



# PERFORMANCE BIKES

RIDING, MODIFYING GREAT BIKES

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SUZUKI'S NEW GP RACER  
CRAZY SHED-BUILT MOTO2  
KTM MOTO3 TESTED  
**PLUS** McGUINNESS:  
'I WAS AS FAST AS ROSSI!'

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TT-winning tyres any of us can buy

2003 954 Blade  
Ten years old and still epic



WHY £3000 BUYS YOU PERFECTION  
+ RIDING THE UK'S FINEST MODIFIED 954

# THE BEST FIREBLADE

**OWNING**

**'60,000 MILES AND STILL GOING STRONG!'**  
Home-fettled GSX-R750

**RIDING**

**'EAT BETTER, DRINK LESS... GROW SOME!'**  
Riding an S1000RR v. fast

**MODIFYING**

**'I MAKE BIKE PARTS USING MY PRINTER!'**  
Future tech, now



**HAYABUSA: HOW TO HIT 200MPH FOR PEANUTS!**

# WELCOME

To Performance Bikes magazine...



I'LL ADMIT IT, I am totally and utterly in love with Honda's 954 Fireblade. It's been a slow-burning thing – ten years ago they were virtually invisible to me. They weren't as fast as a GSX-R1000 and didn't have the kudos of an R1. Now I can see that doesn't matter.

Time has been kind to the 954. The styling has improved with age (BMW's S1000RR copies its tailpiece), the build quality is very impressive and the bikes stand the test of time well. The main thing that sets them apart is the handling. Ten years on there is still an argument that this is the sweetest-steering, best-handling litre bike. This was Tadao Baba's last blade, and a great sign-off.

You can pick up a decent example for £3000 and their potential for modification is huge, as you can see from our ride on Giles Harwood's stunning 954 on p48.

## Matt Wildee

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# The last REA

The 2002 to 03 954cc Fireblade is the final evolution of a great sportsbike and it still hasn't been beaten. We

Words Emma Franklin

## THE SPECIAL

Owner of aftermarket supplier HPS, Giles Harwood has thrown every part in the catalogue at his pride and joy



# ALL Fireblade

of legendary Japanese engineer Tadao Baba's vision  
take two to the Peaks to see what all the fuss is about

Photography Jason Critchell

## THE STOCKER

Reader Dave Powley's mint 954.  
With 23,000 miles on the clock, it's  
testament to Honda's build quality



**O**f all the road bikes that have ever been made, the 954 Fireblade has to be my favourite.' It seems PB's notoriously hard-to-please tester Bruce Dunn has a soft spot for the last of the sub-1000cc Blades. We've hauled a short way up the A1 before cutting through the wormiest of midland B-roads to arrive at the foot of the Peak

District, Matlock Bath – the seaside resort that's missing a seafront – to test two examples of Honda's best Blade. Now ten years old the 954 Fireblade still looks modern, still performs perfectly and, best of all, is exceptional value.

I'm onboard PB reader Dave Powley's totally mint 2003 Honda CBR900RR stocker, while Bruce is on Giles Harwood's thoughtfully modified version. Over a cup of tea Bruce drifts off into his own little dream scene, recalling the day he got the call to ride one of the first 954s in the country. He spent a weekend spanking it through sun drenched mountain roads in the south of France. 'I've ridden a lot of bikes on those roads but nothing before or since has had such a profound effect on me than the 954. It's still right up there as one of the best sportsbikes you can buy. Even ten years on it still feels utterly compelling. It's uncannily much greater than the sum of its parts. I guess that's why Tadao Baba was so revered as an engineer...'

This particular Blade was the last one designed under Baba's watch. He built his Blades around two key principals: one to have low, centralised mass. The other was to give the rider total control. And Baba reckons he got it spot on with the 954. No wonder he still owns one.

That perfect balance is evident as soon as you get on. If ever there was a riding position that perches the posterior perfectly between sports and comfort then the 954 has it. Saddling up and pointing our noses northward the standard 954 beneath me feels both relaxed and up for it. Nothing's cramped or awkward, yet my limbs are still in the right position to be able to make lightning fast inputs. Even just sitting on the last of Baba's Blades feels like the embodiment of what professional racers call 'the flow' – that calm precision that makes going fast feel like the easiest thing in the world. It's something common to all Honda sportsbikes, something that those with muted senses and numb arses often call bland, but riders that

operate at a higher frequency will see that the 'pivotless' 954 chassis is probably one of the finest of them all.

