

# A LITTLE JOY

When most of us think of machines bearing the proud name of MV Agusta we think of bright red racing four-cylinder fire engines. Russ Gannicott, however, lives with an MV Agusta Turismo Rapido Extra Lusso Centomila. A long name for a 125, some might say...

Photos by Russ Gannicott



**T**he MV Agusta Turismo Rapido Extra Lusso Centomila probably has the longest model name in motorcycling history – but what is it? Well, the wee beastie is possibly the most ridden of my collection of lightweight Italians and while it's uncomfortable, very slow and prone to the odd tantrum, it is one of the most 'fun' bikes I've ever ridden.

MV introduced their range of 125cc 4-strokes in 1954 in response to the demand for 'proper' engines in their utility 'get to the pasta factory' bikes. For the next four years the models underwent various changes in style, and progressed from an early all tubular frame to the more recognisable banana frame which was to become a MV trademark. All the bikes were based around a semi duplex cradle frame with the engine being a stressed member. Early models had unsprung front mudguards, while later models employed a more attractive and sportier

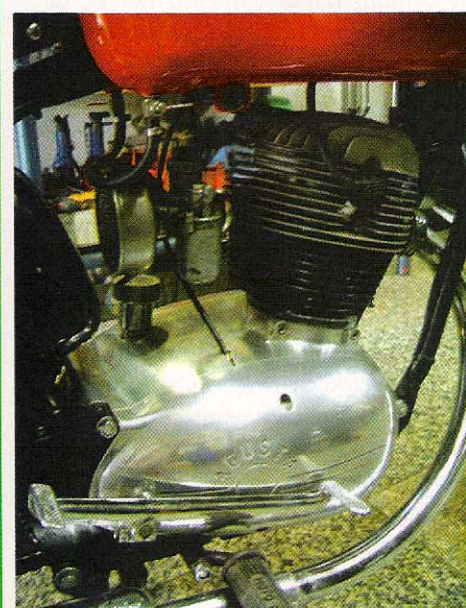
guard fitted to the fork sliders. The engines of all the models was basically the same; 125cc, OHV, 54mm x 54mm square engine running 8.5:1 compression ratio. Petrol tank and cosmetic variations which were introduced are the main means of identifying the various models, but over the years bits get replaced, so now it can be difficult to confirm if a bike is a Turismo Rapido (TR), Rapido Sport (RS), Turismo Rapido Extra (TRE), Turismo Rapido Extra Lusso (TREL), Turismo Rapido America (TRA) or a Turismo Rapido Lusso (TRL)... phew, confusing eh?

In 1959 MV redesigned the lubrication system and in light of the predicted reliability of the updated engine, they christened the model the Turismo Rapido Extra Lusso Centomila (one-hundred-thousand) and warranted the new bike for one hundred thousand kilometres! A very brave marketing move by MV... I wonder if any bike ever attained this mileage and if



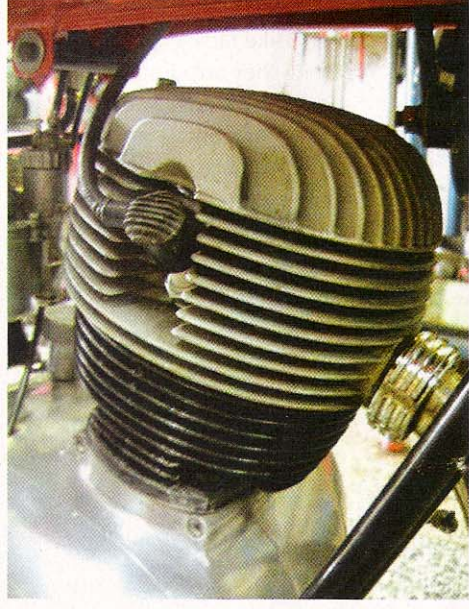
not, whether MV honoured the warranties? The Centomila stayed in the MV catalogue until 1963 and finally gave way to the GT and GTL models which went on until 1973. The little bike is a joy to ride and while slow (60mph with a tail wind), with its 7.5bhp, it is still lively as it only weighs 200lbs. As per most 50s – 70s Italian bikes, the kickstart is on the left, with the one up, three down, toe and heel gear change on the right.

Starting is a piece of cake owing to the low compression – though after all these years I still can't get used to using my left leg to start a bike – and in usual MV fashion the clutch and gears are slick and smooth. The ride is both hard and springy at the same time, owing in part to a combination



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**ITALIANS  
in  
ACTION**

of the very narrow stiff seat and my thirteen stone weight, but handling is true classic Italian. The steering is so true, that if you get it onto full lock at tickover in first gear you can take your hands off the bars and amaze your family by going round and round in twenty foot circles eating you sandwiches and drinking a can of coke... don't ask, but yes I did, much to my son's amusement!

