

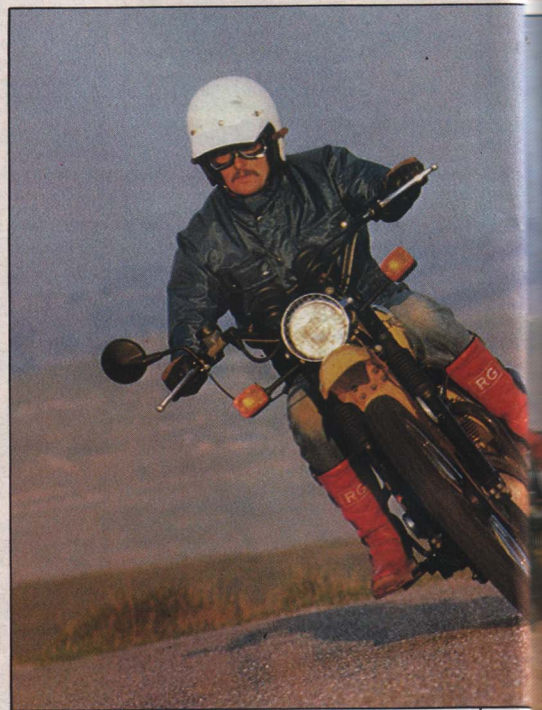
**A MERIDEN 750 ON THE DIRT SHOULDN'T
NECESSARILY BE MORE OF A HANDFUL THAN
THE BMW R80 G/S, BUT PETER WATSON
DISCOVERED THAT ON AND OFF THE ROAD
TRIUMPH'S TIGER TRAIL IS JUST...**

TRAILING BEHIND

THE ABILITY TO EXTRACT NEW TRICKS from an old dog is surely what marketing a motorcycle is often all about. Look at BMW's efforts since the launch of the /5 series in 1969: R90S, R100RS, R80 G/S. Other manufacturers have come up with Limited Edition this, Super Sports that, Hailwood/Phil Read Replica the other. It's making the same old motor look a little more enticing in fresh clothes, a new name and different colours. Even the Japs can't afford to tool up for new power plants every year.

Suzuki's Katanas are a superb example of how to spend a little and make it look an awful lot. And judging by the number of new Katanas you can see on the road, it's worked. But somewhere along the line the Triumph Tiger Trail project took one wrong turning, then another and another. Not enough thought, not enough time and patently next to no money went into transforming the good ol' 750 Tiger into Britain's answer to the G/S.

