

Tools of the trade

Weldtite make just about everything for cycle maintenance.
Rob Ainsley pedalled to their factory near Hull

The puncture repair kit assembly line in the Barton factory. Weldtite produce up to 30,000 kits per day

Cycling over the Humber Bridge is one of the world's great two-wheeled experiences. Opened in 1981, it never succeeded in uniting the banks as 'Humberside': they're East Yorkshire and North Lincolnshire again now, and still feel quite separate. But it's still the world's longest single-span suspension bridge you can pedal over.

There doesn't seem much on the south side apart from Barton, a small North-Lincs town. If you follow National Cycle Route 1 over the bridge, you carry on to skirt rows of modest red-brick East-Midlands terraces, and take a bikes-only lane through some billiard-table fields.

Off to your left is an industrial estate in sight of the bridge's south tower. It's the quietly humming sort of economic engine, providing steady local jobs, that media pundits mean when they talk about 'Britain's

manufacturing base'. In amongst the bland corrugated iron units is Weldtite. It's a company few outside the bike retail trade have heard of, yet its products are almost certainly in your pannier right now, branded and sold by names such as Halfords, Decathlon or Wilkinson.

The factory turns out a range of other unglamorous but necessary maintenance stuff, much appreciated when you need it: lube; cleaners; tools; and puncture repair kits – three million of them a year.

Rubber solutions

The first puncture was presumably experienced by John Boyd Dunlop's son in 1887, shortly after Dunlop developed the pneumatic tyre to smooth the solid predecessor's notoriously bumpy ride. Three years later it was in production in Ireland, and an instant success. The Pall



Mall Gazette of 25 April 1890, accurately predicting the new pneumatic 'is here to stay', also enthused: 'It is easy to learn how to repair a puncture, an operation which requires less than an hour's time.' It takes rather less time now that tyres aren't glued to the wheel – and thanks to puncture repair kits.

Weldtite's first kit dates from the 1940s, when they were based in London and supplied the Ministry of Defence. Examples from that era, and the subsequent seven decades, are on display in the reception of the Barton factory, where they moved in the 1980s.



Clockwise from top left: A display case in the reception area contains a selection of historic puncture repair kits dating back to the 1940s

There are four single-span suspension bridges longer than the Humber Bridge – but you can't cycle across them

James Milnes, Weldtite Sales Manager, checks a tyre lever in the Barton factory

The factory is a standard light-industrial unit, expanded over the last few years to football-pitch size. Lorries disgorge pallets of raw material in one door, and out of another come finished products. The whirr of machinery and background jingle of radio pop swells in and out as we follow the production line. In one part there's an unexpectedly fruity smell – they're filling bottles of citrus-based bike cleaning fluid.

Weldtite employs a 40-strong workforce, most living within cycling or walking distance. A couple of dozen seasonal workers help out in busy periods, and at full tilt they can push out 30,000 puncture repair kits a day. The moulding machinery can work 24/7, but some things – packing those kits, for instance – can only be done by hand. Three-quarters of their range is made totally here in house. The only outsourced manufacturing is the metal tools, which can be made more efficiently in Taiwan.

Building brands

James Milnes, the sales manager, is cautiously positive about the present domestic business situation. 'The bike industry is not exactly recession-proof, but it's very hardy in a recession, as mode of transport or leisure activity. Bike sales, depending on who you speak to, are up, or down, or static. But the repair side of the business is very buoyant. We've continued to see sales increase, with the weather, with the general lifestyle changes people are making.' In addition to the strong home market they export to 40 countries. Australia is one of their fastest-growing areas.

Inside the factory, James picks up a plastic tyre lever from a container holding several thousand. It says Made in England on it, but nothing else. 'A lot of stuff you buy in Halfords is made by us, but it doesn't say on there,' he says.

That anonymity is something he and his colleagues are keen to change, and so they're looking to establish their four brands (Weldtite, Cyclo, TF2 and Dirtwash) with the

general buyer. They've beefed up their website, started to sponsor various bike events, and begun to engage with the press. They see their coverage of all four bike-maintenance sectors – puncture repair, lube, cleaners, tools – as a major plus that marks them apart from their competitors.

Home economics

Have they considered moving production abroad? James's riposte is instant. 'Why wouldn't we be here in Barton? It seems misguided to think we could move overseas and make a massive amount of difference.' Based where they are, they can react quickly to orders, stepping up production, and shipping out – with relatively low distribution costs – in days, rather than the weeks a foreign-based supplier would take. In a country where a spell of bright weather can produce a noticeable spike in orders, that flexibility is important.

'In the Czech Republic or wherever we would have to train extra staff up, but here in Barton we can tap into local skilled workforce instantly. Getting things done quickly is easy,' says James.

Sales co-ordinator Lorraine Stanley gives an example: 'We've just taken a big order and could commit at three hours' notice. Our competitors couldn't because they would have an eight-week manufacturing and shipping timescale. Not to mention the cashflow problems of having stock tied up en route.'

I bike back over the Humber Bridge and back in Hull, I quiz a few friends. Yes, they admit, they sort of assume that their puncture repair kits and chain cleaners and whatever were made in some far-flung foreign part.

'Aha,' I say, pointing in triumph. 'They're actually made right here, just across the water.'

'So,' retorts one, only half-joking, 'I was right, then.'

Ah. The Humber Bridge may be more spectacular than Weldtite's bike widgets, but it's clear which of the two people consider more effective.

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