

A Radical Motorcycling Journal

On yer bike!

Issue number 6. Price 50 pence.

WATCH OUT! THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING

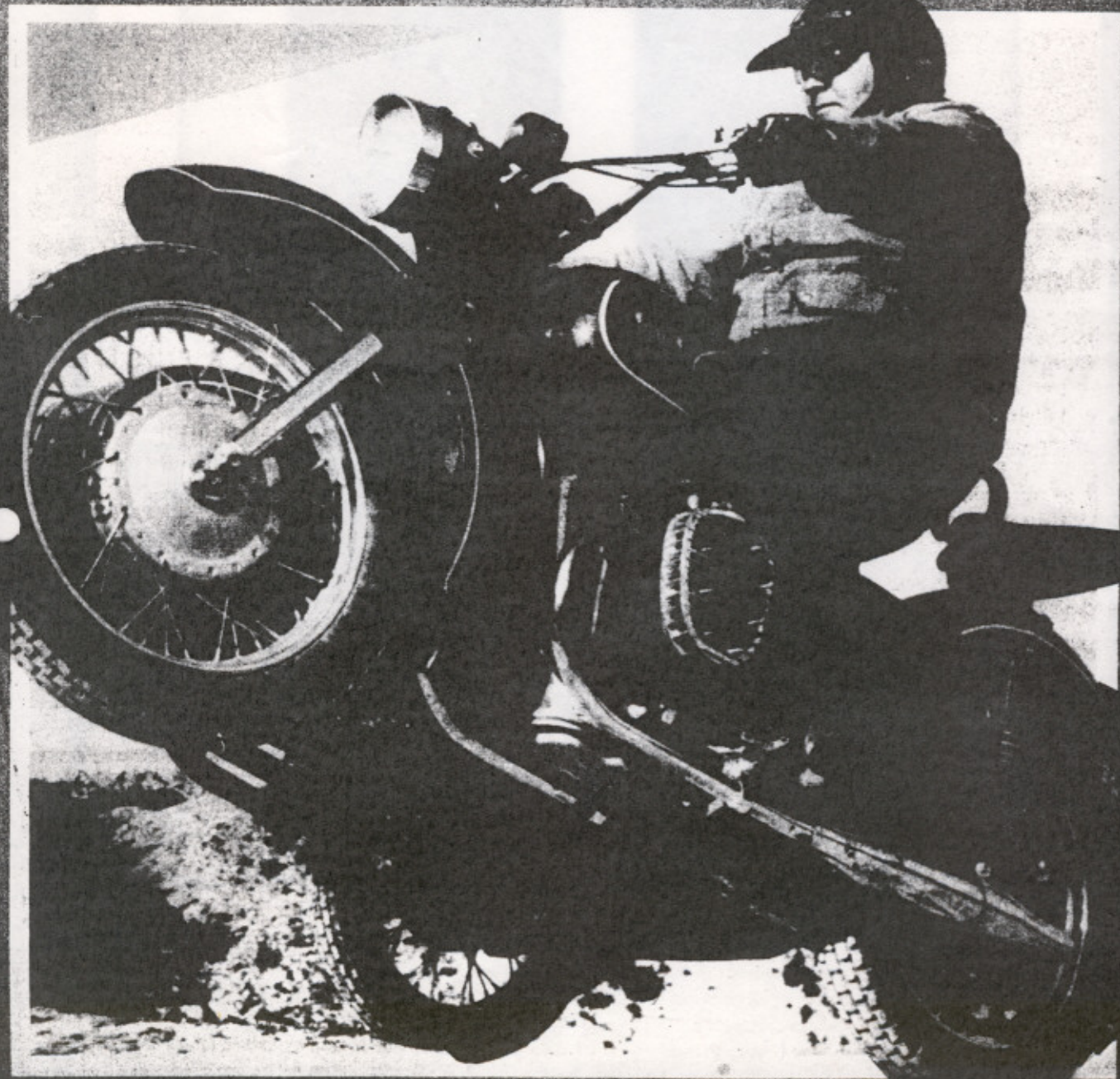
We test the Neval MT12 Combo

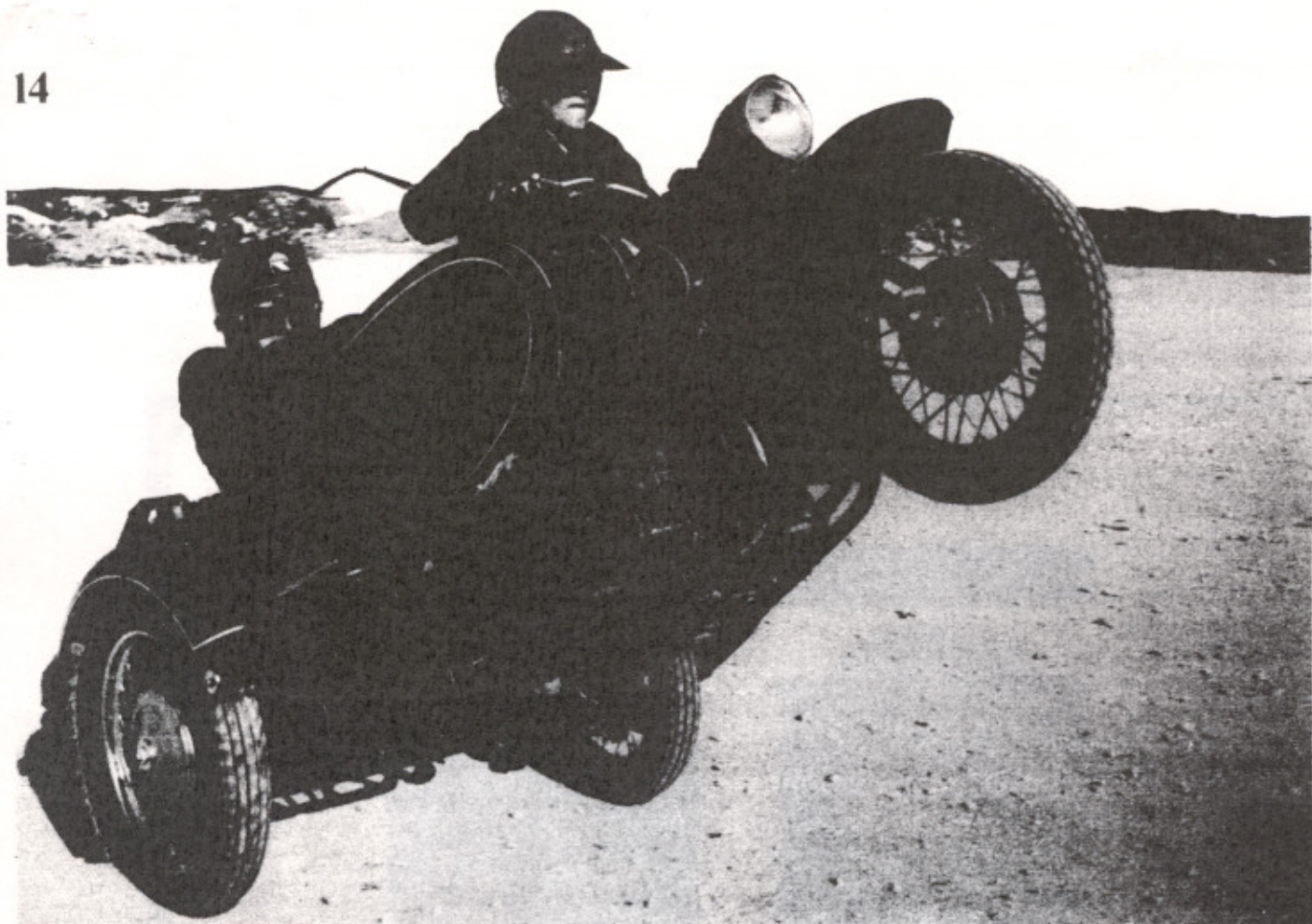
ISTANBUL BY MOPED

Elinor and Sydney's trip to the Orient

SPAIN'S BANKRUPT BIKE INDUSTRY

Bultaco and Montesa on the way down





NEVAL MT12: CONFESSIONS OF AN ARMCHAIR ROADTESTER

A sunny Saturday in North Lincolnshire taught me two things. The first gem of enlightenment to penetrate my consciousness was that riding a combo is not as easy as I had expected, so much for the ace road tester fantasy, and the second was that Russian motorcycles are not the awful old nails of popular disdain.

Despite the horror stories that seem to crop up whenever the subject is mentioned, I have always believed that Soviet-made bikes must be a good deal for impoverished punters. One glance at Neval's, or the previous importer Satra's, price-lists demonstrated that motorcycles just don't come any cheaper. This magazine has stated the obvious fact before, that Japanese production costs are pricing oriental machinery out of the bottom end of the market and the time is ripe for others to move in.

The one obstacle to a Russian takeover of the small commuter and economy tourer market was the notorious unreliability and poor quality of finish of their bikes. Well, it's happened, that obstacle appears to have vanished. The new generation of Soviet bikes being imported by Neval look ready to play in a whole different ball game.

