

CAFE RACE KING



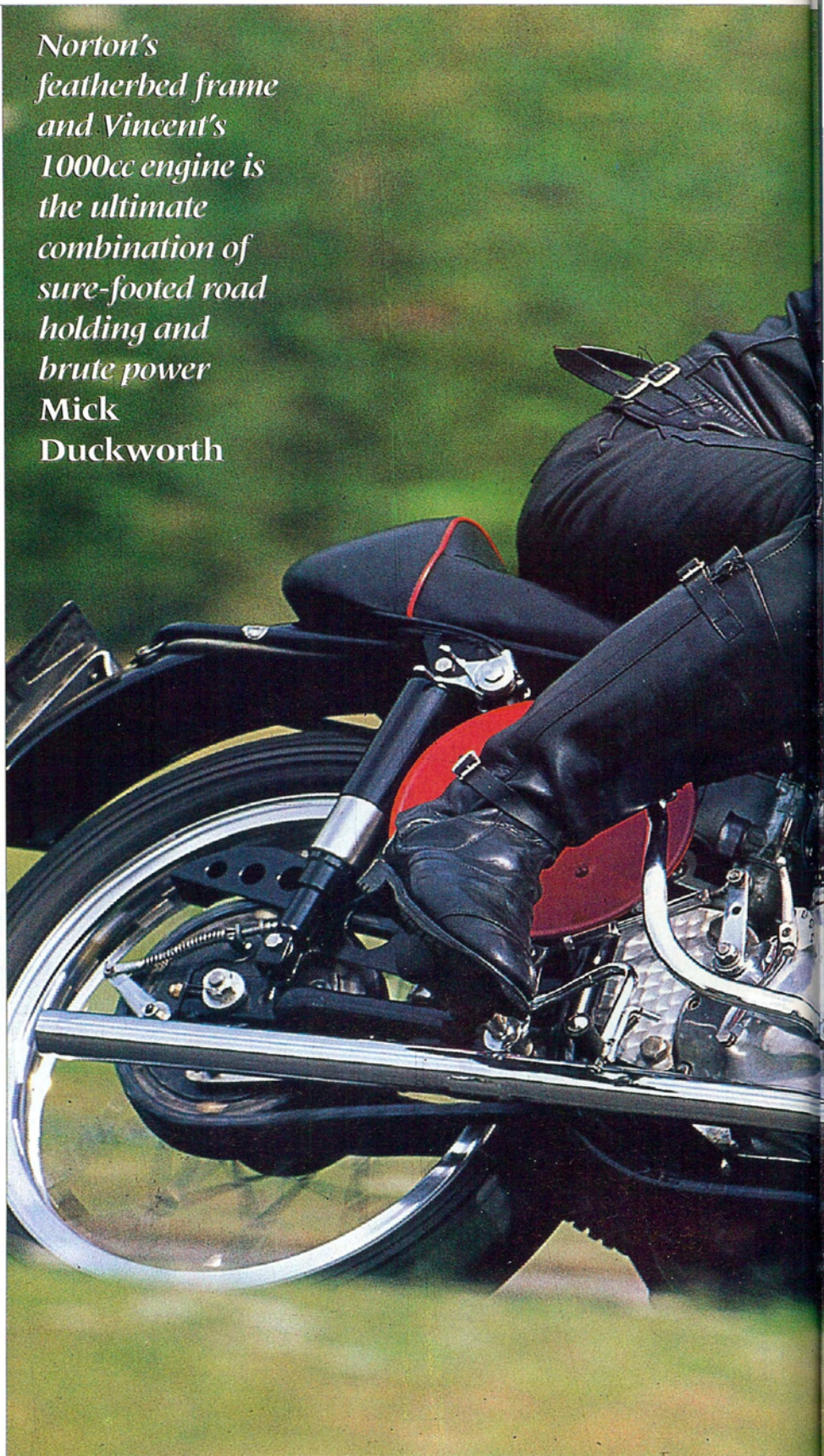
THE NORVIN is an ultimate machine. King among British cafe racers of the sixties, the purpose of a Norton-Vincent hybrid was to top everything else on the streets.

Superior roadholding made the Norton featherbed frame the special builder's first choice, and Vincent's 1000cc V-twin engine was still the biggest, fastest lump available even ten years after after its manufacture ended in 1955. The pair combined was the ultimate in the coffee bar cowboy performance stakes, the last word for ton-up tigers.

Building a successful Norvin was, and still is, an ultimate challenge for the home engineer. Any idiot can build a special that's actually worse to ride than the standard machines dismantled in the cause. And, the sheer size of a Vincent power unit presents bigger installation hassles than those facing the creator of a Tribsa or Triton. The best way to build a Norvin is still a disputed subject amongst those who've attempted it.

