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WHY A HONDA CB750 WILL MAKE YOU HAPPY





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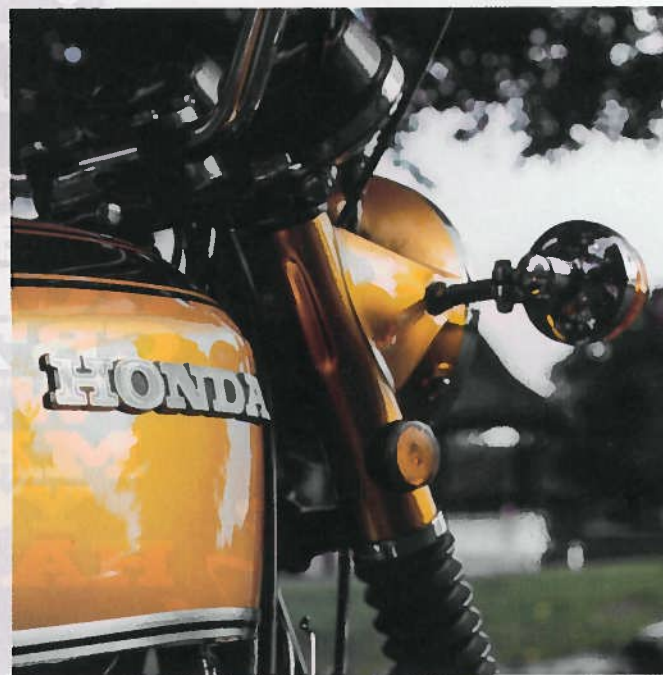
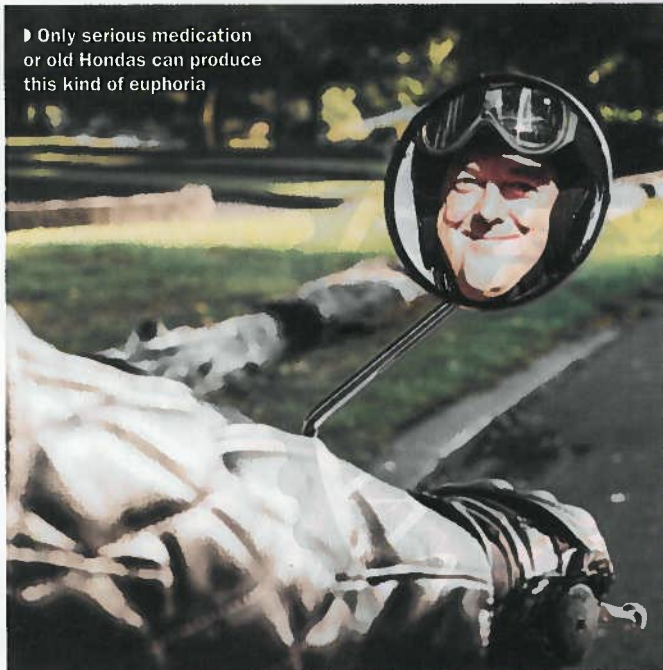
IT'S 'THE BIKE THAT DEFINED THE PATH OF JAPAN'S EVENTUAL OMNIPOTENCE'

That's James May's verdict on Honda's 1969 masterpiece. He explains why he loves his, even though he's not quite sure which one it is...

WORDS: JAMES MAY & GEZ KANE. PHOTOGRAPHY: GEORGE WILLIAMS & RORY GAME



► Only serious medication or old Hondas can produce this kind of euphoria



In a corner of my garage I have a Yamaha RD200 in restored condition. It's even taxed. But close inspection reveals it to be not quite right. It's the wrong colour – yellow, when it should be orange – and the frame and engine numbers don't match, because the previous owner built it from two basket cases.

But so what? It's still a Yamaha RD200, and these minutiae of authenticity don't make any difference to the riding experience, which remains fairly historic and very entertaining regardless of the digits stamped around the thing. I really don't let this sort of thing bother me too much.

But a Honda is different, because I love old Hondas. And my CB750, as an early example of the second most significant bike the company has built (after the Super Cub), is something about which I can be quite boring. And I'm about to be.

This bike came to me from a French dealership via the international old Honda leverage services of David Silver, of bits-for-old-Hondas fame. Strictly speaking, it's a K0 model.

