



# British built

A round-up of frame builders based right here on home soil...

**C**an't find the exact bike you're looking for? Why not get one of Britain's many talented frame builders to create the perfect machine for you? Many will create your dream bike without you even visiting – just your inside leg measurement or the vital statistics of your current machine will do. Steel is the most popular metal, but Enigma and Cyclefit make titanium frames, and some will make frames with carbon rear ends. It might take more effort than buying off the shelf, but you'll end up with a lovingly handcrafted bike to cherish for a lifetime.

## Builders directory

**1** Argos Racing Cycles, Bristol  
☎ 0117 972 4730

Established 1974

**Types** All types of bike including steel hardtail.

**Materials** Mainly steel. It will tackle all aspects of engineering and specialises in a bottom bracket thread renovation service for aluminium and steel frames.

**Measuring system** Adjustable bicycle combined with webcam so you can view your riding position on a screen.

**In the frame** One of the most highly respected UK frame builders and it also handles classic bike renovations.

**Web** [www.argoscycles.com](http://www.argoscycles.com)

**2** Alves Frames, Moray, Scotland  
☎ 01343 860382

Established 1985

**Types** Alves produces all types of bicycles including building specialist bikes for disabled riders.

**Materials** Steel only, and built and enamelled in-house.

**Measuring system** Needs to see the rider with their existing bike.

**In the frame** Only frame builder in Scotland. Also built Roddy Riddle's Scottish time trial record-breaking bike.

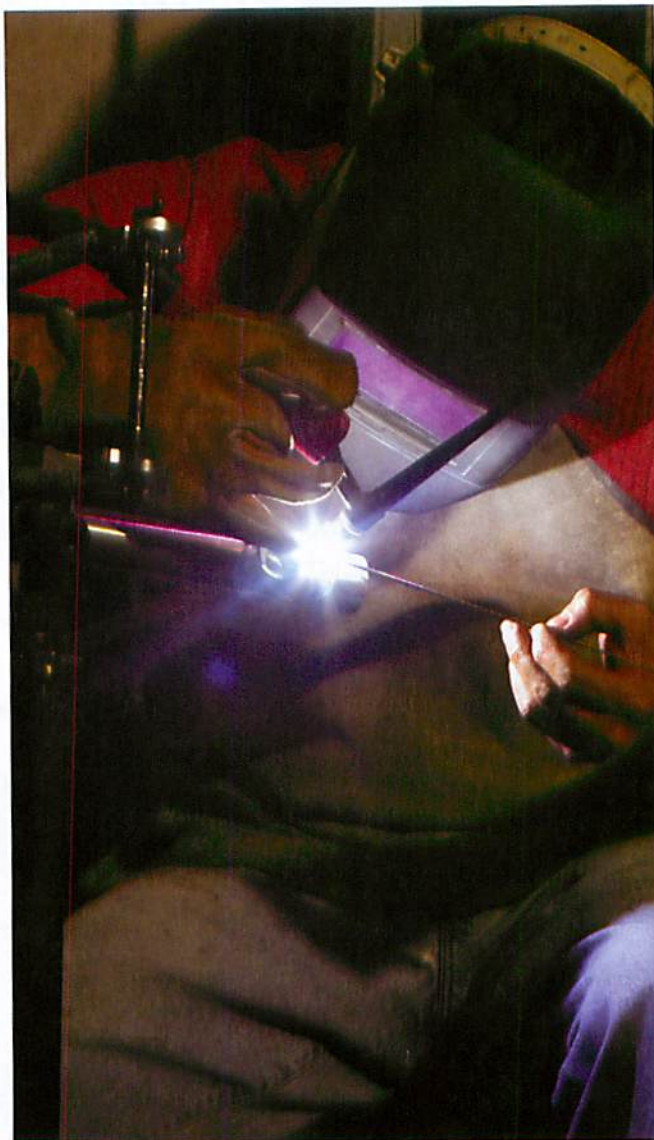
**Email** [charlie.ralph@btinternet.com](mailto:charlie.ralph@btinternet.com)

**3** Vernon Barker, Dronfield, Derbyshire  
☎ 01246 411759

Established 1979

**Types** All types, from bespoke steel to imported 631 steel and alu frames.

**Materials** Steel, including frames with carbon rear ends. Alu and Ti repairs.



**Measuring system** Based on an adjustable bicycle.

**In the frame** Specialist in aluminium and titanium repairs. The company custom builds tandems and provides a stove enamel service.

