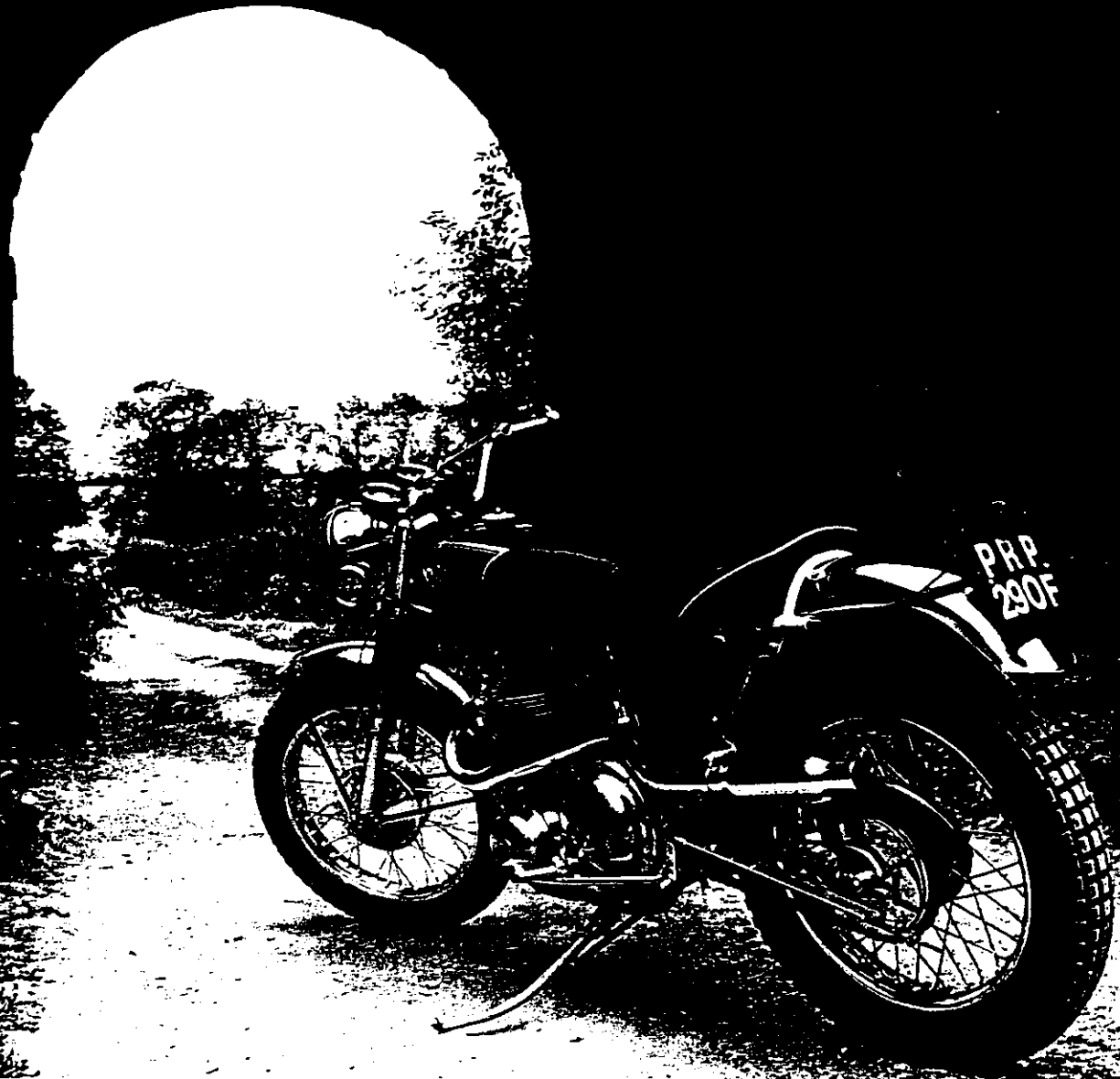


MIX 'N' MATCHLESS



The Atlas-engined P11 could be a Norton or a Matchless, depending on the tank badge.

Jonathan Jones goes street scrambling.

Stills:

John Onemore Overton

here are bikes that deserve the reaction; So What? those that get a doubtful Hmmm; some that encourage laughter, and others, like Norton's American spec P11, that make you say WOW!

