

Panther M100

flat track custom

Geoff Stray usually saves his time for V-twins, but this gorgeous Panther keeps stealing him away

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LEGEND SAYS THAT PANTHERS WERE BUILT FOR hauling sidecars around and transporting Foreman Arkwright from his home to t' mill. And just as their first owners were a special breed, those who retain a passion for Panthers these days are unusual among classic bike enthusiasts. For the most part it's not about polishing a shiny example within an inch of its life and taking it out once in a while. Rather, Panther owners like to ride their big sloper singles all the time, in all conditions. They like to tinker, and they like to improve the breed. But even so, Phelon and Moore's creations aren't for customising, surely?

Yet deep in the heart of Avalon, one owner has turned a Cleckheaton workhorse into a snarling big cat, and something a world away from cobbled streets and loaves of Hovis. Like any good custom, Geoff Stray's Panther M100 flat tracker was reborn from a pile of parts and several boxes of spares.

"It had been in someone's shed in Glastonbury for 26 years," says Geoff. "When I found it, it had a sidecar frame with it, which I left behind, intending to pick up later. I never did, which is something I regret now.

"It was all in bits with the heavy wheel hubs and I was going to restore it to original, until I discovered the swingarm part of the frame was slightly bent, so I used a bolt-on rigid back end."

Denuded of its telescopic forks and swinging arm rear end, the M100 might not quite look as if it would be more at home on California's boulevards, but it would certainly have cut it in Chelsea's Kings Road in the late Sixties. The telescopic forks originally fitted were of Panther's own design and were Phelon and Moore's in-house replacement for a Dowty air-sprung item. The Panther's forks were primitive in their original version and heavy, designed as they were to cope with the rigours of sidecar hauling. Geoff went to specialist frame and fork makers Metal Malarkey, who came back with the one inch over girder items seen on the Panther today, fitted with a custom made Hagon damper. The updated girder-fork tech reportedly provides better service on the road than the original telescopic items, which were technically a more modern design.

Geoff said: "The tubes Metal Malarkey used are a lot thicker than you would normally find with girders and the bike handles so much better than one fitted with Panther forks."



Above: Girder forks were made by Metal Malarkey, with a Hagon shock on duty

The wheels were made by specialist builders Talon and were fitted with wavy disc brakes and the calipers from a Honda CRF 250/450. The wheels were the most expensive part of the build, with the combination of wheel rims and hubs an example of the best in the art of wheel building. Geoff said: "Even when you put them both on the scales together, they weigh less than just one of the Panther's original wheels and hubs."

The petrol tank, which was picked up at the Shepton Mallet show, is of unknown origin, but Geoff believes it might be from a Greeves scrambler, and he designed the Panther's tank badge himself. The handlebars are flat track items from Redmax, while the brake reservoir and levers were sourced at a motocross breaker.

Ignition and minimal electrical system is provided by a Lucas Magdyno coupled with a solid-state rectifier. The Panther is no slouch, with the legendary torque taking the beast at 60mph up the notoriously steep and seemingly never-ending one-in-seven Bristol Hill from the city of Wells.

After problems with the original Amal Monobloc carb, Geoff substituted it with a brand-new Concentric item. The magneto was overhauled and once equipped with an MoT the Panther made it onto the road in 2011, winning its first prize, 'Most Desirable Panther', at the owners' club's West Dorset Rally.

Metal Malarkey made the exhaust system which, while very stylish, Geoff found was a little loud for everyday use. "The first time I started it up I caused a cattle stampede," he admitted. "And I did 600 miles on it in a weekend a couple of years ago. By the time I got home my ears were ringing." The bike has now been fitted with a VW Beetle-type baffle, which reduced the ear-shattering, cow-scaring roar to a more muted but far from restrained deep-throated thump. A further top-secret design for the exhaust is on the drawing board. From the above you might get the impression that Geoff is a just a skilled bolter-together of other people's parts rather than a bike builder, but this couldn't be further from the truth.

As well as being a Panther fan, a writer and a bus driver, Geoff has an obsession with V-twins, so much so that he has a website that you can find by searching 'V-twin obsession'. His website is dedicated in part to persuading Harley-Davidson fans that Mr Harley and Mr Davidson did not invent the V-twin with a history of the early V-twin concept discussed in considerable detail. As well as the beautifully put together Panther flat tracker, there's a handful of other projects on

Below: Geoff may ride his Panther single, but is somewhat obsessed with V-twins - check out his website, diagnosis2012.co.uk







the go. A Dresda-framed special is coming to life in a downstairs room. The special is a Panther 120-based 1300cc V-twin of Geoff's own design, using the crankcases from an M120 (heavily modified) with an extra Panther cylinder grafted on where the magneto should go. While the frame follows the lines of the Norton Featherbed, it's been custom built to fit the new V-twin. After being exhibited at the Shepton show, the Panther V-twin is currently undergoing further development. It uses Buell conrods, and after many experiments trying to get the Panther cam gears to fit and function properly in the modified crank cases, Geoff has now skimmed two gears in half and Dresda are currently working on a lightweight valve operation for him, so the new gears are not overstressed.

Next to the Panther twin is another V-twin, based on two BSA B50 top ends in a Norton frame that Geoff was offered at a bike show and felt he couldn't turn down. And sitting on a straining kitchen chair is a Howard 1340cc side-valve V-twin. The Howard was built in Australia in the 1930s and intended for use in heavy-duty agricultural rotavators. A few Howard engines have found themselves in motorcycle frames, but the biggest drawback of the design for two-wheeled use is the crankcase, which is made from cast iron. This is a great fit for a heavy rotavator, but makes it less practical as a motorcycle powerplant. Geoff also

has his home-built JAP twin-engined BSA special, the Jabsawocky. Work is needed on this, as it leaves a cloud of vision-obscuring smoke everywhere it goes.

Outside again, Geoff gives a demonstration of how to start the Panther. This is no rapid process, and not suited to those who want a quick getaway.

Geoff explains: "You have to tickle the carb and engage the 'half-compression lever', which is the lever on the timing case on the exhaust side, since this is a single-port Panther, pull the clutch in and kick it over once or twice to free the clutch. Then you give it full magneto advance and choke, kick it a few times with the handlebar-mounted valve-lifter pulled in to wet the plug, tickle the carb again, get it to top dead centre, and then just past it is using handlebar-mounted valve-lifter; kick it again and then it will start. And you have to remember to disengage the half-valve lifter after it starts, or it will make an odd noise!"

Forewarned by previous experience, Geoff first checked carefully that there were no bovine observers waiting to be spooked before he demonstrated the procedure. As promised, the Panther burst into snarling life before settling down and the muffled thump of a Panther's famously slow tickover bounced off Glastonbury Tor, the noise a suitable symphony to accompany the passage of a fine example of an old English custom. **CBG**

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