

RealClassic

Go! Commando!

PART ONE

Norton's Isolastic twin is one of the greatest British bikes. Peter Hatfield looks at it closely – and rebuilds one for us

Photos by Peter Hatfield



Commando. What better name for a motorcycle? Unlike Johann Foreigner, to whom a commando or 'Kommando' is, among other meanings, a dreary work detachment, to those of us in the English-speaking world, it is a dare-devil combatant, an unseen hero, someone to venture behind enemy lines when things are getting a little sticky. And things were getting sticky for Norton in the mid-60s. The Japanese invasion was in full swing, the parent company, AMC, was in financial doggy-doo, and Norton desperately needed a new machine.

Stefan Bauer, the then new big cheese at Norton's engineering department, was tasked with developing a new bike to fit this bill. Working with some of the best brains in the industry, a new bike was designed,

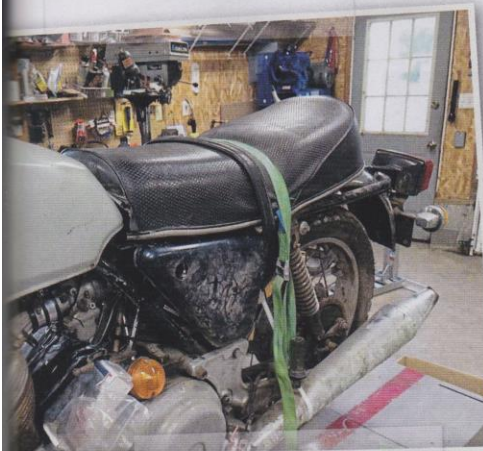
which was eventually given the moniker Commando. Like its fighting namesake, it needed to be daring. Gone was the tried and tested Featherbed frame; in its stead was a new spine-backed frame. A new engine, too, was destined for the Commando – the double overhead camshaft, unit construction P10. And like many a daring commando raid, it was... a total disaster. Consequently, the engine that was hastily pressed into service could have come from a book called *How the Edwardians Did Things*. It was the old Atlas unit, albeit jauntily canted forward as per the P10. Nevertheless, launched in late 1967, the Commando was an instant hit.

So, what's the attraction of the Norton Commando these days? Personally, I have a couple of reasons. Firstly, I'm retired, and was in need of a winter project for 2016 to

2017. Secondly, I had a Mk2A Roadster back in 1975, and we all hanker after our youth. In fact, it was my first big bike after a couple of desperately dull Hondas, both of which have probably long since sunken into the mud of a breaker's yard, never to see the light of day again. So dull are they that few want to restore them. When did you last see a CB125S or CB360GS on the road? Thus, the need for a winter project had me scouring the adverts on Craigslist – not the UK version, but the US version. I'd already bought a Triumph Trident advertised on the Chicago site for the bargain price of £2400 plus shipping, with my buddy Dave Fahringer in Illinois brokering the deal. You have to be lucky when looking for old Brit iron, and so I was with the Commando.

Lurking in an advert with only three small, dark pictures and a fairly scant description

NORTON COMMANDO REBUILD



Above: The secret to successful private buying when a bike is far, far away from you is to rely on the services of a friend you can trust. Dave Fahringer provides Peter Hatfield's eyes and ears in the USA. These are some of the pics of the bike Dave checked out for Peter

Below: And here is Peter's Norton again, all wrapped up and ready for shipment back to the UK