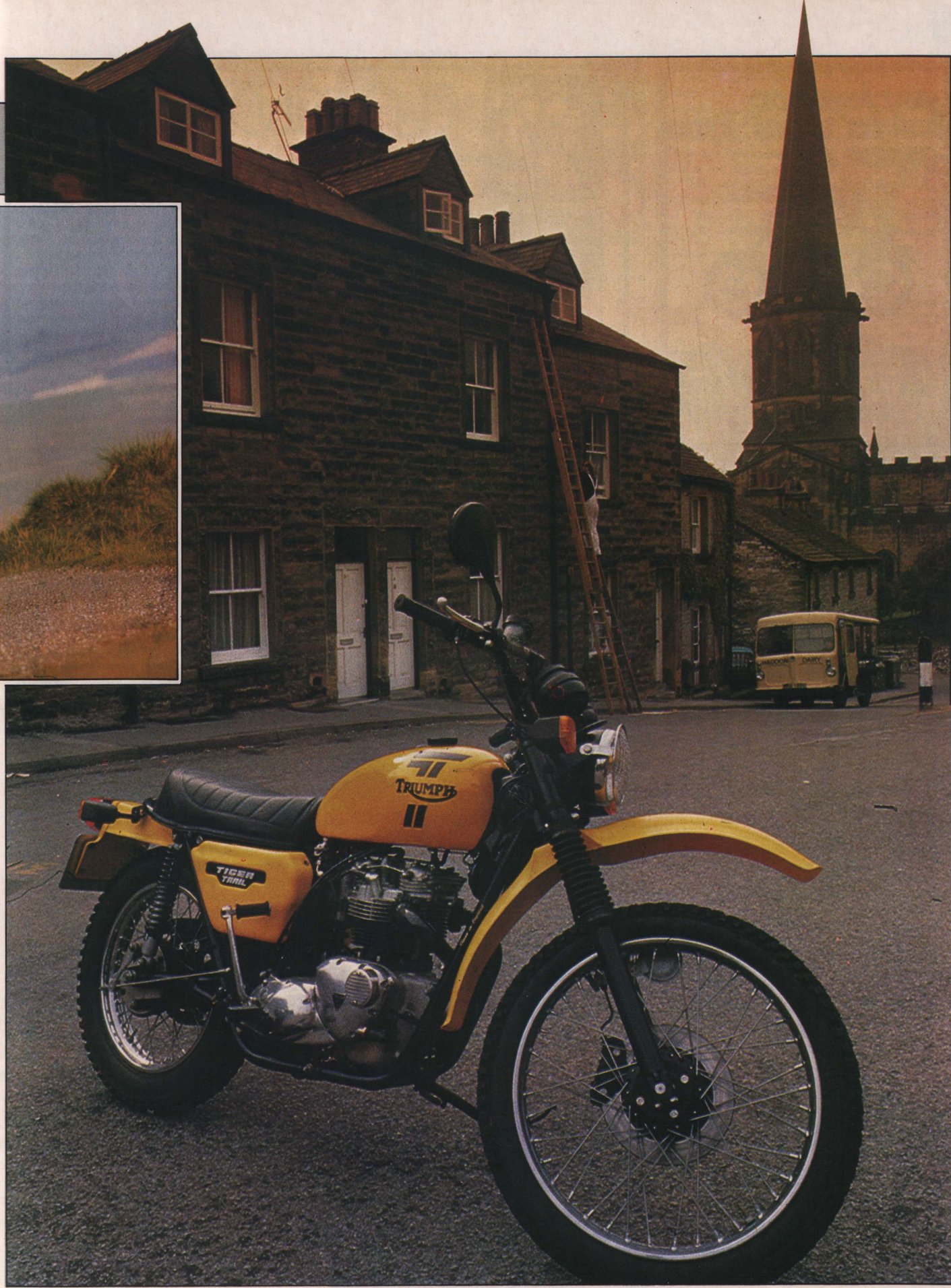
Sympathising with the shrunken workforce at Meriden — now little over 150 strong — hardly provides you with grounds for suspending your critical faculties in favour of blind patriotism when you're faced with a British product. Last year I borrowed a Bonneville Executive in the Island and the gent from Triumph who handed it over left me with the words 'Don't write anything bad about it, will you?' repeated twice. This moving, not to say pathetic, appeal gave me some idea of the dire straits in which the men from Meriden found themselves. Their position has hardly improved in the intervening months.



Triumph has a long history of producing good and sometimes excellent dirt bikes despite what may appear to be the obvious unsuitability of their parallel twin. The 1949 TR5, a mixture of Tiger 100 bottom end and Grand Prix barrels and as softly tuned as possible, at least bore some resemblance to the lightweight works machines that had run away with the 1948 ISDT.

Dropped nine years later, BSA-Triumph's final attempt at a production trail twin was the '71 Adventurer, another mildly tuned, single-carb 500 twin in a BSA Victor single chassis. Now something of a collector's item, anyone who owns an Adventurer must feel as happy as the folk who paid £367 for a Cheney ISDT replica (less engine) in 1972. By the early seventies, Triumph-based Six Days' specials may have been hopelessly outclassed, but the power characteristics of any Triumph twin make it a forgiving and useful off-road motor. I used to borrow a friend's 5T-based scrambler in the late '60s and although he never actually won anything on it, this curious contraption was amazingly good fun.

