

The bike that put Triumph back on track

Triumph's rebirth in Hinckley produced solid but unexciting motorcycles. Then the Speed Triple blustered onto the scene in a historic race at Donington. We ride the winning bike

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This is the one. There had been Tridents and Trophys and a Tiger, but the moment the racing Speed Triple rolled into view was the moment Triumph lived again. Let's be more specific.

Triumph was reborn at 3.45pm on Sunday, July 24, 1994 when 36 of its all-new Speed Triples – mostly dealer demonstrators, some yellow, some black – barged into Donington's Melbourne Hairpin to mark Triumph's 'official return to racing'.

The inevitable turn-one carnage, the drama of the subsequent duel for the win and, above all, the sheer cool and ability of bikes on display began at once to dismantle the Hinckley factory's early reputation for over-engineered tourers and stodgy styling.

Triumph did it by booking the support-race slot for the British Grand Prix (hundreds of deliriously happy Triumph owners were unleashed onto the circuit beforehand). On board for the Shell Triumph Speed Triple Challenge were the pick of Britain's domestic headcases: "We were all thoroughly over-excited by these big Triumphs," recalls Mike Edwards, who would go on to race in virtually every one-make series ever after. There was also Brian Morrison, Nick and Dave Jefferies, Dave Heal, Ray Stringer, Matt Llewellyn, even Ron Haslam and, dangled in front of the donkey's nose, a £10,000 purse that awarded a juicy £1500 to the winner plus crowd-pleasing bonuses for leading laps and overtaking lots.

Haslam's other job was to specify the mods necessary to stop the 220kg Triples gouging lumps out of Donington's Tarmac while keeping the bikes as stock as possible. Triumph's modular production system, which

WHAT'S THE STORY?

When Triumph announced it was running a one-make support race for the 1994 British GP, top domestic racers queued up for a ride (and a crack at the £10,000 prize fund). Spectators who witnessed the Shell Triumph Speed Triple Challenge were left in no doubt that British bikes were once again just a little bit cool.

You had to be planned and smooth with the Speed Triple. It was like dancing with a fat bird in a phone box

Mike Edwards, racer

shared engines and chassis between models, meant that the Speed Triples had similar geometry and wheelbase to the tourers in the range. They were about as racy as Prime Minister John Major. Ron came up with a Yoshimura three-into-one exhaust and cut-down crankcase covers, pegs and pedals to ease ground clearance problems. A long-stroke Proflex shock raised the rear end dramatically, helping with clearance and quickening the Triple's lethargic steering. "We loved the idea of racing that slightly jazzed-up old technology," says Edwards.

And this is Mike's bike – the Bill

Head entry that would plant the seed with so many owners of CBRs and ZZ-Rs. Owned and lovingly restored by Darren Scott, the 11,000-mile bike looks exactly as it did that July afternoon. It still has a slight ding in the tank and scuff on the engine where it was dropped by Mike in practice.

Nosing out into traffic, it feels shockingly top-heavy by modern, mass-centralised norms, and flops embarrassingly into mini-roundabouts, just as it did into the Melbourne Hairpin (all the racers had to pick up their Triples mid-turn). "You had to be planned and smooth," says Mike. "It was like dancing with a fat bird in a phone box."

Triple Challenge re-enactment joy comes as I escape Worthing's sprawl for the South Downs, the Craner Curves of West Sussex. Those brilliant clip-ons, mounted below yokes dropped a further 12mm than standard, stretching me out across the tank; feet high on cut-down pegs. In front is still the best view in motorcycling: a pair of cocked white-face clocks and the rushing hedgerow.

The 150mph speedo does what all good analogue speedos did – it throws down a challenge. Darren says he's seen 130mph on the track, and you'd need a long, straight stretch to see more. But the Triple is brilliant at licence-preserving speeds, growling and grumping, accurately flowing across classic British roads.

