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1969 Triumph Bonneville Buyer's Guide

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IRONHEAD

1969 T120 Bonneville

Factory-Correct Restoration Guide

KEY FACTS AT A GLANCE

- **Model year covered:** 1969 only (T120 Bonneville; T120R in the US). The year Triumph changed its numbering system mid-stream. This guide does not cover the 1968 or 1970 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 with 4-speed gearbox.
- **Fuel system:** Twin Amal Concentric carburetors.
- **Ignition:** Battery-and-coil breaker-point ignition.
- **Electrics:** 12-volt.
- **Transmission:** 4-speed constant-mesh, in unit; chain primary; wet multi-plate clutch; chain final drive.
- **Brakes:** 8-inch twin-leading-shoe front drum; rear drum.
- **Wheels/tires:** Wire-spoked wheels; 3.25 x 19 front, 3.50 x 18 rear (period fitment).
- **Frame/engine serials:** TWO systems in one year. Early 1969: DU85904 through DU90282. Then the new alpha-numeric system: month letter + model-year code + sequential number from 00100. Model-year code for 1969 is C. Documented examples: T120R GC21007, T120R DU86437 (early, still DU), T120R BC10808, GC21787 T120R.
- **Power:** 49 bhp (Hagerty).
- **Documented color:** Olympic Flame — recorded on multiple documented 1969 examples (Bonhams, Hagerty). Survivor evidence; verify the full palette in the parts book.
- **Production context:** The DU allocation (DU85904-DU90282) covers only the early part of the year; the alpha-numeric system took over mid-year.

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This is a single-year guide. It covers the 1969 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 1969 T120 Bonneville unique

The 1969 T120 is the serial-number transition year — the last Bonneville year to use the old DU sequential system and the first to use the new alpha-numeric system, with both appearing on 1969 machines. For the restorer and buyer, the numbering change is the year's defining feature: misread 1969 numbers are the most common dating error on late-60s Bonnevilles.

1969-only details:

- **Two numbering systems, one model year.** Early 1969 production

continued the DU sequence from **DU85904 through DU90282**; then Triumph switched to the new format: a **month letter**, a **model-year code**, and a **sequential number beginning at 00100**. The model-year code for 1969 is **C** (Lowbrow Customs). Documented 1969 examples show both: T120R DU86437 (early, still DU-pattern) alongside T120R GC21007, T120R BC10808, and GC21787 T120R in the new format (Bonhams, Hagerty).

- **How to read a 1969 alpha-numeric:** e.g. GC21007 = G (month), C (1969

model year), 21007 (sequential). The full month-letter/year-code tables are in Lowbrow Customs' serial guide — verify there, because published code lists vary and a wrong table misdates the bike.

- **Mechanically a 1968 continuation.** Concentrics, 8-inch TLS front

brake, the strengthened 1968 chassis, 4-speed unit gearbox — the 1969 bike is the sorted version of the 1968 redesign, not a new redesign.

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- **Olympic Flame.** Multiple documented 1969 examples (Bonhams, Hagerty)

wear Olympic Flame — strong survivor evidence of the year's colorway. Verify the complete palette in the parts book.

- **49 bhp** (Hagerty), as for 1968.

1969 buyer cautions:

- **Date the bike by the correct system.** A DU-number 1969 and an

alpha-numeric 1969 are both genuine — but a bike whose numbers fit neither system (or whose format contradicts its claimed year) is a problem. Check the format first, the range second.

- **Engine/frame match still applies.** Whichever system the bike uses,

original engine and frame numbers should match (Lowbrow Customs).

- **Beware "1969" titles on mixed bikes.** The transition year is the

easiest to fake by accident: a 1968-spec bike with a 1969-format number (or vice versa) needs its actual build specification verified part by part.

4. Decoding your 1969 Bonneville

1969 is the transition year. **Early production:** DU85904 through DU90282 (continuing the old sequential system). **Then the new alpha-numeric system:** month letter + model-year code + sequential number from 00100, with **C as the 1969 model-year code** (Lowbrow Customs). Documented examples: T120R DU86437 (early, DU-pattern), T120R GC21007, T120R BC10808, GC21787 T120R (Bonhams, Hagerty). Engine number: left crankcase below the barrel. Frame number: steering head. The two should match. Note: published month-letter and year-code tables vary between sources — verify against Lowbrow Customs' guide and the factory parts book rather than trusting any single reproduced table.

