

# PEDIGREEED MONGREL

## Rickman Interceptor 750 road test

Story by Alan Cathcart  
Photos by Kel Edge

Britain's iconic Métisse motorcycle marque was founded in the 1950s by brothers Derek and Don Rickman, offroad aces who were household names in Britain thanks to BBC-TV showing the Scrambles racing in which they excelled every Saturday afternoon in winter.

After achieving dirt bike dominance with their stiff, good-handling frames powered by British twin and single engines, they then did something comparable with road bikes. Rickman went on to briefly become Britain's largest street bike manufacturer after the demise of Norton the first time around, and before John Bloor resurrected Triumph.

The Rickmans' creations not only represented a key stage in the evolution of the modern offroad bike, they also played a role in helping the Japanese manufacturers discover the black art of frame design for their 4-cylinder street bikes, in making Hondas that handled, and Kawasakis which delivered their impressive horsepower to the ground, without trying to chuck the rider off in doing so. It's fair to say the brothers' bikes changed the face of modern motorcycling, even if it's too little appreciated today by exactly how much.

### Way back when

That process began with the creation exactly 50 years ago this year of the prototype parallel-twin Rickman Interceptor 750, which was displayed at London's Racing and Sporting Motorcycle Show in February 1970. Until then, alongside their offroad Métisse frame kits to house Triumph, BSA, Matchless and Bultaco engines that were their core business, the Rickman brothers had only just begun to build complete series-production bikes for the MX/Enduro offroad market, which were moreover exclusively powered by 125/250cc 2-stroke engines from Montesa and Zündapp, not the British 4-strokes they'd made their name with. An adapted Street Métisse version of the offroad frame had been available from 1966 onwards for those wanting to build Rickman-framed road bikes, predominantly with 650cc Triumph T120 engines, though efforts to obtain supplies of this engine to build complete motorcycles were rebuffed by the Meriden factory.

But Street Métisse chassis No. 703 delivered to Royal Enfield owners Enfield Precision early in 1970, had been modified by the technical team headed by Don Rickman to accommodate the essentially all-new Reg Thomas-designed Mk II wet-sump version of the 736cc Royal Enfield Interceptor engine introduced in 1968. Its display at the London Show aroused heaps of interest, and at this stage it was envisaged that Royal Enfield would launch its own café racer model based on the Rickman design. This could also be adapted to police use, and indeed an Interceptor-engined Rickman police bike bearing chassis No. 781 was delivered to Dorset Police in June 1970 for evaluation. Meantime, the Rickmans

began offering the Street Métisse frame kit duly adapted to accept the Interceptor engine (and the Albion gearbox which came with it, both firms being formerly owned by the same E. and H.P. Smith Group of companies), though they only delivered the first of these, chassis No. 890, in February 1971 to a customer named Gerry Marshall. However, Royal Enfield then finally entered administration in July 1970 — a demise which had been some years in the making, but which now presented the Rickmans with the chance to finally become series production street bike manufacturers themselves, without the expense and time needed to develop their own engine.

That's because colorful American two-wheeled entrepreneur



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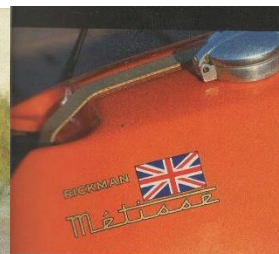
Floyd Clymer had made a deal with Enfield Precision to obtain an initial batch of 200 Interceptor Mk II engines and gearboxes. They were to be sent to Italy for Leopoldo Tartarini, owner of Italjet Motorcycles, to put them into an Italjet frame, rebadge the result as an Indian, and ship them to the U.S. to promote the return of Clymer's beloved Indian brand, whose trademark he held the rights to. Tartarini had already produced a Velocette-engined 500 Indian single for him. But Clymer died in January 1970, aged 74, by which time just 62 Royal Enfield engines had left England for Italy. The remainder of the consignment was held by Clymer's Birmingham, U.K.-based shipping agents P. Mitchell & Co., who'd already had dealings with the Rickman brothers in shipping their frames to Australia, and asked them to build a batch of Métisse-framed motorcycles using these Interceptor engines. It took until the end of the year for Enfield's receivers to approve release of the engines, but in January 1971 assembly began in the newly expanded Rickman works in New Milton of the first of the 138 examples of the production Rickman Enfield Interceptor to be built, with six fitters at a time each working solo on assembling a complete bike. It was the first time that the Rickmans had produced a series production road bike bearing their name.

