

Benelli's 50cc beauty proved no match in the 1962 tiddler stakes . . . but Ralph Bryans' bike shines on

by Peter Dobson

MOPED RACER

FIFTY cc road racing broke out in Italy in 1945, or thereabouts, and was gathering momentum, if not a lot of speed, by the time the British got into the act some eight years later on Britax Hurricanes. Britax imported the Ducati Cucciolo, a motorised bicycle with an overhead valve pull-rod engine, and they built a batch of racing fifties using the ingenious Ducati engines in specially constructed frames. Elegantly wrapped in fairings they looked not unlike the works Gileras, but they were capable of little more than 30mph which was hardly blowing up a storm, although they made a fearful noise.

Possibly because we are, comparatively speaking, a fairly well heeled, well built, race, we British have a tendency to be disdainful of small motorcycles – the 98cc James Comet, which was very likeable, could be the object of derision – and it was largely left to the Italians and Japanese, with profitable home markets for small capacity machines, to evolve the 50cc racing motor cycle to the point where even hulking Anglo Saxons began to take them seriously.

During the 1950s the Italian Federation created a national 50cc Championship, based on hillclimbs rather than on circuit races, and this was always won by four-stroke Motoms, until it was snatched away from them by a 'double knocker' Demm. Of the other main protagonists Itoms concentrated their best efforts on the export private rider market for their two stroke products, and their machines were raced in 1961 in the Coupe d' Europe series, when events were held in Belgium, Germany, Holland, Yugoslavia, and Spain, while Benelli, with their simple two strokes, had some limited success in Italian events without resorting to enclosure. There was little or no cross fertilization of development between Japan and Italy, but the Japanese would soon be streets ahead having had Walter Kaaden's secret two-stroke formula presented to them on a platter when Ernst Degner defected from MZ.

1962 saw the introduction of the 50cc World Championship, and this elevation to respectability not only forced the pace of 50cc racing, leaving the poor Italians for dead, it also brought about a great improvement in the safety and reliability of racing two strokes of all sizes. I can do



Ralph Bryans astride the pretty little 50cc Benelli during the 1962 TT. His left hand operated a twist-grip gearchange to the standard road-bike four speed box. Bryans managed only 15th place at 58.90mph for the two lap race.

no better than to quote Vic Willoughby . . . 'it was the 50cc championship in 1962 that put the two stroke engineers on the track of the improved stamina they needed to be really competitive. Spending so much time flat out, the tiny new engines were expected to register a new low in the reliability stakes. They did just the opposite, and it was clear that their smaller pistons ran cooler, their cylinders distorted less and their big ends were not so highly stressed. The lesson was rammed home when cylinder size was halved as Suzuki switched from 50cc singles to twins and improved both stamina and power'.

Less significantly, perhaps, 1962 also saw the importation by Fron Purslow, the Shropshire rider/agent, of one, or maybe two, ex-works Benelli fifties, in addition to two ex-works 250s, and according to a snippet under the heading of 'Sports Gossip' in 'Motor Cycling'

dated February 1, 1962, two more ex-works grand prix Benelli fifties were on the way to 'Eire Benelli distributor John Arnold. Both will be raced wherever possible, including the TT, one ridden by Joe Wood, a well known member of the Continental circus, the other possibly by an Italian to be nominated by Benelli'.

Fratelli Benelli G, F, & C – Pesaro, had given up on racing when Dario Ambrosini, their only rider, was killed at Albi in 1951 during practice for the French Grand Prix. Suprisingly, Les Graham made a brief appearance on what was basically another 1939 Benelli, in 1952, and then they dropped out altogether until 1959 when they built two up-dated 250cc singles, one of them a 'desmo' model. In 1961 they built four racing fifties for works riders, to be raced in national events; Silvio Grassetti, the factory's development rider, being responsible for this 50cc venture.

One expects a works bike to be pretty special, but in fact the four works fifties were very ordinary indeed. The only special thing about them – apart from the

MOPED RACER

quality of the racing department's workmanship – were the frames, and then only in the sense that they were made especially for these machines, using very up-market Campagnolo, bicycle type, headsets. The forks and wheels were from the firm's production moped, as were the basic two stroke engines, which says a great deal for the standard product. Naturally, the racing engines had the pedals taken off – although they might have proved quite useful in the Isle of Man – and cooling slots were neatly cut in the magneto covers.

Larger carburettors, improved transfer porting in crankcases and cylinders, and stubby one-piece megaphone exhausts dramatically increased both decibel and power output; the cylinder porting being modified through external access holes drilled through the cast iron barrels. These holes were afterwards filled in, leaving un-finned gaps. Lubrication was by petroil, a heavy mixture of three quarters of a pint of oil being added to each gallon, and the standard four-speed gearbox was retained, complete with the non-positive stop twist-grip, cable operated, gear change on the clip-on handlebars.

