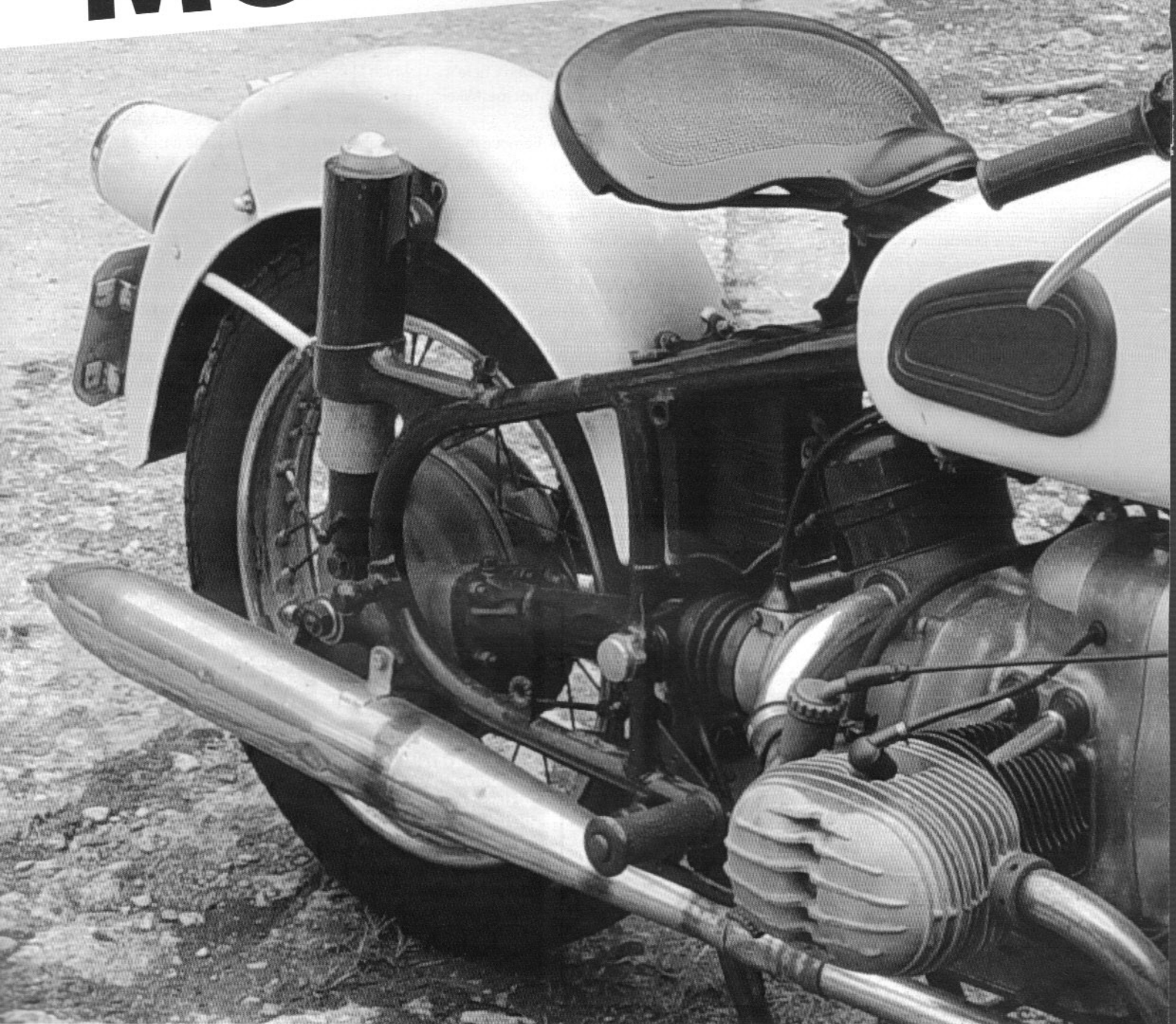


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Back in the day, you needed seriously big bucks to buy this BMW. Rowena Hoseason wonders if it's worth today's rather less intimidating price...

