

RE DREAMLINER • BSA B33 OUTFIT • GUZZI CONVERT • BANTAM!

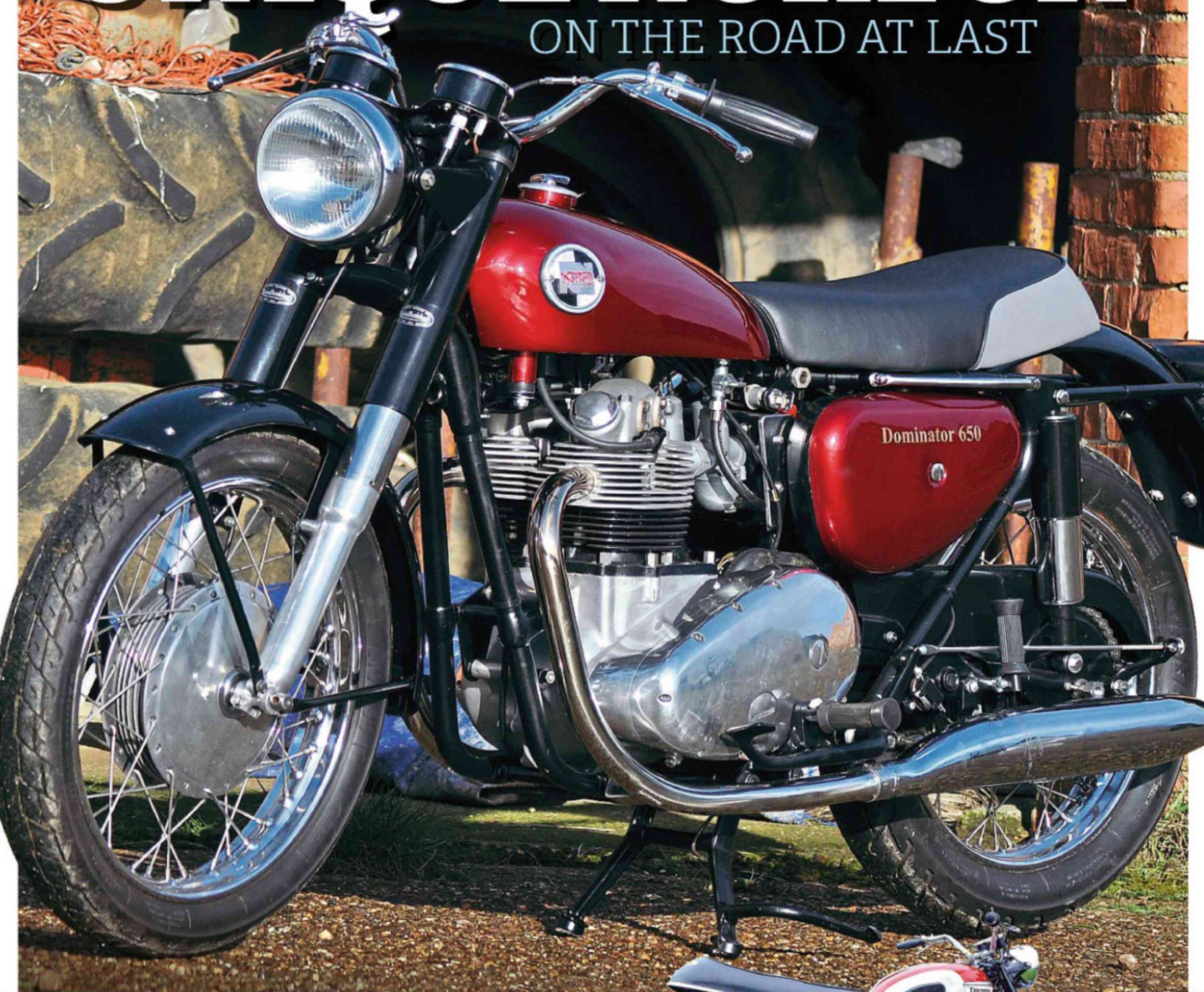
# RealClassic

Running, Riding & Rebuilding RealClassic Motorcycles

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## UNIQUE NORTON

ON THE ROAD AT LAST



TOP  
*Trophy*

BEST OF THE BEST?



