

1 Is it the bike for you?

– marriage guidance



Reasonable running costs, good parts availability.

Tall and short riders

Commando 750s are relatively light by modern standards, but the 850s (especially the MkIIIs) are much heavier. All have tallish seat heights (775-825mm), which isn't good news for the short-legged; you sit on top of the bike rather than 'in' it.

Running costs

Lower than you might think. Fuel consumption is nothing special, at 40-45mpg, but Commandos are not hard on consumables, and spares aren't expensive. *At the time of writing*, all pre-1973 bikes (so none of the 850s) are exempt from road fund duty in the UK.

Maintenance

Make no mistake, any bike from this era needs more TLC and sympathy than a modern machine. You'll need to change the oil every 2000 miles to maximise engine life (preferably using monograde 50, not a modern multi-grade) and just keep an eye open for things coming loose or going out of adjustment. The Commando is definitely not a 'ride it, forget it' sort of bike.

Kickstarting

All except the MkIII 850s are kickstart only, but don't let that put you off – it's more

lines and inclined engine. A few of them had a good-looking twin-tone tank finish. The twin-leading shoe front drum brake works well, but only if set up by someone competent to do the work. For its rarity, this earliest Commando is worth more in original condition than with obvious modifications.

Another distinctive Commando was the Interpol, designed specifically for the police. Offered from 1969, it was one of the longest running models, lasting right up to 1976, and became virtually the standard machine for UK police forces for a time. The exact specification of the Interpol depended on each customer, but a typical police bike had a full fairing, solo seat, and fibreglass panniers, with an all-white finish. Many were sold, but few have survived in their original form. Well worth seeking out as something different, but the blue lights, siren and radio equipment will all have been removed before the bike was sold back into civvy street!

Early in 1970, from engine number 131257, the Fastback was joined by the more conventional-looking Roadster (it did without the rear bodywork) and the S type, with its higher bars and high-level pipes. The S was aimed at the US market, in the street scrambler style, and a proper eyeful it was too. Alongside it was the R type, with similar styling but lower pipes, and a small 2.25-gallon fuel tank in blue or red – rarely seen now, most of these bikes were exported to the USA. These MkII Commandos (though the Roadster is a MkI), have engine prefix 20M3S, and the points were moved to the timing cover and the rev counter drive to the front of the engine.

There were several changes the following year: new forks without gaiters, and the new yokes were non-adjustable. One obvious visual change was to the chunky Lucas alloy switchgear, which allowed for optional direction indicators. The centre stand now pivoted on the engine plates rather than the frame itself, which was more robust but made checking the isolastics even more tricky than before.



The original Fastback was the first Commando.



Pre-Combat 750 with front drum brake.



Bright yellow, high pipes ... a 750S contrasts with the more sober Nortons.

8 Key points

– where to look for problems



One of the most important aspects of the bike – the owner. How long have they had the Commando? How knowledgeable are they? Do they have a decent range of tools, and are they a member of the Norton Owners Club? A knowledgeable, conscientious owner is one of the surest signs of a good, well cared for machine.



Is electronic ignition fitted? The bike will be easier to start and will run better into the bargain. It's another indication that the owner has cared for the bike.



The engine number is a good indication of when the bike was made and what production improvements it has. However, it gives an 'indication' only, as Norton sometimes built engines into bikes out of sequence.



Check that the finned locking rings holding the exhaust downpipes into the head are tight. If they're loose (or worse still, left loose while the bike is ridden) they will allow the pipes to vibrate in the head and strip the threads in the exhaust port (the only cure involves removing the head and having helicoils fitted).



Check the swingarm for play. The bushes are often neglected, and the spindle itself can wear. In that case, the only cure is to remove the engine and swingarm and ream out the bushes and engine/gearbox cradle to accept an oversize spindle. Not a five minute job.

can be made to work properly. A 4-brush conversion for the motor, a decent 20 amp/hr battery and thicker cables should do the trick. If the starter won't engage cleanly, then the culprit is likely to be the sprag clutch.



Check for loose or broken spokes.



Tyres last well.

Wheels/tyres 4 3 2 1

All Commandos used spoked wheels with chromed steel rims (apart from alloy spoked rims on the original Production Racer). Check that the chrome is intact and not pitted or peeling away. Run a screwdriver lightly over the spokes – any that sound 'off' will need tensioning. If any spokes are broken or missing, the bike is unrideable.

Commandos are not hard on tyres – we're used to big modern bikes needing a fresh rear tyre after 4-5000 miles, but then they are dealing with about twice the power of a Commando. Given a gentle rider, rears can last as long as 10,000 miles, and fronts even longer. If the tyre is worn, the legal minimum in the UK is at least 1mm of tread depth across at least three-quarters of the breadth of the tyre.

Because the rubber lasts so long, and because many Commandos cover relatively few miles a year, tyres cracking or going hard is probably more of an issue than straightforward wear. Although easy to sort out, tyre problems are a good bargaining counter and should be reflected in the price you pay. TT100s are still available, and suit the big Norton, and Avon's current Road Rider tyre is thought to be good for the Commando. It's not available as a 19-inch rear, but swapping the wheel for a WM3 x 18 gives a much wider choice of modern tyres.

Wheel bearings 4 3 2 1

Commandos aren't especially hard on wheel bearings, and the bits themselves aren't expensive. Fitting them is a hassle, though, and badly worn bearings could affect handling, so it's worth checking them out. Put the bike on its centre stand and, with the steering on full lock, try rocking the front wheel in a vertical plane, then spin the wheel and listen for signs of roughness.



With the bike on its centre stand, check for play in the wheel bearings.



How not to do it on the front wheel – check in the vertical, not horizontal, plane.

13 Do you really want to restore?

– it'll take longer and cost more than you think ...



There's a romance about restoration projects, about bringing a sick bike back into blooming health, and it's tempting to buy something that 'just needs a few small jobs' to bring it up to scratch. But there are two things to think about: One, once you've got the bike home and start taking it apart, those few small jobs could turn into big ones. Two, restoration takes time, which is a precious thing in itself. Be honest with yourself – will you get as much pleasure from working on the bike as you will from riding it?



Of course, you could hand the whole lot over to a professional, and the biggest cost involved there is not the new parts, but the sheer labour involved. Such restorations don't come cheap, and, if taking this route, there are four other issues to bear in mind as well.

First, make it absolutely clear what you want doing. Do you want the bike to be 100 per cent original at the end of the process, or simply useable? Do you want a concours

Rebuilding an engine is a skilled job.

finish, or are you prepared to put up with a few blemishes on the original parts?

Second, make sure that not only is a detailed estimate involved, but that it is more or less binding. There have been instances where a person has been quoted one figure only to be presented with an invoice for a much larger one!

Third, check that the company you're dealing with has a good reputation – the owners club, or one of the reputable parts suppliers, should be able to make a few recommendations. Finally, having a Commando professionally restored may not make financial sense, as it may cost more than the finished bike will be worth. Not that this should put you off, if you have the budget, and really want to do it this way.



Just about all new parts, such as these crankcases, will be available.