Photos by Rowena Hoseason



Kicking over a BMW of this era is an acquired knack. The lever is sited on the left, and hinges out at an unnatural angle. Unless your hips swivel through 90-degrees sideways, you are best advised to start an R50 while it is parked on its stand. And unless you enjoy literally putting your back into it then you'll want to fit a sturdy sidestand, rather than haul the 400lb Boxer beast onto its main stand ten times a day. It's a bit of a pig to pull over-centre and fair wore me out heaving it around.

Those two obstacles overcome, you have just encountered and conquered the worst aspects of owning and riding an R50. Once the 494cc, horizontally-opposed, OHV twin is ticking over you will thereafter experience only sweetness and light. Quite a lot of light, in fact, thanks to the 35-Watt Bosch blinder fitted to the front, and the twee, twin direction indicators which should enhance the ends of the handlebars. Not only should you be able to see where you're going, but every other blighter on the road should also know which direction you're heading in. Pretty advanced for 1955, huh?

In fact the R50 and its R69 sibling represent BMW's post-war great leap forward. Prior to the introduction of these two models the company had been muddling through with the rag-tag remainder of their pre-war range, wobbling back into production in 1948 with a single-cylinder 250. By 1950 they had a twin in the showrooms, the R51/2, which was little more than an wartime R51 with a coat of civvi-street colour. The R51/3 came out



in 1954 and was a great improvement, and finally the R50 arrived in 1955. It incorporated the important engine upgrades which had brought the R51/3 up to date, and threw two entirely new forms of suspension into the mix. For me (and I admit that I'm the owner of a current model Beemer), this is the moment when BMW laid claim to the 'superior riding machine' mythos which came to surround the marque in the latter half of the 20th century.

The heart of the R50 was the square (68mm by 68mm) motor; much the same as its predecessor with alloy cylinder heads, wet sump lubrication, roller big end bearings and a slight compression ratio boost to 6.8:1. In the R50 fuel was fed by a pair of larger 24mm

Bing carbs, giving a minor power boost to around 24bhp. A Bosch auto-advance magneto managed the sparking duties while a separate 60/90-Watt dynamo shed a little light. The R50 abandoned the earlier, multi-spring clutch and moved to a single-plate diaphragm set-up feeding drive at engine speed to the revised, non-unit construction four-speed gearbox. While the new ratios could hardly be called 'close' they were certainly on better speaking terms with each other than in the earlier BMW 'box, which boasted a fair few yawning chasms between cogs.

These tweaks aside, the revolutionary aspect of the R50 was its suspension. At the

ABOVE: This front brake works brilliantly with the leading link front end to combine swift stopping with 'delightfully sensitive' performance. [Sound of Rowena wondering if she could graft the entire BMW front end onto her Dragonfly]



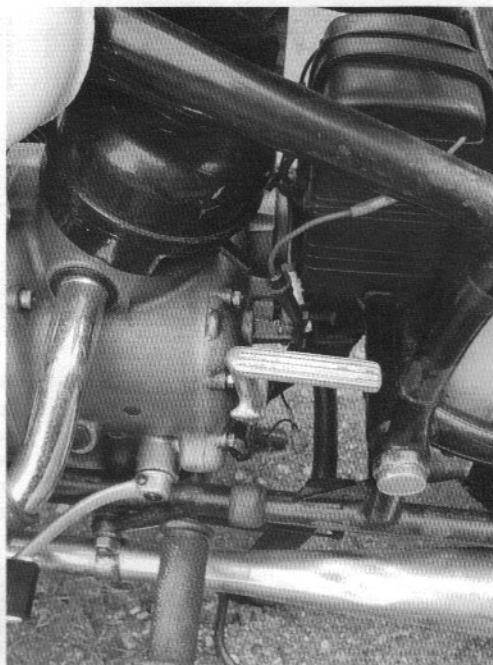


back, BMW introduced a proper swinging arm and a pair of adjustable, multi-rate, hydraulically damped shock absorbers. They did it beautifully, too, creating an artistic arc out of the rear frame rails and hiding the drive shaft in one of the swinging arms. Firmly cross-braced, the swinging arm pivots on taper roller bearings and provides the kind of comfortable and controlled ride which plunger pilots don't dare dream of.

