



Pedigree *Mongrel*

The Rickman brothers built just 138 Enfield-powered Interceptors in 1971-72 – ALAN CATHCART rides one. Photography: Kel Edge

Métisse was founded in the 1950s by brothers Derek and Don Rickman, off-road aces who were household names thanks to the BBC showing the scrambles in which they excelled every Saturday afternoon in winter. After achieving dirt bike dominance with their stiff, good-handling frames powered by British twins and singles, they went on to briefly become Britain's largest road bike manufacturer after the demise of Norton (first time around) and before John Bloor resurrected Triumph. At the same time, they played a role in helping Japanese manufacturers discover the black art of frame design. It's fair to say the Rickmans changed the face of modern motorcycling, even if it's too little appreciated today by exactly how much.

That process began with the Rickman Interceptor 750, which was unveiled at London's Racing and Sporting Motorcycle Show in February 1970. An adapted road version of the Rickman off-road frame had been available from 1966 onwards for those wanting to build Rickman-framed road bikes. Most had Triumph







T120 motors, though Meriden had refused to supply engines for complete bikes. The Interceptor was different, with its Metisse chassis supplied to Enfield Precision, modified by the technical team headed by Don Rickman to accommodate the essentially all-new wet-sump version of Royal Enfield's 736cc twin.

Sadly, Royal Enfield was finally wound up in July 1970, before production really got going. However, this did give RE the chance to finally become a road bike manufacturer in its own right, partly because a final batch of engines was left over after Floyd Clymer died – the colourful American entrepreneur had planned to have them built into bikes by Italjet in Italy, badged as Indians to sell in the States! These surplus engines, married to the modified Metisse chassis, formed the short run of Rickman Interceptors, hand assembled at the newly expanded Rickman works in New Milton, Hampshire.

Stiff & In Line

The Rickman Interceptor's unmodified 736cc parallel-twin sat firmly in the tradition of British big twins, except that the MkII was a full wet-sump design with much improved lubrication. It featured separate cylinders with cast-iron sleeves and aluminium heads, each with two valves per cylinder, and a dynamically balanced nodular iron 360° crank. Its 71x93mm dimensions and an 8.5:1 compression ratio produced 52.5bhp at 6,500rpm, with substantial torque. It kept the four-speed Albion gearbox with duplex primary chain and the trademark RE neutral finder plus a much improved five-plate oil-bath clutch. A 1968 redesign meant that the copious oil leaks for which the Mk1 RE twin had become notorious were essentially cured – at least when new.

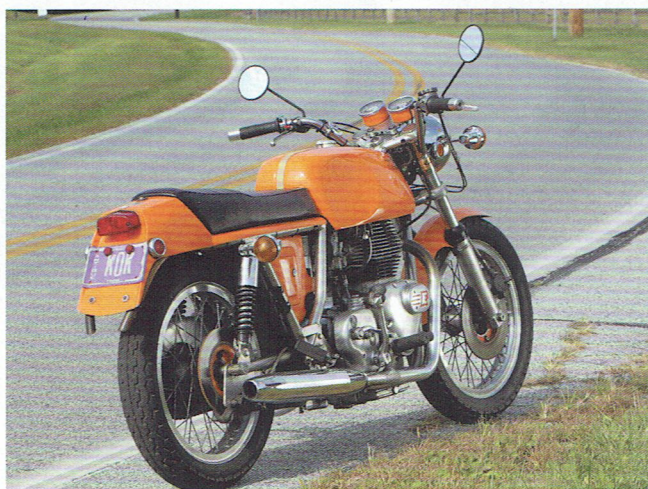
It was all wrapped in a trademark Metisse triangulated duplex frame, modified to suit, as Don Rickman explains. "Because the newer Interceptor engine was wet-sump format, it was wider across the bottom than anything we'd used the Street Metisse frame for before," he says. "So we had to splay the lower part of the frame out a little, to let the crankcase sit between the rails. As with all our frames it was entirely sift bronze-welded using

Reynolds 531 chrome-moly steel tubing, because back when we were just getting started, before designing our very first frames we went to the Reynolds company and talked to Ken Sprayson. In those days he was the whizz kid for frame construction, and he showed us all the technical stuff, including his tricks of the trade. We never used anything else after that."

The frame was nickel-plated – another Rickman feature from first to last – with the firm's own meaty-looking tele fork and forged triple clamps. The sturdy front end was required because of the cast iron disc brakes fitted front and rear, for the first time ever on a production bike.

