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The opening pages of

1973 Harley-Davidson Sportster Buyer's Guide

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IRONHEAD

1973 Harley-Davidson Sportster

Factory-Correct Restoration Guide

IronHead single-year guide · Model year 1973 only

KEY FACTS AT A GLANCE

- **Model year covered:** 1973 only (XLH and XLCH). The front-disc year.
- **Engine:** 997.5 cc (60.9 cu in) air-cooled 45-degree OHV V-twin; 3.188 x 3.8125 in bore x stroke; 9.0:1 compression; 61 bhp @ 6,200 rpm; 52 lb-ft @ 3,800 rpm.
- **Brakes:** Front disc brake (new for 1973) — single disc; rear drum.
- **Fork:** 35 mm Kayaba-type telescopic fork (new for 1973).
- **Chassis changes:** Turn signals standard; speedometer drive moved from the transmission to the front axle; frame updates.
- **Production:** York, Pennsylvania assembly begins in 1973.
- **Carburetor:** Bendix/Zenith I6P12 fixed-venturi.
- **Ignition:** 12-volt battery and coil; breaker points; point gap 0.018 in.
- **Starting:** XLH: electric only. XLCH: kick only.
- **Transmission:** 4-speed; right-foot shift; chain final drive; wet multi-disc clutch.
- **1973 colors:** Not documented in the sources checked — verify against the 1973 parts catalog and survivor bikes.
- **Identification:** 9-character VIN on the steering head and engine (H3 suffix for 1973).
- **Production:** No audited model-year split published in the period literature.
- **Key 1973-only features:** front disc; 35 mm fork; front-axle speedometer drive; late-year cylinder/head change (do not mix early and late sets).

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1. Manufacturer history: Harley-Davidson

Harley-Davidson was founded in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1903 by William S. Harley and Arthur Davidson, with Walter and William A. Davidson joining the effort. The first factory went up in 1906; the first V-twin appeared in 1909. Through the 1910s and 1920s Harley built its name on V-twins and racing success, and the 45-cubic-inch flathead models of the 1930s kept the company alive through the Depression.

The 1936 EL Knucklehead introduced overhead valves to the Big Twin line, and the 1948 Panhead refined the formula. For the sporting rider, the key ancestor is the 1952 K-series: a unit-construction 45-cubic-inch side-valve twin with foot shift and swingarm rear suspension, built to answer the British imports. The K was the direct basis for the 1957 XL Sportster — essentially the K bottom end with larger displacement, overhead valves, and higher compression.

The 1960s brought the Duo-Glide (1958) and Electra Glide (1965) to the touring line while the Sportster carried the sporting brief almost alone. In January 1969 the American Machine and Foundry Company (AMF) bought Harley-Davidson, bankrolling expansion — including Sportster assembly at York, Pennsylvania, from 1973 — through a decade of variable quality control. In June 1981 a group of Harley executives bought the company back from AMF. The Ironhead Sportster ran through the 1985 model year; for 1986 the Evolution engine replaced the cast-iron-top-end motor the "Ironhead" name describes.

For the restorer, the authority is the factory literature: the Harley-Davidson service manuals (1957-1969, 1970-1978, and 1979-1985 XL/XR) and the year parts catalogs. Sportsterpedia's marque research is the strongest secondary source for year-to-year differences; this guide cites it throughout.

2. Model history: the Ironhead Sportster

The 1957 XL was Harley-Davidson's answer to the British 650 twins that were eating its lunch: take the K-model's unit-construction bottom end, bore it to 883 cc, fit overhead valves with hemispherical cast-iron heads, and raise compression. The result made a claimed 42 bhp — nearly half as much again as the side-valve K it replaced — and the Sportster has been in the Harley range continuously ever since.

The designations work like this. **XL** was the 1957 base model (and the name reappears on a basic model in some later literature). **XLH** (1958 on) is the high-compression touring version — bigger tank, lower bars, the volume seller. **XLCH** (1958-1979, "Competition Hot") is the sportier, stripped version: high pipes, small peanut tank, and for most of its life kick-start only. **XLRTT** was a limited-production race model of the mid-1960s. **XLS** (1979 on) is the Roadster. **XLT** (1977-1978) was a short-lived touring variant with hard bags and a windshield. **XLCR** (1977-1979) is Willie G. Davidson's cafe racer. **XLX-61** (1983-1984) was the stripped budget Sportster. **XR1000** (1983-1984) was the street-going XR with race-type heads and twin Dell'Orto carburetors. The **XR-750** (1970 on) is the pure dirt-track racer — not a street model and not covered by this guide except as context.