**Web** [www.vernonbarkercycles.co.uk](http://www.vernonbarkercycles.co.uk)

**4** Roberts Cycles, Croydon, Surrey  
☎ 020 8684 3379

Established 1960

**Types** All types other than full suspension mountain bikes.

**Materials** All steel tubing, including those with carbon wishbone seatstays.

**Measuring system** Company uses its own nine-point body system.

**In the frame** Two professional world championships have been won on Roberts bikes. It was commissioned to build the now highly sought-after Aston Martin mountain bikes.

**Web** [www.robertscycles.com](http://www.robertscycles.com)

**5** Bob Jackson, Leeds ☎ 0113 255 1144  
Established 1935

**Types** Everything, including front suspension mountain bikes.

**Materials** Bespoke steel, as well as in-house refinishing.

**Measuring system** Its own system based on body measurements.

**In the frame** Doing very well with singlespeed fixers at present and exports to America.

**Web** [www.bobjacksoncycles.co.uk](http://www.bobjacksoncycles.co.uk)

**6** Steve Goff, Skelmersdale, Lancashire  
☎ 01695 720030

Established 1988

**Types** Road, mountain bike, tandem.

**Materials** Lugged, fillet brazed, Reynolds tubing.

**Measuring system** Adjustable static cycle system.

**In the frame** Twentieth year of frame manufacturing, and sportive bikes are the bulk of the business.

**Web** [www.steve-goff-frames.co.uk](http://www.steve-goff-frames.co.uk)

**7** Dave Yates, Lincoln  
☎ 01526 343322

Established 1980

**Types** All cycles except full suspension mountain bikes.

**Materials** Any steel tube.

**Measuring system** Its own system.

**In the frame** Its frame building courses are popular. Bulk of the business is audax and touring bikes. Dave is a former metalwork teacher and taught himself to build frames.

**Web** [www.daveyatescycles.co.uk](http://www.daveyatescycles.co.uk)

**8** Brian Rourke Cycles, Stoke-on-Trent  
☎ 01782 835368

Established 1970

**Types** All types of cycle including the odd cycle speedway frame.

**Materials** Steel, Dedacciai and Reynolds, including new 953 tubing.

**Measuring system** Two to three hour general consultation with customer.

**In the frame** The company has built frames for 200 national champions including Nicole Cooke when she won

four world titles. Rourke wrapover seatstay is a unique feature.

Web [www.brianrourke.co.uk](http://www.brianrourke.co.uk)

**9** Mercian, Derby ☎ 01332 346786  
Established 1946

**Types** All types except trikes. Fixies are doing really well.

**Materials** Reynolds.

**Measuring system** Jig measurement system. Inside leg, if the consumer cannot get to the shop. Bike CAD for toe overlap drawings.

**In the frame** Builds bikes for fashion designer and cyclist Paul Smith.

Web [www.merciancycles.com](http://www.merciancycles.com)

**10** Enigma, Herstmonceux, East Sussex ☎ 0870 874 6975  
Established 2007

**Types** Race, time trial, audax, sportive

**Materials** Titanium

**Measuring system** Enigma uses the [www.bikefitting.com](http://www.bikefitting.com) database.

**In the frame** The new bespoke LAB range complements Enigma's off-the-peg range of bikes.

Web [www.enigmabikes.com](http://www.enigmabikes.com)

**11** George Longstaff, Chesterton, Newcastle Under Lyme ☎ 01782 561966  
Established 1982

**Types** All types including mountain bikes and time trial.

**Materials** All brands of steel tubing.

**Measuring system** Purpose-made jig made by George Longstaff.

**In the frame** The legacy of the late George Longstaff lives on in a range of some of the finest touring bikes you can buy. The company has also built a huge frame for a 7ft-tall cyclist and has a reputation for building excellent trikes.

