test report: Dave Yates

A British mountain bike frame kitted out with (mainly) British components provides Robert Garbutt with a chance to wax lyrical about just what makes Britain great. Even our mud.

ONE of the greatest advantages of a British mountain bike frame is that it is built to accommodate our wonderful sticky mud. With this in mind, the Dave Yates frame starts out with 50 bonus points before it has even been ridden. Add to this the perfect handling, some of the most stylish finishing you'll ever see and the result is, frankly, the best MTB this writer has ever ridden.

Tyneside's Dave Yates is well known as one of Britain's premier mountain bike frame builders with a reputation built up after 11 years' experience of the off-road market. His road expertise goes back to 1977, which is a long-winded way of saying that he knows how to put a frame together.

It's all about balance according to Dave — and I reckon he's right. At 23 inches the top tube is half an inch longer than normal for an 18-inch frame. This means that I can use a shorter stem, keeping my weight in the middle. The front wheel doesn't try to bump your chin with sudden uphill efforts and descending, even at my modest speeds, is more dependable. Angles are the usual 71-degree head and 73-degree seat — so there are no surprises here.

Part of the credit for the handling must go to the Project Two forks. Yates says that he can't build a better pair for the money — so he doesn't bother. These benchmark MTB forks are made by Kona from triple butted Ishiwata tubing and were first launched six years ago. John Saville from the importers, Second Level Sport, explains that his forks are more tapered than butted, being thickest at the fork column. Saville has no technical explanation why the forks steer so well — only that they do — and I agree. Since their introduction in 1988 the forks have become lighter and stronger. Saville reckons the original forks were too rigid and had no give to absorb shocks. Oh and that name — Project Two forks were the second project of ex-US national champion and original Kona design supremo Joe Murray. His first was the frame.

Back to the Yates frame and that generous mud clearance. With a 42¼-inch wheelbase and 16 ¾-inch chainstays the frame is not overly long, the secret here is the ample space around the rear tyre. Even with a 2.1-section tyre no amount of mud could stop it slipping through the ovalised Max OR chainstays.

Max OR is the top Columbus off-road tubing combining the three big pluses — rigidity, lightness and strength. It is also the most distinctive with oversized elliptical sections set vertically or horizontally at opposite ends of the tube. The result is an ultra-light steel frame with the rigidity of an oversized aluminium frame. I found that the ride was similar to a Cannondale frame — only it was slightly more comfortable.

Good point number three is the perfectly finished fillet brazed joints. Yates' 'secret' here is very accurate mitring. All joints are finished by hand so it is no surprise that it takes a full two days to build a frame.

Then there is the paint — a choice of 50 super-tough, chip-proof stove enamelled colours.

Frame only price for standard sizes of 16, 18 or 20 inches is £519.95, with a custom sizing option for a further £65, but prices start at £335 for Columbus Cromor OR.

I tried to fit as much mainstream British equipment as possible, opting for a Royce bottom bracket, X-Lite handlebars, bar ends, brake levers, seat pillar and quick-release mechanisms, plus Middlebum chainset and Hope hubs.

Much has already been written

about the Royce brackets with ultra-smooth sealed bearings and ultra-light yet strong titanium axles. Like all Royce brackets once fitted it can be forgotten about for this and several seasons to come with the genuinely maintenance-free bearings.

Titanium is also X-Lite's choice for their XLR handlebars. These are drawn and swaged to give the best combination of strength, flexibility and durability with the handlebars designed to absorb shock. I opted for the three-degree bend and natural polished finishe. Unlike other handlebars the 21-inch width is exactly right and does not need cutting down which is just as well as the bars are fitted with machined and engraved coloured end caps for added strength when clamping the X-Lite Alto 1 bar ends.

These are a perfect fit for my hands and offer two riding positions. They have X-Lite's unique domed spun ends and are knurled for a secure grip.

Other X-Lite favourites are the Chicken Stix three finger brake levers. These give good comfortable leverage and, like the bar ends and seat pillar, titanium bolts are used wherever possible. Don't overtighten these bolts — I did and despite lashings of anti-seze it was impossible to remove the brake lever and I had to cut the bolt.

