

SINGLES SPOT

fondness for big single four-strokes and the Ducati had all that thumping, pounding torque, but with a smoothness and civilised disposition that I didn't expect from such a quick bike. All the handling; I hurled it into all my favorite bends faster than I'd previously dared and yet it kept egging me on to go even faster, at even crazier angles. The strange thing about the handling was the complete lack of effort required to make the bike do what I wanted it to. It seemed that I only had to think about where I wanted to go and the bike took precisely the line I intended to use. Those are the sort of feelings that signal irrevocable Ducati-omania, feelings that make you suffer the undeniable failings of poor electrics and indifferent cosmetic finish for the sake of that superb engine and magical handling.

But sadly, despite these qualities, the singles were becoming too expensive to produce. The amount of skilled labour that the motor's precision engineering demanded would have meant raising the price to unrealistic levels for a single. And other aspects of the bikes, like the appalling six-volt electrical systems were clearly showing their age. It was a choice between completely revamping the whole design with modern standards of finish and equipment--and raising the price--or dropping them altogether and starting afresh on new designs. And so, virtually 20 years after the first little Gran Sport came out of the Bologna factory, the last Ducati singles were wheeled off the production line to make way for the new 350 and 500cc parallel

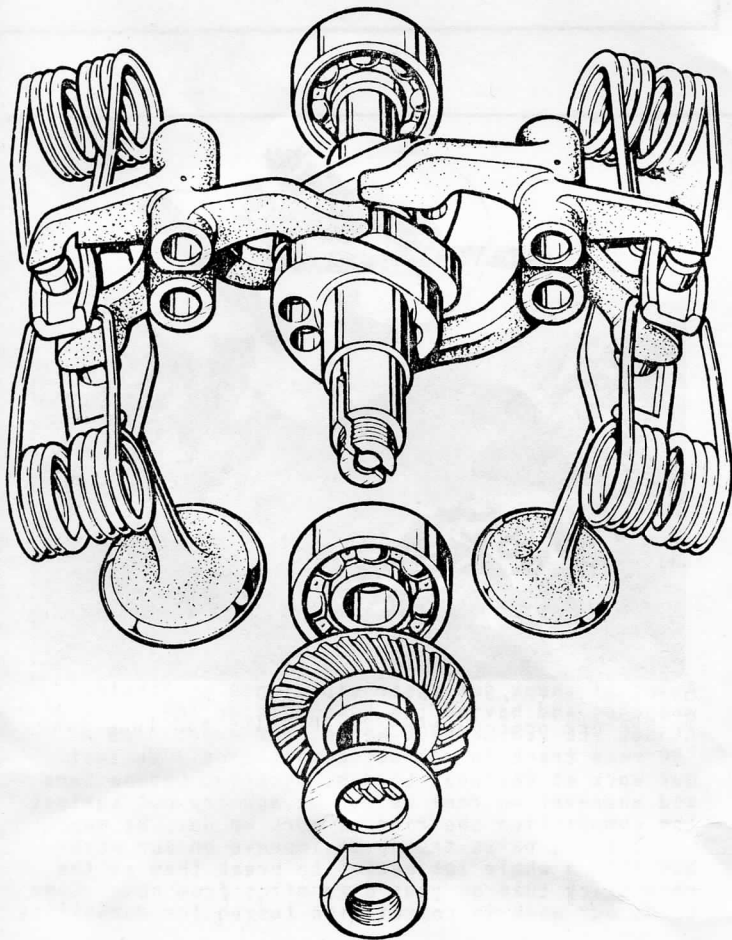


Illustration: Roy Crowson

Above: details of the desmodromic valve gear used on production singles. Note the parallel rocker arms. The lower, forked-end rockers close the valves while the upper pair open them.

twins which replaced them.

The history of Ducati sales in this country is a somewhat tangled tale. The first British concessionaires were Britax, who imported the bolt-on bicycle motor in 1954, but that rapidly folded up as a dismal failure. Ducati motorcycles were first seen in England in 1958, when the big Oxford and Manchester based dealers Kings took on the concession. It was no coincidence that the boss of Kings was a man called Stan Hailwood, whose fresh-faced son Michael was soon to make a name for himself on the 125 desmo racers.

Kings imported the 125 Monza, the 125 Monza Super, the 175 Silverstone, Silverstone Super (which with its special cylinder head, high compression piston and big carb was claimed to do 95mph), the 200cc Elite and 200 Super Sports. They also sold small numbers of the 175cc Formula 3, an out-and-out racer with a titanium conrod in an exotically tuned motor that would rev to 11,000rpm. It also cost a small fortune--£521 3s 11d, in 1959!

In 1961 the first full 250 single reached the British market in the shape of the four-speed Daytona. A race tuning kit was available with it at all of £18 10s. Motor Cycle Mechanics track tested a race-kitted Daytona at over 100mph, which was pretty sensational for a 250 single more than 15 years ago. The 125s and 175s were not imported after 1962, but the Daytona carried on until September '64 when it was replaced by what was in many respects the ultimate of Ducati's roadster singles--the 250 Mach I. This machine had a compression ratio of 10:1, big valves, a five-speed gearbox and a claimed top speed of 106mph. That seems to have been just a little optimistic, but from his own experiences of sponsoring a Mach I in production racing, Mick Walker says that a well set up bike could attain that speed even if those straight off the showroom floor wouldn't. The American magazine Cycle World put one through their speed trap at over 104mph and produced a standing quarter mile time of 16.5sec. Any modern 250 would be hard pressed to emulate that....

Another change of concessionaire in 1965 coupled the name Walthamstow dealer Vic Camp with Ducati. Camp's approach to the sale of Ducatis was perhaps more enthusiastic than commercial. He had a great personal affection for the marque and, perhaps because of that, he was content with a small scale and rather select market. The number of machines imported during his time as concessionaire is only a fraction of the total imported since 1958. But he was responsible for bringing in more exotic members of the Ducati range that hadn't been seen over here before, such as the few early and rare 350 MkIIIs and a high performance version of the rather stodgy and ungainly Sebring that was soon to flood on to the British market.

Three years after Camp's takeover Liverpool businessman Bill Hannah pulled off a curious deal that left the select and prestigious image of Ducati decidedly tarnished for quite some time. He bought a whole shipload of Ducatis--3,500 of them--that had been languishing in holds ever since the Berliner Corporation had some time previously refused to take delivery of as an order for the Stateside market.

This huge consignment consisted mainly of 160cc Monza Juniors, which Vic Camp was already importing the 350 Sebring with its strange styling--an unsuccessful Italian interpretation of American taste--and the 250 Monza (not to be confused with the earlier Monza, this was a Daytona GT engine with cycle parts similar to the Sebring). There were also assorted oddities, like the Brio scooter with a 100cc fan-cooled motor, and two versions of the 250 MkIII. One was a US racing variant with flywheel magneto ignition, the other a roadster with lights.

Of course, this suddenly swamped the market with