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1963 Triumph Bonneville Buyer's Guide

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1963 T120 Bonneville

Factory-Correct Restoration Guide

KEY FACTS AT A GLANCE

- **Model year covered:** 1963 only (T120 Bonneville; T120R in the US). The FIRST year of the unit-construction 650 twin. This guide does not cover the 1962 pre-unit T120 or the 1964 T120 except where differences are explicitly noted.
- **Engine:** 649 cc air-cooled OHV parallel twin; 71.0 mm x 82.0 mm bore x stroke; unit construction (engine and 4-speed gearbox in one crankcase casting) — new for 1963.
- **Fuel system:** Twin Amal Monobloc carburetors. (The Amal Concentric did not arrive until the 1968 model year.)
- **Ignition:** Battery-and-coil breaker-point ignition.
- **Electrics:** 6-volt system. 1963 is the LAST year of 6-volt electrics on the Bonneville — 12-volt arrived for 1964 (Hagerty).
- **Transmission:** 4-speed constant-mesh gearbox in unit with the engine; chain primary drive; wet multi-plate clutch; chain final drive.
- **Brakes:** Drum brakes front and rear.
- **Wheels/tires:** Wire-spoked wheels; 3.25 x 19 front, 3.50 x 18 rear (period fitment).
- **Frame/engine serials:** DU101 through DU5824 (5,724 numbers allocated). Engine number is stamped on the left crankcase below the cylinder barrel; original engine and frame numbers should match.
- **Power:** Period road tests typically quoted around 46 bhp for the unit 650 twin.
- **Production context:** First-year unit 650. Factory number allocation DU101-DU5824 bounds the model-year run (allocations are not the same as built totals).
- **Key 1963-only features:** unit-construction cases (new); 6-volt electrics (last year); the first-year details of the new engine/gearbox unit.

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This is a single-year guide. It covers the 1963 Triumph T120 Bonneville only. Other model years are discussed solely to mark differences — for a different year, use that year's IronHead guide.

1. Manufacturer history: Triumph

Triumph began as a bicycle and motorcycle maker in Coventry, England, founded by the German immigrant Siegfried Bettmann in the 1880s; the company built its first motorcycle in 1902. Through the 1920s Triumph was one of Britain's major motorcycle manufacturers, and in 1936 the arrival of designer Edward Turner changed the company's trajectory permanently: his 1937/38 Speed Twin — a 500 cc parallel twin — created the template (light, narrow, good-looking twin with real performance) that the whole British industry, and then the Japanese, would chase for the next forty years.

Bombing forced the move from Coventry to a new factory at Meriden in 1942, and in 1951 Triumph was sold to the BSA group. The 1950s and 1960s were the boom years: the 650 twins (Thunderbird, Tiger, Bonneville) sold in huge numbers, overwhelmingly to the United States — more than 65 percent of Bonneville production went to America, a figure Hagerty's marque history repeats across its model summaries. The American market's appetite for the big parallel twin is the reason the Bonneville exists in the form it does: tuned for US tastes, styled for US showrooms, and sold through legendary importers like Johnson Motors (JoMo) on the West Coast and the Triumph Corporation (TriCor) in the East.

The 1970s brought the collapse. Mismanagement, labor strife, and Japanese competition pushed BSA/Triumph to the brink; the 1973 creation of Norton Villiers Triumph (NVT) was followed by an 18-month workers' sit-in at Meriden (Hagerty), after which the factory continued as the Meriden Workers' Co-operative — owner-workers building essentially the same motorcycles with almost no development money. Production limped on until 1983, when the Meriden works closed and the rest of Triumph's motorcycle production ended with it. Businessman John Bloor bought the name and assets the same year; his new Hinckley company would eventually relaunch the Bonneville in 2001, but the Meriden-built line this guide covers died in 1983.

For the restorer, that history explains the parts landscape: enormous US sales mean used parts and pattern parts are plentiful for the popular years; the co-operative years (1975-1983) mean running changes, mixed fittings, and documentation gaps that demand verification against the factory parts books rather than memory.

