

STERLING EFFORT

ALTHOUGH IT ISN'T A CLASSIC, THE STERLING PAYS TRUE HOMAGE TO THE PAST WITH ITS ECCENTRIC AND UNIQUE DESIGN...

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It may not be a classic by the true sense of the word, but it sure will be one day. Riding the Black Douglas Sterling is a unique and highly entertaining experience – and not quite what it seems. I'm sitting bolt upright, gripping a broad, pulled-back handlebar, and looking across an enormous, vintage style headlight and a long, narrow, flat-sided fuel tank with a steel frame tube running along its top.

As the rigid-framed Black Douglas cruises down a tree-lined road, I'm bouncing gently in its bicycle style saddle, enjoying the gentle performance of its single-cylinder engine, and the low chuffing sound of its exhaust pipe. The Sterling cuts through the traffic, frequently triggering smiles from pedestrians, cyclists and even car drivers as they catch sight of it.

Many of the sensations are familiar from when I rode a 1920s Douglas, some years ago, but this bike is distinctly different. That old Douglas required a run-and-bump to start it, and had a hand gear change and no clutch. By contrast, the Black Douglas started on the button, has a light clutch and a sweet-shifting five-speed gearbox, and is as easy to ride as just about any other modern commuter bike.



That's because the Sterling is not some century-old vintage machine, but the debut model from The Black Douglas Motorcycles company of Italy based in Milan. Far from being a fragile piece of history best appreciated by elderly enthusiasts, the Sterling is a brand new motorcycle that combines its vintage look with rider-friendly simplicity of use.

That said, the Sterling's make-up is far from straightforward. The Black Douglas company is owned by bike-crazy Italian entrepreneur Fabio Cardoni. But the Sterling was designed in the UK by Birmingham based custom builder Benny Thomas, best known for his Harley-Davidson engined Boneshaker choppers. And it is powered by a 230cc, single-cylinder engine from Zongshen of China; essentially a copy of Honda's CG230 unit.

This multi-national creation came about after Cardoni, a successful businessman who owns a large motorcycle collection, realised that he was no longer enjoying riding his fast bikes as much as he used to. Having previously commissioned a couple of Harley-engined custom bikes from Boneshaker, he asked boss-man Benny to come up with some simpler machines that looked good and were fun at slow speed.

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Thomas, who already had experience with small-capacity Chinese bikes, produced three machines, of which the vintage, flat-tank styled Sterling was Cardoni's favourite. And when the new owner started riding it on his home streets of northern Italy, he found that he not only enjoyed the experience, but attracted so much positive attention that he had the idea of putting a similar machine into small-scale production.

Thus was formed the Black Douglas Motorcycle company, named after one of history enthusiast Cardoni's heroes: James Douglas, a 14th century Scottish knight who fought the English in Scotland's Wars of Independence, and was nicknamed the Black Douglas. "He was a hero who fought for the little people," says Cardoni, who sees a parallel with his firm's attack on the commuter-bike world dominated by Honda and Piaggio.

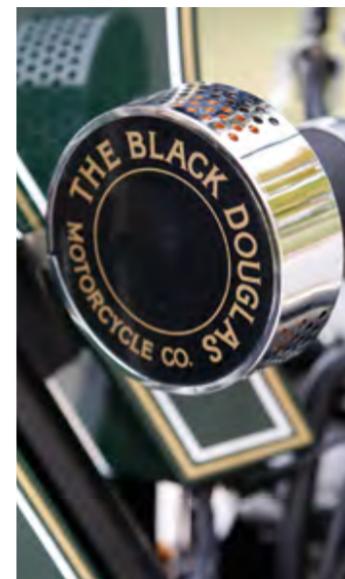


Honda's engineers would doubtless be fascinated to see the CG engine they designed bolted into the Sterling's steel frame, whose top tube runs across the top of the flat-sided, nine-litre aluminium fuel tank. The aircooled, pushrod-operated engine breathes in through a Keihin-replica Keima carburettor, out through a fully catalysed stainless steel exhaust, and produces a claimed maximum of 14bhp at 6000rpm.