To discover the reasons for amazing improvement in the standard of the hardware, and ignoring sinister communist plots to overwhelm the West's motorcycle industry, it's necessary to go back four years to Satra's demise as British

importer. (The communist plot doesn't exist yet, because the *Daily Mail* hasn't got round to inventing it.)

Four years ago, after a steady and often justified mauling from the bike press, plus not a few dissatisfied customers, Satra stopped importing its range of Russian bikes, then known as 'Cossacks'. Neville Mason, one of the partners in an established Hull retail bike business, had already examined a Cossack in his workshop. At the time, he admits that he had about as many prejudices as anybody else. He was, however, surprised to find the bike better than expected.

So, when Mason's company, Neval, were offered the opportunity to buy Satra's remaining stock of lightweight machines, there wasn't much hesitation. Neval Ltd. sold the bikes through the company's own retail operation, with impressive rapidity and, in due course, began dealing with the Russians directly. It's interesting to note, as well, that most of these original bikes are still on the road. Russian-made bikes do, in fact, totally dominate the streets of Hull. The Neval success even contributed to putting some other motorcycle retailers out of business.

Having become the British concessionaire, Neval did have an immediate problem. This was that if the company was to maintain and expand the market for the bikes, the Russians had to be persuaded to modernise and improve the standards of their products. Neville Mason explained to me that this was



no easy task.

Russia is the second biggest manufacturer of motorcycles in the world, and is likely to soon become the biggest. The vast soviet bike industry serves not only an insatiable home market, (The average Russian biker pays for his or her Dniepr outfit and then waits up to *six years* for delivery!) but also a large export market. The bulk of the exports go to either developing countries or to countries politically aligned with Moscow.

In other words, the Russian state bike industry has absolutely no problem in selling every last machine produced and has no economic pressures upon it to change or develop the range of bikes. Life is so easy for the Russian industry that the home consumer gets even more of a raw deal than buyers of early Russian bikes over here. Instead of chrome, cycle parts are galvanised, there is no choice of colour or specification and the lucky comrade with enough roubles to buy 'over the counter' doesn't. Bikes are supplied in the crate, self service, crow bar supplied on request, bring your own tools and oil to assemble the thing, straight from jumped-up warehouses.

Against this background, it's pretty amazing that the Neval partners managed to convince the soviet authorities that changes were necessary, but they did. The basis of their argument was that if bikes would sell in Britain, they would sell anywhere. The Russians eventually accepted this, despite knowing that they would never make an enormous fortune from the British market.

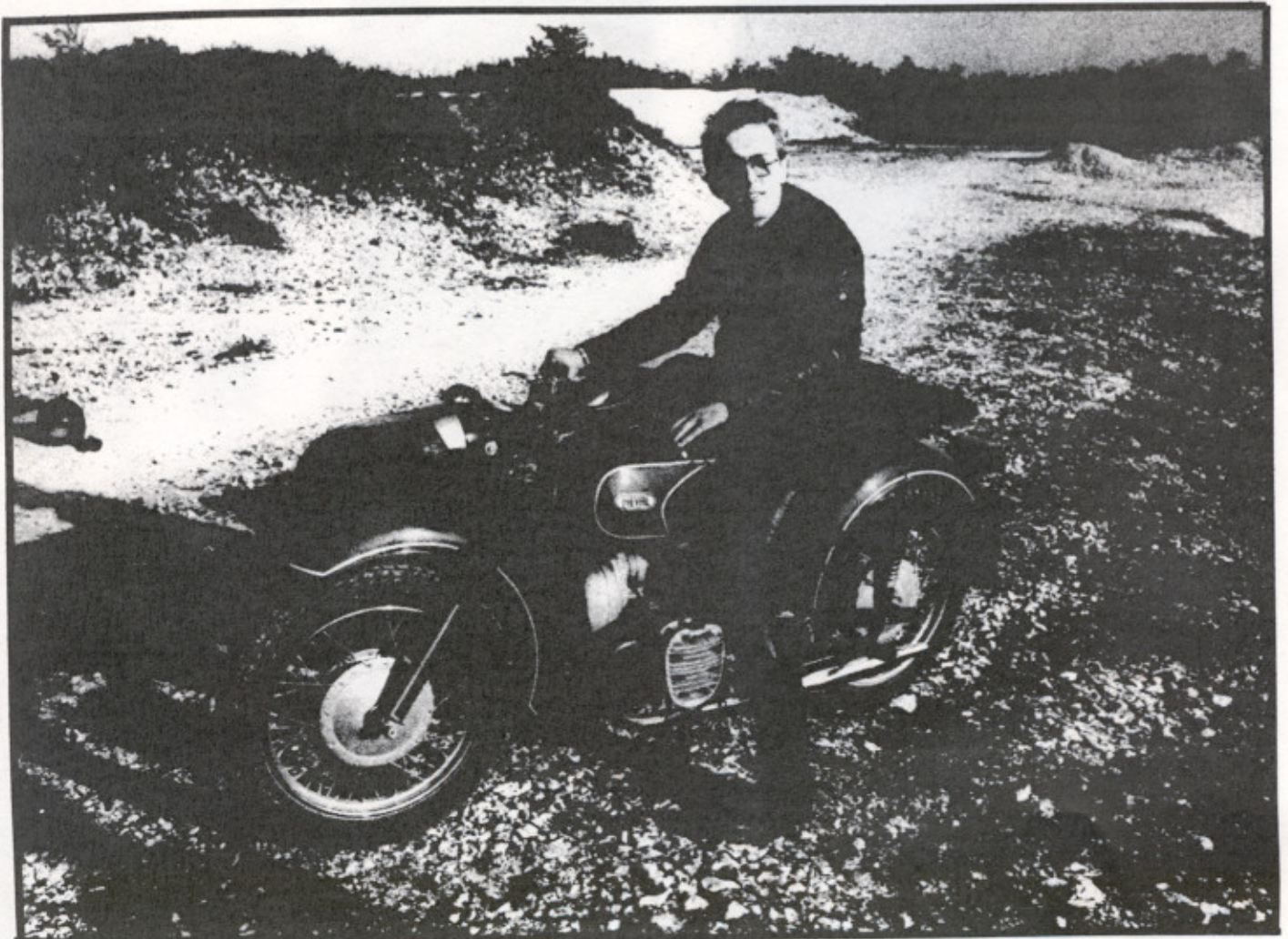
Personally, I think that one of the main reasons the Russians *were* convinced, not always being the most trusting

