



THE VESPA 90 AND 100 IN DETAIL

The Vespa 90 was introduced to the world at the Milan show in 1963 alongside an otherwise similar 50cc version. A completely new interpretation of the traditional Vespa design, the new model was a response to the realisation that the future of scooter sales lay in small models that could be ridden by adolescents (as young as fourteen in some countries), be affordable and still have some style and performance. It was essential that the frame be as light as possible, so the side panels were integral meaning that expensive and heavy internal pressings could be deleted. The front suspension was a miniature version of the GS 160 layout with integral spring and damper, and the cylinder was angled at 45 degrees to enable a shorter wheelbase.

The engine, and in consequence the frame, was much slimmer than previously while the actual styling confirmed the changeover to sharp edges (previously seen only hesitatingly on the GL). The Vespa 90 was in some respects a utility scooter without so much as a helmet hook, mudguard crest or headlight rim to its name. But it scored where it really mattered in terms of performance style and price. This was the last Vespa on which D'Asciano had a direct input, and the manner in which it achieved all its design objectives stands as a testament to his skills.

Specification Changes

In 1966 the engine access hatch was enlarged. The following year the new type Piaggio badge was introduced in common with other models. During the seventies the traditional Vespa scroll was replaced with the later type and the light grey handlebar grips were replaced with black plastic ones. The flywheel cover paint changed from the body colour to silver. Regarding colours; light blue is the only one listed for the home market but, as often was the case, other colours were done for export. In particular, many red ones were brought into the UK.

In 1978 the Vespa 90 became the 100 with an increase in bore, new badges, a larger rear light and white paint. In 1982 it went out of production to be replaced by the new PK. Or so everybody thought....

Japanese Postscript

By the mid nineties it was becoming apparent that the Vespa 100 was still being produced at Pontadera for the Japanese market along with a 50cc version and the Primavera ET3. I'm not exactly when production re-started (assuming that it ever finished in the first place) but it seems to have kept going to around 2000 by which time other supposedly defunct models such as the PK and Cosa were also being made for Japan. Whilst on holiday in Corfu in 1986, I noticed that the local dealer still seemed to have several new 50s or 100s in stock. I assumed these to have been old unsold stock, but now I'm not so sure. Anyway, the later Japanese market 100 appears almost identical to the eighties Italian home market version, even retaining the three speed gearbox (the 50cc version had four). The only detectable differences were a black painted flywheel cover a la ET3, German-style indicators on the ends of the headset, and the larger ET3 style seat.

Did the Small frame Vespa save the day?

Now, as always scooter clubs throughout the land resonate to the sound of debates on the relative merits (or otherwise) of Lambrettas and Vespas. GS is pitched against TV, SX against SS. But this somewhat insular British perspective ignores the real action that Piaggio and Innocenti were engaged in on another front entirely. By the early sixties the mass markets in Italy and elsewhere required small, light, low capacity scooters to accommodate the youth market that wished to take advantage of the liberal (or even non-existent) licence requirements in those countries. Whoever won this particular battle would win the war.

The first shot was fired by Innocenti, who showed a prototype monocoque "Small frame" in late 1961. Unfortunately for them, no production machines rolled off the lines for more than two years by which time the Vespa 50/90 had established itself. Innocenti had realised that miniaturising the LI style Lambretta would not work because the number of parts involved would make it too heavy for small capacity engines and too expensive to make. So a monocoque it had to be, and maybe Innocenti's inexperience in producing such items contributed to the production delays. In any case, tooling costs for monocoques tends to be high. The unit cost only becomes economic if they are produced in very large quantities. The Lambretta Cento/Starstream range, when it finally appeared, did not sell especially well.

Why this should be is a matter of conjecture. Most Lambretta enthusiasts that I know hate the Cento etc with a passion, though few have actually ridden one. Nor have I for that matter, though I'm prepared to wager that its performance is not as bad as its reputation. I rather think it all comes down to styling. The Vespa 90 –from the front especially – is an almost perfect scale miniaturisation of its larger stalemates. This allows the adolescent 50 or 90 owner to bask in the reflected glory of an SS or whatever. This is not the case with the Lambretta. Not in anybody's wildest dreams could a Cento or Starstream be considered to be a small-scale facsimile of an SX. The leg shields are too upright, there's no horn casting at all and its difficult to work out what went wrong at the back. In a market where style was everything the small frame Lambretta had nothing to offer.

Within a few years Innocenti had bit the dust and although there were plenty of other factors at play, the relative failure of their small frame must have had an effect. Piaggio, on the other hand, sold variants of the 50/ 90 for at least two decades in huge quantities. I think it's not unreasonable to credit D'Ascansio's final fling with the very survival of the Vespa marque.

(captions)

(90 1)

Original 1963 Vespa 90. In fact, it was nearly always seen with a dual seat even in Italy

(90 2)

Mid –seventies Vespa 90 showing the larger engine hatch introduced in 1966, later badging, silver painted flywheel cover, and different handlebar grips.

(90 3)

Vespa 100 rear showing different badging and larger rear light

(90 4)

The original catalogue