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MYTHS, LIES & HALF-TRUTHS

The history of the 1960s Triumph TT Special comprises varying degrees of fiction interwoven with fact. Charles Rising debunks the myths



The Triumph TT Special, like the example pictured above, recently rebuilt by Ace Classics in London, was a no-frills, stripped-for-action, racing machine built for the booming American market between 1963-67. British twins became the bikes to beat in American off-road competition and Triumphs excelled on dirt track ovals, TT races (dirt ovals with an infield jump), scrambles and enduros (or cross-country races).

The Americans called the big twin enduro bikes 'desert sleds'. Possibly because the bash plate skidded over rocks in the outback? At least that's the theory American-based *Cycle World* magazine came up with in 1967 when they tested a pair of Triumphs set up for desert racing: a 500cc T100C and a 650cc single-carb TR6C. The TR6C, or 'Trophy Competition' as it was also known, sported high-level exhaust pipes and silencers, front and rear mudguards and full lighting; Triumph marketed the bike in America with the headline: 'Versatility Plus!' Proven winners in

enduros and cross-country events, the bikes were also ideal for 'on-the-road' riding, said the Triumph promo blurb.

But the British company also offered the T120TT 'Bonneville TT Special' – much more of an all-out competition bike, stripped of lights and speedo, with silencer-free exhaust pipes tucked underneath. It was the tool for dirt track racing and scrambling, but was raced in enduros and cross-country events too.

The TT model is commonly accorded a somewhat exaggerated rarity, thanks to much of the inaccurate information available in books, magazines or, worst of all, on the internet. And claims of hot-rod engines coming out of the factory are also exaggerated. Factory records show 3918 TT Specials were built in total, making them *relatively* rare, especially considering over seven times as many T120R roadsters were sold in the States over the same period. But the TT is far from being 'one of the rarest and most collectible Triumphs on the planet,' as has been claimed.

TT Special engine specifications are frequently embellished ►►

with a host of performance extras such as 'wild cams', unspecified 'porting', etc. But they never had them when they left the factory. In fact, the differences between the TT engine and that shared with its sibling, the much rarer T120C Competition Sports scrambler, and the T120R roadster, were limited principally to higher-compression pistons and bigger carbs.

At the time of the TT Special's conception in the early 1960s, America was the biggest market worldwide for Triumph motorcycles, which held pride of place as the most popular of the sporty British twins, dominating in competition and generating a cult-like following. Americans saw bikes not as a utilitarian form of transport but as recreational toys, riding them for kicks – often off-road – across the great expanses of the US heartland.

Triumph's distributors, Johnson Motors (JoMo) in California serving the west coast and the Triumph Corporation (TriCor) in Maryland on the east, knew from their dealer networks exactly what their customers desired. And it sure wasn't the pressed-steel bathtubs, nacelles and deeply valanced mudguards foisted upon them by the factory. The hardcore wanted naked, tuned-up hot-rod bikes that they could race around dirt tracks, power down the drag strip, sling about in scrambles or haul ass on over the desert.

The T120 Bonneville was stripped down and hopped up by numerous owners for use in popular all-American TT events – local 'TT scrambles' and professional 'TT steeplechases' around a purpose-built track with a jump – as well as drag races, while single-carb TR6 'sleds' ruled in the desert. Spotting the potential market for factory TT Bonneville and ▶▶



REBUILDING THE SLED

How Ace Classics took the bones of a decaying '67 TT and recreated a hotrod roadster

The 1967 650cc Triumph Bonneville TT Special pictured has been rebuilt to look just as it would have sat on the showroom floor at JoMo. Built by Ace Classics in London for customer Dominic Jude, this TT has a daytime MoT as the owner intends to use it solely on-road.

Ace Classics are London-based Triumph specialists run by the father-and-son team of Cliff and Kev Rushworth. "The TT's were purely for the American market and never sold into the UK," says Kev. "They were built for racing on the TT circuits (normally half-mile dirt ovals with an infield jump) hence the lack of lights and the pipes tucked under the engine. But they got used for desert racing, too.

