

Frenzy for the 400 FOUR lives on

Honda thrilled UK motorcyclists with its first sporty four-cylinder motorcycle 40 years ago this month. **John Nutting** was there!

It's hard to believe, but what is arguably the most popular classic Japanese motorcycle, Honda's CB400 Four will be 40 years old later this month.

Launched at the Cologne Show in September 1974, it marked a dramatic change of direction for Honda in offering a sports middleweight that evoked memories of the factory's glory days of the 60s in Grand Prix racing. The CB400 Four combined radical styling – highlighted by its swoopy four-into-one exhaust system – with sharp handling and silky refinement. Despite receiving rave reports from magazines on both sides of the

Atlantic, the CB400 Four was met with indifference by Middle America, whose riders preferred a less racy feel in a more passenger-friendly package. Honda diluted the bike's committed riding position, but it wasn't enough and after four model years the CB400 Four was pensioned off and replaced by the CB400T, a completely new and more versatile (as Honda's marketing ☺







people saw it) six-valve twin. America's tastes dictated global markets, so in 1978 European riders also lost the CB400 Four, and established what has evolved into a cult following worldwide with an estimated 110,000 machines that were produced.

Gerald Davison, who in 1974 was senior manager at Honda UK and had taken on responsibility for product development, recalls the events leading up to the introduction of the CB400 Four, and its unusual engine capacity of 408cc. "At that time Honda did not really consult much on what we wanted - some of the key engineers/designers would periodically visit individual markets and ask questions, meet dealers etc. - this was their market research. It didn't mean that we always got what we wanted. Of course, the size of the US market at that time meant that they had enormous influence and the Japanese market regulations often influenced engine capacities. By the mid-70s we were only just beginning to organise ourselves in Europe to provide a consolidated view on model requirements. The 400 Four was introduced at the beginning of one of the most imaginative periods at Honda R&D. They had not long had independence after the separation of car and motorcycle development after a fairly fallow period while resources had been rather concentrated on car development. The 350 Four (launched in 1972) had never been a contender for us in the UK as the price/performance levels were unsuitable. Exactly the opposite was true of the 400 Four which was just a little

"The 400 Four was produced at the beginning of one of the most imaginative periods at Honda R&D. The bike's success was down to the riding experience it gave riders."



bit dull stylistically, apart from the exhaust which became quite iconic. All of the bike's success was down to the riding experience and value it gave riders looking for small four-stroke sportbike."

If there is a Holy Grail for the CB400 Four cult then it's in a sleepy town in Suffolk from where David Silver operates his spares business and has been building up stocks of complete CB400 Fours and parts. After three years, David has found that through publicity generated by keen media interest - and in no small measure by high-profile attention from Top Gear presenter James May - his project to offer restored CB400 Fours has generated a demand that now outstrips supply. Fans of the CB400 Four just can't get enough of them and there's a several-month waiting list, despite the fact that the David Silver warehouse is home to around 60 machines waiting for attention.

Having been the first in the UK to test ride the CB400 Four early in 1975, when I quickly realised that it was going to be hit with British riders, I was keen to find out if the magic had been maintained after four decades; where better than at David Silver's where I had the choice of riding two clean and freshly revived examples that were awaiting collection by their new owners.

Over the years, and like so many Hondas, the CB400 Four has been at the receiving end of criticism: mainly for its ruff ignition, seizure-prone brake caliper and flawed camchain tensioner design. Owners neglected the 1500-mile oil change intervals, with the inevitable



Trademark exhausts on the 400 Four.



Looks even better naked.

The growing CB400 Four parts business

Dealing in genuine parts for Honda 400 Fours can be a lucrative business, and increasingly so with the rising popularity of the bike in Japan.

Indeed, because the market price of a clean 400 Four rarely matches the money spent during its restoration, it's worthwhile breaking such a machine for its parts, horrific though this might sound to the purists.

Neil Murray has been dealing in 400 Four parts for a number of years and knows the market well. He identifies three types of 400 Four fan: "There are those who simply want to keep one on the road, or get it back onto the road, and aren't worried about 100% originality. They're aware of the cost of genuine parts and are quite happy with used bits or pattern parts.

"Then there are people who want to do a proper restoration. These are the guys who'll hunt out all the little cable guides and clips I recently sold four such items for a total of £100. They'll get stuff properly rechromed or refinished, and end up spending a lot of money.

"Finally, there are the real

anoraks who are trying to build one from new old stock (NOS) parts. These guys will spend a decade or more amassing all the bits, and money is no object. For them, though, the thrill is in the chase, rather than the kill.