With BMW's example and the garlic urgings of their French importer to encourage them, Meriden came up with a trail bike that actually varies less from the standard single carb road twin than you'd expect of an enthusiastic amateur conversion. It looks and feels like a hastily cobbled together bodge from its four idiot lights stuffed in the revcounter housing to the low-level exhaust pipe and skimpy bash plate. The only thing that redeems this ghastly



PHOTOGRAPHY: COLIN CURWOOD

TRIUMPH TIGER TRAIL

mess of a dual-purpose machine is the inimitable power delivery of the 750 twin. The Tiger's only other real asset — good road handling at any speed — was tossed away when the factory decided to fit Avon Mudplugger tyres. Off tarmac, and picking your way slowly uphill through a cascade of rocks, you soon discover that road-bike steering geometry plus well over 400lb of motorcycle can make life almost unbearably tedious and tiring.

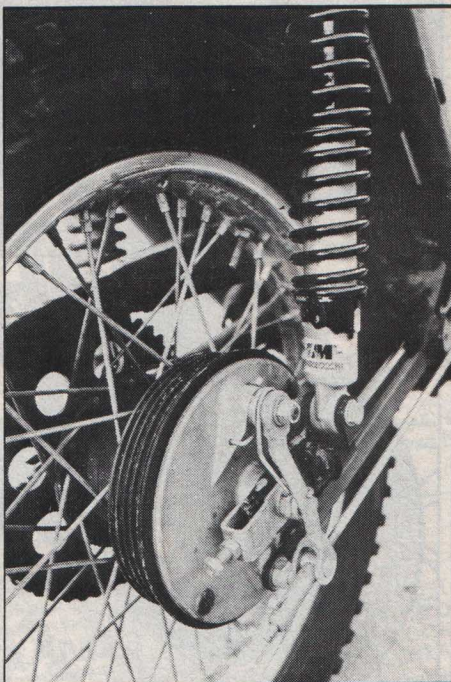
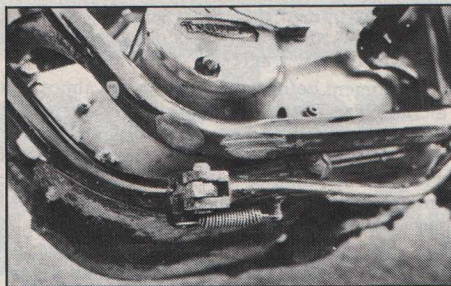
Riding away from the factory with photographer Colin Curwood in tow, I headed towards Derbyshire as fast as I could go in spite of various disincentives. The first was a strange noise coming from the back of the bike which I later traced to the caress of Mudplugger sidewall on the chainguard. In fact, the rear wheel didn't have to be too far out of alignment for this to occur: the rear tyre may only have a 4in section, but it's run at such low pressure (18psi for the road) that the sidewalls bulge significantly under load.

The Mudplugger is an interesting device, launched in 1977 and billed as a significant advance in tyre technology for trials freaks. It has one radial ply over a two-ply crossply casing, thus enabling you to run pressures as low as 2.5psi which is pretty useful off-road. The Tiger's chromed steel Italian Radaelli rims both feature security bolts — something BMW kinda forgot on the G/S — and the Mudpluggers give plenty of grip on dirt. So they should, because the block tread is about 1/4in deep at the front and 1/2in at the rear, but their road performance is decidedly unnerving.

At first I was convinced that the front end was going to wash out from under me going through a couple of mild bends. Then a 65-70mph motorway thrash had the bike weaving gently, but enough for Colin to ask if I felt okay on the thing. 'Back end's doin' the hokey cokey a bit,' he said. An ulcerburger and banana milkshake you could've stripped paint with later, we continued our journey to Derbyshire and all those twisting roads and nearby trails.

This time we proceeded at reduced speed. It wasn't just the cautionary sticker warning me that 80mph is the safe road maximum on Mudpluggers: I was half convinced that even a sustained 70 wasn't going to get us there with a motor in one piece. It felt horribly strained and vibratory at 70mph and, left to tick over on its side stand — there's no centre stand by the way — the bike smoked like a diesel truck. Enough oil was going down the valve guides for it to need 500ml after a mere 290 miles. With 1440 miles on the clock when I collected it, this rattling collection of components had obviously been treated rather roughly early in its life.

