

# STEADY, F

## PUTTING NORTON



Norton is slowly ramping up production again. These bikes are heading to Hong Kong.

# BUT SURE

## BACK ON THE MAP



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**N**orton Motorcycles owner Stuart Garner, 47, is the man who bet big-time on being able to revive Britain's most sporting motorcycle brand as a series production entity, and he now looks set for the bet to pay off. During the past eight years since he acquired the rights to the historic British marque in October 2008 from

its previous American owner, Boston financier Olly Curme, obtaining with them the prototype Commando 961 street bike, which Curme had commissioned from the USA's number-one twin-cylinder Norton guru, Oregon-based Kenny Dreer, Garner has invested long hours in putting the born-again Norton Motorcycles firm back on the map. So far, 2 000 motorcycles have been built and delivered to customers around the world.

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Doing so has entailed shifting from a compact 8000-square-foot factory housing a dozen employees into a six-times-larger modern annex to a 226-year-old stately home nestling in the middle of a 26-acre estate in the heart of England. Workforce is now numbering 75. It's involved returning to the Isle of Man five years running to race in the TT, with new rider David Johnson confirming his status as the TT's fastest Australian in lapping the Isle of Man's 37<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>-mile TT Course at over 130 mph en route to seventh place in the Superbike TT on the Norton SG5 race bike using a factory-supported version of Aprilia's three-time World Superbike Champion RSV4 motor. Norton's new 45,000-square-foot factory formerly housed up to 500 employees of BMI (British Midland International), BMI/British Midland International, which was headquartered at the palatial Donington

Hall estate until it was acquired by its British Airways rival in October 2012. Garner purchased Donington Hall from BA in March 2014, and moved Norton in there later that summer. He's now in the process of converting the mansion built in 1790 into a 14-room boutique hotel and 200-person banqueting facility, and has just pur-



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(Left) Norton Motorcycles owner Stuart Garner is taking it one step at a time when it comes to rebuilding the iconic British motorcycle company. (Right) With David Johnson at the controls, Norton had a great showing in the Superbike TT class at the Isle of Man.



chased the neighboring Priest House Hotel, a luxury 42-bedroom riverside property adjacent to the Norton factory built around an 11th-century Norman mill tower, thus adding a useful revenue stream to help capitalize the flourishing motorcycle business expanding next door in BMI's huge former business HQ, aided by a 4,000,000-pound funding grant from the UK Government after a visit to Norton by Chancellor of the Exchequer,

George Osborne. The reborn Norton Motorcycles company has finally shifted into top gear, and the chance to talk to Stuart Garner in his Donington Hall office explained how and why this has come about.

**Eight years on since you first discussed acquiring what remained of the Norton brand, here you are in Donington Hall, with the former BMI reservations center behind us converted into the Norton as-**

**sembly line. Is Norton finally re-established for real?**

It's going really well, but it's not easy. But we're moving ahead really well, and we're consistently making 15-20 bikes a week for customers all over the world. It varies a bit from one week to another, but that's the average.

**With a global distribution network, and especially strong demand from your latest export market, Australia,**

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**are you able to keep up with demand?**

Just about. We've added some extra assembly bays. We don't have a production line, because each motorcycle is built by a team of two technicians, plus an apprentice who helps and learns from them. We're up to around 150 people in the building right now, split about 50/50 between full-time workers and apprentices.

**I understand you're planning a volume production product in the form of a new 650 twin, as a spinoff from a forthcoming 1200cc Norton V4. What are your plans for these, and when will they reach production?**

Well, you might call it a volume product and I suppose it could be in Norton terms, but I don't think the 650 twin will be one by the standards of other brands. Yes, it is indeed on the engineers' drawing board, it's been there for a good few months, and it will once again be a parallel-twin which, in essence, is derived from the 1200cc 72° V4 we're also working on, so there will be a reasonable amount of similarity between the two. I'll let Simon Skinner, our Head of Design, tell you all about the V4 that's coming up first, but the 650 will be a liquid-cooled, double overhead cam, eight-valve parallel-twin, and its engine will essentially be the V4 with one bank of cylinders chopped off it, so there will be some con-



siderable engineering overlap. For a small business like ours to have two brand new engines in development at the same time is an incredibly big financial commitment, and potentially very risky. We've now started what is a very important two-year development window for Norton to get these engines perfected, and powering new models in the marketplace. But they'll be quite different from our existing core product, the pushrod air/oil-cooled Commando which will, of course, stay in production, and will be unaffected by these two new platforms.

