

BMW R90S

It is hard nowadays to believe that during the early seventies BMW suffered from a poor and staid image. BMWs were well-designed and extremely reliable machines, but they were not seen as the most desirable motorcycles on the planet.

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Falling sales became a significant threat to the motorcycle division of BMW, however BMW North America sales director Bob Lutz as well as Suzuki Katana stylist, Hans Muth, came to the rescue by creating the R90S - the bike that turned around BMW's fortunes. The R90S changed the German marque's course, albeit at a price. Owning BMW's latest and arguably greatest model would set you back a staggering load of beer money when it was launched in 1973. And its high price - £1,799 compared to £585 for a Bonneville - attracted a great deal of flak from the motorcycling press. Costing as much as a small family car, the R90S nevertheless won over critics with its impressive specification and remarkable performance. >



Above: Derek has owned this immaculate R90S for 30 years and the paintwork is original

Overnight BMWs flat twin changed from passé to whoopee and justifiably so - because if you could afford it, BMW ownership now meant excitement, adventure and exclusivity. BIKE's Mark Williams said of the new machine: 'The man who can afford to buy the new R90S doesn't want to be concerned with maintenance, but nevertheless he demands mind-zapping power, controllability and, perhaps above all, something out of the ordinary. I think such a man may consider the R90S to be fair value'.

Not only did the R90S go on to win public approval, to its credit the BMW won the 1976 Production TT in the able hands of Helmut Dahne. The Beemer was elevated to even higher status when British racer Reg Pridmore won the 1976 AMA Superbike Championship on a R90S, with the model taking first and second podiums at Daytona earlier that year. Another British Champion Dave Potter also raced a Gus Kuhn BMW R90S endurance bike at Le Mans, the Barcelona 24hrs and at Bol d'or.

The R90S was bristling with tried and tested German technology and it was no accident that BMW had built a race winner. The new and well engineered 898cc engine was the largest the firm had ever built, with a bore and stroke measuring 90x71mm and a compression ratio of 9.5:1. It produced 67bhp @ 7200rpm with a

(claimed) top speed of 125mph (by contrast, Triumph's admittedly smaller 750 Bonneville produced 46bhp @ 6500rpm) and proved to be as reliable as any of BMW's previous models.

The R90S was fitted with BMW's new 5-speed gearbox, twin front discs, massive accelerator pump Dell'Orto racing carburettors and a completely new cockpit-style half fairing that left no doubts about its sporting intentions. Glowing press reports similar to LJK Setright's appraisal in BIKE magazine catapulted the R90S into the top league of superbike sales: 'The detail finish, overall balance, the feel of the controls, the blissful ease of the new five-speed gearbox, and not least the fact that the new R90S can be ridden fast without fatigue, and without having to be refuelled every fifty minutes, all combine to make this an absolutely top class motorcycle. If I could afford one, I would hesitate no longer.'

Originally launched in two-tone metallic silver-grey the iconic Daytona orange model followed just one year later and is regarded by aficionados as BMW's most desirable and collectable model.

DERECK HORNE'S DELIGHTFULLY ORIGINAL BIKE

The stunning 1975 Daytona orange R90S shown here is an ex-Jack Gow Motorcycles of Dundee machine.

As well as being an official BMW dealer, Jack Gow was Scottish Racing Champion in 1967 and 1970. A renowned racer at the IOM TT Races he realised his dream by winning the 1995 Classic TT on a 500cc Manx Norton. Jack lost his life the following year, aged just 56, during practice at the Manx TT. The R90S now belongs to Derek Horne and is in totally original condition.

During the late Seventies Derek was an ardent racing fan and became a fan of the Daytona orange R90S when it trounced Ducati, Triumph, Norton, Honda and Suzuki to win the Production 1000 Race at Knockhill. 'I just couldn't believe my eyes when this bright orange BMW twin began to carve its way through the field in the 1000cc production race.

"Nothing could touch it for straight line speed and even around the tight circuit that is Knockhill - the BMW swept everything aside. I knew I had to have one!" laughed Derek.

