

THE
SEARCH
FOR

Perfection



*B*uilding just another Norvin didn't really interest Garry Laurence. He wanted to create one that stood head and shoulders above all others. Two years and 1500 hours later he's done it

Words **Jim Moore**

Photography **Simon Hipperson**





arry Laurence doesn't do things by halves. He doesn't cut corners or simply make-do. He's a perfectionist, and his motorcycles radiate this fanatical attention to detail. Over the years Garry has restored both cars and bikes (two have

been featured in *Classic Bike*) but over the past 24 months he's been building and perfecting his pièce de résistance: a Vincent-powered, Manx Featherbed-framed Norvin café racer.

It's everything a café racer should be; fast, low, mean and purposeful, but this British hybrid is also blessed with a quality of finish rarely seen outside a factory race shop and an attention to detail that a watch maker would find fastidious.

"I set out to build the best Norvin that's ever been built," says Garry of his creation. "My philosophy has been the same with every bike I've ever built. Do it properly, or don't do it at all". He's clearly a man of his word.

Building a bike like this requires meticulous planning. "This has been a 35 year quest," he says. "When I was in my teens I used to build these machines in my head. I was earning probably eight quid a week but it'd cost something like £1000 to build one of these back then, so owning one was just a pipe dream. Years later I thought I'd make that dream come true."

Garry had experience of building Norvins prior to starting this project (his exquisite Comet-powered Featherbed café racer made the final 10 of the CBOTY competition in

2005), but that didn't make his search for a suitable donor Vincent twin motor any easier.

"I spent five or six years looking for an engine for this bike. One time I travelled all the way to the Peak District from Kent to buy one. We'd done the deal over the phone, but when I got there it turned out to be awful. I couldn't

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part with the money knowing that it would cost me a further £5000 to restore the engine."

Frustrated by his fruitless search for an engine, Garry took the advice of John Wyatt from the Norvin Centre, Essex. "He suggested I build a new Vincent engine, so I sold my Triton (another *CB* feature bike, from August 2002) to pay for the engine."

The engine is Shadow-spec Rapide, with MkII cams, 7.5:1 Omega pistons and twin plug heads. Every component in the engine is new, right down to the cases and crankshaft so "...this engine isn't like one from the late Forties or early Fifties. All the components were made on a CAD machine so everything has much tighter tolerances."

With that in mind, and faced with his quest for perfection, Garry found himself with a predicament: build it myself, or get someone with the expertise to do it? "There's a vast difference between rebuilding, say, a Bonneville engine, and doing the same to one of these. It had to be right, so in the end I got

Vincent expert Gary Drake from Godden Engineering to put it together. He had all the engineering facilities to hand, so if any machining needed doing he could do it."

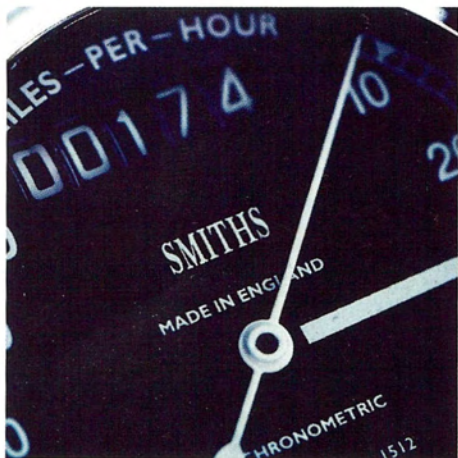
While Godden got on with the engine, Garry dry-built the chassis. The frame is not a modern reproduction, it's a genuine 1954 Manx Featherbed. "I wanted the real thing. That way it's got the right number and heritage. I bought it through the small ads, sandblasted and ready to go". The other chassis components, however, are a mix of new and restored, each picked to match Garry's specification.

