THE WORLD'S NUMBER ONE

Classic Bike

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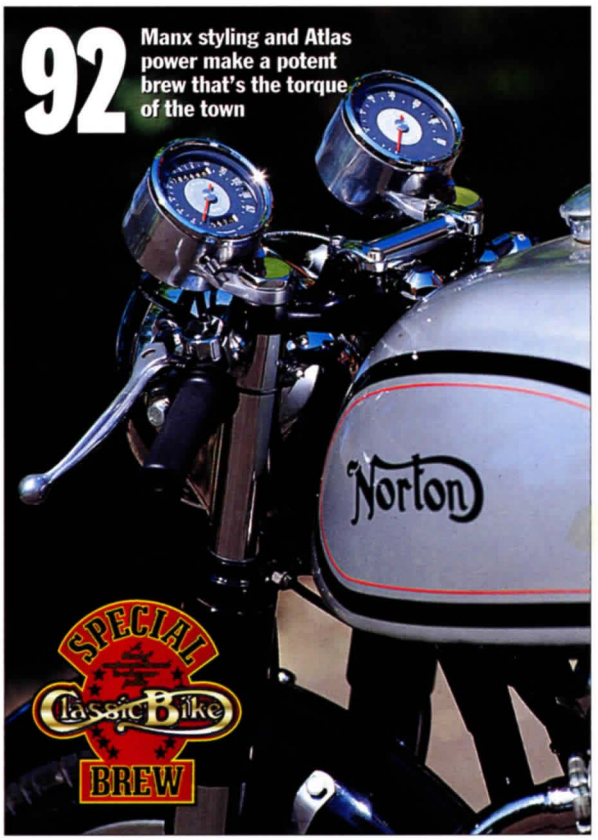
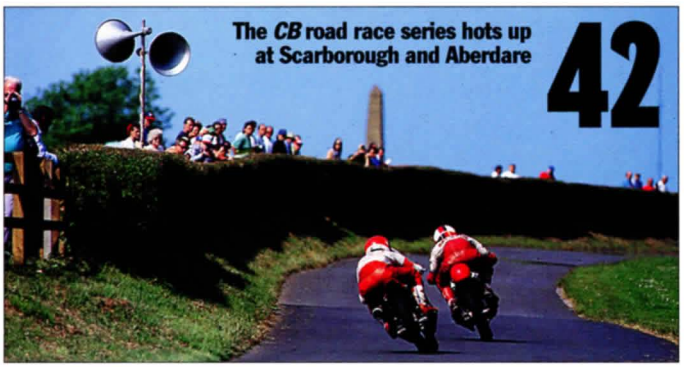
SUZUKI ITALIAN JOB

82 One US Tiger Ton Ten owner didn't pull the plug on the tub

Moto Morini Tresette oozes racing heritage, but does the show match the go? **50**