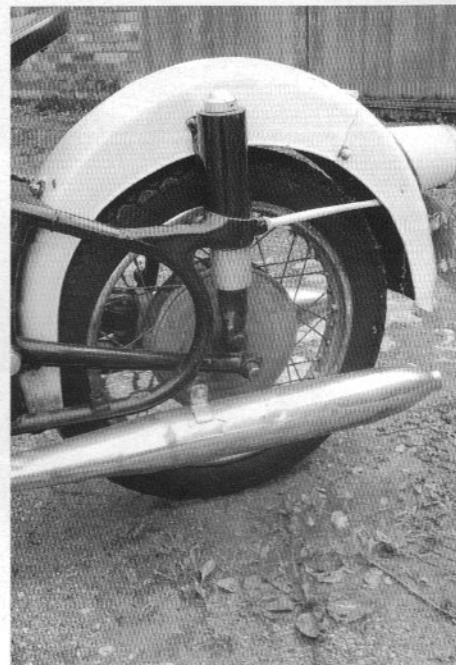
Not to be out-done, the enterprising engineer who was tasked with fixing the front end came up with the elegant if substantial leading-link fork solution. As the R50 was expected to have a dual role as a solo and a sidecar tug, the Earles-type forks could be adjusted for solo or sidecar trail. And there's no doubt that the 200mm (nearly eight inches) 2LS front brake, housed in a dinner-plate sized front hub, was entirely capable of safely slowing the R50 when augmented by a dual-adult sidecar and the whole family to boot. Using the SLS eight-incher at the back would bring a solo R50 to a full stop in less than 27 feet from 30mph, much the same as the performance of the top Norton brake of the era. The best the high-falutin' T120R of the following decade could manage was 31.5 feet...

The R50's interchangeable 18-inch wheels came with light alloy rims, and the rear mudguard hinged upward to facilitate rapid wheel removal. The comprehensive toolkit, complete with tyre inflator, locked away into the petrol tank behind the left knee-grip. Spare bulbs could be kept in the tail-light unit but were seldom needed because the rubber mounting of the headlamp prolonged bulb life. The R50 was obviously intended to be used by dashing young chaps without a companion, because it came as standard with the handsome, single cantilever seat as seen on our test bike, and no pillion rests. You had to pay extra for footrests for your girl (£12.6 in fact) while the chunky but comfy dual seat would set you back an extra tenner. In Germany, even by 1955, motorcycles were losing ground to small cars – more of which, anon – and had begun their steady shuffle towards becoming a leisure pursuit instead of practical everyday transport.

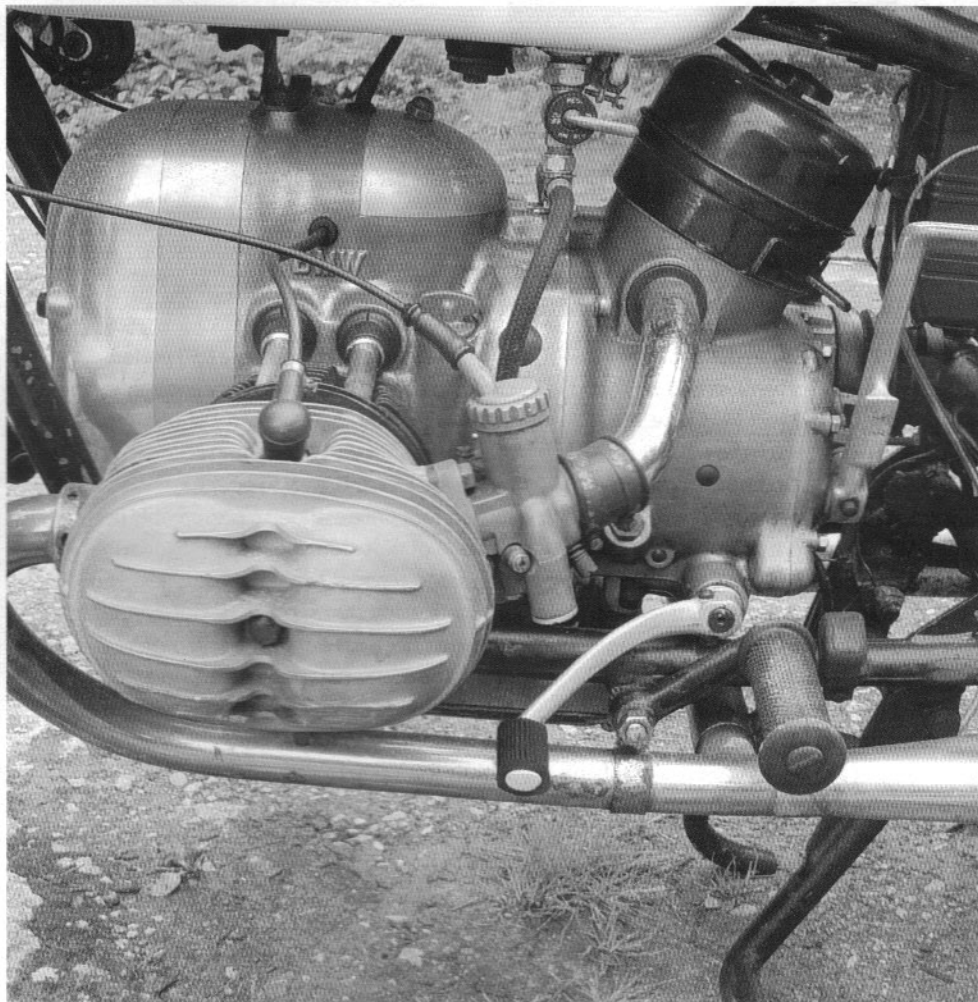
For the British market in 1955, the R50 was a minor mystery. The Motor Cycle described it as 'the woolliest of the BMW twins', lacking an obvious rôle in life. The 500 shared its chassis with the 35bhp R69 which easily out-paced it. Just about any other 500 twin was faster than the R50; BSA's A7 would reach just under ➤