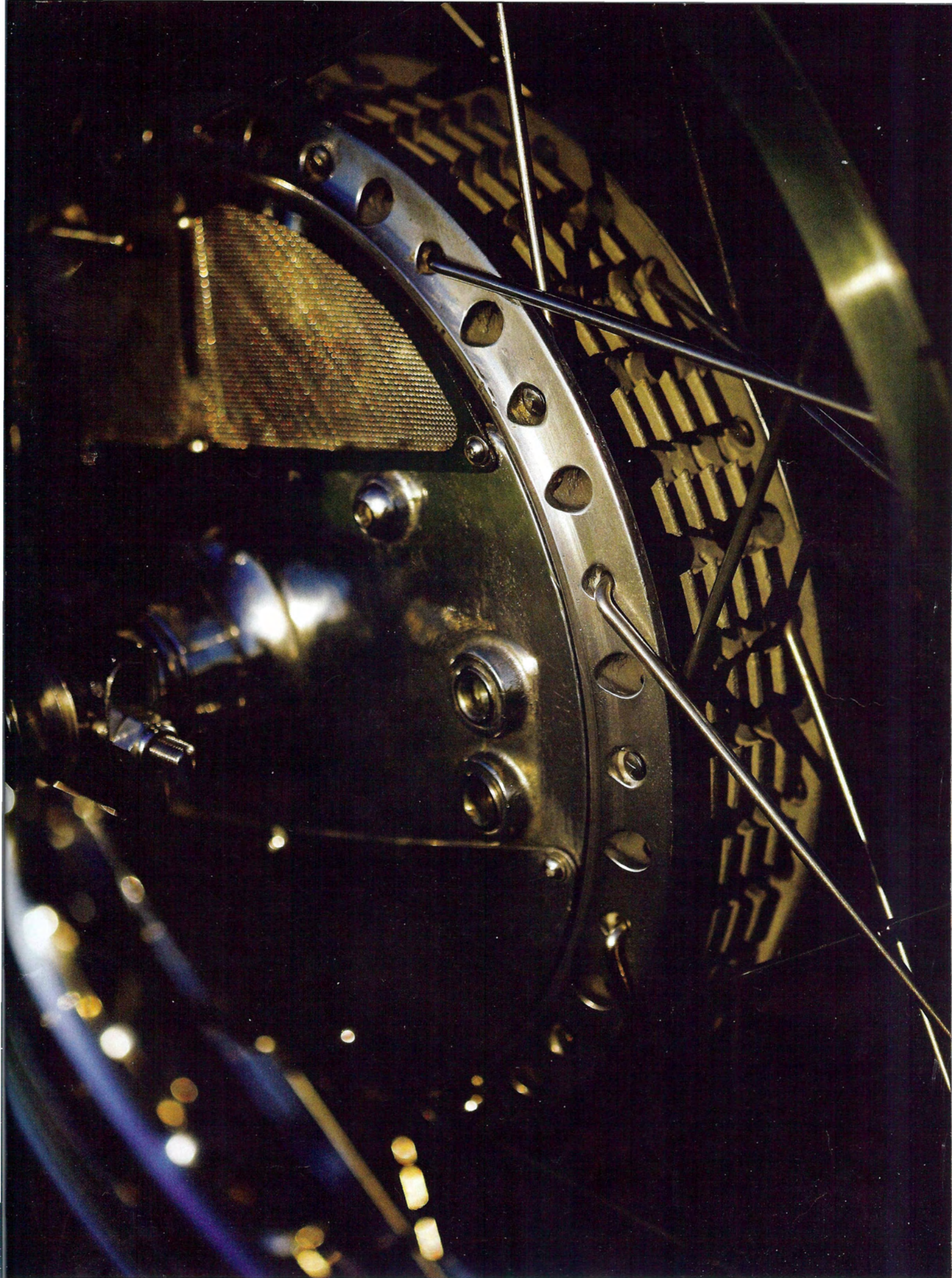
The hubs and 10in drum brakes, for example, are Yamaha TZ350. They were, of course, completely stripped and meticulously rebuilt, Laurence style: soda-vapour blasted, painstakingly polished, then treated to new lazer-cut mesh covers. Using hubs from a racing bike wasn't without its problems but Garry relished the challenge.

"I'm a master engineer by trade. If there's a problem, there's also a solution. I worked out how to fit the speedo drive to the rear wheel. The hub had a double bearing on the drive side, so I removed one of the bearings and that allowed me to fit a sleeve for the Smiths speedo drive. That in turn caused a problem with chain alignment. The sprocket is offset on a machined boss; now it's spot-on."

