

BEAR FOOTIN'

JB takes the new Royal Enfield Bear 650 for a mixed road and trail ride with a difference – waving the TRF flag at a VMCC rally! So a street scrambler at a vintage bike event. What is this magazine coming to?

Words: JB Images: JB & James Cohen



ROYAL ENFIELD BEAR 650

I know what you're thinking... 'You have got to be joking!' And yes, it is a 650cc road bike, here in Trail. Maybe I am pushing things a bit far, but bear with me (yes, bear – Bear!) because, I'll have you know, this Royal Enfield rode the Salisbury Plain trails rather well, in fact very enjoyably. And quite frankly, like many, I fear if we keep riding enduro bikes, keep riding in MX race kit, keep YouTubeing videos of mates playing silly buggers, then we could well lose our green road freedom. We need to embrace alternative rides, proper trail bikes, adventure bikes and yes, maybe even these modern 'scramblers', presenting a softer, less racy image. And besides, and this is a big besides, you'd be surprised how much fun riding the Bear 650 was – on trail and road.

And while we're on the topic of broadening our minds, the context of this test was a Vintage Motorcycle Club (VMCC) event – the White Horse Scatter Rally. Based in a field at the back of a country pub just outside Devizes, this is a fun rally concept where, ahead of the event, the participants are given coordinates of around two dozen



unmanned checkpoints and told the minimum number they need to visit (9 or 12 depending on class) and are then left to themselves to plot their routes. On this rally, for added spice, many of the checkpoints were located in the middle of byways, encouraging the use of a good mix of road types. It was great fun and with participants going in all directions it meant there was no overload of classic bikes on any roads or lanes. At each checkpoint you had to answer a question, mostly observational about your location as proof that you'd been there. Points were awarded for each waypoint collected, and the most inaccessible waypoints scored bonus points. Finally, at the end of the ride, there was a test back at the pub's field: riding a coned course on the grass as accurately as possible to a 60-second target time.

Now, given the VMCC has included a modern bike category (to encourage diversity and maybe new membership), this gave the 'in' for the Trail entry with the Bear 650, an appropriate 'modern' given it's a homage to a desert race-winning Royal Enfield. Specifically, the win in the 1960 Big Bear Run (a 150-mile race across Californian desert) by 16-year-old Eddie Mulder, riding a RE Fury 500cc single. Salisbury Plain is a long way from Rattlesnake Canyon, and the pace was going to be far less hectic, and this Royal Enfield is a 650cc twin... but who's complaining?





Getting there

Of course the scatter rally was just part of the day. First and last was the getting there and back: from furthest Kent it was 180 miles each way. With a 5.00am alarm call. Now the Bear 650 is derived from Royal Enfield's Interceptor, a relatively under-stressed 47hp roadster, so highway riding isn't an issue. Okay, not quite. Two things: the bike was brand new, so the engine was still noticeably tight (it loosened off very nicely as the miles racked up), and there's precious little wind protection, especially with the wide bars to suit the Bear's soft-road credentials. So there was some strain in maintaining a 70mph cruising speed. At least initially.

However, given that the handlebars were seemingly rolled quite forward in the clamps, there was a pretty decent amount of room to settle into, and the firm flat seat seemed to improve with distance (meaning discomfort plateaued at 'moderate', rather than advanced to 'excruciating'), which along with a comfortable-ish relaxed leg room meant the miles kinda got easier. And in fact, with the bars set forward (so many adventure bikes have rearward positioned bars), the rider adopted a more upright-forward stance with less slouching, so it was easier on the spine. Which meant the miles were easier on the Bear than on some adventure bikes.

Fuel economy was ranging around an indicated 60mpg



and, with a 13.7-litre tank that suggested a theoretical range to empty of around 180 miles, I could have ridden non-stop to the event. But with the fuel light flashing I stopped instead at Popham, 132 miles from my start. The refuel took 10.5 litres, showing an actual 57mpg, let's say +/-5%, so yes, I'd verify a max range of 170 miles.

VMCC

The scene in the field behind the pub (it was a hot, sunny July day) was a joy to behold. I'm sure my last recollection of the VMCC was events like the Banbury Run – all to do with Pioneer or pre-war machinery, toddling down country lanes. Lots of wax cotton mixed with tweeds. Not anymore. I guess generations fade and pass, but vintage these days (and in VMCC's rule book that means older than 25 years) starts at 1999. So the paddock was a truly fascinating mix of motorcycling eras. There were still a good number of pre-war machines, but mixed with much later bikes including 1970s to '90s Japanese, a few sidecars and vintage three-wheelers (Morgan/Messerschmitt), even scooters. I'm happy to say there was also a strong contingent of Japanese trail bikes, such as DTs and XRs etc, including an XR600R, ridden by my companion for the day, Reuben Alcock. Dare I say, quite a few sported TRF stickers.