It's not difficult to discover why, because the only alteration to the road bike's gearing has been to substitute an 18 tooth gearbox sprocket for a 20 tooth item. This is the recommended sidecar gearing for a Bonneville, and on a solo it means that the motor's heaviest vibration comes pounding through the solid-mounted handlebars at anything over 55mph. My mechanical and physical sensibilities prevented me ever holding an indicated 65 or 70mph for long, which is probably just as well. Long after I'd got over the queasy feelings generated by the Mudpluggers' wavering we discovered the tyres' limit. On a long left-hander, with Mr Calderwood looking over my shoulder on a Z1000, I felt my grip on reality and Derbyshire asphalt rapidly loosening. A short prayer, apparently enthusiastically seconded from behind, and a little less throttle got us upright once more.



Top: Low-level pipe shows signs of hard off-road riding by ace Bike roadtester (middle) Peter Watson. Above: Soft rear stopper and cheapo Marzocchi.

All this is fair enough from genuine dirt tyres on a large, fairly heavy road bike. But when you compare the Avons' road behaviour with the Metzeler Enduro rubber fitted to the BMW G/S, you can see who got it right. The Mudpluggers are completely out of place on this bike, for where the Metzeler's grip in the wet, the Avons slide at the slightest provocation. Fine and dandy for trail use, the Tiger's inflexible gearing — the internal ratios obviously needed changing but that costs real money — help to finish screwing it up as a road bike. I spent most of the

700-mile test week at speeds under 55mph and that's reflected in our fuel consumption figures: other folk with rubber-mounted hands and feet have got down to 35mpg.

Sybaritic comfort isn't a well-known Triumph feature but the Tiger Trail is pretty painful after 50 miles or more. The seat, which doesn't seem to be able to decide whether it's made for one or two, is poorly padded and the handlebars obviously throw your weight on to your bum. At tickover the plastic rear guard shakes like a rambler's fist. This disposed of the tail light in less than five miles when the filament fractured and then actually parted the earth wire to both stop and tail lights. As the handbook doesn't feature a wiring diagram and I thought that the fractured earth cable was just a spare, I gave up night time jaunts.

The Tiger's headlight is in fact pretty good — despite the laughable chromed stoneguard in front of the glass — but the large rear light isn't rubber mounted. Nor are the front (German made) indicators although the rear pair feature rubber washers. The single mirror — German again — is very neat and useful.

In spite of oil leaks from the rocker spindle caps, an old Triumph vice, and a variety of disturbing rattles, the motor made a nice throaty noise through its siamesed exhaust and always fired up easily. You just flood the ancient Amal Concentric Mk I (it weeped a little fuel here and there as usual), adjust the choke control rather awkwardly placed near the carb, and Uncle Joe's electronics do the rest.

That silencer, rather reminiscent of Honda's Phil Read Replica 750 F2, meant that our test Tiger was for one person only. Fortunately Meriden have recognised this for the marketing error it is, but their solution is equally weird: extended pillion rests and a heat shield over the black chromed silencer. This I have to see, and if you fancy a girl with warm thighs then look no further than the latest Tiger Trail.

Okay, the exhaust system is a disaster off-road. If you're not bashing the front of the pipe you're scraping the silencer clamp and side stand foot over rocks. But with that massive central frame tube/oil tank surrounded by air box, you don't have a lot of room in which to tuck away a pipe and silencer. The silencer has to be that big to meet the noise regs but surely it could have been a little flatter and better tucked away. The obvious route for the pipe is up over the primary chaincase and then back, for the low-level pipe took quite a battering even on an easy trail.

And it wasn't the only thing to take a knock up a relatively simple, rock-strewn track. The engine mounting bolts were scraped and knocked and I was rather worried about the total lack of protection for the spine-tube's sump plate and its exposed oil feed line. The bash plate sits between the frame rails and is merely a piece of 1/16th sheet steel. Triumph have now modified this by extending it rearwards by five inches to protect the sump plate, but it's still painfully inadequate.