Web [www.longstaffcycles.co.uk](http://www.longstaffcycles.co.uk)

**12** Trevor Jarvis Cycles, Worcester ☎ 01584 811451  
Established 1979

**Types** Touring bikes, Flying Gate replicas – around 10 a year produced.

**Materials** Columbus, and Reynolds 725 is a favourite.

**Measuring system** Likes to see existing bike to form the drawing.

**In the frame** Cuts its own lugs. Only frame builder reproducing the classic Baines Flying Gate frame design.

Web [www.tjcycles.co.uk](http://www.tjcycles.co.uk)

**13** Cycles Maximus, Bath, Somerset ☎ 01225 319414  
Established 1999

**Types** The bulk of the business is load-lugging cargo bicycles and Pedicabs that are distributed all over the world. It's also not averse to building the odd bicycle or two...

**Materials** All materials.

**Measuring system** None.

**In the frame** Constantly developing new ideas for alternative modes of self-powered transport. Recently supplied cargo bikes to organic fruit and veg

merchants Riverford Organic.

Web [www.cyclesmaximus.com](http://www.cyclesmaximus.com)

**14** Cyclefit, Covent Garden, London ☎ 020 7430 0083  
Established 2003

**Types** Glider steel, Serotta titanium.

**Materials** Steel, titanium.

**Measuring system** Cyclefit's system takes around two hours of consultation and includes a pedalling asymmetry test using laser as a trace.

**In the frame** Cyclefit was previously known as Bikepark.

Web [www.cyclefit.co.uk](http://www.cyclefit.co.uk) **PLUS**

## OTHER BUILDERS

LEE COOPER CYCLES ☎ 02476 304723

[www.leecoopercycles.com](http://www.leecoopercycles.com)

NEIL ORRELL CYCLES ☎ 0161 681 1517

JUSTIN BURLS [www.burls.co.uk](http://www.burls.co.uk)

EDISON CYCLES ☎ 01246 812878

KEN JAMES ☎ 01233 634334

ROBIN MATHER CYCLES

[www.robinmathercycles.co.uk](http://www.robinmathercycles.co.uk)