Derek bought his R90S from a friend in 1987 for £1250 - 'a substantial amount of money back then', Derek assured me. Today his R90S still looks brand new and its mint condition is quite astonishing considering it has covered more than 48000 miles. His R90S also records four owners and has lived all of its forty-two years in and around Dundee. Thirty of

1 Clock, voltmeter and warning lights for charging faults and brake failure - master cylinder is located under the petrol tank

2 Electric start, kill switch and BMW's alternative indicator switch - you either love it or hate it!

3 One criticism of the bikes nowadays are the ATE callipers, but braided hoses can improve the spongy feel

4 This scrawl is the initials of the final assembly worker, so you could trace your bike back to the factory

5 Original tool roll sir? Complete? Of course

those years have been in Derek's cosseted care - and I can confirm that his R90S looks better in the flesh than it does in the photographs!

"The bike's first three owners did very little work to the R90S, but it is A BMW!" Derek was careful to emphasise. "The first owner took the bike on a long trip to the FIM Rally in Romania and during my thirty years of ownership I have racked up the mileage with tours throughout Scotland and the UK. It has also won countless awards at local shows - including several for 'Best Bike in Original Condition' at VMCC events. In fact the older it gets, the better this R90's immaculate looks are appreciated. However as I notched up the miles, even the world's most reliable motorcycle began to require some TLC.

Unfortunately after 40k miles, some Bavarian twins are known to drop exhaust valves. So rather than cross my fingers when I reached this heady milestone, I had the top end overhauled by renowned engineer Simon Linford. After cutting the valve seats, Simon also added new guides, valves, springs and collets. He also honed the barrels and fitted new piston rings. During this time I decided to add progressive fork springs to calm the BMW's excessive front end dive - the front forks have eight inches of travel and the R90's powerful twin discs tend to swallow this up during heavy braking.



Other age related problems on BMWs are rotting seat bases and rusting battery carriers, both of which had suffered on my machine. So the original seat base was primed and painted before being recovered by BMW expert Keith Shaw. The rusty battery box was blasted back to bare metal, primed and then powder coated for longevity's sake. The starter relay suddenly failed but once I replaced it, normal starting resumed. At the time I also added a Boyer electronic ignition system and it has never let me down. The original factory paintwork is largely unflawed and only the odd stone chip spoils the durable BMW finish. I have owned many different brands of motorcycles and in my experience the quality and finish of BMW's is second to none." Derek concluded.

- 1 You paid your money for quality and finish - more than 30 years later you can see why
- 2 Dell'Orto PHM 38mm carbs need frequent balancing
- 3 Shaft drive simplicity
- 4 Check the lever for easily adjusting the preload - an we no longer have these now why?

SO, WHY A BMW R90S I ASKED?

"After watching the new R90S winning production races at home and abroad I became very impressed with their sporting potential. There was also the harsh reality that BMW's simply outclassed any British bikes of the era. The factory's fame for outstanding reliability and quality engineering was also hard to ignore - particularly when my British Bonneville appeared unrefined by comparison, and vibrated and leaked oil from just about every joint. Maintenance-free shaft drive was another attraction - principally because I was weaned on Duckhams Link-Life and the potentially dangerous practice of boiling a chain over an open gas stove in the middle of your garage. Next you would hang the hot and dripping chain on a rusty old nail to drip-dry before you faced the messy job of refitting it - small wonder that servicing the chain was a largely ignored task. It makes me laugh to think that's just the way it was before BMWs appeared on my horizon."





I often had my nose pressed up against Jack Gow's showroom window just dreaming of riding a BMW. I had the opportunity to test one when a friend offered me a ride on his brand new R90S – he was a very good friend! The smooth engine's relentless torque was a sensation and the stunning looks just blew me away. The finish is also top class and I was delighted to learn that every machine on the Bayerische Motoren Werke production line was signed off by its final assembly line worker. This valued employee's signature can be found inside the RHS cockpit fairing adjacent to the headlight mounting – what a brilliant touch!" beamed Derek.

