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Clockwork Kwacker

■ *Take two bikes into the shower? With four cylinders and electric start I just press and go. And go and go. Big K's Z650 is regular as clockwork* **Sean Hawker**

Pics Martyn Barnwell

Stepping into a bike showroom in 1977 with a wad of cash could have the following possible outcomes: "Looking for a 750 sir? Why not try the latest Kawasaki Z650? It can blow every 750 machine into the weeds." Or: "Looking for a 500 sir? Why not go for a 650? Similar size but bags more power."

Big K's Z650 is a salesman's dream. Pitched between the two acknowledged capacities of half and three quarter litre, the 650 was built to sell at a time when that size had died with its boots on. And being part of the Universal Japanese Machine master plan — four cylinder,



four-stroke with double overhead cams — the zed is built to go too.

Honda may have been first on the ball with what was to become a UJM superbike in the shape of the CB750, but it was Kawasaki who picked up that ball and ran with it. Big K's 900cc Z1 blew the CB750 out of sight and now the 650 is claiming to take on allcomers up to 1000cc bigger. Can the mini zed mix it with the big boys?

▼ **Smoother than showroom sales banter, the clockwork Kwacker purrs along for miles on end. Handling isn't perfect, but who wants perfect?**

■ Smooth cruise

The answer is yes it can. Power delivery smoother than that salesman's patter puts the four cylinder Kwacker in a different league to Brit parallel twins of the same size.

Stroking the starter button has all four cylinders purring sweetly without even a hint of throttle. Then yank the go grip with minimal revs showing and the torquey zed will pull clear with no transmission jerk or snatch from its Hy-Vo primary drive chain. Welcome to modern motorcycling.

That's not to say bland motorcycling, because with 3in of travel and minimal damping the rear shocks can cause a wallow in fast corners. That's character. The same character that shows itself on many old bikes and the reason we ride them. Call me a pervert, but mastering a bike with built in defects is more satisfying than realising you'll never get the better of a near perfect modern machine.

Same with the brakes. The front is excellent — for a single disc setup of the

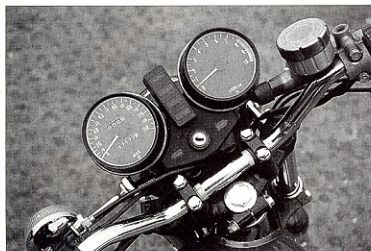
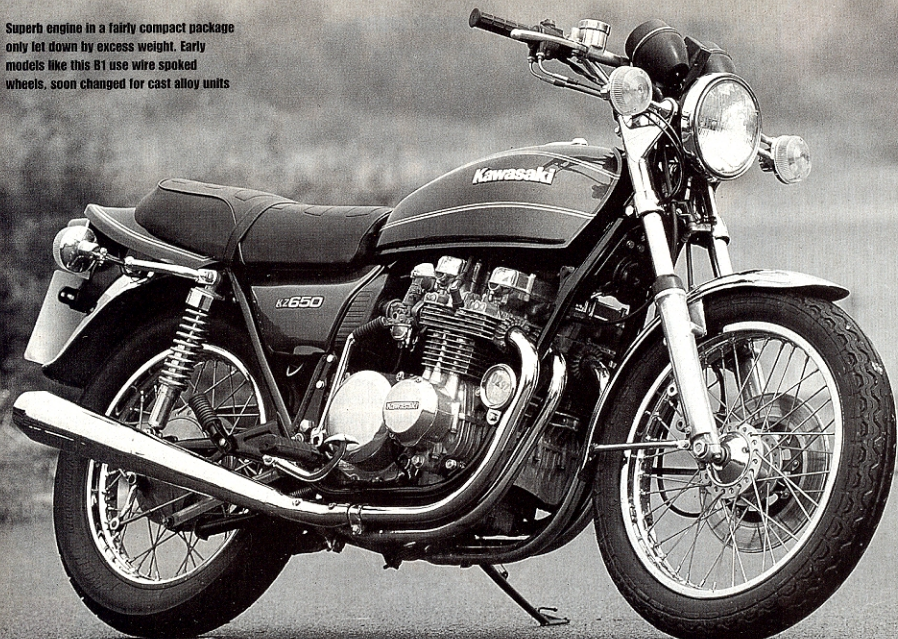
period. Twin rotors were an option when this 1977 KZ650B model — the K denotes US designation — was new and were said to be ferocious. Racer Mick Grant suggested they were too strong for road use when he track tested a double disc Z650 in 1976. The rear drum is a better safety feature being unaffected by wet weather.