There's something else that puts the Norvin in its own league: producing even a mediocre example can be the ultimate wallet-lightening experience. To assemble the necessary components today is costly enough to put most people off, especially if you believe, as some Norvin experts do,

Norton's featherbed frame and Vincent's 1000cc engine is the ultimate combination of sure-footed road holding and brute power
Mick Duckworth



that you'll need to do the job more than once to get it right!

Peter Fox was transfixed by a Norvin on a visit to the Isle of Man TT festival in the early seventies, and made up his mind that one day he would ride one of his own. That day came three years ago, and the machine Peter owns now can claim to be

an ultimate among ultimates. Is there a better-looking, more classically-fashioned Norvin running anywhere today?

This special is not only stunning to look at: it has other vital sixties cafe racer attributes, too. Diabolically loud, the Fox Norvin is supremely impractical, and awkward to start. But although cantankerous



Impressive bulk of the Vincent powerplant overcomes the disadvantage of high-slung weight. So what if it's impractical?

at low speeds, it is hugely tractable and long-legged once it gets into its rapid stride.

You can hang in third gear on country roads, lazily twisting the grip to and fro to vary the road speed between 40 and 100mph. Cosseting the snarling twin at a sleepy 4000rpm through the four-speed

close-ratio gearbox takes you on a wild, unforgettable ride. Using more revs will hurl you along at a scary pace, but the going starts to get rougher. On present gearing the owner estimates top speed as at least 125mph. With an old Norton Dominator rear sprocket, which gave higher gearing than the present set-up,

Fox says he saw 140mph indicated.

Some Norvins are handicapped by severe top-heaviness. There is no way you can set the crankshaft weight as low as a Manx Norton because unlike the V-twin, the single's bottom end slots between the featherbed's lower frame rails. But this bike is surprisingly →

◆ NORVIN CAFE RACER

nimble — you can crank it into a tight corner almost as though it were a Dommi. Flicking it from side to side through a series of bends demands only gentle persuasion. The 19in wheels, with Akront alloy rims, are shod with Dunlop racing tyres: a 3.00in KR76 at the front and a 3.50in KR73 rear.

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continued

ing, and even complete U-turns.

On a machine that seems incapable of going slowly, more powerful brakes would be handy. The cable-operated Manx Norton rear drum is set to come on gently, which is fair enough for preventing panic wheel-locking.

But the double-sided single-leading-shoe Seeley front drum could certainly be set up to act more sharply than it does, especially as it employs Ferodo AM4 racing linings. The operating levers appear to

be at too wide an angle to their cables.

Peter, 40 years-old and managing director of a fire protection company, bought the machine through an *MCN* advertisement, already assembled as a Norvin. Although he carried out a full mechanical and cosmetic reworking of the machine, he retained the existing engine mounting arrangements.

'I thought it looked right as it was. And the previous owner told me he'd built several Norvins,' Peter says. The tidy conversion links engine and frame with four alloy engine plates and a cylinder head steady. At the rear of the gearbox, the right-side plate is outboard of the frame's swinging-arm gusset, whereas the left plate is spaced nearly an inch inside the side-plate.

The lug cast onto the rear of the gearbox casing for attachment to the Vincent monoshock rear subframe had been removed to ease installation.

Sawing off the lug is, understandably, a contentious act in Vincent circles. Peter is glad for his conscience's sake that he didn't have to do it himself. He and his uncle, Jack Fox, are standard V-twin owners, and Vincent Owners Club members. Add the fact that Peter lives less than two miles from the old factory near Stevenage in Hertfordshire, and he surely qualifies as being 'in Vincent circles'. Whether you actually need to saw the lug clean off is all part of Norvinology.

Reversing the Manx Norton rear hub in the swinging arm mates it up with Vincent's right-side transmission, unusual on a British machine. Peter's most recent alteration — all the best cafe racers are subject to continual development — has been to fit a Manx swinging arm and magnesium alloy conical hub in place of roadster equipment.

He intends to replace the 1955 500cc wideline Dominator 88 roadster frame with a full-race Manx chassis. The front fork sliders may look like genuine forged Manx items, but that is because Peter carefully removed the lower muguard stay lugs from a pair of roadster castings.

Manx look is soon to be enhanced by replacing wideline frame with a full-race Manx chassis. Note strong sparking Lucas KVFTT racing magneto



Not just cafe specials



A CAFE racer is fine for quick flings, but Peter Fox (left) and his uncle Jack both appreciate the unobtrusive usability of a well-kept 1000cc Vincent twin with standard running gear.