2. Model history: the Bonneville

The Bonneville began in 1959 as the T120: a 650 cc pre-unit parallel twin, essentially a twin-carburettor Tiger 110, named for the land-speed records Johnny Allen set on the Bonneville Salt Flats in 1956 aboard a Triumph-powered streamliner. It was an instant hit in America, and for the next two decades the Bonneville was Triumph's flagship — the bike the company was known by.

Three mechanical generations matter for the restorer. The **pre-unit T120** (1959-1962) has a separate gearbox. The **unit 650** (1963-1972, covered by factory workshop manual 99-0883/0889 for 1963-1970) combines engine and gearbox in one crankcase casting — the engine most people picture when they hear "Bonneville." The **750 T140** (1973-1983) is a bored-and-developed descendant of the oil-in-frame 650, covered by the T140 factory repair manual. Within those generations, the year-to-year changes — carburetors, brakes, frames, electrics, shift side, paint — are exactly what this guide series isolates, one year at a time.

Two production facts anchor every guide in this series. First, Hagerty's marque history records that by the time the last 649 cc T120 was sold in 1972, production had reached **250,000 units** — the Bonneville was a mass-market machine, not an exotic. Second, the same source puts total T140 production at roughly **60,000 units** across 1973-1983. And more than 65 percent of all Bonneville production was sold in the United States, which is why US-specification details (US-only paint names, US-market fittings, the T120R designation for the US road model) dominate the restoration record.

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Designation	Years	What changed that matters
T120 Bonneville	1959-1962	650 cc pre-unit twin. Named for the 1956 Bonneville Salt Flats land-speed records.
T120 Bonneville (unit)	1963-1970	Unit construction (engine and gearbox in one casting) from 1963. 12-volt electrics from 1964. Amal Concentric carbs and 8-inch twin-leading-shoe front brake from 1968.
T120R/T120V (oil-in-frame)	1971-1972	Oil carried in the frame instead of a separate tank. 54 bhp @ 6,750 rpm. Five-speed option for 1972. Last of the 649 cc line: ~250,000 T120s built in total (Hagerty).
T140V Bonneville	1973-1978	750 twin (724 cc at launch, 744 cc shortly after). Five-speed, right-side shift to 1975, left-side shift and rear disc from 1976.
T140J Silver Jubilee	1977	Limited edition: 1,000 UK + 1,000 US machines (Bonhams).
T140E / T140D	1979-1980	E for emissions: parallel-port head, Amal MkII carbs, Lucas Rita electronic ignition. D Special: factory custom by Tom Higham.
T140ES Electro	1980-1983	Electric start alongside the kick starter.
T140LE Royal Wedding	1981	Limited edition for the Charles and Diana wedding; published build totals conflict (see Section 10).
T140AV	1981-1983	Anti-vibration rubber-mounted police/touring model.
T140 TSS / TSX	1982-1983	Eight-valve Weslake-derived head on the TSS (~60 bhp per Hagerty).
End of line	1983	Meriden closes. ~60,000 T140s built in total (Hagerty).

3. What makes the 1963 T120 Bonneville unique

The 1963 T120 is the genesis bike of the unit-construction Bonneville — the first year Triumph combined the 650 twin's engine and gearbox into a single crankcase casting, replacing the pre-unit arrangement (with its separate gearbox) that the Bonneville had used since 1959. For the restorer, that makes 1963 a first-year-of-generation bike: many of its details were revised within a year or two, and fitting 1964-and-later parts is the most common originality error on these machines.

1963-only details:

- **Unit-construction cases.** The engine and 4-speed gearbox share one

casting — the defining change of the year. Pre-unit (separate-gearbox) parts do not fit, and the cases, covers, and internals are 1963-1970 unit-650 items, not 1959-1962 pre-unit items. Verify any "Bonneville engine part" against the unit-650 parts book, not a generic T120 listing.

