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HONDA CB1100R

Why this exotic 1980s proddie racer makes a sublime, affordable sports tourer in 2008

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9

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HONDA'S CB1100R: THE



The Honda CB1100R was built to win production races in the early 80s.

To begin, a confession: race-bred Hondas do it for me. There's something about the way the world's biggest motorcycle manufacturer makes its homologation road bikes feel special. You can smell the engineering; and feel the outrageous research and development spend beneath your fingertips.

Until today, the CB1100R has been an enigma in my world, elusive and super-cool. Rarer even than RC30s and RC45s, I figured my chances of ever riding a CB1100R were slim to none. And yet, on a bright, clear and slightly runny-nosed October day, here it is, 'my' CB1100R – a 1981 R-B looking every inch the exotic endurance racer despite a backdrop of concrete suburban pathways and sun-greyled fencing. Handsome doesn't do it justice. In a colour combination so right that Honda have been trading on it ever since, and set off perfectly by five-spoke Comstar wheels in gold with silver rims, this CB1100R is already taking apart the notion that you should never meet your heroes.

I'm excited but nervous with it. Without a hint of threat, owner Graham Read has just outlined the realities of running a 27-year-

old machine of which only 1050 were originally built (the later CB1100R-C and D were built in greater numbers, some 1500 each). "Even if it only goes down at 30mph it'll be a write-off," says Graham, as kindly as he can. While CB1100R values range from £2500 to around £6000, the cost of replacing crash-damaged parts is enough to make you want to mummify the thing in bubble wrap. Rough secondhand fuel tanks go for £400 and an immaculate tailpiece can command as much as £1500. Tipping off this honest and carefully maintained R-B just isn't an option.

But as we talk Graham goes on to calm my fears. The shocks are aftermarket Konis, fitted for the greater control they exert over the Honda's back end. The forks hold fresh oil and the pressure in the air-assist system, which essentially acts as an adjustable compressed air spring to help out the actual springs, has been checked (later bikes had anti-dive but the original B did not). The tyres are good, as are the brakes. "It's not immaculate and it's not completely original but it is safe and roadworthy," adds Graham. And it's only a bike after all, albeit an enormous one. Long and tall but nicely slim, the CB1100R's big oil-cooled

LAST AIR-COOLED LEGEND



A quarter-century later, this exotic racer makes a stunning road bike

engine and substantial tubular steel skeleton are clad in swathes of voluptuous bodywork. As a road bike in 2008 the protection it affords is welcome but such vast panels seem at odds with the bike's billing as a no-compromise road racer.

Nudging the beast off its sidestand – Honda's own figures put the bike's weight without fuel at a hefty 518lb, or 235kg – I bring a little choke into play and hit the button. Stone cold and on hotter cams than any other CB, the idle is predictably rough and stall-prone but immediately seductive. Like a 1985 Suzuki GSX-R750 the noise is taut and hard-edged, the 1100R running with a menace that betrays its competitive origins. And despite the considerable mass of its reciprocating parts, the engine answers the thankfully-light throttle without delay – blip it and the revs soar instantly. Oh yes.

In the mid-Seventies Honda were sitting out Grand Prix racing to work on the incredible NR500, the fabulously complex four-stroke with which they planned to topple the dominant Suzuki and Yamaha two-strokes. But while even Honda's four-stroke genius couldn't make a winner of the NR, the same expertise did

help create the awesome RCB1000 endurance racer and, towards the end of the decade, a number of increasingly potent production CBs. That bloodline culminated in the CB1100R, a limited edition racer for the road, first revealed to the world at bike shows in 1980. We didn't know it at the time, but the 1100R would be the last of its kind, and the best. It was the ultimate CB; then a shift in evolution made it the last of the dinosaurs.