**When do you expect to launch the 650?**

In fact, we're looking at launching the 1200cc V4 first at the [Birmingham] NEC Show this November, and the 650 there in November 2017. We've not yet determined prices and production volumes for the V4, which is out at the end of this year, so we're still a way away.

**What sort of model do you envisage launching the 650 twin as, will it be a naked bike?**

We're having some fun with that, and right now we're thinking it could make a fabulous supercharged sportbike, we'd come in at the top of the market with the high performance version, and then develop various



Johnson's Norton SG5 TT racer.

could be a real show stopper, and then the obvious thing is that it could spin out into a naked streetfighter version.

**Would that be unsupercharged, however?**

We'll see. We may well offer both versions for production in those models. We may also do a street scrambler 650 twin, and it could even lead to a full dual-purpose on/off-road model if the market is there for it. I think one of the things we'll have to take a long, hard look at as we get closer to putting a prototype out to launch is how the market is moving. But I repeat, the 961 Commando isn't going anywhere; that model platform will remain in production practically indefinitely, just being constantly improved as in the latest Mark

**product development, is by racing in the Isle of Man TT for the past four years with an Aprilia RSV4 engine in a Norton chassis. You had a much better result this year, with your new Aussie rider David Johnson aboard. Are you satisfied with the way things went?**

We had a great TT this year, and we're now up with the leaders thanks to Davo Johnson's hard work, which we're very grateful to him for. He posted a fastest lap time of 130.87 mph on the Norton, and scored a fabulous seventh-place in the superbike race. He was going well again in the senior TT before he slipped off the course at low speed, fortunately without hurting himself. It's been a huge step forward for Norton this year, but we're always pushing for more, and have lined up a great starting point for our assault on the 2017 TT, again with Davo riding.

Since the very day we came back from the Isle of Man last year, we'd been investing heavily in developing this year's bike. There's a new chassis, a new swingarm and a new rear link, but the big thing for 2016 has been a new electronics package on the bike. We've been working closely with the Aprilia factory, and have the use of their ECU as developed on their World Superbike championship-winning bike.

**So you're saying that now that Aprilia is out of World**

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normally aspirated spinoffs from that. We're going through quite a few scenarios right now, but one that sticks out is a 1970s-style red, white and blue John Player Norton street-legal road racer with a modern super lightweight 650cc parallel-twin engine that's supercharged. We think that

II version of the engine, which has essentially been completely retooled in order to reduce noise, vibration and harshness, and to further refine the product.

**One of the ways you're promoting the existence of Norton, as well as doing**



Norton's "production line" at work in its new facility.

### **Superbike, officially, they've been prepared to work with Norton?**

They were always very helpful previously, but now that they have another focus [on MotoGP] they have a little bit more capacity to be even more helpful. We've swapped engineers, and we've had a few Norton people go to the factory in Italy to learn

more about the electronics package, and the engine platform in general, and that's been super helpful. One thing that has come back from the riders is that the RSV4 motor is super quick, but it's been difficult to calibrate it to tame the substantial horsepower it produces. That's bad enough on a billiard table flat short circuit, but it presents

a whole new level of difficulty when you're racing on public roads, with all the lumps and bumps in the surface that the Island gives you.

