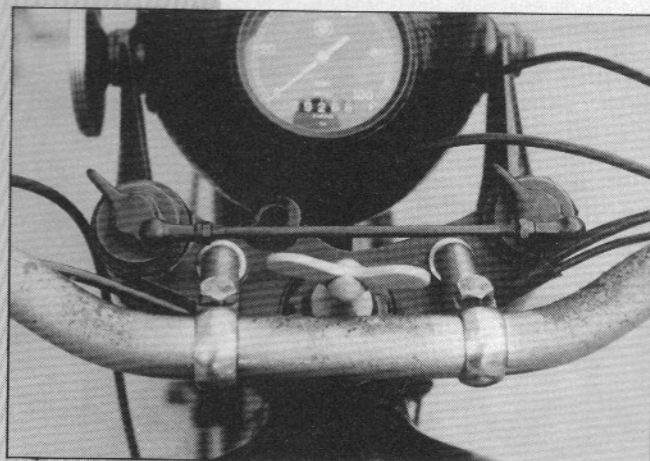
one side as you shifted weight while cornering. It is perhaps a small point that even the saddle feels reassuring, but it is one of those small points which adds up to a large whole.

Similarly, the handlebar controls are all terribly neat. Brake and clutch levers are inverted, pivoting on the ends of the bars with the cables running internally. Then, on the right hand side there is a mechanical dip switch/horn button/twistgrip and on the left an integral choke lever. At the top of the forks we have the damping controls (linked and adjustable), and the steering damper butterfly. The complete layout has been designed as a unit, and it shows.

Foot controls are equally simple and good (with the exception of the intermittent foot change, as mentioned), and treading on the rear brake pedal produced an instant squeal if care was not exercised. Unfortunately the front brake – on this example – was the most useless (drum) I have ever attempted to use. I do not believe this to be typical, for *The Motor Cycle's* tester found the front brake to be most effective, and it is possible that the effects of storage and proximity of grease have had a deleterious effect on the linings. Certainly the drum is large enough and the back plate stiff enough to do the job properly. These machines, let us not forget, were not expected to stick to poorly surfaced roads where an efficient front brake could be a positive hazard; by 1938 they had the freedom of the autobahns, with all that entails.

All-in-all, I have to agree with the tester of 1936. This is a very impressive motor cycle, and one which still does not feel dated. It is well engineered and convenient (full air filtering for the carburettors, for example); it is smooth and powerful; and it allows the rider to “experience the real thrill of motor cycling”. Thanks to a small but dedicated bunch of people like Bob Porecha spares are still available, and a fund of knowledge remains to assist the owner.

And having ridden both the R5 and the Speed Twin, a question formulated itself in my mind and would not go away. What would have happened had Edward Turner split his twin down the middle and let the cylinders hang either side?



The telescopic fork damping is adjustable. Steering damper was not used during the test.