HOW MANY CUSTOMERS FOR THE VOYAGER?

The manufacturers plan an initial build of 200 Voyagers. A "possible potential" customer reports on a test-ride in a production model

FEET-f.rst motorcycles are not new. History is littered with them. Scooters and choppers are more 'feet forward' that your average bike. If you look back to the pioneer machines, you will see that many of them had footboards and footrests up front. A few such as the Wilkinson TAC/TMC (Touring Auto Cycle and Motor Cycle respectively) started down the road of lowering the seat between various bits of mechanical gubbins; but the arrangement which became dominant was the now-conventional one of a bicycle-type frame containing the works with a saddle on top. Through the years various people have retried the FF layout. One of the most famous examples was the Ner-a-car with its low, panelled chassis, hub-steering — and a bunch of other novel features. It has the reputation of being very stable, but never having ridden one, I cannot vouch for this. In recent years, as readers know, thanks mainly to P.N.B.'s untiring efforts, engineers have been beavering away on modern variants of the concept. Malcolm Newell is and Ken Leaman's Quasar was an example which briefly made it into limited production. Now a new example of the breed is on offer to the general public, from the fertile brain of individualist engineer and occasional journalist Royce Creasey. Built by Speake and Co., of Crickhowell (in Wales), the Voyager was unveiled at the NEC show in November, and the *reality* of the machines confirmed by the fact that a test ride was made available only a week later.

The Voyager embodies a number of interesting concepts, not all of which are automatic results of the riding position from which the type derives it name. Hub-centre steering, for instance, is not mandatory but has been chosen in this case because its engineering has attractions over the usual teles; it is, too, compact, which suits the format better. The particular design here is one patented by Bob Tait and is claimed to give 38 degrees of steering lock. Royce Creasey makes extensive use of automotive parts, which have greater production volumes,

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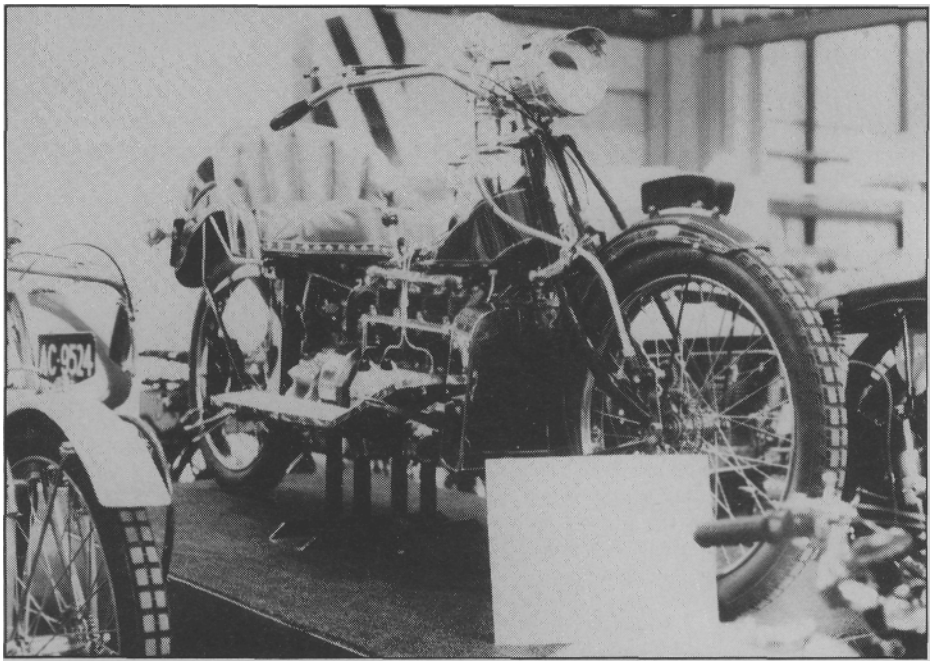
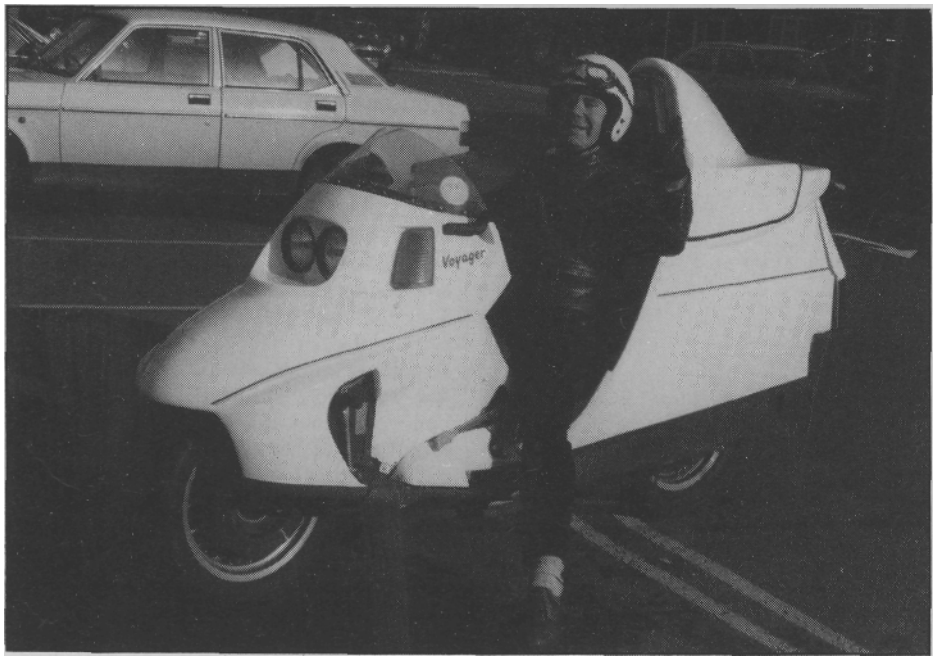
keeping their cost below that of most bike parts — or at least European bike parts. The Voyager manages to be extensively British made. The frame is a steel tube and sheet fabriaction using welded and bolted joints, with the transmission as a structural member. The low seating position is obtained by placing the seat over the gearbox and behind the vertical engine, which makes for a fairly long wheelbase, though at 64 'A inches it is not outrageous. The seat itself is like a car seat; in fact the back is a car seat, an adjustable Volvo item, no less. A sliding arrangement for both the seat back and part of the panelling allows a passenger to be accommodated in 'king and queen' style. The whole works are covered by the glassfibre panels which contribute the aerodynamic shape, and also provide an extensive luggage-carrying space.