MORTONS

# PRIDE & JOY



## GUZZI CONVERT

*Moto Guzzi V-twins are something of an acquired taste. Motorcycles with automatic transmission are even more unusual. Only a true connoisseur could appreciate both at once. Garron Clark-Darby is a man converted – twice...*

Photos by Garron Clark-Darby

**I**t was 1976. I was just 21, slim, with a well-paid job, a newish Laverda SF750 and a full head of hair. The summers were long and hot and life was easy. Oh my, how things have changed since then...

I liked the SF but it vibrated a lot, ate belts, bulbs and oil seals, and I found the handling a bit heavy around the very twisty little roads where I lived in darkest West Wales. So I was already considering a possible change when I saw a full page advert in the American magazine *Cycle*. It was for something called a Moto Guzzi Convert and was simply the most beautiful bike I had ever seen. I was totally and utterly smitten and knew that somehow,

someday, I had to have one. That same advert of the silver blue Convert with an early non-standard screen can be found online, and I confess it still gives me a little buzz when I look at it today.

For those not so familiar, the Convert is a strange beast. Originally conceived for police escort duties, and used extensively by forces in the USA, it is the familiar Guzzi V-twin mated to a two-speed (high/low) gearbox by a Sachs torque-converter, though you don't need 'low' unless you are planning to tow a caravan. The torque converter absorbs a little power, which is why the engine was stretched from the 850cc of all the other Guzzis of the

time to 950cc, and badged as a '1000'. Just twist and go like a (very) big moped which makes it the best bike in the world to ride in heavy traffic; no clutch to slip. It creeps on tickover like an automatic car, hence the unique fitment of a parking brake, operated when you engage the sidestand. A true Marmite bike, you love riding them or hate it, nobody is ever ambivalent. There was a later development of the same drive train in more modern cycle parts, the California II Auto, but that was never sold in the UK.

A friend had a Moto Guzzi at the time, an early V7 that had been hand-painted all over metalflake purple, which was really



*Although it's undoubtedly resplendent in red, the Convert's original colour scheme would have been altogether rather more monochrome*

nice but already seemed very dated. I was really not sure how I would feel about riding an automatic, but the deal was done and I traded the SF for a new Convert in black with two white stripes which, purely by coincidence, perfectly matched the Lewis leathers I already had at the time (poseur!).

My sportier friends were understandably unkind about the concept of any automatic motorcycle, deeming it to be an old man's bike, but the Convert's unique 'fast-getaway' of holding the linked brakes full on while winding up the torque-converter surprised a few of the local heroes getting away from the lights. Add to that that great Tonti frame's handling through the Welsh twisties, which was aided by the other Convert party trick of being able to gently brake with the right foot and simultaneously wind on the power with the right hand. The upshot was that through the bends the Guzzi would usually see off even the biggest Jap fours which at that time still cornered like cows on roller skates.

It was about this time that a chap called Ed Long advertised, asking if anybody wanted to form a club for like-minded Guzzi enthusiasts. I duly replied (by post in those days) and became UK Guzzi Club member number nine, out of the ten original members. The current UK Guzzi Club website suggests there were originally 50 members but we definitely started with just ten, 50 took quite a while



*Tall riders can often suffer from excessive buffeting. Garron's answer was to fit a laminar lip to his Guzzi's windshield*

to achieve. The next summer the first V-twin Rally was organised at Shaftesbury and the rest, as they say, is history.

My first Convert only let me down once, but it was biggie. The original flywheel was just a thin pressed-steel plate, not unlike the sort of thing squaddies and campers eat their dinner off, with the heavy starter ring bolted to the periphery. One day while riding two-up over the steep Welsh hills it simply tore itself apart and all forward progress ceased. The bike was still under warranty so I contacted the importers, Coburn and Hughes. They naturally assumed their generally accepted ➤



*When owner Garron took custody of his current Convert, it appeared to be in a thoroughly sorry state. Although it boasted a fine botanical garden, it transpired that most of the mechanicals could be salvaged and the previous owner had built up a fine stock of spares to get it back on the road*



*The twin discs and their linked actuation system make for arresting stopping*



*Craven Comet panniers were sourced on eBay, and the previous owner had already located a full Keihan stainless steel exhaust system*



*High-rise handlebars came from a T3 Cali. A Chinese moped donated the additional spotlights...*



rôle of chocolate fireguard, so I contacted the factory directly and they eventually responded to my indignant squeaking by despatching a replacement part – for which I had to pay import duty. This time it was machined from solid which, with the added flywheel effect, actually made the bike nicer to ride. It is now a well-known upgrade among Convert owners and Guzzi folk in

general to retrofit the heavier flywheel, especially if you still have a tin one.