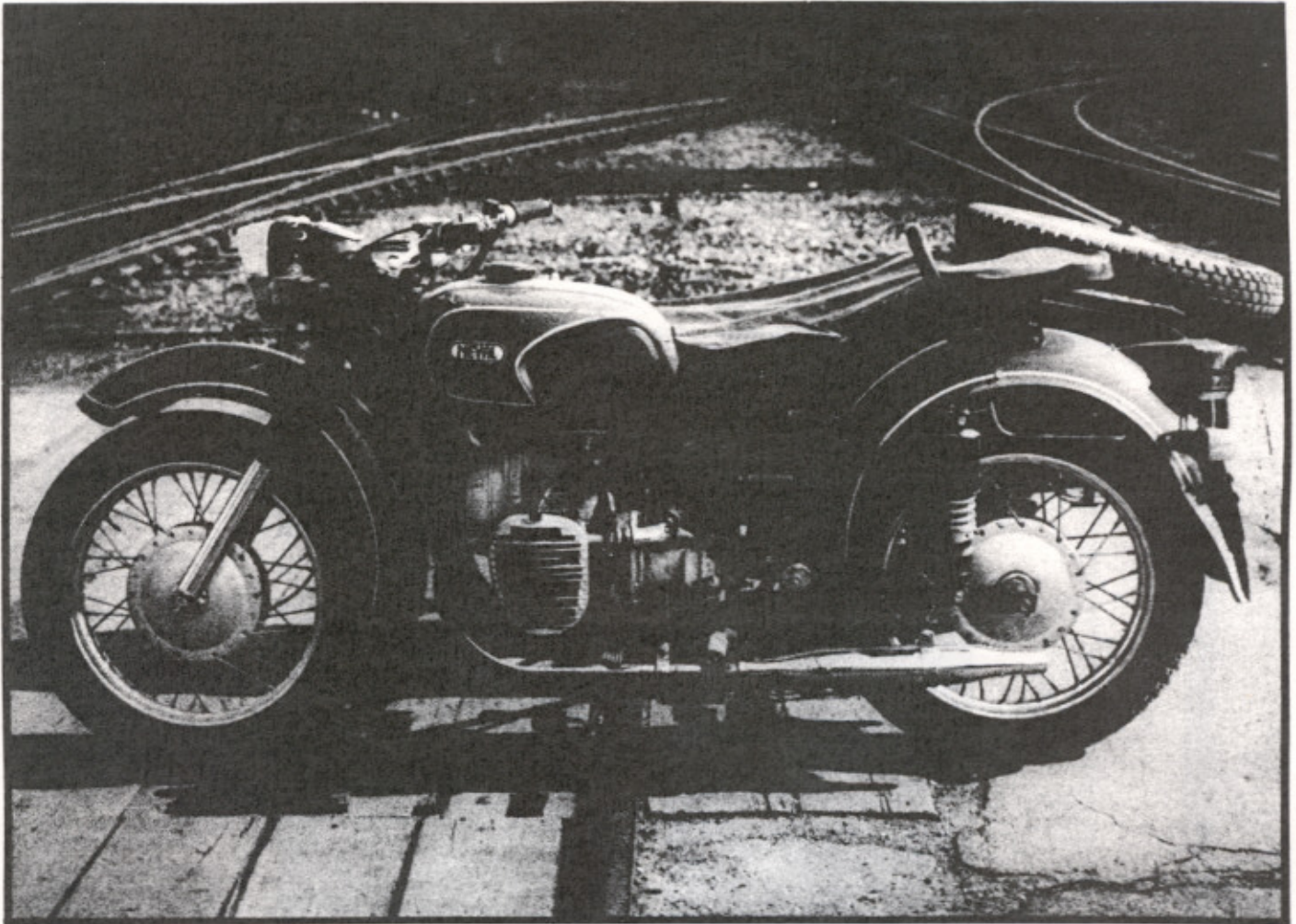
of people, was the nature of the blokes they were dealing with. The directors of Neval Ltd are not the usual silk-tongued, languid, pin-stripe-suited, ex-Eton and Guards creeps who infest the world of international commodity trading. They are hard-nosed, blunt, Northern businessmen who have worked their way up from humble beginnings, into making a few quid without screwing the buying public.