"Interestingly, any new old stock (NOS) stuff I offer tends to go back to Japan. But it must be utterly NOS, preferably in the original wrappers. I sold an NOS fuel tank, still in its original box, for £550 plus postage to Japan,

not long ago. The Holy Grail is an NOS exhaust. I've unearthed a few in the last four or five years. I sold the last one without having to put it on eBay. A bloke doing a 'proper' resto asked me if I had one, and I did, and he was happy to pay £1675 for it. Sometimes people don't realise just what stock Dave Silver has. I've sold a pair of NOS throttle cables for £51 but Dave Silver would have done a pair for £40. Odd."



Parts and expertise are in plentiful supply at David Silver Spares.

SPECIFICATION

CB400F

ENGINE

Air-cooled inline four

CAPACITY

406cc (31 x 50mm)

VALVE OPERATION

Single overhead camshaft

COMPRESSION RATIO

9.4:1

LUBRICATION

Wet sump, capacity 3.5 litres

IGNITION

Contact breakers and coils

CARBURETOR

Four 20mm Keihin

PEAK POWER

3.7bhp @ 8500rpm

PEAK TORQUE

3.2kgm @ 7500rpm

PRIMARY DRIVE

Inverted-tooth chain and gear

PRIMARY RATIO

3.423:1

CLUTCH

Wet multiple

GEARBOX

Six speed

INTERNAL RATIOS

2.733, 1.800, 1.375, 1.111,

0.965, 0.866

FINAL DRIVE

530 chain

FINAL DRIVE RATIO

2.225:1, 30/17

OVERALL RATIOS

20.9, 13.78, 10.52, 8.50, 7.38

and 6.62:1

FRAME

Semi duplex tubular and

pressed-steel cradle

SUSPENSION

Front: Telescopic fork

Rear: Swing arm, twin shock,

adjustable preload

WHEELS

Front: Laced spoke, steel rim

Rear: Laced spoke, steel rim

TYRES

Front: 300 x 518

Rear: 250 x 518

BRAKES

Front: Single 267mm disc,

floating caliper

Rear: 160mm drum

ELECTRICAL SYSTEM

Alternator 156W, 60-55W

quartz headlamp, starter

motor

BATTERY

12V-12Ah

FUEL TANK

14 litres (3.08 gallons)

WHEELBASE

1355mm (53.5in)

SEAT HEIGHT

790mm (31.1in)

CUSTOMER ANGLE

63.5°

TRAIL

85mm (3.35in)

WEIGHT

178kg (392lb) with a

gallon of fuel



consequences. So by the 1990s, ownership of a CB400 Four was seen by some as a poison chalice and only for the hardcore. But when I picked up Honda's demonstrator from dealer Tippetts in Surbiton in February 1975 for the weekly *Motor Cycle* I quickly knew it would be a winner. Although I'd seen the bike at Cologne, it had been overshadowed by the simultaneous launch of the Honda Gold Wing, which in its way was an even more stunning debut and one that would have long-reaching commercial benefits for Honda in the US.

Five years after the CB750's first appearance in the UK we'd been accustomed to Hondas becoming a bit boring, its lightweight twins unable to match the rising tide of performance two-strokes. First it was the CB400 Four's fuel tank that caught the eye; sculpted, slab sided and unadorned except for the Honda Super Sport decals. Then the slim seat, slightly tipped up at the rear and highlighted by shiny rivets. Finally, the four-cylinder engine and its exquisite pipework culminating in a long megaphone-style silencer. Developed from the five-speed CB350 Four, capacity had been increased from 347cc (47 x 50mm) to the six-speed CB400 Four's 408cc (51 x 50mm) with a revised cylinder head and overhead cam valve gear giving 37bhp at 8500rpm. The left side of the bike was pure function, showing off the disc brake, drive chain and gear change linkage. The right side, with those pipes, was pure style and like nothing else we'd seen on a bike.

Sitting astride the CB400 Four was a completely new experience. Beneath the tank, the engine's rocker covers could be seen, but it wasn't wide, barely 5cm more than the twins. Ahead, the ignition key was between the instruments and incorporated the steering lock. Starting involved lifting the mixture lever on the left of the four 20mm Keihin carbs and hitting the button. At idle, all you could hear was the hiss of the valve gear and hum

Still beautiful today.

from the pipe. The impact of the CB400 Four's sporty riding feel can't be underestimated. Few bikes offered a racing crouch, as such, so the Honda's tucked-in rear-set footrests and a flat handlebar were a welcome nod in that direction. Then there was the superb steering and handling, which I described at the time as the best I'd experienced on a Honda.