"In 25 years of our shop, this is the first TT to come our way. This one was one of the early ones, built in October 1966 and sold early in 1967 – hence why we have it registered on a D plate."

Cliff discovered the remains of the TT during one of his regular trips to America,

scouring swap meets, auctions and old barns for Triumph stock.

Kev said: "Dad called me from the States to say he'd found this TT and wondered if there would be any point bringing it back to the UK. Dominic is a regular customer of ours who also has one of the McQueen-replica ISDT Triumphs that we've built and I knew he'd be interested in the bike."

What Cliff brought back was the frame, crankcases, head and barrels, oil tank and petrol tank. Ace love a challenge, though, and the interest for Kev is researching the rarer models and scouring for the right parts.

"This is as original as we could possibly get it," he says. "For example, the original stock Bonnie seat cover would have had a grey top, but this has an original all-black seat cover as used on the C and TT models. We had it 'new old stock' – still in the original brown paper wrapping!"

But some compromises are made to make the old bike liveable-with in 2015. Kev admits: "We used Boyer electronic ignition but with Energy Transfer coils to work with the Boyer. The Boyer is for reliability and ease of starting. We used pattern coils, which came in red – but we've resprayed them with the 'toffee apple' brown colour, which is the same finish as the original coils had."

For Ace Classics, this TT was a relatively straightforward project. "It's what we do on a regular basis – pre-unit

and unit Triumphs. And this bike is not dissimilar to the McQueen-replica ISDT bikes we've built, except this has twin carbs. We never really encounter any real issues because we're conversant with the Triumph twin."

The motor has been treated to new bearings, seals and gaskets. It has the original head and barrels; compression is meant to be 10:1, but that was for racing. As this bike is going to be used regularly on the road, it's been fitted with 7:1 compression pistons so it is easy to start. "The lower compression suits modern rubbish pump fuel," adds Kev.

The carburetors are new 2389 Monoblocs, which were standard, though Triumph switched to the Concentric Amals later in 1967.

The paint is gold under the badges, but Triumph realised that it faded quite quickly under the glare of Californian sunshine, so the later models were white. Mudguards are as they should be – in stainless. Kev says: "Mid-1967, Triumph rolled a lip on the mudguards, but the early bikes had these straight-cut edges, which the riders – not surprisingly – dubbed 'razor-edge mudguards'."

Forks have the competition fork internals, which are the same spec as the Thruxton and TR6C, providing different damping to the regular 6500cc road-going Triumphs.

In original standard form, the bike would not have had a numberplate, but obviously it needs one to be street-legal.



'THIS IS AS ORIGINAL AS WE COULD POSSIBLY GET IT'

■ Kev from Ace Classics gave the TT a run in its natural habitat before its new life as a street bike

Trophy desert sleds, JoMo's sales department had been trying without success to persuade Triumph to provide such models for years.

"We had been advocating and negotiating with Meriden for a factory-built TT machine, to be sold by our dealers, for some time", former JoMo Assistant General Manager Pete Colman told US authors Lindsay Brooke and David Gaylin in an interview in LA in November 1991. TT events, what they called 'TT Scrambles' back east, had a big following on all levels, from local sportsmen through the AMA championship level. The basis of the bike would be the production Bonneville, and Triumph was in agreement. It was a matter of finalising specifications. But we had so many problems with the 1960 duplex frame breaking on the TR6 in desert racing, and on the standard Bonneville. It didn't make sense at that time. By the time they had a 'fix' for the duplex frame, the 1963 frame and unit-construction engine were nearing production, so the TT Special was inserted into the 1963 season's plan, with a lot of constant urging on our part."

When the JoMo brochure for the all-new 1963 unit-construction 'B' range was released in spring 1962 (prior to the beginning of the production year in August) it included the two 'Specials': the T120C TT and the TR6SC Trophy.

