

Taking the oldies out isn't all snakes and weak bladders...

# TRAIL TESTED

## RETRO BIKES



So spindly it's scary but still going strong after 16 years!



# Does Retro Rock?

We pit four classic bikes against the Anthem X1 to see if newer really is better

Words: **Guy Kesteven** Photos: **Russell Burton**

**TUSHINGHAM 'LILY' 1985**  
£700 approx  
The oldest bike here, Orange co-founder Lester Noble's first mountain bike was originally pretty in pink...



**PACE RC100**  
£1000 approx  
Ahead of its game by some margin, the Pace's externally machined frame and carbon fibre-legged forks were truly innovative



**RALEIGH M TRAX TEAM**  
£1500-£2000  
A Lycra-loving racer's dream, the peacock paintjob Raleigh M Trax is astonishingly light, even by today's high standards



**AMP RESEARCH B4**  
£3000 approx  
The lightest full-suss bike available in its time, even if the rear shock offered the damping ability of a bag of spanners



**GIANT ANTHEM X1**  
£2200  
Our Bike of the Year 2009 has it all, so it's the ideal standard to judge our retro bike pensioners against



They don't make paint jobs or rear wheels like that anymore!



It's all four fingers and thumbs on Lester's vintage World Cup ride



Bully's Star Prize was serious steel stiffness



X marks the spot where one of the UK's most popular MTB brands came to life

Act your frame size not your age - it's a trail time warp!



"Pumping Lily's tyres up for the first time in 22 years is a nerve-racking experience"

# TUSHINGHAM 'LILY' 1985

## NEED TO KNOW

**PRICE AT TIME OF SALE** £700 approx  
**WEIGHT** 12.2kg (27.0lb)  
**TRAVEL** Absolutely zero  
**WHY IT WAS/IS AN IMPORTANT BIKE:** Lily (she was originally pink) was Lester Noble's first MTB, which he raced under the Tushingham brand. He then badged the next batch of bikes as Orange - you know the rest.

▲ **HIGHS** The steel frame is still surprisingly smooth and it's not too bad in a straight line, either.  
▼ **LOWS** 150mm stem and almost solid bars make for bruised hands and slow speed steering stumble.

## WHY I LOVE IT

 "I can remember desperately wanting a mountain bike just like this when I was still at school, so it's great to finally ride my first dream bike!"  
- Guy Kesteven



From surf boards to trail boards, Tushingham has always had competitive jeans...



but try to turn sharply or get out of the saddle for a short climb and it jackknives viciously. We have to use every millimetre of width to get through the North Shore sections and the hefty weight makes keeping momentum crucial. Three laps of the demo course though and we're actually getting the hang of the huge turning circle and starting to carry some genuine speed through the more open singletrack sections.

## Memory Lane

Looking down at the drilled-through cable mount on the stem and the constantly loosening threaded headset brings memories of snapped stems and repeated bearing adjustment flooding back. On the plus side, the U-brakes and huge four-finger levers actually work pretty well to minimise danger even if the rubber on the tyres has vulcanised so hard that it's totally grippless. It'd be a really bad start for the feature to cripple such an antique in a crash - and the same could be said of the rider. While the orange and white paintjob is very similar, we're

Are today's mountain bikes really so much better than in previous years? We decided to find out. Our first step was to hook up with the Retrobike posse - a group of enthusiasts who spend their free time rebuilding and riding classic bikes - to find out whether the old skool can really teach our current Bike of the Year some new tricks. We took a selection of legendary historic rides and the Giant Anthem X1 to find out what's really changed about riding in the past 25 years. How many of those

early crashes were really the bike's fault? Do you need suspension and disc brakes in order to have fun, or have we just turned soft in the last quarter century? These were just two of the questions we were hoping to answer... It's been 23 years since I first rattled through Dalby Forest on my old Dawes road bike - all I had, as my mum wouldn't buy herself a mountain bike that I could borrow - and 20 years since I returned to the forest on my bike loan/college job-financed no-name alloy flyer to get my first taste of its huge natural singletrack network.