In an un-faired state the bikes were reported to be capable of 100kph, or 68.2 miles in every hour, with a safe limit of 10,000 revs, but the elegant and aerodynamically sound two-piece works fairings, with their tiny apertures for engine cooling, made a substantial contribution and increased performance to slightly more than Itom level.

Benelli apparently intended to build a batch of 12 production racers based on these works machines, but it is far from certain that they were actually produced. By this time they had started work on the four cylinder 250cc racers – which explains the sale to Purslow of the works 250cc singles – and it is possible that discouraging words had reached Pesaro of incredible performances being wrung by the Japanese from 50cc racing engines – which would explain the sale of the works fifties.

In the opinion of Terry Larner, the London based world authority on racing fifties, Benelli built a batch of frames, probably a dozen; used four of them for the works bikes, and then lost interest in the project, for whatever reason, although Fron Purslow was expecting them. He already had them priced at £225 each, which was more than twice the price of a racing Itom of very similar performance.

It is also far from clear that the two ex-works fifties supposedly dispatched to Ireland did, in fact, arrive, as nothing more was heard of them. Nor is it clear that Purslow actually got two, as was

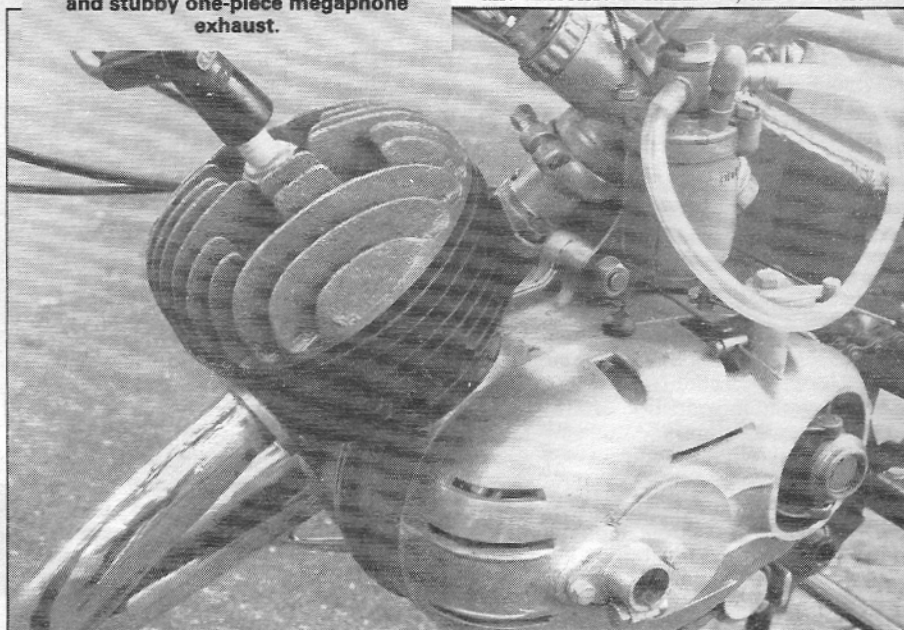
reported in the press. He certainly got one. It was entered for the 1962 50cc TT, and Irishman Ralph Bryans rode it into 15th place in his TT debut year, at an average of 58.90mph for the two laps of the mountain course. The first Itom home, ridden by Charlie Mates, was right behind him, despite its three-speed gearbox, at 58.65mph, but the Italian machinery was totally outclassed, not only by the Suzukis and the Hondas, but by several Kreidlers and one solitary Tohatsu. Ernst Degner won the race; his Suzuki averaging 75.12 miles per hour.

The gulf between the speeds of the first four riders home – all averaged in excess of 74 miles an hour – and Ralph Bryans' 58.90, can be attributed, in part, to the Benelli's lack of ratios. Degner's Suzuki had six speeds, Taveri's and Robb's Hondas both had eight, and the Kreidler had a four-speed gearbox with a twist-grip operated three-speed overdrive, giving Anscheidt twelve to choose from, although there was obviously more to it than that or the Kreidler would have screamed across the line half an hour before the others.

For the TT the grand prix Benelli wore a 2.25 x 18 rear tyre – normal wear was 2.00 x 18 both back and front – and there is evidence that it was fitted with a 12 or 13 tooth gearbox sprocket, and a 27 tooth rear sprocket, giving a top gear of either 9.84 or 9.09 to 1. The latter combination would allow a top speed of 75 miles per hour at 10,000 revs, but as racing push-bikes in the Bicycle TT come down the mountain at well over 60, it would seem more than probable that Bryans was having to hold back on the long downhill stretches of the TT course.