It was when the engine arrived that the real hard work began. The rest of the project couldn't move forward until the engine was in situ, because the fuel and oil tanks and the exhausts had to be built to suit. And mating the engine to the frame was far from a simple matter of dropping it in the cradle.

Main: Yamaha TZ350 hubs were meticulously restored with laser cut mesh covers
Right: The Norvin in Laurence's Dartford workshop
Below: Smiths speedometer is driven from the rear wheel





"I wanted the engine as low as I could get it in the frame, to get the centre of gravity as low as possible. It had to look right too, but it was no good it looking right if it didn't work properly – it's a combination of the two. It took me hours, moving the motor about in the frame to ensure the spacing was right. I got through three sets of engine plates before I got it absolutely spot-on."

Finding that 'spot-on' position required Garry to cut a recess in the top right hand frame rail to allow clearance for the rear cylinder's valve inspection cap. After skilfully removing a semi-circular section of frame, he bronze welded it back into place in reverse. Less critical builders would have shifted the engine to suit. Garry's final positioning of the engine is so precise it looks as if the Featherbed frame was made specifically for that Vincent V-twin. And it had to be right because, as Garry points out, "...the engine's not coming out of there. Not in my lifetime."

Once the engine was in, the fuel and oil tanks could be built. "I was very specific about what I wanted – a Manx oil tank with a big scallop removed so there would be clearance for the rear cylinder head". The work was undertaken by a good friend of Garry, "... who'd prefer to remain nameless because he's snowed under with enough work as it is."

Creating the right look and line for the exhausts involved a stroke of DIY genius. Garry used two lengths of water pipe insulation as dummy pipes, stuffing them into the exhaust ports and angling them out in an up-and-over style down the right side of the bike. "That's what I want them to look like," were his instructions to John Campbell at Campbell Custom Exhausts. "He made the pipes but I made the bracket out of stainless, because I knew exactly where I wanted it."

The quality of components on this Norvin is mouth-watering, but it's the neatness, precision and thought with which they all sit together that really makes this bike. There are no ugly wires, cables or pipes running amok to spoil the lines. Even the switchgear wiring has been hidden, by running it inside the bars. Four coils, for the BTH twin-spark ignition, are also neatly tucked away under the tank, just behind the headstock. The kick start lever, too, is a

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work of genius. It's been carefully cut, shaped and rewelded so that it works perfectly, missing the exhaust by millimetres but giving the strongest swing possible. These are the touches that elevate this Norvin from being good to outstanding.

I could stand and stare at this bike for hours, days even. Everywhere I look – each nook and cranny, each different component – there's another Laurence touch to marvel at. Even the bars, that slot discreetly into the fork shrouds, are Garry's work: "Why buy a pair that aren't right when I can make them myself?" Indeed.

But don't get the impression this bike's been built purely as a polisher's piece; Garry's put it together for all the right reasons. "I get a kick out of riding it, and it's meant to be ridden. You can't treat bikes like this with kid gloves. If you're not going to use it what's the point?" As I said, Garry doesn't do things by halves.

RIDING THE NORVIN

I've been looking forward to riding this Norvin for weeks. The chance to sample two of motorcycling's most exquisite experiences in one ride: Manx Featherbed handling and Vincent Black Shadow power. As I release the clutch, which is lighter than expected, and head off up the road for the first time I savour the moment – it's like being given a reservation at The Ivy, and freedom to attack the menu, all at someone else's expense. "Ride it how you want to ride it," says Garry. Right you are.