- **6-volt electrics — the last year.** Hagerty's marque history records

that 12-volt electrics arrived in 1964, which makes 1963 the final 6-volt Bonneville. A 12-volt conversion is the single most common (and most invisible) modification on these bikes: check the battery, coil, bulbs, and rectifier against 6-volt specification before assuming originality. Converted bikes are not incorrect as riders, but they are not factory-correct.

- **Twin Amal Monobloc carburetors.** The Concentric carburetor did not

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arrive until the 1968 model year, so Monoblocs are the factory-correct fitment for 1963. Concentrics on a 1963 are a later upgrade.

- **First-year running changes.** Factory workshop manual 99-0883/0889

(which covers the unit 650s from 1963) keys its running changes to engine-number breakpoints rather than model years — a warning the manual itself gives: apparent year boundaries can mislead. On a first-year bike, expect early-production details to differ from late-production ones, and verify against the engine number, not the calendar.

What did NOT change for 1963 (common mix-ups):

- The 649 cc displacement, 71 x 82 mm bore and stroke, and the basic OHV

parallel-twin architecture are continuous with the pre-unit T120. The revolution is in the cases, not the cylinder dimensions.

- Drum brakes front and rear, 4-speed gearbox, and the Bonneville's

twin-carburettor specification all carry over in concept.

1963 buyer cautions:

- **Verify the year by the numbers, not the cases.** Because unit-650

engines are visually similar across 1963-1970, a later engine in a 1963 frame is common. The frame and engine numbers should both fall in the DU101-DU5824 range and should match each other (Lowbrow Customs).

- **6-volt originality.** Ask the seller directly whether the electrics are

still 6-volt. A converted bike with 1964-on electrical parts loses its first-year originality claim.

- **First-year parts scarcity.** One-year and early-production details

(1963-specific covers, fasteners, and trim) are the hardest unit-650 parts to find. Budget accordingly, and verify every claimed-correct part against the factory parts book for the DU101-DU5824 range.

4. Decoding your 1963 Bonneville

Triumph numbered the 1963 unit 650 sequentially from **DU101** through **DU5824** — 5,724 numbers allocated to the model year (Lowbrow Customs' serial guide). The engine number is stamped on the left crankcase below the cylinder barrel; the frame number is on the steering head. On an original, unmolested machine the two numbers should match. Both numbers must fall inside DU101-DU5824 for a genuine 1963: a DU number above 5824 is a 1964-on machine regardless of what the title says, and an engine number that does not match the frame is a replacement engine — common, but it must be disclosed and priced accordingly. Number allocations bound the run; they are not the same as built totals, and Triumph did not publish model-year production splits in the sources checked.

5. Engine — technical restoration data

The table below is the 1963 T120 Bonneville's technical core. Every figure is sourced; where no verified factory figure was found in the sources checked, the table says so explicitly rather than printing a plausible number. Use the factory workshop manual for your exact model as the final authority.

Specification	Detail
Engine	649 cc air-cooled OHV parallel twin, unit construction (new for 1963)
Bore x stroke	71.0 mm x 82.0 mm
Compression ratio	Not printed: no verified factory figure found in the sources checked — use the factory workshop manual, do not guess.

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Specification	Detail
Carburetion	Twin Amal Monobloc
Ignition	Battery-and-coil, breaker points
Power	Approx. 46 bhp (period road-test figure for the unit 650)
Gearbox	4-speed constant-mesh, in unit with engine
Clutch / primary	Wet multi-plate clutch; chain primary drive
Final drive	Chain
Frame	Steel cradle (new unit-650 frame for 1963)
Front suspension	Telescopic fork
Rear suspension	Twin Girling shock absorbers
Front brake	Drum
Rear brake	Drum
Wheels	Wire-spoked, steel rims
Tires (period)	3.25 x 19 front, 3.50 x 18 rear
Electrics	6-volt (last year — 12-volt from 1964)
Fuel capacity	Not printed: verify against the factory parts book for the year.