Apart from a queasy feeling from the rear end, handling is sharp whether you're into modern or old. Front forks give 5/8in of movement and soak up most deformities. The bike can be tipped over until the right footrest or centrestand tang on the left skim the road. That's mainly because owner Steve Mason has fitted a sticky pair of Avon Roadrunner AM21 tyres. I wouldn't fancy dicing on the edge of an original equipment Japanese ribbed front tire.

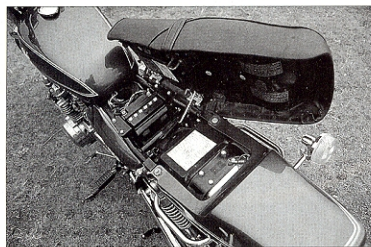
A good few hours on the zed and I'm still up for another blast round the Marlock Bath area of Derbyshire. *Motorcycle Mechanics* track tested the same model at Snetterton over a 24 hour period. ▶



Superb engine in a fairly compact package only let down by excess weight. Early models like this 81 use wire spoked wheels, soon changed for cast alloy units



▲ Redline starts just before 8000rpm, but engine can be safely spun to the end of the dial. Three figure speeds are easily reached



▲ Lift seat to reveal daily safety checks. The suggestions are so comprehensive that only the paranoid would stick to them all

◁ Minor modifications were made to the riding position — ace bars were fitted and a makeshift seat hump taped on — before the team set off. After covering 1300 miles in the day, the only problem with the 650 was a blown fuse and a missing exhaust guard plate.

Meanwhile I'm contemplating a day in the saddle because the creamy engine, thick dualseat, upright bars and well rubbered footrests allow a treacle smooth, vibrate free ride. I think of mounting a television in place of the conical clocks it's that comfortable — although this could have a detrimental effect on handling.

The Seventies salesman however would be able to offload a Z650 even with a TV fitted because the four does everything without moaning — two up touring, scratching and posing is meat and veg for the Z650. A Jap of all trades, as one magazine put it.

But is it a classic? Well at 20 years old the zed should qualify, but I reckon it makes the grade on looks alone. Incredibly, those svelte lines were developed during the era of patchwork denim and striped tanktops. When some of us were taking fashion cues from Little Jimmy Osmond, the 650 borrowed its essential styling key — a duckbill tailpiece — from its 900cc big brother of 1973.

But the 650 was cheaper than the Z1 then and even cheaper now. For less cash you get most of the power you'll need and better handling than the bigger zeds. The only scabs on the knee of the 650 is a lardy weight and fuel consumption that can drop to the mid thirties per gallon when thrashed.

■ How much power?

Loads of the stuff all the way up to 115mph and on to 120mph with raised gearing. A *Motorcycle Mechanics* test measured peak power at 8100rpm, but the engine could be revved right up to 9600rpm on the dyno without the power curve tailing off. And the dohc four cylinder engine was unofficially claimed to be safe to 10,000rpm.

During the dyno test Kawasaki's claimed 64bhp actually worked out as 50.8bhp at the rear wheel. But the wide spread of both power and torque — which tops out at 7000rpm — makes up for the porky pies from Japan.

Despite the similar looks, the smaller capacity zed shares few engine components with the big boys. The 650 crankshaft and conrods run in plain shell bearings compared to the 900's roller bearing setup. And instead of gear primary drive used on the Z1, the 650 uses a Hy-Vo



▲ The Motorcycle Mechanics team tested a 2400 twin and Z650 at Snetterton over 24 hours and both machines survived. Kawasaki works rider Mick Grant stands second from right

chain taken from the centre of the one piece crankshaft.

Being located in the middle of the crank means the drive load is distributed evenly to the crank bearings. The chain transmits drive to a clutch through an idler shaft. A camchain sits next to the primary chain and spins two overhead camshafts that operate directly on the valves via cam followers. A jockey wheel bears on the top run of the camchain between the valves.

The shims used for valve adjustment are relocated under the followers making it impossible for shims to be spat out at high revs. This setup also quiets the top end effectively. The rest of the engine follows simple but efficient UJM practice, where unit construction and wet sump lubrication are the industry standards.