With its NSR500 GP-inspired swingarm mounted directly to the back of the engine via a cast aluminium bracket, Honda made the frame lighter and stiffer. It also allowed them to place the engine further forward, putting more weight on the front and allowing the swingarm to be longer for greater stability. All that translates to a level of feel usually reserved for GP riders. It's the perfect solution for going very quickly on the road without any fuss. BMW they can keep their HP4 and their semi-active suspension, Honda beat them to the punch ten years ago.

'Some people reckoned this Blade was plagued with instability problems, but I've never experienced anything like that,' says Bruce as we stop to let a farmer drive his flock of sheep across the road. 'Even this modified one with its BST carbon wheels feels utterly composed and you'd expect lightweight wheels to expose any instability issues. But this one just feels so agile.'

As proprietor of performance parts mail order specialist HPS, Giles Harwood has festooned his 954 Blade with a stack of well chosen bolt ons, of which carbon wheels are one of the more obvious additions. I'm keen to see how Giles' mods have bettered the already brilliant Blade, so grab the keys before we hit the road again.

The first thing that strikes me about the modified 954 is just how much smoother the initial throttle response is compared to the standard Blade. I hadn't noticed anything when I was riding the other bike in isolation, but it's only now that I'm riding the modified bike, smoothed by the fuelling module in its Bazzaz management system, that I recalled the hint of snatchiness in the standard bike's throttle pick-up. Cracking the throttle back to the stop, the front wheel skims the hot tarmac while the rear shimmies on a bit of freshly squeezed sheep shit. The Bazzaz unit fitted to this bike packs traction control as well as a quickshifter, but on a hot day like today with a pair of fresh Bridgestone R10 race tyres beneath me, not even slimy sheep muck on the road will get the Bazzaz twitching.

I hook another gear using the ultra-smooth quickshifter and the 954 keeps pulling. As power deliveries go, the Blade's is about as ideal as it gets, surfing on a foaming swell of torque that never seems to break. Sure, on paper



Emms and Bruce dash to catch the ice cream van



Would sir like black and red or red and black?



The 954 doesn't feel ten years old when you're carving through the Peaks on one



Save girth and weight with a new end can



Only the SP-1 has longer hero blobs



**‘No wonder it’s the bike  
Tadao Baba still owns’**

the 1000cc competition at the time (Suzuki's GSX-R1000 and the Yamaha YZF-R1) has more midrange and top end, but the feeling you get from being confident enough to open the throttle right to the stop on a proper full-bore sportsbike is a rare and precious thing these days. There are never any peaks in the delivery that'd make you hesitate on the throttle for even a fraction of a second. And the throttle tube itself feels reassuringly heavy and connected, something to savour in this age of light-action PlayStation controller-like fly-by-wire throttles.

If the standard 954 Fireblade felt eager, up-for-it and quick steering then fitting carbon wheels and upgrading the suspension has only served to further polish things. The way this bike steers and rides the bumps means it should be held up as an example of how to perfect an already brilliant bike. The K-Tech internals fitted to the 2006 model Showa forks teamed with the Nitron shock at the rear provide the perfect damping for the road. The roads of the Peak District are still in a bit of a state after the hard winter, but this is the first bike I've ridden this year that completely smoothes it all out. Even with race tyres and carbon wheels, it's as impressive as it is plush.

Bruce is on Dave's 23,000-mile minter and he's very taken with it. 'It's examples like this that contribute to the legend of Honda having great build quality – this bike in no way looks or feels like it's done the miles the odometer says. Even compared to the modded one, the standard bike doesn't feel as lacking as you'd think it should. It's taut, fresh-feeling and still has plenty of tight power inside the engine. Even the standard brakes are spot on – powerful enough on the road with perfect feel – in fact I prefer them to the radial system fitted to the modified bike. Honda hit the bullseye with the 954.'

**'As power deliveries go, the Blade's is about as perfect as it gets'**



**Stunning chassis gives amazing feedback**





'Bugger, we've just missed the turn for Peveril Castle'



**Left:** The perfect utensil for carving through Britain

**Below:** Forget matching anoraks, Emms and Bruce have gone rambling in the Peaks with matching Blades



BST carbon wheels give lighter steering



2006 forks accommodate radial calipers



Sprint steering damper is a sensible mod



MRA screen can be adjusted for height



Full Akrapovic system sounds glorious



CRG levers are beautifully over-engineered

He's right. Ten years ago Honda managed to create a sportsbike that somehow still feels relevant today. There's nothing about the standard 954 Fireblade that feels aged. In many ways the 2013 litre bikes give the illusion of being lightweight simply because they're clad in plastic and have ridiculously light throttles and clutches, but it was when I wheeled this Fireblade out of the PB shed earlier this morning and then did the same with our 2013 BMW S1000RR test bike that I discovered the truth. The S1000RR is one of the lightest litre bikes you can currently buy, but the 2003 CBR900RR feels much, much lighter and infinitely more balanced. The actual difference is around 15kg – the Honda's claimed dry weight is a miniscule 168kg – the lightest of all the Blades. It's a big part of the reason the 954 can still propel itself out of corners with devastating speed, despite *only* having 130bhp.

