

HISTORY OF THE HONDA CB1100R.

The Honda CB1100R was the first Honda built to literally win a major production race, unlike all previous Honda road bikes. It was born of an obsession Honda-san himself had.

BACKGROUND

Honda-san was no ordinary businessman, indeed he himself would not have used that description, and realising that, he early on employed key business types as he professed himself NOT to be one. He was an engineer. A quit brilliant one.

Honda founded the Honda Motor Company in 1948, recognising the huge lack of transport in war ravaged Japan and set about fixing that with tiny 50cc engine bicycles, which then morphed into the most prolific bike ever, the Honda Cub. However, burning away in his heart was his racing ambition. Honda conquered all in the 1960s Grand Prix arena with a succession of magnificent multi cylinder bikes, winning every class, and still the only maker to win the Manufacturers Championship in EVERY GP class in the same year, 1966. On the back of that Honda then released the game changing CB750 Four road bike, altering motorcycling forever.



Why is this relevant to the CB1100R? To understand that, we need to come forward to 1970 in Australia. A genius promoter realised the possibility of running an endurance race for pure production motorcycles. Not the tuned and pretend "production" bikes often raced at the TT, which were much modified and faired models, but absolutely stock out-of-the-crate bikes exactly as they left the factory. The old saying "*what wins on Sunday sells on Monday*" is apt. The world was almost crying out for a race where you could trust the bikes were exactly as they left the factory. The ultimate "road test"! So in 1970 the Castrol 6 Hour was born. A quite unheralded New Zealander very nearly won that first race riding solo on a Honda CB750, denied by cruel fate when a brake pad failed with not long to go. Instead the venerable Triumph 650 would win, the last hurrah for the



British industry. The Honda CB750 did indeed win in 1971, much to the profound relief of the Honda people. The highly strung and heavy fuel consuming Kawasaki 750 triple two stroke took the honours in 1972, and then Kawasaki released the magnificent double cam Z1 900 the year later, which then dominated the 6 hour for some years, as they did road bike sales as well.

LATE 70'S SUPERBIKES

Stung into action by the Kawasaki, Honda set to work. Honda-san commissioned not one but two projects inside the company with the sole aim of recapturing the crown (king of the road) from Kawasaki. So in 1978

the first of those arrived. Just as 10 years before, when jaws all around the world dropped on sighting the CB750 (*which would in 2000 be voted the most significant motorcycle ever by the world press*), exactly the same reaction happened when Honda released the quite unbelievable 6 cylinder CBX, based on the Honda 6 cylinder racers which swept the 250 and 350 titles in 1966 and 1967. Honda were back, and how! The 6 arrived in Australia and won its first race, the Calder 2 Hour, so all looked good for the 6 Hour, by this time recognised world-wide as the premier genuine production race. The big 6 was leading handily when in the closing stages the scrutineers forced Honda to change the rear wheel due to excessive tyre wear, something they made a botch of and lost 4 minutes, even still only losing the race by a hundred metres or so!



Honda-san took this avoidable loss very badly. Making the matter far worse was the bike which won was the heavy, cumbersome, Yamaha 1100 tourer. Not to worry, thought Honda, his other project had not long after the CBX resulted in a much stronger than CB750 4 cylinder, the CB900F double cam. However Honda's 1979 effort did not succeed either, and the race was won by the new Suzuki GS1000. This time Honda-san was incandescent. Twice now he had lost the major race he badly needed to win, and felt rightly he should have. Something needed to be done. Honda-san commissioned a team to literally build a homologation special, a race ready Honda which would as good as guarantee he would win this elusive, high profile, hugely important race.

COMMISSIONING THE CB1100R RACE SPECIAL

Honda set to work, and brought lead rider Dennis Neill up from Australia to work with the team developing the bike specifically with tiny Amaroo circuit in North West Sydney and the 6 Hour in mind. The CB900 engine was enlarged to 1062, with no shortage of Honda racing parts from the Le Mans and Suzuka 8 Hour as well as Isle of Man TT Formula 1 bikes being migrated across! The chassis was strengthened and better suspension dropped in. Engine end-cover clearance was markedly improved due to special engine case covers. As the race was an endurance one, the fewer pit stops the better, so a massive 25 litre tank was employed, crafted from aluminium. A race seat was fabricated, with no provision made for a pillion. To top it off, the famous Honda Formula 1 race car colours of white with red



emphasis were employed for the very first time on a Honda motorcycle. 100 were needed to be sold to qualify for the race so Honda built that initial batch (of 110 bikes just to be certain) and rushed them to Australia in September 1980 in time for the race. This first CB1100R, designated the RB, was "naked", without the half fairing later added to the British and European models

So Honda were deadly serious. Dennis Neill (*right with the 1100R*) duly blasted his way around Amaroo Park in qualifying to bang the big and drop dead gorgeous Honda on pole. However there was to be one more twist in the tail. Sunday dawned wet and miserable, conditions in which Dennis did not shine. Instead

as the field roared up the hill in a massive cloud of spray, a little known lad from Wollongong, south of Sydney, soared to new heights. Wayne Gardner (*left*) and Australian champion Andrew Johnson won that race in dreadful conditions, and allowed Honda-san the relief he so badly sought.

