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Packed with good advice – from running costs, through paperwork, vital statistics, valuation, and the Velocette community, to whether a 350 or 500 will suit you and your lifestyle – this is THE COMPLETE GUIDE to choosing, assessing and buying the Velocette 350 or 500 of your dreams.

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Your marque expert: Peter Henshaw
The Essential Buyer's Guide

Velocette

350 & 500

1946-1970

Your marque expert:
Peter Henshaw
Introduction
– the purpose of this book

If you want to buy a Velocette single, then you are about to join one of the smallest, yet most committed owner groups of all. When they were new, Velocettes inspired great loyalty amongst a small band of riders who loved their idiosyncratic ways, and exactly the same is true today.

Modern day advocates will tell you that Velo singles combine the superb build quality of a Sunbeam, the fine handling of a Norton, and the mechanical strength of a Rudge; and there is some truth in that. Velocettes were quite unlike the mass produced singles from BSA or Matchless, being carefully built in a relatively small factory from quality components.

Mechanically quiet, they had (and still do have) the high speed stamina that some British classics lack. They are also relatively light, and handle very well, something reflected in a whole string of racing successes, right into the 1960s when they were apparently obsolete: Velocettes won the first Production TT in 1967, several long distance circuit races and, in 1961, set a 24-hour speed record that, for 500cc bikes, still stands.

On the other hand, those less enamoured of the Velocette legend would counter that they leak oil like the proverbial sieve, that they are overpriced, overrated and need more than a certain knack to kickstart. Clutch adjustment is seen as a black art, while the electrics belong to a different (and extremely dim) era. To own a Velocette, these people say, you need to be a professional engineer with a well-equipped workshop.
As ever, the truth lies somewhere between these extremes. All those good points are absolutely true: Velocettes are strong and are great fun on twisty roads, but they also need the sympathetic ownership that any classic bike demands, with particular attention paid to starting technique, clutch adjustment and the electrics.

If you haven’t been put off yet, then this book is a straightforward, practical guide to buying a Velocette single. It won’t list all the correct colours for each year, or analyse the bikes’ design philosophy, company background or racing record (there are excellent books and websites listed at the end of this book that do all that) but hopefully it will help you avoid buying a dud.

Although the typical Velocette single is often seen as a sporting, and potentially cantankerous, Thruxton or Venom, the most popular bike – the factory made 25,000 of them – was the mildly tuned, long-stroke MAC 350 from which they were derived. It’s the Velocette that’s easiest to live with, and a good starting point for anyone who wants to sample the Velo experience. But the MAC is not fast, the 500cc MSS, either pre-1948 long-stroke guise or from 1954-on offers more mid-range power. Faster still, at least when revved, are the more highly tuned Viper 350 and Venom 500, plus their Clubman variants. Some see the final Venom Thruxton as the ultimate Velocette, though it’s also the most demanding to own, as well as the most expensive. Velocette built just 1108 Thruxtons, but if that’s not rare enough, the brash Indian Velo is a rare beast indeed, as is the unsuccessful factory Scrambler.

Whichever Velocette you decide on, you will be buying one of the British industry’s most recognisable and idiosyncratic motorcycles, something that will reward sympathetic ownership. You certainly won’t forget it!

This book would not have been possible without the help of several people: Velocette owners Pat Clancy and Alan Deacon allowed me to photograph their bikes and pick their brains about the ins and outs of Velocette ownership. Justin Harvey-James and the staff of the Vintage Motorcycle Club were very helpful in providing the Club’s library for research. Thanks also go to Roger Fogg.
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The Essential Buyer’s Guide™ currency
At the time of publication a BG unit of currency “£” equals approximately £1.00/US$1.31/Euro 1.18. Please adjust to suit current exchange rates using Sterling as the base currency.
Engine/frame numbers

Engine and frame numbers are key to ascertaining which model the bike was originally, and what year it left the factory. Unlike Triumphs, for example, the numbers do not match (except on military machines), so you can’t use them to check whether you’re looking at an original engine and frame that left the factory together.