It's appropriate, then, that we're here again to stage the retro bike showdown. Dalby Forest occupies a special place in UK mountain bike history, as well as mine. It hosted some of the first ever UK mountain bike races back in the late '80s, the first dig day of IMBA UK (and spawned the Yorkshire Singletraction trail-building group in the process) and is now home to a network of purpose-built trails and the extremely popular 'freeride skills area' at Dixon's Hollow. Next year, it'll even be hosting a round of the XC World Cup series. Ironically our oldest bike earned

its World Cup wings 22 years ago, under Orange Mountain Bikes' co-founder Lester Noble. "It used to have Roller Cam brakes, rather than U-brakes," explained Lester, "but I loved those skinny Tricross tyres. I can remember praying that they didn't puncture on the last descent in Italy." Pumping them up for the first time in 22 years is certainly nerve-racking too. They're so baggy that they're falling off the rims, but somehow the ragged sidewalls don't tear apart. Despite ancient cabling and a complete lack of cut-outs and ramps on the

six-cog block, the thumbshifters still work (sort of) as we roll across Adderstone Field onto the demo route. As soon as we hit the first slightly rocky section, though, the limitations of this cyclo fossil become clear. The long, skinny steel tubes with extended stays and racer-reach top tube reduce shock transmission through our jeans. Even with the super long pipe stem, though, the thickwall alloy handlebars buzz our wrists to hell through our authentic gardening glove get-up and the steering is totally alien. It's fine in a straight line, or a very slight curve,

This original Orange's steering might take the pith, but it has sprouted some juicy looking fruit since

Dalby's trails have changed a lot since Pace ran its first race here in the 1980s



## PACE RC100 1989

**NEED TO KNOW**

**PRICE AT TIME OF SALE** £1000 approx  
**WEIGHT** 11.5kg (25.4lb)  
**TRAVEL** 50mm-ish  
**WHY IT WAS/IS AN IMPORTANT BIKE:** Pace's externally-butted alloy tubing, integrated axle crank, hydraulic brakes, threadless headset system and carbon-legged suspension fork give it true 'well before its time' status.

▲ **HIGHS** Still looks superb today and the agile handling, stopping and power delivery aren't far off the modern mark.

▼ **LOWS** Head-down position feels extreme today and it's harsh enough to give you a hernia on rocky terrain.

## "The Pace used external machining to tune frame response and cut weight"

sliding the tyres on our Giant Anthem X1 for a very different reason: not because the bike refuses to turn, but because the ground connection is so consistent and the steep head angle so easily forced into sliding understeer that we can't help over-drive every corner.

It's the predictability with which the rear end then kicks out under power or braking that lets us turn the singletrack into a slide surfer's paradise. In fact the Anthem is in its element as we meet up with our usual Thursday night thrash crew and rip round the red route at tree-blurring speed. It's got enough travel to land every drop in total control, reactive enough to clip every apex and exit perfectly but so fast and efficient that we go for broke at the base of every climb just to smell everyone else's legs burning.

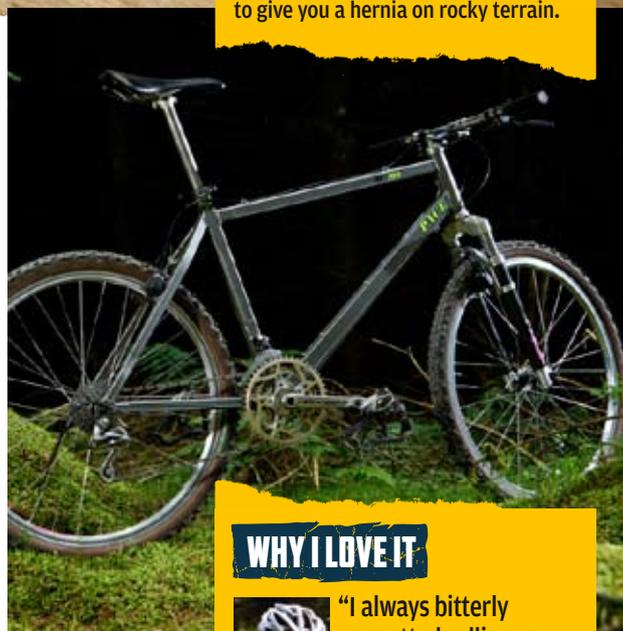
The hydroformed frame tubes, Black Box fork damping circuits, servo wave power surge disc brakes and pitch perfect suspension are a

world away from the technology levels of twenty years ago. As a result, despite its race bike tag, the Anthem is capable of passing safety standards and surviving drops and impacts that would've folded early MTBs in half and put the fear of god into their riders.

We're certainly glad we decided not to risk the tatty tyres of the Tushingham on a flat-out blast as we come to a halt at the vans, two hours after setting off.

