

the revs rise and fall quicker than a seaside whore's



Bolus (road test when we can find one), and a class which has enough of a share of the Japanese domestic market to not be ignored without suffering. Honda don't like suffering, especially when Suzuki rub salt in the wound by updating the Bandit in '96 with a substantial restyle. Honda's previous offering, the Jade, may well have had the performance edge, but c'mon, it just looks so bloody dull, and in the hot contest to get a Jap arse

plonked astride your own particular brand of naked 250, outright performance don't necessarily cut much ice, and dull certainly don't cut none at all.

Enter the Hornet. Cooking and desirable CBR250 lump, competent and able chassis, and a radical yet appealing styling package which pays homage to Honda's own lineage of attractively purposeful CB-1 and aggressively chunky Super Four, steals some of its more outrageous styling cues from under Suzuki's Bandit-esque nose, yet still in the end conspires to create an entirely new identity for itself. It's a real honey of a bike, managing to look awesome without being fearsome, raw yet civilised, tough yet charming, fierce yet charismatic. Straight away the Hornet gives you the impression you can just jump on and thrash away to your heart's content and it'll repay your efforts with maximum enjoyment and satisfaction, without even thinking of biting back at you, and not only that, it'll come back begging for more.

Look at that stance - nose down, arse in the air, all hunched and ready for action like the streetfighter it is. It doesn't look like a 250, either, it's a full size bike - this could be a 400, or a compact 600 for that matter. That wide, sweeping boat-tail rear end stands tall and proud, enhanced by the high level pipe and cats-eye rear light, without no nambypamby hugger hiding that monstrous back tyre. Okay, so the shit flies onto the swingarm - who cares? And that truncated front mudguard might throw more shit onto the pipes - so what, it looks good cut off at the back like that, and ain't you never heard of power-washers? And check out that tank - styling so sharp you could draw blood with it. But as the man said, God is in the details, and whether it's the neat way the rear grab rail bolts are hidden under tiny chrome covers, or the fact that the swingarm is box section alloy, welded to a large chunk of gen-u-ine milled billet (smart), the Hornet is, at least as far as production motorcycles go, almost God-like in its search for perfection. Okay, so maybe some braided stainless hoses, anodised engine screws, and coloured alloy 'bars might finish it off, but you've got to have something to spend your aftermarket Yen on.

First surprise when you climb aboard is how low the bike is. Alright it might look pretty low anyway, but it's even lower than it looks - trust me. It's a sad journalistic cliché that some bikes you sit in rather than on, but it was never more true than on the Hornet, sat cosseted between that waisted tank and that high-tailed seat. Just 29 inches to ground level, and a nicely rounded contour mean comfort and stability for even the smallest legs. With the high set footrests this does mean your feet get pretty close to your bum, but

the pegs are set well for enough back, the tank is narrow enough where it matters to let your knees sit neatly below the protruding waistline. It's very businesslike, but surprisingly very comfy as well, and only six footers might find the Hornet cramped in any way.

So there you are, hunched behind the bars, everything where you want it to be, and having stabbed the starter button, you blip the throttle a couple of times to warm the motor. And oh, it's so silky... There's a bugger all in the way of flywheels down there, the tach needle swings up and down the smart white-faced dial as the revs rise and fall quicker than a seaside whore's underclouts. Whizz, whizz, whizz it all goes, the carburation so instant that the throttle feels more like an on/off switch, the motor so smooth Swiss watchmakers turn green. It's all too wonderful, and, human nature being what it is, you're waiting for something to go wrong. It's bound to be peaky, ain't it? It's gonna stall when I set off. Ha, fooled you again, the light clutch engages sweeter than the sugar plum fairy's smile, and you're away with zero fuss. Just 3 thousand revs on a dial that spins all the way to 16 and when you crack the throttle it just rockets round the clock, grab another gear quick and it does it again. How do the Japs make these little 250s so tractable? The Hornet will bingle along at 2,000 revs in sixth gear as smooth as you like. How many bigger bikes will do that? Presumably the Jap 250 market is composed of fashion freaks rather than committed riders, so the bikes have to score highly in the user-friendly stakes, but that doesn't make them any less of a bike for a committed UK rider - it just makes them easier to live with, which is just fine by me.

And see, I'm already starting to fall into the trap of heaping endless praise onto the Hornet, but what else can I do. The motor is clean and responsive right across the rev range, and the more you rev it, the harder it likes to work. You can whizz around town all day without breaking eight grand, but rev it harder and that high level can give a delicious, if muted howl, and the whole plot fairly flies. Okay, reality check, this is a 40bhp 250, but it's just so much fun to ride it makes you wonder why 150bhp bikes exist. You can scream the Hornet around without feeling anything other than quick, yet you don't get yourself into trouble. As I'm sure I've said before, but it bears repeating, look at it this way - remember when grey 400s were first coming onto the market, and everyone said they were too small, and you needed at least 750ccs? Yeh, well those words of so called wisdom got eaten pretty quickly, and it's the same with the four cylinder 250s. To quote the ancient sage, "Don't knock it till you've tried it," and there's more than a few discerning riders riding round on mega-rev, mega fun 250s and quietly smiling to themselves about the well kept secret. Okay, it doesn't do 150mph. Hands up, honestly now. How many of you have actually done 150mph, as opposed to talked about it? Yep, I thought so. Get real, I'd sooner trade superb lightweight handling and a really rewarding all round package for what is basically five extra meaningless numbers on a speedo dial. On the flat out, unrestricted main section of the TT course, you may well curse the Hornet for not having enough power. But then think about what most of your riding entails. For more than 90% of the time, the Hornet is probably ideal.

So, the motor's a doozee, the throttle response delightfully spot on, even the six ratios shift unobtrusively; what are Honda playing at here? Because the handling package is high-on perfect as well. Front forks are a comparatively massive 41mm in diameter, but without any form of adjustment how can they work so well? It's a mystery only Honda know, some form of oriental magic perhaps. Quite why Honda reverted back to a now unfashionable 16" front rim is another unanswered question, but that works too. Feedback from the low profile 130/70 Bridgestone is there in any amount you want, but if you don't care about such things, just enjoy the smooth ride. Steering is more neutral than a New Labour election promise, and the front end turns in