Earlier problems with the seat clamp slipping have now been solved and the new Wedge Head design clamps the saddle securely. Care must be taken not to let the Loctite sealant ooze out and drip or you could be left with a big spot of bare metal if you follow my example and leave it on the paint overnight.

I am impressed with the Camlok wheel quick-releases — not just the lightweight, 84 grams for the stainless steel and alloy combination — but the fact that one twist of the lever opens the mechanism wide enough for fast, easy wheel removal. There is no need to also undo the adjuster as is so often the case with other makes.

The Middleburn chainset is my favourite off-road design. Extensive fluting on the inside of the cranks keeps the weight down to just 400 grams. A big advantage is that the spider bolts separately to the cranks and can be changed to accommodate MicroDrive, road or standard MTB chainrings.

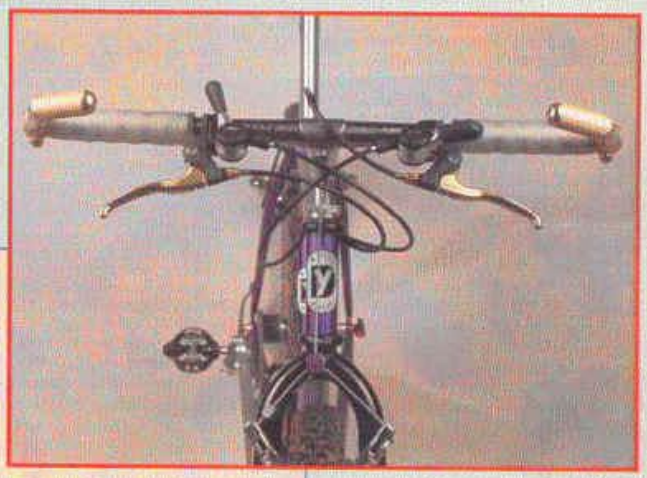
My chainset was fitted with alloy bolts and there was a problem with these creaking under load. Despite applying plenty of grease these bolts eventually seized as I cranked up the allen key pressure to stop the noise.

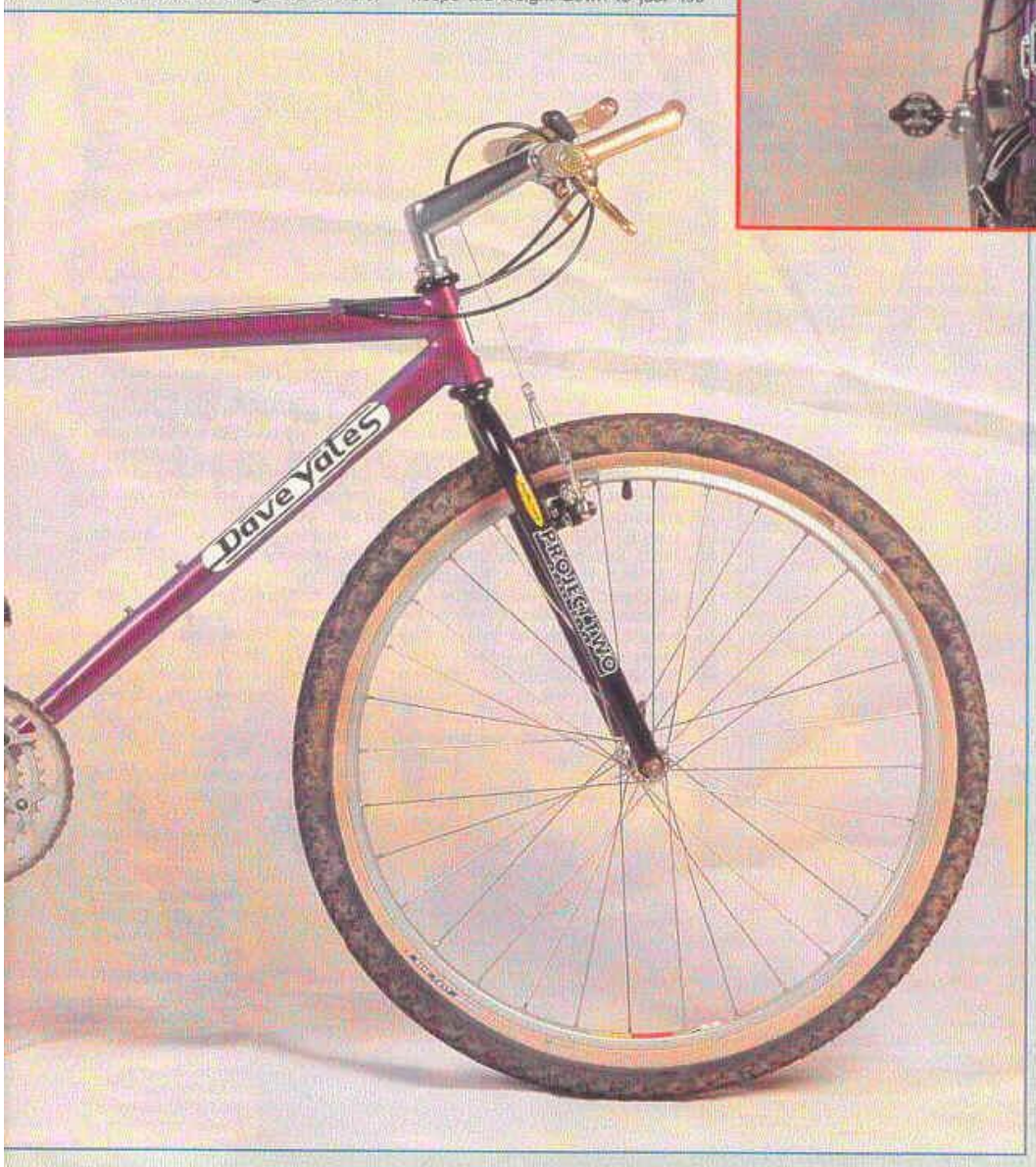
I drilled out the ruined bolts and replaced all five with first steel and then titanium bolts. Both were then completely silent.