The rather small looking brakes are surprisingly efficient, but with such a light bike I suppose their main job is working against the momentum of the rider rather than the machine... if you were a nine stone Italian teenager you'd easily end up over the bars! The only time

the Centomila shows any vices and has a bit of a tantrum is when you push it too hard through bumpy corners. It can have a tendency to 'bump-steer', especially if something happens and you need to apply some brake. In fairness, this won't normally happen if you use the back brake, but I'm afraid I'm one of those riders who believe the only purpose of the left hand pedal is to switch the brake light on! Even when the bike does shake its head and complain you just let it know who's boss and ride through it. Let's face it, you're probably not going fast enough to get into trouble anyway and the whole experience is guaranteed to put a manic grin on your face! One final point; the bike has a

bottomless petrol tank. I'm not quite sure what the exact fuel consumption is now, but the factory claimed 2 litres per 100km, which equates to around 130mpg, a figure that I wouldn't dispute.

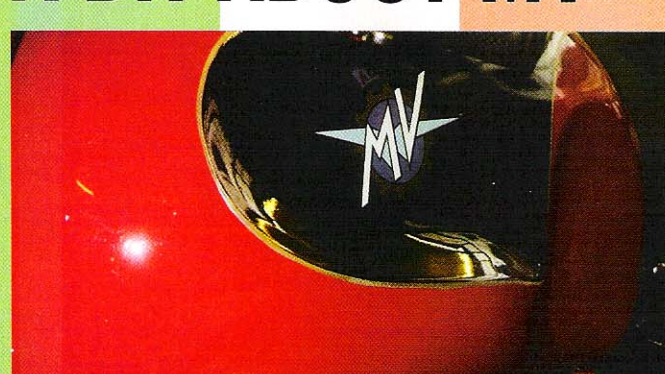
My particular bike is a recent Italian import, having come from Adam Bolton from Italian Classic Bikes, a company based in Volterra in Tuscany which specialize in sourcing and supplying bikes to customers world-wide. The MV was fully restored by an Italian engineer who was 'thinning out' his extensive collection and with the exception of one or two minor jobs is still very much as I bought it. The obvious exception to originality is that it currently sports a Triumph silencer while I'm having



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## A BIT ABOUT MV



Count Domenico Agusta started to build motorcycles in order to dominate motorcycle racing. Inheriting and developing a successful aviation business before the Second World War, in the post-war years he sought a more controllable market in which to excel. Agusta had the resources to build world-beating competition motorcycles, and so he did. If these championship winners also happened to establish a brand which could be sold, at a profit, to the man in the street then that was all to the good – but it was on the racetrack that the marque made its name. As a result the machines built by MV (Meccanica Verghera) Agusta were created to dominate their sporting competitors, so they were frequently innovative and occasionally extreme. The road-going offshoots tended to be less well endowed; they might have come equipped with the name but they didn't always possess the fleet-footed attributes which made the racing MVs so remarkable.

And 'remarkable' is the right word for MV Agusta's racing record. The company withdrew from competition in 1976, taking with it some 4000 race wins, 270 Grand Prix wins, 75 world titles and a place in the Guinness Book of Records. For nearly two decades MV Agusta had been THE Italian racebike, carrying every famous name in the business to victory – Bill Lomas, John Surtees, Phil Read and Mike Hailwood among them. At the last, Giacomo Agostini flew the flag for the marque in fine style at the Nurburgring in 1976, winning with his usual crowd-pleasing panache.

The competition success came at a price for it drained the family finances and the modest sales of spin-off streetbikes couldn't cover the costs. The more mundane go-to-work 125s did not sit comfortably alongside the concept of world-beating racebikes – if MV were the Ferrari of the two-wheeled world then it seemed a little strange to be using one as a weekday hack.

Even so, the original MV streetbikes have won a dedicated following – especially the four-cylinder machines like the 105mph dohc 600-4; the extraordinary slim, 125mph 750S; the Boxer (a 955cc straight four, by the way, which lost its claim to that name when Ferrari objected!); and the 75bhp, 130mph 750S America. Such is the strength of the brand that it was worth resurrecting in the last decade, and the MV name now lives again, attached to Massimo Tamburini's finely-crafted F4.

I always wanted an MV – it's such an evocative marque for anyone with an interest in the history of bike racing – and while I might aspire to a cammy single or a multi they are simply beyond my means. The little single has satisfied and indeed exceeded my desire and is both a great little machine to ride and a real crowd-puller at shows – even if I do have to keep telling 'experts' that although it looks like one, it is not a 2-stroke!

As a postscript to this, the other day I met the son of the 1960s London-based MV concessionaires. He told me how his father met Count Agusta and set up the UK deal, but the operation was never a commercial success owing to the high costs of the bikes. In the early 60s a 125 MV cost the same, if not more than a British 250! This trend towards high costs and values continued well into the 'classic era' with all MVs commanding premium prices, and it has only been in the past couple of years that this trend has reversed, with bikes like mine now fetching less than some restored Bantams.

Back in the Sixties, the final nail in the coffin was the introduction of the Hire Purchase regulations which led to the importers getting rid of the last of their stock by offering to accept anything from cameras to broken push-bikes as deposits against new bikes. Even with this offer and huge discounts, a number of these bikes remained unsold for many years and now it's possible to see a 1960 model sporting a 1970s registration number. A sad end for a wonderful range of lightweight motorcycles that spanned ten years of production. **RC**



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