



THE MAKERS

Surely no bicycles are constructed with more tender, loving care than those that enter the world in the Derby workshop of Mercian Cycles. **Kate Salter** reports

In a small, low brick building on an industrial estate in Derby, you can find some of the most beautiful handmade bicycles in Britain. Mercian Cycles has been making bespoke steel-framed bikes the same way ever since it first opened in 1946. It is a Derby institution among cycling enthusiasts who remember Mercian from the heyday of the local racing clubs, and its fans also include aristocrats and fashion designers. From this unassuming building, Mercian bicycles are shipped all over the world.

Inside the workshop, wheels are suspended from the ceiling like a conceptual art installation. Tools hang on the walls, there are boxes of steel tubing, the smell of oil and the sound of metal being filed. It is a small operation. There are only two frame builders, two paint sprayers and one mechanic, most of them in their fifties and sixties, having spent their lives building bikes.

Grant Mosley, who owns the company with his wife Jane, started making cups of tea as a “Saturday lad” in the 1970s. He eventually took over from the previous owner, who had worked as a frame builder. The company has had only three owners and is almost always passed down from frame builder to frame builder.

Despite the orders coming in thick and fast, it is a place where nothing is hurried. “We don’t have a time scale,” Mosley says when I ask how long a bike takes to build. “At the moment we’re telling customers nine to ten months.”

One frame builder will build a frame from start to finish, finishing it with his unique number next to the individual frame number. “We don’t put pressure on the frame builder because the frame has got to be right,” Mosley says.

New customers are measured for a Mercian rather as they would be measured by a tailor for a Savile Row →

ILLUSTRATION BY JESSICA KENDREW



suit. Each bike is built according to the customer's measurements, making it far more comfortable than an off-the-shelf bike. Mercian uses lightweight steel tubing for its frames.

"If you're racking up the miles on an aluminium bike, it gets to feel like a wooden horse," Mosley observes.

Customers can specify which type of Reynolds steel tubing they would like for their frame, and whether they want a frame with 'lugs' (the pieces that connect the frame sections). One of Mercian's most popular frame models is the Vincitore Special, known for its ornate lugs, which involve hours of cutting and filing by hand.

Mercian still uses the traditional method of an open hearth to join the frame tubes, called brazing, a skill that takes years to learn. As Mosley says, "It takes a bit of nounce to put this thing together."

Once the frame is ready, it is sprayed with one of Mercian's 63 colours of stove-enamel paint. Most of the paints are mixed by hand and Mercian can match its colours to any shade a customer has in mind (previous requests have



Mercian's five-strong team uses traditional skills honed over many decades in its Derby workshop



included school ties and favourite cars). As with the frame building, it is a laborious process and takes around four weeks per frame. The contours of the decorative lugs are all lined by hand, and the transfers are applied by hand and left to dry for up to five days.

A complete bike starts at around £3,000 but, if customers specify "whizz bang" components such as electronic gears or hydraulic disc brakes, it can be a lot more. There are customers who return again and again and own numerous Mercians, and there are those who save up for a very long time. "We had a lad who was a caretaker at a local school," Mosley says. "And he saved up for years and years."

One of the bikes being renovated in the workshop is a frame from the 1950s owned by 90-year-old Mercian fanatic Alan Gifford. He wanted to ensure that his treasured bike would go to someone who would appreciate it, so Mosley arranged for William Cavendish, the Earl of Burlington and a Mercian customer, to take the bike.

On Mercian's website, Gifford describes his memories of the company's first shop. "To us, as new enthusiasts, it was entering heaven – when we looked at the club bikes to be seen hanging in the workshop we knew we had to get one." Seventy years later, it's nice to know little has changed. ■

More information: merciancycles.co.uk