

Cranking Old Brit Bikes for the First Time

So, your dad left you his old BSA, or you found an old barn and inside was an Triumph, or you saw an ad in the paper to haul away an old Norton. Congratulations on your find, but please in your excitement, don't make a simple mistake that could cost you thousands to repair. In fact, please, don't do a thing to that bike until you read these notes...

1) The first rule you must observe when dealing with any type of classic (and you may have one of the most valuable British motorcycle classics) is to "do no harm". This, simply because they aren't making them anymore, and experimentation on your part will cost you dearly in lost time and cash to get the bike back where it is today. Remember this point when you get ready to drill a "special" hole, will you?

2) Before you can do anything you'll need the serial number to discover the exact year. Read the numbers on the LH aluminum cases, right below massive chunk of iron known as the cylinder. This makes a big difference since all the British manufacturers made significant changes each model year. There are several serial number lists available on the Internet.

3) If there is no oil in the oil tank, then that's a GOOD thing. But don't add new oil! This is a "dry sump oil system" and when some Brit bikes sit all their oil ends up in the sump. If this is the case, then this will preserve the main bearings. Remove the plate or plug on the bottom of the engine and you may be surprised to find 4 quarts of free oil waiting there for you. Drain into a clean pan... then pour this back into the oil tank! This sounds crazy, but the first oil change after storage is CRITICAL to the life of the engine. So simply... don't change it! They'll be plenty of time to change the oil after running the engine.

4) Before you "change" your engine oil you'll want to closely inspect the bottom of your oil tank for what professionals call "crud". There's no oil filter on these bikes. All modern engine oils are "high detergent" and will therefore circulate the crud presently lying on the bottom of the tank. So before you change the engine oil you must wash out the inside of the oil tank. For more information see the GABMA article "Oil Tank Sludge".

5) The carbs and fuel tank will be gummed up with old fuel. You'll want to remove and clean each carefully. Check the tank for rust. There's info on GABMA on rebuilding carbs... it's the #1 showstopper. Be aware that some older Brit bikes came with fiberglass fuel tanks that will be totally destroyed by using modern fuels with ethanol. If you have rust issues or a fiberglass tank, then we highly recommend Caswell tank sealer. Find Caswell in the GABMA list of "Resto Sources" web links.

6) You'll need to clean the points with some folded over 400 grit and add a set of new NGK B7ES spark plugs. This brand is fairly impervious to the oil and crud that will blow though the engine for the first 30 minutes after cranking. DO NOT attempt to set the timing. Setting the timing accurately takes a PHd in Brit-ology and cleaning the points is enough for now.

7) * **WARNING** * **WARNING** * **WARNING** *

Most of these motorcycles use a POSITIVE ground electrical system. DO NOT connect the battery like a "normal" car or modern motorcycle. That means the RED wire goes to battery Positive (+) and the BRN/BLU wire goes to the battery Negative (-). If you don't have these colors, then STOP! Also a great number of bikes built before 1965 were 6V. Be sure of the polarity. Be sure of the voltage.

There's no electric start, so any correct voltage battery will do. For now, just get some small jumper cables and use the one from another bike. #16 AWG jumper cables with alligator clips will work just fine.

8) Being a high performance air-cooled engine, these bikes drink only high-octane fuel. If you have Chevron or Texaco in your area that will help clean the fuel system as you drive. Again... only high-test fuel.

9) Buy a manual. Buy 2 or 3 different manuals. No single book tells it all. Come back to the GABMA web site often, especially when you get "stuck". Visit web sites such as BritBike.Com to become familiar with your brand and its idiosyncrasies.

10) Your tool collection is about to grow. A goodly number of the fasteners used on pre-1970 Brit bikes are a special British size nominally called "Whitworth" (aka "British Standard"). It's not metric and it's not SAE. If you use any type other than Whitworth you'll simply be destroying things. Start with a basic set of open-end/box-end "combination" wrenches. These can be found on Ebay or from vendors listed here.

11) Do yourself a favor and plan to come to the GABMA meetings and monthly rides. You'll meet some of us and make contacts that are mandatory for finding the parts and getting special repairs done. If you are not local to the Atlanta area, then find a local club. Any body you see riding the same brand is your long lost brother; one of the 1,734 brothers your dad never told you about!

12) Join GABMA to get the newsletters, which are full of tips and tricks.

Hope all this helps!

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