

MODERN RARITIES

Everything you need
to know before buying

THE INFAMOUS CX500 HONDA



The original
'plastic maggot', but few
good ones are
left around
these days

Why would anyone want to restore this ugly duckling? Good early ones are, in fact, quite rare and cheap parts hard to come by. Despite many problems they came to be one of the most popular bikes ever, writes Rosie Marston.

WHEN *Motor Cycle News* proclaimed in their test of April 1978, "I can't see how the CX can fail to become one of tomorrow's classics," I bet there were soon some red faces as early models ground to a halt with cam chain problems, or, more accurately, tensioner failure.

Main bearing failure and total engine write-offs were also early failings. It was particularly ironic that the CX500 would suffer — it had been hailed by Honda as a machine designed to be quiet, efficient

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and almost maintenance-free!

There were two reasons for the problems. The first was reportedly an oversight in Honda's quality control which failed to spot a fault in the castings of some of the crankcases. That meant the camchain tensioner allowed the chain to throw itself off the cog and damage all in its way.

The other reported cause was that the tensioner blades and guides cracked and snapped to allow the chain to flail around inside the engine.

Whatever the cause, Honda were to pick up the bill for many a warranty claim until the problem was rectified with modified tensioners.

MODEL HISTORY

THE CX500 story begins in 1975 when it started life as a project codenamed A3S — a watercooled CX360 80 degree vee-twin. There was also an A3S 11 which was a turbocharged 360 vee-twin.

The non-supercharged 360 twin was a heavy lump, weighing in at 332lb dry with a power output of 38.3bhp. That

wasn't good enough for Honda who reasoned the CX360 could benefit from more performance. So, bore and stroke was increased to 78 x 52mm and the CX500 was born.

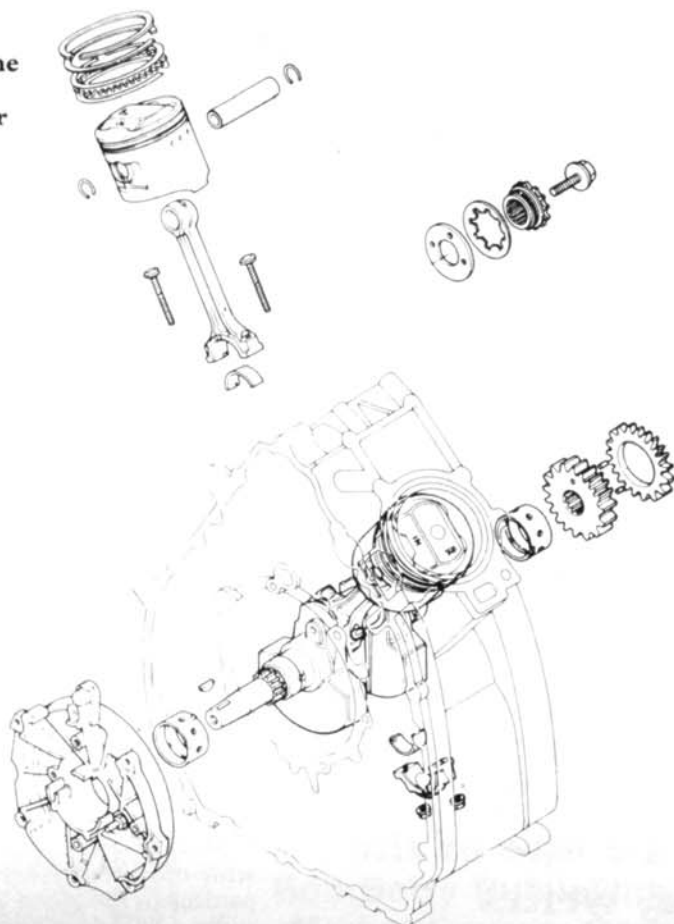
It was launched in 1977, something of a milestone year for Honda. It shared its launch with the awesome six cylinder CBX1000 and at the same time Honda announced their intention to return to World Championship Grand Prix racing with a 500cc four stroke, the ill-fated NR500 with oval pistons.

