

Kawasaki's U.K. Contender

A million pound 250 is put through
its paces on Road and Track

After three years and a million pounds spent on development work the twin-cylinder four-stroke Kawasaki Z250 ought to be good.

The concept behind the latest model from big K was for a machine tailored specifically for the British market, and the design brief for Kawasaki's engineers was quite simple produce the best 250 available!

This meant that top performance had to be combined with good handling, safety, comfort, reliability and a motor flexible enough to offer the commuter and sporting rider the best of both worlds.

A four-stroke engine was chosen to meet ever-more stringent pollution laws and with the 180 degree crank, single overhead cam unit spinning at 10,000rpm a mean 27bhp is pushed out. It all sounds very promising, but how does it perform on the road and track? Merrill Boulton rode it to find out...



Road and Track Test....

THE Z250 was like a breath of fresh air to ride compared to the fat lumpy machine I arrived on at Kawasaki's. Everything immediately fell into place and it felt smooth and free and easy. I had that bird-released-from-cage feeling and, inspired by the revvy excitable engine, winged my way homeward appreciative of riding a proper motorcycle and not a two wheeled tank.

Large machines are great on the fast open country carriageways but through cramped town traffic they're like mobile suet puddings and might just as well have 50cc engines for all the use their super power is.

Crossing London from southwest to southeast via a quick stop in Hammersmith at about 5pm one busy Friday afternoon was a good illustration of the commuting instincts of the Kawasaki's light manoeuvrable build. And by the time I arrived home, after what is normally an extremely laborious journey, I found myself full of the joys of motorcycling and my first notes on the Z250 were "... makes you want to shout yahoo or something..." — never did find the right word.

Fun it might be, but an awful lot of serious workmanship (research), three years in fact,

has gone into the design of the Z250 which is purpose built for the UK. There's a large market to cater for here because learners are restricted to 250cc and anyway it is a very popular size catering for many needs and fulfilling many roles. This means that as manufacturers compete for domination of the 250 class, we, the customers, are being enticed with better and better machines, and Kawasaki have certainly broken new ground with their latest 250.

Inspired

So, having been inspired into great admiration after the first exhilarating ride it was time to take the notebook out and have a closer look.

Kawasaki set out to make a crowd puller and as far as visual appeal is concerned they've achieved it. The Z250 would certainly not be the drooping gooseberry in anyone's shop window for its sleek yet unpretentious form is quietly alluring and oozing with sophistication. The glassfibre extension at the rear of the seat matches the slender, stylish tank which is sculptured to match the width of the seat and encourages a neat tucked in riding position.

Seven spoke cast aluminium wheels with blackened edges look flash but mean and

sturdy, while the chrome mudguard and upswept exhaust system shine in polished contrast.

The front and rear disc brakes are asymmetrically drilled to prevent squeal and following the trail of the black fluid pipes from the calipers leads to the rather uniquely shaped fluid reservoirs with level indicator eyelets. The reservoir for the rear brake is positioned under the side panel while the black, rectangular front brake reservoir is handlebar mounted and with four screws securing the lid should discourage any fiddlydiddlys. Handy though the level indicator is — why position it facing away from the rider?

Whilst on the subject of keeping a check on things there is also a glass peephole in the crankcase for an immediately spontaneous check on engine oil without having to faff around with a dipstick.

The seat opens up — with a prop to support it — revealing the tool kit and handbook secured in the glassfibre tail piece. The tank is very easy to remove with no screws or bolts to undo only a thick band of rubber to detach. Both tank and seat are lockable for Kawasaki really seem to have deterring the thief in mind. The integral ignition lock, which is used on several of their models, is so handy and easy to use and means of course that a rider can't even begin to ride off with the steering still locked, for turning the ignition on automatically frees the steering.

Twin black mirrors designed to be vibration free can be adjusted in three places — at the base, rim and reflector and because of their lengthy stems provide excellent rear vision and means the ol' shoulder and elbow is out of the limelight.