Jack's twin is a Series B Rapide recently refitted with Brampton girder forks, used by Vincent until the introduction of the C Series. It has other interesting non-standard fittings, like a 21in Dunlop alloy front rim, Lightning front brake backplates, two front heads, plus the 5in speedometer from a Shadow.

Peter also has a standard Vincent (not pictured), a late Series C Rapide.

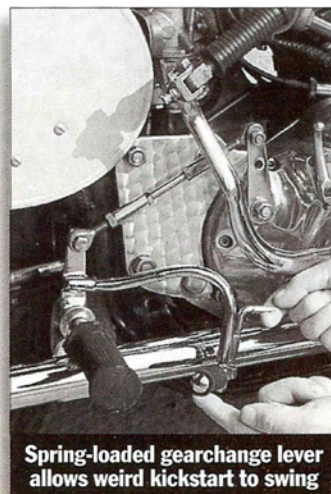
'I really can't get over how completely different the Vincent engine feels in the Norvin,' he says.

The engine is from the last phase of 998cc Rapide Series C production in 1954, evidenced by die-cast crankcase castings with provision for Series D alternator electrics. Peter had it rebuilt by Furness & Searle, a specialist company run by former Vincent service department men Alf Furness and Jack Searle.

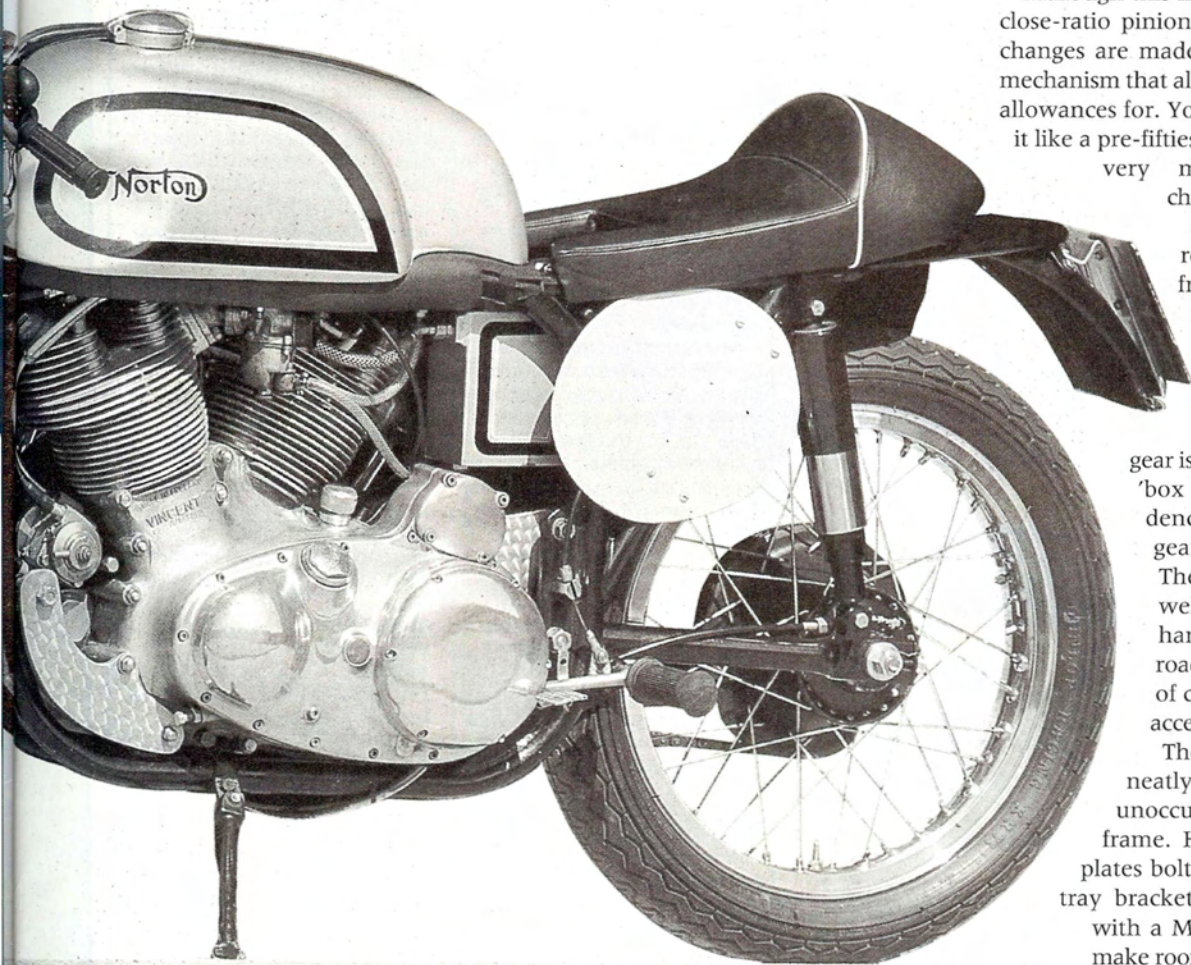
Mainly standard, the 84 x 90mm unit has been tweaked up from basic 45bhp Rapide trim with pistons giving nearer 9:1 than the original 6.5:1 compression ratio. And most importantly, it now has Vincent Black Lightning racing cams, which give this machine

its exciting sharp edge.

