

1 Is it the right bike for you?

– marriage guidance



Tall and short riders

The CB750 suits six-footers, as it's a big, heavy bike. Shorter riders should go for one of the smaller fours, which still offer exciting performance in a manageable package.

Running costs

Modest for the 400/4, 500, 550 and 650, but the 750 will always cost more in consumables – you pay for the performance. Expect 50mpg from the small fours, but as little as 35mpg from the 750. In the UK, all pre-1973 bikes are exempt from road tax.

Maintenance

Needs to be kept on top of, but relatively straightforward. The frequent oil and filter changes are easy to do, and other routine jobs can be done without special tools.

Usability

Very good. All Honda fours are smooth and tractable on the road, with strong electrics and good reliability. Given regular maintenance, they can still be used as everyday bikes.



Even a non-standard four can make a fun classic bike.



400/4 is a different – and sportier – prospect.



400cc four is a lively little motor.



'Super Sport' badge arrived with the 400/4.

Despite there being few around, the CB350/4 costs slightly less than an equivalent 400, and they do tend to collect a crowd. There's much to recommend seeking out a 350, if you can live with the performance and staid looks.

All this changed in 1975, when the 350 was replaced by the 400/4. Out went the touring stance, in came the newly fashionable café racer styling, with lower bars, rear-set footrests and plain solid colours. The centrepiece of the new bike was its four-into-one exhaust system, all four pipes curving seductively down to meet the single silencer. The makeover was so complete it was hard to accept that underneath much was the same as the 350; its frame and front end were still shared with the 350cc twin.

Cycle parts

Switch off the engine and put the bike back on its centre stand. Check for play in the forks, headstock and swingarm. Are there leaks from the front forks or rear shocks? Check the wheels for loose or broken spokes, and run a screwdriver lightly over the spokes (which obviously doesn't apply to later bikes with Comstar wheels), listening for any that are 'off key'

– these are the loose ones. Do the tyres have a decent amount of tread, or are they so old that they've gone hard and cracked? Check that the chain is well lubed and adjusted, and that the sprocket teeth aren't hooked.

Are details like the seat, badges and tank colour right for the year of the bike? (A little research helps here, and the reference books and websites listed at the end of this volume have all this information).

Documentation & numbers

If the seller claims to be the bike's owner, make sure he/she really is by checking the registration document, which in the UK is V5C. The person listed on the V5 isn't necessarily the legal owner, but their details should match those of whoever is selling the bike. Also use the V5C to check the engine/frame numbers, and that these match those on the bike – engine number is on top of the crankcase, frame number stamped onto steering head.

An annual roadworthiness certificate – the 'MoT' in the UK – is handy proof not just that the bike was roadworthy when tested, but a whole sheaf of them gives evidence of the bike's history – when it was actively being used, and what the mileage was. The more of these that come with the bike, the better.



Partially seized brake caliper is a common fault.



VIN plate holds more information.

9 Serious evaluation

– 30 minutes for years of enjoyment



Score each section as follows: 4 = excellent; 3 = good; 2 = average; 1 = poor
The totting up procedure is detailed at the end of the chapter. Be realistic in your marking!

Engine/frame numbers

4 3 2 1

Frame numbers are found on the steering head, and engine numbers on top of the crankcase. The exact position varies between models – on 400s, for example, the frame number is stamped onto the right-hand side of the steering head, with a VIN plate riveted to the downtube, and the engine number is on top of the crankcase, viewed from the right-hand side – on the 750, look from the left-hand side.



Frame number is found on steering head.



There may also be a VIN plate.



Engine number on top of crankcase behind engine.

Honda fours aren't like certain classic British bikes, in which matching engine and frame numbers are the holy grail of an original machine. The engines and frames were actually made in different factories, so although the starting numbers were the same, they soon ran out of sequence, though they shouldn't differ by more than 2000 or so. If the numbers are way out, you may have mix 'n' match engine/frame. This isn't the end of the world – a non-original bike may still be a perfectly sound motorcycle, but the lack of originality needs to be reflected in the price.

Check engine and frame numbers against the model/year information in the back of this book, which should prove whether the bike is what it claims to be. Also check against the documentation.

Paint/chrome

4 3 2 1

Hondas have long been known for their good finish, and the paintwork on the fours confirms it – there are plenty of bikes around in their original coat of paint, which still polishes up well. Look out for scratches and chips – these aren't enough to reject any bike, but if unsightly they are a lever to reduce the price.

13 Do you really want to restore?

– it'll take longer and cost more than you think ...



Some people buy classic bikes because they love the restoration process: the strip down, the searching for rare parts and the careful rebuild. This page is not aimed at them. If you've never tackled a restoration before, it's a tempting prospect, to buy a cheap and tatty bike that 'just needs a few small jobs' to bring it up to scratch. But be honest with yourself – will you get as much pleasure from working on the bike as you will riding it? A good restoration takes time, and usually far longer than originally envisaged when those 'few small jobs' turn into big ones.



Even honest dirt can take some shifting.



Chrome can be replated.

The alternative is to hand the whole lot over to a professional, and the biggest cost involved there is not the new parts, but the sheer labour involved. From a financial point of view, this simply doesn't make sense with a Honda four. A professional restoration doesn't come cheap, and there are so many of these bikes around that the restoration cost will never be recouped by a high end value. If you still want to go the professional route, make it