It's been one of those days where, despite the rare summer heat, we could ride all day, but unfortunately one of us has forgotten their clear visor... and it's not Bruce. In the ten sweaty hours we've spent with these two 954 Blades – one bog standard and one cleverly fettled, we've learned so much about Baba's last Blade. Even through a fly-splattered screen it's plain to see that if you can get your head around the low weight rather than big power philosophy, the 954 Fireblade is truly epic as a road bike and a genuine all-rounder. It's well built, age-defying and an excellent basis for a spot of modification, simply because there's tonnes of stuff out there for them. We might have been scratching around the Derbyshire countryside instead of the south of France, but after today I can definitely see the reason why Bruce has such fond memories of this particular Fireblade. It's gone straight to the top of my all-time-favourites list too.

*Turn over to read more about Giles Harwood's awesome modified 954 Fireblade...*





#### **FORKS**

Front forks from Honda CBR1000RR 2006 Showa. K-Tech 20-SSK front fork piston kit with optional compression damping flow control valves. K-Tech linear fork springs

'I fitted the later model forks because they allow me to use the ISR radial calipers. The standard 954 forks feel pretty good as standard, but the K-Tech internals have just sweetened things up a bit further.'



#### **SHOCK**

Nitron Track, fully adjustable, plus length adjustable rear shock absorber with piggyback nitrogen gas reservoir. Nitron shock remote hydraulic preload adjuster (HPA) option 'I'm a little challenged in the inside leg department, so found I was often slipping on gravel and diesel when coming to a stop so the adjustable preload adjuster is a bit of a godsend for altering the rear ride height as and when I need to.'



#### **WHEELS**

BST carbon fibre composite wheels with Hybrid ceramic wheel bearings, Gilles chain adjusters with integrated GP-style paddock-stand hooks 'Carbon wheels make the most profound difference to a bike's handling than any other mod you can make. The reduction in unsprung weight provides steering, braking and acceleration benefits, as well as looking bloody lovely.'



#### **BRAKES**

ISR radial monoblock six-piston front calipers, ISR 320mm rebuildable fully floating discs, HEL stainless steel braided front brake lines, Braketech 220mm fully floating rear disc 'ISR calipers are extremely lightweight so they compliment the BST carbon fibre wheels by saving unsprung mass. It's important for me to know how parts work before recommending them to customers.'