The CX500 and CBX1000 have since become classics in their own right, but taking opposite routes to get there. The six by virtue of its sheer technology, the CX500 through its amazing ability as a workhorse. Despite that shaky start it was to become one of Honda's best sellers and synonymous with despatch riding.

Never has a motorcycle caused such violent, emotional reaction upon its arrival in Britain. The 'Plastic Maggot' as it became known, was loved or hated with equal passion. Its portly styling, odd-looking plastic headlight nacelle, squat seat and massive radiator made it the laughing stock of the motorcycling world. As for those who bought them, they were accused of being one link short of a full cam chain!

Bike magazine wrote in June 1978, "If looks could kill then this one should be six feet under. There is only one word to describe the styling of the CX500. It's ugly. Not 'striking', 'unusual', or any other word to disguise our reaction to

**Simplicity
itself? The
CX500 engine
has proved
itself so over
the years.**



**CX500 'Sports' gained
a nose fairing. Ac-
cess to engine was
easy**



some gruesome stylistic outrage."

However, if beauty is skin deep, then so is its opposite, for underneath its ugly exterior, the CX500 was quoted as smooth, comfortable and had one of the lightest clutches in the business. It was also universally hailed as a marvellous piece of technology.

The 496cc engine was an 80 degree vee-twin, with each cylinder then twisted through 22 degrees. This was done to so the two 35mm Keihin carburettors could be angled under the petrol tank. Each cylinder had four valves which were operated by two pairs of rockers which were actuated by short pushrods from the camshaft which ran between the cylinders.

Compression ratio was a high 10:1 and power output was a claimed 50bhp at 9000rpm. Transmission was by five speed gearbox and shaft final drive.

Watercooling added much bulk to this machine and as if the huge radiator wasn't enough, there was also a thermostatically controlled fan to help if the going got too hot.

The frame was a sturdy spine type which used the engine as a stressed member. With this arrangement, it's



reported the engine can be dropped out in a matter of 15 minutes. Aside from this, the CX was pretty much standard seventies issue — telescopic front forks, swinging arm rear with twin FVQ (Fade Very Quickly) suspension units and the Comstar wheels were 18 inch rear and 19 inch front.

Tubeless tyres were still quite an innovation and some testers admitted they were worried about punctures when riding the CX500. The tyres were S rated Yokohamas, size 3.25x19 front and 3.75x18 front. Stopping power was provided by two eight inch diameter discs up front and a seven inch single leading shoe drum rear. This was said by some testers to be too much brake and care was needed or the front could lock up.

This 441lb (dry) heavyweight was thought to be quite sluggish, yet it managed a tested top speed of 111.45mph and a standing quarter in 14 seconds. Of more relevance a CX500 could cruise smoothly and effortlessly at around 80-90mph and with a riding position and seat that were said to be extremely comfortable, it was to make the ideal mid-range tourer.

Fuel consumption figures quoted

varied between 45mpg and 54mpg and although in its day testers berated this, compared to modern bikes, it's the accepted norm.

All this technology was available in 1978 for just £1195.

THE CX500 remained virtually unchanged. Later standard CX500 'B' models gained a small flyscreen and the black plastic radiator surround was changed to a metal surround.



That huge seat has been graced by many a despatcher's bum since 1978

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In the early eighties, the CX500 was to become the basis of several further models. In 1981 it was customised with the obligatory peanut tank, high rise handlebars, smaller rear wheel and shortened megga-type exhausts. The carburettors were also more tucked in than before.

That same year Honda brought out the CX500 Turbo. On the face of it, the CX500 wasn't the obvious choice for turbocharging, until you remember its development stage back in 1975 when the CX360 had been turbocharged. As with the standard CX360, performance was disappointing and the project discontinued, but not forgotten.

The CX500 Turbo was incredibly complex, and there was more to it than simply bolting on the turbo unit. It had new pistons with thicker crowns, strong connecting rods to carry bigger bearings and larger main bearing journals. The compression ratio was down to 7.2:1. In addition it had an on-board computer to control the fuel injection and ignition and it even had a self-diagnostic capacity. If one part of the system failed, another could take over.