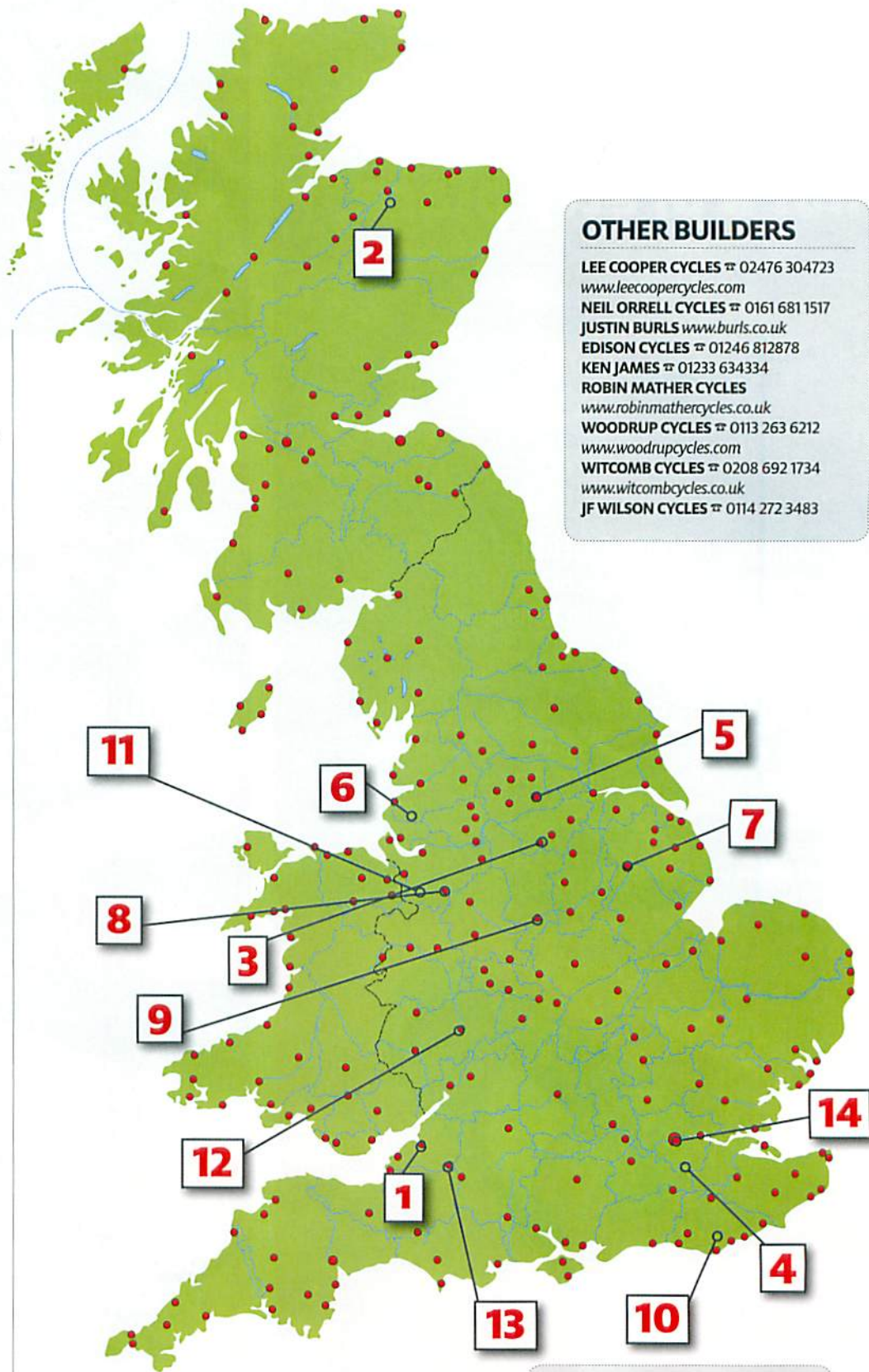
WOODRUP CYCLES ☎ 0113 263 6212

[www.woodrupcycles.com](http://www.woodrupcycles.com)

WITCOMB CYCLES ☎ 0208 692 1734

[www.witcombcycles.co.uk](http://www.witcombcycles.co.uk)

JF WILSON CYCLES ☎ 0114 272 3483



## YOU'VE BEEN FRAMED

**STEEL FRAMES ARE** constructed using one of three different techniques:

■ **TIG** (tungsten inert gas) welding, where an electric arc welds the two adjoining tubes together while also adding metal by feeding a filler rod down into the joint.

■ **Fillet brazing**, the hallmark of the frame-builder's art, involves melting a base metal (either silver or brass rod) to form a bridge between the tubes.

■ **The lugged frame** involves melting the same silver or brass rod into the gap between the lugs and the tubing.

**O**ne sector of the UK bicycle industry has, somehow, survived a fluctuating market, various trends, vogues, fads and caprice, and is still going strong, entirely dependent on native expertise, flair and sheer bloody-mindedness: the hand-builders. They put their names to the frames they build, names revered by their cognoscenti as purists and enthusiasts – men who made an indelible mark on cycling and cycle lore. I visited two of them: Chas Roberts, son of Charlie, who started the business, and Dave Yates.

### Chas Roberts

I cycled across to Chas's workshop at 89 Gloucester Road, Croydon, just past The Drum and Monkey. Andrew, the technical assistant who fronts the shop, ushered my old workhorse Claud Butler past the lustrous machines on display into the workshop. It was like tugging a flea-bitten mongrel onto the podium at Crufts. "How long have you had that Brooks saddle?" he quizzed. I'm surprised he recognised it as such, so misshapen has it become. Then he told me about a guy who had bought a Roberts bike and plonked onto it the favourite comfortable battered old

## A lot of audax riders want a Roberts for the long-distance lunacy, which is the driving force of their strange masochistic addiction

Brooks which was near part of him. That encapsulates the Roberts design philosophy: fit the customer exactly. Chas asks every customer what he or she wants from the bike and then takes the essential measurements for a bespoke fit: inside leg, height, weight, length of arms and forearms, shoulder width, shoe size (for mudguard clearance). Weight is important because a beanpole and a bruiser might well have the same skeleton. A lot of women buy Roberts bikes because the standard, mass-manufactured machines do not accommodate their generally shorter height: small frames with small everything else simply don't work. As for preternaturally tall men, two recent customers checked in at around 6ft 9in but they didn't want the cumbersome huge frame that would ordinarily be prescribed; they needed a more thoughtful mix of standard-size frame plus taller head tube and so on.

