

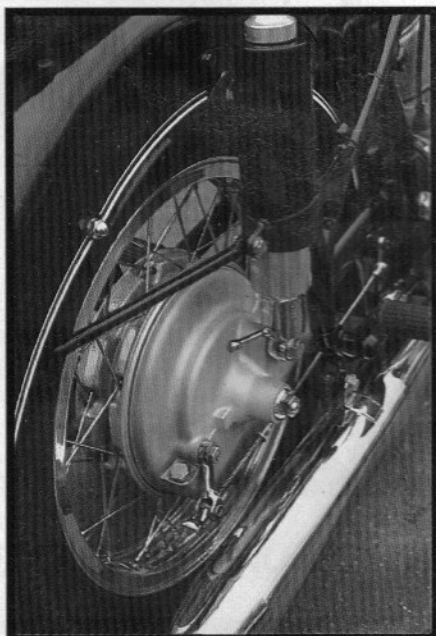
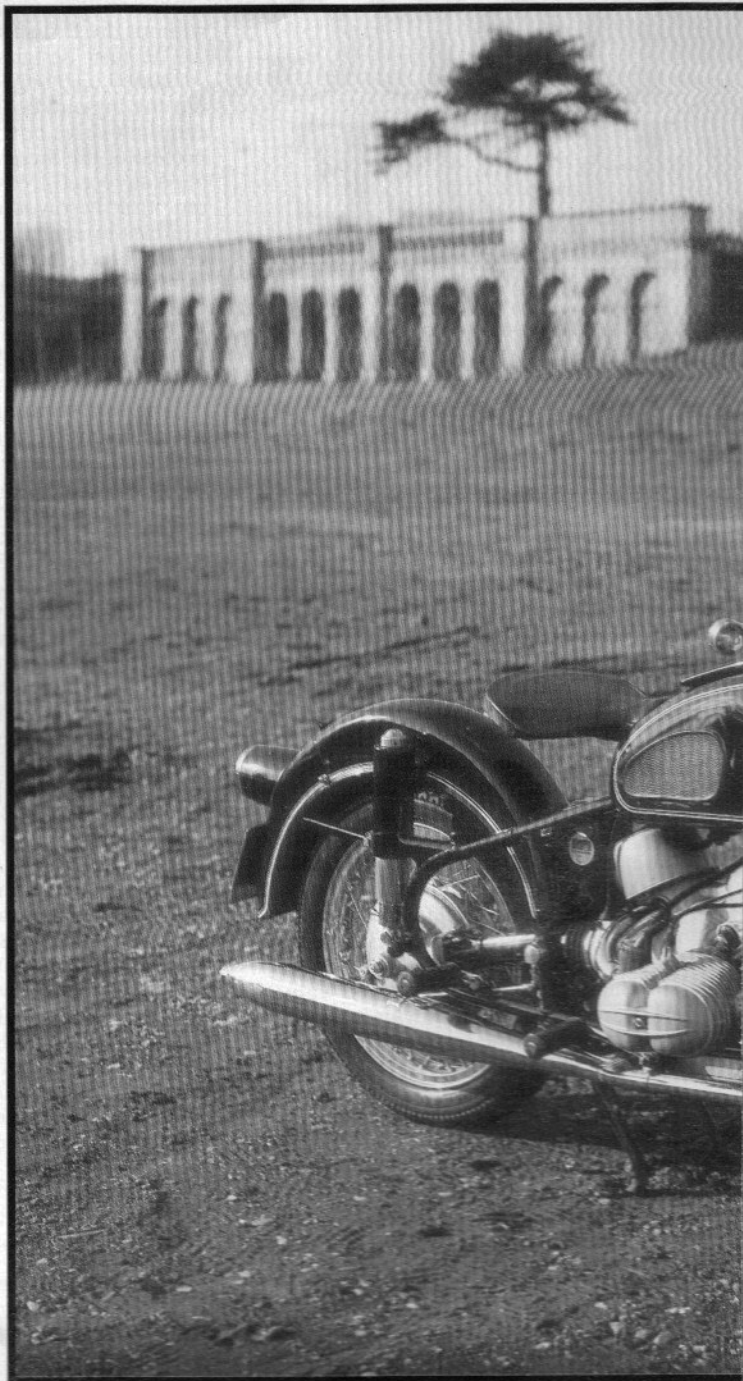
BOXING CLEVER

BMW boxer twins of the classic era combine sophistication with simplicity: Mick Duckworth tries an R69 restored by marque specialist Bob Porecha

BMW very nearly went broke in the late 1950s. Plummeting motorcycle sales in Germany and the cost of developing small cars to meet a rising demand for four-wheelers threatened to make the famous roundel trademark in the blue and white colours of Bavaria extinct. Such crises often take their toll on the quality of a factory's products, but looking at Bob Porecha's R69 model from 1960 there isn't even a hint of desperation in its luxurious solidity.

