

Forever ADLER

The German two-stroke twin set performance benchmarks for 250cc machines of its type - and its performance still impresses today.

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MOST CLASSIC ENTHUSIASTS have heard and read about Adler twins, but they are as rare as hen's teeth this side of the English Channel, and few of us have ever seen one in the metal. Still, you'd hardly expect anything else when they were only imported from Germany for a couple of years, and they cost almost twice as much as their contemporary British opposition!

So, when Ian Munro's sparkling restoration of an MB250 scooped the best continental award at this year's Bristol Classic MotorCycle Show, I couldn't wait to take a spin on it to see whether it could justify its astronomical price-tag. And the short answer is, yes, provided two-strokes are your thing, but if you are only happy with large cylinders firing regularly, then you'd probably consider the Adler to be an expensive toy.



The reason Adlers are frequently mentioned despite their tiny numbers is that bar-room pundits often declare that the Ariel Arrow/Leader engine was copied from them. Well, I don't know how that story started, but you don't have to study the bikes very hard to see that there's very little truth in it.

Agreed, both machines are two- stroke twins, but that's a category that encompasses everything from the man-sized Scott to the toy-like Rumi. And, yes, the bore and stroke are the same on the Adler and Ariel, but why would you expect anything else when they are the 'square' dimensions that give the desired 250cc capacity.



In fact, the closest connection between Adler and Ariel is probably the way their names share the same initial and have four of their five letters in common! Oh, and the front forks are superficially similar, too, but having to drag those into the discussion just shows how tenuous the relationship is.

In any case, Ariel's Val Page shouldn't have needed to copy anyone, because the British firm and its chief designer had decades of experience to fall back on, while the German company only had a short period of production after an extremely long lay-off.

Like many pioneering manufacturers, Adler started making pedal cycles well before the end of the 19th century, and by 1895 was also making typewriters, with cars joining the product list one year later. In 1902 the bicycles were motorised by the addition of De Dion power units, and soon afterwards Adler was making motorcycles fitted with their own engine. In 1907, however, motorcycle production was abandoned in order to concentrate on the other products, and that's how things remained for 42 years!



In common with other European countries, Germany was starved for personal transport after WWII, and Adler seized on this sales opportunity by developing a two-stroke motorcycle with a capacity of 98cc. With devastating Teutonic logic it was called the M100, so you don't need to be Einstein to work out that its engine size was increased in 25cc steps to produce the following year's M125 and M150.

Another new arrival -- the M200 -- unsurprisingly had a capacity of about 200cc, but much more significantly it was a twin. Already its crankshaft gave a stroke of 54mm, and within a year or so Adler had bored out the cylinders to the same dimension and boosted the capacity to the archetypal quarter-litre.



The new bike was christened the MB250, and you'd have to know more about German motorcycles than me to say where the 'B' came from, or whether there was ever an MA250.

Anyway, the MB250 became Adler's most successful motorcycle and, whatever its relationship to Ariel's beam-framed bikes (and later Yamahas and Suzukis), it undoubtedly established the practicality of fast quarter-litre two-stroke twins.



By the time the MB250 was imported to the UK it had already proved very successful on the Continent, even though it shared the marketplace with bikes having equally high levels of finish, performance and price.

However, the competing BMW R25 and the NSU Max had four-stroke engines, substantial flywheels and highish gearing, and that gave them a refined touring style that suited some riders, while others moved on to something else.

And that something else might well have been an Adler, because it was a machine that could be sedate or lively, depending on its rider's mood. Big bike fans would expect a little two-stroke to be sedate, but there's a big difference between merely going slowly and being able to enjoy the experience. Some two-strokes -- especially larger, single-cylinder ones - can be annoyingly snatchy at low speeds, but the frequent firing strokes of twins improve flexibility and the best ones, like the Adler, have sufficient flywheel effect for you simply not to notice the uneven firing at low throttle openings.