Anecdote time, readers. Neville Mason's bluntness is characterised by his *actual* response to a request for a test bike from Barry Winfield, deputy camp commandant of *Stalag Luft Bike Magazine*. Bazza reported, in his regulation slugging of an old, second-hand, Dniepr combo obtained from some other source, that Neville had . . . er . . . impolitely refused his request, in the light of *Bike's* past treatment of a Neval motorcycle. (*Bike* had used pictures of a Neval stood rather suggestively in a scrapyard.) Neville had told him, in fact, to *Fuck Off!*

Neval had already begun developing bikes, using Russian two-stroke motors to produce cheap, clubman's trials irons. This process was extended to the lightweight road machines. Bikes were stripped down, modified and restyled. Neval paid particular attention to the smaller bikes' well known faults. The terrible handling of earlier models was cured by gussetting frames. More chrome, better brakes, switchgear and paintwork were added. The engines, which were not at all bad, if a little rough around the edges, were improved with gas flowing, modified porting and the addition of electronic ignition on all the range.

The completed sample bikes were then airfreighted back to the USSR, where the relevant factories attempted to





PICTURES

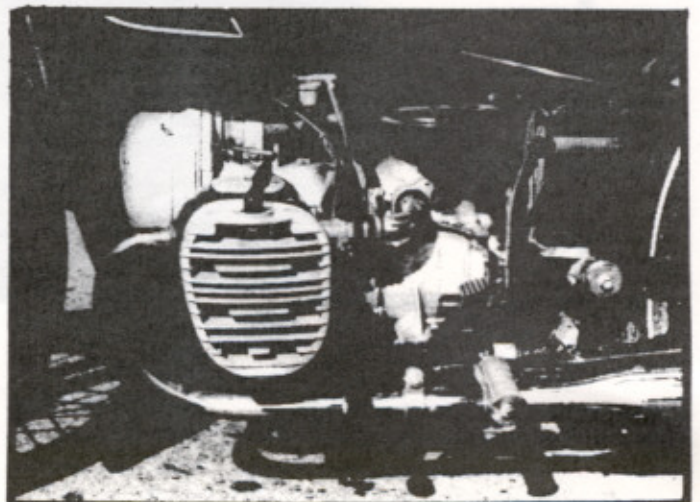
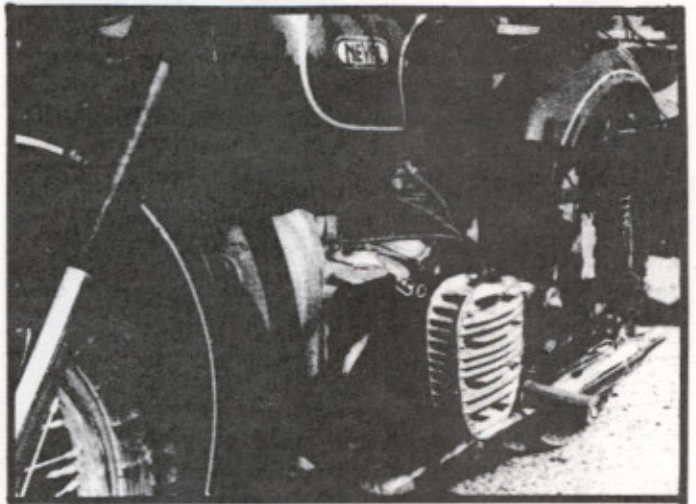
Page fourteen/The proof of the pudding. . . yes, the MT12 will wheelie like a good'un. Notice ace road tester Willis cowering in the sidecar.