To suit the cams, the engine builders made an unrestricted two-into-one exhaust system. Fashioned on a factory jig, the straight-through pipe is a replica of a



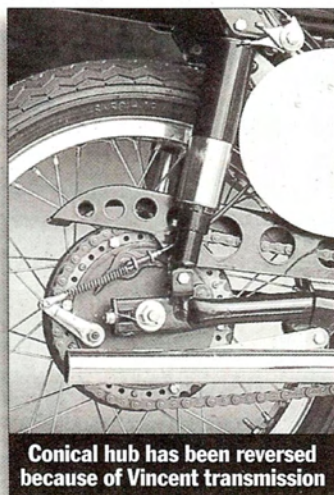
Spring-loaded gearchange lever allows weird kickstart to swing



system used on Gunga Din for a while. This was the first high performance 1000cc twin developed by George Brown at Stevenage, which explains the legend Peter has written around the Norvin's front cowl - 'Tribute to Gunga Din'.

Another desirable Vincent racing component was on the machine when bought. It is one of the very few Lucas KVFTT racing magnetos in existence. Made specifically for the awesome 70bhp Lightning model, the rotating coil instrument has the word Lucas cast into its lightweight body. The red colouring of its high tension pickups comes from the use of a special anti-tracking paint. Peter acquired a supply for restoration purposes through a friend involved with vintage aircraft renovation. He reports that this mag gives an outstan-

dlingly strong spark. Platinum contact-breaker points, normally specified for Vincent V-twins are still fitted. Peter favours NGK spark plugs, of a B6ES grade.



Conical hub has been reversed because of Vincent transmission

A pair of 30mm Amal Concentric carburettors let the twin idle reliably, but it sounds like a Top Fuel class dragster being eased to the lights. The spitting and crackling caused by the combination of cams and exhaust smooths away as the throttle is opened. Mix this rough period with the high-geared bottom ratio, and you can imagine the sounds and drama of every take-off.

When I foolishly pulled off the same junction twice beside the same Home Counties front garden, the result was a furious verbal attack, as a glaring red face contorted with rage rose over the privet hedge. Peter

admits that he uses his Norvin as an occasional Sunday blast machine, and also for outings like the Ultimate *Classic Bike* Sprint.

Although this model is equipped with close-ratio pinions within the gearbox, changes are made by the same archaic mechanism that all Vincent owners make allowances for. You almost have to treat it like a pre-fifties Burman box, making

very measured and slow changes. The remote linkage required with rerset footrests in the frames pillion rest mounts exacerbates the problem. Luckily the fantastic torque means that getting caught in the wrong

gear is a rare occurrence. This 'box has a distressing tendency to jump out of first gear under acceleration. The Vincent clutch coped well with the strains of handling raw power in road conditions with a hint of clutch slip under harsh acceleration.

The oil tank is tucked neatly into one of the few unoccupied spaces in the frame. Hanging on triangular plates bolted to the original tool tray brackets, the alloy reservoir with a Monza cap is shaped to make room for the rear carburettor on the right side. For optimum performance, Vincent tuners tend to use two front cylinder heads with left-side carburettors, as the factory did on Series D models. The arrangement permits superior gas-flowing of the rearmost head.

Detailing is vital in achieving an authentic café racer look, and Peter has done a good job. Smiths chronometric instruments, a 150mph speedometer and an 8000rpm clockwise rev-counter are crammed into space between the Tickle alloy fork top yoke, and the Manx-style cowl and flyscreen. The rev-counter drive is via a 1:1 gearbox on the timing cover, apparently made specially for the machine at some time. Authentic Manx lines are emphasised by the Norton-style racing seat, with its oil filler cutaway, and Manx style alloy mudguards in black.

You can understand how anyone hooked on café racers could yearn for a 1000cc Norvin as handsome as this, just as the sixties heroes of the North Circular yearned for the ultimate road burner. But if you are lucky enough to buy or build one, don't expect suburban gardeners to appreciate its beauty. 