Once signed in and stickered up, and once Reuben had got his XR started (kick start only and defying the usual just-over-TDC technique), we set off. Salisbury Plain on a sunny summer's day is quite inspiring: more gently rolling hills than billiard-table-flat plain, a great mix of fields and forests, and plenty of MoD activity, peppered – mostly it seemed in little valleys – with the cutest country villages. It was a great ride down the flowing lanes.

On reaching the byways came the pleasant surprise of just how manageable the Bear was off-seal. The wide bars and low footrests are allied to a narrow mid-section to make for a comfortable standing riding position. The 19in front wheel and Pirelli Scorpion Rally STR knock-offs (by the Madras Rubber Factory – MRF) felt quite happy, even at normal road pressures, the Bear was going where it was pointed. Given the grip, I didn't bother to deactivate the ABS, a one-button push with just two options: ABS rear on or off (i.e. ABS front remains on at all times). Of course, this was Salisbury Plain at its most benign, bone dry in midsummer, so even a MotoGP slick would have worked well on the mix of compacted gravel and hard chalk. It would be a different story midwinter.

The Bear 650 was quite happy on the lanes, even the most overgrown single track, as were the various vintage machines we encountered. Old Velocettes and AJSs, more modern BMW R 100 GSPDs and a brace of 1980s DT175MXs, all happily puttered down the lanes as riders searched far and wide for their checkpoints.

Bear with me

Royal Enfield has played a canny hand with the Bear 650. Scramblers have not yet gone out of fashion, and probably never will, and the Bear is a good rendition of the breed. Given the Interceptor base, RE swapped out the 18in wheels for a trail/adventure 19/17in combo which are not overly wide, with a 100/90 front and 140/80 rear. The suspension has been lengthened and

the 130mm Showa forks are a nice unit, working well on road and trail. The twin shocks offer 115mm of travel, according to the spec. Sometimes it felt like no travel. They're probably better on the trail, where you're standing, but are definitely too harsh on the road and you feel every bump, while potholes positively bruise your kidneys. Easily, these will be the first upgrade any owner would make.

Shocks notwithstanding, the Bear possesses exemplary road manners. Maybe it's old school, but take your hands off the bars and the Bear tracks truer than an arrow, hands back on and the Bear will flow through the curves and corners as if – remember this one? – on rails. It holds a line so perfectly, and on a constant radius curve it locks itself in so securely, it's a constant amusement and satisfaction to carve corner after corner. Whoever sorted the road handling deserves a knighthood.

The brakes meanwhile were a bit 'beige'. There's not a huge amount of feel, nor strength, and I never really felt a connection with the rear brake. I'm not sure if ABS is



"THERE'S SOMETHING VERY CORRECT, VERY OLD SCHOOL BRITISH IN THE HANDLING OF THE BEAR 650"



even needed, but at least there were no sudden surprises when riding on dirt. All said, they work.

The Siamesed exhaust (i.e. two-into-one) is another win. The twin mufflers on the Interceptor are big and ugly and detract from that model's lines, but the under-engine muffler and BBQ-paint-black stubby pipe on the Bear make for an uncluttered look and a nice exhaust note, thobby but not loud. The look is spot on for the scrambler scene – plus apparently the exhaust helps deliver an 8% boost in peak torque.

For me, the engine just got better and better. As said, whilst tight when I set off, it loosened as the miles racked up and seemed to get smoother too. I recall a slight tingly buzz at 70mph on the ride-out, bringing on a bit of white-finger numbness, but on the return home this seemed to have disappeared. The 47hp (which is limited to appease the A2 licensing laws as I understand it) is enjoyable in every way. It makes for easy cruising, popping along smoothly at just under 5000rpm at 70mph on the motorway. It was easy to potter in 1st and 2nd gear on the byways, and when faced with a twisting country road it was pleasing to let the revs rise up through the healthy mid-range. It does go a bit flat at high revs, but that didn't matter: the upper-mid range was fun enough.