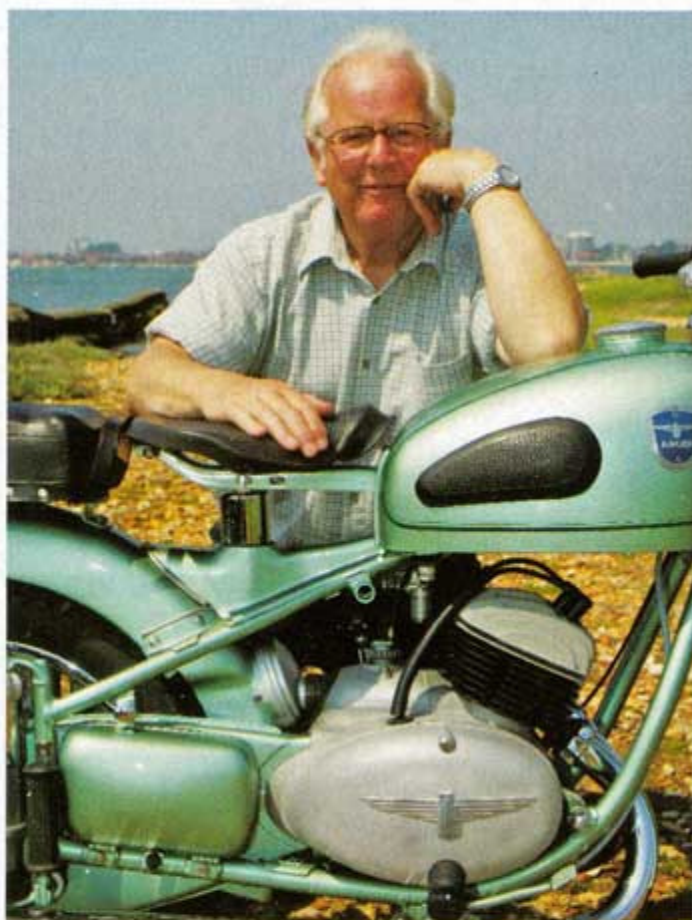
That's provided you have a helmet that keeps the tell-tale uneven exhaust note at bay, of course. And this MB250 is a bit noisier than it should be, because the pattern exhaust is less efficient than the one fitted originally.

That's provided you have a helmet that keeps the tell-tale uneven exhaust note at bay, of course. And this MB250 is a bit noisier than it should be, because the pattern exhaust is less efficient than the one fitted originally. How do I know that? Because the machine I am riding is the actual one tested by *Motor Cycling* magazine in February 1955, and my forerunner commented on the 'highly efficient silencing system'.

He added the word 'system' because the intake is effectively silenced, too, and you don't get the gasping drone so typical of, say, a Villiers twin. Air is taken from under the petrol tank and passes through the chamber at the base of the saddle before going through the air filter and carburettor into the engine.

According to Glass' *Guide To Used Motor Cycle Values*, the MB250 only became available some months after *Motor Cycle's* test, and also shows, that, within a year, its exorbitant price had risen by a further 30 quid! The high cost of the machine, and the small number sold, are doubtless largely responsible for the rarity value that has enabled the first import to survive.

It eventually came into the possession of Sammy Miller, who chose not to restore it himself but passed it on to the capable hands of local enthusiast Ian Munro, some of whose eclectic collection of twins has been previously featured in TCM.



Owner Ian Munro has a penchant for unusual twins, though thinks this is the best handling one in his collection.

Ian takes pride in doing most of the work on his restorations, including spraying the excellent two-pack paintwork. "The Adler had only one name in its log book when I got it," he grins, "but it had been through a few changes as it was painted black, while the original road test referred to a polychromatic light green.

I scraped the black off and found everything painted blue, but eventually discovered a scrap of the original colour under the stuck-on knee grip, and a local paint factor produced a perfect match for it."

The restoration wasn't cheap - despite being half the price of totally accurate replicas, the pattern exhausts still cost £250 - but has resulted in a superb little bike. The Germanic styling of its heavy mudguards makes it look quite imposing in photographs, but it actually has a shorter wheelbase than many contemporary lightweight British commuters.



Despite that, handling is amazingly good. "It has the best roadholding of any of my bikes," reports Ian, and I can only agree with him. When *Motor Cycle* magazine tested a slightly later example, it reported that 'as far as steering was concerned, the model could be placed to an inch when bend-swinging', and went on to say that the only limiting factor was the ease with which the centre-stand could be grounded. I can confirm that from personal experience, too... sorry Ian! Comfort is pretty good, although a tall rider would feel cramped. The leading link front forks -- which for no obvious reason have a single, bicycle-type stem like the Ariel's -- have a long, supple movement, and the rear, despite being of plunger design, is oil-damped and has quickly adjustable pre-loading to suit riders of various weight.

