

TRIUMPH TRIDENT



ON ROAD AND TRACK

By Graham Clayton

In the early 1960's the top management at Triumph Motorcycles firmly believed that Japanese motorcycle manufacturers would continue to focus on the production and sale of small displacement models. The introduction of the Honda CB450 "Black Bomber" in 1965 and later persistent rumors that Honda was developing a 750cc road bike would shatter any such thinking.

The British were already aware of the Japanese firms' capacity to rapidly generate motorcycles of advanced design. Triumph chief Edward Turner had visited Japan in the early '60s, met Soichiro Honda and toured Japanese motorcycle production facilities. He was awed by the organization, financial strength and manufacturing capabilities of the Japanese companies. What he relayed to his board of directors had little effect, and Triumph later scrambled to meet the Japanese big bike threat and preserve its market.

Tiger and a half

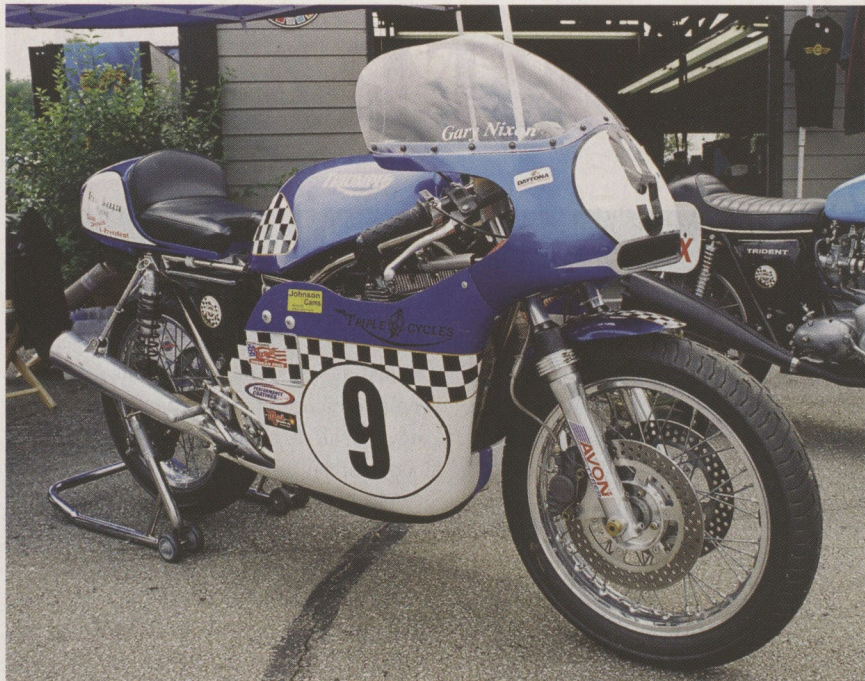
Fortunately for Triumph two key people, Bert Hopwood and Doug Hele, had been working on an unofficial back-room project since 1963. Their idea was to create a transverse three-cylinder 750cc engine, based on the addition of a cylinder to the push-rod OHV 500cc Tiger twin. (A "Tiger and a half" prototype was built and running by 1965, and could have been in production as early as 1966 had the Triumph top management taken the Japanese threat seriously.)

The triple was rushed into production as the T150 Trident and launched in the summer of 1968 amid much fanfare. Hailed as the first superbike, the Triumph triple offered performance levels well beyond the company's 650cc twins, and were much smoother running.

Triumph was first to market with its 750cc multi, but the bike was clearly tied, technically and cosmetically, to earlier

Gary Nixon was a Triumph factory team racer in the early 1970s, and has raced Tridents now in vintage events. *Matt Benson photo*





It's unfortunate that Honda's CB750 eclipsed the Brit triple so much — it would have been nice to see the Trident on the street and track a few years longer. *Graham Clayton photo*

1960s models (making it more evolution than revolution). When Honda released its CB750 the following year the contrast between the two was glaring.

Honda's SOHC 750cc transverse four with four-into-four exhaust, electric start, front disc brake, five-speed gearbox, in-

novative styling and quality finish made it a quantum leap forward in motorcycle design.

