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# A 116 Year Old Legend, Reborn

By Neil Hallam



I am just old enough to remember British "Rockers" with their beards, black leather jackets and most importantly; British motorcycles. The last of these British classics was the Norton Commando and Triumph Bonneville. Both disappeared from British roads in the 1980s, but are again on the rise. I was surprised to learn that the Norton survived on US roads throughout the missing decades in Britain and are now finding their way back with new models.

I visited Norton's new factory, close to Britain's Donington Park race track, where Sales Manager Sean Kynnersley reacquainted me with a legend. Factory is perhaps not the obvious term for the Norton operation. Formerly a British Airways office building, Norton's technicians hand build bikes in a fully carpeted workspace. As most of their assembly work is clean it seemed



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unnecessary to remove the carpet

## The Beginning

Norton began in Birmingham, England, in 1898. First making motorcycle parts and then building bikes in 1902. However, it took until 1908 to fit a Norton engine. The Norton racing legend began in the Thirties; of the nine Isle of Man TTs between 1931 and 1939, Norton won seven.

Norton contributed to WW2 by supplying almost 100,000 motorcycles to the forces. After the War, in 1949 the 500 cc Norton Dominator arrived.

The legendary Manx Norton appeared in 1950 with its Featherbed frame, raced by legends including Geoff Duke and John Surtees. This exceptionally stiff frame became the benchmark by which other frames were judged. In 1953 Norton sold out to Associated Motorcycles (AMC), who owned AJS, Matchless, Francis-Barnett and James. Norton pulled out of racing in 1954, but the Manx remained popular with privateer racers until production stopped in 1963.

American buyers contributed to Norton's development by demanding more power. This demand was met in 1962 with the 750cc Atlas. But increasing the engine's capacity caused vibration and was expensive to build. By the

late 1960s, competition from Japan was driving British motorcycle industry into decline. In 1966 AMC was reformed as Norton-Villiers.

The 750cc Commando arrived in 1968. The engine was mounted "isolastically" with rubber mountings. The vibration free ride made it a best seller, and was voted Motorcycle of the Year in Britain. Things looked good when the 850cc Commando appeared in 1973 and four new Nortons followed in 1974, including the John Player Norton race replica. But when the government withdrew its loans in 1975 Norton-Villiers went bust and the individual brands were sold.

Norton UK was re-launched in 1988. They enjoyed some racing success, winning the Isle of Man TT in 1992. Their only road model was a rotary "wankel" engined bike, which was supplied as an Interpol model for police use.

With debts of \$11.5 million, in 1991, Norton UK was sold to American investor Nelson Skalbania, who put his daughter Rosanda in charge of Norton Motors (1993) Ltd. This incarnation of the company ended in 1994, amid controversy over attempting to reclaim Nortons placed as museum exhibits.

During the 1990s, Oregon based Kenny Dreer was restoring old Nortons. He launched a modernised Commando

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...continued

in the early 2000s, but this was short lived and produced few bikes and ending production in 2006. Two of his prototypes are now in the Castle Donington factory.

After fifteen years of US ownership Norton returned to Britain thanks to Stuart Garner, UK businessman and owner of Norton Racing Ltd. Garner began production of a Commando based on Dreer's model at Leicestershire's Donington Park race track. Garner said that Norton will continue to race because racing is an essential part of their make-up.

### Norton Today

Norton's philosophy is to buy as local as possible, with 83% of their suppliers from the UK. Where they cannot buy British, they look for the world's best; such as Swedish Ohlins suspension and Italian Brembo brakes. The first of the new Commandos were single seat café racers. Early market research suggested most Norton owners would ride solo. So a single seat bike was designed, with a frame resembling the classic Featherbed frame. Later market pressure necessitated a dual seat, but most are still sold solo.

In just four years of production, Norton has sold over 1000 bikes. Only 350 are on British roads, the rest are mainly in Europe and the USA. The bike they shipped to the USA for type approval covered 12000 miles, as it had to be approved individually by each state. Sean described California as being a benchmark state, with many other states accepting California's test results.

Stuart Garner commented: "The Norton team has accomplished a monumental feat. The bike has come through rigorous testing, showing durability and build quality.

The process of opening the US market began two years ago with the recruitment of Dan Van Epps, ex CEO of Ducati North America, who helped steer us through the process to achieve the approvals. Peter Howes of Norton Canada has also worked tirelessly to make this possible...It has taken the Norton team a little under four years to rebuild this iconic British motorcycle brand."

The Commando genuinely is a hand built bike. It takes between eight and 12 hours for two technicians to build a Commando. Some pre-assembly is done earlier in the process, but each bike is essentially built by two men. This pace of production does mean that waiting time for a new Commando in the UK is 6 months. They have orders for 3000, which they are building at a rate of ten per week. So a Norton owner will be in an exclusive club. As a small manufacturer, with local suppliers, dealing with warranty work is always swift.

During my visit they were working on their Domi Racer project. This is a limited edition of 50 bikes, which was the result of giving their designers a free reign to come up with something special.

US retail prices for Norton's model range starts at \$18,000 for the Commando Sport to \$20,000 for the Café model.

[www.southbaytriumph.com](http://www.southbaytriumph.com) - USA

Distributor

[www.nortonmotorcycles.com](http://www.nortonmotorcycles.com) - Norton UK



Keanu Reeves took a female friend out for a spin on his Norton.



Vintage Norton



Stuart Garner, CEO Norton Motorcycles



Rt - Stuart Garner meets with Dan Van Epps, CEO of Norton America, in central New York



2010 Norton Commando961a