They had no lighting or horn, high-level pipes without silencers, 'racing tyres', bash plates, just a tacho for the TT ('stripped for action for experts only!') and no instrumentation at all for the Trophy ('specially outfitted for off-the-highway fun and competition'). There was little difference between the two otherwise, except for their engines: a tuned Bonneville mill with big carbs and high compression pistons for the TT; a single-carb stock TR6R motor for the Trophy Special for reliability.

The first batch of TT Specials was equipped with 12:1 pistons, 1³/₁₆in carbs, Energy Transfer battery-less ignition and 17-tooth gearbox sprockets, giving higher gearing than the road bike. Power output was increased by two horsepower to 52bhp (though in their May 1963 road test of an example of the model, *Cycle World* thought the 'gap between the pair is greater').

The first two batches of TT Specials (131 bikes) built in December 1962 and February 1963 were shipped exclusively to JoMo. But from the time of the third batch in April 1963, they were despatched in increasing numbers to TriCor too, alongside the considerably rarer east coast-only T120C Bonneville Scrambler.

Service Bulletins were sent out to puzzled dealers across the nation who had opened a crate to find one of these strange beasts lurking within: 'WARNING... 1963 TRIUMPH T120C... TT SPECIAL. This Special Competition Model is NOT recommended for use on the Highway... extreme caution must be given when the motorcycle is set up.'

The specification was enhanced for 1964 to include reduced compression 11:1 pistons, a revised head with tapered inlet manifolds for the bigger carbs, a TR6 top yoke with backswept bar mounts and heavy duty forks with internal hydraulic dampers.

From 1965 the TTs were fitted with folding footrests (to comply with AMA competition regulations) and the swooping downswept 'TT' pipes that were to become their signature.

A modified frame introduced for the 650cc models in 1966, with increased rake to improve high-speed stability, proved unpopular among TT racers, for whom quick steering was the priority. In the report from the USA Sales Conference, held at Meriden in November 1966, the following note is recorded:

'Johnson Motors requested that 300 T120TT models for December production be fitted with the 1965-type frame, as the 1966/7 frame, whilst ideally suited for normal road conditions, is not acceptable by TT riders. This matter was investigated and confirmation given that the request could be met.'

During the two-day conference, revised specifications were agreed for the 1968 TT Special, aimed at maintaining its

competitiveness as an 'off the showroom floor' racer: 'This machine to be as 1967 with the following alterations (Johnson Motors only): 1) Stellite tips to valves; 2) 1965-type frame; ▶▶

'THE TT SPECIAL WAS MORE OF AN ALL-OUT COMPETITION BIKE'

■ A TT, a Triumph jacket and sand dunes. Totally cool



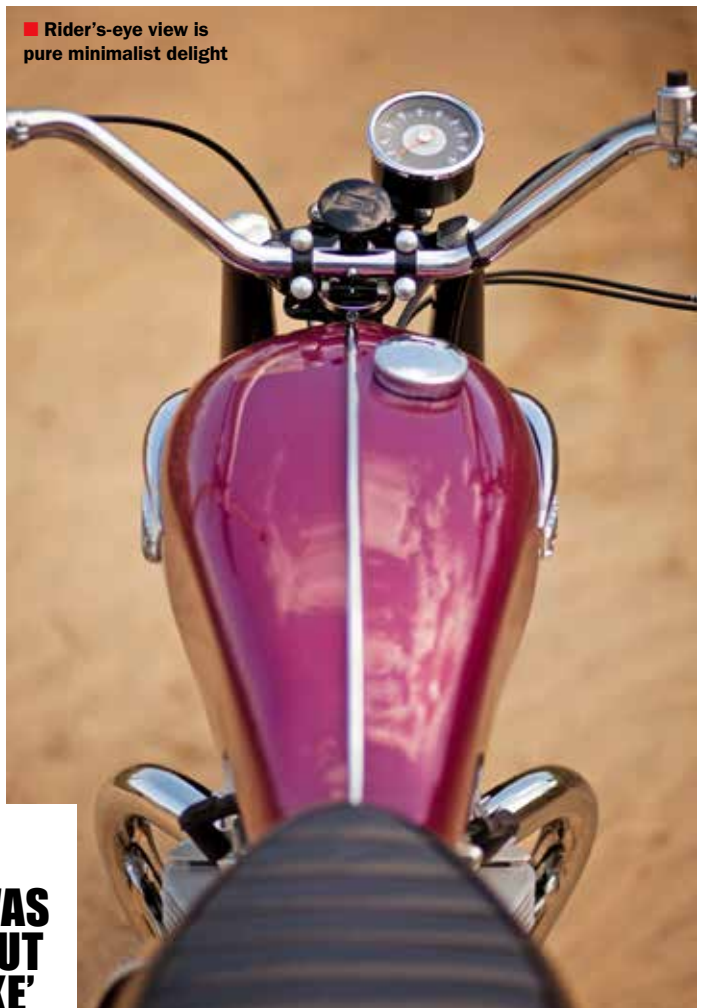
■ It's rare to see this script – but not as rare as some people make out