5. Engine — technical restoration data

The table below is the 1969 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
Bore x stroke	71.0 mm x 82.0 mm
Compression ratio	Not printed: no verified factory figure found in the sources checked.
Carburetion	Twin Amal Concentric
Ignition	Battery-and-coil, breaker points
Power	49 bhp (Hagerty)
Gearbox	4-speed constant-mesh, in unit with engine
Clutch / primary	Wet multi-plate clutch; chain primary drive
Final drive	Chain
Frame	Steel cradle, unit-650 type (1968 thicker-tube specification)

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Specification	Detail
Front suspension	Telescopic fork (1968 improved-damping type)
Rear suspension	Twin Girling shock absorbers
Front brake	8-inch twin-leading-shoe drum
Rear brake	Drum
Wheels	Wire-spoked, steel rims
Tires (period)	3.25 x 19 front, 3.50 x 18 rear
Electrics	12-volt
Fuel capacity	Not printed: verify against the factory parts book for the year.

6. Transmission, clutch and primary drive

The 1969 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, unit-650 type (1968 thicker-tube specification). Front suspension: Telescopic fork (1968 improved-damping type). Rear: Twin Girling shock absorbers. Brakes: 8-inch twin-leading-shoe 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 Concentric. Electrics: 12-volt. 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.

9. Paint, trim and finishes

Documented: Olympic Flame, recorded on multiple documented 1969 examples (Bonhams, Hagerty) — strong survivor evidence of the year's colorway. Verify the complete 1969 palette against the factory parts book and period brochures before paint.

10. Production and rarity

No published model-year split found. The DU allocation **DU85904-DU90282** (4,379 numbers) covers only the early part of the year; the alpha-numeric system (from 00100) took over mid-year, so the DU range understates 1969 production. Total T120 production: 250,000 by 1972 (Hagerty).

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11. Corrosion and wear areas to inspect

Check every one of these before committing to the restoration — they are the places 1969 Bonnevilles hide their expensive surprises.

- **Chrome:** rechroming expected.
- **Exhaust:** inside-out rot.
- **Frame:** steering head, swingarm pivot, lower rails.
- **Tank interior:** borescope before paint.
- **Electrics:** replace connectors and grounds.
- **Fasteners:** replating usually needed.

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 1969 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 1969, pay particular attention to serial-format verification before any other work.

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

damage, cracks at the steering head and swingarm pivot, and previous repairs. 1968-specification frame; verify the exact frame type against the engine number and numbering system.

4. **Engine rebuild.** Split only as far as needed. Measure everything:

bore, crank journals, cam bushings, valve guides. Rebores on these barrels are routine, but match pistons to the measured clearance, not to the catalogue's optimism. Replace the sludge-trap plug's staking on the crank — a loose sludge trap destroys cranks.

5. **Gearbox and clutch.** Inspect dogs and slots for rounding, replace

bearings and seals as a set, check clutch-plate flatness and basket notching.

6. **Cycle parts.** Rebuild forks with new seals and correct oil; rebuild

shocks or replace with correct-pattern units. Wheel rebuilds: new spokes and nipples, rims trued — chrome rims that are pitted will not take a lasting polish.

7. **Brakes.** 8-inch TLS front: full strip, check plate/cams/shoes; rear drum as usual. Rebuild hydraulics completely on disc models:

seals, hoses (replace, don't reuse), master-cylinder bore inspection.

8. **Electrics.** New wiring harness (the original insulation is done),

rebuilt or replaced switches, correct battery, charging-system test under load. 12-volt system: new harness, rebuilt switches, charging test under load.

9. **Paint and plating.** Paint last among the major jobs, after all

trial-fitting is done. Olympic Flame is strongly documented for 1969 — verify the complete palette in the parts book before paint.

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