Big, chunky-tired wheels support a frame and power plant that really mean business. The tank clings leech-like to the frame, and glows in Candy Apple Red. Below it run some of the most sensually curved exhaust pipes ever bent, feeding into skimpy, sawn-off barrel silencers. And the briefest of saddles offers seating

at handlebars that pull back like the ears of a startled hare. The Norton P11 street scrambler is ready to go, and if you don't get on soon, it's going without you.

The reserved Englishman has no time for such nonsense. In private he may admit to going terribly fast around corners and nearly falling off, but the machine of his choice is as reserved as himself in its styling. Let the Yanks ride behind ostentatious, high-rise bars with flashy cross-braces, off-road tyres and gaudy paintwork. For the home market it's flat handlebars, SM rears and

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Speedmaster fronts, with cycle pans smartly turned out in classic black and chrome.

Things were not going well for Norton in the early Sixties. Sales had been dropping dramatically, and in 1962 they

stood at about half the 1959 total. By the middle of the year the firm were forced to throw in their lot with the AMC group at Woolwich.

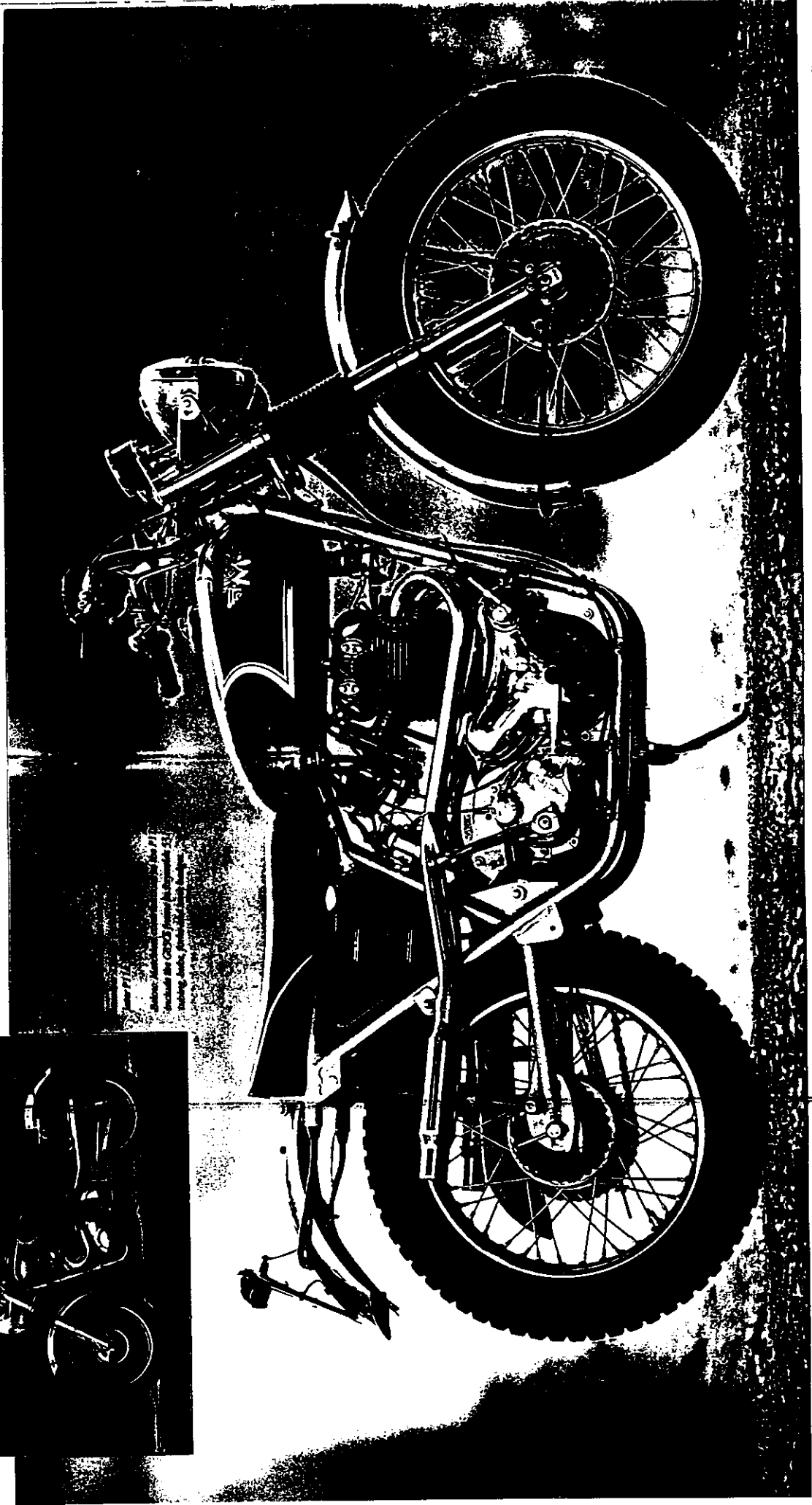
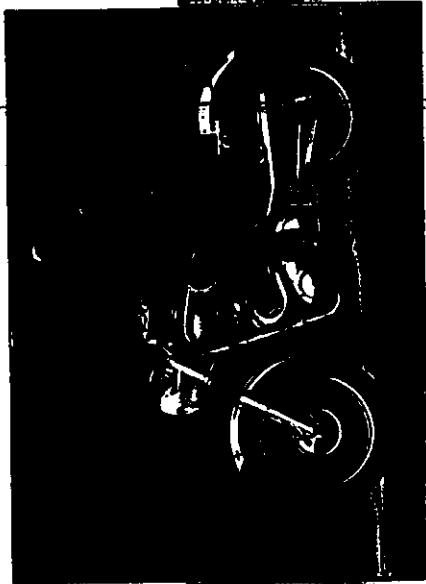
One of the new company's first joint efforts was the export-only, Atlas scrambler, announced in 1963. It used a twin carb version of the 745cc motor in the AJS Matchless CSR frame, with Norton