Now already we need some clarity on this. Americans tend to brand all early CB750s as 'K0', but strictly we should differentiate between this and the original CB750. The true K0 was a very short-lived transition model (just 121 examples were made) between the first so-called 'sand-cast' engine bikes (they were actually gravity-cast in refractory-lined dies, hence the rougher finish) and the subsequent, improved K1.

So, my bike has the chunky, fluted side panels, an unpainted front caliper and the baffling slider on the left bar that changes the function of the switchgear button from horn to flasher, which is not something you want to have to think about in an emergency. In these and other respects, my bike is just like the first CB750.

But it has the later push-pull throttle cables, the properly-beaded front mudguard, an indentation in the number four exhaust pipe for the brake pedal (ahem!) and the smoother,

pressure die-cast engine finish, all of which were incorporated in the new-and-improved K1 launched in late 1970. So that would appear to be that. It's a genuine K0.

Except that, according to John Wyatt's definitive book, *Original Honda CB750*, the frame number of mine places it squarely in the first batch of bikes – too early to be a K0 and definitely too early to be a French-market model. So what is it? It definitely isn't a bitsa, because I can see that it's never been significantly dismantled. This sort of thing is troubling me in those quiet hours prostrated before the shrine of Soichiro in the shed*.

Out on the road, historical significance manifests itself in more apparent ways. That disc brake may have been a marvel in 1969, but it doesn't work very well. And I don't doubt that the Brit bike rearguard are right when they say a contemporary Triumph or Norton steered better. The CB750 isn't the last word in agility.

The Honda doesn't leak oil, though, and all the electrical stuff still works a treat. The bike that defined the path of Japan's eventual omnipotence also has a satisfying bulk between the knees, and the engine makes a lovely granular noise.

But there's another thing, right there. Once I've fired the CB up, I feel obliged to go for a decently long ride, just to be absolutely sure I've banished all trace of condensation from the notoriously rot-prone four-into-four pipes, which are virtually unobtainable and catastrophically expensive in their early form, stamped simply 'HM300'. It's important, because the baffles are removable.

I'm sorry about this, but I did warn you that I can be a bit dull on the subject of my CB750. I think I'll go for a quick ride on the Yamaha. It would appear to have an incorrect seat-locking mechanism. But I just don't care.

**Not literally. I don't actually have a shrine to the great man, just a few of his bikes to contemplate.*

'It doesn't leak engine oil and all the electrical stuff works a treat'





▶ Ribbed front tyre looks the part, as does Lewis jacket

SEVENTIES CB750s

1969-1970 CB750: The first four-cylinder bike from Japan featured a forged crank with shell-type main and big-end bearings, a single overhead camshaft, dry-sump lubrication, electric start and indicators. The first 7500 examples feature the 'sand-cast' engine cases and are highly prized by collectors. After that, all cases are pressure die-cast. Colours are Candy Blue-Green, Candy Red and – slightly later – the Candy Gold you see here.

1970 CB750 K0: Just 121 machines were manufactured between June and August. Single throttle cable with four-way splitter replaced by twin, push-pull cable operating a rocking bar that operated the bank of four carburettors.

1971 CB750 K1: Stronger airbox, reshaped side panels (with no air slots at the front), oil tank and seat. Glass instrument lenses, strengthened clutch basket, slimmer front hub, revised front mudguard and rear suspension units. Gearing changed to 18/48 tooth from 16/45 or 17/45. Colours as before, plus Candy Garnet, Valley Green and Polynesian Blue Metallic.

1972 CB750 K2: In the UK, the K2 remained in the range until it was replaced by the K6 in 1976, though it received yearly updates. Revised fuel filler cap and chrome headlamp brackets. Warning light panel added to handlebar clamps. Quieter silencers, Showa rear shocks and metal chain guard. US models have audible indicator warning and bigger rear light in addition

to higher handlebars. Colours are Briar Brown, Candy Gold, Planet Blue and Flake Sunrise Orange.

1973 CB750 K3: Black panels on tank replace the earlier black stripe. Revised forks with improved damping, new switchgear and smaller intakes on airbox. Colours are Bacchus Olive, Maxim Brown Metallic and Flake Sunrise Orange.

1974 CB750 K4: New speedometer, revised cylinder head casting and graphics updated on tank. Colours are Maroon Metallic, Freedom Green Metallic and Flake Sunrise Orange.


1975 CB750 K5: Bigger indicators and fuel tap moved to the left side of the tank. Colours are Flake Apricot Red and Planet Blue Metallic.

