



RALEIGH SUPERBE

TOWN BIKE

Raleigh Superbe

The classic roadster is enjoying something of a renaissance.

Chris Juden reviews a 1950s style Raleigh

▶ **IT'S RALEIGH'S** 125th anniversary this year and they're celebrating with a range of 'Classic' bikes. The most classic, perhaps, is this reincarnation of the Raleigh Superbe.

It appears to be modelled on a 1950s version. Other manufacturers paid the sincerest compliment to Raleigh's classic roadster design by emulating the general layout and even specific features of the 1950s Superbe. The Pashley Sovereign, for example, even has a tubular fork crown.

Frame & fork

Some unique Raleigh features, such as a steering lock neatly integrated with that tubular crown, would be too costly to reproduce (or contravene health and safety). So you get a rear wheel lock instead. But whereas Pashley's crown is simply blanked off, Raleigh retain the original chromed end-caps.

The blurb admits that 'the modern version has some changes' whilst

claiming that 'many of the original features and geometry are retained'. I'm not so sure about the geometry. The angles are shallow all right, but I don't think 1950s roadsters have such high bottom-brackets. That's a modern disease, a dumb defence against careless customers' complaints of bent cranks after knocking pedals on kerbs, which lumbers careful riders with higher saddles than they want on a city bike. It follows that you need to choose a somewhat smaller frame than someone your size might have wanted back in the day.

As a Raleigh development engineer, in the '80s, I played a part in making bikes like this, not for UK sale by that time but as kits of parts for assembly at local factories, e.g. in Nigeria. I'm not ashamed to say that we made them somewhat better than this.

Things got off to a bad start when I set the saddle height and the nut threads stripped before I'd got it

remotely tight enough! Not only is the nut 'made from cheese', but its threads are oversize. This made it hard for me to dismiss other defects as merely cosmetic. But with more than 20kg of steel in this bike, it ought to hang together for a while. And from a distance it looks very smart.



Massive (but malleable) steel carrier and stand. The chaincase is plastic, so not as rattly as you might imagine

Wheels

Although 28×1½ remains a common size in the developing world, it's now rare in Europe (the Netherlands apart). So I'm sorry to see it specified here, likewise on Pashley's Sovereign. It's easy for the manufacturer to spec the same wheels as his Asian frameshop already builds for, but hard for his European customer when the original tyres wear out.

The 1950s Superbe came on 26×1 3/8. This kind of bike should have 700C today. In fact, since the Superbe comes with hub brakes, you could fit new 700C rims too when the tyres wear out. By then the plating may well be rusting through (1951 Superbes had stainless rims) and it'll help to lower the bottom-bracket 7.5mm.

The hubs, however, are a step up on 1951, with alloy shells, more gears at the back and more Watts in front, plus hub brakes. The latter are a

major improvement on pressing bits of rubber on polished steel rims – especially when it rains.

Transmission

Raleigh spec the new wide-ratio 5-speed from their ex-subsiary, Sturmey-Archer. It's a useful increase in range, but they've done it all wrong. The problem with the normal 5-speed is bigger jumps between the middle three gears than to top and bottom. More range should come from increasing the outer jumps. They are a bit bigger, but the middle is spread even further out of proportion! It's basically a 7-speed without gears 3 and 5. It worked okay, once adjusted.

The gear range is set rather high. I never used the 104in top, not even downhill. And at 24kg this is not a bike for hilly places. I wanted a much lower bottom than 41in to climb those 10% slopes. For comparison, it weighs twice as much as my current commuter and added 10 minutes to the one-hour journey.

Steering & Seating

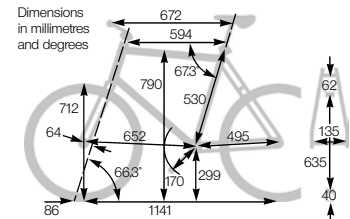
The steering felt heavy with a definite tendency to wheel flop. I think it has too much trail and that shallow head angle wants even more fork offset. It handles like a pre-war tandem I had. I got used to it.

