



Kawasaki Special

The trials world has seen many new, innovative machines come from the UK, such as the Majesty Yamaha and Beamish Suzuki machines, using the original components from Japan housed in British fabricated frames. These machines achieved incredible success, notably in the hands of Mick Andrews with the Majesty winning a world round at the height of its popularity. The Gollner Kawasaki was no different in that it was based on the original KT 250cc production machine developed by the legendry "Ace" Don Smith. The advertising headline for the new Bob Gollner Kawasaki from 1976 headlined "A masterpiece for experienced riders" so the bike certainly had something to live up to. It would not achieve the success of the Majesty but became immensely popular on the trials scene.

Words: Matthew Heppleston – John Hulme
Pictures: Steven Crane

"the principal problem with the bike was the handling; the engine and brakes however were excellent. Kawasaki offered me all the unsold bikes at a very good price so the project was born".

The original KT 250



Kawasaki's involvement with trials started in 1972 when they hired the legendry Don Smith, twice European Champion to develop a new machine. This was also the first year of the big bore two-strokes, with Sammy Miller developing the 325cc Bultaco. With an eye to the future the first engine supplied by Kawasaki was a 450cc based on a motocross engine, which arrived in April. Smith built a rolling chassis around the engine and the project was away; he won his first trial on the bike in the September. This cylinder capacity evaluation phase lasted until the arrival in the UK of the 250cc prototypes in August 1973. Quite why they spent so long developing a machine which was ultimately never put into production was a bit of a mystery at the time. This delay in producing a bike for sale allowed other Japanese factories to catch up in the race to be number one. Yamaha had hired Mick Andrews who developed the very successful TY250 and Suzuki had Gordon Farley under contract for the less successful RL250; Miller had moved to Honda. The KT250 was even rarer and so we must suspect that it was not as good as the others. Bob Gollner was the owner of a successful Kawasaki franchise based in Denmead, near Portsmouth in the south of England. At the time he had over 20 years' riding experience and was well known as the developer of his own bikes such as the "Cheetah", which was very successful in the late 60s and was the first machine to be built with a chrome plated Reynolds 531 frame as standard; it also used a mechanical disc front brake. When the Villiers engine supply dried up he created the Gollner-Bantam using the engine from BSA and later still he devised and initiated the Whitlock Ossa. The Gollner KT was thus based on a vast fund of experience and knowledge.

Developing Times

We spoke to Gollner recently and he gave us much more of an insight into how the project was born. Being a Kawasaki dealer he was acutely aware that the factory's trials model was not selling and that a large stock of unsold machines were sitting around in

a warehouse. He explained "the principal problem with the bike was the handling; the engine and brakes however were excellent. Kawasaki offered me all the unsold bikes at a very good price so the project was born". He contacted well-known frame builder Robin Rhind-Tutt, better known for his WASP machines, to fabricate some frames. The new frame had a significantly steeper head angle than the standard 63.5°, and the engine was mounted 1½" (38mm) further back. Again the superior quality Reynolds 531 was used and treated to a dip in the chrome plating bath! Incidentally the way to tell if you have a genuine frame is to look at the side panels; on a Gollner they are held on by three bolts. Overall the new frame gave lighter steering, lower seat height, better ground clearance and an improved riding position with more weight over the rear wheel for improved grip. The frames were produced in batches of 30 and he couldn't remember if either 3 or 4 batches were made. Even so the total number of machines made, of between 90 and 120, means they are pretty rare. They were sold as complete machine, with only a few frames being sold to customers who wanted to upgrade the standard KT. The engine itself was fitted with a heavier flywheel and modified carburetion, and each machine was tuned and tested before being sold. Moving on to today, the standard Kawasaki KT250 is still a fairly unusual sighting in twin-shock trials, so when I was offered the chance to ride the Gollner version by the ever enthusiastic Patrick Jay (www.aspencafe.fr) around the French Alps, the car was packed and we were heading down to the mountain paradise of Samoens (www.mairiedesamoens.fr). This machine is the same one that introduced me to Pat, and a ride round the valley was featured in an article in TM UK issue 6.

