

THE HURRICANE

IT MAY NOT HAVE GONE LIKE A HURRICANE,
BUT THE TRIUMPH X-75 WASN'T SO MUCH
ABOUT PERFORMANCE AS MORE
STYLE AND ATTITUDE...

FEATURE BY
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Has there ever been a factory special quite as stunning and futuristic as Triumph's X-75 Hurricane? Leaning on its sidestand, sunlight reflecting off the chrome of its trio of exhaust pipes, and the wasp-waisted tank-seat unit emphasising the handsome, aircooled powerplant, the Hurricane looks so fresh and stylish that it hardly seems possible that more than 40 years have passed since this model was launched by a BSA-Triumph firm in deep financial trouble.

Its looks were by no means the only thing for which the X-75 was memorable, either. The Triumph's 60bhp engine, a lower-g geared version of the T150 Trident/BSA Rocket 3 unit, made this one of the quickest-accelerating bikes on the roads back in 1973. Given the Hurricane's appearance, performance and rarity – fewer than 1200 examples were ever built – it's no surprise that it is among the best-loved and most valuable of Seventies classics.

And the Hurricane is also notable for the strange story behind its production – because the bike was designed without Triumph's Meriden factory bosses even knowing about it! The X-75 was shaped not in Britain but in America – in top secret, by a young freelance designer named Craig Vetter. In fact the whole concept of the X-75 originated in the States, with Don Brown, the vice-chairman of BSA's American company.



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When the original Trident and Rocket 3 triples were revealed in late 1968, US market reaction was very poor, mainly because of the bikes' unusual, angular styling. "The only way we were going to sell the triples was by restyling them, I was convinced of that," Brown later recalled (in the book *Triumph Motorcycles in America*, by Lindsay Brooke and David Gaylin). "And I knew that because BSA Group executives approved the original Rocket 3's styling, I'd have to get the bike restyled on my own, in the US – and in secret!"

Brown approached Vetter, who ran a business making fairings, and had just displayed two bikes of his own design at a show in Daytona. Vetter flew to BSA's base in New Jersey with some initial sketches that impressed Brown. "He was a long-haired, hippie-type guy – a free spirit – but he was a keen thinker and ambitious," the BSA man later recalled. It was agreed that the project would be kept secret even from the BSA Group's chairman and managing director, and Vetter was provided with a standard Rocket 3 on which to start work.

His prototype, completed less than a year later in September 1969, retained the BSA's angled-forward, 740cc pushrod engine and twin-downtube steel frame. Vetter extended the cylinder head fins to make the motor look bigger and more impressive, though. (Special heads were machined for production versions.) Some other parts including the chromed mudguards and polished alloy rear light were also retained.

But almost everything else was new. The handlebars were higher, clocks were mounted above a new chromed headlight, and front forks were lengthened by 50mm. The wheels comprised polished hubs, chromed spokes and alloy rims, holding a ribbed 19-inch front tyre and a fatter 4.25 x 18-inch rear. Three exhaust downpipes slanted across the front of the motor, then ran back to the bank of shiny, upswept silencers on the right side.

And best of all, the original slab-sided bodywork was replaced by a slender and graceful fibreglass form that blended the fuel tank into the sidepanel area,

above which was a dual-seat with a chromed pillion grab-rail. The arrangement was inevitably impractical – the tank held only 10 litres – but the visual effect was undeniable. Vetter had combined his love of late-60s Triumph Bonneville styling with chopper influences to produce a uniquely eye-catching motorbike.

Despite the secrecy surrounding the project, the American BSA firm's president Peter Thornton heard about the prototype, and asked Vetter to bring it to New Jersey. When he arrived, the reaction was so positive that Thornton had the bike shipped to Triumph's Meriden factory the same day – complete with instructions that it was to be built with no changes.

Even so, the Hurricane's progress to the production line was far from smooth. Brown and Vetter had always envisaged the bike as a BSA, and even the first pre-production model assembled at Meriden wore the rival marque's badges. But BSA's financial collapse around that time ensured that the triples, all assembled between June 1972 and January '73, were eventually marketed as the Triumph X-75 Hurricane.

Incorporating remarkably few changes from Vetter's original prototype, the Hurricane turned plenty of heads when it was launched. It still looks great, at least from the right side, particularly when you examine a bike in such immaculate condition as this 15,000km example. It has been owned from almost new, and was restored after being slightly damaged in a fire, by American Triumph and BSA enthusiast Mike Lumsford, who utilised expertise gained in running his own paint shop to respray the bike in original colours.

