Age of Agusta

Like the Ducati desmo singles, the MV 350B represented the culmination of an era for Italian motorcyles. Ian Falloon reports.

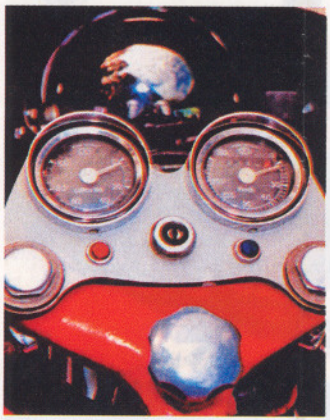
There are few names in motorcycling as illustrious as MV Agusta. Yet while the racing machines and magnificent four-cylinder models receive most of the accolades, the MV legend was also built on a range of single- and twin-cylinder production machines.

Racing success in the 1950s led to MV offering some of the finest sporting singles then available – including the magnificent 175 CSS – and in 1955 they unveiled a prototype 350cc twin. The double overhead camshaft design was quite radical for its day but remained a dream, and it wasn't until 1963 that MV reconsidered the twin. This time the design was much more mundane, with a 160cc overhead valve pushrod twin-cylinder engine that produced an unremarkable 7.5 horsepower.

One thing that has characterised MV over the years is the time delay between initial display and production. The parallel twin was no different. The 160 disappeared for a couple of years, but in the meantime grew to 250cc and eventual availability towards the end of 1967.

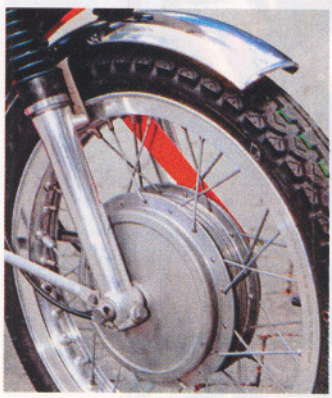
By 1971, the twin became 350cc, and for 1972 and 1973 emerged as the magnificent 350B featured here.

The all-alloy unit construction twin-cylinder engine followed the usual MV practice of looking outwardly similar to a two-stroke, with



the heavily finned cylinder head and barrel almost completely disguising the overhead valve layout. In the process, in growing from 160 to 350cc, the bore and stroke became over-square (63 x 56mm), the compression ratio went up to 9.5:1 and carburettors increased to two 24mm Dell'Orto. The power was up to 32 horsepower at 7650rpm, and was transmitted through a five-speed gearbox.

Vibration, always a problem with 360-degree parallel twins, was reasonably well controlled on this short-stroke engine. The earliest MV350B featured coil and points ignition, but this was changed to electronic (as on this example) in October 1972. At the same time the electrical system was upgraded to 12 volts.



When it came to the chassis, the 350B was more akin to 1950s bikes than 1960s. Utilising the engine as a stressed member, the frame was not unlike that of the contemporary Ducati single, with a single front downtube. In many other respects, the 350B was also similar to the little single-cylinder desmo Ducatis. There were 18-inch wheels front and rear, with full width Grimeca drum brakes.

The overall dimensions of both bikes were also similar, but the slightly heavier (149kg) MV could outrun the desmo Ducati, topping out at around 160kph.

Both bikes were typical middleweight Italian cafe racers of the era, featuring clip-on handlebars and rear-set footpegs. And because the power was moderate, it didn't tax the chassis unnecessarily.

One feature that set the MV apart was the optional full racing fairing. MV Agusta wanted to make the most of their racing success – then at its greatest – and while the 350B engine specification was unremarkable, its breeding was impeccable.

Demand for faster and more powerful motorcycles led to the market for small displacement sporting bikes diminishing. The cost of producing such high-specification machines was no longer justified, and only those who appreciated finesse over horsepower wanted the expensive MV 350B.

But those who did appreciate it got one of the sweetest handling, best looking, and best balanced bikes ever. ■

Five things you didn't know about the MV Agusta 350

1. **Although MV is best known for a record 63 world championships, racing was always seen as a promotion for the production models.**
2. **As early as 1943, Count Agusta envisaged a need for cheap and reliable transport in the postwar period, and responded with a range of successful two-strokes.**
3. **MV Agusta also produced scooters, but their final scooter – the Chicco of 1960 – arrived too late.**
4. **The 350 Sport was redesigned during 1973 by car stylist Giorgio Giugiaro, also responsible for the Ducati 860 GT at the same time.**
5. **Giugiaro's 350 Sport eventually went into production during 1975, lasting until 1978.**