The tubular steel Metisse swinging arm carried twin Girling shocks, and featured an eccentric pivot for chain adjustment, the first time ever on a production road bike. "What we really set out to do on all our frames was to make the back wheel follow the front one exactly," Derek Rickman once explained to me. "So what we had to do was clamp the rear axle strongly in the swingarm, and alter the chain adjustment at the frame pivot, which made it very rigid. We had to design the steering head so that it held the forks very rigidly, via our own forged triple clamps and bigger diameter fork tubes, which were very strong, so you wouldn't get any whip at all. Then from the steering head to the swinging arm, the frame had to be such that it wouldn't twist in any shape or form. Also, as long as you used the same discs on both sides, the braking forces would always be in line as well, so wouldn't affect the steering."

The Rickman Enfield weighed in at 365lb dry, a massive 61lb lighter than the stock Interceptor MkII. Besides the lighter frame and the brakes, the 18-inch Borrani alloy rims saved significant extra weight, unsprung at that, while at 30in the Rickman's seat height was an inch lower than the Enfield's, though the swan neck clip-on bars resulted in a quite upright, feet-forward riding position. Another controversial feature were the footrest mountings, which were clamped to small vertical tubes welded to the two separate standard Interceptor exhausts. Strange, but apparently successful....



On the Road

Rickman Interceptors are few and far between nowadays, with around 60 of the 138 such bikes built known to have survived. One of these, carrying frame no.1112 RE made in June 1971, was exported to the USA, where it today earns its keep in southern Pennsylvania as one of the fleet of classics available for hire from Retro Tours (www.retro tours.com) for group or solo rides through the northeast USA and the Atlantic seaboard, in company with Retro Tours founder, Joel Samick.

I'll own up now to coming within a hair's breadth of buying a brand new Rickman Interceptor from Elite Motors back in 1974, when the last few unsold bikes were still available. Living in London back then, I actually rode to Tooting twice to look at the bike, and even discussed the trade-in value of my purple peril Suzuki GT750J triple, before deciding to pass it up.

Why? Partly because I'd heard that the long-awaited 750SS replica of Paul Smart's Imola 200-winning Ducati was finally going to become available later that year. And I just couldn't get comfortable sitting on the Rickman, thanks to the strange swan neck bars, high set and pulled WAAAY back. This very upright stance was not in keeping with the rest of the bike, so the Rickman was definitely bi-polar – it couldn't decide if it was a café racer like the Ducati or a sports tourer like the Suzuki. Plus, I just couldn't get my head around the footrests being mounted on the exhausts!

So it took almost 50 years for me to finally discover what a Rickman Interceptor was like to ride, thanks to the pleasant 120-mile autumn day I spent riding round Pennsylvania's countryside and the Susquehanna River valley. Along the way, Joel Samick and I passed through the Amish country, contending with massed ranks of horse-drawn carriages when we stopped for coffee outside of Lancaster.

I was ready for that cuppa, too, since while the Interceptor has serious grunt, and lopes along pretty well at 70mph, it's at the expense of serious vibration at almost any revs, perhaps because the engine is so well tied in to the Rickman frame? Though it was apparently capable of 117mph when new, you'd have to grit your teeth to get there, despite the one-pound balance weights at the end of each handlebar. It's pretty intrusive, too, coming at you through seat, footrests and handlebars, though marginally less so when you back off the throttle a little. I will admit that I've ridden Norton twins (Atlas, not Commando) of the same era that vibed just as badly, so it's arguably simply an inescapable trait of the species.

Accessing that trait can be hard work too, because starting the Rickman took quite a bit of practice. In the absence of the electric starter, then becoming available on other twins like the Benelli Tornado and all Laverdas, you have to fold out the right-foot kickstart, then try to make sure that in its downward sweep your toes don't foul the footrest parked on the exhaust pipe right next door to it.

Eventually I more or less got the hang of it, although once fired up, I found the four-speed Albion gearbox's shift lever stiff to operate, especially in lifting it to select bottom gear. It invariably went in with a graunch, and selecting second was sometimes equally challenging, though the top two changes were just fine. Selecting neutral was impossible at rest, though – I invariably had to kick the neutral finder with my heel to make it work. Mind you, I wasn't really expecting anything better, having experienced how awful Albion 'boxes are on the pre-unit Bullets made in India until 2010, and the arrival of the unit construction single.

Rock Solid

Still, the torquey nature of the Interceptor engine meant I was able to cut down on shifting gear, and the Rickman's substantially lighter weight compared to any other British twin of the era, and especially the donor machine, delivers genuinely impressive roll-on performance. It accelerates really well, to the trademark thud of a two-up 360° twin through the separate exhausts – when you wind the twin Amals wide open the Enfield motor sounds positively angry, and definitely assertive. This is a bike with hair on its chest! Yet it's also easy to tootle through town at little more than idle speed on the ubiquitous '60s era tacho fitted to most British bikes of the day, set alongside the similar speedo which strangely only reads up to 100mph. Well, in theory at least, it'll go even faster than that.

