

The Dominator

MIDWAY THROUGH LAST CENTURY,
THE NORTON DOMINATOR 7 WAS
THE BIKE TO HAVE...

FEATURE BY
BROWNIE

This standard of handling was acceptable for a bike that is well over half a century old, but it certainly didn't bring to mind Norton's 1950s reputation for unbeatable chassis performance – and there was a very good reason for that. That Norton reputation was largely based on the legendary Featherbed frame which, when this Model 7 twin was built back in 1952, had recently been fitted to the single-cylinder Manx model, following its sensational debut a few years earlier on the factory race bikes ridden by Geoff Duke and Harold Daniell.

But the Dominator Model 7 roadster twin of 1952 had a rather less celebrated frame. Ironically, in that year Norton had adapted the twin-cradle Featherbed to fit its twin-cylinder engine, too, but the resultant Dominator 88 model was sold only in the American export market, and would not become more widely available for another year. So for most Norton enthusiasts wanting

a twin-cylinder model in 1952 – even those living near the firm's Birmingham base – this Model 7, with its traditional single downtube frame and plunger suspension, was as good as it got.

Not that many Model 7 owners were complaining, because Norton's first parallel-twin roadster was a fine bike that had proved a success since its introduction three years earlier. Designed by Bert Hopwood, later to become one of the great names of the British motorcycle industry, the Model 7 motor had quickly succeeded in giving Norton a popular and reliable twin to compete with the Speed Twin with which Triumph's Edward Turner had revolutionised motorcycling during the previous decade.

Hopwood was a good choice as designer of Norton's twin, as he had worked under Turner at both Ariel and Triumph, and had been responsible for honing some

As I aimed the handsome, silver-tanked Norton into a right-hand bend on a narrow country road, I could see that the surface up ahead was bumpy and rough. And sure enough, the Dominator Model 7 let me know all about it when I reached the apex a few seconds later. The Norton's front end clonked slightly over the bumps, and the plunger rear system really showed its age, giving the bike a vague, unstable feel as I wound back the throttle to send the 500cc twin accelerating through the turn.



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of the genius designer's ideas, which were often imaginative but not always practical. Hopwood began work on the Norton engine in April 1947, aiming to create a powerplant that was stronger, quieter and less prone to overheating than Triumph's twin, and which could be produced using Norton's existing (and old-fashioned, even then) machinery.

His design featured exhaust ports that were notably wide apart, to aid cooling, with much narrower inlet ports fed by a single Amal carburettor. Cylinder dimensions of 66 x 72mm were short-stroke compared to the Speed Twin and most other British parallel twin layouts. Unlike the Triumph motor, which had two separate gear-driven camshafts, the Norton used a single cam that was situated at the front of the motor and driven by chain. Peak output was a respectable 29bhp.

Another of Hopwood's design constraints was that the new twin-pot motor had to be compact enough to fit into the chassis from Norton's existing ES2 single-cylinder model. As well as the single-downtube frame with its plunger rear end, retained ES2 chassis features included Roadholder front forks; the combination of 21in front and 19in rear wheels; and a 178mm, single-leading-shoe drum brake at each end. The Dominator, which entered production in 1949, did have some special parts, including a distinctively swoopy petrol tank and flared rear mudguard.

This immaculately restored 1952-model machine was a stylish bike, with its paint finish in Norton's traditional silver and black (pre-1951 models had a mainly chromed tank finish). It incorporated the tank-mounted oil pressure gauge that was dropped after that year, plus the chromed headlamp peak and crash-bars that were popular accessories at the time. The original sprung saddle had also been replaced by the dual-seat that became standard fitment in 1953.

The Norton had been standing for some years following its restoration, without its tank being drained, so owner Phil Clarke of Kent-based British bike specialist Clarke's Classics (www.clarkesclassics.co.uk) had cleaned out the carb and replaced a blocked fuel filter along with all the necessary fluids. The softly tuned engine came to life easily given a fairly gentle kick, the deep and surprisingly loud sound from its twin pipes overwhelming the relatively gentle rustling from the valve gear. And the Model 7 pulled away easily, too, thanks to an abundance of low-rev torque that helped make it very pleasant to ride.