1976: CB750 K6: First new model since the K2 in the UK. Stronger

swingarm (from the new CB750F), revised carburettors. Colour choice? No, it's Candy Antares Red or nothing.

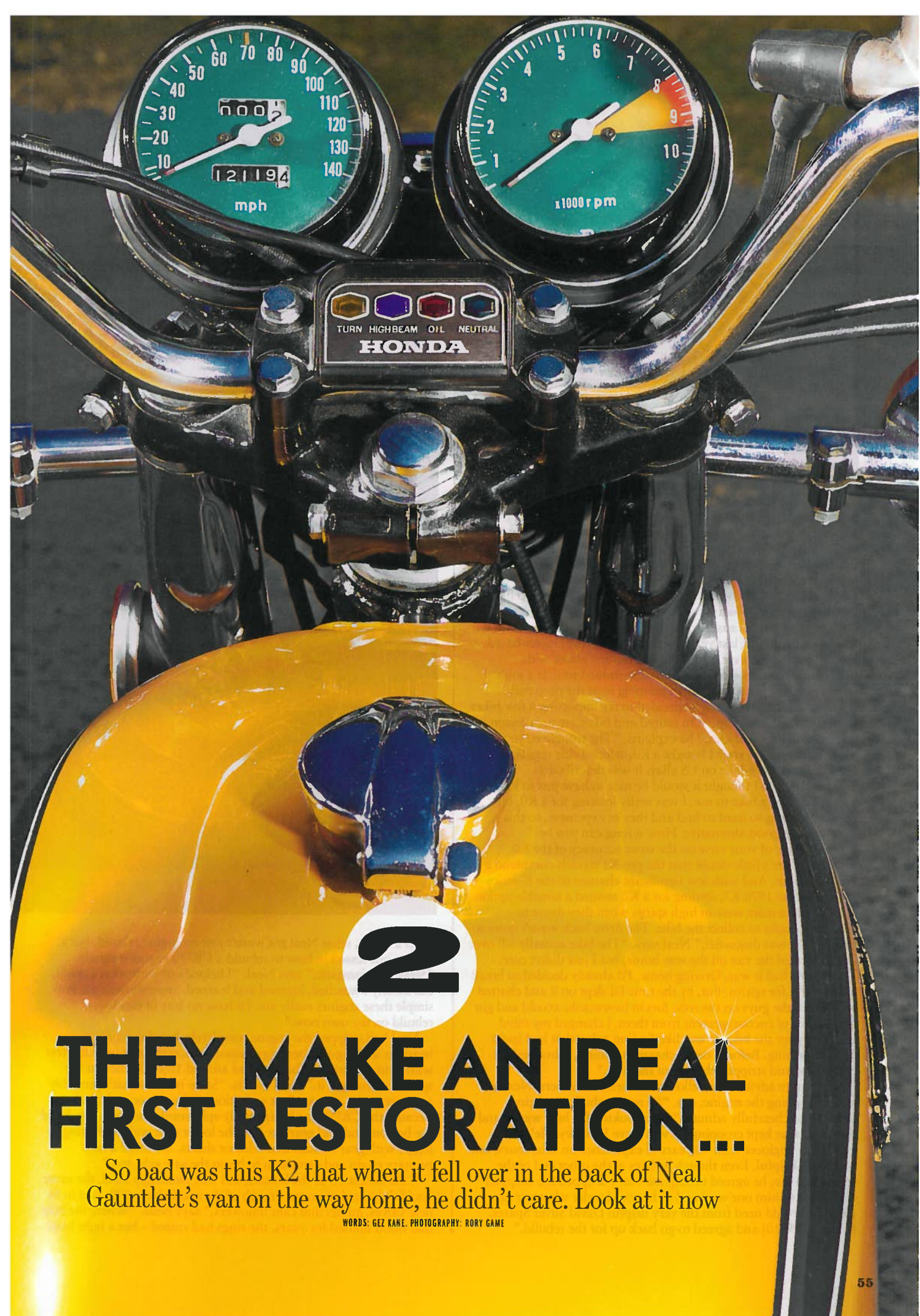
1977 CB750 K7: Engine to similar specification to the F1 sports model made the K7 the fastest K-series bike since the launch model. Higher compression at 9.2:1 and lumpier cams. Accelerator pump on one carb and closer-ratio gearbox fitted. Larger fuel tank, no fork gaiters and restyled side panels. Exhausts have no heat shields or raised seams. A 17in rear wheel replaces the 18in and rear shocks feature exposed springs. Colours are Candy Alpha Red and Excel Black.