Triumph responded to the CB750 with a series of refinements over the next five years, including adding a front disc brake, five-speed gearbox and improved

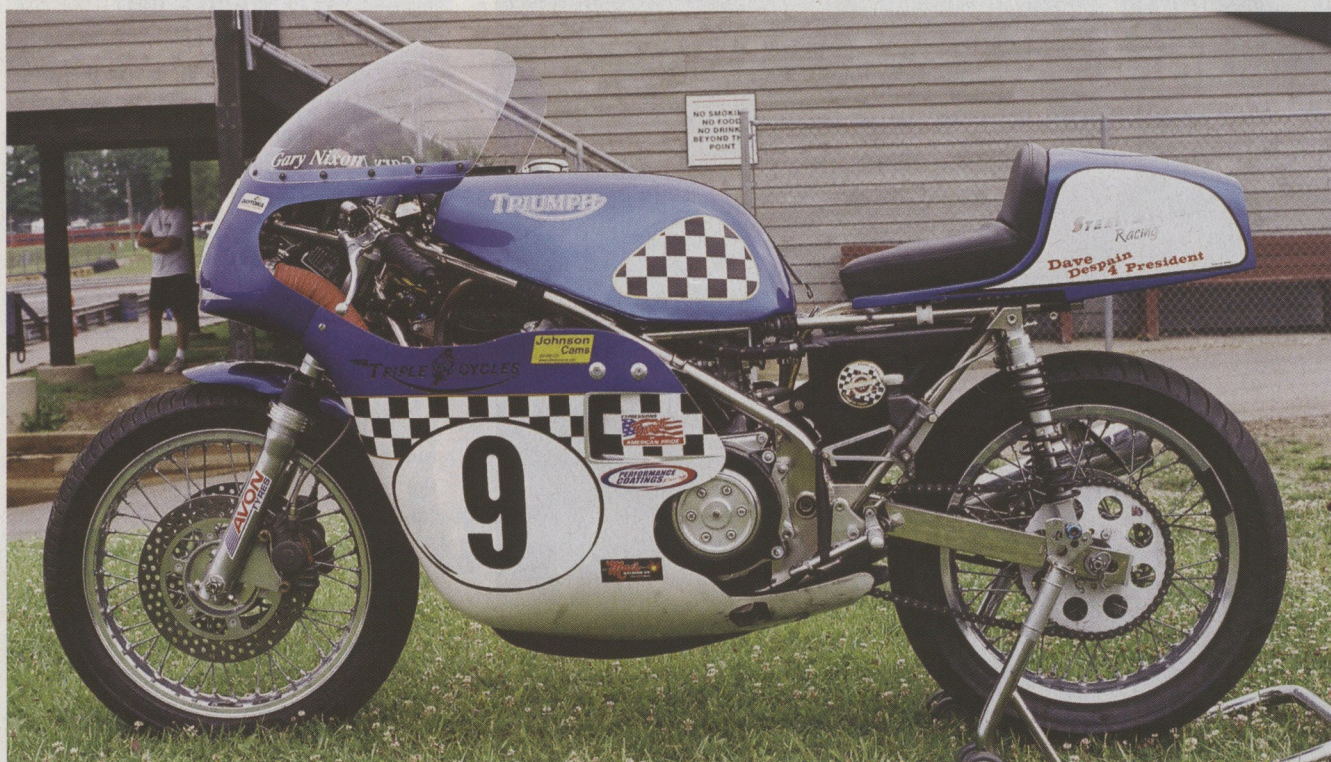
lubrication. Unfortunately, Trident sales never threatened the CB750; by the time the final revised T160 version came out in early 1975, the company was on the verge of bankruptcy. The T160 Tridents fitted with electric start and disc brakes front and rear were produced for barely one year before the Meriden plant closed its doors.

Total Trident production (all models) was about 26,000 units, far less than the roughly 1 million total sales for the single-cam CB750s. The six-valve triple, what many would argue as the pinnacle of postwar British motorcycle development, was a fine bike, but too little too late.

On the road

The 1969 T150 Trident featured here belongs to enthusiast Cyril Brazier. Finished in aquamarine, it features the angular bread box fuel tank and triple-tip "ray gun" mufflers (that many American riders disliked). The ray guns were replaced from 1970 on with a more traditional Triumph twin-style gas tank and megaphones.

The original T150 was one of the fastest versions of the Trident with speeds of 80 mph in second, 110 mph in third and 125-130 mph in top gear regu-



Watch for Steel Breeze Racing's Trident at vintage racing events, like here at AMA Vintage Motorcycle Days at Mid-Ohio, to get a look at what Brit racers could've been if they'd kept up better with the competition from Japan. *Graham Clayton photo*

lary reported in period road tests. Later models were fitted with more restrictive carburetors and exhausts, due to U.S. requirements, that dropped the top end by a good 10 mph.