The styling was changed with a large half fairing, sidepanels that stretched to the rear and formed a tailpiece and it had TURBO emblazoned on the fairing and silencers. Fuel tank capacity increased to 4.4 gallons over the standard CX's 3.7 gallon tank.

The frame was strengthened with extra tubes and the rear suspension was uprated to Honda's Pro-Link monoshock. Front suspension now featured Honda's TRAC anti-dive and air assistance. Seat height fell by half an inch to 31.5 inches.

New Comstars wheels were fitted with wider rims and the front was now an 18 inch. The front brake changed to twin-piston calipers and a disc rear replaced the drum.

The Turbo pushed out a claimed 82bhp but top speed was only around 120-127mph — depending who you believe. It was an extremely heavy machine weighing at around the 500lb mark and has a correspondingly hefty price tag of £3350. This was nearly double the price of the standard CX500 of the day.

For 1982 Honda brought out the CX500EC Eurosport with Superdream type styling and a small headlight fairing instead of that nacelle. It used the standard CX500 motor but with smaller 34mm CV carburettors, automatic cam chain tensioner and different rocker covers. It used much of the Turbo's chassis (front and rear suspension and



The Turbo-charged version was slow and cumbersome and later enlarged to 650cc

a 31 inch seat height.

This model was joined by the Silver Wing which was a Gold Wing styled tourer with a CX500 motor.

As the year turned to 1983 so the standard CX500 was discontinued and became the CX650 in Eurosports, Turbo and Silver Wing styles. The CX500 Custom and Silver Wings were finally discontinued in 1984.

Despite its critics, the CX500 sold in thousands and many mourned its passing of the 'Plastic Maggot' for it had become the yardstick by which all middleweight tourers were marked. The fact that it became one of THE despatch riders mounts is testimony to its comfort, reliability and staying power.

It was succeeded by the shaft drive VT500E which was a far prettier machine but was rather over complicated

for its own good and initially suffered (wrongly) the poor reputation gained by Honda's move into the vee-four market.

PROBLEM AREAS

IF the bike has survived until now then it's unlikely to suddenly suffer the exploding tensioner syndrome. However, I'm told it doesn't take a degree in engineering to work on a CX should you feel like overhauling the top end.

The CX500 is a heavy bike to stop and the discs have a hard time so check for disc grooving. The exhaust collector box 'collects' rust and the upswept silencers rot from the inside out.

If the shocks are worn out on the twin shock model it's still possible to buy bet-



It's him again! Editor Bob Berry at the 1977 launch of the CX500 in Japan. It was somewhat overshadowed by the CBX



Roger Coleman's own restored CX500. He bought it in relatively good order but has restored it to this pristine state. Full story next month



The CX500 being put through its paces at Snetterton by the old 'Motorcycle Mechanics' magazine



The CX500's natural environment — on the city roads as a despatch vehicle

ter replacements off the shelf. Beware of suspension squeak on the Pro-Link model, it could be seized and will need a complete strip and re-grease which could be a time consuming process.

When checking the air filter, remember it feeds the carburettor from the inside out and the internal part of the filter needs to be clear of dirt. Also check the hoses for cracking.

It can be tiresome changing a rev counter cable but go for a really hefty long screwdriver and you'll free off the retaining screw a lot more easily. Plenty of grease when replacing the screw will save future frustration.

At the oil filter check the bolt. If it's at all rounded, get it out and buy a new bolt.

Many riders fitted fork braces to their CXs. Not a bad idea if you intend to do a fair amount of cruising. Add to this a pair of quality tyres as the nature of the engine could put you into a tank slapper on over-run from high speed.

WHAT'S IT WORTH?

TODAY you're unlikely to find a good example of a CX500 as most were snatched up and abused to death as workhorses. I've seen secondhand prices quoted at anything from £350-£600 depending on age and model. The Silver Wings are more expensive but surprisingly custom models are particularly cheap for the early attempts at Japanese customs have always been a British source of amusement.

● **Roger Coleman's restored Honda CX500.**

● **COMING SOON: we rebuild the grottiest, most damaged CX500 engine we could find!**