I knew something was missing but it took a while for it to sink in. Wheels are there, tank, engine... but absolutely no sign of a kickstart. Had it dropped off, been stolen

Built for ear'olin'
Neil Millen-style on
Japanese Dunlop 'Red
Arrow' tyres...





(there wasn't a lock on it) or was the robot chatting to Artoo Deetoo when it went past on the production line? Nope, none of those — there isn't even a boss for one. The day has really arrived when not even 250's have kickstarts. So people will have to adjust accordingly and make sure the battery is always in a good state of health, though with the standard of electrics on most motorcycles nowadays the absence of a kickstart will probably never be noticed.

The Z250 has been built specifically as a 250 and not in a shell that will also accommodate a 400 engine, as practised by other manufacturers such as Honda and Yamaha. This means there is no unnecessary bulk and at 335lbs dry weight the Kawasaki is a light 250 by today's standards.

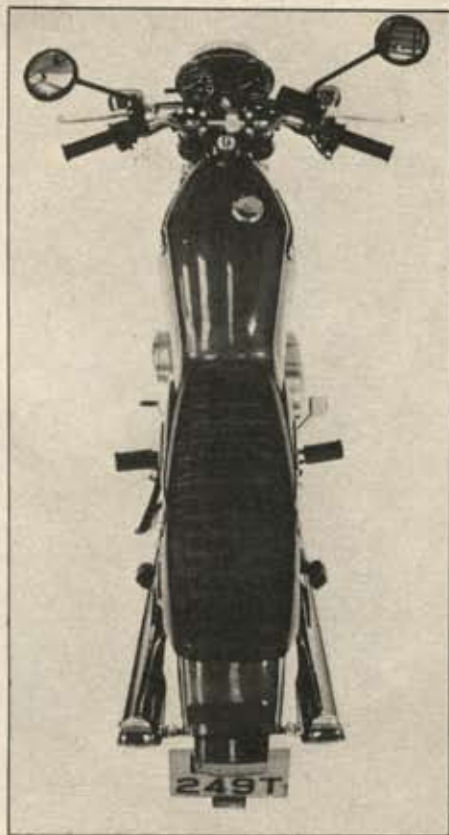
Starting-up

The engine is a very straightforward four-stroke parallel twin with single overhead camshaft and a simple two valves per cylinder. It doesn't have any fancy balancing counterweight shafts which would add to the weight, but instead the combination of 180 degree crank and rubber engine mountings brings vibration down to a minimum.

The engine fires up enthusiastically with the choke — which I was disappointed to see is mounted on the carburettor — almost full on. If the choke is fully opened it operates the throttle fractionally which would aid very cold starts, though I never had need of it. The engine wouldn't fire up without choke yet it coughed and spluttered under load for about half a mile until the choke had been completely dispensed with.

Once under way the Kawasaki was just raring to go and with a redline of 10,000rpm and a six speed box that means a great deal

of fun is to be had winding up each gear. Though normally a fairly quiet running engine, once it is opened up the Z250 emits a rather enticing purry yowl from the exhaust which adds to the thrill of the ride. Many bikes are so quiet at high speed that the only



thing heard is the rushing wind or rattling ignition key. Quite a few bikes could do with a hearty exhaust note to add a bit of soul to their unruffled technology.

The Z250 really does fall between two stools in its performance — which is a good thing in many ways. For on the one hand it is competing with rather sluggish sounding four-strokes, so practical, sensible, noiseless and boring as to have no character. While on the other hand there are the impractical but totally funbound 100mph-in-a-flash two-strokes. But what really is the use of 100mph to an inexperienced young learner, who because the power is there will be tempted to use it and is therefore just asking for trouble — as many have unfortunately found?

Acceleration

Top speed on the Z250 hangs warily around the 90mph mark — warily because unfavourable conditions easily affected its top end performance. But even though it doesn't have the best top speed that comes so high on priority lists it does have better all round performance. Not because it's quicker or slower than its competitors but because the acceleration is understandable. It's not a question of opening the throttle and nothing much happens or opening the throttle and suddenly the speedo is showing 'X' million miles an hour before the rider has even clipped his visor down. But it accelerated in a way that can be felt, heard and understood.

