

# TRIUMPH

## THE TRIUMPH BONNEVILLE - 50 YEARS OF A MODERN CLASSIC

The Triumph Bonneville is an undisputed modern classic, synonymous with British motorcycling and a byword for simple, original style. Today, it stands as the perfect blend of British heritage, design and glamour, backed by modern technology.

Named in recognition of Johnny Allen's 1950's record breaking feats on a Triumph at the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah, the very first Bonneville, the T120, was showcased at the Earls Court Bike Show in 1958, with the machines available for sale to the general public the following year. An instant hit in both the UK and America, essentially the T120 was a high performance, twin carburettor version of Triumph's T110 Tiger model. The combination of extra performance with a fine-handling, light weight chassis and attractive design proved a winning combination and the bike went on to become one of the most successful models of the era.

Today's Bonneville is an agile, honest roadster – perfect for getting around town in style or blatting around back lanes - but back then it was a high performance sports bike and billed by Triumph in 1959 as offering “the highest performance from a standard production motorcycle”. Although in standard trim the T120 could not quite manage the 120mph (193km/h) top speed that its name suggested, it was good for over 110mph (177km/h) and notched up plenty of victories on the race track. Racing success spawned a special edition ‘Bonneville Thruxton’ (1964/65), which in turn inspired a generation of café racer machines.

### **The making of an icon**

Much more than a racer though, during the halcyon days of motorcycling in the 1950s and 60s, the Triumph Bonneville established itself as the iconic bike of the era – a status that it retains to this day. Motorcycling was at the height of its popularity and the Bonneville achieved global cult status with many a charismatic screen legend associated with this evocative machine, both on and off screen. These included Steve McQueen in The Great

Escape, James Dean, in *Rebel Without a Cause*, and Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* - as well as the likes of Bob Dylan and Clint Eastwood amongst other cultural icons of the era.

In December 1967, legendary American daredevil Evel Knievel even chose the Triumph Bonneville for his ill-fated attempt to jump the Caesar's Palace fountain in Las Vegas.

For many, 1969 was the Bonneville's finest hour with a series of progressive developments culminating in a model at the peak of its form. The most significant of the changes was to the engine, which had notable trouble-free carburetion, a smooth power delivery and great tractability at low speeds.

The 1969 edition is also considered a design highlight for the Bonneville; the tank badge was changed to a more simple 'picture-frame' design, the dual seats were fitted with raised tops, and the rear units became mere exposed springs which most young riders wanted. Even the colour scheme adopted was a fashionable Olympic Flame and white-lined in silver.

### **The Rock n' Roll Years**

Especially in the UK in the 1960s, the Triumph Bonneville became closely associated with Rock n' Roll culture – with versions of the Bonneville being adopted by British Rockers as the ultimate motorcycle.

London's Rocker community found a home at the famous transport café, Ace Café, which became the heart of motorcycling and Rock n' Roll culture – and Bonneville's, or modified versions of them, would always be lined up outside. The most popular machine of the Rocker period was the Triton – a custom built motorcycle made from a Norton Featherbed frame, and a Triumph Bonneville engine – combining what was considered the best handling frame of the era with the fastest racing engine.

### **A Right Royal Occasion**

The Bonneville continued to make its mark in the 1970s and 80s, when special, limited edition bikes were launched to mark significant Royal occasions. In 1977, the T140J celebrated the Queen's Silver Jubilee; and in 1981, 250 T140LE Royal Wedding Bonneville's were produced to mark the Royal wedding between Prince Charles and Diana.

## **The Bonneville into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The seventies were a troubled time at Triumph, with discontent among the work force following a government-sponsored merge with Norton Villiers. Workers took over the Meriden factory in 1973 amid rumours that it was to be closed and a strike ensued. Virtually no bikes were produced over the following year and in 1975 the Meridan Worker's Cooperative was formed. Production resumed and Bonneville T140s continued to be built into the early 1980s and were the last bikes to be built by Triumph before the Meriden factory closed in 1983. Even then the Bonnie refused to die. Small numbers were built under licence by LF Harris of Newton Abbot, Devon, between 1985 and '88.

The Bonnie looked as if it had been consigned to history, until in 2000 a thoroughly modern version of the bike was unveiled. Blending authentic styling with modern materials and manufacturing techniques, the first of the new Bonneville's was produced with a 790cc parallel-twin motor. A centenary model followed the next year – the Bonneville T100 Centennial Edition - marking 100 years of the Triumph brand.

The early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century have continued to witness the Bonneville's evolution, including an increase in capacity to 865cc and the introduction of fuel injection (cleverly concealed to retain the bike's original styling). The Bonneville family has also grown to include the T100, Scrambler and Thruxton models.

The Bonneville has found real relevance today as a simple, authentic roadster offering plenty of performance combined with easy-going road manners. Clever design hides modern technology to retain the authentic retro silhouette, while the characterful and distinctive note of the twin cylinder engine is unmistakable. A low seat height and similarly low centre of gravity make it an agile, manageable motorcycle that all riders – ranging from those with little experience to those with lots – can appreciate. It remains an indisputable icon - a symbol of rebellion and individuality – and still inspires a loyalty and emotion in everyone that rides it.