Built at a time when banks were having to bail out the Munich company, this 600cc machine exemplifies the high standards – and production costs – of the classic BMW product. Porecha, who runs one of Britain's few shops catering for Bee-Ems of all ages at 303 Sydenham Road, London SE26, is equally involved with later and current models, but he has special admiration for the engineering quality that prevailed in a bygone era. 'They were built by engineers then, not by accountants,' he says.

The former stockbroker, who originally came to Britain from Bombay in 1961 out of his love for motorcycling, can point to countless examples of how technical excellence prevailed over economies when his R69 was made. He cites how camshaft drive gears for this ohv model were available in a range of sizes from -10 to +10, to ensure a degree of tolerances approaching perfection. Later twins had the helical-





cut gears replaced by a chain: 'Not for cheapness, of course, but to suit production economics,' Porecha says wryly.

He's had the R69 since the late sixties. In those days he was already involved with Munich flat twins, customising a 500cc R50 on cafe racer lines and in the process causing a stir in the BMW Club – this sort of thing just wasn't done to the up-market Bee-Em. The 600 was bought in a damaged state: its previous owner had found it so comfortable that he'd drifted off to sleep while riding and crashed.

Porecha, who is BMW trained and formerly worked in a BMW dealer's shop, repaired the machine and used it until 1978, by which time it had clocked up 80,000 miles and was beginning to look scruffy as rust took hold of the cycle parts. He stripped it down for a full restoration, which took about three and a half years of spare moments when not looking after his customers' needs: he opened his own shop in 1986.

The crankshaft, a pressed-up assembly with three webs sandwiching roller-bearing big-ends, was sent to Germany for reconditioning. Porecha has had these cranks rebuilt in Britain in the past, but wasn't happy with the results. Correctly built, this sturdy item should last up to 150,000 miles provided that the engine oil is changed regularly: the crude lubrication system relies on a crank-mounted slinger plate to direct oil to the big-ends. Accumulation of sludge prevents this device from working properly, with dire results. Porecha strongly advises using high detergent oil like Shell Rotella or Castrol CRI in this type of engine, but it must be used from new, or from the completion of a rebuild.

All the engine's wearing parts were replaced. An expensive job, especially with the current fall of the pound against the Deutschemark, but not necessarily disproportionate to the cost of restoring other engines for the same output and longevity. German crank rebuilds are £200, pistons are £75 a pair.

Roller bearings support the crank at each end, with the rear main bearing being a special type of self-

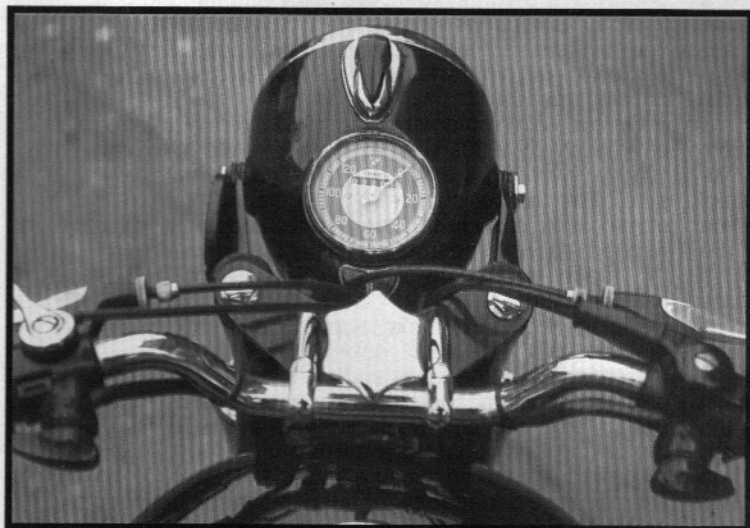
Main picture: Dating from 1960, the R69 offers comfort as well as speed and reliability

Left to right: Rear suspension setting can be adjusted from hard to soft by hand.

Bing carburettors breathe through an air filter above the gearbox.

Attention to design detail shows in switchgear and instruments.

Leading-link front forks carry effective 200mm t/s drum brake.