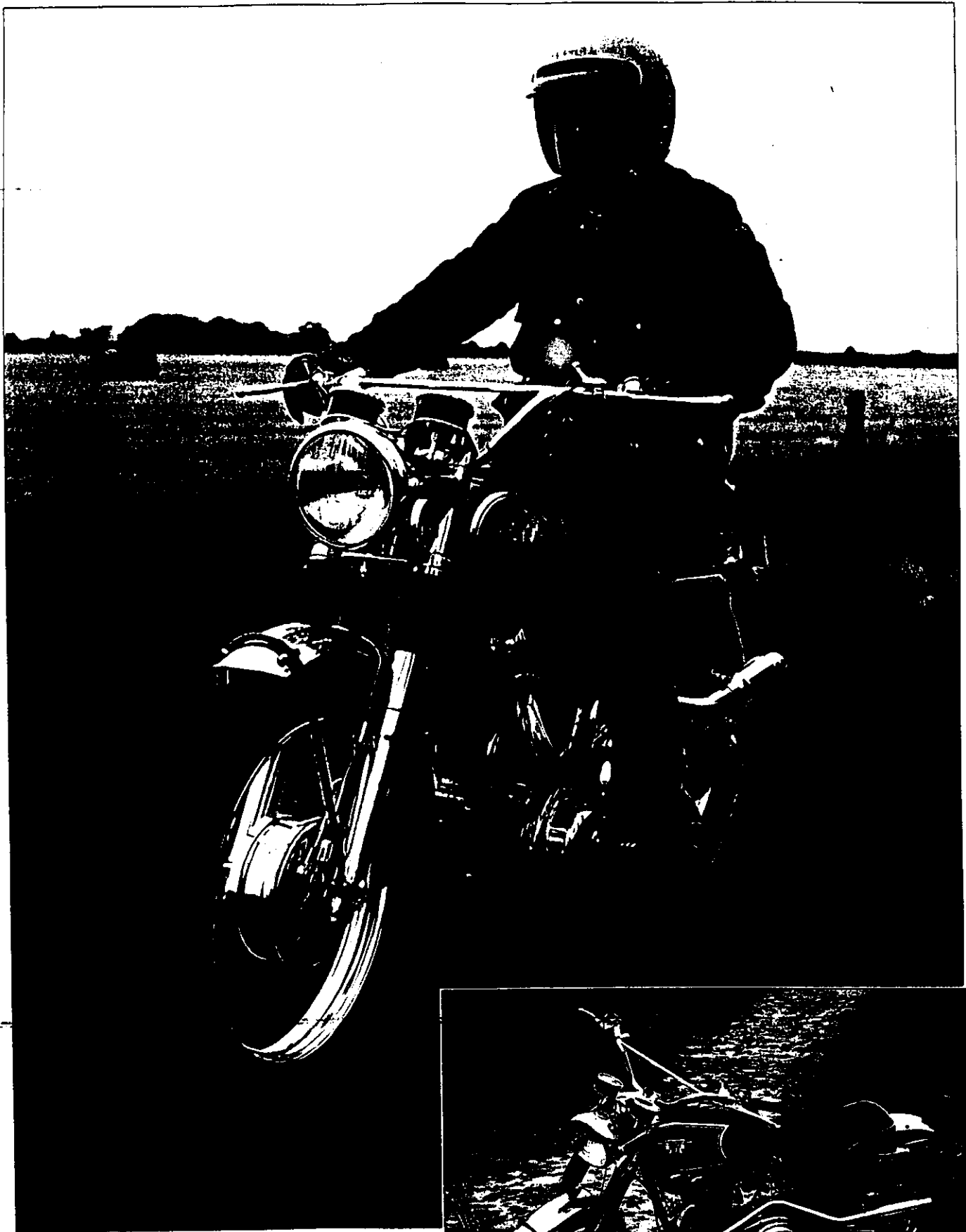
readwelder forks and hubs, but with the undoubted advantages of the classic Matchless cast chaincase, in place of the free-flowing Dornan-style pressing.