The engine is a mildly tuned Reliant watercooled 850cc four, while transmission is taken care of by a five-speed MotoGuzzi gearbox and shaft drive to the rear wheel (chain drive is quite unthinkable). There are Hagon dampers at the front, rear swinging forks, and braking is by triple discs. Twin headlights are fitted (and of course the car-type alternator is quite up to powering these.) Handlebars and controls look very strange, with vertical contoured grips and no twistgrip, but are not as unconventional as they may first appear. Clutch and front brake are conventionally operated, but the throttle uses a finger-operated 'trigger'. Foot controls are conventional too (and adjustable), but placed forward to suit the riding position.





Above: Veteran FF — Wilkinson TAC
Left: "Controls fall readily to hand . . ."

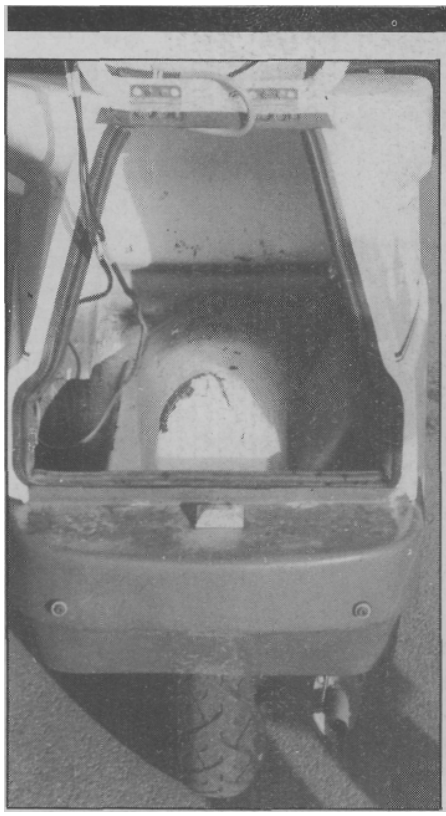
Enough of the specifications, how does the Voyager feel? My first pull away was a nervous occasion, as I was mostly concerned with getting my feet up and not dropping the vehicle and not looking a fool in front of onlookers — or, indeed, the owners! Getting my feet up was not difficult, nor was adjusting to the slightly unusual control layout. What was harder to tune into was the sensation at very low speed when the Voyager seemed to want to roll/weave. At first I needed a lot of space and couldn't risk going feet up through narrow gaps which meant no access to the rear brake.