The late Jim Pink, the motor cycle and three wheeler specialist of Wallingford in Berkshire, who was also the Tohatsu importer, had been interested in a Benelli fifty as a TT ride. He wrote to

Close up of the 'works' Benelli engine. It was a basic two stroke moped engine (with the pedals removed) with cooling slots cut into the magneto covers, larger carburettors, improved porting and stubby one-piece megaphone exhaust.



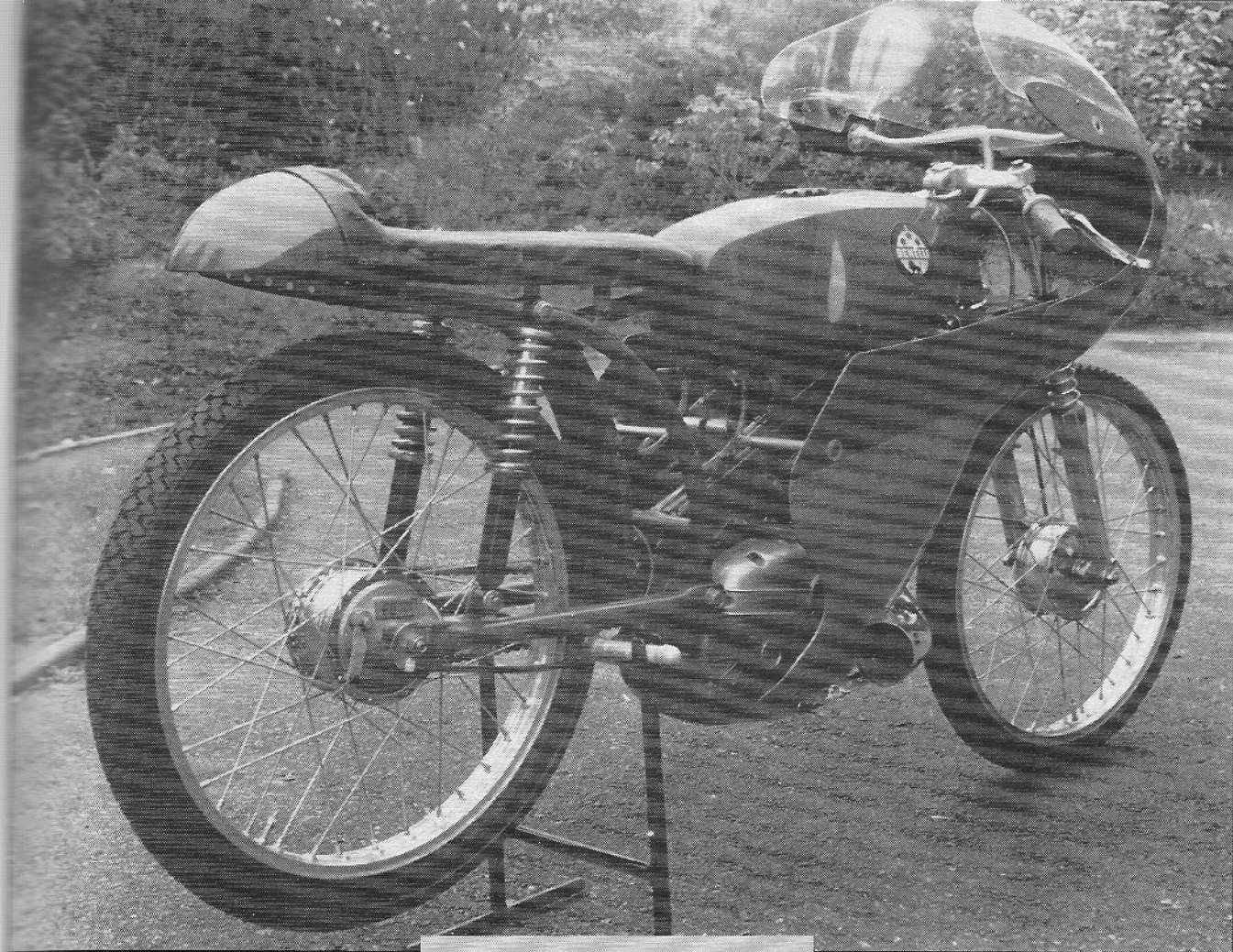
Purslow on the subject in February 1962, and had Purslow received his two machines he might well have succeeded in acquiring one. After the TT Jim Pink rode the bike for Purslow in a number of events, and Don Juler, who rode an Itom into 20th place in the 1962 50cc TT race, and later did so well in 125 events on his Minarelli engine fifty, remembers stripping the Benelli engine and fitting a new crankshaft in the paddock at the Bob McIntyre Memorial meeting at Oulton Park in 1962.

In October of that year Pink wrote to the Benelli factory to enquire if they would be prepared to tune the bike if Fron Purslow sent it, or took it, back to them, and could they fit a five or six-speed gear cluster with foot pedal control. He also asked if they would supply him with 50cc racing engines to be fitted into British frames, in order to keep down the cost of a projected racer.