The engine number is found just below the cylinder barrel, on the left-hand side, with a prefix to denote the model – MAC and MSS are self-explanatory, while VM, VR and VMT translate as a Venom, Viper and Thruxton respectively. A ‘C’ on the end of the number denotes coil ignition. Frame numbers are on the right-hand side of the upper front engine lug on rigid frames, and on a raised oblong above the head steady bracket on swingarm frames – prefixes are M for rigid and RS for swingarm.

Are the numbers clearly visible or do they look fuzzy and tampered with? If the frame has been repainted (especially if it’s been powder coated) then the number may be difficult to decipher, but tampering should be obvious. If in doubt, walk away.

Having checked the engine and frame numbers, get down on the ground and look for the inspector’s marks on the underside of the crankcases. These should match each other.

Documentation

Only buy a vehicle from an individual who can prove that they are the person named in the vehicle’s registration document (V5C in the UK) and, preferably, at the address shown in the document. Also check that the VIN or chassis number/frame and engine numbers of the car/motorcycle match the numbers in the registration document.

An annual roadworthiness certificate (the ‘MoT’ in the UK) is handy proof not just that the bike was roadworthy when tested, but if there’s a whole sheaf of them it gives evidence of the bike’s history – when it was actively being used, and what the mileage was. The more of these that come with the bike, the better.

Beware upgraded bikes

We’ve mentioned elsewhere that it is relatively easy to upgrade one Velocette...
model into another simply by adding the appropriate parts. Some Vipers became Venoms after fitting the 500cc piston, barrel and cylinder head, and the addition of the correct extras turns a Venom into a Clubman.

There’s nothing wrong with any of this if the seller is honest about it, stating what model the bike started out as, but that it has certain non-standard parts. After all, it’s an honourable tradition among Velocette owners to fettle the bikes, and good quality parts, fitted well, won’t detract from the bike’s value. Problems arise when sellers try to pass off these upgraded bikes as genuine. The unscrupulous could try and dress up a standard Venom as a far more valuable Thruxton – look for that VMT engine number prefix. Bikes purporting to be Scramblers are less easy to police, since they didn’t have a specific prefix – if in doubt, ask the Velocette Owners’ Club if it can identify a Scrambler from the engine and frame numbers.

**General condition**

Put the bike on its centre stand, to shed equal light on both sides, and take a good, slow walk around it. If it’s claimed to be restored, and has a nice shiny tank and engine cases, look more closely – how far does the ‘restored’ finish go? Are the nooks and crannies behind the gearbox as spotless as the fuel tank? If not, the bike may have been given a quick smarten up to sell. A generally faded look all over isn’t necessarily a bad thing – it suggests a machine that hasn’t been restored, and isn’t trying to pretend that it has.

Now look at the engine, which is by far the most expensive and time-consuming thing to put right if anything’s wrong. Expect some oil leakage from the primary chain cover and/or pushrod tube, though the engine shouldn’t be very oily.

Take the bike off the centre stand and stand astride it to kickstart the engine, or if you’re not confident, ask the owner to do it – they should have the right knack, and if they can’t start it within half a dozen kicks, then something could be wrong. Once running, the engine should rev crisply and cleanly without showing blue or black smoke. Velocettes are relatively quiet mechanically, but listen for rumbles and knocks from the bottom end. While the engine’s running, check that the ammeter is showing a positive charge.

Switch off the engine and put the bike back on its centre stand. Check for play in the forks, headstock and swingarm, and the front forks or rear shocks for leaks.
10 Auctions
– sold! Another way to buy your dream

Auction pros & cons
Pros: Prices will usually be lower than those of dealers or private sellers and you might grab a real bargain on the day. Auctioneers have usually established clear title with the seller. At the venue you can usually examine documentation relating to the bike.
Cons: You have to rely on a sketchy catalogue description of condition & history. The opportunity to inspect is limited and you cannot ride the bike. Auction machines can be a little below par and may require some work. It’s easy to overbid. There will usually be a buyer’s premium to pay in addition to the auction hammer price.