The American magazine, *Cycle World*, tested it in April 1964, finding the ground clearance and fork angle of the Matchless CSR frame more suitable for off road work than the original Featherbed. The

motor's power was considered an asset, not an embarrassment for off road use, but the magazine thought that few riders would be able to hold the reins on full throttle for long enough to hurt the engine.

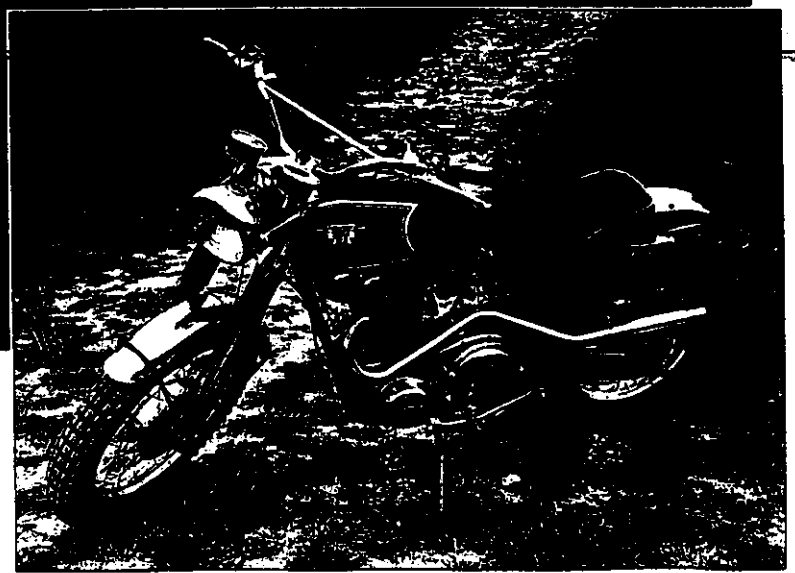
"Piss up the wick hard for a few seconds, shift twice, and you will be lashing across the handbricks like the





Above: No production P11 appears to have been sold in the UK, say the Hy-Cam Information Group, though a few ex-demonstration models did find their way into private hands.

Right: Sinuous pipes follow the engine and frame contours precisely. Sawm-off barrel silencers give AMC's Desert Sled an agricultural tractor sound.



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rocket from which this motor cycle was so aptly named," they enthused.

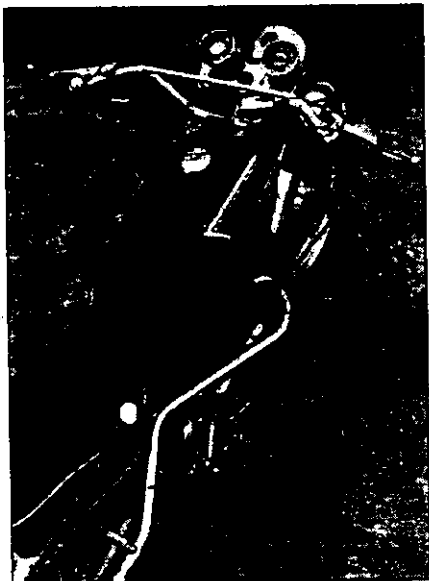
But they were critical of the excessive weight — 439lbs — and thought that the Norton hubs looked rather odd, commenting that most off-pavement machines have smaller brake drums, and that those fitted were nearly big enough for a road racer. Fixed footrests were not considered ideal for a scrambler either, and the open pipes caused a raised eyebrow.

"If the police in your area are in the least bit sticky about noise, a pair of mufflers would have to be fitted."

