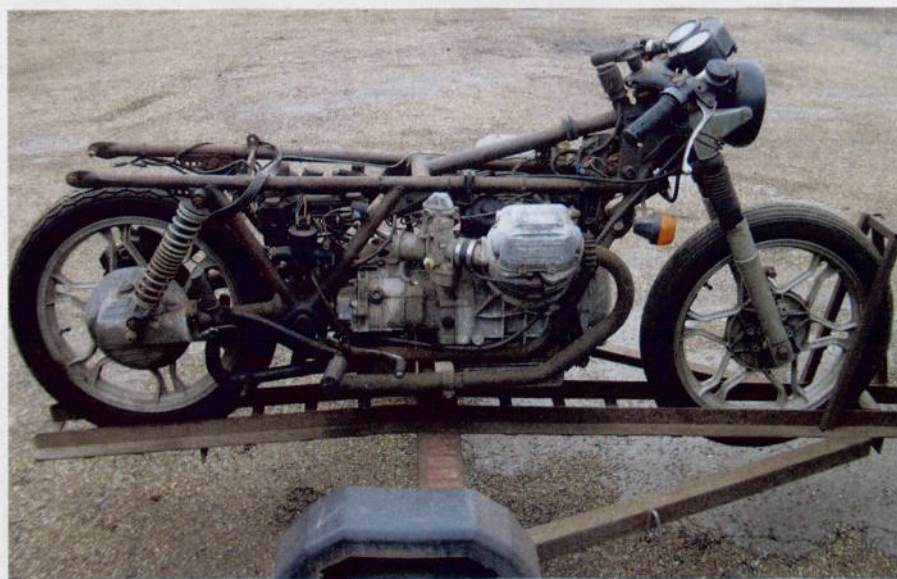




**Top:** The seller, John Norman, opens his lock-up to reveal the grungy Guzzi  
**Middle:** Restorer Nigel Billingsley assesses the project watched by John Norman and Clem  
**Bottom:** Decision made, the bodywork was removed for the trip to Staffordshire



# A

s I drag open the half-rotten door of an Essex lock-up the sun shines in on a bike that looks a mess. Its chrome and frame are masked with rust and the V-twin's alloy is thick in corrosion blooms. An enticing 9,031 miles show through the dusty glass of the clocks but what really excites me is the gaping hole in the rear fibreglass mudguard. Am I staring at a 1976 Moto Guzzi 850 Le Mans still shod with original tyres? Is this ice-blue maiden about to bring three decades of unrequited desire to an end? I've wanted one ever since my sister's boyfriend roared into our driveway aboard his dealer-fresh red Le Mans. I was 16 years old and its stunning looks made my jaw drop. It dropped a bit more when I worked out it would take 80 weeks of my lowly apprentice wages to buy one.

This is one of the sexiest superbikes of all time. With its sinister matt-black paint, moulded rubber seat and bikini fairing it looks fast even perched on its centrestand.