A superbike win on a modified Honda CB1100R, in similar wet conditions later that year, was to secure Wayne a ride with Moriwaki in Britain for the following year, and the rest is of course history.



Early 1981 saw the half-faired model 1100RB released in Britain and Europe.

In 1981, the CB1100RB entered the British MCN Street Bike series for unmodified road production bikes. Unlike Australia, where indicators and lights are removed for racing, the British series even kept those on, albeit taped up, so the bikes looked even more street! Rising English star Ron Haslam took on the lead ride, along with Isle of Man TT specialist Joey Dunlop. Ron was to absolutely dominate the series, winning all bar the last race, where he fell, and still remounted to finish second. In a supreme irony, Aussie Wayne Gardner had earned the ride with Moriwaki in Britain in 1981 courtesy of his 1980 6 hour and Australian championship last round win on the 1100R. His astonishing speed and commitment attracted the attention of Honda Britain who signed him up for 1982, and thus he rode the last round of the street series on an 1100R, and duly won!

Both Ron and Wayne were to go on to distinguished careers in GP, where Wayne won the 1987 500cc title (on a Honda), and Ron finished 4th while developing the Elf Honda special.



It all began with the CB1100R.

THEN THE CB1100RC

There is more to the 6 hour homologation story. When Honda rocked up with the 1100R with its single seat in 1980, the organisers said "*oh no, you can't race that, it is only a single seater*". Honda checked the rule book, and reminded them that they had allowed the Ducati SS single seaters, and nothing in there said anything about a bike having to have a dual seat, so they were forced to allow the Honda. Predictably, straight after the 1980 race, they changed to rules to specify a production bike had to have facilities for a pillion.

So in 1981 the Honda was not allowed in, which was later to prove the first in a set of poor decisions which would finally kill the race a few years later, as it lost its hard won credibility as the world's leading production race. Again we saw the huge importance to Honda of this race. Off they went and designed the 1100R to have a pillion seat and pegs, with a clever seat cover to allow riders to keep the appearance of the original 1100R single seat, and this time with a proper and well-designed full fairing, resulting in the 1100RC.



So the 6 hour in 1982 saw the return of the Honda, and this time the race was utterly dominated by the CB1100R, with Wayne Gardner teaming with fellow Wollongong native Wayne Clarke for a close win over another



1100RC ridden by 1980 runner up John Pace.

Wayne had had rather a decent amount of practice on the 1100RC! Honda entered him and Rocket Ron Haslam in the 1982 British Street Bike series, won by a mile in 1981 by Ron on the 1100RB. Again the Honda dominated the series, this time with Wayne Gardner emerging as the champion. He promptly jumped on a plane to Australia to then win the Australian 6 hour for the second time on the Honda.



In the process the CB1100R (B and C models) became the only bike ever to win every Castrol 6 Hour in which it was allowed to compete!

FINALLY THE **CB1100RD**

One slight technical issue was detected with the 1982 CB1100RC, the fairing protruded slightly in front of a line drawn vertically through the front axle. Strictly speaking that was not allowed for racing, although as the bike was in standard form, the RC was allowed to race in production racing mainly in Australia and Britain throughout 1982. In the case of the Castrol 6 Hour, rather grudgingly! Nonetheless Honda decided to fix that minor issue, and at the same time perform a number of other updates.

The fairing was shortened but retained the same appearance as the RC, except for one notable change. For some reason, Honda decided to drop the original plain red white and blue paint and substituted it with metallic red and blue, except for the fork legs and chassis, so ended up with a slightly clashing colour scheme. The RC wheels were retained as had proven excellent, so no change needed.



Again, in stepped the 6 Hour organisers and dropped the size limit to 1000cc for 1983 onwards, so denying the final CB1100R, the RD, a chance to replicate its "brothers" success.

Nigel Bryan

Various articles have been written by others, and published, on the origins of the CB1100R, as per below links.

<https://www.oldbikemag.com.au/honda-cb1100r-machine-mission/>

<https://classic-motorbikes.net/honda-cb1100r-rare-road-racer/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honda_CB1100R