

Cosmopolitan creation

Italian design, British engine, American name and marketing come together in a marvellous motorcycle.

Words: JAMES ROBINSON Photography: GARY CHAPMAN

or such a rare machine (sources vary on the numbers, with only something like 100 built according to some, up to 150 say others)

I'm in the rare position of having ridden two examples of the Tartarini-designed, Floyd Clymer-financed Indian Velocette. Both were low mileage too, and they – as one would expect – felt similar indeed.

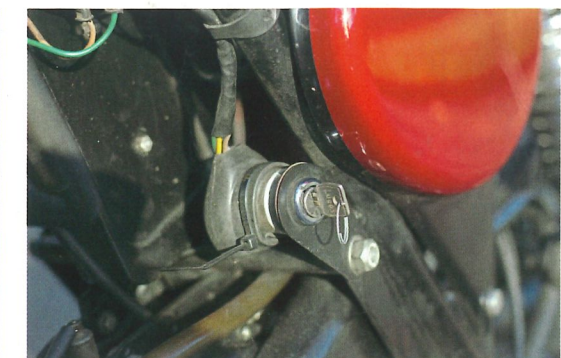
And what does that feel like? Well, the simplest analogy I can think of (and the one that came to mind the first time I rode Neil Redley's Indian some years ago) was that it felt just like an XT500 Yamaha, though the Indian predated the famous Yamaha by a good few years. I wonder if the Japanese had a look at Tartarini's design before building its own 'big single'. I'm sure I've read somewhere in the past that Tartarini had a hand, somewhere, in the Yamaha, but I can't find where I'd come across that information, or whether I've simply dreamed it up. But the riding sensation is uncannily similar. On the Indian, the rider feels to be sitting high, with the wide bars further accentuating that sensation – one sits on, rather than in, the motorcycle. Seat height, at 32in, is a good inch and half higher than a standard Venom, while the other thing about the Indian, especially compared to a standard Velocette sporting the RS (Rear Springing) frame, is that it is longer – the Indian is 55in, compared to the standard 53¾in. I was actually surprised by that statistic and I'd have wagered that a standard Venom was the longer, from optical and riding impressions.

To ride, the Indian feels a generation newer than a standard Venom, despite the fact that production overlaps. It is taut and precise, and hugely confidence inspiring. I've ridden this one for a couple of 60-odd mile journeys, and it's comfortable too; in short, it's an absolutely lovely machine to ride. If it was practical to close one's eyes when riding it, and guess what it is, then the reaction would be 'early 70s Japanese, maybe Italian, trail influenced' (i.e. XT500) whereas the same question posed aboard a Venom, particularly if it's a big tank Venom Clubman (or Thruxton) makes the answer 'MkVIII KTT'. And that was introduced in 1939.

The story of the Indian is one of recognition, opportunism and, ultimately, tragedy. In the first instance recognition – Floyd Clymer (best known as a publisher of motorcycle publications, but a former Indian and Harley racer in his own right) wanted something on which to paste the Indian name he'd acquired in 1967, and so he looked at the Tartarini-designed machine as a short cut way into production. Clymer recognised that the Italjet machine was a quality-made product and then displayed opportunism too; Velocette, of Hall Green, Birmingham, was in financial strife and so it was happy to supply engines to go into the Italian-made chassis. Add some quality components – Marzocchi forks, Grimeca hubs, Ceriani shock absorbers, alloy wheel rims from Borrani – paint 'Indian' on the petrol tank and hey presto, there's a ready-made production machine... ▶



Far left: The gorgeous front brake comes from Grimeca. It works as well as it looks.



Left: Don't forget to turn this to 'on' otherwise you'll be going nowhere...

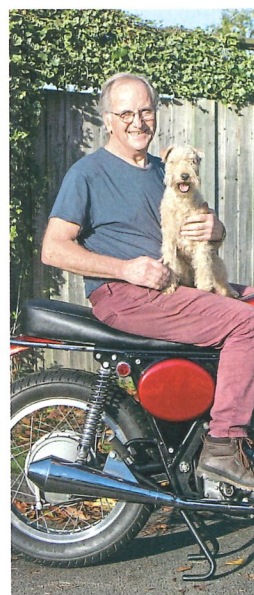


◻ We say ready made, but an inspection of the Indian does reveal a few 'short cuts' along the way. For example, the standard Velocette oil tank was used, only hidden behind side covers. And to fit in the oil tank it has – quite literally – been given a few well-placed 'whacks' so that it'll go in... And it is situated so that the filler is directly under the top rail of the frame too. Handy.