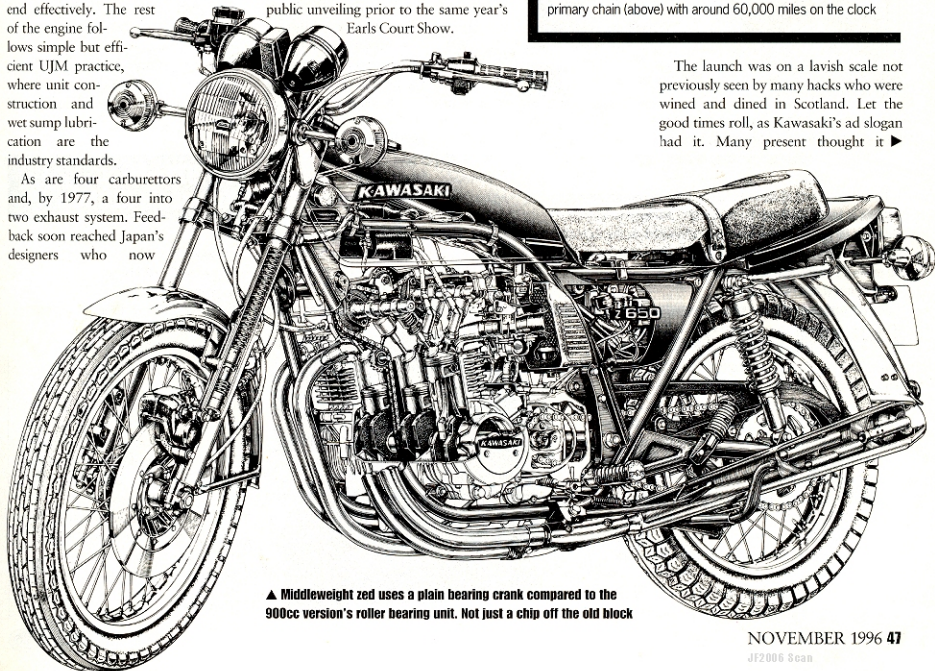
As are four carburetors and, by 1977, a four into two exhaust system. Feedback soon reached Japan's designers who now

realised that one cylinder feeding one silencer didn't generate enough heat to remove condensation. The result that many four piped Z1 riders have experienced is rusted silencers, a condition extremely painful to the wallet. Top tip: spray WD40 up the silencers after a run to help combat condensation.

Ignition is conventional battery and coil with two sets of points. Carbs are rubber mounted to prevent fuel frothing.

■ Let the good times roll

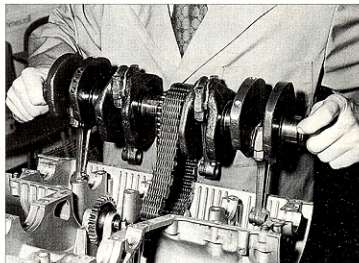
Launched in 1976, the Z650 marked a change in direction from Big K. The firm invited journalists to the UK for the 650's public unveiling prior to the same year's Earls Court Show.



▲ Middleweight zed uses a plain bearing crank compared to the 900cc version's roller bearing unit. Not just a chip off the old block