By the mid Sixties it had become the vogue to mix and match a collection of parts, to create a range of 'new' models, Lego-style. In October 1964 the Atlas engined machine appeared in Britain as a Matchless G15, intended as a sidecar bike. It still sported Norton Forks, but such releases were little more than publicity exercises. If you want the attention of the Press, tell them you've got something new. It works every time. Unfortunately, these conglomerations can also induce serious schizophrenia among brand loyalists.

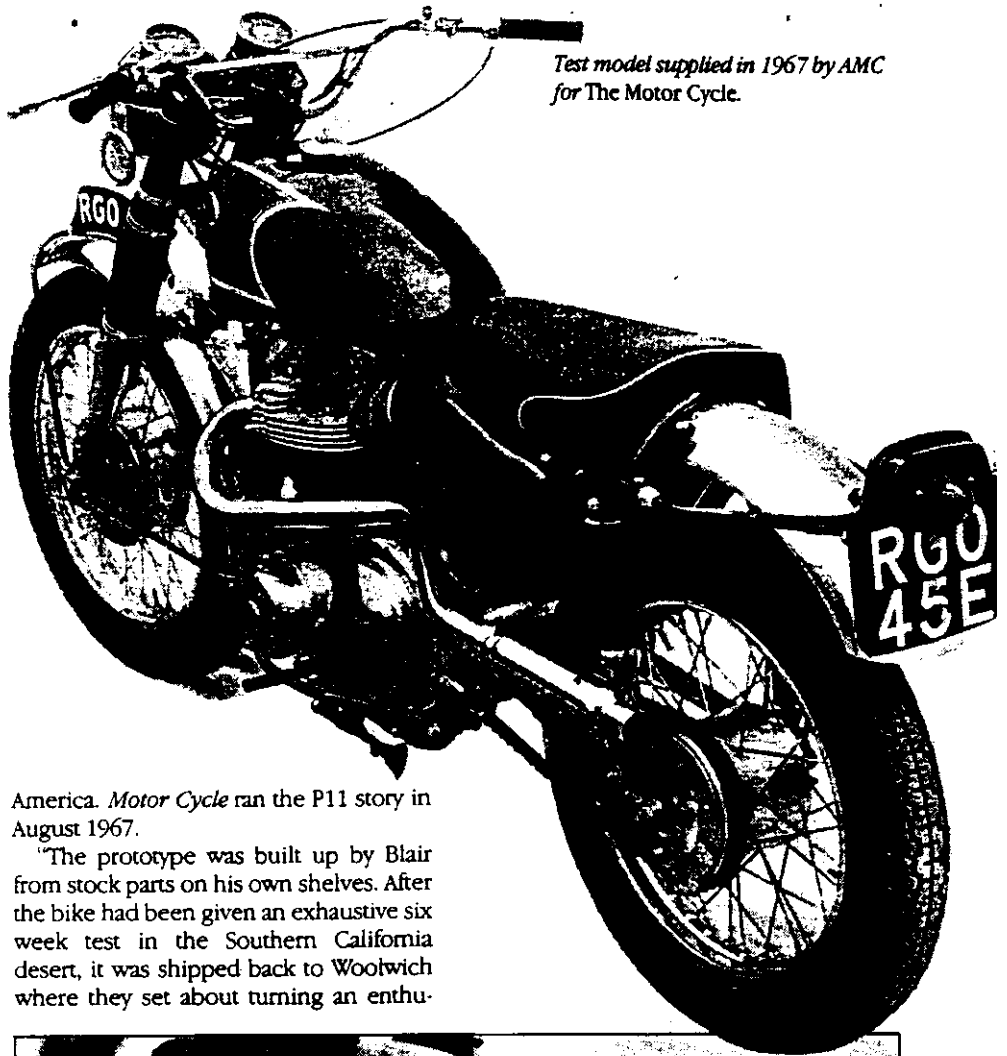
In 1966 before *Cycle World* got the machine they wanted. The Matchless G85CS had a new frame, and this was chosen as the basis for a lighter, trimmer Atlas scrambler.

First shown at Earls Court at the end of 1966, the duplex Matchless frame was chosen by Bob Blair of ZDS Motors, AMC's distributor on the west coast of



Above: Original speedometer alleged 22,000 miles, but the gearbox bearings hinted that the Matchless had been a lot further.

Right: Engine spotters can identify the big-pipe models by their 121 prefixes; 122 indicates one of a mixed batch of P11 and P11A. Prefix 124 motors are all P11A or Ranger models. A total of 2500 were built.



Test model supplied in 1967 by AMC for The Motor Cycle.