I kept that original Convert for three years and did a lot of miles. However the combination of Italian chrome and electrics, living right by the sea, not having a garage (and a fairly serious trip through a wet hedge near Oxford) triggered a change. I did the patriotic thing and bought one of the last

of the Meriden-built Triumphs, a very pretty T140D in American spec. Six months later, while looking for another Guzzi to replace the Triumph (don't ask) I saw a T3 California advertised locally. It had only done a few hundred miles but the owner had fallen off manoeuvring at low speed and decided he didn't like it anymore, so we did a swap for the T140 and a few quid and I was back in the Guzzi fold (and also back in the Guzzi club again).

The T3 California was nice apart from the porous cylinder castings which kept both boots well waterproofed. It was only sold when I went to live abroad, where I was occupied with all things Velocette for the next few years.

Move swiftly on to 1991. The imminent birth of #1 son (more to follow) put a squeeze on the family finances. I realised that the lovely but now largely unused Velo Venom in the garage could be swapped for a both decent Moto Guzzi of some kind and a sizeable sum of cash left over for baby things, so I went and found a nice red 850T. I kept that for a few years, rejoined the Guzzi club again and went to the V-twin rally, sorted lots of bits and added a second front disc (they only came with one, and a rear drum). I generally enjoyed it until three things happened at once; a chap in the village was



*The rocker covers are custom jobs, ribs removed and polished up. The red HT leads may have been a momentary lapse of good taste*



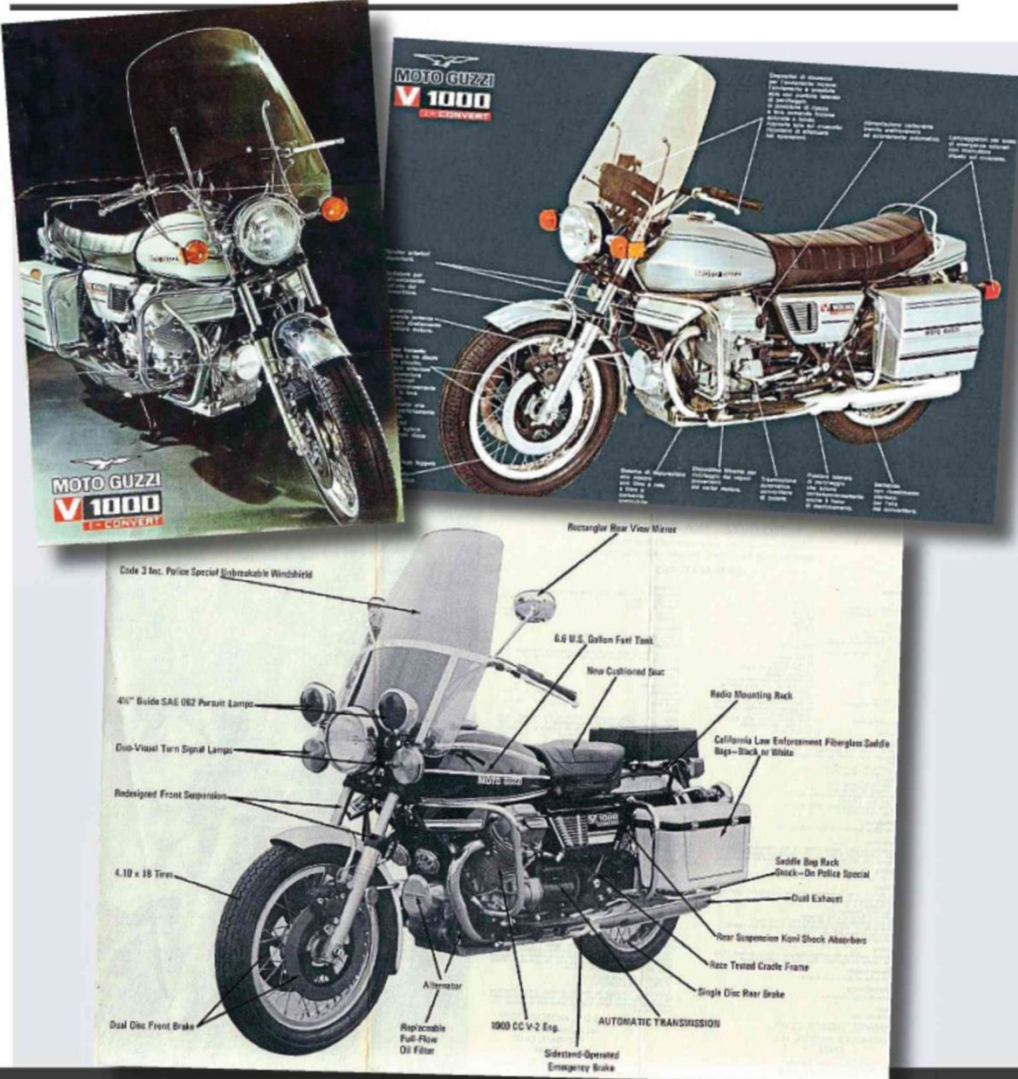
*Garron's Convert shares shed space with his other P&J, a Triumph 500. Of which, more later...*