Chas arrived at the appointed time and we went up the narrow stairs to his

office in what used to be a cottage. He moved to these premises some years back when Croydon Council decided to make the estate where they worked wholly residential. They didn't want pedestrians who passed the Roberts establishment emerging with a blue rinse from the paint sprayers.

Chas currently has four guys working for him: Andrew and the three in the workshop, each of whom learnt their skill in a larger manufacturing workshop and, over the past 17 years, has refined it in the more exacting work of hand-built frames. Some years ago, their brilliant in-house painter, who'd worked for Claud Butler and J Holland, retired, and Chas realised that it was going to be impossible to finance a replacement for him. The trade is now so highly specialised, health and safety

regulations are punitive and insurance companies so jittery that small firms simply cannot handle the excessive added financial risks and demands. Now their painting is done by a freelance in Crayford, to whom they sold the plant. (Even Colnago doesn't have its own paint shop.)

The trimmed-down Roberts workshop produces anywhere between 250 and 350 frames per year – some sold as frames, others built into bikes to suit a wide range of needs: a lot of audax riders want a Roberts for the long-distance lunacy, which is the driving force of their strange masochistic addiction. People taking time out from work – six months, a year – to ride around the world or to make the big continental expedition, ask Roberts for the exact machine *snug for the job*. And, >>





**BEST OF BRITISH**

all things considered, up to £2000 or £3000 for such a specialised bike is not high. Others come in for their own tailor-made version of the racing machines I drooled over in the shop, examples of the bikes ridden by Olympic track-riders and world champions such as Tony Doyle, even the prototype Roberts mountain bike. "We made that," Chas explained, "when the mountain bike fraternity were just getting going [c. 1982] and we didn't know what to call it. There was a graduate working for us who read that magazine, *Viz*. Every other sentence seemed to have 'the dog's bollocks' in it. So, that's what we called the MTB." And there it is, painted on the down-tube of the opaline blue frame: D.O.G.S. B.L.X. Cool.

Professional MTB riders have homed in on the Roberts off-road machine, too.

Chas is agreeably unselfconscious when he talks about the superb quality of design and finish in his frames. But the casual way he speaks of abstractions cannot mask the passion, the thinking, the constant substratum of inventive energy behind the sketch he pulls out of a drawer – a scrap of paper cut to shape, a new conception of disc brakes. He'll go two or three weeks when he's sick to the back teeth of bikes but then, almost unbidden, comes the fidget of an idea, the need to review. This is what he calls 'playing around the edges', where the advances in design come, the special touch. Maybe nothing that'll shake the bike fraternity to its roots, but it's part of the responsibility he feels, the pride in

producing something that's down to him, with his name attached.

Sure, he gets upset when he's knocked by snide individuals wittering on: "Oh, Roberts – they charge so much extra for this, so much extra for that. Overpriced and overblown."

I suggest there's no accounting for ignorance. It's a sour British thing, attuned to the snivelling cloth-cap image of the bike, taking pops at what seems pretentious but is, in fact, top drawer. Ah, how we cleave to failure.

"Yes," he agrees. "If you're close to the top of the tree people like to shake it to see who comes down."

Chas designs every single Roberts himself, even if he can't get into the workshop as often as he likes because of ringing phones and having to keep even an understanding bank manager happy. Accordingly, each hand-built Roberts presents what he calls 'a human face'. Mass-produced models speak 'machine-made' at you. Even the top-range, pro-style classy items ridden by pros are, as he put it, "Very aerospace but they have little character. We were always drawn by a bike, a frame and that's the feeling that lasts."

Chas gave me an hour and a half of his time, content to indulge the real pleasure he takes in the bike and the idea of the bike. I didn't mention my saddle: I'm sure I was already outstaying my welcome. We said goodbye and a few moments later, Chas came back with a frame that's ready for painting, just to show me the fillet brazing he'd

talked about. A brass and silver solder sealing perfectly mitred tube ends, filed to a satin smoothness: we're talking goldsmith standards here.

This day had given me something very special; I'm not speaking of insights, not an acquaintance with the technology of lugs (I'm very attached to lugs), nor even an insane envy of those Roberts frames, though I did bring away all three. No, it was the delight, the sheer delight, of seeing excellence at close quarters, at 89 Gloucester Road, on the left, past The Drum and Monkey.