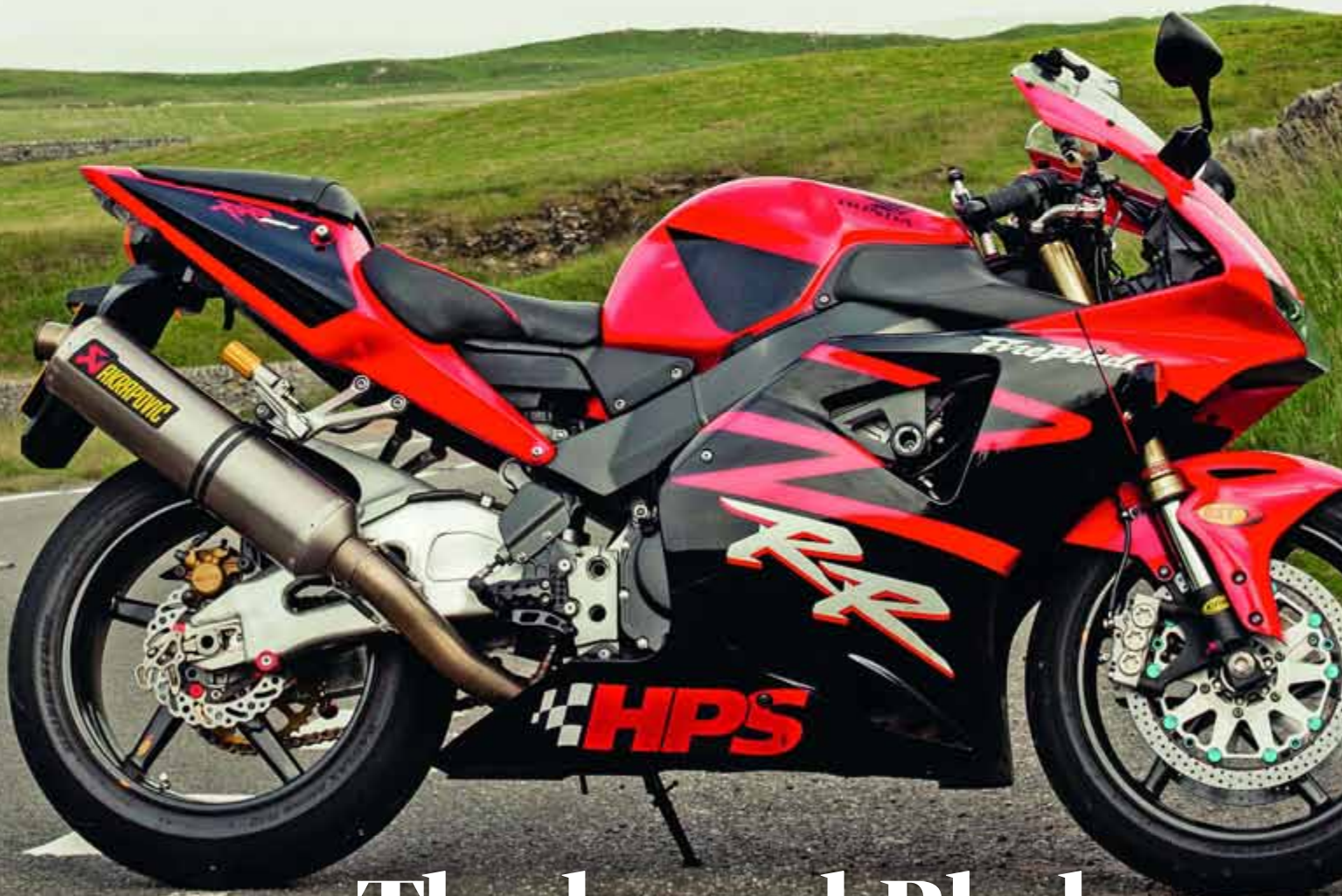
#### **ENGINE MANAGEMENT**

Bazzaz Z-Fi TC fuel injection management module with switchable dual-maps, Bazzaz Z-AFM self-mapping module with Bosch wide-band Lambda sensor, Bazzaz Z-Fi TC traction control system, Bazzaz bar-mounted map/TC switch, Akrapovic full system, Servo Buddy H-VIX exhaust valve eliminator 'I've mapped this with the unit's self mapping module and it's now brilliantly smooth.'



#### **TRANSMISSION**

Sigma ramp-style slipper clutch, Talon alloy rear sprocket, Bazzaz Z-Fi TC quickshifter, Gilles Shiftholder 'My previous 954's gearbox expired at 14,000 miles and many believe a lot of failures are to do with how the gearchange shaft is positioned. It sticks out a long way from the box and is unsupported so the bearings and linkages wear. The Shiftholder is an essential mod for every 929/954 Fireblade owner.'



# The honed Blade

Giles Harwood tells us how he created the ultimate Fireblade to excel at fast road riding, trackdays and long-distance touring



**DISPLAYS**

Giro X-Type gear position indicator, TomTom Rider 5 widescreen satellite navigation system, Bazzaz Traction Control/TC active warning light.

'I'm especially proud of my homemade TomTom mount. Have you ever tried to use a sat nav mount on a sportsbike before? It's near impossible – so I made this using bits of old, folded clip ons. Now I can navigate myself around Europe and see all my dashboard.'

**THE KNOWLEDGE**

**BEST MODS**

**£100**

The Blade is a very practical sportsbike, something that is further enhanced by the addition of a double-bubble screen. There are plenty of options out there with most costing around £60.

**£500**

To sort the slightly snatchy fuel injection, fit a Power Commander for £320 or get the ECU re-flashed for around £150. The stock Dynojet map works pretty well with most aftermarket slip-on cans so dyno set-up isn't always necessary. Spend the leftover cash on a set of stiffer fork springs to firm up the front end.

**£1500**

By removing the H-VIX exhaust valve with a full system you should gain around 15bhp. This will also fill the huge hole between 4,000 and 5,000rpm, making the bike far more responsive lower down. A well set-up 954 with a Power Commander and a bit of dyno time should see 145bhp with a beautifully smooth throttle response and excellent midrange drive. Rebuilding the OE Showa shock costs around £100 and, though Ohlins have stopped making units for the Blade, secondhand Ohlins shocks cost in the £500 area.