As expected, things improved on the open road, but within a very short distance I had to negotiate a bit of village traffic, and still didn't feel very confident. The index finger-operated throttle trigger was very responsive, in fact at first it was rather too quick, and my throttle blips were somewhat clumsy. With confidence rising slightly, I managed to relax back into the seat on the open road and savour the intent of the machine.

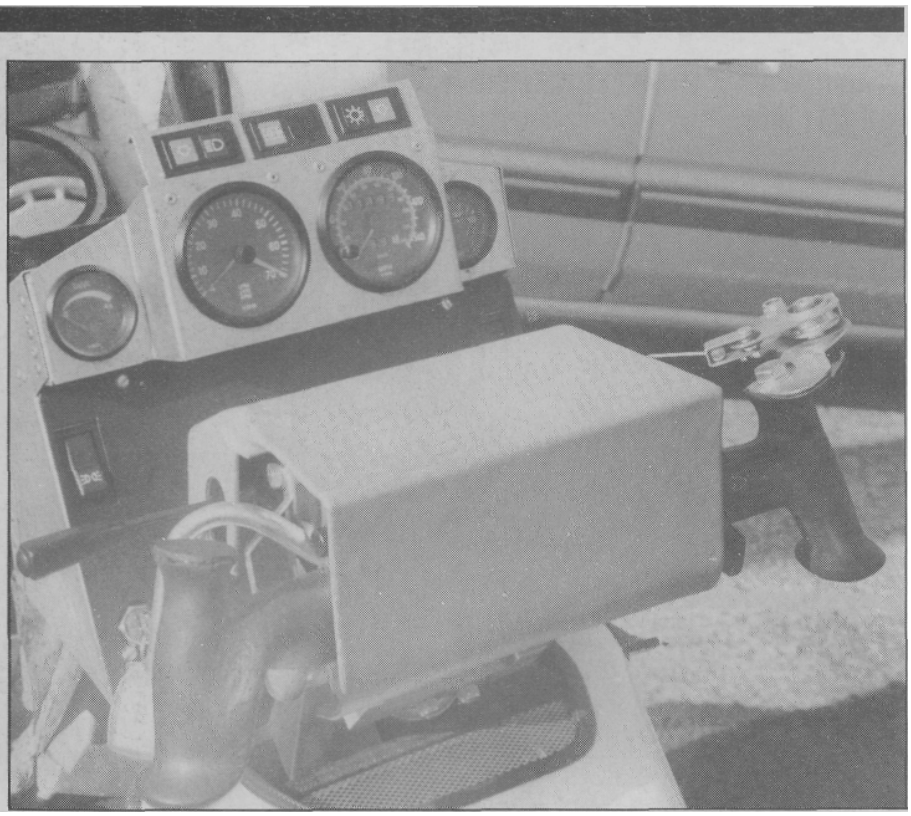
Performance is not lacking, although even with this body's low frontal area and aerodynamics the 60bhp engine is never going to give speed to match a Japanese rocket ship. Cruising well over the limit would be no problem; indeed I can vouch for at least the ton.

Since the Relaint engine is the basis for a car racing class I imagine tuning is possible if the claimed 130 mph isn't enough for the owner. My ride was not very long, and cornering was something I was only just beginning to get the feel of during my restricted outing on corners; this was mainly due to my being a cautious person unused to the wheelbase/trail combination, I suspect. I got better, but never tried anything odd. Another first-timer having a trial ride did push on rather faster and exercised the braking on a bend without problems. I did try chugging along a grass verge .. . after all, if you go to Mallory you will probably have to ride across a field to park. No real problem, save that I wasn't terribly confident at low speed, anyway. It will turn around in a main road.

The Voyager is not excessively heavy by modern big-bike standards, at 4751b, and so the triple discs are able to haul speed down without problems, my test stop confirmed this without any trauma. Real lighting effectiveness could not be tested, although as the weather was rapidly turning foggy during my test ride the lamps were used. With twin head and tail lamps, there should be no problem in that area. The model being tested was the works development hack, a fact which may be apparent in some of the accompanying photographs; I was assured that small alterations are still being made to the contouring to achieve best airflow over the rider. It is pretty reasonable in this regard at present, however, for I purposely took an open-faced helmet to see how one •would fare behind the screen (single curvature on this bike, but a moulded, double-