The dratted side-operated kickstart lever. Keen competitors campaigned bikes like this one in the Land's End Trials of the 1950s and 60s, so they must have been able to start the things while stood astride them...



BMW's first stab at swinging arm suspension featured twin shocks with two preload settings, adjusted in seconds should you want to offer a friend a lift home



The engine is running. You just can't hear it. Or, as Motor Cycling said; 'halt and you have to lower your head to hear the slow chuff-chuff of the tickover'



In standard trim the R50 wasn't equipped to carry a pillion. A dual seat and pillion 'rests' were optional, but the solo saddle is a thing of wonder in any case. Tell your friend to catch the bus!

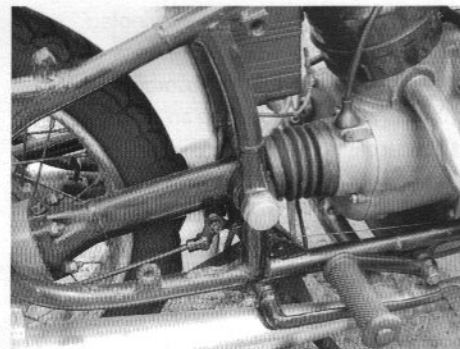
100mph while the R50 ran out of puff at 90, flat out. Enfield's Meteor Minor 500 was good for 97mph, and it cost just £275 new. The A7 would set you back much the same. Even an upmarket Norton, a Dommi 88, cost under £300 when the R50 was new.

The BMW 500 twin, by comparison, carried a price tag of (get a chair and some smelling salts before you read the next bit) ... £450 in the UK. In the 1950s. When the average wage of a British male worker was £190pa! Converted to modern money, as the average man earns around £27,600pa, that makes the equivalent price of the R50 today a petrifying £65,368. That's Range Rover money. You could buy half a house in the frozen north for that. How could any motorcycle have been worth an equivalent amount in the 1950s?

The testers of the day adored riding the R50, and if you can adjust your perceptions a tad then it's easy to see why. Once you've tackled the idiosyncratic starting arrangement, it's a beguiling motorcycle. Like

my own Douglas flat twins, the R50 prefers choke to being flooded. It's easy enough to get the flywheel spinning and it chuffs into life very readily. Vic Willoughby reckoned he found the kickstart 'easy to operate... with the left foot once astride' so presumably he was one of those lotus-legged individuals who stood ten foot tall. However, unless you are particularly clumsy with the clutch you shouldn't need to re-start the engine very often. The R50 settles down to an amiable tickover, idling completely steadily without any tiresome throttle blipping, shuddering slightly from side to side. Keen owners can spend hours adjusting and lubing the throttle cables to co-ordinate their action and keep the rocking to a minimum.