**FIVE THINGS TO LOOK FOR**

**1 EXHAUST VALVE/ENGINE**

The 954 Blade has a titanium exhaust system, so no rust issues there. However, the H-VIX exhaust valve can seize solid so check it moves freely. A very few Blades suffer from cam chain tension failures, so listen for that tell-tale rattle. However, far more common issues are reg/rec failures and generators packing in.

**2 HISS MASTER KEY**

Unlike some systems the Honda immobiliser system doesn't have a red 'master' key, meaning as long as you have one key you can get new ones made.

**3 FINISH**

Generally fairly good. The main issue is the fasteners, which tend to corrode into place and also the paint finish isn't as deep as you would expect on a Honda. Look for cracks

on the fairing panels and around the fasteners, as well as rounded heads as an indication of the state of the owner's mechanical sympathy. Also check for crash damage around the engine cases and fork legs.

**4 AIR AND FUEL PUMP FILTERS**

There are a lot of cases of older FireBlades making less than the expected 130bhp and feeling lethargic, an issue that is almost certainly down to either a clogged fuel filter or air filter. Ask when the last time either was checked or changed.

**5 SERVICING**

The Blade needs its valve clearances done at 16,000 miles, which increases the service costs from around £240 to over £400. It is very unlikely they will need altering, but they must at least be inspected. Ensure the owners has done this as

**IF YOU DO ONE THING, DO THIS...**

Without a doubt, fitting a Bazzaz fuelling module. The unit to allows you to create bespoke fuelling maps, switch between maps and plus there is quickshifter.

**LOWSIDE COSTS**

- Fairing panel: £225.60
- Front brake lever: £44.65
- Clip-on: £126.90
- Engine case: £225.60
- Exhaust: £546.38

**BIG THANKS**

To Giles Harwood and Dave Powley for loaning us their stunning 954 Fireblades. Cheers chaps, for reminding us how good the 954 is.

**I WORK ON THEM...**

**PB's grumpy resident tech Mark White has worked on his fair share of 954 Blades but he's still not convinced**



'It's a good job these bikes are so reliable as they are a nightmare to work on. Honda made the 954 and the 929 a complete pig for access. To do anything at all, you need to remove the tank and that means draining it as the pump doesn't have a shut-off mechanism. The frame/swingarm design makes securing the bike on

a swingarm pivot stand tricky and the motor attracts dirt. They are always filthy (well, Matt's one was) and owners seem to have an aversion to cleaning their bikes. The fasteners corroding is pretty standard for any older bike, but don't buy this model of Fireblade expecting to undertake the maintenance yourself as you will really struggle like hell. I hate working on them.'

**I OWN ONE TOO..**

**David Higham has covered over 5000 miles on his 2003 Honda FireBlade and it hasn't missed a beat so far**



'I sold my 2008 Suzuki GSX-R750 for £6000 and bought the 954 for £3500. It was almost half the cost yet delivered the same performance. I've covered over 5000 miles on it and it hasn't missed a beat. I use it for commuting, weekend blasts, trackdays and I also take my wife Wendy on the back for weekends away. It's such a versatile machine.

I fitted a Micron pipe, which made it sound better but didn't really affect the performance. The best thing I've done is to buy an Arrow steering damper for £200. The front end can get a bit twitchy, so I leave the damper on its lowest setting for peace of mind. When you look at the price and performance you are getting for your money, it's hard to fault the 954 Blade.'

**SPECIFICATIONS 2002/2003 HONDA FIREBLADE**

**ENGINE**

Type	4-stroke, liquid-cooled, 954cc, 16v inline four
Bore x stroke	98mm x 66mm
Fuelling	Fuel injection
Claimed power	130bhp @ 11,500rpm
Claimed torque	66lb.ft @ 8000rpm

**CHASSIS**

Frame	aluminium twin-spar
Front susp	43mm inverted forks, fully adjustable monoshock, fully adjustable
Rear susp	Nissin 4-piston calipers, 330mm discs
Front brakes	Nissin caliper, 220mm disc
Rear brakes	none
Rider aids	none

**DIMENSIONS**

Wheelbase	1400mm
Rake/trail	23°/97mm
Weight	168kg (claimed)
Seat height	815mm
Fuel capacity	18 litres

**BUYING**

Private	£2800 to £3700
Dealer	£3000 to £4000

**COLOURS**

2002



2003



Check out the PB Fireblade app! Visit the Apple app store and search for 'Fireblades'