6. Transmission, clutch and primary drive

The 1963 runs a 4-speed constant-mesh, in unit with engine. Wet multi-plate clutch; chain primary drive. Final drive is by Chain. Rebuild practice is standard unit-twin work: inspect gear dogs and slots for rounding, replace bearings and seals as a set, check clutch-plate flatness and basket notching, and set the primary-chain tension and clutch adjustment to the factory manual before judging gearbox behavior.

7. Frame, suspension, wheels and brakes

Frame: Steel cradle (new unit-650 frame for 1963). Front suspension: Telescopic fork. Rear: Twin Girling shock absorbers. Brakes: Drum front, Drum rear. Wheels: Wire-spoked, steel rims. Wheel and brake originality is checked as a set — hub, brake plate or caliper, and fork fitment must all agree with the year's specification in Section 3.

8. Electrics, ignition and instruments

Ignition: Battery-and-coil, breaker points. Carburetion: Twin Amal Monobloc. Electrics: 6-volt (last year — 12-volt from 1964). Fit a new wiring harness — original insulation is finished — rebuild or replace the switches, fit the correct battery, and test the charging system under load. Set timing to the factory manual before attempting any carburetion tuning.

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9. Paint, trim and finishes

No factory-verified 1963 color palette was found in the sources checked for this guide — not in the factory workshop-manual material reviewed, not in the period references consulted. What is documented is the factory's own paint-formula discipline: Triumph service bulletin T-63-48, dated 28 June 1963 and archived by the Vintage Triumph Register, publishes factory paint formulas (including White and Jonquil among other additions), which proves the factory controlled color by formula, not by folklore. For a 1963 restoration: verify the color against the factory parts book and a period brochure for the DU101-DU5824 range; treat any repainted survivor as evidence of nothing; and do not trust color names repeated on forums without a factory source. This guide prints no 1963 palette rather than a dubious one.

10. Production and rarity

Triumph did not publish model-year production splits in the sources checked. The verifiable bound is the factory number allocation: **DU101 through DU5824**, i.e. 5,724 numbers allocated to the 1963 model year (Lowbrow Customs). Allocations are not built totals — numbers were not always used in unbroken sequence — but the allocation is the hard, checkable frame for the year's production. For context, Hagerty's marque history records that total T120 production reached 250,000 units by the time the last 649 cc bike was sold in 1972.

11. Corrosion and wear areas to inspect

Check every one of these before committing to the restoration — they are the places 1963 Bonnevilles hide their expensive surprises.

- **Mudguards and rims:** chrome over steel; stone chips become rust quickly. Original chrome is thin — rechroming is usually required, not polishing.
- **Exhaust system:** the twin high pipes rot from the inside out. Check the collector areas and silencer seams.
- **Frame:** inspect the steering head and swingarm pivot areas for cracks and previous repairs; check inside the tubes for rust where paint has failed.
- **Fasteners and brightwork:** original cadmium/zinc plating is long gone on most survivors; corrosion here is cosmetic but pervasive.
- **Fuel tank interior:** 60-year-old tanks rust from the inside. Verify with a borescope before paint — a rusty tank ruins fresh paint and carburetors alike.
- **Electrical connections:** 6-volt systems are unforgiving of corroded connections. Every bullet connector and ground point needs cleaning or replacement.

12. Restoration sequence

Work in an order that never forces you to undo finished work. The sequence below is the standard professional order for a unit-twin Triumph; the notes flag where the 1963 T120 Bonneville needs special attention.

1. **Document everything first.** Photograph the complete bike from all sides,

then every assembly before you touch a fastener. Record the frame and engine numbers (see Section 4) and check them against the year ranges before spending money — a mis-described year is the most expensive restoration mistake.

2. **Assess, don't strip.** Inventory what's original, what's period-correct,

what's wrong-year, and what's missing. On a 1963, pay particular attention to first-year unit-construction details and 6-volt electrical originality.

3. **Engine and gearbox out; frame inspection.** Check the frame for crash

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