There's no narrow power band that suddenly comes in and brings the front wheel up with it, but there's a definite surge of power from around 6000rpm which makes overtaking a safe bet in the middle gears as well as showing off the smooth and responsive motor.

Mid range flexibility is excellent, aided of course by the six speed gearbox which releases the performance in very neat and even quantities so that even top is a useable pulling gear. Out on the M4 which seems to specialise in strong headwinds, sixth gear would hold a good cruising speed of an indicated 80mph (71mph true) with great ease.

In the absence of such headwinds (one sunny day on the M3) the speedo actually indicated 100mph (89mph true) in top gear pulling to about 9000rpm. Only then did it feel like a 250.

Economy

The fact that steady speed fuel consumption at 70mph in top is 50mpg shows how well the engine can cope. This is a marginally better figure than the CB250 at the same speed but this is due to the gearing on the Honda of which top is a much less able gear compared to the Kawasaki. Overall fuel consumption was reasonable at 51.49mpg, though constant speed figures taken at the track suggest that it should be 89.4mpg. It may have the potential to be economical but because of its revvable (and therefore thrashable) nature our fuel returns varied from worst at 46.04 (after the test session at MIRA) to 59.02mpg, but the most common was around 50mpg.

The rather rigid looking frame shows great thought and design with its triangular struts and enforced steering head which forms the basis of the slim tight shape which lends itself to a reasonably fast, comfortable ride. The handling is good up to a point but there are certain things that prevent it from being any better.

The first of these is the wretched centre

stand which seemed to ground with no effort at all and would put you off getting really stuck into a corner. But even on a nice sweeping roundabout which the Kawasaki simply begged to be leaned round the stand caught very badly on the right hand side and threw the bike off line as the steering wobbled and the back end jumped about. This happened frequently when carrying a pillion passenger so there was no getting away with anything but the highest setting on the rear units.

For solo riding the fourth setting seemed the most accommodating, although the third provided a flowing and comfortable ride but as soon as speeds built up into bends it was obviously too soft. The fifth setting solo was too hard and this would make the rear skittish and jumpy. But even on the fourth setting the rear end was easily upset by small humps and bumps — usually when cornering. Bends found the rear end wallowing, creating a slight steering wobble — or was it the other way round?

We kept a check on tyre pressures which were correctly set and came to the conclusion that though the handling is well up to the standards of other 250's a hard ride soon showed its limits.

What we never found limiting though were the tyres and I must say that if it wasn't for the freedom felt in the tyres we may not have got into so much trouble with the handling. They are Japanese Dunlops and virtually a replica of the Red Arrows. They offered superb grip in the dry — despite our twitches and leanings they didn't break away in irrevocable fashion (as has been known before) — they stuck to their guns as if protecting the Kawasaki for all it was worth. They provided good road holding on wet

roads but the real test will be how well they wear and if their performance deteriorates as much as it does on conventional Jap tyres.

New systems

It's just not worth talking about the brakes — it'll only be boring — yet because they're so good and boring they can't be ignored. So there we have it, Kawasaki who not only bring you the first kick-start-less 250 now bring you the first wet weather disc brakes.

Yes, they absolutely do work in the wet, so much so that all we've ever learned about drying out time can be forgotten. Braking distances achieved at the track were excellent: 28.5ft from 30 and 109ft from 60mph. What better brakes to learn on and even continue biking on.

The electrical side of the bike as I've hinted before was of a high standard, which it's got to be, relying totally on an electric start. Switches for hi/lo, indicators, horn and flashlight were in the usual Kawasaki places and so easily fell to hand. The headlamp on dipped beam produced a bright positive spread while the main lamp appeared a bit watery around the edges. Still they provided very adequate light for making good progress along the dark, spooky unlit lanes.

Meanwhile I wonder how big a wave Kawasaki have created on the 250 market and on whose shore an even bigger piece of design paper has washed up with instructions to create an even bigger wave back?