At its heart was a monster of an air-cooled, double overhead camshaft engine. The first step in any quest for more power has always involved a boring bar and the CB1100R was no different. The standard CB900F's 64.5mm was enlarged to 70mm while the stroke remain unchanged at 69mm, giving a final capacity of 1062cc. Forged pistons helped raise the compression ratio to a scarcely believable 10:1 from the standard 900's 8.8:1, while hotter camshafts (longer duration and greater lift) completed a motor for which Honda claimed a peak power output of 11.5bhp at 9000rpm. Its nose housed an oil cooler far bigger than the 900's. The chassis was based round the CB900F's frame, but with the removable section of frame welded in place and a deeper, more



rigid headstock. Forks were air-assisted and the bike had Honda's first twin piston front brake calipers.

Graham's bike is the half-faired first of the line, an R-B. It was originally priced at an astonishing £3700 and sold, emphatically, as a racer (Honda's literature described the bike as 'Ultra Super

again in 1982 (a cheeky ruling outlawed the 1100R in 1981 for not having a dual seat). On the domestic scene, Ron Haslam and Joey Dunlop won every race of the 1981 Street Bike championship between them. This bike and those racing successes were later recognised as the swansong of the air-cooled musclebike.

“Its performance prompted anxiety within Honda that selling such a bike would be seen as irresponsible...”

Sports'). At the time, the specialist press suggested the price was as much about keeping the bike out of the hands of ordinary road riders as recouping costs, and that its performance had prompted anxiety within Honda that selling such a bike would be seen as irresponsible, as the TZ750 had done at Yamaha.

Certainly the CB1100R was the real deal, not an empty race replica. The bike won the 1980 Castrol 6 Hour at Amaroo Park in the hands of Wayne Gardner and Andrew Johnson and did it

Of course the CB1100R evolved, first into the fully faired 1100R-C with its stouter anti-dive forks, boomerang Comstar wheels and all-important dual seat, and then into the R-D, with its shorter fairing and box-section swingarm, but its slide into obsolescence as a racer was rapid and undignified.

Within a couple of years far lighter and more compact liquid-cooled machines like the FZ750 Yamaha, Kawasaki GPz900R and Honda's own VF1000 were running rings around anyone



who dared to race an air-cooled dinosaur. But the hearts of race enthusiasts still belonged to them.

Back to 2008 and the mid-afternoon October sun is already making for the horizon, keen to knock off early and leave Hampshire to a clear, chilly night. The light has taken on a warmth at odds with the plunging temperature, catching leaves already blushed orange by autumn and setting them on fire.

A sudden lull in the traffic gives the Honda and I a few miles of tricky rural A-road to ourselves. The engine, which has done nothing but impress since it first rumbled into life this morning, now has the space to roam. It immediately underlines its class.

Nearly three decades on it remains a powerhouse – far smoother than I expected, with just a couple of patches of intrusive vibration. It's strong everywhere and truly rapid beyond 5000rpm. Like Honda's later V4 masterpieces the delivery is seamless, surge-free. Put the throttle on the stop from 3000rpm and the thing just pulls, conservatively at first, until you close in on the 11,000rpm redline and the speedo needle, wavering like a Cessna's altimeter, flies sharply clockwise. Modern traffic is

WANT ONE? HERE'S WHAT TO LOOK FOR

1. Check the bodywork Difficult and expensive to replace, the CB1100R's generous bodywork is easily damaged. Original parts are of close-weave fibreglass, with orderly layering visible on the inside of the panels. If the weave is more chaotic, without rolled-over edges, the panel may be a replacement part. The bike's price should reflect this.

2. Engine noises The CB1100R's engine is tough but often doesn't sound like it is. Clutch noise and camchain rattle is normal. If the starter motor sometimes spins without turning the engine over the starter clutch is slipping.

3. Does she ride true? Many of these bikes were raced and racing means crashes. Check that the bike is equally at ease in left and right-hand corners. If it's not, a bent frame (which is easily straightened) could be the culprit.

4. Are the parts CB1100R? Many CB parts are interchangeable, so some 1100Rs now sport CB900F and CB1100 bits. Some non-standard parts like CB900 carbs will detract from the riding experience. The 1100R's 33mm Mikunis should sport the code VB53.

