



# THE NEO-NOSTALGIC LOOK

How do the 2001 Triumph Bonneville and Kawasaki W650 stack up against the original?

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**Three bikes,** one the long-awaited 2001 Triumph Bonneville, one a 1969 Bonneville superbly restored, and the last, a 2000 Kawasaki W650. It is no coincidence that there is a certain sameness in the styling, all with parallel-twin engines, cylinders vertical, middling gas tanks, spoked wheels. The two new models have made elaborate efforts to resemble the old Brit vertical twins as much as possible, but the two have their differences...and they have both entirely missed the heart and soul of the old Bonneville's primary purpose.



The author astride his '60 Bonneville that same year. Note the all-natural beret.

For the day, that original T120 Bonnie was a kick-butt bike, 400 pounds and 46 horsepower. It wasn't meant to be taken on a leisurely Sunday ride; it was the top dog, the alpha cat, the motorcycle that could rip off a stoplight drag, leaving the doofus on the Harley CH sucking exhaust. Guys bought this model because they wanted to be the baddest guy in town, tucked in and trying to reach that semi-mythical 120 mph.

Forty years ago the major English motorcycle manufacturers all had vertical twins in their lineups, but in the American mind the Bonnie became the most notorious of these twins. After breaking records in the fall of 1958 at the Bonneville Salt Flats, Triumph bolted dual-carb heads onto a limited number of



Standard equipment on the '69 Bonnie included (above) a pair of Smith's clocks, an ammeter and adjustable steering damper. Right: Later models had a unit engine and tranny.



Full-time mechanic Phil Hone did most of the restoration of his lovely 1969 Bonneville himself. The bike was repainted, but is otherwise very close to original.

650s for the 1959 model year, touting them as "the fastest motorcycles made anywhere in the world today." As an impressionable college freshman, I had to have one, scoring a brand-new T120 in the summer of '60.

I put more than 10,000 miles on it between June and September—and suffered one holed piston (left side), two failed generators (ignition was by magneto, so no real worries), and a connecting rod big-end was shot at the end of the summer; Triumph rebuilt my engine under warranty. Back then motorcycles broke, and riders took it in stride. Despite those minor tribulations I was sold on this Limey bike, and rode mainly Triumph for the next 10 years.

I maintained my motorcycles as best I could, but when a connecting rod snapped while cruising down a road in the middle of Texas in 1966, it was symbolic of the demise of the British motorcycle industry. This fragility did not have to continue, as the Japanese were rapidly proving, but the Brits

were just too cheap to spend the R&D cash when the going was good, and by the time the going was bad, it was way too late.

In the late '80s "retro" styling became popular, mostly due to Harley-Davidson; if they could not sell the performance, they could sell "the look." In 1990 the "retro" name of Triumph was born again, the new DOHC triples and in-line fours using the names of old like Trident and Thunderbird and Trophy, but with modern performance. Everybody waited for the "new" Bonneville.

In the meantime the Kawasaki designers decided to build their own "nostalgia" bike, since in Japan that market was, and is, very hot. For the general style they took their own 1960s W2 vertical twin, which was based on a 1950s BSA Super Rocket, and they got it down quite nicely, without being slavish to the concept. Wanting a modern engine, they went to a bevel-drive SOHC—the tower running up the right side of the vertical twin—which is a very British approach, as both Norton and Velocette used bevel drives on their sporting singles way back in the '20s. This keeps the engine nicely compact, four-valve heads being concealed under an Anglo-looking rocker box, with no pretensions at being an old pushrod unit.

**A FIVE-SPEED** box is powered by a geared primary on the W650, doing away with the primary chain of yore. This very modern unit is bolted into an old-fashioned cradle frame, with twin shocks on the swingarm—adjustable for preload only—like the old Girlings. A gaiter-covered 39mm fork keeps the retro look going, although the single disc on the front wheel reminds us that this is the 21st century. A drum brake is on the back, and the four-gallon tank appears rightly sized. Curb weight is a svelte 467 pounds.

Although the dyno claims 47.3 horsepower at the rear wheel, the W650 feels somewhat less gutsy than the 1969 Bonnie; but when the throttle is severely twisted, the new engine feels a lot more solid, and a lot less frivolous. The rider of any sporting Brit twin would sense just when the valves began to float, hit the kill button for an instant, slam-shifting into the next gear; the W650 is more sedate, and quieter. And a lot more reliable.

Triumph finally showed its own Bonneville late in 2000. The look is a bit bulky, the engine block and gas tank both appearing rather large. The planners





Unlike the new Triumph Bonneville, the Kawasaki W650 comes with a tachometer (above), kickstarter and knee pads (left). Camshaft is driven by a bevel-gear tower.



appear to have taken the old T120 form as a basis, and then gone off to fulfill engineering and modern motorcycling expectations rather than design criteria. It still has a British look, but more similar to the beefy appearance of a Royal Enfield Constellation than a Bonneville.

The 790cc engine is big because of the chain-driven double overhead camshafts. And the oil cooler is quite apparent. It puts out respectable power, some 55 ponies to move the 500 pounds along, though at 40.7 pounds-feet it only makes slightly more rear-wheel peak torque than the W650. Ride with a half-helmet and a good deal of gear whine can be heard, whereas with the 1969 all you get is lots of valve clatter.

Triumph made some regrettable budgetary decisions with this bike. No tachometer, for example, when every hotshot knows you should be staring at the twin faces of a Smiths speedo and tach. No centerstand; how do you oil the chain? No gaiters on the fork, which would have been very cheap. And getting the seat off is a befuddlement of British boggling.

So how does this, the indirect descendent of the old Bonnie, fit into the nostalgia pattern? For me, the old T120 was like the girl I was madly in love with my senior year in high school; beautiful, full of fun and an unintentional heartbreaker. Our paths diverged, and then I went to my 25th

reunion. She was there, still attractive, but looking a bit more matronly and a lot wiser, a lot more steady.

I could consider living with this contemporary woman. Just as I could see riding the new 800 across country without a worry in the world, instead of 40 pounds of tools and spares strapped to the back seat. The new Bonnie is way better, technically, than the old girl—but it is not the old one.

So what do you choose? In my eye, the determination is aesthetics; both the W650 and the 800 Bonnie work well, but you are not buying performance. It is a stylistic decision. Or maybe brand loyalty. Neither of these have any pretenses about being a sporty ride; of course, for about the same money you could buy a restored 1960s Bonnie. And I like to think that a well-fettled T120 could thrash both of these Limey-come-latelys.

To Editor Tuttle and Sr. Editor Ken Freund, the choice is more black-and-



Though down a bit on horsepower compared to the new Bonneville, the W650 makes nearly as much torque.

white, more functional. The new Triumph does offer contemporary motorcycle performance in the areas of engine smoothness and suspension, and may be a more practical choice for someone who doesn't want to cut corners in these important areas while they pretend to relive a bit of history. If you can only own one bike, and you want it to wear the Triumph Bonneville nameplate, this is it. Keeping in mind that the new Triumph has no more to do with the old than the name, however, the vintage enthusiast may find that the Kawasaki is the more satisfying choice by virtue of its throatier sound, sexier overall look and lustier feel. It does, in effect, out-Bonneville the new Bonneville, and offers as standard a kickstarter in addition to the electric, centerstand, tach, toolkit, locking seat and gas cap that aren't available for the Triumph.

Note: Many, many thanks to Phil Hone, ex-Birmingham, England, rocker and current resident of San Luis Obispo, California, for the use of his '69 Bonneville, and for his riding in the photo shoot. ☺