killed on his bike, leaving young children; I became a father for the third time (some people never learn), and we needed a second car, so in 1997 sadly the Guzzi just had to go. Incidentally, many years later while buying some Guzzi bits online the vendor emailed 'I still have the 850T you sold me, and it's the best bike I ever had' – nice.

In the ensuing bike-free years it occurred to me that out of the thirty or so bikes I had owned in total, the only motorcycle I had truly loved was the Convert. So if I ever was able to have another bike, that is what it would have to be. In 2006 a scan of eBay revealed a very sad-looking silver-grey Convert which had been stood in a garden for several years due to electrical problems (you surprise me). Despite its condition I hadn't seen another one so knew I had to have it. I madly outbid everybody and bought it, unseen, for around £900. Then I went into a quiet corner for a meltdown, knowing that I had been well and truly eBayed and had paid way too much.

Just a hobby. I shall enjoy rebuilding it, cheaply, I said to all the doubters, of whom there were many.

Even the prior knowledge of the Convert's sad circumstances did not quite prepare me for that first actual sighting. Those of you familiar with such things will be aware ➤



of the little square reservoirs formed by the cast webs on the top of the Guzzi crankcase, a bit like an ice-cube tray. They are almost impossible to access, so on clean bikes they are often permanently filled with soapy water. On neglected bikes they are usually filled with old oil and dead insects. On my Guzzi they were filled with... soil and little green plants, growing nicely, like a semi-mobile cottage garden.

We loaded the Convert into the van and were strapping it down when the vendor started coming out of his shed with boxes of bits. I already knew that, being an eternal optimist, he had fitted new tyres to the defunct bike ready for the day it was back on the road, and he had said on eBay there were also some new parts, but I wasn't in any way prepared for what came next.

Over the next half an hour he located and produced a full Keihan stainless steel exhaust system, three brake caliper rebuild kits, a windscreen and fittings, a complete replacement seat, lights, indicators, a set of braided brake hoses, handlebars, shock absorbers, fork stanchions, dampers, grips, mirrors, cables, etc, etc, all brand new and still wrapped. It just kept coming. I thought I had bid too much on eBay, being blindly determined to win, but the value of the parts alone (he gave me the receipts) was more than twice what I had paid for the whole bike! He was a lovely chap, but I really don't think his wife knew the extent of the shopping he'd been doing over the years, so he seemed sad but actually quite relieved to part with it all. I discretely asked why he had not simply sold off all the parts and got his money back. He replied that he really wanted to see 'his' bike back on the road again.



