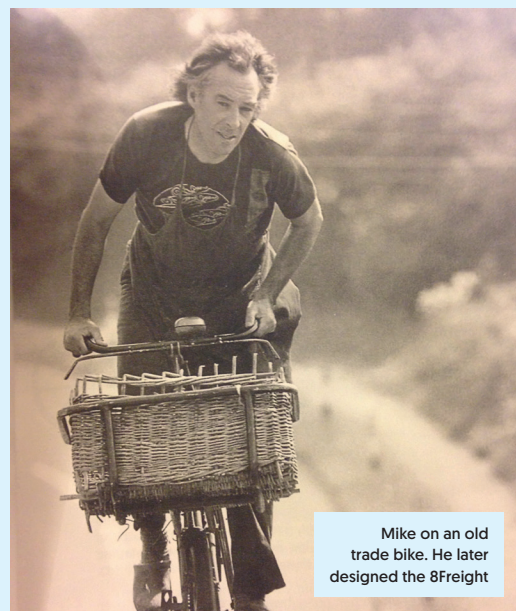


Obituary

MIKE BURROWS

*Bike designer and Cycling UK member **Mike Burrows** has passed away. Dan Joyce recalls decades of innovation, faxed articles, and animated phone calls*



Mike on an old trade bike. He later designed the 8Freight

Revolutionary bike designer Mike Burrows has died. He was 79. Best known for the Lotus track bike that Chris Boardman rode to Olympic glory in 1992, Mike was a pioneer in the disparate worlds of aerodynamics, recumbents and cargo bikes.

Largely overlooked by the cycling industry and snubbed by the UCI who banned his aero frames for being too fast [just as they banned recumbents long before], Mike was an old-school engineer who developed cycling ideas in the same way he spoke: in a constant stream. He's the reason your road bike has a compact frame with a sloping top tube and is sized S-XL. Inline barrel adjusters? Also Mike.

I first read about Mike and his recumbent trikes in the 1980s in Richard's Bicycle Book, written by his long-time friend, the late Richard Ballantine. Our paths crossed in 1991 on New Cyclist magazine: I was its staff writer, Mike its freelance technical expert. His handwritten articles came in, then and for years after, by fax machine. Mike didn't do "that webby thing", or computers, or mobile phones. He communicated – at length – by landline phone and did his design work on a drawing board.

He produced the world's first aerodynamic monocoque bicycle that way in 1984. By 1990 the Burrows Mk2 Monocoque was the Lotus bike's obvious antecedent, its carbon fibre frame featuring that signature monoblade fork. Instead of stealth black like the Lotus, however, the original's frame was beautifully painted with a flock of birds over water. Birdwatching was one of Mike's hobbies.

As a teenager his main interest was model aircraft. Not collecting them but designing and building them, which required a hands-on understanding of aerodynamics. He had a bike for transport even then but only became a cycling enthusiast in his 30s when he was living in Norwich with a family of his own.

He joined the Cyclists' Touring Club in the mid-70s. At the end of the decade he began time trialling, initially on the everyday bike he'd built for himself from 531 tubing, then on

self-made time trial bikes. By 1982 his TT bike had already diverged from standard designs: it had aero tubing, an aero seatpost, and an aero 'gull wing' handlebar.

At the same time, and alongside his day job as a manufacturer of packaging machines, Mike was busy with far more radical cycles: recumbents. Having watched the Aspro Clear Speed Trials in Brighton in 1980, Mike decided to build his own human-powered vehicle, a recumbent tricycle christened the Speed Machine (Windcheetah). The British Human Power Club was formed in 1983 with Mike as its chairman. The Speedy went through many iterations. Richard Ballantine enthused about them. Andy Wilkinson smashed the Land's End to John o' Groats record riding one.

Mike was still racing recumbents until a few years ago. His performances stayed much the same: as age slowed him down, he designed his bikes to be faster. Yet he wasn't just a racer. He cycled for transport and designed bikes for that, notably the 8Freight cargo bike. And he cycled for the joy of it. His favourite article for Cycle, I think, was the one he wrote in 2003 about cycling 170 miles on his Ratcatcher to celebrate his sixtieth birthday.

For several years Mike worked for Giant, a relationship that produced compact road bike frames; those inline barrel adjusters; the Halfway folder; and a prototype city bike. Yet while his time with Giant was fruitful, Mike was scathing about the cycling industry in general. "No one knows anything," he told me a few years ago. "They're pinning tails on donkeys in the dark."

Mike's unwillingness to water down his opinions may have kept some of his ideas out of the mainstream, but the self-proclaimed world's greatest bicycle designer wasn't a haughty 'mad professor'. Forthright, yes, but generally amiable, always interesting, and usually right. I'll miss the phone conversations we've had over the last three decades. I was just thinking that I hadn't heard from him in a while. And then I found out why.

Mike Burrows: April 1943-August 2022. He is survived by his wife Marjatta and their son Paul. ●

Further reading

Mike's magnum opus, *Bicycle Design: Towards the Perfect Machine* (ISBN 9781905005680), is sadly out of print, although various editions of it turn up on Amazon etc now and then. It's a very readable book that explains the technical side of cycling without maths and equations. From *Bicycle to Superbike* (ISBN 9780953617456) a later book that looks at Mike's life and his bikes, is also out of print. Tony Hadland, who edited *Bicycle Design* and co-wrote *From Bicycle to Superbike*, reports that there are "expressions of interest" in both books being reprinted.



Below: Mike at York Rally by Jason Patient