92 Manx styling and Atlas power make a potent brew that's the torque of the town



The *CB* road race series hots up at Scarborough and Aberdare **42**

16 Bella Bimota. Rimini magicians gave Suzuki's GS750 motor more go than before — and a better chassis

34 Out and about with *Classic Bike*. A new series on how *CB* staff keep on the road

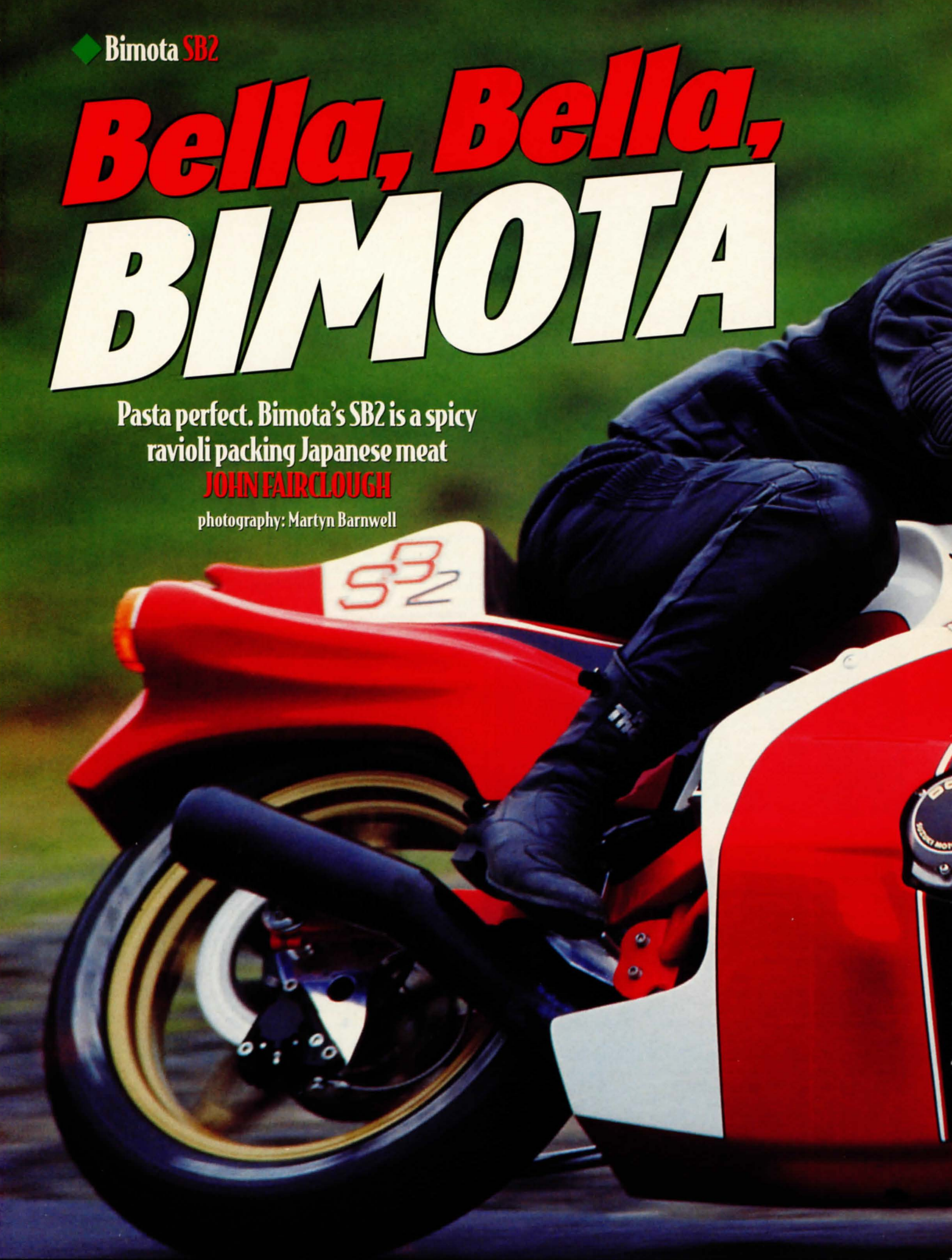
Bimota SB2

Bella, Bella, BIMOTA

Pasta perfect. Bimota's SB2 is a spicy ravioli packing Japanese meat

JOHN FAIRCLOUGH

photography: Martyn Barnwell



Superbike is a curious label first coined in the Seventies to describe motorcycles with outstanding qualities. But overuse devalued it into a generic term for any bike that cost a lot and went very fast, never mind how badly it handled.