Page sixteen/Ace road tester Willis posing nonchalantly on the bike. He even rode it a bit.

This page/Above/side view of the MT12 amply demonstrates the long, low, lines of the plot. We didn't measure the seat height but it sure is low.

Right/two aspects of the 750cc side-valve mill. Those big, flat, finned heads take a bit of getting used to, as does the rather peculiar double ended gear lever, which has a choice of pedal heights, presumably so that the comrades can still swop cogs whilst keeping their feet clear of the Afghan snow.

Page nineteen/Nev. Mason's son doing his best to put the wind up our Roger. The quizzical expression on his face is related to the difficulty of rolling cigarettes without letting go of the grabrail.





produce carbon copies, which were in turn freighted back to the British concessionaire. Mistakes were not tolerated. If the factories made cock-ups, the bikes were remodified and sent all the way back to Russia again.

Each Soviet bike factory only makes one model, so the factories which didn't cooperate were easily identifiable. In several cases, Neval complained to the state exporting organisation in Moscow and were surprised to learn that older, more conservative, factory directors were actually put out to grass because of the complaints. Whether this meant peaceful retirement to a Black Sea resort or a one way trip to the Gulag Archipelago, the Russians didn't say.

The end result of all this effort is that Russian metal is about to make it. I saw a single cylinder, two stroke, 250cc Neval in the company's Lincolnshire factory. It had lotsa chrome, blue metallic finish paint, somewhat Yamaha-esque switchgear and looked as good as any Italian lightweight. The only big difference, of course, being the price. It only costs about six hundred quid. It's going to sell.

One unintentional by-product of all this development work has been the effect on Russia's other export markets. Recently, Neval were expecting a delivery of 150 bikes from the Minsk factory, where the 125cc machines are made. Only 100 crates turned up. In due course, the company discovered that the bikes had got lost in the docks and had been loaded onto a freighter bound for Cuba.

It turned out that not only did the Cubans not want to give them back, but they are now demanding that all the thousands of motorcycles they import from Russia be of the same standard as Neval's fifty bikes! Previously Havana

greasers were having to put up with the basic stuff produced for Russia's home consumption. (And not even a cigar lighter!).

Neval are now planning to open up several new overseas markets for soviet bikes. The company is already the sole concessionaire in places as diverse as Canada, The Seychelles and Mauritius. Very recently, an agreement was reached on the concession for the USA, as well.

In the last year, Neval has extended its range to include the Dniepr, a flat twin four-stroke. This bike is a 650cc shaftie, mutated from the BMW at some point way back in the mists of time. Designated the MT10, when equipped with a chair on the left-hand side, or the M10 without it, the bike has an OHV motor minus many of the fabled mechanical disaster areas of the Ural, a similar machine imported in the bad old days of Satra. (The Ural is incidentally, still in production, but Neval have no plans to import it!).

With the aid of a resident Russian technician, Neville Mason is giving the Dniepr the standard Neval treatment. In the half-light of their workshop, I saw a thoroughly modern combo, with greatly altered cycle parts and styling, awaiting completion and a journey back to the Dniepr factory for evaluation. Future bikes are likely to have improved motors, too, with the addition of electric starters.

There is one even larger and stranger machine in the Neval line-up. It's called the Dniepr MT12 and was the official reason for my trek to the heathen wastes of Lincolnshire, or at least the bit of it that the bureaucrats would have us call Humberside. When Neville Mason offered me the chance to test a 750cc, side-valve, two wheel drive combo with *reverse*

gear, I just couldn't resist it. Needless to say, he knew that I couldn't possibly have ridden a two wheel drive combo before. What I didn't tell him, until actually slinging a leg over the said object, was that I had never ridden a combo before, either. (Pause for knowing laughter from readership.)