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aligning unit with barrelled rollers. Later used on the Norton Commando, this method of allowing for some whip in the shaft was introduced on BMW boxers in the early fifties.

Replacing bearings in the in-line gearbox demands professional skill. Porecha takes a pride in 'doing a good gearbox', the secret of which is in setting end-play accurately. Many BMW owners are familiar with the chatter from the clutch housing at tickover that results from failure to do this on later models.

Clutch centre mounting splines are another area where metal seems to have been pared away over the years of flat-twin production. 'The older ones are really tough, like on a truck,' says Porecha approvingly.

Old-fashioned sturdiness shows in the chassis too. The wheels run on taper-roller bearings of a larger size than used on later models, and this type of bearing is also used for pivoting the swinging arms of both the rear suspension and the British-designed Earles front fork. The duplex frame shows how BMW adapted to the adoption of rear springing without radically altering the tube geometry: instead of a subframe to hold the tops of the rear units, the struts are anchored centrally by clamps on loops reminiscent of BMW's pre-war rigid frames.

The spring and damper units at front and rear are dismantlable – Porecha carries a healthy stock of replacement parts for these. An interesting feature of the front suspension is the provision of an alternative fork pivot mounting offering increased trail for sidecar use. The friction-type steering damper with its handsome adjusting knob should only be needed when a third wheel is added – as it very often was to these models in the sixties.

The R69's external finish comes up to the high standard set originally. Most of the lustrous black coating was applied by Dream Machine of Nottingham, although the petrol tank managed to find its way into a Rolls-Royce plant for finishing. After bead blasting, the alloy wheel hubs were stove-enamelled silver for extra protection against deterioration from use in bad weather.

Though immaculate, the machine is not absolutely original in every detail. Porecha opted for some extra chrome plate on the rear brake pedal and cam lever, and has used some domed nuts on cycle parts. American-market handlebar switches are used, which include controls for Hella handlebar-end indicators from the slightly later R69S sports model.

Also from the S variant is the air filter housing, which would have originally incorporated a sliding choke shutter. Remarkably, the 18in Niemann alloy wheel rims and the Pagusa saddle, which is cantilevered on a rubber block adjustable for height and damping, are original items. As the engine and gearbox castings didn't mate perfectly at their external joints, Porecha smoothed out the imperfections by hand.

Riding BMW's flat-twins, with their in-line crank and transmission give a sensation that can feel strange after riding a traditional British single or parallel twin. It doesn't take long to become acclimatised to the Bavarian way, though, especially on a nicely prepared example like this. Once the awkward sideways-on kick starter has been mastered and the engine has warmed up, the tick-over is uncannily quiet.



The R69 is ideal for all-weather long distance riding.

Engaging first gear is accomplished without the clunk of protest from within the gearbox so common with later Bee-Em twins. Pulling away proves that the engine is smoothly tractable, although the exhaust note that amazed British motorcyclists of the past with its restraint seems just average these days. Some slight transmission whine from the shaft drive can be heard if you listen hard enough.

At low and moderate speeds the Earles fork gives an impression of being ponderous compared with the telescopic type, but its steering always feels precise. Over severe bumps, the front end's shock absorption and silence is exemplary compared to the average set of clonky telescopes. When the front brake is applied, instead of the accustomed dip at the front it seems to happen at the back! In fact, the forks' design causes them to rise rather than plunge in reaction to braking. The back brake on this machine is easily powerful enough, but the front, with its two leading shoes seemed weak at first, until it was appreciated that it has a progressive action and with sufficient finger pressure it matches the machine's 100mph capability.

All the controls are easy to use, although clean gear changes with an engine-speed clutch are a matter of practice. The lights and indicators are remarkably bright for a 6 volt system. Germany had its long and very fast *autobahns* long before Britain built a motorway system, so large-capacity machines were expected to be comfortable as well as reliable at high cruising speeds.

On the M25 motorway the R69 droned along effortlessly at 1980s velocity, free from vibration and without sweating a drop of oil from its wet-sump engine. The rubber-suspended saddle is supremely comfortable, though it does restrict accommodation to one person: a separate pillion seat was available for this model, one of the last Bee-Ems without a dual seat as standard.

Riding Bob Porcha's superb restoration demonstrates the level of sophistication available to motorcyclists in the fifties and sixties who wanted to, or could afford to, spend £500 on a motorcycle when British large capacity machines were available at half the price. Extravagant standards may have brought the marque near to closure once, but BMW don't seem to have done too badly out of the reputation they established in the process.