The early Tridents had a reputation for fine handling and stability, much more so than the 40-pounds heavier CB750. The triple's twin shock, single down-tube frame layout was very close to the Triumph twins, but reinforced. Also borrowed from the twins were the front forks (with heavier springs) and drum brakes front and back.

The T150s were faster than the CB750s, though with quarter-mile times in the sub-14 second category, they were

a good half second or so slower through the time traps. The Tridents could cruise two-up at speeds of 70-80+ mph without difficulty. With 58 bhp on tap from the 740cc (67mm x 70mm) mill at 7,250 rpm and silky-smooth running, the triple was an excellent highway bike. The only thing that tarnishes that, admits Brazier, is the bike's relatively poor mileage (upper 30s), compounded on later models with smaller capacity fuel tanks.

Brazier admits that for around town riding the Trident can be a bit of a handful with a somewhat heavy clutch pull. The wide low-rise handle bars used on earlier models help somewhat in reducing low-speed steering effort, but the

bike is happier on the open road.

Brazier's experience with his T150 triple has been very positive. The bike has proven to be reliable, well behaved and a real pleasure to ride. He also likes its distinctive good looks, regardless of what others say.

On the track

One of the great ironies associated with the Triumph Trident is that while it was losing to its competition in the marketplace, it was winning on racetracks.

Triumph decided to enter the 1970 AMA Road Racing Series and Rob North was commissioned to construct flex-free racing frames for full-race



The "ray gun" exhaust tip on the Trident was not popular with U.S. buyers, and the exhaust would become more traditional after 1970. *Graham Clayton photo*



The Triumph Trident triple borrowed much from the twins, including front forks, brakes, and twin shock and single downtube styling. This 1969 Trident also features the angular bread box fuel tank of other Triumphs. *Graham Clayton photos*



Gary Nixon and the Trident triple have an edge here on Keith Campbell piloting a Harley-Davidson XR750TT. *Matt Benson photo*

Trident engines. These developed 85 bhp at the rear wheel, and posted the three highest trap speeds in qualifying for the 1970 Daytona 200 (with a fastest speed of 165.44 mph). Dick Mann won the race on a works CR750 Honda (the only

one of four CR750s to finish), but Triumph factory riders Gene Romero and Don Castro took their Tridents to second and third place finishes.

Over the next couple of years, riders of works Triumph triples and the closely related works BSA 750 Rocket IIIs won many AMA races, including first, second and third in the 1971 Daytona 200. Trident and Rocket III pilots also chalked up some impressive victories on the short circuits in Britain and Europe.

The Tridents also proved successful in production and endurance racing events. In 1971, Ray Pickrell and Percy Tait won the Bol D'Or 24-Hour endurance race on a Trident. 1971 also marked the first of five consecutive victories in the 10-lap Isle of Man Production TT Race by "Slippery Sam" — probably the World's best-known Trident.

The blue F750 Triumph racer here is the race-modified Steel Breeze Racing Trident built by Jerry Liggett. In 2005, former Triumph works rider and two-time AMA Grand National Champion Gary Nixon won the AHRMA Formula Vintage National Championship racing this bike. Nixon racked up five wins, four seconds and a fifth place finish to

take the championship.

Liggett is a long-standing Trident enthusiast, competent racer and is recognized as an expert restorer and builder of Tridents. The Slippery Sam replica on display at the Allen Motorsports Museum (www.allenmotorsports.com) is a noteworthy example of Liggett's work. The replica was certified by Les Williams, who built the original, as a 100-percent accurate reproduction of the bike as ridden to victory in the 1975 Production TT.

Nixon was a Triumph factory team rider in the early 1970s and raced the original works Tridents at Daytona, Talladega and other AMA National venues with considerable success. For him, returning to the saddle of a vintage racing triple was like coming home.

Nixon rates the Triumph Trident as the best four-stroke racer that he ever rode. While slightly less powerful than a CR750 Honda, and not quite as light as some other F750 machines, in his view it was the best all-around racing package. Coming from a racer who was a works rider for 10 years, and an acknowledged pavement expert, who would argue with him?



The Steel Breeze Trident is an attractive racer from every angle. *Graham Clayton photo*