The arrangements were made, London NW1 was definitely to be deprived of the presence of self and trusty lensperson, Andrew Macpherson, for one whole day. The trouble with arrangements, especially ones made by associates of chaotically-run publications like this one, is that they don't stay made for long. My bike broke on the Tuesday before the Saturday. By Thursday, I'd mended it only to discover that Andy's lump of upmarket Italian scrap had developed a bent crank. (How does any bike *develop* a bent crank? Easy, if it's a Laverda.)

The trouble with photographers is that they tend to carry about lots of gear, too much stuff to load onto one bike with two people on it, in fact. Saturday morning saw us solve this problem by venturing forth in a borrowed Renault R16. I don't particularly enjoy driving things with a wheel at each corner. I definitely get a zero buzz from knackered Renaults with windscreen wipers that switch themselves on every time you change gear and have cooling systems that leak. It got us there and back, so here endeth the Renault road test. At least it had a radio.

We arrived in New Holland, where the Neval Works is situated, admiring a skyline dominated by the biggest job-creation programme since Roosevelt's New Deal, otherwise known as the Humber Suspension Bridge. We were late, the sun was shining and Neville Mason had gone home for lunch. A quick phone call ascertained that we had not yet blown it. Ten minutes later we were in Neville's back yard, admiring the combo and a collection of well-used Neval trials bikes. The Mason family *ride* them as well as sell them.

After a preliminary chat, which provided me with most of the information for the first part of this feature, we returned to the factory to look over some other machines. Neville led the way, with his son as ballast in the chair, me desperately trying to keep up on half a mile of curvy gravel road. Hang on a minute, I thought, he's not riding a fast bike, motor cars can go round corners as fast as any combo, etc. By the time we reached a straight bit of metalled road, he was vanishing into the proverbial sunset.

At the factory, Neville diplomatically suggested that we head for a nice, traffic-free, disused airfield, considering my, ahem, inexperience. I changed into professional road tester's fancy dress, thinking that if this was going to be wipe-out time, I might as well look stylishly silly in the photos, rather than just silly. I climbed into the chair and Neville drove.

I think that if I'd insisted, he would have been quite happy for me to take over there and then. He knew just how robust the outfit is; at that point, I didn't. He gets prospective customers turning up all the time, for tests, and is happy to let anybody have a go. Only the previous week, some kid had turned it over into a ditch on his first corner, Neville laughingly informed me.

We set off on a tortuous route through several miles of dusty backroads, photographer in hot pursuit, in the Renault, with Neville's son. Neville drove flat out, drifting through bends with incredible ease, shouting a commentary about the machine down at me, cowering in the chair, wondering quite which way to lean, and when.

My introduction to the delights of riding the Neval MT12 began on an old taxi-path, now surrounded by fields of green, young corn. Having restarted the thing . . . easier than I thought, considering the side operating kickstart like an old BMW's . . . I pulled in the clutch and engaged first gear.

"The clutch cable's broken, I think."

"No it hasn't, just take your foot off the gear pedal."

I did as I was told, the bike stalled. I'd let go of the poxy clutch lever as well, hadn't I. The bike has a slick-shaft, you see, similar to the old Triumph device, where the shift also operates the clutch. Try again, yeah, great, we're rolling.

The gearbox isn't very positive and is a bit clunky. After all, it took BMW about 17 million years to sort the aggravations of its similar box, the Russians haven't moved into detailed high-tech, yet, and certainly not on this bike.

The first time you get across a different bike, it always feels strange. The MT12 was no exception. The bike is deceptively small and the riding position weird as a result. The rider sits right down into it, on a sprung saddle. I found my knees a bit high for comfort and the foot controls difficult to locate and operate.

Somehow, on the long tarmac straight, I found my way through the gears and gathered a bit of speed. Combos are not so bad, I thought. Fair enough, it's necessary to concentrate on straight line direction but certainly not to the extent of it being a nuisance. Easy, really, isn't it? Oh, yes, what have we here? A tight right hand corner approaching me at a great rate of knots. Simple, just lean into the . . . ah, this thing has a sidecar on the right hand side, hasn't it. I can't lean it into anything.

When the surprisingly good brakes slid us to a halt, we were in a cornfield. "What happened then?" I asked Neville, who



was helpless with mirth in the sidecar. "You panicked" he replied. He was quite correct. After further instruction, I managed to cope with the right-handers, the left-handers being relatively easy, just a matter of keeping the throttle wide open and letting the bike steer itself.

It had become increasingly apparent, though, that I wasn't going to learn enough to do party tricks for the benefit of the photographer or be able to really put the outfit through its paces. Neville suggested that we retire to some nearby disused chalkpits, which were a popular practice ground for local trials riders.