I was a little worried at first by the thought of how the Tiger's brakes and suspension were going to make out on the trail. The front fork is completely standard, while the rear shox are the cheapest Marzocchi units that not a lot of money can buy. Ducati 900SS owners will recognise these and recall that they're only one-way damped. Yet although the springing is hard even on the softest preload, they keep the back end in line rather well. And anyway, this is a *trail* bike, not an enduro and we went trail riding at moderate speeds and not motocrossing around the Peak Park.

Needless to say, Mr Curwood demanded a bit of flying through the air for the benefit of his new long lens. I've ridden a few trails over the years, but I'm definitely a danger to myself and others on a dirt racer, and once in the air I'm usually totally out of control. However, the Tiger amazed me by flying straight and true, landing with ease without dispatching me into the heather. On straightforward dirt roads it's really superb. You have lashings of bottom end, excellent acceleration and suspension that's adequate up to about 50mph provided you don't meet anything too serious in the way of gulleys and cross-ruts. You can slide it through bends nicely and the steering feels reasonable if nowhere near quick enough.

The real problems come later on slow climbs and descents. Because the steering geometry is designed to promote high speed stability on the road and the front end of the bike is remarkably heavy, changing line at walking pace requires bodybuilder's arms. The front end just keeps on going straight until you wrench it over.

As Calderwood had been getting very rude about my performance on the Amazing Flying Tiger — 'Yeah, okay. Totally out of control, but okay' — I collapsed in a sweaty heap, offered him a ride under the world's largest helmet peak, and turned to watch. The gratifying sound of metal scraping on rock immediately told me that he'd discovered the lack of ground clearance and he was having to sweat to turn the Tiger's 400lb-plus around. A passing *Motorcycle Sport* reader and rambler, who'd paused to ascertain if we were Genuine Motorcycle

Chappies, opined that the Tiger looked like a handful. As stinging rivulets of sweat filled up my eye sockets, I agreed.

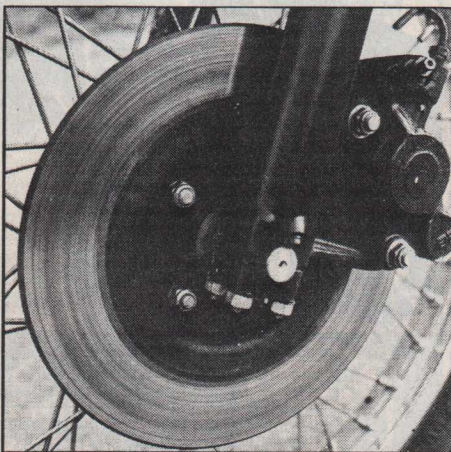
A moment before, the steering had almost got me into terrible trouble. Working my way up the trail on its right hand edge to avoid the worst of the rocks, I nearly ran over a lurching rambler who had cunningly positioned himself in some undergrowth inches from my chosen path, chewing a Milky Way in a very offensive manner. A swift move to the left prevented me starring in a *Trail Rider Runs Over Rambler* headline ('A gang of 40 trail riders, described by Mr Alan Mattingley of the Ramblers Association as "hooligans hell bent on destruction" yesterday ran over the Milky Way of hiker Julian Spart (28), a systems analyst from Milton Keynes, several times'. Said Mr Spart . . .').

Such diversions apart, the Tiger produced nothing more than a case of terminal exhaustion up the trail. Anything over 300lb on the dirt is decidedly overweight and I was delighted to discover that the front disc I'd eyed with such apprehension is quite superbly sensitive and

doesn't grab or bind. Nice one, AP Lockheed, and I could have wished that the rear drum was in similar condition. This heavily ribbed unit may normally be quite efficient, but ours squealed horribly and was discovered to be binding when we came to re-align the rear wheel.

This is definitely easier if someone gives you the extension sleeve for the rear axle nut wrench in your toolkit. The nut itself is done up to about 1000ft/lb and cunningly masked by the brake's actuating arm. This is quite unnecessary as the arm could be reversed and the brake rod run inside the frame tubes simply and cheaply. Needless to add, there are no marks on the fork ends to help you align the rear wheel, and the tommy bar provided in the tool-kit is so soft it's a joke. You don't get a spanner to enable you to free off the brake torque arm either, and naturally this isn't fully floating.