Get expert advice The fantastic CB1100R owners club has knowledgeable members all over the UK. Membership is £10 a year. Write to Andy Jackson, 40 Hardy Road, Lymm, Cheshire, WA13 0NY or visit www.cb1100r.com



CB1100R MODEL GUIDE



1980 CB1100R (Australia only)

Price then: \$8500 Australian

Value now: £3000-£6000*

As per the CB1100R-B (see right) but unfaired. If you're looking at one, check it's not simply a crash-damaged UK R-B without a fairing. *Valuation is all but impossible since they're beyond rare in the UK.



1981 CB1100R-B

Price then: £3700

Value now: £2500-£5500

The original. 1050 built. Based on the CB900F but with 1062cc plus hotter camshafts, forged pistons, a wider primary chain, a stiffer frame and larger diameter exhausts. Half-faired. Air-assisted front forks, six-gallon aluminium fuel tank, two-piston front brakes and five-spoke Comstar wheels.



1982 CB1100R-C

Price then: £4292

Value now: £3000-£6000

1500 built. Full fairing, metallic paint, rectangular headlight and chrome mirrors. Larger diameter front forks with anti-dive and ventilated front discs. Also had boomerang Comstar wheels and a twin seat.

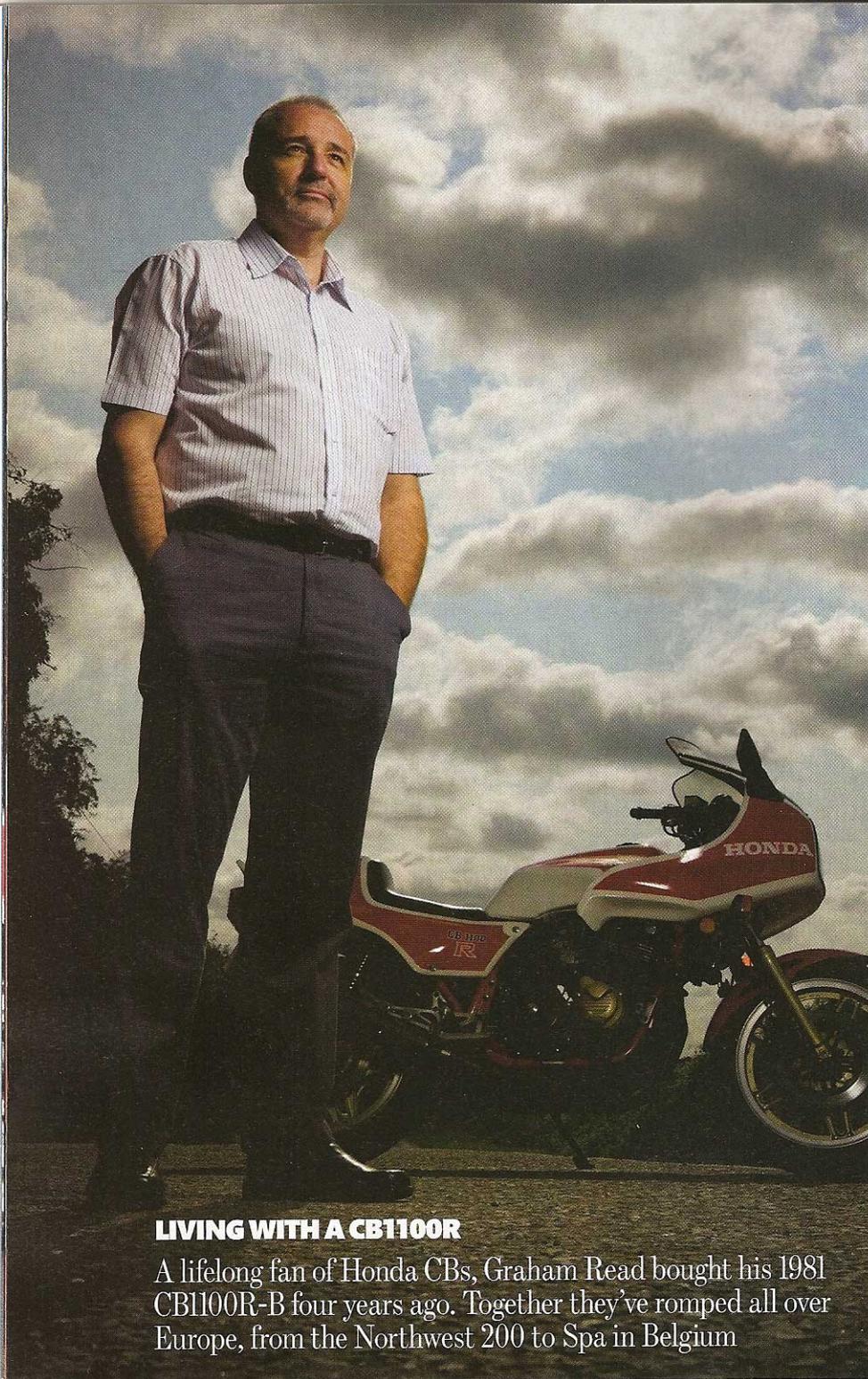


1983 CB1100R-D

Cost then: £4750

Value now: £3000-£6000

1500 built. To comply with race regulations the fairing no longer extends beyond the front wheel spindle. Gloss black engine cases. Up-rated clutch and box-section steel swingarm.



LIVING WITH A CB1100R

A lifelong fan of Honda CBs, Graham Read bought his 1981 CB1100R-B four years ago. Together they've romped all over Europe, from the Northwest 200 to Spa in Belgium

I've been into bikes since I was 14 and I'm a bit of a born again. About six years ago I bought a CB900F. I've also got a CB1100 in bits as well. Of course I wanted a CB1100R. It's the dream CB. I couldn't afford one then; they were £4000 and we were earning £40 a week as apprentices.