I got into the chair and he drove. Five minutes later, he swerved straight through the hedge, I kid you not, smashed the combo through a screen of brushwood and small trees, ("No problem" said Neville) and over the edge of what I thought was a thirty foot sheer drop. It wasn't quite sheer, only about 1/1. When we hit the floor, the suspension didn't even bottom out. ("Pretty good, eh?" said Neville.)

It was on rough terrain that the incredible traction of two driven wheels really showed. We steamed round and round the chalk pits, with Neville doing his best to scare the shit out of me and/or knock the bike to bits. It stayed completely intact, I couldn't even see any new scratches on the paintwork, despite the earlier exercise in tree demolition.

Aimed up semi-vertical, loose shale slopes, the MT12 made easy meat of them, taking off from the top edges. We even attacked one such slope, from a standing start, in reverse, making it almost to the top. We were only baulked once, not because the plot lost traction but because excessive steepness slowed us down sufficiently for the front wheel to drop over the top edge, grounding the bottom runners of the frame.

We slid backwards down the slope, wheels locked, broadsiding near the bottom and nearly turning over. The entire outfit reared up on the side of the chair, which just happened to still contain me, but Neville managed to pull it back. ("Your face went totally white, then" said Neville, laughing.) No mean feat, that, I thought, he's a strong lad, Neville, holding onto 900lbs of out-of-control combo. I asked him when he thought I should consider stepping out . . . "Simple," he replied, "When you see me step off, you know it's time to do something."

Considering how well the MT12 stuck to the most outrageous contours, I was, by this time, convinced that the tyres must have been made by Doctor Martens. The solidity of the unit is very impressive. The bike is really part of the old generation of Russian machines but seems to have none of the shoddy finish and mechanical unreliability that is associated with the Urals and early Dnieprs.

The quality of its design and construction is directly related to its function. The Dniepr is a military bike. This explains a lot of the more peculiar features of its specification. The most peculiar must be the engine. A strong selling point of this motorcycle will be the fact that it's got the only large capacity side-valve motor in production anywhere in the world. The mill actually wacks out 28bhp, more than the OHV 650cc

Dniepr, which despite being a more modern unit, produces only 26bhp. (*Incorrect MT12 @ 32 BHP. JG*)

It's almost possible to fire the engine up on anything from 90 proof vodka to suntan oil. It should run, normally, on very low octane petrol but two star fuel will do. Neville had experienced a few problems with three star, the lowest grade obtainable in New Holland, but nothing serious. Whatever you put in the tank, the bottom end pulling power is such that the outfit has happily chugged along with up to seven people loaded onto it.

The gearing is very low, because of the drive to two wheels and the weight of the whole plot. Flat out in top means a mere 56 mph, which isn't much to write home about, until you remember that you can maintain quite unusual speeds over anything from foot-deep blancmange to broken bricks. Neval will probably have a solo version of the MT12 available soon, and Mason reckons that with a change of cogs it should pull 85 mph.

The transmission on the combo is comprised of two exposed shafts, which are apparently quite robust. The only bits that wear are the UJ's even though they are covered by rubber boots. The drive to the sidecar wheel feeds power through a conventional slip differential. (*No! split torque!*)³

The chassis looks old-fashioned but is incredibly strong and rigid. The welding must be functional . . . we didn't manage to break the frame and we certainly tried . . . but doesn't look pretty and wouldn't win any BOC welder-of-the-year awards. The sidecar sub-frame is so hefty that I don't think dropping a house on it would bend it.

The suspension is on the hard side, but copes with any amount of abuse, as previously stated. The small cycle parts and switchgear are just what you'd expect on a military vehicle . . . basic.

As you probably gathered by now, I think the Neval MT12 is pretty terrific. It has a unique character that's hard to define. Viewing it purely as a 750cc road motorcycle, within parameters like performance, handling, finish, comfort, etc., it's a museum piece. Solid, reliable, slow, alright for miserable, long-coated trads but worse than useless for having fun on.

Such a narrow view is wildly wrong. It's probably one of the most versatile motorcycles ever built. The MT12's off-road potential is greater than any Jap street scrambler. It'll do everything the average spotty trailbike owner could possibly desire, why, it even wheelie's like nothing on earth. For a fraction of the price, serious dirt-diggers can own a machine that'll make a Land Rover look silly.

The price is the one thing that you should never forget. If *Maggie Thatcher and the Whitehall Rude Boys* start the Third World War tomorrow, I know what I'll do. It's straight down the local NatWest for me, a quick revolutionary expropriation of £1400 and off to buy a Neval MT12. Besides, it'll look good when the Russian Army gets here two days later.

Roger Willis