Irritation caused by this stunning ease of maintenance also extended to the clutch and gearbox. When hot, the clutch dragged noticeably and the gearshift was unpleasantly stiff and yet notchy. On occasion it would refuse to yield



second going up through the box and I always found that I had to take my boot right off the peg to change gear. It would be nice to have dog-levers, too, as the clutch action is quite heavy and the lever's a long way from the left grip.

Apart from the gearing and carb changes, the engine is pure road Tiger apart from lower compression pistons (7.4 instead of 8.5:1) and a milder inlet cam, but you still have to fill the US-spec tank with 4 star. However if you do indeed fill it up to the brim plenty comes pouring out of the filler-cap's vent hole. It had already almost removed the tatty bits of tape on one side of the yellow tank.

Most people seem to like the paint scheme — unlike the somewhat violent green of the recently announced 650 trail bike — but an unexpected drawback to fitting that generously proportioned plastic front guard is the difficulty with which you now operate the steering lock. There are lots of small things on the Tiger like



Triumph TR7T Tiger Trail

Engineohv parallel twin
Bore x stroke 76 x 82mm
Capacity 744cc
Compression ratio 7.41:1
Carburation 30mm Amal Concentric Mk1
Bhp @ rpm 42 @ 6500
Max torque @ rpm 37 ft/lb @ 5000
Primary drive Triplex chain
Clutch Multiplate, wet
Gearbox 5 speed
Electrical system 180W alternator,
12V, 12Ah battery,
electronic ignition
Headlamp 45/40W

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase 57in
Overall width 37in
Seat height 32½in
Ground clearance 8in
Dry weight 383lb
Fuel/capacity 2.8gal

EQUIPMENT

Indicators Yes
Electric start No
Trip odometer Yes
Steering lock Yes
Helmet lock No
Headlamp flasher Yes
Others Mirror, headlamp stoneguard

CYCLE PARTS

Tyres
front 3.00 x 21in Avon Mudplugger
rear 4.00 x 18in Avon Mudplugger
Brakes
front 10in disc
rear 7.5in sls drum

PERFORMANCE

Top speed 95mph (est)
Standing ¼ mile 14.5sec (est)
Fuel consumption

overall 53mpg
ridden hard 51mpg

PRICE £1895

Guarantee 12 months/12,000 miles

Supplied by Triumph Motor Cycles
(Meriden) Ltd, Meriden
Works, Allesley, Coventry



that which irritate. Take that silly metal cap oil filler under the seat, for instance. You always have to take the suspension C-spanner to it before it will budge and then you have to spend another couple of minutes slamming the lockable seat down until the catch locates properly.

It's certainly true that, over the past two or three years, Triumph's quality control has improved. Oil leaks there may still be, but they're a rarity. What remains is a pig-headed refusal to improve the bikes in areas which have given continuous trouble over the years. Why couldn't we have had proper rubber-mounted indicators and at least a rubber-mounted rear light? That wouldn't have broken the bank any more than a half-decent bash plate.

In June 1975 *Bike* reported the then Meriden Co-op leader Denis Johnson as saying that: 'The dealers we spoke to said they could go on selling the Bonneville for five years, more or less

without change.' It's now 1981 and the Bonneville has an electric start, new Bing carbs and yet more restrictive silencers. But can it possibly survive the legislative horrors that are causing much larger manufacturers so much pain? Even BMW are getting ready to ditch the big flat twins in favour of fours, threes and watercooling.

What is clear is that the company will gain few sales by building bikes like the Tiger Trail. At £1895 it's not a cheap bike despite its budget equipment, but Triumph are offering good insurance deals as something of a come-on. BMW were hoping to sell a large number of G/S models in this country and although it's a much better (and much more expensive) bike than the Triumph I haven't seen many on the road this year. Perhaps Meriden should stick with the Bonnie and the Royals. After all, a Son of Bonneville Royal should be on the cards fairly soon . . . ■