

Billy Wh

Oddie does

You have to have a certain amount of self-doubt to be a good test rider - it helps keep everything in perspective. You have to stay aware that thousands of potential bike buyers are going to take at least some notice of your judgement and opinions, so to do the job properly you have to question your objectivity regularly, lest you fall into the black hole of ego-inspired self-indulgent raving or simple tabloid bullshit.

Now I enjoy riding bikes. I've owned everything from CZ175s to Gold Wings, vintage BSAs to race-rep whizzbangs, and I've yet to find a bike that doesn't have some saving grace - if it's got two wheels and an engine that works, you can generally have fun on it. Whether that makes me a better or worse road-tester I prefer to leave unsaid, but I like to spend a lot of time assessing a bike from the point of view of who's likely to own it, revelling in its good points, searching out its bad, tracking down its individual character... So you don't expect razor sharp handling from a factory custom, or plush touring comfort from a dirt bike - you judge according to common sense.

All of that may seem blindingly obvious, but I labour the point because, every so often, albeit rarely, you come across a bike that hits you as being so close to perfection that you have to stand back and reassess both it and yourself all over again. Has someone moved the marker posts - it really can't be that good, can it? You must be missing something, losing your objectivity to the tempting lure of subjective hyperbole, being seduced by a competence whose apparently flawless surface must surely mask a hidden insufficiency somewhere. So you ride again and again, scrutinising to the Nth degree, hoping, like some demented Persian carpet owner, to locate even the smallest of inaccuracies. On the Hornet, that becomes quite a task...

Because the Hornet is simply superb. It's faultless in every area. In its class it sits top of the class by a mile. You can only find faults by taking it out of its class; it doesn't have much weather protection - but it's not a tourer. It's not covered in dayglo graphic plastic - but it ain't a race rep. It doesn't do 150mph - yeh, but hell, it's a 250. Leave the Hornet in its own context, and it's unbeatable.

But to retrack slightly, let's go back a couple of years, to a time when Suzuki are sitting pretty atop the four cylinder 250 naked retro/tekro class with their Bandit. A class which has thrown up its styling idiosyncracies, with the Yamaha Zeal (a cute and capable machine), and Kawasaki

the Hornet is simply superb. It's faultless in every area.