## Dave Yates

During a research trip to Newcastle, I cycled down to the trading estate where Dave Yates makes (and repairs) frames for the shop run by his compadre, Joe Waugh, in Gosforth. He had a stinking cold which he was trying to weld into submission, crouched over the TIG (Tungsten Inert Gas) welding apparatus in a glow of electric blue. He'd told me on the phone he was badly pressed for time, but I went anyway.

Dave Yates told me I had 30 seconds. We talked for about 10 minutes until the delivery man arrived to carry him off, possibly to a rehab centre for irrecoverable TIG addicts, and there really could be no prolonging the conversation with the guy who can't resist talking about bikes and frame building. Enthusiasm? No, obsession. To do such a job for the derisory monetary reward, it has to be an obsession. A made-up steel frame can be imported >>

from the Czech Republic and sold at £20; Yates can't even buy the tubes alone for under £40. No contest, except... except, there are little pockets of Yates frame/bike owners all round the country. A guy walks into the workshop, Yates looks at him, scans his existing bike (very rarely does he indulge in Roberts-style measurements) and delivers a bespoke frame with the Reynolds 831 steel tubing he sticks by. The guy's friends see the finished article, ask him for the phone number and Yates has another customer. The big market is, and will always be, beyond the reach of him and his ilk. But they have a similar attitude to that of the huge Taiwan operations – utterly

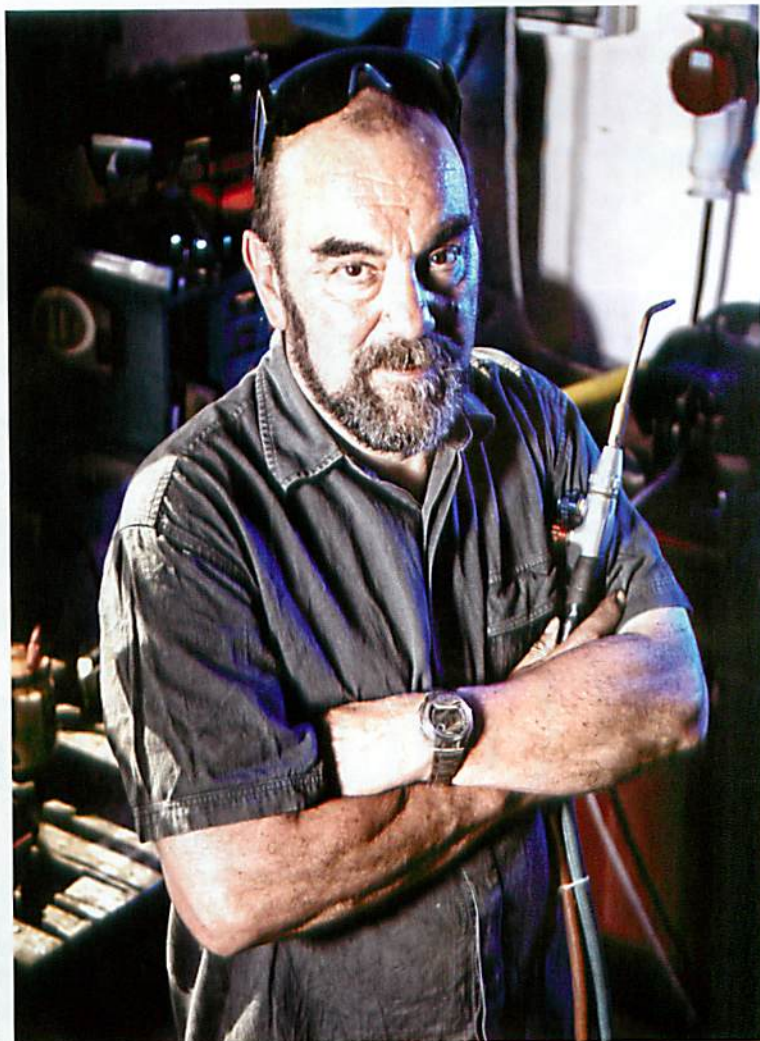
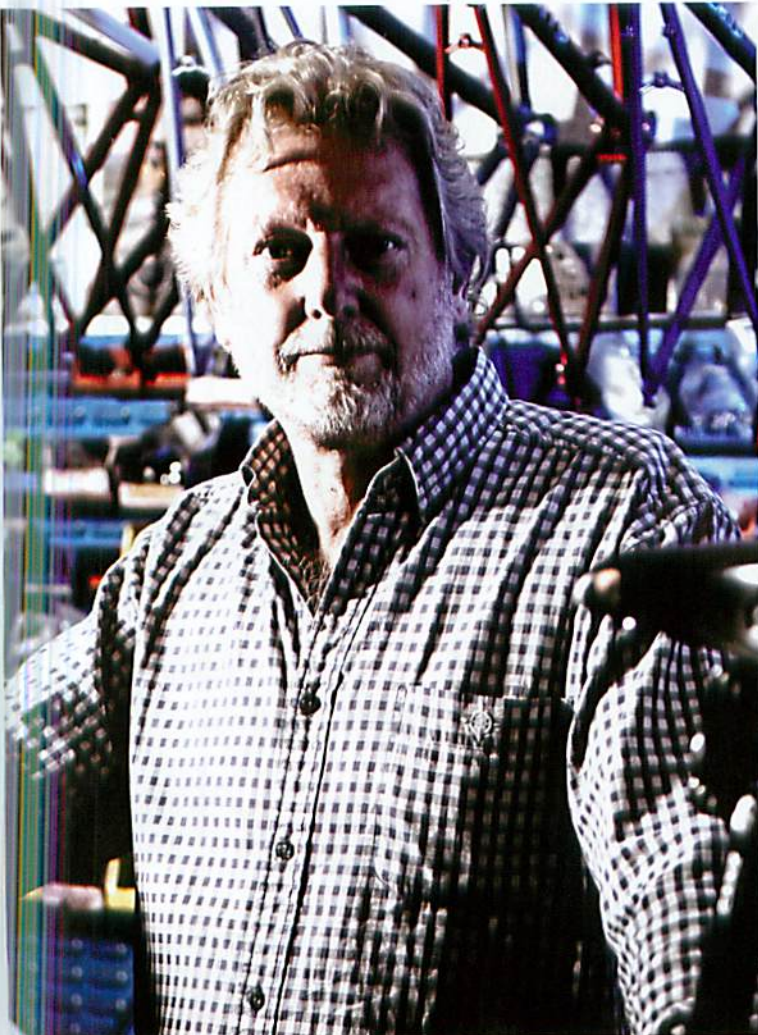
## The guy who can't resist talking about bikes and frame building. Enthusiasm? No, obsession