Originally priced at £750 and available in blue, orange or maroon, sales of what by the standards of the day was a very high performance motorcycle — the first ever production bike with disc brakes front and rear — were initially slow, until the price was dropped to £550, whereupon they took off. Without

their own dealer network in the U.K., the Rickmans arranged for major South London dealer Elite Motors in Tooting to sell this model exclusively, though Mitchells took 26 bikes with frame numbers 1101-26 to sell abroad, mainly to Canada. This was effectively a back door into the U.S., where several of the 26 went on sale for \$1,695, with a spare engine available for \$550. Direct sales to a country where the Métisse name was already legendary, and where 546 examples of the standard Mk II Enfield Interceptor had already been shipped, were impossible because Rickman's California-based U.S. importer Steens had ran into trouble after a failed takeover.

#### That engine

The Rickman Interceptor's unmodified 736cc parallel-twin OHV twin-cam engine sat firmly in the tradition of British big twins, except that the essentially all-new Mk II version was a full wet-sump design with much improved lubrication, instead of the Mk I's separate oil receptacle cast into the vertically split crankcase housing. It featured separate cylinders with cast iron sleeves and aluminum heads, each with two valves per cylinder, and a dynamically balanced nodular iron 360-degree crank. Its 71mm x 93mm dimensions and an 8.5:1 compression ratio produced 52.5 horsepower at 6,500rpm at the gearbox, with substantial torque. This was the same 4-speed Albion from before, bolted to the rear of the crankcase for a sort of semi-unit construction, with duplex primary chain and a trademark RE neutral finder, but a much improved 5-plate oil-bath clutch. The 12v Lucas capacitor



Joel painted the Rickman a bright orange VW shade (above). The engine is fed by two 30mm Amal Mark 1 carburetors (far right).

ignition with twin coils and auto advance was triggered by contacts operated off the end of the exhaust camshaft, hidden behind a triangular timing cover. Carburetion was by twin 30mm Amal Mk 1 Concentrics, and Thomas's redesign meant that the copious oil leaks for which the Mk I version of the engine had become notorious, were essentially cured — at least when new. The optional oil cooler fitted to the Mk II Interceptor was absent from the Rickman — finding space to fit it might have been too hard.

This new-generation Interceptor engine was wrapped in a trademark Street Métisse 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 Métisse frame for before," he says. "So we had to splay the lower part



#### 1971 RICKMAN INTERCEPTOR

**Engine:** 736cc air-cooled pushrod OHV 4-stroke parallel-twin, 71mm x 93mm bore and stroke, 8.5:1 compression ratio, 52.5hp at 6,500rpm (at gearbox)

**Top speed:** 117mph

**Carburetion:** Two 30mm Amal Mark 1 Concentrics

**Transmission:** Albion 4-speed with duplex chain primary drive and five-plate oil-bath clutch

**Ignition:** 12v, Lucas capacitor with twin coils

**Frame/wheelbase:** Nickel-plated, bronze-welded chrome-moly tubular steel double cradle frame/56in (1,422mm)

**Suspension:** 41.3mm Rickman telescopic fork front, tubular steel swingarm with dual Girling shocks rear

**Brakes:** Single 8in (203mm) disc front, single 7in (178mm) disc rear

**Tires:** 4.10 x 18in front and rear

**Weight:** 365lb/166kg

**Seat height:** 30in (762mm)

**Fuel tank capacity:** 3gal (13.3ltr)



of the frame out a little, to let the crankcase sit between the rails. As with all our frames it was entirely silt bronze-welded using Reynolds 531 steel tubing, because 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 whiz 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 set at a 27.5-degree rake, and carried in Rickman's 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 Norton Commando which







The 736cc air-cooled twin makes 52.5 horsepower at 6,500rpm (left and right). The 8-inch front disc brake (middle).

was the Rickman Enfield's closest rival back then, still had a drum rear brake.

