



Kingdom of Mercia

Mercian Cycles have been handbuilding steel bicycles in Derby for over 60 years. **Chris Juden**, who has two, paid them a visit



When I started cycling, everywhere had its local frame-builder. In Derby it was Mercian Cycles – named after the kingdom of Mercia, which had its capital in the village of Repton.

Being a Derbyshire lad, I dreamed of riding a Mercian and would gaze longingly at the serried ranks of frames of many colours adorning the walls of their retail premises. Eventually I got one: a custom-built 'King of Mercia' number 100073. Five years later my fiancée and I happened to call at the shop when Mercian's first tandem was being assembled, for the manager Jeff Bowler and his wife Sue. There and then we persuaded them to build another for us!

So for Helen and I to visit Mercian Cycles was a trip down memory lane. We were welcomed into the factory by Grant and Jane Mosley, who bought the firm from Bill Betton in 2004. Bill had joined Mercian as an apprentice frame-builder when it was run by Ethel Crowther, ex-wife of co-founder Tom. Grant has also been with Mercian man and boy, having started in the shop as a Saturday lad. Bill worried that Mercian might be split up when he retired and was pleased to hear of Grant and Jane's plan to buy him out, at a chance meeting with Grant on Willington canal bridge, when both were riding their bikes one Sunday near Repton!

It can't have been easy to raise finance for a business building bike frames out of steel in Britain. Since the days when all frames were made like this, and

riders on Mercians were victorious in national and international competitions, racing cyclists have turned to lighter materials, mass-produced abroad, and when mountain bikes revitalised cycling it was the same story. Previously a bit of a sideline, touring has become the mainstay of custom-builders. Grant reckons it now accounts for at least two-thirds of Mercian's production. However, there are many other reasons why this British brand – like my/our two Mercians – is still going strong.

Fancy lugs & handcrafted frames

Although I've visited the factory once before, I failed to appreciate how utterly hand-built Mercians are. I don't think it would be cheating to mitre the ends of tubes with a milling machine, but I couldn't see so much as a lathe. Instead I observed a lot of very sharp hacksaws and files and three highly skilled craftsmen hard at work. Most Mercian frames are built with lugs, with the option of cut-outs and fancy extensions that can turn a frame into a work of art. But supplies of materials for old-fashioned ways of making things are inclined to dwindle, so Jane is often on the phone and internet seeking alternative sources of lugs etc.

The process by which yesterday's out-moded product becomes newly desirable has now reached hand-made bikes of the '60s and '70s, bringing Mercians to the fore in events such as The Tweed Run. A more familiar manifestation of such nostalgia is the fixie fad, and

(Above) Mercian frames await their owners in the shop

(Above right) Tony Phillips brazes in a top eye



(Left) A designer fixie: the many colours of Paul Smith

(Below) Grant Mosley with a frame in 953, outside the shop



currently about one in four new Mercians are 'track' bikes that will never circle a velodrome! But it's not all retro-chic at Mercian. Joints can also be lugless, top-tubes can slope and one of the frames in the workshop was having a carbon composite rear triangle bonded into its Reynolds 853 front triangle. Mercian also build in 953 stainless.

Annual production of 300 to 400 frames doesn't equal the thousand plus that must have been made in 1973, but there's more work in a modern touring frame than yesterday's racers, and more correspondence getting all those details agreed. It's important to get it right before any metal is cut!

Famous names

Nowadays Mercian Cycles handle almost as many renovations as new builds. At least one third of the frames I saw hardening off in the paint shop sported other makers' names, many of them long gone. Sourcing original transfers or making copies is another of Jane's specialities. She opened a filing drawer and

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pulled out a folder pregnant with precious remains of Britain's cycle-making heritage. A yellowing envelope picked at random contained perhaps the last original transfers for 'F C Parkes'.

The quality of the finish is another factor in the decision to buy a Mercian frame. It is often said to be the best in the business: tough as nails and so smooth that dirt just slides off! A chart of 63 standard colours merely hints at the variety of finishes that can be produced by Mercian's two highly experienced painters. There have indeed been times when the

demand for a Mercian re-spray was such that other makers' frames were refused. But Grant has expanded that side of the business, employing an extra sprayer and installing a new stoving oven.

Many people can now afford to buy the bikes they could only dream of when they were young. One such is Paul Smith, whose youthful ambition to race bikes was frustrated by an accident - so he became a famous fashion designer instead. He now owns several Mercians - and rides them. A suggestion from Grant that bikes might complement the window display of his Nottingham store immediately clicked with Sir Paul, whose creativity was inspired by Mercian's decorative lugwork and facility with colour, leading to a unique collaboration that has put the Derby firm's craftsmanship in fashionable shop windows from Tokyo to New York! 'The World Over' head badge adopted in the 1960s was never truer than now, with the proportion of frames exported 20% and growing.

Building the business

It was time to visit Mercian's shop. A dazzling spectrum of frames awaiting collection still hangs from the walls of this well-stocked cycle retailer: where customers come to be measured for a new Mercian and their frame returns for assembly into a bike. With the rise of touring, Shimano is increasingly fitted, but there's always been a close association between Mercian Cycles and Campagnolo components, for which the shop keeps a huge inventory of spare parts. Jeff Bowler is the Campag expert and although now semi-retired, he still attends to the more complex repairs.

Grant and Jane have further plans to develop Mercian Cycles, but you can be sure that British craftsmanship will always be key to the enterprise. They've just launched a new website at merciancycles.com on which you can even design your own frame, and an online shop is coming soon. For the netless there's the phone: 01332 752468. Or get yourself to 7 Shardlow Road, Alvaston, Derby DE24 0JG - if only to stand and gaze and wish, as the cyclists of Mercia have done since 1946.