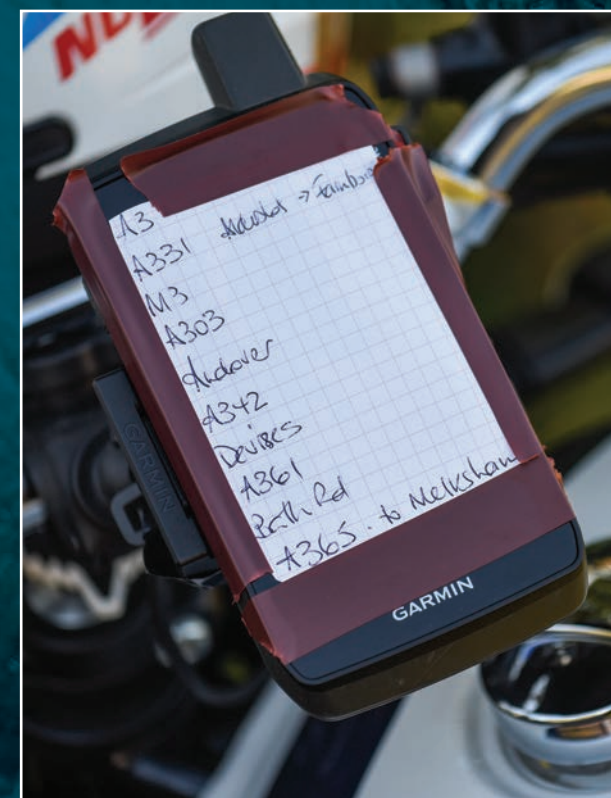
The Bear borrows the round TFT dash from the Himalayan 450, to help that stripped-back scrambler look, although in very bright midsummer light it did at certain angles become unreadable. I've no issues with the functionality, although not for the first time (or last) I decided against pursuing the phone/map connectivity the unit offers. I don't seek such tech – I'm riding a bike, not a computer – and besides my phone barely serves the core functions it's meant to, let alone communicate with a motorcycle. That said, I'm not a fan of the direction-indicator display on the screen – it's too small and not bright enough – so too often I was riding oblivious to an indicator that was still flashing.

Minute man

No, not the intercontinental ballistic missile – me! Somehow I aced the final test of the day in the pub's field. Target time, 60 secs; round the paddock, round the cones, no watch, just counting in your head. And my time: 60.16 secs. Now, if only Reuben and I hadn't lunched so



extensively, and had actually started somewhere near on time, we might have hit all 12 of our waypoints, but 7 out of 12 does not constitute a finish, and definitely not a win. But we didn't care. The event vibe was great; complementary tea and cake at the start and finish also helped (and good homemade cake it was too). Equally, it was fascinating to be able to investigate machines from so many eras. Watching vintage two-strokes, happily zinging along mile after mile, reminded us that there was a lot of pleasure in riding simpler machinery in decades past. And whenever you bring XRs and DTs with 1920s Velocette two-strokes, 1960s Ariels and Lambrettas, bubble cars and even Kawasaki Z1s together in the same event, you've got the makings of a great day out. And scatter rallies – what a great variation on ride-leading, or gpx nav rides. Something for our groups to consider. ▶



TRF TEST: 2025 ROYAL ENFIELD BEAR 650

Meanwhile, after 500 miles, the Bear delivered me home surprisingly just in time for a late supper. The journey and the rally had only improved the Bear's ride, the motor bedding in nicely while I got to understand its strengths more and more. I understand now why the Royal Enfield 650s have been so successful. There's the character to start with, brought by the almost lazy power of the engine. An air- and oil-cooled four-stroke twin with old world charm, delivering on point in a modern world with emissions sorted, and ABS safety too. Then there's something very correct, very old school British in the handling; it speaks of classic biking pleasures. In the case of the Bear 650, here we have a scrambler that will very ably take on the trails. Maybe not midwinter, with difficulty rating above say 5/10, but in the drier months and for the scenic trails that many of us enjoy, yes, it'll get along just fine... ■



ROYAL ENFIELD
BEAR 650

Engine:	Air & oil-cooled, SOHC, twin-cylinder four-stroke
Capacity:	648cc
Bore & stroke:	78 x 67.8mm
Max power:	Claimed 47hp at 7150rpm
Max torque:	56.5Nm @ 5150rpm
Transmission:	Six-speed gearbox, wet multiplate clutch
Frame:	Tubular steel frame, double cradle
Rake & trail:	NA
Front suspension:	43mm Showa USD fork, 130mm travel.
Rear suspension:	Twin shock, 115mm travel
Wheels/tyres:	Wire spoked with anodised aluminium rims, F 100/90-19, R 140/80-17
Front brake:	Single 320mm disc, Bybre twin-piston caliper, ABS
Rear brake:	270mm disc, Bybre caliper, switchable ABS
Wheelbase:	1460mm
Seat height:	830mm
Ground clearance:	184mm
Fuel capacity:	13.7 litres
Curb weight:	214kg (90% fuel + oil)
Colours:	Petrol Green (green), Wild Honey (yellow/blue), Golden Shadow (black/grey) or Two Four Nine (white)
Servicing:	Every 3000 miles
Price:	£6749
Warranty:	Three years
Contact:	royalenfield.com