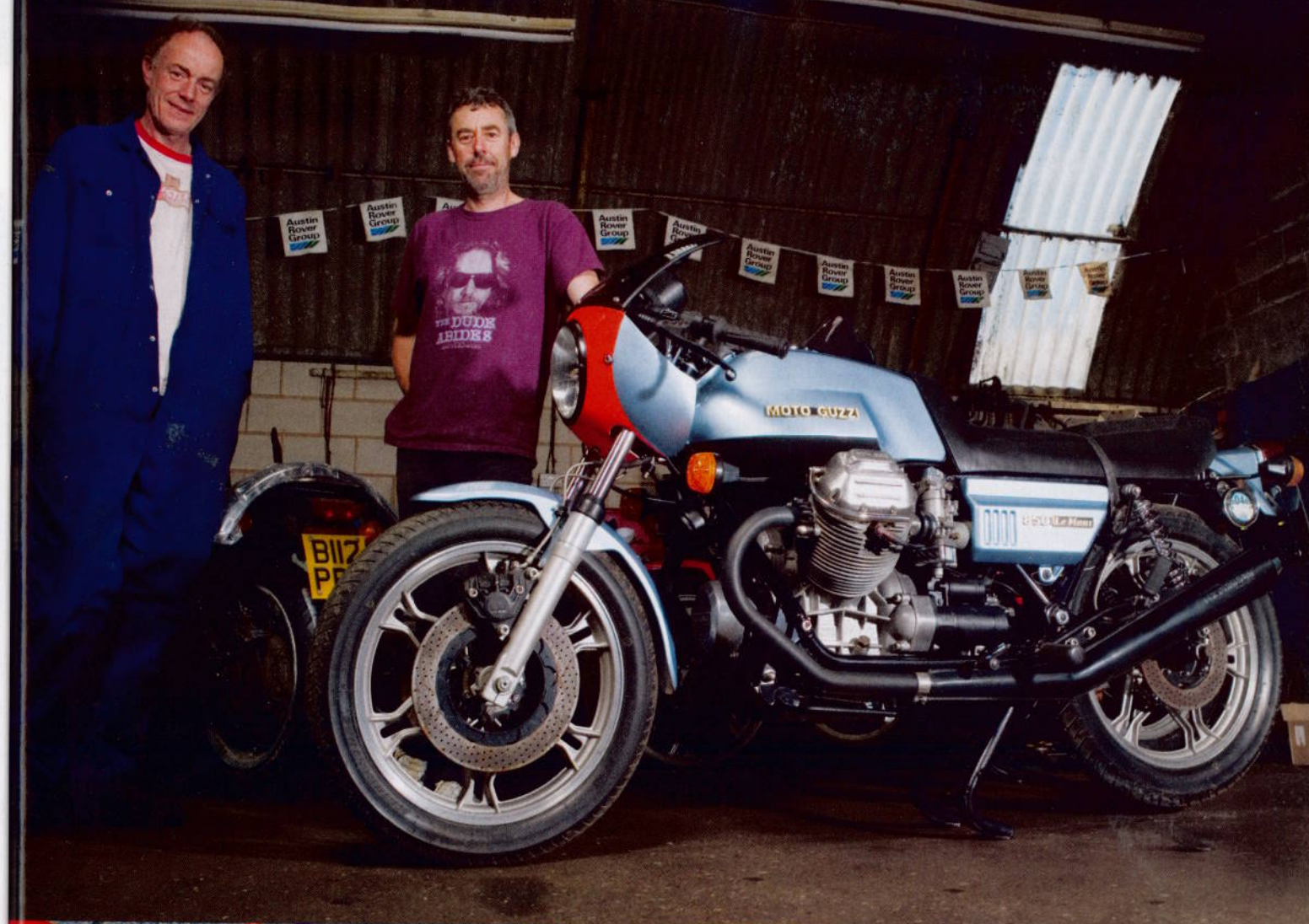
Lino Tonti designed the hefty, long and low-slung frame to outwit Laverda's Jota, Ducati's 900SS and Kawasaki's Z-1. The low-tech OHV pushrod 844cc engine was torquey and easier to maintain than those of the opposition. First shown in late 1975 at Milan the Le Mans was launched with the straight sided CEV tail-light carried on most Italian makes. On the next year's Series 2 it was rectangular. The rarity of the round tail Series 1 means buyers should beware of fakes. The Mark II was introduced in 1978 and by the end of the Mark III's run in 1985 about 22,000 bikes had been made. It continued as a litre bike until 1993; by then more than 30,000 units had rolled out of the factory.

Although my weekly wage has improved I am now also wari-er of committing to a restoration. After talking to a couple of specialist Guzzi restorers in the south of England I call Nigel Billingsley of NBS Motorcycle Servicing in Staffordshire. I hear a mellow voice of reason. He allays my fears and I trust his judgment.

"Provided there is no water ingress not a lot can go wrong inside an 850 engine sitting unused, even for such a long period," he tells me. "They are full of plain bearings. Don't worry too much."

Trading as NBS for 16-years, Nigel, who is 49, has a quarter-century of Guzzi experience. He owned a Le Mans I in the early 1980s. "There is something enticing about them. They don't compare to modern bikes in performance but it was quick in its day, it handled well and braked really well," he says. "I liked them then and I still do."

I don't want a concours bike. I want patina not polish and I want to ride rain or shine. Nigel is on my wavelength. "It is easy to get carried away on a restoration and before you



**ABOVE** Restorer (left) and owner with the finished bike  
**LEFT** Speedo had notched up a few more miles by the time the bike left Nigel's workshop  
**RIGHT** Original switchgear controls relays that actually direct the electrical current