The saddle comes from another ex-partner company: Brooks. Whatever it costs to spec, it's worth it – just to smell the leather and feel the springs!

Lighting & accessories

Sturmey-Archer invented the 'Dynohub', so it's good to spin a new one of theirs. It powers only the headlamp, a German (approved) copy of the Lucas original, whilst the rear is that rarest of beasts: a carrier-fitting battery lamp with BSI approval! Its reflector has an ECE mark, and with pedal reflectors too, this is one of very few bikes on British roads that can be ridden legally at night! The pedals, by the way, are a quality item, solid alloy, not your usual plastic.

The mudguards are still sturdy steel, but I'm glad the chaincase isn't. Plastic has a less tinny rattle. The wheel lock is a bit more deterrent than fixed steering (a chain is easily added) and the pump will do for emergencies. The bell, though – what a bell! Too good for just emergencies, I relished every opportunity to broadcast its deeply sonorous tone.



RALEIGH SUPERBE

Price: £560

Weight: 24.24kg

Sizes: 21in (tested), 24in

Frame & fork: high-carbon steel

Wheels: 40-635 (28×1½in) Meghna tyres on chrome-plated steel rims, 36×3 2.0 stainless spokes, Sturmey-Archer nuted hubs XL-FDD front, X-RD5(W) rear.

Transmission: 41, 49, 65, 87, 104in.

Rubber-treaded solid alloy pedals, steel cotterless 44T crankset on Thun BB, 19T sprocket on 5-speed internal gear.

Braking: Sturmey-Archer drum brakes.

Steering & seating: Steel bar, 7cm alloy stem, 1in threaded headset. Brooks B33 sprung leather saddle on steel post.

Lighting: Sturmey-Archer hub powers FER chromed steel halogen headlamp, Basta Ray battery rearlamp.

Accessories: Steel mudguards with coat guards at rear, Axa Solid wheel lock, SKS pump, plastic chaincase, ding-dong bell.

Contact: raleigh.co.uk, 01773 532 600 – or your local Raleigh dealer.



The saddle is Brooks' springiest. Getting it to stay at the right height required a new nut for the seat bolt, however

A rear carrier is more than an 'accessory' on a city bike, yet the 1951 Superbe didn't have one – just a saddlebag. It had a stand, but an easier to use side-stand, not this heavy rear load support. I think that a heavy carrier, with this kind of stand, is not something a well-to-do commuter would ever have wanted. It confirms my general feeling that this bike – and others like it – embody more Asian traditions than British.

Does it matter? Not if the bike does the job and not if the quality's good enough. This bike came out of its box with carrier and stand badly bent to one side, but their steel tubing, whilst heavy, is apparently very soft, as it took dismayingly little force to pull them back into line!

Conclusion

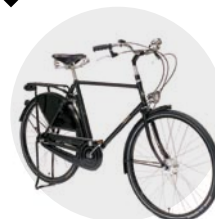
£23 16s 4d in 1951 equates to £643 now, so perhaps we should expect some lower quality parts for £560, especially considering the new materials and higher modern standards in other components.

Comparison with the Pashley Sovereign is inevitable. They share many components. Is Raleigh copying Pashley copying Raleigh? The Sovereign has some better-quality parts but costs £645. A bit more super

then. The Superbe nevertheless looks slightly better value.

Would I buy one? No. I don't live in a flat place and this bike is for sauntering, rather than the cycling equivalent of a brisk walk. But for cruising places like Cambridge, it's just the ticket. Should you venture into the hills – or burden that carrier with the load it seems intended for – do fit a 22 sprocket.

Also consider



1) Pashley Roadster Sovereign £645
Same Sturmey-Archer hubs as the Raleigh, and also has 28 inch (635) wheels. Women's version is Princess Sovereign. pashley.co.uk



2) Dawes Graduate £549.99
Similar roadster equipment, including SA drum brakes and 5-speed hub, but uses 559 rims instead of 635. Women's version available. dawescycles.com