Engineering constants across the whole Ironhead run: a 45-degree air-cooled V-twin with four gear-driven camshafts, cast-iron cylinder heads (the source of the "Ironhead" nickname), unit-construction four-speed gearbox, and chain final drive. Displacement was 883 cc (advertised as 900) through 1971 and 997.5 cc (advertised as 1000) from 1972 on.

Year	What changed
1957	First XL: 883 cc OHV V-twin (3.000 x 3.8125 in, 7.5:1), 42 bhp, Linkert DC carburetor, 6-volt electrics, kick start, drum brakes.

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Year	What changed
1958	XLH (high-compression touring) and XLCH (Competition Hot) replace the single XL; higher compression, domed pistons, larger ports and valves; XLCH gets high pipes, magneto ignition, peanut tank.
1959	High-lift camshafts; period reports of 115 mph and sub-14-second quarter-miles.
1960	Detail refinements on the established 1958 formula.
1961	Hi-Fi color combinations introduced.
1962	Staggered shorty exhausts; the even/odd serial-number rule begins.
1963	Alloy fork brackets and motor mounts offered.
1964	Alloy front hubs fitted.
1965	12-volt electrical system replaces 6-volt.
1966	Tillotson diaphragm carburetor; hotter camshafts.
1967	Electric starting on the XLH (kick starter retained for 1967); new stronger crankcases and a stretched frame and swingarm for the XLH; the XLCH stays short-frame and kick-only.
1968	XLH becomes electric-start only (kicker optional); new front forks with more travel; about 58 bhp.
1969	Larger intake valves and revised cast-iron heads; AMF buys Harley-Davidson in January.
1970	Ownership VIN moves to the steering head (9-character format); XLCH gains electric start and battery-and-coil ignition; fiberglass boat-tail tail section; XR-750 racer debuts; about 8,650 Sportsters outsell the Electra Glide.
1971	New crankcases: the ignition timer moves into the cam-cover nose cone with automatic spark advance; wet multi-disc clutch; last year for the boat-tail option.
1972	Engine enlarged to 997.5 cc (3.188 x 3.8125 in, 9:1), 61 bhp; Bendix/Zenith carburetor; revised timer cam (dwell 90 to 140 degrees).
1973	**Front disc brake; 35 mm Kayaba-type fork; turn signals standard; speedometer drive moves to the front axle; York, PA assembly begins.**
1974	Cast wheels available; sales top 20,000.
1975	Left-side shift with right-side rear brake (DOT mandate), worked through linkage behind the engine; sales slump below 6,000.
1976	Bicentennial special edition; otherwise a steady year.

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Year	What changed
1977	New crankcases with gerotor oil pump (frame tube notched for access); Keihin carburetor; XLCR cafe racer and XLT touring model introduced; limited Confederate Edition.
1978	Siamese 2-into-1-into-2 exhaust across the line; solid-state charging electronics; dual front discs; 75th-anniversary editions; electronic ignition phased in late in the year.
1979	New lighter, stiffer frame; rear disc brake; electronic ignition standard; XLS Roadster introduced; last year for the XLCH.
1980	Timing marks revised (advance = single dot, TDC = lazy eight); 9-character VIN with J0 suffix.
1981	17-digit federal VIN; AMF sells Harley-Davidson to the investor group in June.
1982	25th-anniversary XLH and XLS editions; Hitachi generator in the charging system.
1983	XLX-61 budget Sportster; XR1000 street model (twin 36 mm Dell'Ortos, XR750-type heads, about 70 bhp).
1984	XR1000 final year; late-year charging-system running change (the factory manual treats Late 1984-1985 as its own variant).
1985	Final year of the Ironhead Sportster; the Evolution engine follows for 1986.

The company context matters when judging a bike. The 1969 AMF takeover funded the York plant and the 1970s expansion, but the AMF years are also the era of the most variable factory quality control — which is why matching numbers, correct fasteners, and year-correct trim matter more, not less, on a 1970s Ironhead. The 1981 buyback steadied the company; the 1986 Evolution engine kept the Sportster alive by fixing the Ironhead's oil-leak and overheating reputation at its root.

3. What is unique about the 1973 Sportster

1973 is the front-disc year — the first disc brake on a street Sportster, and the most important chassis change since the 1967 frame stretch. With it came the 35 mm Kayaba-type fork, standard turn signals, and the speedometer drive's move from the transmission to the front axle (a detail that matters when fitting cables and drive units). York, Pennsylvania assembly began the same year. Late in 1973 the cylinders and heads changed again — early and late 1973 head/cylinder sets must not be mixed.