"My brother-in-law Trevor, who is chairman of the CB1100R owners' club (details on page 47), helped me find my bike. I wanted an R-B because it's half-faired and I love the look of the engine. If I had my way I'd get another R-B engine and have it on a stand in the living room. I actually found my bike in the Motorcycle News classifieds. I paid £2300.

"The club's pretty active, with about 150 members, but there's a hardcore of about 30 who meet regularly. We try to do one good foreign jaunt each summer. I don't use the 1100R to just potter around but it's great when you're going for a proper ride.

"As for riding it, you have to adapt. Next to something modern it's going to feel like a bag of nails, obviously. The R-B is kind of the rough one - they never were meant for the road. They rev a bit harder, they're rougher lower down and they vibrate a bit more, but everyone says the R-B is the best of the bunch. At the end of the day they are what they are - an aluminium-tanked ex-race bike. If you want civility and good economy, buy something else."

■ SPECIFICATION 1981 HONDA CB1100R-B

ENGINE/TRANSMISSION

Type	air-cooled, DOHC, 16-valve, in-line four cylinder
Capacity	1062cc
Bore x stroke	70mm x 69mm
Compression ratio	10:1
Carburation	4 x 33mm Mikuni CV carbs
Clutch	wet multiplate
Gearbox	5-speed

CHASSIS

Frame	tubular steel cradle
Front suspension	37mm non-adjustable telescopic fork with air assistance
Rear suspension	twin shocks with remote reservoirs adjustable for preload, rebound and compression
Brakes front/rear	2 x 296mm / 1x296mm disc with two-piston calipers
Tyres	100/90 x 19, 130/80 x 18

DIMENSIONS

Dry weight	518lb (235kg)
Wheelbase	58.6in (1488mm)
Seat height	31in (795mm)
Fuel capacity	6gal (26 litres)

PERFORMANCE

Top speed	145mph
Max power	115bhp@9000rpm
Fuel consumption	35mpg
Price new	£3700



THE FUTURE

Honda's only recent nod to the legendary CB1100R has been the underwhelming CB1300 retro, a bike that somehow manages to be less powerful than its 27-year-old inspiration. But at last year's Tokyo show, Honda unveiled a more interesting modern take on the CB1100R (see picture above).

