

Rider Retrospective

Yamaha XS650: 1970-1983

Build a better mousetrap . . . and you can sell it for a long time. The XS650 was Yamaha's first foray into the four-stroke sweepstakes and it was a lasting success, an enduring, and endearing, motorcycle. With few changes over 14 years, it remained basically the same machine. The company made a lot of money off of this 653cc twin.

The trouble with the overhead-valve parallel twin, as conceived by Englishman Ted Turner back in the '30s, was that it shook. The revs rose and so did the vibration level, bringing mild anguish to the person gripping the handlebars. And what was an acceptable level of rider discomfort by the standards of the '40s and '50s changed considerably in the '60s.

Yamaha engineers decided to improve on the theme. First, all that crashing and banging of great, long pushrods could be dispensed with by putting in an overhead camshaft. Turn it by chain. The pistons and valves on this biggish twin could spin at 7,000 rpm with no fear of the engine's self destructing. Second, the major problem associated with that discordant reciprocating engine was in the harmonics of the 360-degree crankshaft; any lack of precision in manufacturing tolerances were painfully magnified many times. Using excellent production techniques and a lot of care in assembly, the XS650 was remarkably smooth, even without the benefit of counterbalancers on the crankshaft.

Happiness was in the hands of the



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT KEEN



Model: 1970 XS650. Owner: Robert Keen, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

rider. This was not a threateningly heavy machine, nor overly complicated. Many riders who remembered the wonder years of the balky, breaking, bum-numbing British twins looked upon the XS650 with great affection. It was one of the first Japanese motorcycles to acquire a cultish following, and the Yamaha 650 Society, founded by Gentleman Jim Griner of the Old School, became the motorcycling equivalent of the Skull & Bones.

The XS650 provided the rider with a basic motorcycle at a basic cost. In this present era of specialization, we often forget that the no-frills machine of yore, with a long, flat saddle, middling-wide handlebars and sufficient power at the right hand remains the highly pleasurable essence of our sport.

Yamaha was not loathe to implement progress. An electric starter was added in 1972 (with a little compression release/starter mechanism right out of Rube Goldberg; this was soon changed), and a disc front brake. What more needed to be done? In time an electronic breakerless ignition. Mag wheels.

The XS650 was the logical extension of the twin. However, it did take a radical departure in 1977 when the Special was introduced. This was the nascence of the Oriental cruiser. A stepped saddle, fat rear tire and small gas tank were the prerequisites. Much griping was heard from the traditionalists, but the styling mavens were not to be denied.

And then . . . gone. But certainly not forgotten. Every summer in some meadow somewhere in this great land, the Society gathers, and from a thousand throats comes the rallying cry, "On Six Fifty!" ■ *Clement Salvadori*