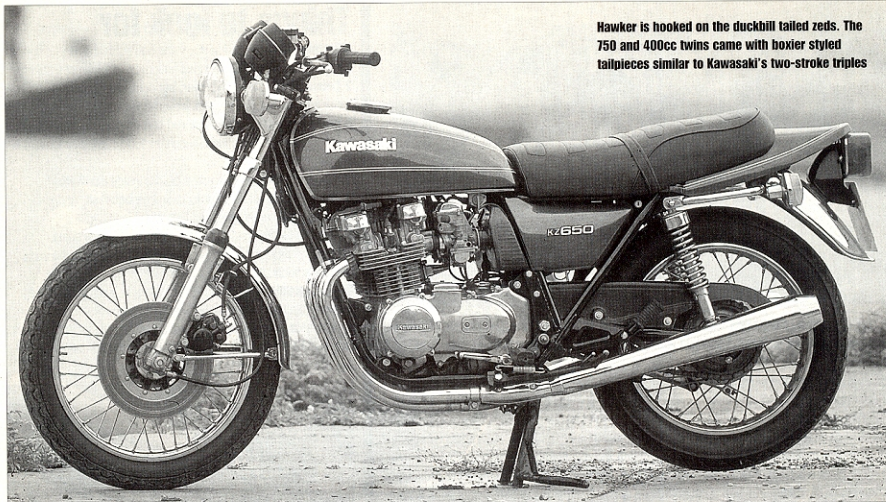
Things to look for

- 1 Burning oil.** Worn piston rings and barrels can lead to smoky exhausts and alarming oil consumption. Steer clear of smokers
- 2 Camchains.** Rattle at tickover, but don't worry about that. Early models have single row chain, later models use a Hy-Vo type.
- 3 Carbs.** Early B1 models suffered carburettor problems due to the mixture screw location. These can flood if left to tick over on the sidestand.
- 4 Clutch.** The rubber cush drive blocks inside the rivetted together ring gear can wear to give drive backlash. And a grievous clunk when engaging first gear.
- 5 Starter clutch.** It squeals annoyingly and can fall apart, distributing bits round the engine. Can be got at from the sump, but that's fiddly. Alternative is an engine strip.
- 6 Weak headlamp.** Can uprate with halogen unit, but beware blown fuses because of excess electrical current.
- 7 Regulator and rectifier.** Can blow and it's difficult to tell which unit is gone. Fit a cheaper Honda Superdream combined regulator/rectifier unit.



8 Primary chain. Quick getaways can knacker the untensioned primary chain (above) with around 60,000 miles on the clock

The launch was on a lavish scale not previously seen by many hacks who were wine and dined in Scotland. Let the good times roll, as Kawasaki's ad slogan had it. Many present thought it ▶



Hawker is hooked on the duckbill tailed zeds. The 750 and 400cc twins came with boxier styled tailpieces similar to Kawasaki's two-stroke triples



▲ Steve Mason started importing modern classic Japanese bikes from the States in 1990 after giving up a promising career in racing. The 29 year old competed in 125cc GPs until an accident left him with a broken back.

He has hundreds of Japanese bikes from the Seventies and Eighties in his AP Motorcycles Derbyshire warehouse (above), although 80 per cent them are restoration jobs. At the time of press Mason had 10 Z650s ranging from £750. He can also supply spares for many US bound Japanese models.

AP Motorcycles 01629 584558

I've got one of those

Adam Claxton (right) has owned his Z650 bitsa for three years after paying £750 for the C3 frame and B1 engine.

The 31 year old Scot from Inglestone, coincidentally where the Z650 was launched in 1976, assembled the bits and rebuilt its wheels using alloy rims and stainless steel spokes.

His machine is far from immaculate with a painted Piper exhaust system and missing chrome rear mudguard piece. But the 650 goes well now a set of decent barrels and new piston rings are fitted. "People call them bland because they do everything well but nothing brilliantly," says Adam, who also owns a Royal Enfield Interceptor (behind him) and a Constellation from Redditch.

His mates ride bigger zeds, but Adam is happy with his lighter 650 that he holidayed on this year with no problem.

◁ remarkable that this machine should be targeted for the European market when seemingly every other Far Eastern two wheeler was designed for the States. Hence the launch on Scottish twisties instead of Californian Interstates.

The Z1 was intended for the States and incorporated a Positive Crankcase Ventilation system, or PCV, to placate the Environmental Protection Agency. This system was passed down to the Z650 and involves the engine breathing back through the air filter via an oil separator from where the oil mist is directed into the carbs to be burnt again. This is claimed to reduce hydrocarbon emission by up to 40 per cent.

Stateside fever gripped Kawasaki again in 1978 with the introduction of the Z650C — C for custom. Its engine sports heavier flywheels and polished crankcases. America got the more radical KZ650SR with a 5.10 x 16in rear wheel, siamese exhaust system and semi King

and Queen seat.

Whether these versions are a styling improvement over the original duckbill models is up to you. Similarly you can choose between the wire spoked model like the test bike KZ — a US designation — or the later cast alloy wheel models. Or you may favour an owner customised model with twin lamps, box section swingarm and tuned engine.

Me? I'm the bloke who's making eyes at the first model Z650 while being strung along by the salesman's banter. All the benefits of a 750 but lighter and cheaper, you say? ●

1977 652cc Kawasaki KZ650

Engine	air cooled dohc four
Capacity	652cc
Bore x stroke	62 x 54mm
Compression	9.5:1
Carburation	24mm Mikuni VM
Output	50.8bhp @ 8100rpm
Electrical	12v, coil ignition
Clutch	wet multipleplate
Primary drive	Hy-Vo chain
Gearbox	five speed
Frame	tubular duplex
Tyres	front 100/90 H18 Avon AM21 rear 120/90 H19 Avon AM21
Brakes	front hydraulic disc (rear disc option) two s/s drum brake
Fuel capacity	3.7 gallons (16.8 litres)
Kerb weight	485lb (220kg)
Wheelbase	55.9in (1420mm)
Top speed	116mph