The Beemer is admirably quiet, even after half a century and a recent rebuild. The engine is far less of a chatterbox than my Dragonfly's motor, and even with big throttle openings you tend only to hear a remote burble from the exhausts. Back in the 50s, The Motor Cycle

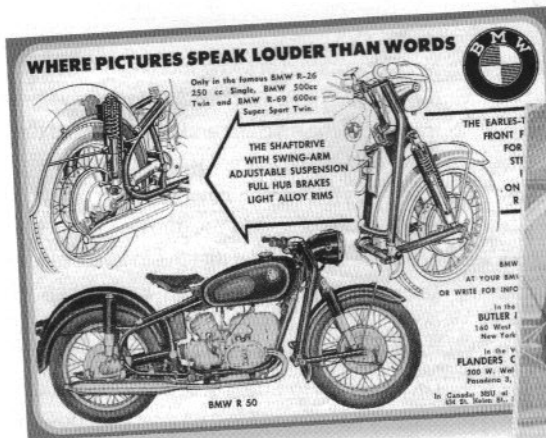


BMW were keen to explain that the R50 was 'practically the only motorcycle manufactured today that uses an automotive type driveshaft with ring and pinion gear' which 'requires no maintenance whatsoever' and promises 'years of trouble-free performance'



felt that this silent running 'contributed greatly to the absence of rider fatigue'.

The R50's riding position plays a substantial role in the 'ride it all day' stakes, too. My feeling is that the handlebars on the test bike are wrong (they've not got wipers, for one thing) and they're too far pulled back; probably fitted by some Britbike rider who prefers the sack o'spuds riding position. The original BMW bars would have been flatter but with a slight kink and rise which combined with the footrests to make the rider lean forward from the hips. This more modern riding position always feels far more comfortable to me, although I know of many riders who grizzle about the weight they then have to carry through their elbows. This is surely a good thing, guys: it loads some



The Canadian and American adverts suggest that perhaps the exchange rate made the R50 less fearsomely expensive than in the UK. Maybe people could actually afford to buy one!



more of the mass onto the front end of the bike (useful for steering control and sudden stopping), and encourages you to actively ride the machine around corners rather than let it have its head and just tug you along afterwards. Plus, as soon as you are travelling at any speed at all the air pressure on your chest will carry most of your weight for you, easing the burden on your arms.

The Beemer will suit modern riders in other ways, too. The brake pedal is on the right and the gear lever is on the left, and you press down to change down. However, although the levers are arranged in modern formats, you're never misled into thinking that this might be a modern gearbox. It takes a little co-ordination to match the throttle and clutch action, and gear selection is not what you might call slick. It's considerably better than the earlier BMW gearbox... but that ain't saying much!

Bruce Preston once commented that 'real BMW owners prided themselves in being able to accomplish silent gearchanges with or without the use of the clutch. Let no-one say that it could be achieved without skill and practice, though.' Bruce was right. After a few days riding you'll be snicking up and down the 'box like a pro, and reasonably fast, clean and quiet changes are entirely possible with practice. However, if you take a Boxer of this era for a test ride – especially on a cold day or if it's not in regular use – then you can expect to encounter a little culture shock.

Ditto with the steering and shaft drive. Both are simply superb, and provide levels of sure-footed security and practical accomplishment which were far ahead of their time. However, if you aren't used to how they feel then you'll be convinced that the slow steering weave is trying to unseat you at walking speeds; that you can't really feel what's going on at the sharp end, and that the blunt end has a mind of its own, utterly unrelated to your intended direction.

Firstly you need to check that all the bearings are correctly greased and adjusted (don't over-tighten the steering head bearings or it will really roll at low speeds), and that there's nothing worn to extremes in the swinging arm arrangement. Then just operate the twistgrip and go faster – the weave will vanish as soon as you pick up your feet and stop flapping them about (dropping the throttle in alarm at the initial sensation just makes things worse, too). Earles forks are an acquired taste, but taking the time to learn the ropes of all of BMW's snazzy steering systems (Telelever included) is a solid investment.