Brilliant is the only word for the Hope cassette rear hub. I have never used anything better. The same hub can be converted between seven and eight speed with a simple alloy spacer.

I was pleased that the design of the front hub has been altered after problems with excessive play in the bearings of the previous front suspension hub. This new version also incorporates alloy covers to keep the worst dirt out of the bearings.

Constant upgrading continues and my latest acquisition is a pair of Gripshift SRT800 gear shifters. More about these later — if I can bring myself to get £2,000 worth of mountain bike covered in mud again.





TECH SPEC

MANUFACTURER: Dave Yates MTB's.
DISTRIBUTOR: M. Steel Ltd on 091 234 4275.
PRICE: £1,945 (Frame only: £519.95)
WEIGHT: 22lbs 8oz
FRAME: Columbus Max OR tubing, Ritchey ends.
FORK: Kona Project Two, Shimano Deore DX 1" headset.
SIZE RANGE: 16, 18, 20"
SIZE TESTED: 18"
WHEELBASE: 42 1/4"
TOP TUBE LENGTH: 23"
FORK RAKE: 1.65"
CHAINSTAY LENGTH: 16 3/4"
BB HEIGHT: 11 3/4"
HEAD ANGLE: 71 degrees
SEAT ANGLE: 73 degrees
STANDOVER HEIGHT: 29 1/4"
CHAINSET: Middleburn, 172.5mm cranks
BOTTOM BRACKET: Royce titanium
PEDALS: Onza HO titanium
GEAR MECHANISMS: Shimano XT including thumbshifters.
BRAKES: Dia Compe 987 stirrups with X-Lite Chicken Stik levers, Venhill Control System cables, Onza Chillpill hangers.
HANDLEBARS: X-Lite XLR titanium, 3-degree bend, 21 ins wide.
BAR ENDS: X-Lite Alto One Pro
STEM: Specialized, 13 1/2cm.
SEAT PILLAR: X-Lite Wedge Head.
SADDLE: San Marco Rolls titanium.
HUBS: Hope Ultralight front, cassette rear.
RIMS: Ritchey Rock 395E front, Ritchey Rock 415E rear, 32-hole.
GEAR RATIOS: 48/36/26 with 12/14/16/18/21/24/28
TYRES: Ritchey Alfa Bite 2.1 front, Ritchey Omega Bite 2.1 rear.