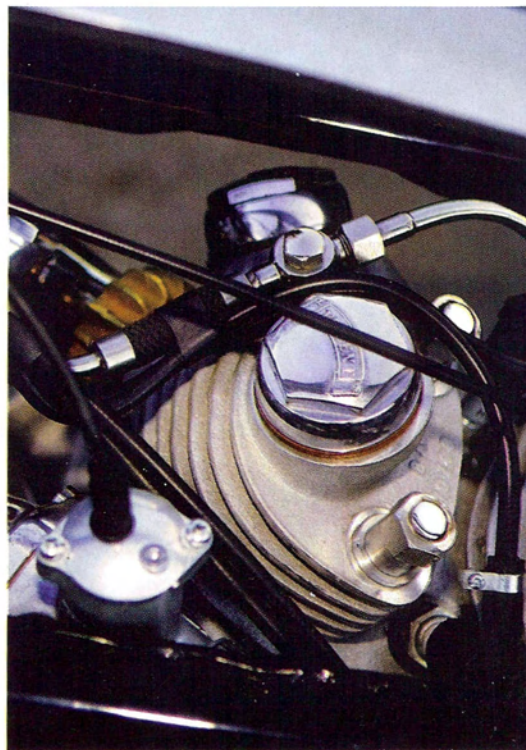
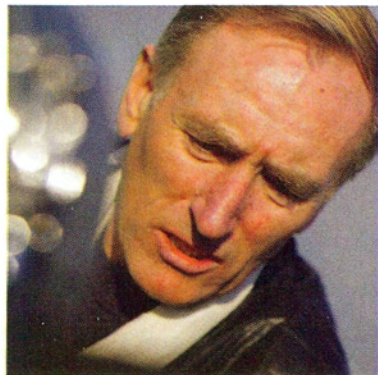
My immediate impression of this Norvin is how contemporary it feels. Not that it's lost its classic roots and appeal, but because everything works so well – throttle, clutch, brakes, suspension and gearbox. It's the mark of a well built bike and quality components that it feels so right. Throttle response, for example, is immediate. You think; it goes. The urge with which it punches forward is indecent. I can't stop grinning like an idiot. Where's a modern bike to embarrass when you need one?

Around Dartford the roads are busy and I have to keep reigning the Norvin in. It wants to gallop, but amongst the traffic we can only indulge in a brisk canter before we're on top of the next car again. What this bike really needs – and deserves – is a long, open, empty, winding stretch of tarmac where it can be properly let off the leash. Holding a steady 85-90mph would be a breeze.

On a road like that the Featherbed chassis could really give of its best, but even amongst the cars, vans and trucks that clog the arteries of South East England it proves to be light, flickable and absorbingly responsive.

My ride is all too brief. I'd like to spend days exploring the bike's potential and treating passers-by to the symphonic glory of a Vincent V-twin on full gas – those 1500 hours of workshop toil would have been worth it for the sound of the motor alone. As a riding experience it really was worth waiting for.

Main: CB's jim on the Norvin, looking for a modern bike to embarrass
Right: Frame cut-away affords crucial millimetres for the inspection cap
Below: Garry Laurence; the perfectionist in person



SPECIFICATION MANX/BLACK SHADOW NORVIN SPECIAL

TRANSMISSION	
Type	air-cooled, ohv, 4v, 50-degree V-twin
Capacity	998cc
Bore x stroke	84x90mm
Compression ratio	7.5:1
Carburation	1in 3/16 Amal Concentrics
Primary/final drive	Triplex chain/chain
Clutch/Gearbox	dry, V2 multi plate/ four-speed
CHASSIS	
Frame	1954 Manx Norton Featherbed
Front suspension	Manx Roadholders
Rear suspension	twin Koni adjustable shocks
Brakes front/rear	2 x 10in tfs (Yamaha TZ350)
Tyres front/rear	3.60H x 19/4.10H x 19
DIMENSIONS	
Dry weight	390lbs (177.2kg)
Wheelbase	57in (1447mm)
Seat height	29in (736mm)
Fuel capacity	4 gal (18.16 litres)
PERFORMANCE	
Top speed	125mph (est)



THANKS TO

John Wyatt at **The Norvin Centre**, 01708 470526; Colin Jenner at **Conway Motors Ltd**, 01622 820635; Gary Drake at **Godden Engineering**, 01732 844072; Gary Jolliffe at **Blackbird Leathers**, 0208 460 0373; Malcolm Simmons at **West Kingsdown Speedway**, 01474 855557; John Campbell at **Campbell Custom Exhausts**, 07946 759990; Phil at **Bikecraft**, 01580 765578