It is knackered, though. The clip-ons are narrow, and with Darren's rear ride-height set to standard, turning takes a physical toll on wimps pampered by light and responsive modern steering. "They were very, very physical," says Mike. "But if you knew how to ride them smoothly, they also managed surprisingly quick lap times."

A Triumph Sprint comes my way; its rider does a double-take. Does the black triangular number board trigger his memory or is he simply ogling a bike with enormous road presence? Wherever it goes, there's an acknowledgement of something special and a passer-by's delight at being near the



Darren Scott's bike is one of the 36 that battled it out in the Speed Triple Challenge at Donington in 1994. And it's just as it was on that day



'The best view in motorcycling,' according to Thompson. Big old white-face clocks – including a 150mph speedo – and roadside greenery rushing by



The task of specifying basic modifications for the racing Speed Triple fell to Ron Haslam. Here he is during development at Mallory Park in June 1994



Crankcase covers were cut down to increase race bikes' ground clearance



Forks were beefed-up by Maxton, but brakes use standard road-bike parts



Most of the bike's weight seems to be balanced invisibly above the tank – it feels like a huge mass. But it also has huge road presence



Scott's Triple Challenge winner has been lovingly restored to race spec

Owner tells Triple tale

Darren Scott (46), from Rustington, West Sussex, has owned every Speed Triple model. He currently has a sweetly-modded 2012 model in his garage, plus a stock Mk1 minter and the history-making Speed Triple Challenge winner we rode, brilliantly restored by Darren and Triumph specialist Clive Wood, who raced that day in July 1994.

'We put it back to race spec. The bike owes me £5500, but I've turned down an offer of £9000. It's irreplaceable'

DARREN SCOTT, OWNER

"Most of the bikes that raced that day went to race in the Mobil 1 Challenge the next year," says Darren. "But this one sat in Bill Head's showroom window with its laurel wreath on the tank."

"I bought it off Andrew Lodge, who'd kept all the original bits in a box. It had been converted back to road spec, but with Clive's help and lots and lots of picture research we put it back to race spec. The burn stop is Mike's original, and he's even donated me the leathers he wore that day. The bike owes me £5500, but I've turned down an offer of £9000. It's irreplaceable."

Thanks to Darren Scott, Clive Wood (07752-477738) and Mike Edwards. You can see more Speed Triple racing at www.mike-edwards.net



Scott's collection also includes this mint example of a Mk1 Speed Triple

Speed Triple. The Yoshi system only adds 5bhp to the original 93 but magnifies the engine's personality, moaning like the old tractor it is at 3000rpm before barking its arrival at 6000. In town, no-one seems to object.

The more miles I do, the more the bike's age and limits fall away. The forks (Maxton-sorted on the racers) crash-dive under hard braking, though the Proflex shock adds control to the rear. "The springs, especially the rear shock's, were soft," says Mike. "So you had to be extra smooth in the transition phase from throttle to brakes and brakes to throttle. Ride it like a super-sport bike and it'd be all over the place."

I can sort of see how they did it: bend it in, don't unnecessarily disturb any-

'The Yoshi system magnifies the engine's personality, moaning like an old tractor at 3000rpm before barking at 6000'

TIM THOMPSON

thing; concentrate on the best bit: the drive, the noise, its amazing attitude.

After that first-lap pile-up, Mike and Morrison cleared off, trading places most laps. "Brian kept coming past me on the last corner of each lap, showing his hand early, which was unlike him. Then I remembered there was a £50 bonus for each lap led, so it got a

bit quicker after that! On the last lap, I defended down the inside at Melbourne but Brian took a late, wide line and drove out early. I did the same back to him on the last left. Really close. Good racing on surprisingly good bikes."

Following the success of the one-off race, the Mobil 1 series, run to similar rules, lasted two seasons. "A lot of good people cut their teeth on Speed Triples in '95 and '96, and the rules were well policed, which is vital for a one-make series," says Mike. More one-make Triumph series have followed, but none has made the same impact as that one-off Donington race – when owners of Japanese sports bikes for the first time wondered if they might like a British motorcycle instead.