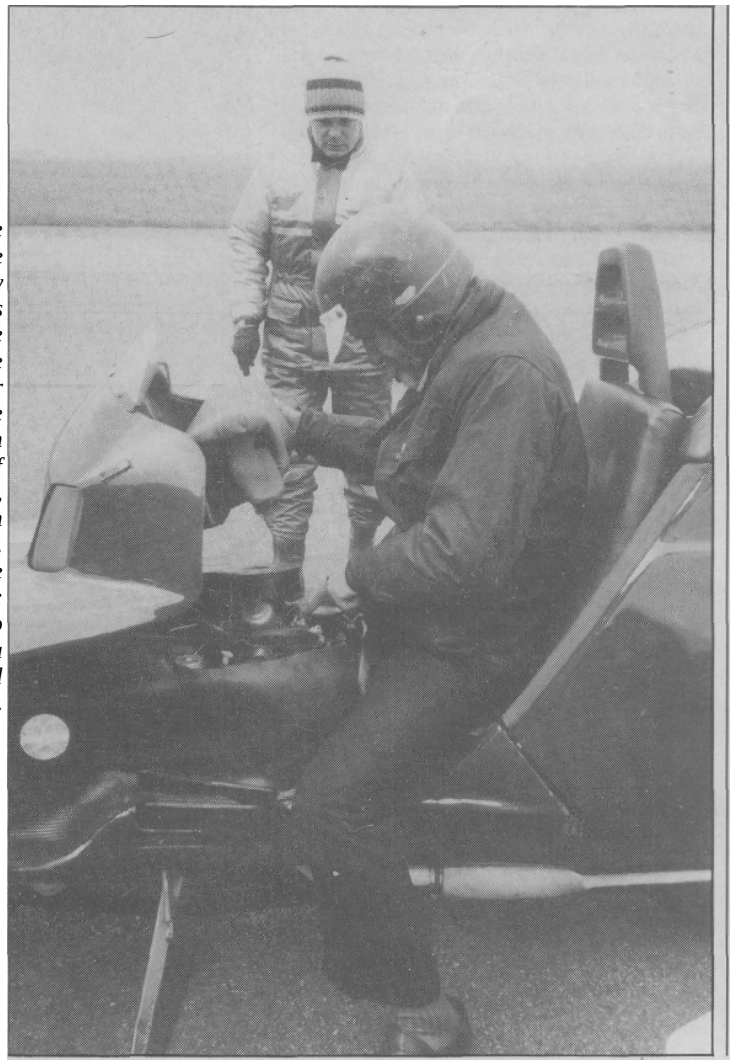
Extensive storage is available at the rear



Handlebar and instrument layout of the Voyager

SPECIFICATION

ENGINE: 850cc Reliant four-cylinder four-stroke, aluminium, watercooled. Power: 60 bhp at 7,000 rpm.
TRANSMISSION: Gearbox — Five-speed Moto Guzzi constant-mesh. Rear drive -shaft/bevels, cushdrive in hub.
CHASSIS-FRAME: Fabricated steel sheet and tube, incorporating transmission as a structural member; zinc and painted protective finish.
BODYWORK: Sectional glass reinforced plastic (GRP), rubber-mounted, upholstered and soundproofed. **SUSPENSION:** Front — Pivoted fork with hub-centre steering developed for Voyager, giving 38 degree lock (UK patent 1466061), twin Hagon spring-damper units. Rear -Pivoted fork with driveshaft housed in r.h. fork leg, twin Hagon spring-damper units.
BRAKES AND TYRES: Front - Twin JAP discs and calipers; Avon AM18 120/80 x 16. Rear -- Brembo disc and caliper; Avon AMIS 120/90 x 16.
ELECTRICAL SYSTEM: Lights -- Twin 60/55 watt quartz-halogen headlights, twin tail-lamps winkers, parking and instrument lamps. Generator — Lucas 12 v alternator, twin 12 v 12 AH batteries, fuses. Starter — Pre-engage type.
DIMENSIONS: Wheelbase -- 1,640 mm (64.5 in). Length — 2450 mm (8 in). Width - 685 mm (27 in). Scat height — 430 mm (17 in). Weight — 215 kg (475 Ib)
PERFORMANCE (claimed): Top speed -200 kph (130 mph). Fuel consumption at 112 kph (70 mph) — 3.21 litres/l00km (80 mpg).
MANUFACTURER: Speake and Co., Ltd., Elvicta Estate, Crickhowell, Powys, Wales, NP8 IDF. Tel. (0873) 811281/810302 Fax (0873) 810958.