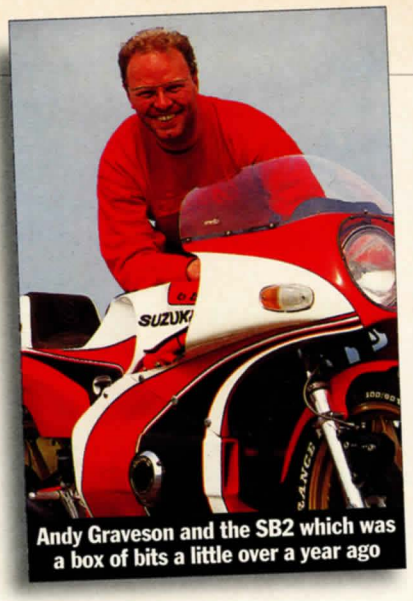
Retrospection shows how much the word was misused, for while the decade produced many motorcycles that seemed super at the time, few were true superbikes. The Suzuki GS750 powered Bimota SB2 was definitely one though. Maybe THE one.

Prestazione

EVEN BY TODAY'S standards the SB2 has a staggering amount of go. A standard motor is pretty quick, but customers able to afford such exotica usually wanted a hopped up motor too. So this bike's spec is not untypical: overbored 850cc engine; Yoshimura high compression pistons; Stage III full race camshafts; and gas flowed head.

A 10 year old dyno readout shows this Bimota produced a healthy 78.3bhp at 9000rpm at the rear wheel, with 46.3 ft lb peak torque at 7000rpm. This still adds up to serious licence shredding performance and a top speed approaching twice the legal limit.

The Bimota's lightness helps out. Perhaps 1977 claims that the SB2 weighed just under 400lb dry were a little fanciful, but add another 50 to



Andy Graveson and the SB2 which was a box of bits a little over a year ago

get nearer to on-road reality and that still makes it 50lb lighter than a standard GS750.

Riding with the tacho needle around 6000rpm — well away from the 9000-12,000 red sector — has the scenery moving by very smartly. From 8000rpm upwards things get truly blurred and you lose yourself in exhaust shriek and wind noise. Even in this state of tune, the engine is unfussy and entirely unconcerned about which gear I'm is using.

At 4000rpm in top it's making useful power, but the standard Suzuki gearbox encourages you to play tunes on the five speed cluster. Accelerate away and the racket from the motor, directed to the rider's ears by the fairing, is blown away on the wind. It also carries off the engine heat that wafts up to cook legs and torso.

You either fit the Bimota or you undergo surgery. The suede covered single seat chocks your posterior and that's where you stay. There is no room for movement. Frosted chrome clip ons hide inside the fairing. Once you've grasped the soft grips, recesses in the tank unit point out where your arms belong. Depressions for knees with hard flared edges above them let your legs know if they've strayed out of position when operating the foot controls.

The compulsory posture is short and cramped and very front wheel biased for a Seventies bike. But it works, and once on the move its rightness becomes apparent because you've become part of the bike whether you like it or not.

This obviously helps when winding the grip open, and it helps too when stopping quickly. The lightened Brembo racing calipers — no dust shields are fitted — nip the undrilled discs so well that this pilot is grateful for all the attachment points available. Delicate control is helped by short, perfectly shaped levers, the only Bimota parts on the Suzuki equipped bars. Footrests, pedals and rose joint linkages are exquisitely forged. Nothing so mundane as rubber is permitted to hide their beauty, but their shapeliness is such that no discomfort is felt through boot leather.

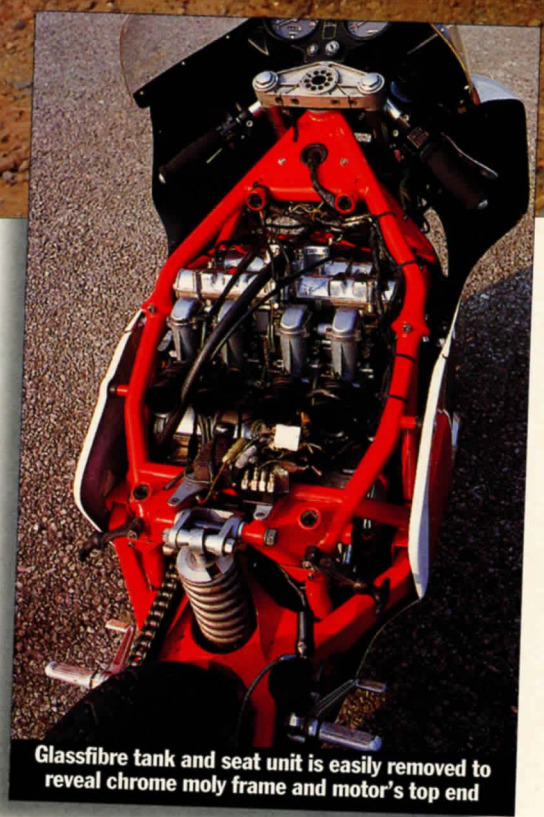
Bimota's SB2 is one of few superbikes from the Seventies that deserves the title

