

BEST OF BOTH

AI travels to Derbyshire to find out what surprises lurk beneath the exterior of this standard-looking 'Blade

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Most exotics today are all about looking good and going fast. A blend of bling and performance trying to conjure that special something different, with open wallets and no attention to practicality. We love it.

But how about a five year-old 'Blade that has the balls to upset a K7 Gixer Thou' on the straight bits, and the mid-corner suppleness to trouble the list of new generation apex-hugging 600s? And all for just over £10k. Surely not?

Owner Giles Harwood set about creating his dream bike with the help of the business he set up, HPS, and the inspiration from two favourite rides. "We wanted the flickability, sporty, lightweight feel of a Honda NSR250R and the comfort, practicality and relaxed feel of a VFR750F, so the decision was taken to start with a 2002 FireBlade as a donor bike." Not an obvious choice, but one that would certainly provide a challenge. From that day on, the project

has continued with each part on the impressive spec sheet going through careful thought and consideration, and constant development. 100 dyno runs later, and a slipper clutch fitted just days prior to our arrival, and the project is finished.

At a glance, this 954 is no Sienna Miller, but look beyond the standard paint and the touring accessories. Think more along the lines of Fatima Whitbread; no eye candy but serves a purpose well. Giles admits he doesn't get to ride his creation too often, but when he does, he covers several thousand miles at a time, so comfort and realism were always going to be sacrifices made on the 'Blade.

A medley of touring goodies, such as a touring seat, mirror wideners, Honda heated grips, and some Baglux essentials were slapped on to ensure you could return home from a European hike without a visit to an osteopath.

It's only when you get a closer look at the 'Blade and its Boeing 737-alike cockpit that you realise there's more to this special than a mile-munching tourer. I was eager to sample HPS' 'real world' creation, so it was off to explore the Derbyshire dales and the 'Blade's potential.



A snap on the throttle confirms the claimed 160 horses at the rear wheel are alive and kicking with serious intent. Without looking at the dyno graph, you can sense the 954's super-smooth curve, and it feels uncannily like the power delivery of an MV Agusta F4.

This 'Blade even has the same fluffy bottom end fuelling gremlins. When getting excited with the gas in high gears and low revs, the 954 coughs and splutters like Dot Cotton after 20 Lamberts. To be fair though, it does take an exaggerated wrist action to do so.

Firing up through the 'box is made easy by the fully programmable Techtronics Quickshifter. Let's face it: any bike welcomes a quickshifter, but this one serves a dual purpose.

It hastens progress through the gears for head-down thrashes, or it can save your left hand on upshifts. And that's how Giles uses it on his long journeys. Going back down the gears, a box fresh Sigma slipper clutch takes the credit for slick down changes and award winning corner entry stability. I couldn't unsettle it even when I tried.

The motor side of the project wasn't all happy dyno days though. Honda's gearboxes aren't renowned for their reliability, so when the original item gave up with only a few engine mods, Giles and Co. went to town on building a proper lump.

A 2KTT blueprinted and gas flowed head is the main source of the extra ponies, but a great list of performance upgrades adorn the 954. You just have to cast an eye on the spec sheet for a second before you start dribbling.

The combination of a Pipercross filter, the Akrapovic full system and Factory velocity stacks all add to the

power gains, but also provide an induction roar that mimics the GSX-R family. First and second gear wheelies off the throttle prove a cinch, but there isn't quite the modern day midrange to raise a third gear clutch up. There's plenty on tap to get the rear jiving exiting bends though.

Back in '02, the 954 was far from a shoddy bike. It lacked the guts and yobbo attitude of the R1, but to make up for it, weighed in as the lightest in the litre class. To shed a few more kilos, Giles added

the biggest pocket-busting mod, and certainly the most effective, the BST carbon wheels. The moment you tug on the bars, the weight loss is prominent and the 'Blade is on its side quicker than you can say 'carbon rules'.

Not only does the 954 love a corner entry, it can hold its line too. Pirelli Diablo Corsa IIIs do a top job of combining plenty of road grip and the dual compound versatility to go the distance. Having spent the season so far racing the R6 on these rubbers,

“ THERE'S PLENTY TO GET THE REAR JIVING OUT OF BENDS ”

confidence was high as I hacked through unfamiliar roads, but even if I did run in a bit hard, the 'Blade didn't panic.

A dab on the CRG lever gets the Braking discs into action and soon put me back online. Carbone Lorraine pads perform their duties but are a bit on the grabby side even with the standard hoses on show. ➤

GILES HARWOOD SPEAKS OUT

AL TALKS TO THE OWNER ABOUT HIS PROJECT BIKE

So why did he do it?

So the task of mating an NSR 250R and a VFR 750F. Easy eh?