Other compromises abound. Fixtures and fittings are a mixture of Whitworth and metric, though there isn't a toolbox to carry any spanners in anyway. The petrol tank has a capacity of less than two gallons too.

Apparently, the first batch of Indian Velos were supplied in 'dusky pink' and the engine number on this machine confirmed it was one of that batch. Mike, at Grove Classics, was able to check the factory records and discovered that this engine was one of 23 Venoms that were invoiced on December 30, 1968, with the numbers running consecutively through VM6578C (C for coil) to 6600. Whether this is the exact colour this particular example is finished in we're unable to ascertain – but apparently the 'dusky pink' wasn't popular in America and so it was replaced by the more familiar gold and cream scheme most Indian Velos seem to have. Machines in publicity material seem to have featured quite a lot of blue, too, though the fact this model was in the first batch does tend to suggest its colour is correct. I think the 'dusky pink' (if this is what this one is!) is a really attractive colour.

The short, stubby exhaust on the Indian Velo gives quite some bark. I remember this from the previous example I'd ridden too – that one was, if anything, even louder. Starting is the usual Velocette drill, but



Above: Rob Drury and Bella the Lakeland Terrier.

it actually starts very easily – one of the bonuses of having a coil ignition, which, of course, delivers a big, fat, healthy spark when it comes in most useful. When starting, and this Indian starts easily, so long as one remembers to turn on the ignition, the position is somewhat fiddly, down by the left side-panel.

The owner of this Indian is Velocette enthusiast Rob Drury – it shares garage space with a Mk II Venom Clubman, a KSS and a pair of KTTs. Rob bought the Indian 18 months ago, when its aesthetic condition was not dissimilar to how it appears now. He has made various modifications, including reversing the camplate so the Velocette has 'up for up' gearchange pattern, which pre-war Velos have (and postwar Triumphs too, of course) and which he has on all of his other Velocettes.

Rob also made new oil pipes as the old ones had gone hard and rigid – they appeared to be the original ones. He fitted a VOC paper oil filter, as well as adding a JG regulator, to go with a new dynamo. Then there were fresh tyres too – though the old ones, which were Avon Supremes, looked okay (and weren't actually too bad – the first time I rode the bike it was shod with them) – it was deemed prudent to have a new set, Steve Lomas at Five-One Wheels (01507 343313) sourced a set of 18in Pirelli City Demons, which have the right chunky look; the Supremes seem to be no longer available.

Another fiddly job that ended up taking far longer than anticipated was the fuel cap, which didn't shut properly and leaked. Rob took it apart – "I don't think it was designed to come apart..." he reckons in hindsight – while putting it back together was a two-day job too, with a Velocette kickstart spring eventually used in its (re)construction.

Rob also had the primary drive down too, just for strip and reassembly. As he said: "I just wasn't quite happy with it." Despite that, he found nothing wrong and careful reassembly has resulted in a really nice, light clutch and smooth-acting drive train. Next on the list will be a rewire by Ferret from Ferret's Electrickery (07765 832420) – again, it isn't desperately needed, but it will just improve and neaten up the Velo and take out another potential problem before it arises.

So what conclusions can we draw about the Velocette and its creator? Well, it is a rider's motorcycle and a true joy to pilot. In many ways, it could be called the ultimate road-going Velocette, a modern machine that gave the old engine yet another lease of life. And I think its influence is perhaps still to be seen; have a look at Suzuki's home market Tempter. The style of Tartarini surely?

End



Left: The oil cap takes some dexterity to undo, while filling the tank is a fiddly job as well.

Right: The Velocette oil tank has been 'persuaded' to fit the Italian side panels.

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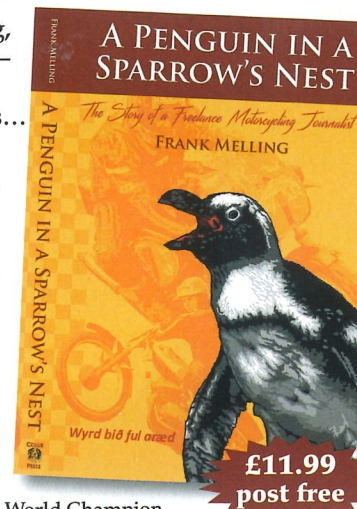
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