But come the twisties heading down into the Delaware Valley, the Rickman's great forte came into its own. Its rock solid handling and completely predictable steering allowed me to make the most of the good grip provided by the front TT100 Dunlop, probably the benchmark road tyre of its generation. Despite the curious handlebar which prevented me loading up the front end with my body weight, the Rickman chassis felt ultimately pretty well balanced and confidence inspiring. The sturdy-for-those-days Rickman fork is adequately compliant and well-damped, so much so that I ended up looking for bumps and other road rash to relish how well it shrugged them off. The twin Girling shocks were pretty taut, and the Interceptor skipped in the air a little over the worst of the surfaces we found on the Delaware back roads, but by the standards of 1970 this is a capable motorcycle. However, the front disc brake didn't have as much bite as I expected – and I know how well that Lockheed



caliper can function from all the years I've been racing with one on my 750SS Ducati – though the slightly smaller rear disc thankfully worked much better. I respectfully suggest you either change the brake pads, or use a smaller-bore master cylinder Joel!

Mongrel or Pedigree?

Though the Rickman Interceptor 750 doesn't officially carry the moniker, 'Metisse' is the French word for 'mongrel', in this case denoting the combination of a proprietary engine in a Rickman-built frame. But this Royal Enfield-powered roadburner really is a pedigree mongrel of a bike – it's just that it deserved a better engine, and especially a much improved transmission. That would change with the 1974 debut of the first four-cylinder Japanese-engined Rickman road bike, which exploited the fine handling properties of the Metisse frame by combining it with the fluid performance and increased horsepower of a 750cc Honda motor, in delivering the chassis with the performance it deserved.

This was the first of many such bikes powered by Kawasaki, Suzuki and even Honda Gold Wing engines – over 2000 such Rickman-framed Japanese fours were built from 1974 to 1985. But that's another chapter in the Rickman brothers' story!

RICKMAN INTERCEPTOR – Specification

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| Engine: | Air-cooled pushrod OHV wet-sump parallel-twin four-stroke with two valves per cylinder and 360-degree crank |
| Bore x stroke: | 71 x 93 mm |
| Capacity: | 736 cc |
| Power: | 52.5 bhp at 6,500rpm |
| Compression ratio: | 8.5:1 |
| Carburation: | 2 x 30mm Amal Mark 1 Concentric |
| Ignition: | 12v Lucas capacitor with twin coils/auto advance |
| Gearbox: | Albion 4-speed |
| Primary drive: | Duplex chain, five-plate oil-bath clutch |
| Frame: | Nickel-plated, bronze-welded chrome-moly tubular steel double cradle |
| Suspension: | Front: 41.3 mm Rickman telescopic fork Rear: Fabricated tubular steel swingarm with 2 x Girling shocks |
| Head angle: | 27.5 degrees |
| Wheelbase: | 56in |
| Weight: | 365lb |
| Brakes: | Front: 8in Lockheed cast iron disc with single-piston Lockheed caliper Rear: 7in Lockheed cast iron disc with single-piston Lockheed caliper |
| Tyres: | Front: 4.10-18 Dunlop Roadmaster TT100 Rear: 4.10-18 Dunlop Roadmaster TT100 |
| Seat height: | 30 in |
| Fuel tank: | 3 gallons |
| Top speed: | 117mph |
| Year of manufacture: | 1971 |
| Owner: | Joel Samick, Kennett Square, Pa., USA |



Rickman & the Big Boys

The Rickman brothers made great frames, but they struggled to get co-operation from the British industry

The Rickman Metisse success story presents a vivid counterpoint to the concurrent demise of larger British manufacturers like BSA, Triumph, AJS/Matchless and Norton. "The British factories were completely uninterested in what we were doing, and would never supply us with anything," said Derek Rickman, who sadly died last year. "Not wheels, not forks, nothing – not even cash on delivery, not even after we'd become established, and to be honest, rather successful.

"But you know, when we built the first Metisse frame in my back bedroom and got it running, it seemed a very good frame, so we took it to Triumph, Norton, BSA and Matchless – all four of them – and tried to get each of them to evaluate it with a view to taking it on. We were prepared to give them the design free of charge – all we wanted were bikes to race with ourselves. We didn't want any money for it. We must have been very naïve to give it all away, even for racers – you wouldn't ever do a thing like that these days, would you?

"Anyway, they all turned us down flat, and that's what made us into manufacturers – because at that time we were retail motorcycle people, and we had no idea about building bikes ourselves. But when they all turned us down, it quite frankly annoyed us, so we said, 'Right, we'll make them ourselves!' And so we did, in increasing numbers – but then within 20 years, of course, they had all gone, and we were the only ones left in Britain still manufacturing bikes. What do you make of that?"