The frame is a hard-tail, relying for suspension on a pair of springs under the bicycle-style leather saddle. A matching sprung leather pillion pad can be added if desired, on top of the test bike's simple rack. Front suspension is by a traditional girder design, featuring milled-from-solid aluminium legs and a single, centrally placed Alcotech shock unit, which is adjustable for preload and rebound damping.

That sits below a large Bosch headlight, and behind a matching smaller horn. Wheels are wire spoked and a huge 21-inches in diameter, with generous mudguards; brakes are single-leading-shoe drums at each end. The whole bike maintains the vintage look, backed up by painstaking detailing, including the dark green, neatly pinstriped tank and sidepanels. The prototype is in very good condition despite being a well-used development bike that Cardoni rode for most of a 1700km trip from Milan to Birmingham.

Almost everything is metal, the small amount of plastic in the wiring carefully concealed. Control levers and other parts are plated in nickel, rather than chrome, for a period finish. Cables are wrapped in cotton canvas tape. The indicators are



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Black Douglas Sterling Original Drayton

Engine type	Air-cooled single
Valve arrangement	Ohv pushrod, two valves
Displacement	229cc
Bore x stroke	67 x 65mm
Compression ratio	11.2:1
Carburation	Keima carburettor
Maximum power	14bhp (10.5kW) @ 6000rpm
Maximum torque	18.3N.m @ 4500rpm
Clutch	Wet multiplate
Transmission	5-speed
Front suspension	Girder, single Alcotech shock
Rear suspension	None
Front brake	170mm single-leading-shoe drum
Rear brake	180mm single-leading-shoe drum
Front tyre	2.75 x 21in Ensign Universal
Rear tyre	3.00 x 21in Ensign Universal
Wheelbase	1500mm
Seat height	830mm
Fuel capacity	9 litres
Weight	98kg kerb

small enough to be unobtrusive, and operated by minimalist switchgear that includes, next to the right handlebar's brown twistgrip, a starter button.

My first impression, on seeing the Sterling in the metal, was one of surprise at how big it is. The handlebar is tall and wide; the wheel diameter enormous; the 1500mm wheelbase longer than that of most superbikes. Even the saddle is quite high, at 830mm, contributing to a very roomy and relaxed riding position. But at just under 100kg without fuel the Black Douglas is as light as it is slim, and immediately felt effortlessly manageable.

That feeling remained after I'd turned the ignition switch in the left sidepanel, fired up the engine on the button, selected first gear with a prod of my left boot, and let out the light-action clutch to pull away. For all its century-old appearance, the Sterling was as easy to ride as any modern lightweight motorcycle.

It accelerated away effortlessly, fuelling sweetly, the only negative an occasional bit of low-speed snatching from the long drive chain.

Anyone looking for arm-stretching performance won't find it here, but on a mild autumn day the Sterling was well up to the task of cutting through traffic with ease and just as comfortable on the open road. In the city it was far more agile than I'd expected, the generous steering lock helping negotiate bunged-up traffic, and the sweet five-speed box and heel-and-toe gear lever helping give decent acceleration away from the lights.

On faster roads it was sufficiently powerful to be entertaining, getting to about 100km/h reasonably quickly, and eventually putting 70mph (113km/h) on the small, round-faced speedometer, designed to resemble an oil pressure dial, and located down by my left knee. There was a bit of vibration at higher revs, but nothing to worry about unless you were planning a lengthy road trip.

It is available in small numbers and variants in other colours with names like Silent Grey and Claret Classic. There are also more expensive models such as the Sport Imperial and Countryman Deluxe, kitted out with accessories including canvas saddlebags, wicker basket and believe it or not, an umbrella holder.

As I eluded to earlier, it may not come under the category of a classic, but the Sterling definitely takes you back to the days of the classics, and this imaginatively conceived, superbly executed and gloriously eccentric machine is impossible to ride without smiling, and without making other people smile too. And if that's not a good enough reason to ride a motorbike, I'm not sure what is... **LTR**