The X-75 seat provides a simple view dominated by the narrow petrol tank, the shiny chromed headlight and the round friction steering damper at the headstock. The handlebars are more wide than high, giving a bolt-upright riding position with feet placed well forward. Ignition is on the left, below the steering head; the choke lever sits on the bank of 27mm Amal carbs. There's no electric start but, given a gentle prod of the kickstart, the triple burst into life with a pleasant three-cylinder warbling from its side-by-side silencers.

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With its flashy looks, potent engine, limited fuel range (as little as 100km, given the triple's traditional thirst) and short gearing, the Hurricane was aimed unashamedly at urban cruisers and traffic-light racers. Although fairly tall, at 191kg it was respectably light, too – a useful 20kg lighter than the Trident. That helped to make the Hurricane feel refreshingly quick off the mark, as I pulled away for a blast in the Florida sunshine.

Triumph's old three-cylinder motor was always regarded as smooth, and that was certainly true of this well-maintained example. The triple traditionally likes to be revved, too, but the Hurricane pulled fairly well from low revs, kicking harder above 4000rpm and emitting a wonderful exhaust wail as the revs rose towards the peak power figure of 7250rpm.

The impression of acceleration in the lower gears was terrific by Seventies standards, thanks to the Hurricane's blend of exposed riding position, relatively light weight and short gearing. I had plenty of opportunity to practise my right-foot change on the five-speed Triumph, whose top speed of about 185km/h was 15km/h down on the T150 Trident – although its standing quarter-mile time of just over 13 seconds was at least half a second quicker.

Some early road-tests criticised the Hurricane's gear-change for being imprecise but this bike shifted cleanly, which helped to make it very pleasant for low- and

medium-speed cruising. For gentle use the bike was comfortable, thanks partly to the generous seat and the fact that vibration only became noticeable, mainly through the handlebars, above about 5000rpm. But at higher speeds it was a different story. Performance began to tail off before 150km/h, and wind pressure meant that few riders would have wanted to hold that speed for long.

The Triumph's handling traditionally also discouraged high-speed riding, because the X-75 earned a dubious reputation thanks to its combination of high handlebars, kicked-out forks and ribbed front tyre. This bike remained stable in a straight line, admittedly at less than flat-out speeds (the engine had never been apart, and I intended it to stay that way), and delivered a fairly sporty ride thanks to firm shocks and front forks that, although long, were reasonably well-damped.

Ground clearance was always rated slightly lacking on the right, thanks to those three pipes, but Florida's road planners allowed me little opportunity to test either that or the grip of this bike's Dunlop tyres. I did have plenty of chance to use the conical, twin-leading-shoe drum front brake, which gave a rather soft feel at the lever but pulled the Triumph up reasonably well, in conjunction with the smaller rear drum. Even so, the X-75 would have benefited from the single disc brake that Triumph introduced on the T150V Trident in 1973.

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In the end, though, the X-75 wasn't so much about performance as about style and attitude. The more conventional Trident was in many respects a better all-round performer – faster, more stable, better braked, more comfortable at speed and with better fuel range – but the handsome Hurricane had the looks and the low-speed acceleration that made it more popular with many American riders, despite a higher price tag.

That still did not endear the X-75 to many at Triumph's Meriden base, where the bike was disliked by some workers both for being more of a BSA than a Triumph, and for being designed "more for show than go". One veteran Triumph tester even conducted a run past the factory with his hands off the bars, to demonstrate the bike's high-speed instability.

Politics was a big part of life at Meriden in the early Seventies, as the BSA Group (of which Triumph was a part) lurched from crisis to crisis. Financial problems even affected Craig Vetter, who was not paid for his work for many months. Even then, he only got his cheque for \$12,000 after a personal appeal from Don Brown, who had left the company.

Vetter went on to become well-known in the motorcycle world for his firm's range of aftermarket fairings and luggage systems. But as long as the gorgeous Triumph X-75 Hurricane is ridden and admired, its designer will be remembered as the man who brought a touch of American glamour to the classic British triple... **LTR**



Triumph X-75 Hurricane (1973)

Engine type	Aircooled pushrod, 6-valve transverse triple
Displacement	740cc
Bore x stroke	67 x 70mm
Compression ratio	9:1
Carburation	3 x 27mm Amals
Claimed power	60bhp @ 7250rpm
Transmission	5-speed
Frame	Tubular steel twin cradle
Front suspension	Telescopic, no adjustment
Rear suspension	Twin shock absorbers, adjustable preload
Front brake	203mm twin-leading-shoe drum
Rear brake	178mm single-leading-shoe drum
Front tyre	3.25 x 19in
Rear tyre	4.25 x 18in
Wheelbase	1524mm
Seat height	825mm
Fuel capacity	10 litres
Weight	191kg dry