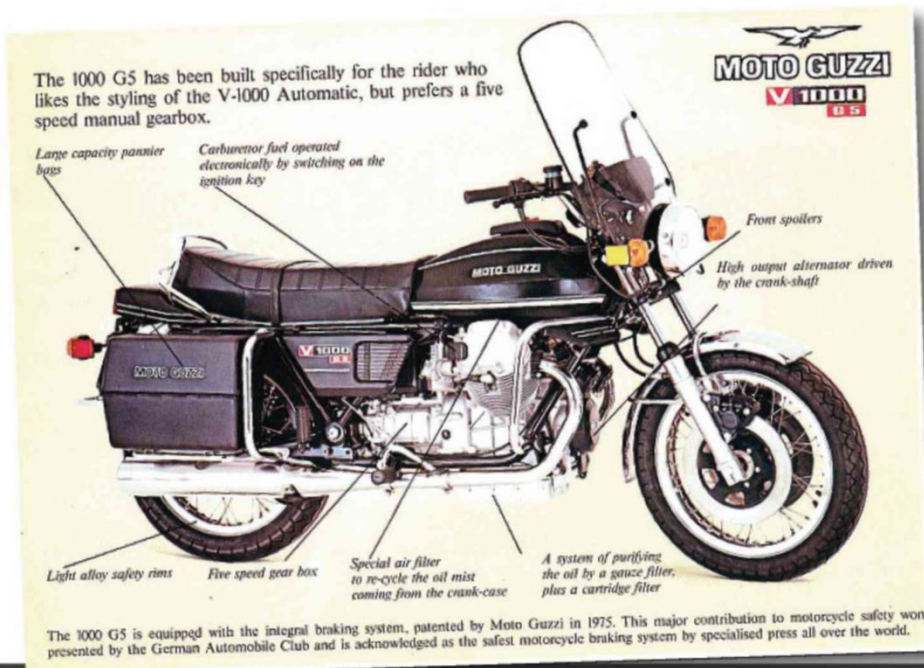
**Garron removed the surplus-to-his-requirement 'heel' from the heel-and-toe rocking gear lever**

If it doesn't make you too dizzy, we will wind time forward again. The Convert went back on the road about twelve months later. Maybe 90% of the required parts were already there, and all the mechanical bits were totally fine as it had less than 30k miles recorded, so it just had a good check over and service. I renewed the paint (my sons said that as it was an Italian then it had to be painted non-standard Guzzi red), and all the chrome, and replaced most of the fasteners with stainless. The biggest job by far was the cleaning – I think the word 'organic' best describes the original state. I also set about

a fairly extensive rewire, eradicating yards and yards of wiring and a multitude of components associated with superfluous and problematic items such as the micro-switches on the side stand and clutch cable, the coil control device, the automatic fuel tap, the fuel level indicator and the four-way flashers, and updating the switchgear with the usual Japanese replacements.

It came with the standard little Guzzi panniers in very poor condition, but I recalled seeing a Guzzi at the V-twin fitted with Craven Comet luggage, which somehow seemed to suit the shape of the bike so I decided to fit those instead. Back to eBay again, I found a decent used black pair for a reasonable price. I was pleasantly surprised to find they already had little Guzzi badges glued on (although given a choice I would have used round ones, not square, but beggars and choosers and all that...).

As I needed to replace all the cables anyway, I took the opportunity to fit T3 California handlebars. These bars much better suit the relationship of footboards-to-saddle than the standard T3 type bars and it was a modification I'd wanted to do to my original



**Left: As motorcyclists are such a conservative breed, we probably shouldn't be surprised that Moto Guzzi rapidly introduced a five-speed manual version of the Convert, for the stubbornly unconvertable**



Convert but was never able to afford. The final job was an Odyssey battery, from those nice people at Active Robots, who I really can't recommend highly enough. Incidentally, I never did find the original electrical fault that had relegated the Convert to the garden in the first place. Once I had connected everything up it worked fine for me.

In the years since then, she has gained Dynatek electronic ignition to replace the rubbish contact breakers and condensers they now sell, a couple of spotlights from a Chinese moped to complete the look, and I changed the indicators for chrome instead of the black ones with the side reflectors which I always thought looked a bit cheap. I do regret the red HT leads though: black leads and

caps next time. I also brutally cut the rear part off the heel-and-toe gear lever as you don't ever use it and that way you have more room on the footboard. The rocker covers are also an eBay find, de-ribbed and polished, but I subsequently sold the original pair for more than I paid for the new ones. I also fitted a 'laminar lip' on the windscreen which works well, although rumour has it that if you are medically afflicted by a laminar lip then you are probably not able to say it...

The Convert has shared shed space with a variety of bedfellows at different times, including another Laverda SF, a T140 Bonneville and a Ducati Monster. but they have all moved on. It now shares the little shed with my (also much loved) T100-based

trail bike that I built from bits. I confess that the Guzzi does not come out much in winter as there is an awful lot to damage, and cleaning after a wet ride is an all-day job, but it does get wet from time to time.

The Convert shines up well and looks good in pictures, but closer inspection will reveal that the original frame paint is now looking a little tired. There are a few bumps and scrapes, bits of corrosion, two or three minor oil leaks from here and there, but with still only around 45k miles recorded she will probably do me until the end of my riding days. I'll keep the Convert for as long as I can still find the strength to push her around, because she is certainly no lightweight. Keep safe, and may your roads always be dry. **Rc**