Which auction?
Auctions by established auctioneers are advertised in the motorcycle magazines and on the auction houses’ websites. A catalogue, or a simple printed list of the lots for auctions might only be available a day or two ahead, though often lots are listed and pictured on auctioneers’ websites much earlier. Contact the auction company to ask if previous auction selling prices are available as this is useful information (details of past sales are often available on websites).

Catalogue, entry fee and payment details
When you purchase the catalogue of the bikes in the auction, it often acts as a ticket allowing two people to attend the viewing days and the auction. Catalogue details tend to be comparatively brief, but will include information such as ‘one owner from new, low mileage, full service history,’ etc. It will also usually show a guide price to give you some idea of what to expect to pay and will tell you what is charged as a ‘Buyer’s premium,’ The catalogue will also contain details of acceptable forms of payment. At the fall of the hammer an immediate deposit is usually required, the balance payable within 24 hours. If the plan is to pay by cash there may be a cash limit. Some auctions will accept payment by debit card. Sometimes credit or charge cards are acceptable, but will often incur an extra charge. A bank draft or bank transfer will have to be arranged with your own bank as well as with the auction house. No bike will be released before all payments are cleared. If delays occur in payment transfers then storage costs can accrue.

Buyer’s premium
A buyer’s premium will be added to the hammer price: don’t forget this in your calculations. It’s not usual for there to be a further state tax or local tax on the purchase price and/or on the buyer’s premium.

Viewing
In some instances it’s possible to view on the day or days before, as well as in the hours prior to, the auction. There are auction officials available who are willing to help out if need be. While the officials may start the engine for you, a test ride is out of the question. Crawling under and around the bike as much as you want is permitted. You can also ask to see any documentation available.
Bidding
Before you take part in the auction, decide your maximum bid – and stick to it! It may take a while for the auctioneer to reach the lot you are interested in, so use that time to observe how other bidders behave. When it’s the turn of your bike, attract the auctioneer’s attention and make an early bid. The auctioneer will then look to you for a reaction every time another bid is made. Usually the bids will be in fixed increments until the bidding slows, when smaller increments will often be accepted before the hammer falls. If you want to withdraw from the bidding, make sure the auctioneer understands your intentions – a vigorous shake of the head when he or she looks to you for the next bid should do the trick!

Assuming that you are the successful bidder, the auctioneer will note your card or paddle number, and from that moment on you will be responsible for the bike. If it is unsold, either because it failed to reach the reserve or because there was little interest, it may be possible to negotiate with the owner, via the auctioneers, after the sale is over.

Successful bid
There are two more items to think about – how to get the bike home, and insurance. If you can’t ride it, your own or a hired trailer is one way, another is to have it shipped using the facilities of a local company. The auction house will also have details of companies specialising in the transport of bikes.

Insurance for immediate cover can usually be purchased on site, but it may be more cost-effective to make arrangements with your own insurance company in advance, and then call to confirm the full details.

eBay & other online auctions?
eBay & other online auctions once had a reputation for bargains, though many traders as well as private sellers now use eBay and prices have risen. Velocettes, being collectable classics rising in value, tend to be sold through specialist auction houses such as Bonhams, rather than online. As with any auction, the final price depends how many buyers are bidding and how desperately they want the bike! Either way, it would be foolhardy to bid without examining the bike first, which is something most vendors encourage. A useful feature of eBay is that the geographical location of the bike is shown, so you can narrow your choices to those within a realistic radius of home. Be prepared to be outbid in the last few moments of the auction. Remember, your bid is binding and that it will be very, very difficult to get restitution in the case of a crooked vendor fleecing you – caveat emptor! Look at the seller’s rating as well as the bike.

Be aware that some bikes offered for sale in online auctions are ‘ghost’ machines. Don’t part with any cash without being sure that the vehicle does actually exist and is as described (usually pre-bidding inspection is possible).

Auctioneers
Bonhams www.bonhams.com
British Car Auctions (BCA) www.bca-europe.com or www.british-car-auctions.co.uk
Cheffins www.cheffins.co.uk
eBay www.eBay.com
H&H www.classic-auctions.co.uk
Shannons www.shannons.com.au
Silver www.silverauctions.com
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Velocette

350 & 500 SINGLES

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