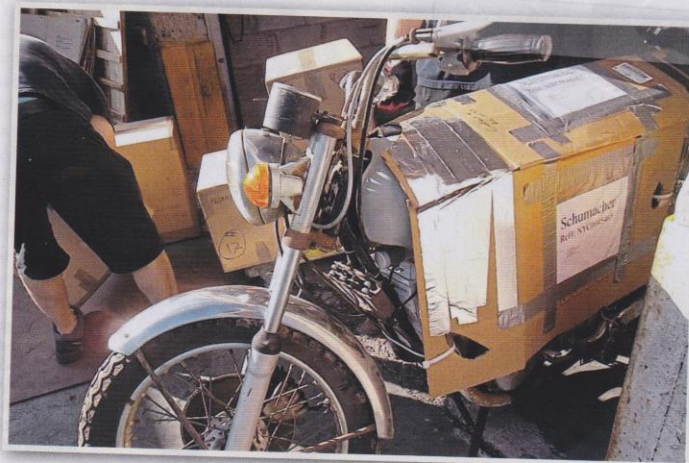
was a sorry-looking Commando. The price was \$2995, and fortunately it wasn't far from Dave's house. Dave knew a thing or two about Commandos, having restored an early example himself, and the result can only be described as beautiful in its British Racing Green livery – it's a shame he sold it. Not wanting to miss out on this bike, I shot off an email to Dave asking him to view it for me, and the next day he was on his way to check out the machine. It was a non-runner, but it had a straight frame, good compression, and all the gears selected – it was a good restoration project despite not having matching frame and engine numbers. Dave 'I haggle hard' Fahringer could probably have negotiated a lower price from a private seller, but the dealer wouldn't shift from \$2600, or exactly £2000 at the time. What would you do? I snapped it up, and Dave hauled it back to his house. As with my other US bikes, Schumacher Cargo was enlisted to ship the Commando from Dave's place, via New Jersey, to England. The long wait began.

Cometh September, cometh the Commando. I couldn't wait to get stuck in, but where to start? A damned good clean was in order to remove the grime of decades, being

dispatched in short order with degreaser and a high pressure washer, followed by snow foam and the same washer. Ah, that's better, but it was still a sorry sight. (I fail to understand how people let their bikes go to rack and ruin like this.) Job done, the old girl was wheeled into my carpeted garage for a triage.

I already knew that it was a bitsa, as Dave had already sent me the engine and frame

numbers, which showed the bike to be a Mk2 engine and swinging arm in a Mk3 frame. For me that was the best of both worlds: right foot shift gearbox, but with the vernier Isolastic engine mounts. It had obviously been down the road on both sides at some time in its life, as witnessed by the scrapes on the engine cases, footrests, handlebar levers, brake master cylinder, and instrument



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Below: It helps if your Stateside helper also knows his Nortons. Dave Fahringer's own Commando

Right: Finally, the great arrival, followed by the great unwrapping – a moment to compare expectations and reality



The cast-iron (and silver painted) 850 barrels cleaned up well enough



The rider spends a lot of time admiring the bike's clocks, so it pays to ensure that they're worth looking at. How Peter's started out, and how they ended up. He also refurbished their holders more than somewhat



Right: Peter discovered a rather remarkable fork seal bodge, some towelling to absorb the leaking oil...



pods. The useless front brake did have some fluid – all on the wrong side, AKA the outside. The frame had shabby paint, the fuel tank was mildly dented and had only high-build primer on it, and the side panels were incorrect. The wiring was a home-brewed affair consisting of black 14 AWG cable. All black. No colours. However, after connecting up a battery, it mostly worked. Mentally, that was all going in the bin, along with the oil cooler. Unless you intend riding on the surface of the sun, why would you need an oil cooler? It is the proverbial chocolate teapot.

What I was really itching to know, though, was whether or not the engine was a runner. The Boyer Bransden electronic ignition produced a spark, but you need a fuel delivery system to get things combusting. With 26,500 miles on

NORTON COMMANDO REBUILD



Above: Time to step back and take a long, long look at what's arrived. This all looks really rather good

Left: The oil tank needed a little attention, as Commando oil tanks often do



Above: Oil filtration is fairly simple, but is usually effective on later Nortons. This is the crankcase gauze filter. Observe that it may never have been cleaned before. Ever...

dometer, the original Amal Concentrics more than likely totally worn out, not they came with the bike. What the bike came with was a brace of Mikunis and jetted manifolds. The previous owner probably thought it a splendid idea to replace the manifolds with Mikunis. It wasn't. His original plan was obviously to place these Japanese carburetors side by side, but hadn't reckoned on their extreme girth. Any attempt to mount them was like trying to squeeze two Cyril Mailes into one of Twiggy's outfits – it was never going to happen.

Even the other manifold with the spares, the BB must have been to mount one of the carburetors in a two-into-one configuration. This manifold had a flange designed for a Mikuni carburettor, this wasn't going to work. The Mikunis and manifolds were fitted to a box marked 'May Be Vaguely Useful in the Future', and a pair of Amal's

excellent Premier Concentrics was duly ordered from my supplier of choice, RGM Norton in Cumbria.

