

The first commercial off-road sports machine from BMW

BMW R 4

BMW established the large touring enduro class of motorcycle with the introduction of the R 80 G/S back in 1980 – a class in which the brand has continued to set the pace until the present. But 75 years ago BMW had already developed a motorcycle for use both on and off the beaten track – the BMW R 4.

Fred Jakobs

In December 1924 BMW introduced its first single-cylinder model – the 250 cc R 39. Technically elaborate in design, the motorcycle rapidly proved to be a hit both for its performance – it won the 1925 German Road Championship in the quarter-litre category – and in terms of build quality. However, BMW quality came at a price and the R 39's tag was only marginally lower than those of the large Boxer models and the more powerful German and foreign competition. As a result just 855 examples were sold before production was abandoned in 1927. And with that the whole subject of an entry-level motorcycle with the BMW badge was effectively put on ice while the company concentrated on the large Boxer models that were proving increasingly popular in both touring and sports versions.

When BMW subsequently returned to the idea of an entry-level model, the reasons were rooted in the general economic depression of the late 1920s – or more precisely, in measures taken by the German state to prop up the economy. In order to give the automotive industry a much-needed boost, motorcycles up to 200 cc were exempted not only from tax but also from the need for riders to own a driving licence. BMW saw enormous potential in this small market segment and developed the R 2, which was launched in 1931. This 6 hp single-cylinder machine with a pressed-steel frame was built to the same exacting quality standards as the larger models, and with a price tag of 975 reichsmarks it was about 20 percent more expensive than competitor models. But over 4,000 customers were prepared to pay the extra, knowing that for the price they were getting a genuine BMW.

By this time, however, there was a gaping hole in the BMW product range. With the introduction of the pressed-

steel models in 1930 there were now only 750 cc Boxers, since production of the 500 cc models had been discontinued in 1929. In order to close this gap it was decided to develop a 400 cc single-cylinder engine which could be fitted to the R 2 chassis. Since this development ran largely in parallel to the 200 cc machine and borrowed the chassis almost without modification, production of the BMW R 4 could begin at the Munich plant as early as December 1931.

Publicity material in the company's 1932 brochure hailed the R 4 as "The German motorcycle for German roads." The specific reference to Germany pointed to taxation regulations in force in the country which the R 4 with its 399 cc exploited to the full. The brochure also informed the customer: "Output is close to that of a 500 cc machine, while fuel consumption remains within the parameters of a 350 cc machine. In every respect the performance fulfils everything one would expect from a sports motorcycle with considerable reserves of power."

The bald technical data demonstrated that these were no empty promises. Its 12 hp output was identical to that of the BMW R 52, the latest 500 cc tourer. And at 1,250 reichsmarks the R 4 was priced somewhere between the R 2 and the R 52, which by the end of its production boasted a list price of 1,450 reichsmarks. With that, the R 4 proved itself to be the ideal complement to the BMW range – especially since the 750 cc BMW R 11, with its 18 hp and price tag of 1,750 reichsmarks, was in a league of its own. Demand was correspondingly high, the 1,100 or so units built in the first year representing approximately one quarter of total production.

Like its sister model the BMW R 2, the R 4 underwent continuous improvements. An adjustable friction damper, 4-speed transmission, a larger-capacity tank and output increased to 14 hp were the most important modifications over the next few years. However, such improvements were not reflected in the price – on the contrary, from 1933 until production ceased in 1937, the price of the R 4 was cut to 1,150 reichsmarks.

In 1934 the R 4 enjoyed a sharp rise in sales, the figure of 3,700 more than doubling previous results and placing the motorcycle well ahead of the entry-level model, the R 2. The reason for this was in part due

to rising demand from the German military, which from spring of that year saw the R 4 as an ideal motorcycle for training purposes and from the second half of the year ordered large numbers also for courier work. But in addition, the R 4 had shown itself to be a highly capable off-road machine. With a full tank, the BMW R 4 weighed just 137 kg and this factor in combination with its powerful engine and robust chassis made the R 4 manoeuvrable and surefooted, whether over difficult terrain or on proper roads.

The BMW works team starring Ernst Jakob Henne, the three-times winner of the International Six Days Trial, picked up medal after medal riding the R 4 at national events such as the Three Days Harz Trial and showed that under certain circumstances the R 4 was at least the equal of the heavy Boxer models, if not their superior. But the R 4 also had a special place in the heart of another BMW motorcycle racing legend. In the late 1930s Georg Meier was Europe's outstanding road racer, winning both the European Championship title and the Senior TT. Meier began his career in 1933 on the BMW R 4, forming the Munich Police team along with his colleagues Josef Forster and Fritz Linhardt. Thanks to their off-road successes riding the BMW R 4 they soon became better known as the Gussseisernen – "men of iron".