"Our road racing entrant Tom Kirby came to us with a big cast aluminum hub to house a disc brake in that his South African rider Paddy Driver had brought back from America, and said, 'Can you do something with this?' recalls Don, 'So we had to develop our own forks to use it, because it needed a caliper bracket on one side, and it all went from there. We'd started using the front disc with Matchless forks, but these were never strong enough to absorb the braking forces without deflection, so that's why we went to 1-5/8-inch tubing, to prevent that. Dare I say it, we were the first people to go to the big tube forks, because we found that with a Lockheed cast iron disc brake which worked much better than the steel one Honda used on the CB750 Four's front wheel, you needed something sturdier to withstand the braking forces. And to go up to 1-5/8-inch [41.3mm] from 1-3/8-inch [35mm], that makes a tube much stronger. Plus, we had our triple clamps made out of some very high grade alloy material, the same as the factory we got to make them for us in France used on the Caravelle aircraft undercarriage they were then making parts for. Our head crowns were forged, too, not cast, which made them a lot stronger — we never had a triple clamp bend, ever, not even with the worst of impacts offroad." After the first seven bikes the large U.S.-sourced front hub, which was also quite heavy, was replaced by Rickman's own light alloy cast hub, same as at the rear.

#### Front to back

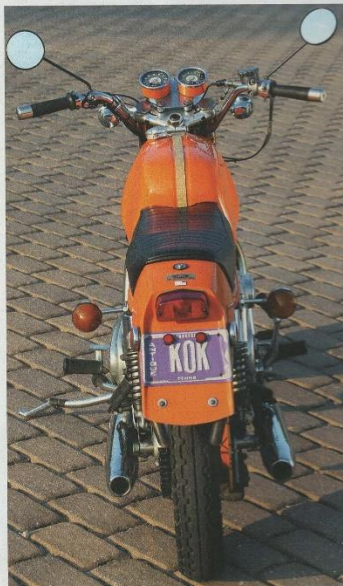
The tubular steel swingarm carried twin Girling shocks, but featured a hitherto unique means of chain adjustment for the first time ever on a series production street bike, via an

eccentric swingarm pivot. "What we really set out to do on all our frames was to make the back wheel follow the front one exactly," Derek Rickman explains. "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 swingarm, the frame had to be such that it wouldn't twist in any shape or form. And the other aspect of it was that 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."

Fitted with an 8-inch (203mm) front and 7-inch (178mm) rear brake discs, each gripped by a single-piston Lockheed caliper, the Rickman Enfield weighed in at 365 pounds dry, a massive 61 pounds lighter than the stock Interceptor Mk II with which it shared the same 56-inch wheelbase. Besides the lighter frame and brakes, the 18-inch Borrani alloy rims saved significant extra weight, unsprung at that, while the bread loaf-shaped 3-gallon fuel tank, as well as the base of the long, flat seat with slightly raised passenger space, were all made in fiberglass at the Rickman factory, with the seat pan extending back to comprise the tail section and rear fender. At 30 inches, the Rickman's seat height was an inch lower than the Enfield's, though, while the clip-on handlebars, rather than the

expected dropped café racer-type, were a swan's neck design resulting in a quite upright, feet-forward riding position. Another controversial feature were the footrest mountings, which saw these clamped to small vertical tubes welded to the two separate standard Interceptor exhausts. Strange, but apparently successful.



Joel added turn signals to his Rickman to make it a little more usable for group tours.



#### Joel's Rickman

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 one of the Mitchells bikes shipped to Canada, and then transported to the U.S., where it today earns its keep in southern Pennsylvania as one of the fleet of street Classics available for hire from Retro Tours (retrotours.com), to ride with company founder, Joel Samick (See Page 54 for more about Retro Tours). We'll let Joel explain how he came to acquire the Rickman.

"A few years ago, I was on the prowl for another English bike, since the Italians in my garage were beginning to outnumber the Brits, and I like to maintain a balance of power!" he says. "I remember back in 1970 dreaming about the awesome Rickman Royal Enfield big twin, the first production bike with front and rear disc brakes, but I could never afford one, of course, and I never really even saw one, just read about it and thought it was fantastic. So about 15 years ago, I began making inquiries to try to track one down. This eventually led me to a fellow who lived in Washington D.C., and I'm going to guess that he was some kind of a spy, because he worked in Moscow, but was periodically back in D.C., and he had two Rickman Enfields

up and running, plus a bunch of loose parts. Apparently he had enough to build two or three more of them."