While waiting for the new carburettors, I planned to do a quick change of all the oils. Those in the know, including Frank W in The Shed, will know that 'quick' isn't compatible with any kind of restoration. Dropping the gearbox oil produced an interesting emulsified solution, caused no doubt by water ingress due to lack of gasket on the gearbox filler cover. And you could have grown potatoes in the grunge sitting in the gauze of the crankcase filter. (You need a very large spanner to remove this filter housing, so the previous owner probably didn't bother.) Fresh oil and away we go? Not quite. That grunge had me wondering what the oil tank was like. Let's remove that, and clean it out properly. And now would be a good opportunity to fix that broken tab, and

to paint the exterior. While I was at it, I could now junk that crappy oil cooler. I was on a slippery slope now... The oil filter head could now be moved to its correct location on the gearbox cradle, its holes in the battery tray filled, and the tray painted.

The Hammerite Smooth Black in aerosol form takes an aeon to dry, even in the airing cupboard, so I could tackle more jobs while waiting. First up was to drain and refill the primary chaincase with ATF – a good choice, and more anon. You know the situation: while I'm in there... Not knowing the state of the clutch, and not wanting to re-do the job, I replaced the clutch friction plates.

The final oil-based task was the front fork,

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Left: The fork bushes... you might as well replace them while the forks are stripped

and I was curious to discover why there was a bulge in the fork gaiters. Pushing up the gaiters revealed another horror, and the reason for the bulge: a wodge of terry towelling around each fork leg secured by a cable tie. This botch was evidently to staunch an oil leak caused by a seal failure. Ah well, more delay and more parts to be ordered, but it was worthwhile to rebuild the front fork with new seals.

With the oil tank and battery paint now dry and all the oils replenished, I could install the new Amal Premier carburetters, and see what the engine was like. I cannot claim a first-kick start, but start it did, and there's a short video of the bike running on Youtube. This is a landmark moment in any restoration. The engine was a good 'un, and I definitely dodged a bullet there.

Now that I knew the engine was good, I could concentrate on the cosmetic jobs, the brakes and the electrics. The ethos for this restoration was that I wanted to do most of the work myself. Those jobs for which I had neither the tools nor the skill, I would farm out, and chromium plating was an obvious candidate. Thus the footrests, kick starter, and gear lever were dispatched to Alderney Plating for them to perform their alchemy.

The speedometer and tachometer were both a sorry sight, but actually worked quite well, as evidenced by spinning them up with an electric drill. OK, there was a bit of waving from the tachometer, but I could live with that. You can buy a kit of new bezel, glass and seals for the Smiths magnetic instruments, but fitting them is made needlessly complicated by the fact



Left: One fork leg, stripped for repair, as necessary



Next time:
Refinishing the finish
and finishing the job!

The revitalised front end. Looking very good so far...

that the bezel is cheaply crimped on, unlike the Chronometrics that have an impressive screw-on bezel. However, I had a cunning plan. My mate Steve has a wood-working lathe, which I was certain we could jerry-rig into a crimping tool. I popped over to his house, where he made up some wooden mandrels to hold each instrument. With the instrument held firmly in the lathe in the mandrels, the rubber seals compressed, and the lathe was spun up. Pressing an old bearing attached to a metal bar against the bottom of the bezel caused it to be crimped neatly to the instrument housing. Golly gosh – they looked fabulous. I popped them in the refurbished instrument cups, and they looked as good as new. So, spurred on by my success...

Suppliers

RGM Norton, Cumbria
(rgmnorton.co.uk)

Andover Norton
(andover-norton.co.uk/)

Armour's Exhausts, Bournemouth
(armoursltd.co.uk/)

D. Middleton Stainless Fasteners
(stainlessmiddleton.co.uk/)

Autosparks Electrical
(autosparks.co.uk/)

Alderney Plating, Bournemouth
(alderneyplating.co.uk/)

Videos

https://youtu.be/jJl_IFsxMjc
(Commando First Start)

<https://youtu.be/1j3du5NiMiA>
(Commando Idling Nicely)