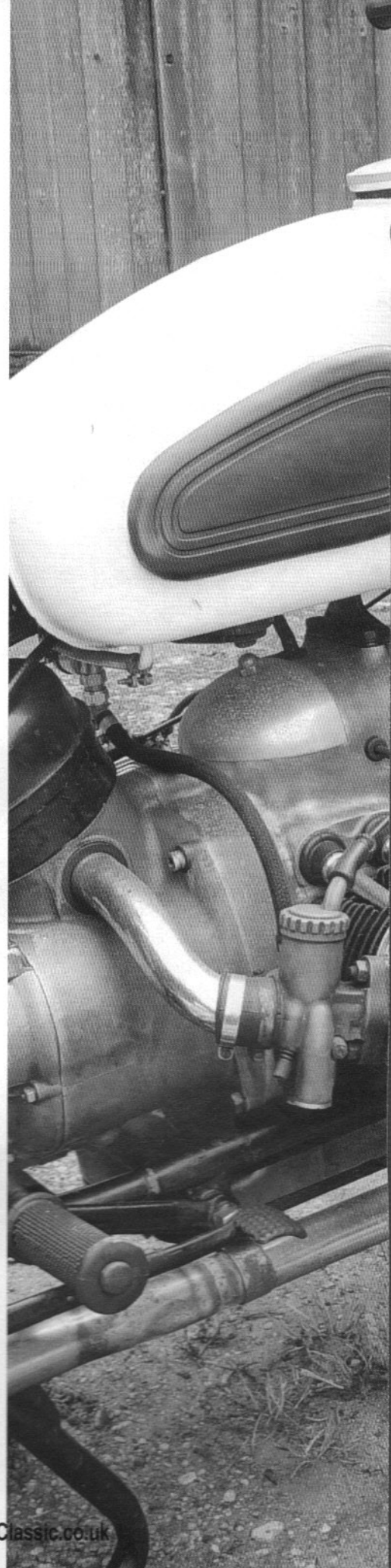
The R50's steering isn't lightning-fast by any stretch but it is rock steady over ripples and utterly unshakeable once committed to a corner. It's a far cry from the twitchy, disconcertingly un-

hinged sensation of some sporting Brit twins of the period. The R50 thrives on rider involvement; move with the machine and the camber of the curve and, as The Motor Cycle discovered 'the road veers this way and that and your bike curves round on invisible rails.' You don't experience any of that nasty sensation that the forks are made of semi-rigid spaghetti and might just tie themselves in a total tangle at the next set of twisties...

However, a Triumph twin ridden with spirit (and a certain sod-the-consequences attitude) will waltz all over the R50 on a set of bends. The Beemer comes into its own later in the day. Much later in the day; several hundreds of miles later in fact. The R50 rolls along at a supremely easy 70mph, seeking an endless highway to devour. A burst of beefy acceleration it to 80 or 85mph *sans* commotion or unnecessary excitement, and lesser vehicles fall back in its wake. Even with a stiff headwind the R50 will maintain progress at the legal limit indefinitely. Its progressive throttle action means that larger wrist movements are required at slower speeds, making the delicate act of trickling through traffic easier to accomplish with accuracy and less lurching than you might expect of an early shaft-drive bike. At greater throttle openings the action is more sensitive, so you don't spend all day on the autobahn wrenching your wrist. In every little way the R50 is set up for serious mileage and to keep rider fatigue to a minimum.

The standard solo gearing provides considerable flexibility. Peak power is at 6000rpm and the Beemer is happy to rev straight to the limit, which gives third gear in particular an enormously useful range. Alternatively you can run as low as 12mph in top, or up to nearly 40mph in first. For town riding, 30mph in top equates to just under 2000rpm, with satisfying scope for a lively leap forward as you pass the No Limits sign. Be careful, however, if you buy an R50 or R69 which has been used as a sidecar tug. Changing the gearing is a time-consuming and hence expensive job.

'A series of crash stops were made in comfort with no sign of wheel lock or brake fade and in distances that were little short of amazing' said Motor Cycling, who were mightily impressed by the Beemer's big brakes. 'Caress the brakes and a giant magnet holds you back' enthused The Motor Cycle. It's hard not to join the chorus of approval because on modern roads it really doesn't matter how fast your old bike can go, if you dare not use that theoretical speed. The speed I travel at on the open road is largely dictated by the performance of my bike's brakes. The R50's brakes proved capable of locking either wheel on dry roads. They're more than good enough to inspire





exploration of its upper performance limits! The Motor Cycle summed up the R50 thus: 'This is a bike for riding, not tinkering with. Just about all you do is tank-up every 200 miles' and that holds entirely true even 50 years later. The engine doesn't leak and it's exceptionally well balanced – no vibes will intrude to spoil your party and your fingertips won't turn white after a day in the saddle. You can ride into the night thanks to the 'exceptionally powerful' headlamp, and changing plugs or adjusting the valves are both straightforward, simple jobs.