The large aluminium drum brakes are as effective as they are handsome. Indeed, the rear one is too good and still exhibits the tendency to lock that was noted in the original road tests. Also impressive are details like the tiny lever that lurks under the headlamp switch and tilts the reflector downwards when a passenger is being carried.



Before I launch into an explanation of how the performance of the Adler is as remarkable as everything else, I must balance things by mentioning one weak spot -- its gear change. The clutch operates at engine speed, and having to control less torque makes it very light in operation but - as riders of certain larger German machines are well aware -- also makes it harder to match engine and road speed. As a result, gear changes are slow at best, and downright clunky at worst.

The throttle cable emerges from the twist-grip in line with the handlebars, and that's neat, but it further complicates things by involving a scroll mechanism with a significant amount of backlash. That's not a reflection on Ian Munro's restoration, as *Motor Cycle* noted exactly the same thing with its new test Adler. The twist-grip's slow action doesn't help, either, as a rider used to British machines has to make a conscious effort to twist it farther in order to blip the throttle.



No shocks there, really, but an apparently sensible factor is surprisingly problematical. Most of us expect neutral to be located between first and second gears, but here it is beyond the first gear position. Until I tried it, I hadn't realised how frequently I change right down through the gears, timing my approach to road obstructions so that I'm ready to pull away in first as the lights change, or whatever.

Doing that on the Adler, I keep finding myself stranded out of gear at just the moment when the traffic queue takes off! Admittedly there is an 'idiot light' for neutral, but that's really not the time to be peering down to see if the appropriate flicker has appeared in the headlamp shell! Doubtless I'd get used to the principle in time but, although it was tried on some Japanese lightweights, it never caught on, so I guess I'm not the only one who finds it awkward.

The heel and toe gear lever is strangely designed, too, and Ian jokingly comments that, if you have the front part positioned sensibly, you'll need high-heeled shoes to operate the rear end. Thanks, but no thanks, Ian -- I'll manage just using the toe lever.



We mustn't let those gripes overshadow the excellence of the engine, though, because it is pretty incredible for a design over half-a-century old! It's smooth, and mechanically quiet and, while a top speed of just over 70mph may not impress younger readers, it was in a different league to early 50s British competitors like the BSA C11, whose maximum speed was some 10mph less, or the side valve C10 that only managed 56mph flat out!

Motor Cycle rated the MB250 the fastest 250cc roadster yet tested, and said that the acceleration was 'astonishing'. You can't argue with that when you evaluate the Adler against the much later Ariel Sports Arrow. The MB250 took 5.2sec to accelerate from 30-50mph in third gear, with the same task taking 11.5sec in top. In comparison, the 'Golden' Arrow -- generally regarded as the top British sportster of its era - took no less than 7.7 and 13.2sec respectively for the same acceleration tests!



Even so, the Adler was well within its limits, as the factory tuned it to produce the 24bhp Renn Sport racer, while privateers eventually got it up to 38bhp and 140mph.

As a friend who was in the trade at the time bluntly says, 'if Ariels copied the Adler, they didn't make a very good job of it, did they?'



But then, the Arrow was built down to a price, while the earlier Adler reflected a different ethos altogether.

I've no wish to get political, but it seems that the MB250 dates from a time when UK manufacturers -- despite celebrating the future with the Festival of Britain - were content to rest on their laurels and churn out four-strokes of elderly design and dubious quality.

German firms, on the other hand -- in a country supposedly on its knees after the war -- were determined to make innovative motorcycles whose combination of performance and quality would never be matched by British firms... ever.



Quality costs, though, and for the same price British motorcyclists had a straight choice between the Adler and a Triumph Speed Twin.

So perhaps the most remarkable thing about the MB250 is not its all-round excellence, but the fact that its makers anticipated a continuing market for it!

Maybe -- despite all their shortcomings - British manufacturers got it right, after all. The incoming Ariel Arrow/Leader and myriad Villiers 2T-engined bikes would sell like hot cakes for several more years, while Adler faded out in 1957-58.