MÉCATWIN X-90

TRIUMPH

FRENCH SAUCE

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A Little Piquance Helps Flavour British Beef

As guided tours of Paris go, it was hurried but undeniably exciting. Ahead of me the tuned Triumph Super III sportster carved its way neatly through the French capital's traffic, the howl from its free-breathing exhaust system bouncing off walls and cars as the bright yellow triple was opened-up on occasional clear stretches of road. Mécatwin boss Frank Depoisier was running late, and he wasn't wasting much time en route.

Tucked in behind, I was enjoying every minute of my ride on Depoisier's naked red Triumph X-90 special. The high-handlebarred 900cc triple flicked through traffic gaps with ease, accelerated hard away from every set of lights, and looked mighty good every time I sneaked a quick glance in a shop window. When finally Depoisier pulled up at his base in south-eastern Paris, I was still right with him – and impressed with the X-90's performance, as well as its style.

QUICK TEST

If the X-90's name and shape bring to mind the old Triumph firm's X-75 Hurricane triple of the 1970s, then that is entirely intentional. Depoisier is a long-time Triumph and classic bike fan who set up his M catwin firm ten years ago, to tune Bonnevilles and the like. In recent years Depoisier has become increasingly involved with modern Triumphs, and his X-90 gives the Hinckley-built bikes a neat look inspired by Craig Vetter's legendary X-75.

The X-90's centrepiece is unmistakably its tank-seat unit, a dramatic carbon-and-epoxy composite form that sweeps down from the steering head, taking in exaggerated knee cut-outs, diminutive sidepanels and a sculpted dual-seat. Its swooping shape totally transforms the naked Trident triple on which this X-90 is based, giving a lean, aggressive look that acknowledges Triumph's past while being as avant-garde as any Jean-Paul Gaultier creation.

This triple doesn't have the X-75's distinctive trio of silencers up its right side, but it incorporates numerous other modifications designed to reduce weight and improve performance. The reverse-cone silencers are Mécatwin parts. In combination with K&N filters and fine-tuning of the standard 33mm Keihin carbs, they give the otherwise standard 885cc triple motor a boost of about 5bhp between 6000rpm and 9000rpm.

The chassis has received attention, too, but not with the lengthened front forks that were one of the key features with which Triumph's T150 Trident was converted into the X-75 Hurricane back in 1973. In contrast the modern Trident's forks and single rear suspen-

sion unit have been shortened slightly, using progressively wound fork springs and a custom-built shock from WP of Holland. Depoisier says he has also lowered the seat's height, without reducing its padding.

Although I'm pretty tall, the X-90 certainly felt slightly lower than a stock Triumph as I settled into a seat whose shape and lack of anything for a pillion to hold on to suggested that it was designed more for one person than two. Moderately raised handlebars, bolted to custom yokes, gave an upright riding position. The X-90 fired-up with a pleasant three-cylinder burble from its matt-black pipes (chrome finish is also available), and pulled away cleanly, my legs fitting neatly into the tank cut-outs.

Eh bien, mes enfants ... how is it that M. Dupoisier was able to improve Triumph's basic triple so easily? Formidable!

The kick at six grand and tuneful exhaust note combined to make the bike feel enjoyably lively on the roads near Mécatwin's base at Ivry-sur-Seine. Depoisier's engine mods have increased peak rear-wheel output from 90bhp to about 95bhp, and the X-90 certainly pulled hard provided it was kept revving. Less impressive was the corresponding dip in the power curve between 3000 and 4500rpm, which meant that some of the standard Trident's roll-on grunt was missing, though the difference was not huge in either case.

Handling was good, too, with a subtle improvement over the stock Trident. Geometry was little-changed, if anything feeling slightly sportier than stan-

Original and Best. Expertly-modded Mécatwin faces up to the standard Trident. Source of inspiration is the X-75 Triumph (below)

dard. The high bars and firmer, lower suspension set-up gave a little of the aggressive feel of an old-style naked Superbike racer. On the open road the triple repeatedly shot to the ton mark, heading for a top speed of about 135mph, and it remained stable in fast curves and bumpy Parisian backstreets alike. Comfort was reasonable, though maybe slightly down on the more softly-sprung Trident.

Depoisier says his mods have reduced the Triumph's weight by a worthwhile 23kg, giving a total of 189kg, and much of that weight is now held lower, which makes the bike feel a little more compact and manageable. You'd have to ride the X-90 on more suitable roads than I did to be certain that ground clearance has not been compromised by the chassis changes. But nothing scraped during my test, despite some cornering that must have pushed the Avon AM22/23 tyres towards their limits. By naked bike standards the X-90 was a respectably quick and fine-handling machine.

But while Mécatwin's engine and chassis mods might be beneficial, the latter especially to Triumph riders with short legs – it's the X-90's look that is its main attraction. That holds true when you get up close, too, because perhaps the bike's most impressive aspect was the quality of its construction. The fit and finish of the tank-seat unit looked exemplary, and Depoisier is confident enough to match Triumph's two-year warranty.

For a special the X-90 is practical, too. Its tank-seat can be removed or replaced in a few minutes. Everything seemed to fit very well, steering lock is unchanged, and fuel capacity is reduced only by four litres to a still respectable 21 litres. The bike I rode looked good enough to be an official factory machine and in some French dealerships it's possible to order a brand new X-90, with 750, 900 or 1200cc engine (all Triumph triples and fours can be used as a base) and a choice of six single-colour paint schemes.

Depoisier is keen to expand sales to other countries, too. The basic X-90 kit costs FF18,000 (about £2400), and includes paintwork, front and rear mudguards, seat and taillight. This bike's carb kit, exhaust system, handlebars and top yoke, indicators and WP suspension parts can be bought separately or included for a total of FF25,000 (£3300). For Triumph riders looking for something a bit different, that could be money well spent. The X-90's blend of British engineering, American inspiration and French flair and craftsmanship makes for a very classy motorbike.

INSPIRATION FOR THE X-90. TRIUMPH'S X-75 HURRICANE

Triumph's X-75 Hurricane of 1973 was one of the most striking and radical models a major factory has ever produced. Its story is also one of the most unusual. Craig Vetter, a freelance American designer who later became famous for his fairings and luggage, was commissioned in secret by American BSA/Triumph bosses disappointed by the angular styling of the recently-released Triumph Trident and BSA Rocket 3 triples.

Vetter's prototype, which was initially intended to be produced as a BSA, retained the Rocket 3's aircooled, 60bhp three-cylinder engine but featured bigger cylinder heads, to make the motor look more substantial, plus shorter gearing to improve low-speed acceleration. Higher bars, a new headlight and clocks, 50mm longer forks and a trio of silencers on the right side combined with the slender tank-seat unit to give an unmistakeable look.

BSA/Triumph's management was impressed by the prototype, and had the bike shipped over to Triumph's Meriden factory, where it was put into production with few changes. Named the Triumph X-75 Hurricane, because BSA was on the point of collapse, the bike turned plenty of heads when it was launched in 1973. Fewer than 1200 examples were built; those still in good condition are now worth serious money. The X-75's futuristic styling still looks great, at least from the right side – although in contrast to the X-90, its handling and braking were inferior to those of the standard T150 Trident.