If other Seventies Italian bikes stop almost as well as the Bimota, none rides road irregularities like it. Front forks are racing Cerianis with 35mm stanchions, but Bimota modifications give 4½in of travel.

The single racing de Carbon rear suspension unit offers 5½in of wheel travel at the back. None of this is evident on the road since the suspension is so well damped it seems to provide a lot less movement than these figures suggest, but the simple reality is that the Bimota feels tied to the road. Even when the going gets rough enough to make the glassfibre rattle with all the musicality of a cardboard box being beaten with a big stick, the wheels never leave tarmac.

Such road holding is not allied to ponderous handling. The wheelbase is a mere 54¾in — a 900SS Ducati's is 59in —and


Bimota's racing design compromises comfort. But handling can't be faulted


Glassfibre tank and seat unit is easily removed to reveal chrome moly frame and motor's top end

the headstock is inclined at 25 degrees from vertical, so flickability is guaranteed.

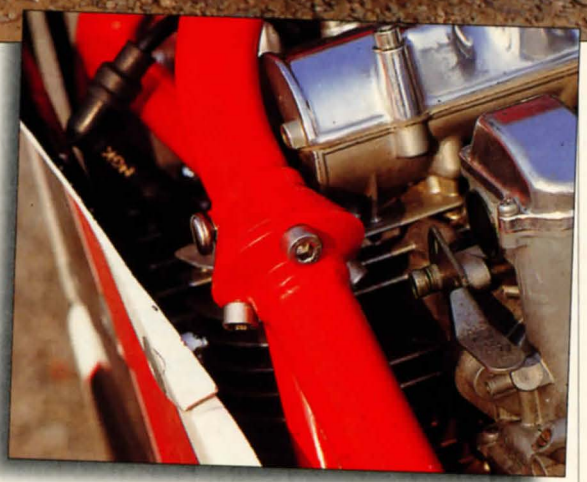
The fork legs have a slightly bigger angle of 29 degrees effected by eccentrics at the steering head. Bimota claimed this reduces trail fluctuations caused by heavy braking and gives a beneficial lever effect at the headstock to counter the rear wheel's tendency to lift and lock. The same eccentrics even allow a choice of two trail settings: 3.9in for twisty stuff; 4.7in for sweepers.

This adjustability is of little concern to the average road rider. Chassis sophistication simply translates into exemplary road manners. Changes of direction are ridiculously easy, the bike flips effortlessly from side to side, and road holding and stability are amazing whatever the speed.

A steering damper would be a pointless ornament, although there is provision to fit one for the rider who must have everything. Steering lock is generous, its limits summarily defined by the fork stanchions hitting recesses in the bottom frame tubes.

Apart from a few aches and pains after riding the bike, and an attack of cramp in the aging Fairclough left leg the following morning, sampling the Bimota was a rare treat. Only the ancient K391 Dunlop Endurance tyres interfere with the fun, the rear bringing me back to reality with a couple of hairy slides when the Bimota is banked right over.

The real world also intrudes whenever the tuppenny prop stand is used. It's poorly mounted on the footrest hanger and permits alarming angles of lean on all but flat surfaces. Possibly it's just a cunning Bimota anti theft device to stop the rider leaving the SB2 unattended. If so, it works perfectly.