By the time I'd reached the Kingston bypass, just two miles from Tippetts, I knew that Honda had hit the bullseye. And I hadn't even properly explored the bike's performance envelope. On the bypass, the super sports aspect of its character was revealed. Above 6000rpm response was markedly more lively, with the turbine-like power not tailing off until the revs had topped the red line at 10,000rpm, by which time the exhaust was

Classic clockset.



Honda CB400 F model developments

- 1972 CB350 Four launched in US and Europe
- 1974 CB400F launched in September at Cologne Show. Power 37bhp at 8500rpm
- 1975 CB400F available from March in varnish blue or ruby red. US models fitted mid-section with higher handlebars and forward-set rider footrests. UK models changed from frame number 1054883, with passenger footrests moved from the swingarm to frame-mounted brackets.
- 1976 US market models have ruby red or parakeet yellow tanks and black side panels. A 398cc (51 x 48.8mm) version is produced to satisfy the Japanese licence regs for riders of sub-400cc machines. Power 36bhp at 8500rpm.
- 1977 Locking fuel cap, no other changes.
- 1978 F2 version with new paint - candy Antares or parakeet yellow, both with pin stripes; American bikes retain black side panels - and from engine number 1084315 longer cylinder head studs



emitting a spine-tingling banshee wail. We'd never been able to see five-figures on a road bike's rev counter before. Amazing.

On the open road you could cruise comfortably at up to 85mph, but you'd need to dance on the gear pedal for overtaking, which was part of the fun. A measure of the Honda CB400 Four's versatility is shown by its performance figures measured at MIRA's proving ground. On a misty and cold day, it clocked 104.0mph flat out, slightly down on the CB500 Four, but more than any 350 or 400 previously tested, even Yamaha's RD350A twin (103.3mph) or Kawasaki's KH400 triple (100.5mph).

Flat-out acceleration from a standing start through the quarter mile was hit by the Honda's higher weight of 392lb (178kg) tanked up, but 14.9 seconds with a terminal speed of 87.3mph wasn't far from the Yamaha (14.4s/88.5mph) or the Kawasaki (14.75s/88.8mph). Where the Honda scored was in its meagre fuel consumption: at a steady 70mph it clocked 54mpg, while the Yamaha could manage just 44mpg and the Kawasaki a shocking 24mpg. The CB400 Four was my top bike of the 1975 year, and the best all-rounder (with Laverda's 140mph 3CE best for performance and the Gold Wing best for touring).

Owners backed up the reports and in a review in *Motor Cycle* at the end of 1976 gave the CB400 Four an 8.3 out of 10 rating, better than Kawasaki's 903cc Z1. Scores above nine out of 10 were given for its smoothness, starting, reliability, handling, riding position and oil tightness (clearly still a concern in those days). Relatively poor scores for the gearbox, mudguarding and horn spoilt the overall average. Tony Mortimer, then 22 and from Bristol had covered 11,000 miles in his first nine months of ownership, said: "To appreciate the CB400 it is best to leave it as standard. Just get on ☺

The CB400 Four project at David Silver Spares



The CB400 Four project set up by David Silver has become

such a success that although the aim of creating a resource of restored classics and hard-to-find parts has been achieved, demand for the 70s icon has now outstripped supply. Says David: "In 2012 we ended up with a peak of about 110 bikes, but after James May (of *Top Gear* fame) got interested we suddenly had a waiting list of about 150 who wanted to buy a restored 400 four. At one point we were quoting a waiting time of two years because each one takes a long time to do.

"We're not doing ground up nut-and-bolt restorations, that would be too expensive and time consuming but with this project in the background it has given us an ample supply of discontinued parts; the parts that have come with bikes, people have supplied spare engines and scrapped bikes too, we can use those parts where we don't have access to

new parts but more importantly we've got access to anything we want to get replicated which we can sell by mail order and we can use ourselves."