1978 CB750 K8: Last K-series model. Stepped seat, re-styled side panels and leaner carburettor settings. Colours are unchanged from 1977.


**WHY A
HONDA
CB750
WILL
MAKE
YOU
HAPPY**



► Note indentation in the fourth exhaust pipe, to give clearance for rear brake lever



2

THEY MAKE AN IDEAL FIRST RESTORATION...

So bad was this K2 that when it fell over in the back of Neal Gauntlett's van on the way home, he didn't care. Look at it now

WORDS: GEZ KANE. PHOTOGRAPHY: RORY GANE



► Neal at home in his English outpost of Honda Motor Co

It's fair to say Neal Gauntlett likes Honda CB750s. His first big bike – bought back in 1974 – was a brand new CB750 K2 and, since then, he's only been without a single-overhead-camshaft 750 for two years. Even when he spent a few years travelling and working in New Zealand and Australia, he couldn't bear to be parted from his beloved Hondas – he had one of them shipped down under to share his adventures.

"It's true," admits Neal with a smile. "I really do love them. I've tried all sorts of other bikes, and I own a couple of modern machines as well as my two sohc 750s and a US-spec CBX1000Z. Oh, and I've got a US-market Pro-Link CBX on its way to me, too. But the sohc 750s are really special to me."

They must be. Because, amazingly, Neal's immaculate 1974 K2 model – bought just last year – is the first bike the Dorset-based Honda fanatic has ever restored. No mucking about with lightweights or two-strokes for this determined soul. If a job's worth tackling, surely it's worth jumping in at the deep end.

He found the bike when he decided to try importing a few bikes from the USA, to sell on. "I'm retired and bikes are my passion, so it seemed like a good idea," he explains. "The trouble is, you never sell them, do you? I bought a K3, which I ride regularly, and I spotted this 1974 bike on US eBay. It was described as 'immaculate', so I thought it would be nice to have just to look at – I already had a bike to use. I was really looking for a K0, but they are getting so hard to find and they're expensive, so this looked like a good alternative. How wrong can you be?"

Irrespective of your view on the strict accuracy of the K0 moniker, there's little doubt that the pre-K1 models command a king's ransom. And with few significant changes to the K-series 750s until the 1976 K7, settling for a K2 seemed a sensible option.

Neal and a mate were in high spirits when they drove to Chatham docks to collect the bike. The drive back wasn't quite so cheerful. "I was disgusted," Neal says. "The bike actually fell over in the back of the van on the way home, but I just didn't care. That's how bad it was. Driving home, I'd already decided to break it and sell it for spares. But, by the time I'd slept on it and chatted to a few of the guys on the sohc forum [www.sohc.co.uk] and got a whole lot of encouragement from them, I changed my mind. I felt sorry for the bike. It was like finding a dog that had had a good thrashing. Before I could change my mind, I dropped the engine out and stripped the rest of the bike."

After more advice from fellow sohc forum members, Neal set about stripping the engine, too. "I'd never rebuilt an engine before," he cheerfully admits. "I was looking for help with it and the name that kept cropping up was Steve Lambley. He's an ex-Honda engineer with 40 years of experience on sohc fours, but he was so helpful. Even though he lives at the other end of the country to me, he agreed to help me out. I dropped the stripped engine off to him one weekend so he could order whatever new parts we would need from the very helpful David Silver Spares [01728 833020] and agreed to go back up for the rebuild."

► After five months of hard fettling beside Neal's pool table, the doggy old nail emerged as a pedigree CB