Yellow Peril

Pat's has been recently restored and is even more special than a standard Gollner. His is fitted with a mystery 325cc cylinder. This was not available from Gollner but Bob remembered that Don Smith was experimenting with large bore engines of this



capacity. Using the standard stroke of 64.9mm it has a piston of 78.5mm (originally intended for a Maico 400 produced between 1973 and 81), making it a very over square 313cc. Another possibility is that it came from the USA as a 302cc kit that was developed with factory support by The Tryals Shope in Cookeville, Tennessee. Their kit used a 77mm bore and like the one on this bike had a spacer under the cylinder and a spacer to accommodate a much heavier flywheel. Whatever the source it certainly makes the bike a bit different! Originally the Gollner machines were painted yellow and soon earned the nickname of "yellow perils". This one as you can see has been restored in pearlescent Kawasaki green, which set against the chrome and alloy looks superb! I grew up in the days when Mick Grant was racing the "green meanies" and the colour scheme has always stood out from the crowd.

Starting the bike is simple with a swing on the kick-start; it has in-gear starting and CDI ignition to ease the task. The first surprise came with the footrest height; these are unchanged and follow the 1970s fashion of being very high, a scary 410mm above the ground! A second problem was the use of the original rear brake lever which was some 60mm below the standard slippery dimpled footrest, and impossible to use. Let's start with the engine, which is a barnstormer; it has so much grunt off the bottom end that I found I could use third gear much more often. There was some mild vibration, probably due to the increased capacity, but from the lowest of rpm the bike drove away and finding grip was a doddle. The extra mass bolted to the flywheel contributed to keeping things turning over smoothly. As always with modifications there are compromises, given we were riding in the Alps there are some pretty damned big climbs to be had up the ski slopes. Providing the machine was running at below 3/4 throttle it ran fine, but when searching for the last of the power at full throttle the engine started to feel strangled. This was most probably due to the transfer ports being too small to flow enough gases, as the larger cylinder liner reduces cross-sectional area. Other

culprits could be the air filter, carburettor or exhaust system. Needless to say it is now work in progress to discover the source of the problem. In all honesty this is probably not too much of a handicap in modern twin-shock trials, where flat-out blasts have all but disappeared, but annoying all the same.

Nice Balance

The balance of the machine was good and once you got used to being so high off the ground the new frame characteristics made sense. Contemporary tests complained that the standard KT steering was too heavy and the soft suspension made it feel even more so. On the Gollner, with its dramatic rearward shift of the engine combined with sharper steering the bike felt quite nimble; you could pick up the front wheel and place it wherever you wanted. The machine was still stable over some rolling rocks we found thanks to the new geometry and excellent suspension. Up front the forks have been fully rebuilt by the Kayaba official support team in France (BPRS Suspensions) and the action was superb; I didn't find the springs too soft but as they are new the spring rate may also have been changed. At the rear new Falcon shocks (www.falconshockabsorbers.co.uk) had been set up with harder springs than standard to compensate for the rear weight bias and as usual they were faultless. Good suspension is a key requisite of any trials machine and a big tick went

into that box. The front brake was as good, which is a reference point for me, despite using one of the most extravagant brake arms to grace a trials bike. The back also works well (once you can reach it!) One thing you need to be aware of is that the frame tubes are very thin and can crack if the engine bolts are not tight. On the swinging arm the rear stand mounting is also prone to cracking and most will have been patched at some stage. The machine feels nimble and steers very well. The engine is very good offering a lot of traction. This would have been perfect for the southern type of sections, being predominately muddy, however with modern tyres grip is less of an issue. If the full throttle issues could be eliminated it would be an even more fantastic trail machine for exploring the mountain paths around the village. The spare parts situation is still relatively good if you are prepared to source them from the USA. Pat has already stashed enough away to make using the machine a less risky operation! The Gollner frame has transformed the apparently mediocre standard machine and turned it into something more special. I can answer the question I posed at the beginning; the original advert was certainly not overblown hype, sound knowledge went into the machine's development. Even in standard form they are a rare bike so to be able to test the Gollner was a treat. One area which always impresses is its looks; the green and white of tank and side panels combined with dazzling chrome and bare alloy are fabulous. My thanks go to Patrick for his warm hospitality and allowing me to ride a "British" bike in deepest France. ●

