

Oil Tank Sludge Warning

With the rising resale value of vintage motorcycles, a lot of classic British bikes are being dragged out of granddad's basement and fired up. After the battery is replaced, and the fuel tank and carburetor thoroughly cleaned, they usually are happy to crank right up. But there is one hidden "booby-trap" that should be avoided before you do any serious riding.

Up until about 1969 the very best motor oils you could buy were all non-detergent oils. With non-detergent oils the oil tank acted like an oil filter. When the engine pumped the oil back into the tank, the slow speed of the oil in the tank and the simple pull of gravity combined to make all the impurities settle on to the bottom of the tank. There, just like the ocean floor, the undisturbed debris simply built up in continuing layers never to be a problem.

That was the 1960's. These days, modern engine oils have made dramatic strides in engine protection because almost every motor oil is now high-detergent. This means that once the motor oil is warm, any goop, sludge, muck, slime, crud (and all those other *very* technical terms readers may not fully understand), which have had time to settle into the bottom of the oil tank and other hiding places within the engine, will now start to circulate. You don't want to run non-detergent because it's hard to find and very poor protection. So what can you do?

Required Measures

What you need to do is drain the oil tank and disconnect the oil lines, then steam clean or otherwise wash the inside of the oil tank out until you see a clean steel bottom. About 3/8" to 1/2" of "oh my God" will come out and you'll be very, very happy you did this.

After the wash-out go get some inexpensive Wal-Mart 15W40 diesel oil and run it for about 15-20 miles, then come back and dump it immediately while the oil is hot. There's simply going to be a lot of minute trash left in the engine that you'll want to flush it out to prevent excessive engine wear. I recommend 15W40 diesel oil because its inexpensive, thin enough to circulate freely, and best of all, simply an outstanding lubricant for these old engines.

Suggested Measures

It is highly suggested that you fit an accessory oil filter. External filters **must** be fitted to the return oil line. Adding an oil filter will easily double or triple the life expectancy of your classic motorcycle and is well worth the investment. In fact, an external oil filter is the only accessory that will pay for itself. MAP sells a very small housing that uses the 3-cylinder filter cartridge. Another favorite is the much larger spin-on filter used on the Norton 850. Sometimes the small canister filters from the 1971-72 B25 can be found. There are also several small chrome oil filters sold for Harleys. Filter size is not the issue, clean oil is. (See the GABMA article on Oil Filters.)

Conclusion

When you are ready to place your classic back into regular service, you'll need to find some 20W50 "Motorcycle Oil" to run in the engine. 20W50 seems to be the best oil weight for most places in the world where motorcycles are ridden. If the engine smokes excessively, then try some 40W or even 50W "Motorcycle Oil". If you're feeling especially wealthy,

Mobil-1 for “V-Twins” is an extremely good choice. In all cases the oil you choose should be labeled “Motorcycle Oil”, otherwise continue using the 15W40 diesel oil.



Your Oil Should Be Labeled “Motorcycle Oil”

No matter what oil you use, you'll want to consistently change the oil about every 1000 miles (you can double this mileage if you install a modern external filter), and only when the oil tank is hot. If this sounds wasteful, then you can put the drained oil into your lawn mower or other garden implement.

All this may sound extreme, but parts for these classic engines are expensive and good engine rebuilding shops are hard to find. So you'll want to slow down the engine wear as much as possible. The best way to do that is ride the bike with good, clean oil after minimizing any existing internal trash.

Hope this helps!

Richard Whatley
Rodi Bikes