

# Benelli's baby



**A**lthough Honda produced a series of technically brilliant 125 and 250cc multis when they dominated GP racing in the sixties, they were not the only factory to make small four-strokes of that type during the period. Indeed, when the original Honda four was raced in 1960, it did so 20 years after similar machines had first been campaigned in the class. The originators of lightweight multis were the Benelli and Gilera firms, each of which designed 250cc fours in 1940. But these bikes appeared too late to race before the outbreak of hostilities, and were rendered obsolete after the war by the FIM's ban on supercharging in 1946. Though Gilera managed to make their blown 500 four reasonably competitive bereft of its supercharger, their 250 was too heavy to make a similar exercise worthwhile, while the water-cooled Benelli was bulkier still. But new ground had been broken, and though Gilera's retirement from racing at the end of 1957 meant they never again trod the path of small-capacity multis, the 1960s

saw the little Benelli factory at Pesaro field a range of 250, 350 and 500cc four-cylinder machines which seriously threatened Honda and Yamaha in the smaller classes, and MV Agusta in the larger.

I'm not alone in believing that Benelli have never really had the recognition they deserve for their racing efforts in the 1960s: they've always been regarded as the makers of the 'other' Italian four, much as Alfa Romeo have played second fiddle to Ferrari in the car world during the past 20 years. Yet given that their GP involvement was financed by the failing profits from their road machines, the fact that they produced a series of technical *tours de force* culminating in a 250cc V8 and won a world championship in 1969, thanks to Aussie Kel Carruthers, merits considerable applause.

MV's racing efforts, on the other hand, were backed by the resources of one of Europe's leading aeronautical concerns. And to carry the MV analogy further, the reason that Benelli's

**Tarquinio Provini, the rider who played a crucial role in the development of the Benelli four, takes the 250 round the Isle of Man in 1964.**

feats have gone largely unrecognised is due mainly to the low-key, unostentatious atmosphere which pervaded their racing team. Instead of a bombastic, larger than life personality like Count Domenico Agusta, the retiring Benelli family ran a close-knit squad of designers, mechanics and usually just one or two riders at a time. Headed by a Benelli cousin, Count Nardi Dei, the team attracted riders of the calibre of Tarquinio Provini, Renzo Pasolini, Phil Read, Mike Hailwood and Jarno Saarinen, who were happy to ride for smaller fees than MV and Honda could pay.

When the racing department was closed in the wake of the company's takeover by Alessandro de Tomaso in 1971, Benelli's legacy to the racing world was already manifest. Ex-mechanic Eugenio Lazzarini was a future world champion, and staff from