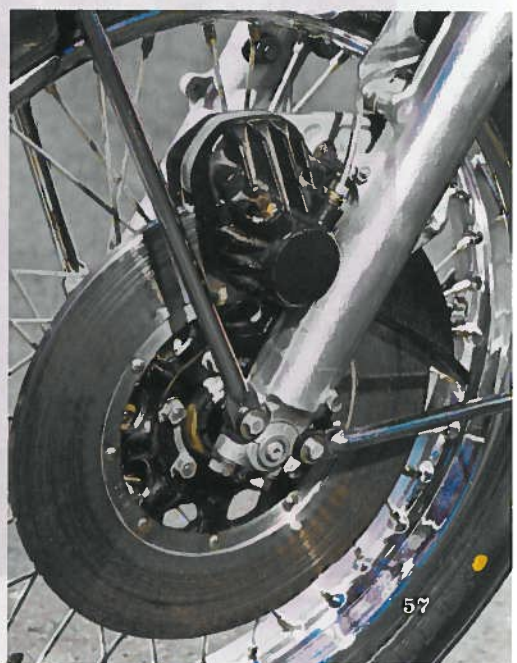


As a result, what Neal got wasn't just an engine rebuild, but a one-to-one lesson in how to rebuild a CB750 engine properly. "Steve was fantastic," says Neal. "I helped out with what I could, but mostly I watched, listened and learned. Steve showed me how simple these engines really are. I'd have no fear of tackling a rebuild on my own now."

Neal had stripped the engine completely, but the crank, main bearings and big-end bearings passed the Lambley re-usability test with flying colours. "The bike had around 12,000 miles on the speedo when I got it," Neal recalls. "Steve reckons that's probably accurate, given the excellent condition of the engine and gearbox. Because the CB750 has horizontally-split crankcases, you can build the bottom end and gearbox into the lower case without having to juggle with gear clusters and selector shafts. We fitted a new primary chain and camchain to be on the safe side, too."

If the condition of the bottom end was pleasingly solid, the same couldn't be said of matters north of the crankshaft. "We had to fit new valves, guides and cam followers," says Neal. "Where the bike had stood unused for years, the rings had rusted – but a light hone

'I changed my mind. I felt sorry for the bike. It was like finding a dog that had had a good thrashing'



‘Owning and restoring a CB750 is like a love affair – it takes effort, but it’s rewarding’



cleaned up the bores and the pistons were hardly worn, so they went back in as they were. We had the engine back together in little more than three hours.”

With the engine back in the pool room at home – “That’s the room that I had my pool table in, not a swimming pool...” Neal points out quickly – work could continue on the rest of the bike. “I tend to work on bikes through the winter, and the house is warmer than a shed or garage. It meant I wasn’t tempted to leave it until spring and I got it finished in just five months of hard work.”

The lovely silver finish on the engine cases is nothing more exotic than aerosol spray paint applied by Neal, but when it came to re-finishing the frame and swingarm, he wanted something better. “I did toy with the idea of getting them powder coated,” he admits. “But I’m not a big fan of it and decided on stove enamelling. I got it done by a local firm and I’m pleased with the result.”

If he was happy with the stoved finish, though, he was positively ecstatic about the Candy Gold paintwork. “Stacey Phillips at Ace of Sprays in Bristol [07966 842313] handled it using paint supplied by RS Paints,” says a delighted Neal. He’s such a professional, even insisting on painting the tanks and side panels at the same time to ensure a 100% colour match. He was quite disappointed that I supplied the tank decals, too – he wanted to paint the stripes.”

Neal was keen to keep costs reasonable. That explains why he spent hours polishing the fork sliders, spokes, rims and mudguards. But he still had to dig deep for essential replacement parts. “The rear shocks were beyond saving,” he says. “Luckily, David Silver came up with genuine NOS shocks for £130. I’ve got them looking for a genuine front mudguard, too – this one has a couple of scratches and a tiny dent on it.”

The signature four-pipe exhaust was too far gone to use, too. “Genuine exhaust systems are still available through Honda from time to time, but they cost in the region of £1200,” Neal explains. The Sankei exhausts were made in China originally, and when the classic Japanese scene started to get big, they produced 4000 systems for the CB750 before Honda objected. Now Sankei market them under licence, but they aren’t allowed to use the original Honda HM341 stamping. They’re better made than the originals and only cost £689. I can live without the correct stamping.”

Countless hours cleaning the carbs to rid them of ethanol-induced goo has saved Neal further expense, but he still winces at how the catalogue of smaller parts has added up to a hefty spend. “You can’t do it on the cheap,” he confirms. “I sourced a new pattern seat from eBay, the needle roller bearings for the swingarm turned up in Germany and I got new clock faces from CMS [www.cmsnl.com]. The clock faces aren’t quite the right colour, but they shouldn’t fade as quickly.”

Despite the expense, Neal is pretty happy with his first restoration. He should be. It would be an impressive effort for a seasoned, serial restorer, let alone a first-timer. Is it Neal’s genuine passion for the CB750 that pulled him through the resto in such fine style? “I think so,” he says. “Owning and restoring a CB750 is like a love affair – it takes effort, but it’s rewarding. And for me, the CB750 was the start of the modern era in motorcycling. It’s a thoroughbred and it changed people’s opinion of what a bike could be like forever.”