America. Motor Cycle ran the P11 story in August 1967.

The prototype was built up by Blair from stock parts on his own shelves. After the bike had been given an exhaustive six week test in the Southern California desert, it was shipped back to Woolwich where they set about turning an enthu-



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siast's hybrid into a factory production model."

But if I rabbit on much longer about the P11's genealogy, like I said, it's going to leave without us!

Chris Scasbrook refers to the Matchless as his stump-jumper, and the Atlas motor's lazy power makes it a great favourite for fun riding. Swing a leg over and haul the 366lb twin off its side stand. It feels tall — the 33in high seat puts it a couple of inches above the Featherbed Atlas — and the broad, braced handlebars add to that high and mighty impression. They are also at the root of the P11's charm, putting the rider in a bolt upright 'here I am, look at me' stance. And if the chest to the wind position is not for shy, retiring types, nor is the sound from those stubby silencers.

Get the P11 motoring, and it's hard to resist the temptation to glance behind and see if you're ploughing a straight furrow. That agricultural impression is strengthened by the tractor-like power of its 52bhp motor. Chris found it so much more pleasurable to ride when making use of the low-down Atlas grunt, that he upped the gearbox sprocket from the standard 19 to 24 teeth.

"I was getting too old for pulling wheelies," he says. "Geared like this it makes for lazy riding, and you can enjoy the torque. It really gets going at 6000 revs. Just make sure you know where the kill button is, in case the throttle sticks!"

Riding on tarmac does little to tame this desert racer. Knobbly tyres give about 18 degrees of turn for 20 degrees effort at the bars. But tickle the twistgrip and you can push it back on line from the rear wheel. Control of the twin MKI Amal Concentrics is so positive that holding the grip is like having a fistful of power. Give it a gentle squeeze, and the motor responds as if grip and power output were one and the same. Twist, dab; twist, dab, with right hand and foot, and the motor plays fast and loose through the gears in the Norton box.

Once you get the hang of that rear wheel steering technique, the combination of Atlas snarl and the sensation of drifting around corners is like a drug. The P11 turned me into a B-road junkie, high on the pleasure of playing second and third gears, with the revs balancing between 2500 and 3500. And that was all it needed, for even at 70mph in top, the motor is still barely nudging 4000 revs.

But the P11 is not at its best at speed. There is no positive location between aim and target, and you need all the room you can get. Run it up beyond the high 60s, and lumpy tyres and the light Matchless scrambles frame make high-speed handling notably approximate.



A complex system of spacers made engine fitting a job more suited to the development shop than the production line.

This is Chris Scasbrook's second try at re-importing a P11.

"AJS and Matchless Owners Club spares man Ernie Merriweather was bringing one in for me, but we lost track of it. Then this one came up, so I bought that instead."

It proved a good move, because when the original eventually re-appeared it was in a terrible state.

"A lot of the P11s ended up as choppers, and that was one," says Chris. "Someone's got a job on their hands. I had enough trouble finding parts for this one!"

Contacts within the AJS & MOC helped to find obscure items. Norton and Matchless parts are fairly plentiful, and items like the bash plate and rear mudguard stay — alloy plugs bolted onto a high tensile steel bar — were made in the Scasbrook workshop.

Colour matching to the original Candy Apple, a translucent red sprayed onto silver, was simplified by finding traces inside the battery cover. And the high level pipes were bent using patterns borrowed from enthusiast Tony Curzon, partner to Paul Morin and Mark Stephens of the Hy-Cam Information Group, which is dedicated to the P11 and G15 hybrids.

Chris would be the last person to

suggest that his Matchless is totally original. Engine number 124645 makes this a P11A, which would have had the later, low level pipes. Frame colour too is non-standard, though Hy-Cam's Paul Morin says that several have been finished in this attractive combination, since a photo of the silver-framed prototype was published.

"I've heard people say that the P11 was a failed project," says Paul, who can be contacted at 5 Frederick Close, Cheam, Sutton, Surrey SM1 2HY. "But they made 2500 in 18 months of production, and sold every one. That's not my idea of a failure."

The P11 was followed by the P11A with its low-level pipes and a steel oil tank, which was less prone to splitting than the early alloy item. The final incarnation was the Ranger of 1968; all of them machines built specially for brash, tasteless foreigners.

They moved out from Plumstead like a wave in the late Sixties, hit the American market and are now washing back across the Atlantic to be snapped up by enthusiastic British buyers. One can only draw the conclusion which the Yanks reached years ago. The Brits are still about 25 years behind.