In those days, more so even than today, there was truth in the adage: Win on Sunday – sell on Monday. In other words, sporting success made for better sales. In 1934 – with a new 4-speed transmission and beefier 14 hp engine – BMW stopped selling the model under its real model designation. Instead the brochure hailed the arrival of "... a new model developed from the R 4, the machine that had itself proved so successful over numerous reliability trials". The brochure went on: "The BMW Geländesport is an extremely manoeuvrable and powerful machine, equally suited to the daily grind of solo use as to the demands of tough off-roading."

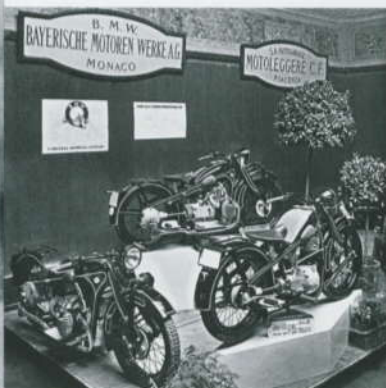
With that, BMW had designed the perfect symbiosis for road and off-road use, just as they would do five decades later with the R 80 G/S. And these two models have one other thing in common – for just like the BMW R 80 G/S, the R 4 was also a great commercial success, exceeding all expectations with more than 15,000 examples sold.

Below left | Unveiling of the BMW R 4 at the Milan Motor Show in January 1932.

Below centre | Two BMW R 4s during a hill-climb trial, 1935.

Below right | Ernst Henne (No. 13) rode one of the three BMW R 4s entered by the BMW works team in the Three Days Harz Trial.

Facing page | Off-road sporting success boosted sales of the BMW R 4.



3 große Siege

in den 3 größten Dauer-Prüfungsfahrten

BMW R4

400 ccm „Geländesport“

setzt die im Jahre 1934 errungenen Erfolge in den schwersten Zuverlässigkeitsfahrten und Geländeprüfungen auch 1935 fort und beweist damit aufs neue ihre

unbedingte Zuverlässigkeit und überragende Leistung
Kraftfahrzeug-Winterprüfung 1935:

Einzige bewertete Solo-Motorradmannschaft. BMW R4
Ostpreußenfahrt 1935:

2 Goldmedaillen

auf **BMW R4**

3 Tage Mittelgebirgsfahrt 1935:

26 Medaillen, 5 Mannschaftspreise

auf **BMW R4**

Was könnte mehr überzeugen, als eine solch ununterbrochene und überragende Erfolgsserie, die mit Serienmaschinen erzielt wurde? Wenn Serienmaschinen so schwere Materialprüfungen mit derartiger Überlegenheit bestehen, dann bieten sie auch im täglichen Gebrauch für Beruf und Reise Gewähr für höchste Dauerleistung, unbedingte Zuverlässigkeit und größte Lebensdauer. Die Sparsamkeit der BMW R4 im Betriebsstoffverbrauch und ihre Wertbeständigkeit infolge der vielbewunderten Güte des Materials macht sie zur

wirtschaftlichen Gebrauchsmaschine von unbedingter Zuverlässigkeit!

Wählen Sie also die erprobte 400 ccm BMW R4, wenn Sie ein Motorrad zu besitzen wünschen, das Ihnen immer ein treuer, dienstbereiter Helfer sein soll.



Eine 400er Maschine mit der Leistung einer 500er und dem Verbrauch einer 300er. Sowohl auf der Straße als auch im schwierigen Gelände infolge der ausgezeichneten Fahreigenschaften als Solo- und Sozius-Maschine bestens geeignet. Der überaus kräftige und reichlich gekühlte Motor sowie das Viergang-Getriebe mit bequemer Tank-Kulissenschaltung und das geringe Gewicht der Maschine gewährleisten Handlichkeit, Elastizität, gleichbleibende Dauerleistung und ausgezeichnete Bergfreudigkeit. Dreidüsen-Sum-Vergaser mit Luftfilter, trockene Einscheibenkupplung, hängende Ventile, Boschlicht-Batterieanlage 45/70 Watt. Brennstoff-Verbrauch Solo 3-3 1/2 Ltr. auf 100 km, Öl-Verbrauch ca. 1/10 Ltr. auf 100 km.



BAYERISCHE MOTOREN WERKE AG MÜNCHEN