

Despite stiff competition from abroad, Chas Roberts hand builds 300 steel frames each year. In the first in a series on the UK bike industry, **Steve Jackson** went to meet him



Roberts cycles



(Clockwise from top) The brazing is perfect. Chas with some lightweight Reynolds 953 tubes. A Roberts tourer with Campag levers and Shimano transmission

As an ex-pat living in France, I often wonder if British cyclists realise how lucky you are to have such a great choice when it comes to buying a touring bike. On my side of the Channel, no large companies produce a real tourer these days and cyclists in the know are getting more and more envious of the British market. So when my FFCT (Fédération française de cyclotourisme) friends asked me to investigate, I started with a company I have always admired.

Old-school quality

Roberts Cycles is not a shop, it is a small factory in a town-centre industrial estate in Croydon. You ring the bell and walk into an exhibition of beautifully built bicycle eye candy.

Chas Roberts is passionate about design and craftsmanship. He started brazing as a 12 year-old, making pannier racks at the weekend. His father founded the company in 1963, and Chas joined him full-time when he was 17.

He is proud to be old-school: 'My generation judges frames on lug-filing and artistry. Aluminium is put together agriculturally and the welds are sometimes finished with body putty. TIG welding is necessary in Taiwan; it's the only way to produce such high volumes. We don't work like that. It takes 20 hours to make a Roberts frame and we build every one of them ourselves.'

Chas still offers road, track and mountain bike racing frames but these days 80% of his customers are cycle tourists. They are generally 35 to 50 years old, they appreciate the comfort of steel and they want to add a dream bike to their

collection. The firm has a full range of touring designs, from audax bikes to expedition bikes with disc brakes. Women-specific cycles have compact diamond frames for stiffness but ultra-low top tubes that can be stepped over more easily.

The bikes are beautifully made and painted but they are also stable and safe. Chas has carefully listed every usable combination, so if you order a small 700C frame you can be sure that your foot will not foul the front wheel when you turn.

The same effort is applied to component choice. 'We often use Campag levers with wide-range Shimano mountain bike gears, so we have to explain our choices carefully. If the customer goes to an ordinary bike shop, they will probably be told that the bike was set up wrong and feel cheated. But it's an excellent combination and it works perfectly.'

Custom tubesets

In the true British tradition, Chas chooses tubes to suit the rider and Reynolds encourages him by supplying



Photos: Steve Jackson

small series of special designs. Needless to say, nobody offers this level of customisation in France. So what would he suggest for me?

'I would need to know more about the kind of touring you do, but you are very tall so I'd recommend a compact frame because it will be more comfortable and stable. The stays would be Reynolds 725 with a conical 853 oversize top tube and a Columbus Nivachrom or 853 down tube. The seat tube would probably be Nivachrom. Of course we would use lighter tubes for a small cyclist.'

The choice will change as Reynolds 953 stainless steel tubes are starting to arrive in small quantities. Chas is clearly very excited about this new material which, while strong, is almost as light as titanium.

Driven by enthusiasm

It is a privilege to watch the frame-builders at work. The lugless joints are the best you can buy: they have perfectly formed fillets of brass which are lovingly filed with a pneumatic linisher and then polished by hand.

Good engineering practices are applied naturally. The insides of all frames are sprayed with anti-corrosion treatment and air-holes are filled with silver solder. For a lugless frame, the bottom-bracket shell is drilled and the seat-tube is fitted into it: this makes a stronger joint and water cannot collect there. Bikes are designed to work with their components, so if you specify Continental-style calliper brakes you can have a diagonal cable run under the top tube.

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These days five people work at Roberts: Andrew at reception, Brian the mechanic, the frame-builders Winston and Adrian, and Chas the designer (who is in the workshop as often as possible).

Chas says, 'Our builders have been here for 20 years. There is not much money to be made in this business, but everyone is driven by enthusiasm. I sometimes drop by at 8pm and find Brian polishing ball-bearings.'

During our visit, a handful of customers ring the bell. You can feel their excitement: they have come to buy a masterpiece.

Contact www.robertscycles.com, tel: 020 8684 3370.