How much is a good CB400 Four worth? "The red or blue examples ridden would be £4000 to £4500 and those figures depend if it's got a Honda seat on or a replica, exhaust system - to have a genuine Honda exhaust system now that's worth considerably more. We've never asked six. The best of the best was £4950 I think." David reckons about 110,000 CB400 Fours were produced, and now is sitting on a database of around 12,000 people who have an interest in them. "They're not rare and that will keep the prices in check. It's Japan's most-loved classic bike."





and ride. Go as quickly as possible along any clear twisty road and then you will realise just how perfectly set up it is. It just steers itself. For all round efficiency in its class, it will be a long time before it is bettered." The CB400 Four also did well in road racing, with Tony Rutter winning the international production bike event at Silverstone in 1976 on the 458cc Mocheck CB400, and John Kidson the Isle of Man Formula 3 world championship in 1977 on one of the 398cc short-stroke (51 x 48.8mm) versions made for the Japanese market.

Fast forward almost 40 years and I'm again on a CB400 Four, one of David Silver's tidy and clean restorations. Under a huge Suffolk sky the sun is beating down on ripening wheatfields as I carve through the twisty lanes from Leiston to Saxmundham. This CB400 Four is typically not completely original in that it features a British-made exhaust system (and pretty close to stock thanks to Motad and Brituro) while the tyres, a ribbed Maxxis front and patterned Avon rear look the part.

Examples with a clean factory exhaust system are hard to find these days for two reasons: without care the originals corrode, and the tools for making them in Japan deteriorated long ago. Their rarity is such that David Silver says that when an NOS exhaust comes up for sale the prices can reach £1500. But the experience of riding Silver's bike is undiluted. Once warmed up, the CB400 Four is just as smooth and refined as ever, revving briskly into the red with its typical whine from the transmission. As I dive into a series of right-lefts the memories come flooding back. This 35,000-mile example is taut with its modern rear shocks and tyres and it drops into the corners confidently and holds its line. Even the front disc, widely chastised for its poor wet response, pulls up the bike unexpectedly well as I perform U-turns for the camera shots. That's when a trickiness in the carburation shows up and I get caught out a couple of times as I try to accelerate from the U-turn. I'm already getting fired up about joining the CB400 Four frenzy. There's a space in the garage waiting for another bike and the CB400 Four ticks all the boxes. **am**

What is MIRA?

British motorcycle factories and tyre manufacturers used research and testing facilities at the proving grounds operated by the Motor Industry Research Association (MIRA) in the Midlands from the 1950s.

The high speed (about 160 to 200 mph) banking enabled vehicle testing speeds of more than 100mph while the 1000 yard straight provided electronic timing equipment for performance testing, a facility that was also used by suspension. Built on the site of RAF Littlehey near Sutton in Warwickshire in 1943, MIRA continues to take a leading role in the development of vehicles of all kinds.



Honda CB400 Four performance data

	Model	Honda CB400F	Honda CB460 Harrier
Date of test		February 27, 1975	December 1977
Reg no		JGC 606N	CEB 35
Conditions		Mozy, 40°F	Cold, tailwind
Maximum speed, mean		104.02mph	113.75mph
Best one-way speed		105.09mph	121.70mph
Standing quarter mile, (mean)		14.9s/87.27mph	13.7s/95.47mph
Fuel consumption:			
30mph		101mpg	78.4mpg
50mph		83.2mpg	60.8mpg
70mph		54.4mpg	46.4mpg
Fuel consumption overall		53.4mpg	44.2mpg
Braking distance (from 30mph)		8.5m (28ft)	9.1m (30ft)
Test weight (1 gallon fuel)		392lb	380lb

All figures compiled at Motor Industry Research Association's proving ground, Nuneaton, Warwickshire

350-400cc performance comparisons

Year	Model	Top speed mph (mean)	St 1/4-mile secs./mph	Fuel consumption mpg at 70mph
1972	Suzuki GT380	95.99	16.30/81.6	50
1973	Yamaha RD350A	103.3	14.45/88.5	44
1974	Honda CB360	97.04	15.75/82.9	45
1974	Kawasaki KH400	100.5	14.75/88.8	24
1974	Suzuki GT380	101.9	15.00/85.4	42
1975	Kawasaki Z400	95.4	16.40/80.8	34
1975	Honda CB400 Four	104.0	14.90/87.3	54
1975	Yamaha RD350B	102.6	14.75/88.5	30
1975	Morini 350 Sport	96.8	15.10/85.2	58
1974	Yamaha RD400C	103.3	14.80/89.6	42
1977	Honda CB400F	105.9	14.60/89.3	43
1977	Yamaha XS400	102.8	15.20/87.5	58
1978	Honda CB400 Harrier	113.7	13.70/95.5	46
1978	Honda CB400N	105.2	15.00/88.6	54
1978	Kawasaki Z400	97.6	16.00/82.0	70
1978	Yamaha RD400E	106.6	14.30/93.3	38