“It might not be a remarkable bike now, in terms of performance, but at the time it was nothing short of a revelation.”

It certainly was. And, in the case of Neal’s stunning first restoration, it still is.

SPECIFICATION
1974 HONDA CB750 K2

ENGINE / TRANSMISSION	
Type	air-cooled, sohc inline four
Capacity	736cc
Bore x stroke	61mm x 63mm
Compression ratio	9:1
Fuel system	4 x 28mm Keihin carburettors
Clutch/primary drive	wet multiplate/chain
Gearbox/final drive	five-speed/chain

CHASSIS	
Frame	tubular twin downtube cradle
Front suspension	35mm telescopic forks
Rear suspension	twin shocks
Brakes front/rear	296mm (11.65in) disc/single 180mm (7.1in) sis drum
Wheels	spoked
Tyres front/rear	3.25 x 19in/4.00 x 18in

DIMENSIONS	
Dry weight	480lb (218kg)
Wheelbase	57.3in (1455mm)
Seat height	31.9in (810mm)
Fuel capacity	3.5 gallons (16 litres)

PERFORMANCE	
Top speed	112mph
Peak power	67bhp at 8000rpm (claimed)
Fuel consumption	51mpg

COSTS	
Price new (1974)	£849
Value now	£6000



WHY A HONDA CB750 WILL MAKE YOU HAPPY

Neal has a twin-disc conversion ready to go on – with 110mph performance, the CB could really do with it



3

IT'S STILL A SUPERBIKE

No leaks, no rattles, no stress – just smooth, refined speed

“I hope you like it,” Neal calls after me, as I head out on his very tidy 1973 US K3, a bike that’s essentially the same as the UK K2. “Just don’t expect too much of it,” he adds as I ease out into the road. He needn’t worry. By the time I’ve got to the end of his street, I like it very much indeed.

The engine is just so delightfully smooth – that’s what strikes you first. Okay, modern bikes may be even more so, but the Honda must have been a revelation in 1969. Mechanical noise is minimal. There’s no clattering and rattling from this most civilised of machines – just the usual polite Honda rustle from the primary drive and camchains. I can potter through town without disturbing the peace but, as I pass the national speed limit signs, the Honda reveals a different side of its character.

Shifting up through the sweet, slick gearbox as I clear the edge of town, the bike just keeps on impressing. There’s so little vibration, I have to remind myself I’m sitting on a ton-topping motorcycle that could cruise all day at 80mph-plus. Acceleration is remarkably good; strong and apparently effortless. I don’t have to venture anywhere near the redline on the olive-green rev counter face to leave everyday traffic floundering behind me but, twisting the throttle a little further releases genuine performance from the big four. Sadly, by the time the K3 was released, the exhaust note had been tamed a little from the surprisingly racer-like bellow of the original K, but the sound from those four pipes remains wonderfully soulful as the Honda comes on cam.

“The starter starts, the indicators flash and the clutch is light and smooth – groundbreaking stuff”

Despite the fact that it’s no lightweight, the handling on smooth surfaces is very good. There’s bags of cornering clearance and I can really enjoy tipping the big four into rapid sweepers with confidence. It’s only at speed that the suspension gets found out. The forks are a little harsh, despite the K3’s revised damping and the use of the entire length of the fork slider – rather than two bushes – as the bearing surface for the stanchion. The rear end gets a touch lively on poor road surfaces as I press on a bit, too, but that’s probably unfair criticism of a bike that was never intended as an out-and-out sports machine.

The rest of the bike is astonishingly good for a machine released back in the depths of the last century. The single front disc needs a good tug – Neal has the parts in his garage to convert to a double-disc set-up – but it’s by no means poor. The riding position, with the US-spec high ‘bars, is just right for me, negating the slight feeling of being perched on top of the bike that the flatter, UK ‘bars produce. The starter starts, the indicators flash (accompanied by US-market beeping) and the clutch action is light and smooth.

In 1969, all of this was groundbreaking stuff. It really is no wonder that the CB750 has been dubbed the first ever superbike. Time may have moved on, but the performance, sophistication and reliability of Honda’s first four lifted motorcycling to a new level overnight. More than 40 years on, the CB750 remains a genuinely fast, comfortable, remarkably refined and truly beautiful all-rounder.