

ROAD TEST

★ HONDA HORNET 600 92%



NEW Hornet has reworked engine, suspension and styling, but at a glance it's difficult to tell

Buzziness

Honda has revamped its Hornet 600 with engine and chassis improvements but it's still marred by bad vibes and limited range

HONDA'S new updated version of its Hornet 600 makes it much closer to the bike it always promised to be. But while it does set your spine tingling, it is not always for the right reasons.

The idea of a light middleweight with, arguably, the best looks in the category powered by the brilliant CBR600F engine, was clearly a winner.

But until now the Hornet has disappointed with awkward handling and an engine that seemed flat compared with Yamaha's rival Fazer 600.

It also vibrated excessively and gave poor

BY KEVIN ASH

PICTURES JASON CRITCHELL

WHAT'S NEW?

THE engine is basically the same as before – from the CBR600F with a retune to add midrange and an extra 1bhp. The intake ports have been narrowed slightly to sharpen throttle response and the exhaust system reworked to improve efficiency. There is also a restyled silencer. Cam profiles are reshaped to improve throttle response, a paper air cleaner replaces the old oiled type and the ducting is enlarged to increase

air flow. It also gets an exhaust catalyser, which helps it achieve the lowest emissions in the class.

The chassis has a host of detail changes, including repositioned swingarm pivot and retuned suspension.

The instruments are now electronic, headlamp is a new dual bulb, multi-reflector, tank, seat and tail are all restyled, and there is now a 12-litre storage space under the seat.

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as usual

fuel economy – in hard use tank range could be less than 100 miles.

Honda says these criticisms have been addressed with the new model. So the only question is: How good is the new Hornet?

Revisions to the CBR600F-derived engine have added some of the sparkle missing from the old Hornet. Power is up fractionally – Honda claims by 1bhp to 95bhp – and it spins up more willingly with a greater sense of urgency, while the power delivery is more linear, right across the rev range.

The Hornet still feels flat when it's revved up to 12,000rpm, but if you change up a gear earlier it's rewarding and fun – as long as you don't mind the vibration... Up to 6000rpm the engine buzzes a bit but without being bothersome. But rev it harder and the vibes start to dominate.

By 8000rpm the tingles coming through the tank, seat, footrests and bars are a real distraction. And on long, constant speed trips such as motorway journeys it could be a major nuisance. Get a test ride before buying to see how you feel about it.

Another Hornet bugbear was high fuel consumption, as much for the resulting restricted tank range as the cost. A rough estimate at the launch suggested the new bike was returning around 33mpg during mixed riding, which is about what I'd have expected from the old model. And as Honda is making no claims for improved economy, that's about right.

But that is really not good enough, and the addition of one litre to the tank capacity doesn't make a significant difference. If you're hoping to make many long trips on your Hornet, schedule in plenty of fuel stops – you'll now be able to squeeze 100 miles from pump to pump, but unless you're taking it easy, not much more.

But there are plenty of positive things to report, too. For one, the suspension is far better. The previous Hornet felt as if it was built down to a price, offering a bouncy, choppy ride that coped badly with harsh, washboard surfaces. But the new bike is much improved. Its ride is plush and well controlled, improving comfort with its compliance instead of fighting the road surface, but also working very well when thrown from side to side at speed.

All the signs are that the new Hornet has more than enough chassis ability for some serious riding – and it should even cope with track days without too much difficulty. The new set-up is actually firmer than before, but because it's better damped and controlled, it deceives you into thinking it is actually softer.

The brakes also work well without being intimidatingly powerful – for a lot of novice riders the Hornet and its rivals are their first big motorcycle, so this is important. And because the forks are better damped, stopping distances are shorter as there's more grip from the front tyre with improved feedback too.

HANDLING is an excellent compromise



Honda is also hoping the bike will attract women riders, mostly because it's so compact with a very low seat. For lanky types such as myself (I'm 6'3"), I found the Hornet seat a little too low and its footrests slightly high – it is a bit cramped. That said, you do get used to it, and as seat comfort is very good it doesn't induce too many aches after a long spell on board.

But shorties will love the ease with which they can reach the ground. They'll also like the low speed handling, which is now very natural and easy. Tricking the Hornet through the seized-up rush hour traffic during the launch in Palermo, Sicily, was a doddle, and gave me more time to concentrate on not being flattened by homicidal truck drivers.

Plenty of style-conscious Italians were also giving the Hornet a second glance as it squeezed past their battered Fiats – which

surely confirms the success of the reworked styling. There's a freshness and aggression to the 2003 Hornet which comes from greater attention to its lines. The sharp tail unit is angled neatly in tune with the tasty slash-cut silencer, and there's a stronger definition to the tank, resulting in a head-turning visual package. The old model was frequently Italy's best selling bike, largely for its looks as well as Honda's reputation for quality, and that will certainly continue with the new one.

But we Brits have slightly different priorities – how a bike rides is more important, and here the Hornet does have that vibration problem. If you liked the old one you'll love the latest. But if you're considering moving from a Yamaha Fazer, you'll be sacrificing some smoothness with the change. In most other respects, the Honda is now right up there with it.

THE FACTS

HONDA CB600F
£4699 (+£350 OTR)

Availability
Early April
Honda UK: 01753-590500
Deals, offers and bonuses
1 year free AA Recovery

Colours
Blue, black, white

Main updates for 2003
Engine retuned, chassis updated, bodywork restyled
Insurance group NU, max 17
Group 12

Specification
Engine: Liquid-cooled, 600cc (65mm x 45.2mm) 16v dohc four-stroke in-line four, 4 x 36mm Mikuni carbs. Five gears **Chassis:** Steel spine frame. **Front suspension:** 41mm telescopic forks with no adjustments. **Rear suspension:** Single shock with adjustment for pre-load
Tyres: 120/70 x 17 front, 180/55 x 17 rear
Brakes: 2 x 296mm front discs with 2-piston calipers, 220mm rear disc with single-piston caliper

PERFORMANCE

Power and torque Claimed
95bhp, 46ftlb

Weight, power to weight
178kg (392lb), 0.53bhp/kg

Geometry *Rake, trail, w/base*
25°, 9.8cm, 142cm

OUR VERDICT

Engine
85% Too buzzy and thirsty
Handling
92% Agile and stable
Braking
93% Does the business
Comfort
96% No aches or pains
Grip factor
90% Keeps you smiling
OVERALL
92% Fun despite flaws

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