"Long story short, I shipped him a pile of money, and he sent me a pallet with 6 or 8 huge boxes containing most of a motorcycle, along with reassurances that he'd follow up with anything that might be missing. Piecing it together was one very involved puzzle. I had an Enfield manual which covered the engine, but had to rely on pictures in old magazine articles to create a complete stock Rickman. The seller made

good on his promise to ship some additional parts, but many others had to be sourced elsewhere, and still more had to be fabricated — like the engine plates, for example. But in the end I gradually completed it, and it's reasonably close to what it should be. I added blinkers, which it's not supposed to have, but I think it looks about how it should look — I painted it a

VW shade of orange, which is the closest I could get to the original Rickman tint. The resulting bike is unique, and it's enjoyable enough riding it to justify re-creating it."

"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

"Long story short, I shipped him a pile of money, and he sent me a pallet containing most of a motorcycle."





Curvy roads are where the Interceptor shines (left).

like to ride, thanks to the pleasant 120-mile autumn day I spent riding round the Pennsylvania Dutch Country and the Susquehanna River valley on Retro Tours' piece of Britbike history, in company with Joel Samick on his BMW. Along the way we 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 it's marginally less so when you back off the throttle a little, and the engine's no longer under load. But, I will admit that I've ridden Norton twins (Atlas, not Commando) of the same era that vibed just as badly in those pre-counter-balancer days, so it's arguably simply an inescap-

able 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 Laverda models, 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. But eventually I more or less got the hang of it, although once fired up, I found the 4-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 gearshifts 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.

However, 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, delivers genuinely impressive roll-on

my purple peril Suzuki GT750J triple, before deciding to pass it up. Why? Partly because I'd heard that the long-awaited 750SS street replica of Paul Smart's Imola 200-winning Ducati desmo V-twin was finally going to become available later that year, but also because I just couldn't get comfortable sitting on the Rickman, thanks to the strange swan's neck clip-on handlebars with their already pretty high-set grips pulled WAAAY back. Coupled with the footrests mounted surprisingly far forward for a bike that looked like the ultimate British café racer (which otherwise it was — a sort of uber-Dresda Triton), this resulted in a very upright stance not at all in keeping with the rest of the bike. The Rickman was definitely bipolar — it couldn't decide if it was a café racer like the Ducati I did indeed eventually acquire instead, or a sports tourer like the Suzuki I was already riding. Plus, I just couldn't get my head around the footrests being mounted on the exhausts!

The fact that Elite Motors didn't have a demo bike was another reason for my walking away — so it took almost 50 years for me to finally discover what a Rickman Interceptor was



performance. It accelerates really well, to the trademark thud of a two-up 360-degree twin as expressed through the separate exhausts — when you wind the twin Amals wide open the Enfield engine 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 as shown on the ubiquitous '70s-era tachometer fitted to most British bikes of the day, set alongside the similar speedometer which strangely only reads up to 100mph. Well, in theory at least it'll go even faster.

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, which allowed me to make the most of the good grip provided by the front TT100 Dunlop, probably the benchmark road tire 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, with the sturdy-for-those-days Rickman fork adequately compliant and well-damped — 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, though, and the Interceptor skipped in the air a little over the worst of the surfaces we found running along 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 Ducati 750SS — 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!

Though the Rickman Interceptor 750 doesn't officially carry the moniker, *Métisse* is the French word for "mongrel," in two-wheeled terms denoting the combination of a proprietary engine in a Rickman-built frame. But this Royal Enfield-powered road-burner is a pedigreed mongrel of a bike — just that it deserved a better engine and especially a much improved transmission than this first series production example of the Rickman brothers' chassis expertise incorporated. But all that would change with the 1974 debut of the first 4-cylinder Japanese-engined Rickman road bike, which deservedly exploited the fine handling properties of the Street Metisse frame concept, by combining it with the fluid performance and increased horsepower of a 750 Honda engine, in delivering the chassis with the performance it deserved.

It was the first of many such bikes powered by Kawasaki, Suzuki and even Honda Gold Wing engines — but that's another chapter in the Rickman brothers' story! *IMC*