RIDING AND USING AN R90S

Derek's R90S benefits from regular use at club events and on occasional tours – meaning he now clocks up several hundred miles per year. Although he passed me a box-load of rosettes and trophies for this feature, he does admit that showing the bike has lost some of its allure. Nowadays he much prefers to get out and about exploring the local scenery. The BMW is often rolled out for special SCMC events and is Derek's choice for competing in 'The Scotia Challenge' - a map based orienteering challenge with no less than 45 remote checkpoints, each location requiring to be photographed with the participating bike and rider before moving on to the next checkpoint. Competing classics such as Derek's R90S are awarded extra points over modern motorcycles – an incentive intended to get more classics out roaming in the gloaming, instead of collecting dust in the garage.

"Some Scotia checkpoints require ferry trips and overnight stays in remote Scottish islands and the BMW is the ideal machine for gobbling up the miles and arriving at the checkpoint as fresh as when you

departed. Remember that the R90S was a highly successful endurance machine and when fully loaded with panniers, tank bag and even a pillion, the BMW will still cruise effortlessly all day long.

The engine can feel lumpy at low revs but I believe this is just a characteristic of the 900cc engine's heavy flywheels and high compression. The twin Dell-Ortos do tend to go off tune and require regular attention. On an open throttle however, the engine is silky-smooth and delivers useable power all the way past the ton. These days I prefer gentle touring; but I once had the R90S ripping along at 115mph on the TT's mountain section, with some still to go. The tach redlines at 6,700rpm and the needle swings rapidly in the lower gears. Third gear is good for 80mph, and forth just tops the ton - after that, the engine is good for 122mph in fifth (BMW claim a top speed of 125mph). The engine revels in the power band all the way through the gears thanks to BMW's excellent five speed close-ratio gearbox.

On the move the cockpit fairing deflects most of the elements from your body. It is possible to tuck your head and knees behind the fairing but room is tight, so I would describe weather protection as fairly good. A welcome bonus is the delightful cluster of cockpit instruments: clock, voltmeter, speedometer and tachometer - all of which are easy to read and are classically styled. There is also a group of five warning lights – brake failure, generator charge, oil pressure, neutral and indicators. All are bright enough to be visible day or night, but not enough to dazzle the rider. Instruments are softly back-lit in true BMW fashion. Other nice details are the two little inlay panels that supply information about tyre pressures and oil specifications. I should also mention the cockpit clock, which keeps excellent time."

- 1 An R90S in the shed and Scotland on his doorstep means Derek gets out as often as he can
- 2 Practicality can still look good
- 3 Fairing is more protective than it looks and adds greatly to touring ability

Right: Each R90S paintjob was sprayed by hand and therefore, unique



**"The bike that gave
BMW direction"**

During the photo shoot Derek also insisted on rolling out the impressive BMW tool kit for my camera to gawp at...after which he revealed the location of the factory assembly worker's signature. I was next briefed about the BMW's exclusive hand-pump, first aid kit and useful hand levers for adjusting the rear shock springs – all a nod to the consistently high level of refinement on the BMW R90S.

According to Derek some tyre brands can be sensitive to crossing white lines. Currently he's rolling on Bridgestone Battlax BT45's; but after 30 years on his R90S he feels Continentals or Metzlers are best suited to his style of riding. Handling he described as 'solid and predictable' and the brakes are apparently good performers too - although the front

discs can feel 'wooden' when compared to the modern equivalent.

Derek further said of his R90S: "There is not a quicker or more comfortable bike from A to B, and once you're in the groove it's deceptively easy to knock off the miles. Economy is also useful at around 50-55mpg. So whether its scratching or touring that takes your fancy, the R90S is an accomplished all-rounder."

In summing up his stunning motorcycle Derek believes a succinct quotation from the BMW Airheads website best defines the model's importance: 'The R90S was the bike that gave BMW direction'.