With styling clearly inspired by the R-B, blended with a little RCB endurance racer, the bike sported a red, white and blue livery on its half fairing, gold painted wheels and a nose-mounted oil cooler.

It is handsome and unashamedly retro, with twin piggyback shocks, a heavily finned engine and a tubular steel frame. For a concept bike it looks remarkably feasible (no rear-view camera or token supercharger to dash production hopes). The bike was also at October's motorcycle show in Cologne.

Officially, the CB1100R isn't scheduled for production. But we're cautiously optimistic.

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This month in the CLASSIC WORLD



Great friends Ron Haslam (2) and Joey Dunlop (3) battle for second place at Oulton Park in the 1982 Shell Oils/MCN Streetbike Series. Haslam stayed ahead - Wayne Gardner, also on a CB1100R, was already in the distance. During their first test-ride on the CB1100R at Kyalami, South Africa, in 1981 Haslam took Dunlop pillion for a few laps, to show him the track. The pair then swapped places - on the move - leaving the watching Honda crew goggle-eyed

BIG PICTURE

1982 OULTON PARK, CHESHIRE

CB1100R DOMINATES STREETBIKE SERIES

Honda redefined production racing in 1981. They knew that a race win on a Sunday sold bikes on a Monday, so it wasn't enough to compete against their Japanese rivals, they wanted to annihilate them. Their weapon of choice was the CB1100R. Suzuki's GSX1100 Katana and Kawasaki's Z1100GP, were merely road bikes with taped up lights. The CB1100R was an exotic, hand-assembled racer (with lights and a speedo).

In 1981 the Honda won every race in the seven-round Shell Oils/MCN Streetbike series, with Ron Haslam taking six of the wins. "I won every round, except Brands Hatch, where I fell off on the final lap going onto the full circuit. I'd got the lap record at every other track and I wanted to get the lap record there as well, but I pushed too hard and lost the front." The lap record was, in fact, already his.

Honda were almost embarrassed by the success of their uncompromising approach to production racing. They ordered Haslam to "slow down a bit, and make more of a race of it" by mid-season. He still won the title by a huge margin (117 points to second place Dave Hiscock's 49 points).

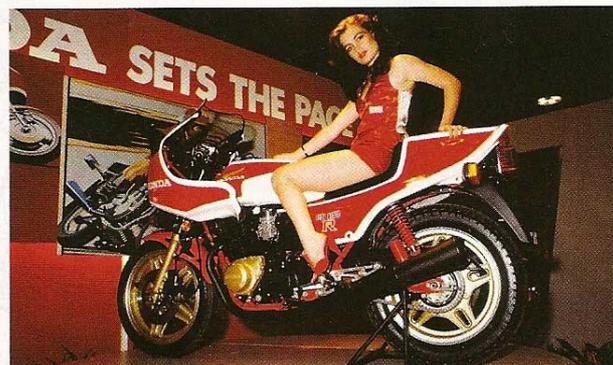
"For some reason I really clicked with the bike – I found it really easy to ride," Haslam recalls. "Joey [Dunlop] gave me some good runs, and so did [Wayne] Gardner, but I got the top side of both of them. I was that confident with it.

"The bike's strengths were its engine, which was powerful but also really smooth. It also handled reasonably well, steered well and gripped ok. The only thing that let it down was the fairing. It was so big, it put too much pressure on the front end and made it push in fast fourth gear corners."

The 1982 Shell Oils Streetbike series was another Honda whitewash, with Haslam, Gardner and Dunlop slogging it out at the front. Haslam and Gardner won four races each and were crowned joint champions, with Dunlop third.

"My memories of the CB1100R are that it was a fantastic bike. I didn't have to push to get a result," remembers Ron. "But I've ridden a couple since – on the Isle of Man and at Macau – and I couldn't believe how big it was."

■ See page 44 for our ride on a CB1100R



PR girls in PVC – another masterstroke in Honda's campaign