

THE DOUGLAS-VESPA 125cc ROD MODEL 1951-53 IN DETAIL

The Douglas built Vespa 125cc –subsequently always referred to as the “Rod Model” – officially went on sale on March 15 1951. It was built at Douglas’ factory at Kingswood, near Bristol, and though by no means the first scooter to be built or sold over here, is none-the-less often thought of as representing the start of modern scootering in Britain.

The basis of the Rod Model was the 1949 Vespa 125, and this was actually displayed by Douglas at the 1949 Motor Cycle Show. The fact that it took until 1951 to get it into production at Kingswood is indicative of the amount of effort required by the British firm, which was actually in receivership. As a stop-gap, a number of the Italian 125cc Vespas were imported in the intervening period. By the time the Rod Model was launched it was well out of date in Vespa terms. Pontedera was already moving onto hydraulic front shock absorbers, a cable gear change and smooth body sides. It was to be several years before Kingswood production caught up with Piaggio as far as specification goes. None-the-less, it was a good effort by Douglas to get anything in production considering the difficulties they faced. A lot of the machinery was worn out, the workforce had to get used to metric rather than imperial measurements, and there were still raw material shortages. And, of course, very little money.

The Rod Model was genuinely largely manufactured in Britain as opposed to merely being assembled here. Pressed Steel in Birmingham made the legshields, Milverton the seat , Lucas the electrics and Amal the carb. Douglas’ own foundry cast many items such as engine bearers, clutch covers and cylinder heads, while the machine shop turned out cylinder barrels. crankshafts and gear clusters amongst other things.

There were a few specification changes from the Italian version. Most obviously the headlight position was altered, but also there was a Smiths speedo and a completely different rear light/number plate arrangement.

Production was on quite a small scale for a while. This was a great disappointment to Piaggio, who had granted Douglas exclusive marketing rights over much of the British Commonwealth and were therefore expecting enormous sales! The friction caused by this gradually subsided as Piaggio successfully expanded elsewhere and Douglas upped production a bit and established a proper dealer network. With only an obsolete model to sell, and hardly any advertising budget, it’s maybe not too surprising that Douglas could not prevent Lambretta (with up-to-date imported machines) from gaining a sales advantage in Britain that they were unable to repeat in most other countries.

But, despite all manner of early production problems, ultimately this is a story of triumph over adversity. Douglas kept manufacturing going and it’s workforce employed making Vespas until the mid sixties. Despite its undeniable Italian origins, in it’s own way the Rod Model is a very British scooter.

Distinguishing features and specification changes –information collected by Matthew Phillips

March-April 1951

The original paint colour was 6000M

There was no “Vespa” scroll badge on the legshield and the horn casting badge was made of plastic.

The kick-start and brake pedals were both chromed.

A few examples were fitted with a Piaggio stator plate and Handlebar switch - possibly on machines without parking lights.

For the first six months alloy panels were fitted, to be replaced by slightly differently shaped steel ones. Both of these items were made in Britain, the alloy ones being of a slightly thicker gauge than the Italian equivalent.

The engine number was in the same place as an Italian made Vespa of this period.

The rear light was a LucasMT211 type.

Jan-Dec 1952

The paint colour changed to 6002M

The familiar Vespa scroll badge appeared on the legshield.

The kick-start and brake pedals were now painted rather than chromed.

A different type of rear light was fitted.

The engine number was moved to a position below the gear selector.

1953

The horn casting “badge” now became a transfer

The end caps on the runners were deleted, the ends of the runners themselves now being “pinched in”

(captions)

(rod 1)

The 1949 Pontedera built 125cc Vespa on which the Rod Model was based

(rod 2)

A side view of a Rod Model for comparison. Clearly seen are the different rear light and number plate holder, the higher front light mounting, the speedometer, the rubber stand

feet and the “fish” shaped silencer. Also note how the side panels are angled forward compared to the Italian ones.

(rod 3)

Most Rod Models were later fitted with this 92L2 type Lucas rear light, as the originals were so small.

(rod 4)

The second type rear light. The original one was even smaller!