In a letter dated November 7, 1962 Benelli replied that they would be happy to receive the racing moped. 'We shall be able, in such occasion, to tune up your motorcycle, but since now we tell you exactly (sic) that we may not apply a pedal gear at five or six-speeds. The size of the engine sump does not allow this thing'. On the subject of supplying Jim Pink with racing engines they became obtuse, pretending to believe that he was asking for a moped with the frame, and external finish, of their Sprint model – which may have had the unsuccessful 49cc overhead camshaft engine, that was later stretched to 75cc.

It is possible that at this juncture Pink and Purslow made up their minds that the grand prix racing moped was not competitive, and Purslow sold the bike to Alan Hutchings who rode it in the 1963 TT. He suffered big end trouble throughout practice, and in the actual race, and then sold the bike to Pink, which brings us to the present owner, Robin Read, a devotee of racing fifties.

His interest in the bike arose from a decision to assemble a small collection of classic motor cycles, including a Scott, and Excelsior Manxman, and a Benelli.



The beautifully restored Bryans Benelli. Owner Robin Read has kept the original tank finish and stickers and even retained the notorious twist-grip gearchange mechanism in the interests of originality. The blanked-off hole beneath the crankcases is where the pedals used to be.

This was in 1965 when Jim Pink was advertising the ex-works machine, and Robin bought it from the shop in Wallingford for £80, with a spare petrol tank, a few jets and sprockets, and two tyres.

It was in excellent condition. Jim Pink had overhauled it, thoroughly, and it started and ran well. Without realising the full significance of its provenance Robin played about with it that summer. He had intended to use it on the road, but having run the engine in the garden of his country home he, and all his neighbours, quickly came to the conclusion that it wasn't suitable. On the open 'megga' it made a lot more noise than a bevy of Manx Nortons, and the Dagenham Girl Pipers, and he soon sold the bike, at a small profit, to a man, who like himself, had always wanted a Benelli. After that he bought a Mk8 Itom, which siezed-up in a snow storm on the way to Leighton Buzzard.

Eight years later he began to wonder if he could re-purchase the Benelli. Through Jim Parker, the Secretary of the Racing 50 MC, the bike was traced, eventually, to a Scott enthusiast, and VMCC member, who had the engine in a cardboard box, while the cycle parts, more or less complete, stood out in his garden. He had bought the bike as a non-runner, but whether the previous owner had blown up the engine or had himself bought it as a 'cardboard box' case was not made clear. The Scott man was reluctant to part with the Benelli, but in November 1973 he agreed to sell,

and Robin, once again, collected it and took it home.

From the sad condition of the engine it was obvious that the bike had been raced, frequently, since the last time that he'd owned it. An Adriatic holiday provided a useful opportunity to visit Salvatore Baronciani, the Benelli and MV Agusta concessionaires in Pesaro, to pick up a new piston, a gudgeon pin, and two sets of rings. The crankshaft assembly was rebuilt by Alpha, and the engine was meticulously put together by Don Juler.

No-one bothered to record Ralph Bryans' opinion of the twist-grip gear change, which may not have been too irritating on the TT course, but successive owners hated it and tried, without success, to arrange for quicker and more certain progress from one gear to another. When Robin bought the bike in 1965 it had been fitted with a non positive-stop foot change which was slightly less effective than the original equipment. In the interval optimists had tried all sorts of things, and the engine plates were riddled where rods and shafts had passed from the selector arm to levers on the right hand side. With the assorted bits and pieces that came with

the bike the second time around there was even a detent device that had been rigged up on the gearbox in another effort to provide a positive-stop gear change.

As a remedial exercise for lads with limp left wrists the twist-grip might be useful, but as a means of swapping cogs it's rotten. From first to top the clutch lever must be wrenched through almost a semicircle, and it isn't difficult to understand why everybody hated it. Nevertheless, the twist-grip has been reinstated in the interest of originality.

Over the years the Benelli has gradually been repainted and restored to a superb, but sensible, condition; the tank finish and Benelli decals are original and have been left as such. I have just spent a most enjoyable few days putting the machine together, in my office, where it was much admired by motor cyclists, sober matrons, and right minded children. I was very sad to see it go.

Robin Read, who raced the ex-Don Juler Minarelli during 1982, has already entered the Benelli for the 1987 TT Lap of Honour. Despite the bike's small size - the wheelbase is only 44", and the seat, when occupied, no more than knee high to a tallish jockey - the owner, who is rather larger than most jockeys, can tuck himself away quite neatly and intends to ride in Classic races.

He has promised me a ride. Ralph Bryans was five feet eight, and I am only seven inches taller. I too could tuck myself away quite neatly, if I lost a stone or two.