General

Test machine supplied by Kawasaki UK.

Price: £823.14 ex. VAT

Colours available: Candy Emerald Green
Metallic Stardust Silver

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Engine

A quarter litre engine with two vertical cylinders is nothing new but it's well proven. Kawasaki's innovation include needle roller bearings on the con rods plus needle and ball bearings on the mains. 180 degree crankshaft and rubber engine mounts contribute to a smooth responsive engine that provides excellent flexibility.

Type: four-stroke two cylinder, air cooled, SOHC

Bore x Stroke: 55 x 52.4mm (2.2in x 2.06in)

Displacement: 248cc

Compression ratio: 9.5:1

Carburettors: 2 x 32mm Keihin constant vacuum

Max horsepower: 25hp @ 10,000rpm

Max torque: 15.2ft/lb @ 8500rpm

Lubrication: Forced pressure, wet sump

Transmission

Slightly clunky gearchange plus light clutch action provide easy access to the six computer selected gear ratios. Though top gear is sluggish from slow speeds it comes into its own from about 70mph to achieve the maximum speed. A versatile gearbox means it's easy to get the best from engine performance.

Six speed, constant mesh gearbox.

Wet, multiplate clutch.

Overall gear ratios: 1st — 22.65; 2nd — 15.59; 3rd — 12.28; 4th — 10.10; 5th — 8.71; 6th — 7.75

Frame and Forks

Front forks have apparently 20-30% more usable stroke action which does provide a comfortable ride over variable road surfaces.





Rear suspension is on the soft side for scratching two up but solo enables a fast ride through traffic.

Single downtube tubular cradle frame. Telescopic front fork suspension with 6in. travel. Rear swinging arm with five setting suspension units with 100mm (3.93in) movement.

Wheels and Brakes

Cast alloy wheels help reduce unsprung weight and are stronger than spoked wheels (though not so cheap to replace). Kawasaki sintered brake pads provide the best wet weather disc brakes around.

Seven spoke cast alloy wheels.

Dunlop Gold Seal Tyres: Front —

3.00S-18 4PR Rear — 3.50S-18 4PR

Single hydraulic front disc brake with a 9in. diameter. Single hydraulic rear disc with a 8½in. diameter. Sintered metal pads.

Electrics

Unique for its size the Kawasaki has no kickstart. A new design Ferrite-type electric starter takes its place. A regulator keeps the battery fully charged without 'cooking' or overcharging it on long runs.

Alternator: 190W output at 4000rpm coil ignition. Battery: 12 volt 10AH. Headlamp: 35/35 watt

Dimensions

The Z250's short wheelbase improves cornering but larger riders may find its small frame a little cramped, especially with a pillion passenger.

Overall length: 2060mm (81in.)

Overall width: 740mm (29.5in.)

Overall height: 1070mm (42in.)

Wheelbase: 1340mm (52.8in.)

Ground clearance: 140mm (5.5in.)

Dry weight: 153kg (337lbs)