Conical couplings allow top tubes to be split for rapid removal of the Suzuki engine

Tagliatelle

BIMOTA'S choice of Suzuki, Honda or Kawasaki four cylinder engines for their Seventies superbikes was sensible. Bullet proof and easily tuned, they offered top drawer performance.

The Japanese factories also supplied ancillaries which were better than contemporary Italian products, so the SB2 has Suzuki electrics, switchgear, twistgrip, instrumentation, warning lights, choke control and vacuum petrol tap.

All of this is lost in the impact of the Bimota cycle parts. The glassfibre tank/seat unit's bumps and hollows defy description and the fairing is another conversation stopper. Both fit perfectly and have shapely cut-outs for petrol tap, choke and engine covers, but their aesthetics don't compromise function. They can be removed in minutes. The tank/seat has four protrusions on its underside which locate in rubber bushes on the frame, and a couple of recessed rubber straps hold it down.

Undoing a few screws has the fairing off to reveal a frame that is an immensely strong, thin wall chrome moly steel tube confection weighing just over 20lb. It hugs the motor closely, meeting it at three points to use it as a stressed member. Only bolts retained by lock nuts are needed as a head steady; these screw inwards from each top tube to nip the cam cover.

The top tubes split at conical couplings when six high tensile socket head bolts are undone. The engine can be removed in minutes. Flexing around the headstock is impossible thanks to extensive gusseting and triangulation, but there is still room to house the ignition coils. Triangulation continues down to two discrete swinging arm brackets sited coaxial with the gearbox sprocket; so when the box section swinging arm pivots on its tapered roller bearings, rear chain tension remains constant. When chain adjustment is needed, eccentrics at the rear wheel spindle make the job a quick and easy one.

Quality fitments include gold finished magnesium wheels made by Speedline to Bimota's design. Extensive use of Avional 14, an aircraft quality alloy lighter and stronger than conventional aluminium, saves more weight. This was machined from solid billet: there are no castings on the SB2, unlike the SB2/80 and SB3. The fork yokes are works of art, enhanced by detachable rear sections that allow the complete front end to be separated from the steering head without dismantling.

The Bimota SB2 is a mobile testimony to the vision and skills of one small factory

The bottom yoke has the splitter for the twin brake pipes machined into it, not bolted on. The carrier for the rear sprocket, caliper hanger and footrest plates are Avional. So too are all washers, spacers and even the tiny eccentrics to adjust the angle of the gear and brake pedals. More weight saving comes from hollow wheel spindles and the thin wall steel tubes used in the four into one exhaust system.

Restaurazione

IN MANY WAYS this was one of the easiest restorations self confessed Italian bike nut Andy Graveson has undertaken. But it had its moments. The Bolton based enthusiast bought Bimota SB2 No44 last year from Phil Worth's Italia Classics (01522 511851) in a dismantled state. Worth had done some restoration during his 10 years of ownership. The Bimota still retains its 260kph speedometer.

Andy employed his favourite restoration expert Pete Twentyman (01204 791555) to screw everything together. "It was like trying to do a three dimensional jigsaw puzzle without the picture," recalls Twentyman. And like any secondhand jigsaw, one or two pieces were missing. Like the headlamp cover, wiring harness and various fasteners. Order of assembly, engine settings

Exquisite forged footrests and controls have none of their beauty hidden by rubber, but are comfortable underboot

Despite being almost 20 years old the SB2's futuristic lines give it the stance of a modern superbike

and electrical connections made easy by referring to a workshop manual become brainteasers when the book doesn't exist, and a Bimota's reputation for everything fitting oh so tightly exacerbated rebuild problems. In fact the rear damper and spring had just about convinced Pete and Andy that it was too large to fit and that trimming the surrounding gusset was the only way to locate it, when it inexplicably dropped into place. Even then the only settings they could unearth were for a 12 stone rider, so guesswork accommodates Andy's greater weight.