"Nah, don't need them. There's nothing new under the sun in frame building – we all know the angles. They've got the software and all the geometry, it's just a case of re-jigging."

After the almost sacerdotal approach in the Roberts works in Croydon, this way of thinking was surprising and it

duck's-back sort of man. So, the idea was for him to go like the clappers to keep up with the racing bikes for a few miles and then swap to his own sleeker road machine, which Joe Waugh would bring down. But Waugh wasn't there. Yates, unabashed, had to slog on aboard the heavy, thick-tyred prototype.

Later, I phoned him from home to ask him about the technology of TIG welding and, still labouring with the beastly rheum, he gave me the lowdown: argon, fusion, oxidation, the virtues of welding over brazing, the usefulness of brazing over welding, weight proportions – all steel weighs the same on a volume-for-volume basis, so the weight of a frame is reduced by



positive, always can do, the very antithesis of the stubborn inflexibility which left dog-in-the-manger native bike manufacturers stranded, high and dry. Yates says, admiringly, you can ask a Taiwanese factory for something they aren't yet producing, they'll go away and in a very short time promise swift delivery.

"Do they have big design departments?" I asked.

may simply be a bluff disclaimer of any special skill or mastery.

Dave Yates made a mountain bike sometime around 1983 and lined up with the rest of the field in Carlisle for the annual Hadrian's Wall ride, which ends not far from the works in Wallsend. The rest of the field were bemused. Had the boy Yates been snorting oxy-acetylene? Call that a bike? But, like Roberts, Yates is a water-off-a-

using less metal, but the thinner the metal the weaker it becomes and the more accurate the skill needed to work it. Thus, in a dwindling number of small workshops in outposts of the country, it remains a fact, a happy fact, which outfaces sentimentality, that high-quality steel and high-quality craftsmanship go together into the making of each and every particular handcrafted frame bearing its maker's name. **PLUS**