It's important to point out that our test rider is 2009 Senior TT winner Steve Plater, so he knows what he's doing. Steve's been helping refine the Norton package, but we were in



a position using the Cosworth software from last year that we couldn't get the correct throttle calibration to make the engine calm enough for the guys to be able to use it properly on the TT Course. The bike was too reactive until now, it was just too aggressive, so we had a discussion with Aprilia about that, and it seems they had similar issues

on their own superbikes with this same engine. It delivers 230 horsepower, so this output gives you problems when you're in the bottom three gears trying to get hard on the gas. It's super aggressive and some of the electronic packages out there don't let you calibrate the bike in a way that the rider can use to control his throttle response, but that's been a big issue that we've now cracked with the help

**since you first began negotiating to acquire Norton. Are you where you hoped you'd be?**

I think we're behind in some ways, and ahead in others. We're behind in terms of where we thought we'd be with actual volume, and the physical number of bikes being built, but we're miles ahead in terms of the strength of the brand, and how we've established such a great infrastructure here at Donington

“THE 961 COMMANDO ISN'T GOING ANYWHERE; THAT MODEL PLATFORM WILL REMAIN IN PRODUCTION PRACTICALLY INDEFINITELY.”

of Aprilia, and Davo's great performance on this year's Norton has underlined that.

**Presumably the acquired knowledge that you've achieved in liaising with Aprilia on the TT racer is going to help with producing the forthcoming Norton V4 road bikes?**

One hundred percent correct. The only way to justify the budget we spend going racing in the Isle of Man is that it's helping us develop the 1200cc V4 road bike that's morphing out of the Norton TT racer.

**Norton doing well in the Isle of Man TT is a very significant step forward in bringing the brand back to the global stage. It's been eight years**

Hall. So I think if seven and a half years ago you'd offered me the chance for Norton to be where it is today, I'd have grabbed it with both hands. Because we've not got where we wanted to go in quite the same manner, but the net result is that the Norton brand is very much back in business in a very strong, healthy way. We've managed to avoid all the inevitable banana skins in navigating from a startup company into an established motorcycle manufacturer with good export sales, and an exciting range of future platforms coming to market, which also, may I add, are bought and paid for. The business has minimal debt precisely because we've taken our time and gone one

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foot at a time, keeping an eye on costs, so what we have here in Norton is quite a strong, robust business with a bright future.

**It's been rumored in the Indian press that you're close to agreeing to a deal with Mahindra for them to acquire a majority of Norton equity, possibly leaving you still in charge of running the company for them. Can you comment on that?**

I'm not a seller—there's no truth whatsoever in those rumors.

**Do you envisage an eventual ceiling of how many Nortons you want to make each year?**

We know that we're good for somewhere between 6000 and 8000 units a year without devaluing Norton's image, so I believe that's what we'll eventually aim for as a future production ceiling. But all in good time.

**With the added benefit of training up the next generation in your workforce via the government sponsored apprenticeship scheme?**

Thanks for having the perception to notice what we're doing here with our students, because not everyone does. Instead I get asked, why did you buy that big old place, why have you got these huge premises if you're only building 15-20 bikes a week, why are you building a brand new factory next door? Look, it's all about what happens



Garner is excited about Norton's future

five, 10 or 15 years from now. I haven't sold equity because we want Norton to be a slow burner and control our own destiny, doing it the right way for the brand in building British motorcycles that we're training young people to make, using British components. We've got control over our own fate, and the accountants and venture capitalists aren't pushing us with a three-year horizon to bring Norton to the market via an IPO. My horizon for this business is to be in it for the length of my lifetime. I strongly believe that my successor as Managing Director of Norton will be one of the apprentices we'll have had working here, who, I might say, are all interviewed for a place here without our ever looking at their school qualifications.

I think it's important we bring people into Norton who are here for the passion and the skills they can acquire, rather than to

flaunt an academic certificate or diploma.

But that does all take time, and it's only further down the road we'll be able to look back and hopefully decide that, yes, that was actually the correct way to re-establish the Norton brand. As I said before, it's sad to see what's happened at MV Agusta, but equally it's heartwarming to know that with Norton we've probably chosen the right way to revive one of the most historic, prestigious brands of all over the last few years. Let's hope MV emerges from its troubles in one piece, but it's strangely reassuring to know that, while the risks are still out there in the marketplace, we've avoided them as we look forward to introducing two brand new engine platforms over the next 18 months, and to develop new Norton products from a position of strength. **CN**