The motor raised a smile. It was together at purchase, apart from the four 29mm filterless Mikunis which were clean, wrapped and properly adjusted, so a chance was taken on its state of health. It ran perfectly first time.

Some of the paintwork wasn't as fit, so Ian Brown at Cycle Art (01204 308003) repainted the tank/seat unit and the bottom half of the fairing. A new Regina chain and a fresh battery under the suede seat got the Bimota rolling.

Conclusione

THE BIMOTA is a mobile testimony to one small factory's skill, ingenuity and pursuit of perfection. For some, gazing at the SB2 for a couple of hours won't be nearly long enough. Two hours in the saddle certainly will be because its commitment to race track standards involves a little suffering.

It's well worth it though, for this blend of tack-sharp Italian handling and Japanese horsepower offers a very special motorcycling experience. A true superbike. And I want one CB

BIMOTA BASICS

Morri (right) and Tamburini debut the SB2 at Bologna in 1977. Suzuki Italia's president and sports director look on

ALTHOUGH Massimo Tamburini owned a heating business at Rimini, he warmed more to his hobby of turning stock race bikes into red hot flyers with his special frame tubes.

One creation, a 750 Honda powered racer, aroused so much interest that he and two partners formed Bimota in 1972 to meet demand for a road going version of the hybrid, neatly assembling the company name from the first two letters of the founders' surnames: Bianchi, Morri and Tamburini. The HB1 (Honda/Bimota) frame kit of 1973 was designed to wrap round the CB750 motor and comprised chrome molybdenum frame, box section rear fork, oil cooler, Ceriani forks, twin Marzocchi rear shocks, and glassfibre petrol tank and seat. The engine was the customer's responsibility.

Racing was still the priority, and the range of frame kits increased to take motors as diverse as a Yamaha TR2 and a Paton four-stroke twin. In 1975 Bimota's frame building reputation was gilded when Jonnny Cecotto's Yamaha/Bimota won the 350cc World Championship and again the following year when Walter Villa scooped 250cc and 350cc titles aboard the Bimota framed Harley-Davidson. Interested factories now included Suzuki whose Italian importers ordered 50 frame kits to take TR500 twin cylinder race motors.

This led to plans for a GS750 powered roadster, and the SB2 bowed in at the January 1977 Bologna show. It was the first Bimota that could be had in either kit form or as a complete package and demanded a massive — for Bimota — workforce increase from 10 to 30. The show model featured a four gallon petrol tank under the engine and a pump to take fuel to the carbs. This layout was intended for an endurance race version; the road bike got an alloy tank in the conventional position beneath the swoopy glassfibre bodywork. It's unlikely that the initial plan to build 200 SB2s was fulfilled — probably less than 70 of the £3800 Bimotas left Rimini.

Next roadster was the less radical KB1 (Kawasaki/Bimota) first shown at the November 1977 Milan show. The frame housed either the 900 or 1000cc dohc four. Like the SB2, its eccentric headstock pivots offered a choice of two trail settings; unlike the frame for the Suzuki, the top tubes didn't split and the single rear suspension unit was laid flat. Two years later the KB2 was on the scene powered by the 550cc Kawasaki four; this became the KB2/80 for 1980 and then the KB2 Laser with 16in wheels and Forcella forks a year later.

The Suzuki connection continued mid 1979 with the SB3 sporting a 90bhp GS1000 engine, and in 1980 with the GS750 powered SB2/80. Essentially both were the SB2 with more conventional and cheaper to make bodywork. Even though Bimota's racing activities were spotlighted again at the beginning of the new decade by Jon Ekerold's 350cc World Championship win aboard the YB3, the Rimini company decided to cut back on GP involvement to concentrate on road machinery. Despite the HB2 and HB3 appearing in the early Eighties and the first Italian engined Bimota — the Ducati powered DB1 — showing up mid decade, strong Suzuki ties remain. The current Suzuki model is the SB7. Hot stuff every one.