Flashback to the prototype. Royce Creasey contemplates his navel, and the top of the Reliant power unit, while Graham Sanderson, of Honda UK, looks on in amazement. Note difference in clothing; there's no heating on a Honda Gold Wing. . .

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Ken Pollock, Top Gear director, goes for a ride in Voyager — designer Creasey at the controls - at the NEC, November 1989

I felt, very definitely, that I was riding a bike

curvature version incorporating a deflector is planned. The weather did not deteriorate enough to allow me to check on the effectiveness of the bodywork in protecting the rider from wet as well as from wind. A spin as passenger reminded me what an 80 or 90 mph blast of air feels like, for the 'pillion' rider is seated higher than the pilot and thus of course if of similar stature can look over him (sometimes an advantage, sometimes not, depending on whether a good view or protection from the elements is most relevant at the time). The passenger's lower legs are exposed on the fold-down footrests in much the same way as on a conventional machine, but the trunk of the body is well shielded within the fibreglass (the passenger's weight is carried well within the wheel-base too). There's no danger of falling off. In fact going to sleep on the back might be quite an acceptable practice. Now that could open up some long-distance trips for twosomes!

With the feet-forward riding position, unusual-looking controls, and enveloping bodywork I had wondered just how much of a 'motorcycle' the Voyager would seem. Within a brief distance this question was resolved. As soon as initial 'nerves' subsided, I was pleased to realise that I felt very definitely that I was riding a *bike*, albeit with a couple of unfamiliar characteristics. Controls 'fall readily to hand'; as the old roadtest phrase had it. The narrow -looking bars led me to expect heavy steering, but this was not the case. Handlebar controls were fine, foot controls rather a long reach for me — but I noted that they were mounted on adjustable subframes, so there would be no difficulty in tailoring the riding position. Very short riders might have to drill alternative mounting holes, I suppose. Reaching the ground should be no problem for anyone, although it may still pay not to let the bike roll too far off vertical because one's legs are not at the best angle for producing lots of righting force. As for picking the machine up, well, doing that with the Voyager is no harder than picking up my Vincent (don't ask how I know about either chore!).

By the time I returned to the factory I was able to ride around the industrial estate and up to the factory door feet-up, although I was still leaving myself reasonable manoeuvring room as I hadn't completely mastered the low-sped roll, which might be inherent, or might just be operator-trying-too-hard. Higher-speed riding was also feeling better.

A longer ride

How to sum up? Well, as I said to Nick Lowerings, I think one would need a rather longer ride on the Voyager than 20 or so miles to be able to make real judgements. The Voyager does not handle like an 'average' bike, and so needs a rather longer familiarisation period. Some things are easy to sum up, however. It offers a good touring performance, both in speed and fuel consumption, which is claimed to be in the region of 70mpg, at steady speeds. Fairly good weather (and crash) protection is offered — even a *heater*. Braking and lighting are good, and the vibration level is low. Passenger-carrying capability is fine, and built-in luggage space exceeds that of any ordinary panniers arrangement (although if your tent poles are too long I'm not sure where you strap them!)

Comfort is presumably one of the aims of FF design. But checking how well this is achieved on the Voyager is the job of a five-hour ride or more. Handling is the difficult thing to judge, or categorise. Certainly at first it takes a bit of getting used to, but being different to a 'conventional' bike is not necessarily a bad thing (in fact I'm sure designer Royce Creasey would cite that as a plus point). Until one does get used to the bike one cannot really be sure what is down to the machine's basic characteristics, set by the low centre of gravity, rake trail, etc, and what is derived from rider unfamiliarity resulting in over-correction. I doubt that the Voyager will ever challenge a trail bike, either on the rough or in town traffic (notwithstanding the advertisement comment, 'no wider than a moped'), but then trail bikes are not ideal tourers.

Would I buy one? Well firstly I'm not in the market for a new bike; and secondly, over £8,000 is a lot of money. But something special, something different, something handbuilt in small numbers, costs money: and seen that way, the Voyager has its appeal. In this respect it is not very different from the Triking threewheeler, and as read ers may know, I did buy one of those. There are motorcyclists buying at this end of the market, Speake aim to capture over 200 of them, because that is their initial build figure. The first few are already under construction, with four demonstrator/show models having been completed; the prettier show models were in the van ready for despatch to the next show, so I missed the chance to photograph them. Anyone seriously thinking of buying is welcomed to the factory for a trial ride, which I would recommend. If I was a real potential customer I think I would ask for another, rather longer, tryout. I'm not; but I might ask just the same. P.U.B.