If you ride one which has been recently rebuilt then bear in mind that the engine will take longer than the usual thousand miles to bed in – it'll really loosen up between 2000 and 3000 miles. And on the first ride of any Boxer you are bound to kick the carbs; hefty hooves take a little practice to position properly. Bings are very forgiving: I've welted hundreds of 'em...

The next generation of the R50 and R69 were introduced at the start of the 1960s, so our test bike is among the final batch of the original type. And yes, it is supposed to have a cream colour scheme. The R50 was one of the first BMWs to be offered in any colour other than black; 'an immediate success amongst the younger customers' which could be specified for an additional £10.

Despite the success of the new Boxers on their home market, BMW the company was undergoing one of its periodic crises. While BMW were building 13,500 examples of the R50 they were also cranking out 150,000 Isetta bubblecars to meet the European demand for small cars. BMW remained committed to the motorcycle market even though it started to contract earlier on the Continent than it did in the UK and the company fell into financial crisis at the end of the 1950s, a decade ahead of the British industry's collapse. At that moment enter Dr Quandt, who fulfilled the rôle of John Bloor, and provided the financing which kept BMW afloat even though he wasn't particularly interested in motorcycles.

Sales of the R50 were never high in the UK, which is hardly surprisingly given that it cost about as much as a small ship. Its 'performance, handling, braking and finish' were judged to be in 'the "best of the best" class' but the price was far too high for the time. The years, however, have been kind to the R50's comparative cost. The BMW badge still commands a price premium and the relative scarcity of this model in the UK means that it is still rather more expensive than a common or garden BSA A7 or somesuch.

You're looking at around five grand for an R50 these days; some 350cc Douglas flat twins of the same era fetch similar money and there are

plenty of prestige 500s in the £5000 to £6000 bracket. So the R50 has become rather more affordable – certainly something to consider if you've been mulling over the attractions of a shaft-drive Sunbeam...

The testers of the 1950s and early 60s could not praise the R50 enough. It 'stands out from the ruck as a super tourer for the connoisseur' said The Motor Cycle; 'a pride and joy to own' with 'impeccable manners'. Thirty years later, Bruce Preston went rather further: 'were the R50-series BMWs the best motorcycles produced by the company?' he asked, and then answered his own question with a definite 'Yes. They introduced sophistication and comfort that had never been seen before on a motorcycle', as well as being reliable, leakproof and quiet.

I'm not entirely convinced. The R50 is not the best motorcycle I've ever ridden – it's not even the best BMW I've ever ridden. But it is an impressively competent and quirkily engaging machine, ideal for the classic rider who seeks 'a Rolls-Bentley among motorcycles; capable of safe and effortless high speed over distances but quiet, docile, and bearing the unmistakeable stamp of quality.' **RC**

1960 BMW R50 FACT PACK

Engine:	Four-stroke OHV flat twin
Capacity:	494cc
Bore / stroke:	68mm x 68mm
Compression:	6.8:1
Output:	26bhp @ 5800rpm
Carburation:	2 x 24mm Bing
Ignition:	Magneto
Gearbox:	Four-speed, left foot change
Final drive:	Shaft (bevel/crown wheel)
Frame:	Steel tubular double-loop
Front suspension:	Earles-type leading link forks, adjustable
Front brake:	200mm 2LS drum in full width hub
Rear brake:	200mm SLS drum in full width hub
Rear suspension:	Swinging arm twin shocks, adjustable
Wheelbase:	56 inches
Seat height:	31.5 inches
Ground clearance:	6.5 inches
Wheelbase:	55.7 inches
Weight:	425lb fuelled
Fuel capacity:	3.75 gallons
Fuel consumption:	70mpg at 50mpg
Top speed:	88mph
In production:	1955 to 1960

Featured bike courtesy of Cotswold Classics: www.cotswold-classics.co.uk or 01242 228622