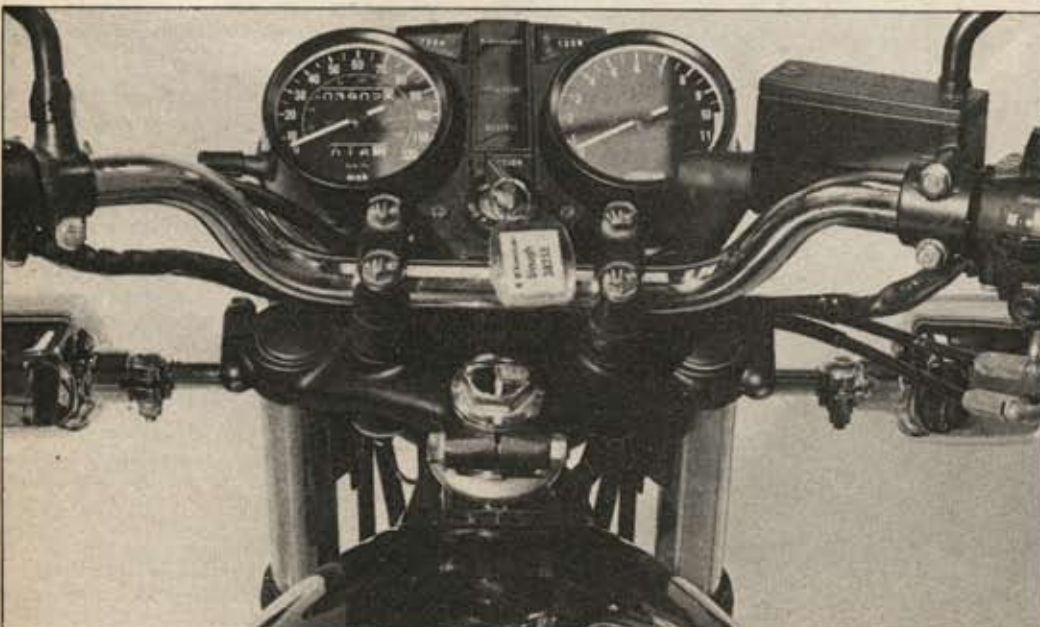
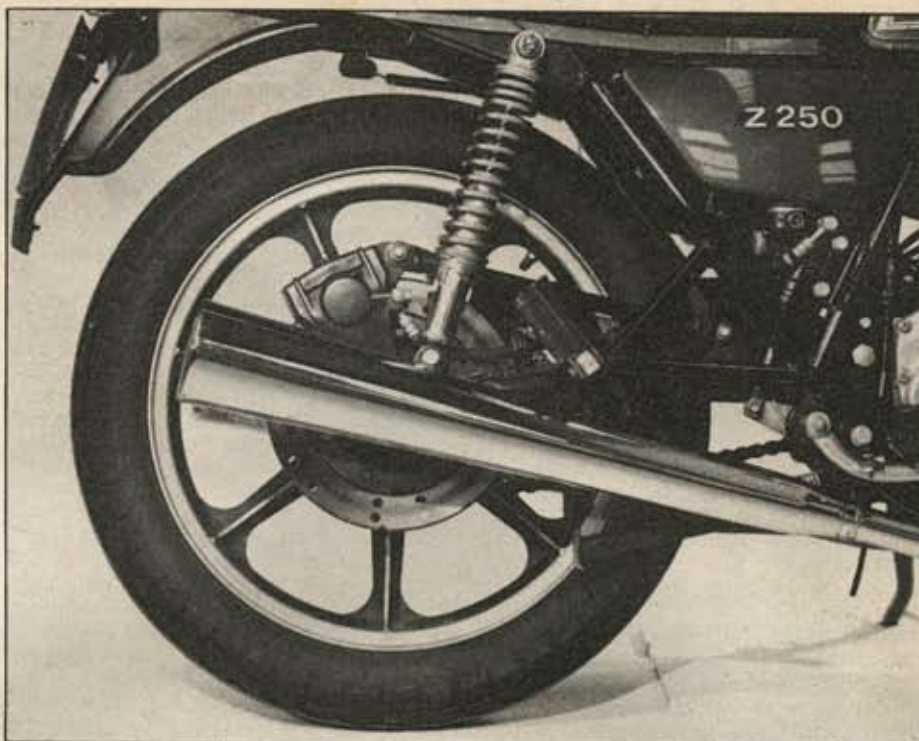
Fuel tank capacity: 13.6 litres (2.9 gals)

Minimum turning radius: 2.2m.