"The reason I went for the 954 'Blade donor bike is that it was the lightest 1000 at the time, and actually remains 6kg lighter than the current Fireblade. It was also more accommodating for shorter riders, as I'm not the tallest.

"It's had plenty of development time. It's as good as it can be with this style of fuel injection. I was totally happy with 148bhp at the rear wheel, but I went to town after the gearbox fault developed. Now it makes 159bhp.

"I don't get to ride as often as I'd like, but when I do, I'll cover roughly 2,000 miles in around six days, and I'm off on a big supplier visit to Europe soon.

"I tend to carry all sorts of spares and tools with me when I travel. Me and my mates were taught how to give bikes a roadside service when we younger, because so many of them broke down back then.

"As we had to make do with what we had, we could cope with most breakdowns. That's one reason why I've not been tempted to buy a bike with an underseat exhaust, because all my stuff is heavy to carry in luggage, and there'd be no room for it. I've seen many riders stranded at the roadside for want of a lever, or a footpeg.

"We've tried to create the perfect real-world combination, though it may look a little odd, looking so standard, compared to some of the other flashy bikes you guys feature.

MODIFICATIONS

GILES HARWOOD'S 2002 CBR900RR FIREBLADE

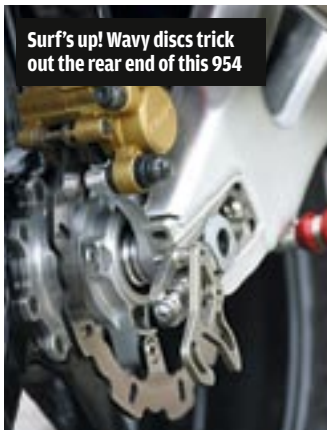
Standard 2002 CBR954RR FireBlade	£8,349	Chassis	
Performance		K-Tech fork conversion	£200
2KTT blueprinted and gas flowed engine	£1,500	Datatool alarm/immobiliser and remote pager	£299
Abus Granit City Security chain	£113	Nitron Sport rear shock	£468
Akrapovic Evo full exhaust system	£1,083	Aesthetic	
Braking Wave discs front and rear	£422	Gilles KTS chain adjusters and GP paddock stand hooks	£163
BST carbon fibre road approved wheels	£1,995	Gilles shift holder for gear lever shaft	£45
Carbone Lorraine SBK5 compound brake pads	£74	Honda heated handlebar grips	£150
CRG Roll-A-Click adjustable and folding levers	£180	HRC wiring mod for increased rev limit	£0
Datatool DIGI digital gear position indicator	£60	Infrared Safety Camera Visual Alert	£100
Datatool Turn-Alert audible turn signal indicator	£39	SW-Motech Mirror Mount Wideners	£70
MRA Vario adjustable touring screen	£88	Sargent World Sport Touring rider's seat	£190
Dynojet Power Commander III USB	£280	Sprint SXC adjustable 916-style steering damper	£295
Factory Evo Transmission Star/Detent kit	£112	TomTom Rider Sat-Nav	£399
Factory Velocity Stacks	£187	Baglux protective fuel tank cover with tank bag mounts	£72
Gilles adjustable rearsets	£299	Baglux Alpha tank bag	£70
Pipercross air filter	£58	Baglux Whoppa tail pack luggage	£83
Scottoiler automatic chain oiler	£80	Bike Design crash protectors	£80
Sigma slipper clutch	£550		
Talon aluminium alloy gold rear sprocket	£29		
Techtronics PQS3 digital quickshifter and rev-lights	£445	Total	£18,627



I'll ride anything fast me. Hardcore!

Oh, the sheer indignity of it all!

Surf's up! Wavy discs trick out the rear end of this 954



Before I set off, Giles warned me that he thought the K-Tech re-worked forks might be a tad on the harsh side. He may have a point for the duties he asks of the bike. But for thrashing around UK roads and a trackday or two, the internal fondling has made an ideal set-up.

Like any good girl worth hooning, you have to have a sorted rear end, and the 'Blade is catered for by a Nitron shock. Although it doesn't have the vast adjustment of a gazillion different settings that an Öhlins would, it still does the same job.

Don't be put off by the name and the budget status, the Nitron does more than enough. It soaks up the swells and lends a hand in producing a superbly balanced bike, along with the K-Tech tweaked forks.

The end product is something left of field, capable of two very different things, and executing them in similar fashion. You could rock up to a trackday with this 'Blade, destroy a few club racing posers on ex-BSB bikes, and then ride all the way to the Nurburgring for a bash at the lap record.

Giles Harwood's 954 is arguably the best FireBlade I have ever ridden. It's definitely a wolf in sheep's clothing.

This is how a 'Blade should be. 



I forgot to buy sandwiches on the way!



Al is momentarily distracted by how much road he can see behind him!