### Ahead of the Pace

The formative years of UK mountain biking certainly weren't short of innovation however, as Gill's original RC100 sample from local Yorkshire brand Pace proves. Not only does it use external machining to tune frame tube response and shave weight, but the Magura hydraulic brakes are directly fitted to the frame and carbon fibre-legged suspension forks. →



Twenty years on, the RC100 still looks like an iconic bike

### WHY I LOVE IT

 "I always bitterly regretted selling my original Pace to fund a Klein Mantra full-suspension rocking horse, so when I saw this mint condition original I just had to have it. It's the ultimate retro bike for all my Dalby Forest riding."  
 - Gil Montague

Ultralight weight and race handling put plenty of go in the dayglo Raleigh

# RALEIGH M TRAX TEAM ISSUE 1992

## NEED TO KNOW

**PRICE AT TIME OF SALE** £1500-£2000 approx (the true race bikes were never sold to the public)

**WEIGHT** 9.8kg (21.5lb)

**TRAVEL** A little bit of fork and stay flex  
**WHY IT WAS/IS AN IMPORTANT BIKE**  
 Back in the mid-90s, XC racing was at its peak and nobody fielded a stronger UK team than Raleigh. This originally belonged to Tour de France racer Adrian Timmis, and has been lovingly restored to race condition.

▲ **HIGHS** Astonishingly light even by today's standards, this is a proper startline and straightline dragster that's surprisingly comfortable too.

▼ **LOWS** Getting the super narrow, bar-end equipped cockpit through tight corners requires three weeks' written notice.



## “The M Trax Team makes modern hardtails look fat”

agile than we expected. Add razor sharp power delivery and it's definitely the sharpest and most accurate of the oldsters through the singletrack.

Pace's unique right-angled polished steel stem pipe in a modified Campagnolo headset also pre-dated Dia Compe's threadless Aheadset by several years. Add the super wide bottom bracket shell running tubular steel Bullseye cranks, and this 20-year-old bike accelerates hard enough to make us feel 20 again too.

The head down, arse up position is more triathlon bike than trail bike though and wheelies or drops are a nightmare. With so much weight forward the elastomer sprung forks feel more like riding through roadkill than the fluid, floated response of a modern fork, and the brutal back end rigidity makes rockier sections of the trail far from comfortable unless we stand up and stomp.

That said the steering characteristics through the narrow Merlin titanium bars are a lot more

Well, it does once we've got our feet in the pedals!

When it comes to sharp dressing though, Retrobike member Mark wins hands down with his full blue and dayglo yellow team kit to match his meticulously restored Raleigh race bike. Not only is his kit lighting up the darker sections of Dalby's red route but the Raleigh shocks everyone with its super low weight. By using a mix of thin Matrix alloy tubing, alloy lugs, skinny steel fork and pencil thin titanium rear stays this sub-22lb 15-year-old would make most modern hardtails feel overweight.

That weight includes great big cow horn bar ends and big block original SPDs too – state of the art stuff for charging up climbs back in the cross country heyday. It sets off like a scalded cat down the singletrack too, with a real whip spring from the skinny



## WHY I LOVE IT



“There are so many reasons I love this bike, but the main reason is that it goes like stink. Add that to its history, character, and its no-nonsense Britishness and you have a bike that sets you apart from anything else on the trails.”

- Mark Sinnett

**Race Raleighs were one of the fastest bikes you could never buy – until now**

Getting the AMP through North Shore sections needs some serious skill

# AMP RESEARCH B4 1996

## NEED TO KNOW

**PRICE AT TIME OF SALE** £3000 approx  
**WEIGHT** 10.6kg (23.3lb)

**TRAVEL** 60mm  
**WHY IT WAS/IS AN IMPORTANT BIKE:**  
The AMP B4 was the brainchild of legendary suspension guru Horst Leitner, showing the potential of superlight XC full-suspension at a time when double springs were DH only.

▲ **HIGHS** Even by today's standards it's stunningly light for a full-suss bike with discs, and the handling is surprisingly contemporary.

▼ **LOWS** There's a frighteningly small amount of metal in some crucial places, suspension is limited, the brakes are crap and it's super flexy.



## WHY I LOVE IT

"It was the lightest full-suss bike available at the time and I liked the fact that it was a small, bloke in a shed-type company that was pushing the boundaries. Everyone said it would wear out quickly or break, but it's still going strong!"