Equipment and Finish

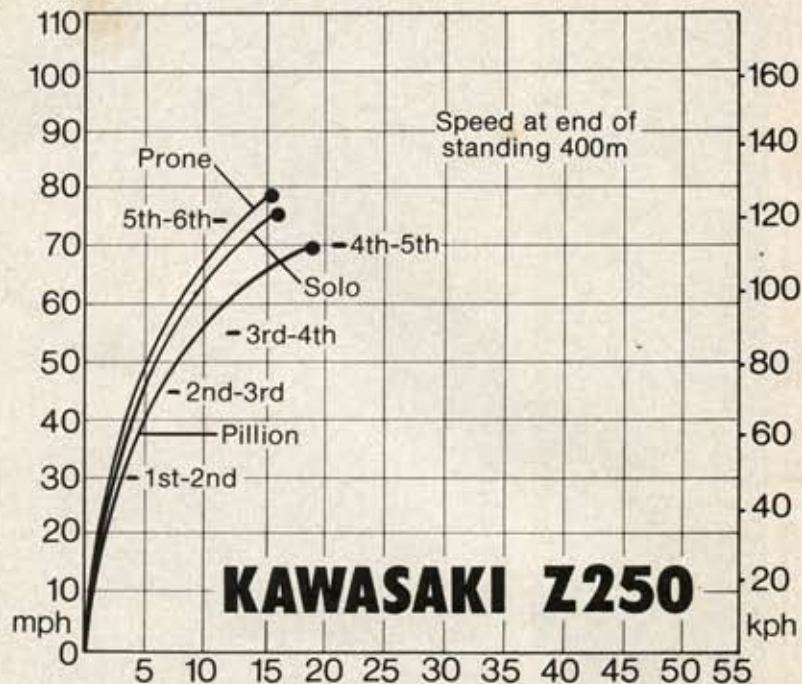
Finish was generally good. It seems rather bad not to have a grab rail to make a pillion passenger's life more comfortable. Toolkit is not really adequate or well fitting.

Indicators, electric start, trip odometer, steering lock, petrol cap and helmet lock, headlight flasher, mirrors.



Speed in Gears

GEAR		MAX	MIN
1	SOLO	31.48	3.84
	PILLION	"	"
	PRONE	"	"
2	SOLO	45.80	5.49
	PILLION	"	"
	PRONE	"	"
3	SOLO	57.91	6.85
	PILLION	"	"
	PRONE	"	"
4	SOLO	71.51	8.31
	PILLION	"	"
	PRONE	"	"
5	SOLO	79.21	10.75
	PILLION	76.90	"
	PRONE	87.54	"
6	SOLO	76.05	13.37
	PILLION	72.20	"
	PRONE	88.29	"



Brakes (both)

mph	Feet	
	SOLO	PILLION
30	28.5	31.0
40	63.5	70.0
50	84.5	89.0
60	109.0	133.0
70	150.0	172.0

Acceleration over standing 1/4 mile/400m

		50 M	100 M	150 M	200 M	250 M	300 M	350 M	1/4 MILE
SOLO	sec	4.25	6.98	8.59	10.04	11.84	13.39	15.11	16.31
	mph	39.12	52.50	59.21	64.13	67.88	70.80	71.76	75.30
PILLION	sec	4.90	7.49	9.70	11.40	13.24	14.80	16.61	18.02
	mph	38.40	48.72	55.21	59.33	62.16	65.29	68.28	69.83
PRONE	sec	4.01	6.45	8.26	9.98	11.73	13.10	14.52	16.04
	mph	41.33	53.51	62.03	66.21	70.98	74.38	76.88	78.41

Mpg (solo)

mph	
30	154
40	98
50	82
60	63
70	50

Mph per 1000 Rpm

GEAR	1	2	3	4	5	6
	3.19	4.75	6.02	7.14	8.31	9.42

Speedo

IND	TRUE
20	19
30	29
40	35
50	46
60	54
70	64
80	71
90	79

OIL CONSUMPTION

Neg.

MILOMETER

Accurate

Passing Times (solo)

GEAR	30 - 50	40 - 60	50 - 70	60 - 80	70 - 90
3	6.15				
4	7.57	7.65	9.08		
5	9.52	10.21	12.46		
6	12.14	13.21	17.42	24.23	

MOTOR CYCLING

TEST SHEET

Performance figures
obtained at:-
M.I.R.A. Test track
Nr. ATHERSTONE WARKS.