That engine flexibility was rated one of the Norton's most attractive features when new, by a test in *The Motor Cycle* in December 1949. "It proved so good, in fact, that it gave the impression that the engine was bigger than a 500cc," the tester wrote. "From idling to full bore the pick-up was clean and rapid. Acceleration right up the range was of the most exhilarating



kind! At low speeds the engine was beautifully and unobtrusively smooth. It remained so throughout its speed range except for a very slight period at 60mph [97km/h].”

This rebuilt twin was certainly nicely smooth, but its flexibility was marred by a carburation glitch in the midrange. The bike cruised happily enough at about 80km/h in top gear, but responded very lazily to a tweak of the throttle, until the revs picked up enough to get through the flat spot, when the bike surged forward with much more urgency. Phil thought the Amal was probably set up a bit lean, and was confident that the problem would be easy enough to cure.

Back in 1949, The Motor Cycle magazine’s tester had no such reservations about the new Dominator Model 7’s straight-line performance. “Acceleration through the gears when the entire engine performance was used was so zestful as to be almost breathtaking, and again gave the impression that this was an engine over 500cc,” he wrote. “The maximum speed available when the rider was sitting up and clad in bulky coat and waders was 80-85mph [129-137km/h], depending on the conditions.

“Mean maximum speed, with the rider ‘right down to it’, was 92mph [148km/h]. An enchanting feature, however, was that the machine could be driven for as long as was wanted at 80-85mph without giving any hint of stress. No oil leaks were apparent from either engine or gearbox. The exhaust pipes did not discolour, even slightly, at the ports.”

This elderly bike was similarly well behaved and oil-tight, albeit given much more gentle use of the throttle, but didn’t live up to the old test’s claim that “transmission smoothness was in keeping with that of the engine”. The four-speed box shifted cleanly enough on the way up, but was reluctant to change from top to third, due to a spring problem that Phil had warned me about and was planning to fix following my hastily arranged ride.

The Model 7’s handling might never have matched that of the Dominator 88, but back in 1949 the bike had cornered well enough to impress the man from The Motor Cycle. “Handling from the Dominator at speed was sheer joy,” the publication reported. “Fast bends and corners could be taken cleanly at speed in the classic manner. There was always that ‘on rails’ feeling – even when the model was heeled over at seemingly impossible angles.”

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Testers of the 1940s and '50s were generally rather generous in their opinions, though this writer did criticise the Norton's suspension, for providing "comparatively little comfort at low speeds on poor road surfaces", and also complained that the front drum brake never came up to the recognised Norton standard, although "when used seriously together the brakes provided excellent stopping power". This old bike's front drum had not improved with age, and had little effect even when the lever was squeezed hard, but using both anchors did slow the 191kg Norton at a reasonable rate, provided I left plenty of space ahead when in traffic.

Even allowing for the passing of time and the fact that this bike, although restored, was much older than me, it was hard to understand how The Motor Cycle's tester could have reported that: "at speed on the open road, the suspension comes into its own and allows pot-holes to be taken hands off or, when the model is heeled over, without allowing the machine to get the slightest bit out of hand."

Although the Roadholder forks were reasonably firm, and the bike was stable in a straight line, I wouldn't have wanted to ride over many bumps no-handed, even with the friction steering damper tightened up. And the typically crude plunger rear suspension system, whose lack of damping allowed the bike to pitch and wallow in bumpy bends, made it easy to see why in 1952 Norton was about to uprate the Model 7 with a swinging-arm rear end, which was introduced for the following year.



The arrival of the Featherbed-framed Dominator 88, also in 1953, allowed the updated Model 7 to remain in Norton's range as a less glamorous alternative. It was often fitted with a sidecar (unlike the Model 88, which lacked the necessary frame lugs), and was popular as a torquey, reliable and stable roadster. The Model 7 remained in Norton's range until 1956, gaining a larger front brake, alloy cylinder head and a few other updates along the way, before being replaced by the Model 77, which had a slightly more powerful 600cc engine.

Ironically the Model 7 engine's designer Bert Hopwood had not even seen the bike put into production in 1949 because he had been sacked earlier that year, following disagreements with Joe Craig, Norton's powerful race team boss. But his twin-cylinder engine layout would prove a success for Norton over almost three decades, through numerous modifications and enlargements. Great models including the 650SS, Atlas and Commando were all essentially derived from the original, plunger-framed Dominator Model 7. **LTR**