- Tim Price

The AMP B4 is still one of the lightest, most innovation rich full suss-bikes ever made...



tubes tensing and then firing you forward with every single stomp of those soap bar-sized pedals.

Unfortunately the super narrow bar and hard tyres definitely need serious courage to go into corners hard on – especially with only cantilevers to cling to if your bottle goes. You wouldn't guess that trying to follow Mark, though, as he shimmies down the narrow-topped snake trail sections and plunges in and out of the bomb holes like a Lycra kingfisher.

Even the final retro bike we hop aboard manages to erase some ropery memories from when we tested it back in the day. The teaspoon full of damping oil in the AMP Research B4's rear shock made it a soggy softail at best and, looking at the parallelogram-topped carbon fibre fork legs, we'd be

## "Despite its brakes and chunky tyres, the B4 weighs less than the Anthem"

scared to ride them on the road now let alone rough, rocky trails like we did back then.

## Showing its age

Let's be honest, the cable to hydraulic brakes on the B4 were dreadful back in 1997, and they stayed dreadful even after RockShox threw a whole bunch of development money at them. They're sticking every time we pull them now too, which is slowing down the otherwise rapid ride.

While the flex and slack in the fork and super skinny frame tubes

make turning a vague and delayed experience, even compared with the other retro bikes, the actual steering geometry and ride position are surprisingly modern, and the original four-bar Horst Link suspension is exactly the same layout that Specialized and other licensed frames use today.

Most remarkably, despite the disc brakes and chunky Panaracer white 'Magic' tyres, it weighs significantly less than the 24lb Anthem. While we're worried the super skinny chainstay bridge might buckle trying to deliver the power, the B4's happy to prove its easy speed whenever the chance appears. However our blast round Dalby's red route was an affirmation of the Anthem's Bike of the Year status, and a retro reality check. However good these bikes were in their day in terms of braking, handling and suspension, they're no better than most modern £300 bikes.

Don't think of them as a cheap 'build your own' option either as

## PICKING A CLASSIC

While the bikes here are real pensioners with some restrictive component aspects like 1in threaded headset, more recent classics can be a great way to get a cracking bike on the cheap. As long as you don't try to plug in too long a fork (it'll snap the head tube off), most hardtails that are young enough to have a disc brake mount will still make a great ride with a shorter stem and wider bar.

Simpler suspension bikes such as the swingarm Marin East Peak (Orange's Patriot/Mr XC/Five and original Santa Cruz Bullit and Superlight bikes are also classics) can also give a surprisingly up-to-date ride if you update the suspension and refresh the bearings. For more details and advice, check out [www.retrobike.co.uk](http://www.retrobike.co.uk) and prepare to embark upon a whole new addiction.



Older bikes like the Marin East Peak can make a great retrobike project



However old you and your ride are, you can't beat taking a bike down the woods for maximum fun

that's less than the going rate of a boxed original XTR chainset on eBay. Speaking to the retrobike boys, though, this thrill of the hunt is a massive part of the appeal of retro biking. The pride of completing a project bike with components discontinued a decade or more ago is in a different league, satisfaction-wise, from the world of 24hr internet shopping for any new component you can imagine.

What you're creating are properly timeless rides too, ones that will make people stop, grin and talk about as early riding memories are rekindled by a neon fade paintjob or the thunderous roar of a Tioga disc wheel.

The challenge of riding and racing these bikes hard enough that they can compete with totally competent but somehow characterless modern machines is also hugely addictive. Whoever is riding the Anthem instantly becomes the prey for our pack of high-performance pensioners, forks

## THE RETRO VERDICT

They might be surprisingly light and fast in a straight line, but our time aboard these classic rides proved just how much mountain biking has changed since their heyday. The tight singletrack, drops and big rocks that are the staple of modern trail biking would have been seen as extreme or even totally unrideable when most of these bikes were built.

Restoring and riding an antique bike won't put you on

an equal footing with a top contemporary bike – and it's rarely even a cheap option – but that's missing the whole point of retro biking.

What Mark and his mates showed us is that you're getting yourself a potentially unique icon that'll spark smiles and make fans wherever you ride. It's also a great reminder that it's how much fun you have on the trail, and not how easy you make it, that really counts.

clunking, brakes squealing, long stems swaying as they fight to keep the pressure on. The lack of gaps on the trail and the inane grins on everyone's faces prove time and again that, as long as your attitude is right, you can have an absolute blast on any bike.