■ What does it sound like through open, unsilenced pipes? Just as raw and raucous as you'd imagine



■ Rider's-eye view is pure minimalist delight



3) Front and rear alloy rims; 4) Racing-type torpedo twin seat; 5) New oil tank, centre mounting.' A note in the margin stated: 'If we cannot supply 4 and 5, machines to be shipped less these items and Johnson Motors will obtain from local manufacturers.'

Over their production years, TT Specials were campaigned successfully in US TT scrambles/steeplechases, desert races and drag races. *Cycle World* Tech Editor Gordon Jennings even took one to the Bonneville Speed Trials in 1963, 'very slightly modified' it and captured the Partial Streamlined Class C 650cc record with a speed of 135.74mph. Steve McQueen bought a '63 model and had his pal Bud Ekins transform it into a desert sled. Evel Knievel rode and trashed them before he switched to riding Harleys.

Despite the warnings in the Service Bulletins, many TT Specials were fitted with lights and silencers and used on the street. Bill Milburn, who worked at Midwest Triumph in Chicago in the '60s, says: "We never sold a TT Special to a racer. They were more like a Camaro Z28, Mustang Boss 302 or Shelby Cobra. They looked like the bikes that were at the track and in the magazines and having one made you cool. Most of the ones we sold got a Bates headlight and tail light and became street hot-rod drag racers."

The May 1965 issue of *Cycle World* included a piece on one such '63 TT belonging to a Harry Penn from Philadelphia, which had 'led a busy life this year'. Heavily modified with a lightened

flywheel, big valves, sportier cams and (sensibly) 9.5:1 pistons, fitted with QD lighting and 're-baffled Matchless mufflers', central oil tank and custom seat/tank/paint job, Harry had won dozens of trophies at Eastern drag bike meets, top awards at custom shows and 'even herded it to second place in an AAMRR road race'. He'd then upped sticks, jumped on his bike and rode it nearly 3000 miles from his home town in Pennsylvania to southern California to take up work... "for a Triumph dealer, naturally".

Landspeed record legend Bob Leppan told author Lindsay Brooke that most of the TTs sold at his Triumph Detroit dealership were drag raced competitively, while other former dealers attested to their popularity as both dragsters and for local TT scrambles. Others were supplied to top professional racers.

In 1967, the Triumph Engineering Company was on a roll, celebrating record sales – particularly of the best-selling T120R Bonneville – and a hard-nosed management decision was taken to discontinue production of the TT Special in favour of the more profitable roadster. On June 19, 1967 a confidential memo sent from the factory to TriCor stated coldly that T120TTs 'are no longer being produced'. It was the end of an era. **CB**

*Special thanks to Lindsay Brooke, author of *Triumph Motorcycles in America*, for sharing material from his archive

**'THEY LOOKED LIKE THE BIKES
AT THE TRACK AND HAVING
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