1973-specific details:

- **Single front disc, rear drum.** Dual front discs do not arrive until

1978; a dual-disc 1973 is modified.

- **35 mm Kayaba-type fork** — new stanchion diameter; seals and internals

are year-specific.

- **Front-axle speedometer drive** — the transmission-driven speedometer

provision of 1972-earlier is gone; cables and drive units differ.

- **Turn signals standard** — wiring and switchgear change with them.

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- **Late-1973 cylinder/head change.** Verify whether a top end is early or late 1973 before ordering gaskets and heads — the sets do not mix.
- **Cases 24534-72 / 24558-73A** (1973-1976 era begins).

What did NOT exist in 1973 (common mix-ups):

- No dual front discs (1978); no rear disc (1979); no left-side shift (1975); no Keihin carburetor (1977).

1973 buyer cautions:

- **Disc-system completeness.** The 1973 front-disc system is year-specific — master cylinder, caliper, hose, and disc all differ from later dual-disc setups. Incomplete systems are expensive to complete correctly.
- **Early/late top end.** The late-1973 cylinder/head change is the classic parts-ordering trap — identify the top end before buying.
- **York transition.** Early York-assembly bikes can carry running changes; verify trim against the parts catalog, not just the model year.

4. Technical restoration data — 1973 Harley-Davidson Sportster

4.1 Frame and engine numbers (1973)

1970 is the first year of the ownership VIN on the frame. The 9-character VIN is stamped on the engine and on the frame, with a label on the steering head showing the VIN and date of manufacture. Format:

```
3A13675H0
3A = model code (3A = XLH, 4A = XLCH) | 13675 = five-digit serial
H = fixed character before the year digit | 0 = model year (1970)
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A 1971 example reads 4A13675H1 (4A = XLCH, H1 = 1971). Note a one-year quirk: on 1970 engines (and some early 1971 engines built with carryover 1970 cases) the VIN pad sits between the front two lifters; from 1971 on it is on the right side of the crankcase between the cylinders. The 1980 VIN uses a J0 suffix (example: 3A26782J0). Cam-cover castings: 25202-71 (1971-1976), 76-25202F (1977-1978), 79-25202 (1979-1980). Crankcase castings: 24534-72 / 24558-72 (1972); 24534-72 / 24558-73A (1973-1976); 24534-75 / 24558-75 (1977-1980).

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4.2 Engine specifications (1973)

Item	Specification
Configuration	45-degree air-cooled OHV V-twin; four gear-driven camshafts; cast-iron heads
Displacement	997.5 cc (60.9 cu in) — advertised as 1000
Bore x stroke	3.188 x 3.8125 in
Compression ratio	9.0:1
Claimed output	61 bhp @ 6,200 rpm; 52 lb-ft @ 3,800 rpm
Carburetor	Bendix/Zenith I6P12 fixed-venturi
Ignition	12-volt battery and coil, breaker points in the nose cone; revised timer cam (dwell 90 to 140 degrees); point gap 0.018 in
Starting	XLH: electric only (Prestolite). XLCH: kick only
Clutch	Wet multi-disc
Lubrication	Dry sump; gear-driven oil pump

4.3 Carburetion and electrical

- Bendix/Zenith I6P12 fixed-venturi carburetor
- 12-volt battery-and-coil ignition; breaker points in the nose cone; point gap 0.018 in; spark-plug gap 0.025-0.030 in
- XLH: electric start only. XLCH: kick starter only
- 12-volt generator; turn signals standard (new wiring and switchgear)

4.4 Transmission and final drive

- Four-speed constant-mesh gearbox in unit with the engine
- Right-foot shift, left-hand clutch
- Chain final drive; wet multi-disc clutch

4.5 Chassis, suspension, and brakes (1973)

- 35 mm Kayaba-type telescopic front fork (new for 1973); dual rear shock absorbers
- Single front disc brake (new for 1973); rear drum
- Speedometer drive moved to the front axle (new for 1973)
- Wire-spoked wheels; 19-inch front, 18-inch rear
- Period fitment: 3.25-19 front (disc), 4.00-18 rear
- York, PA assembly begins

4.6 Paint and finish (1973)

- Factory color options for this year are not documented in the sources checked. Verify paint against the year parts catalog and survivor bikes rather than trusting internet color charts — guessing at colors is how restorations get the most visible detail wrong.

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