



MY BIKE

(Left and below) Isla's bike with its 11-speed Alfine hub. She says: 'You don't get any lower bottom gears than with the 8-speed. So I run it with the biggest sprocket that I can fit on, which is a 23. And I've got a 32 chainring to get the gears as low as I can. That's been fine for off-road touring.'



ISLA ROWNTREE

BIKE MANUFACTURER ISLA ROWNTREE TALKS ABOUT HER CUSTOM ROUGH-STUFF TOURER, WHICH DOUBLES AS HER WINTER MOUNTAIN BIKE

Isla Rowntree is best known for her meticulously designed children's bikes. She's been in the bike industry for many years and also has an impressive racing *palmares*, particularly in cyclo-cross. When she needed a rough-stuff bike, she designed her own. It was built in house by Islabikes colleague Keen Burns, using lightweight Reynolds 853 tubing.

'It was prompted by our annual staff trip,' Isla says. 'We cycle off-road from Ludlow to the beach, going west across Wales. I use it for riding with the Rough-Stuff Fellowship as well. And it's my winter mountain bike – with the mudguards. We go riding after work on Tuesdays, finishing in a local pub. It's nice not to be caked in mud!'

The bike has 29-inch wheels, despite the fact that Isla is 5ft 4in. 'I use 29-inch wheels because I find they roll so much better off-road,' she says. 'They're perfect for the type of terrain you get with rough-stuffing: bumpy tracks and fields, and trails across the mountains. I can achieve a riding position that I find acceptable with that size wheel. So why not?'

The big wheels and relatively compact frame are reminiscent of junior Islabikes like the Beinn. 'With our kids' bikes, we try to fit the children to the biggest wheel size that they can reasonably manage for exactly the same reason,' Isla says. 'Big wheels roll

better on anything other than smooth surfaces.'

For gearing, Isla uses a Shimano Alfine hub – currently an 11-speed – or a singlespeed. To tension the chain, she chose

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rocker dropouts from Paragon, a machining company in San Francisco that makes parts for frame builders. 'Unlike a normal sliding dropout, the tension in the chain is not trying to move the wheel. And you can adjust your chain tension without having to readjust your disc brake – it all moves with the dropout. So it's easy to take your wheel in and out. They also remove the need for an eccentric bottom bracket, which works but can be a bit fiddly.'

Isla's bike is unusual for an off-road machine in that it's designed for full-length mudguards. 'I like to have them for obvious reasons,' she says, 'but I want a really big gap between them and the tyre for use off-road. It's a nuisance if mud jams underneath. Here you can get your hand underneath.'

'I found it difficult to source any mudguards that were big enough for a

proper 29er tyre. Eventually, I imported some Cascadia 29er ones from an American company. The only slight issue is that the attachment via the breakaway stays isn't really sturdy enough on the front mudguard when you're riding on very rough surfaces. I put some washers in to wedge inside the breakaway bit, to stop it moving side to side. But the plastic has distorted over time. I've got some twigs rammed in at the moment, which has done the trick. Not a professional modification!' ☺

TECH SPEC

Isla Rowntree's custom rough-stuff bike

Frame & fork: Custom Reynolds 853 tubes. **Rocker dropouts** (paragonmachineworks.com). **Chainstay disc mount.** Reynolds fork.

Wheels: Schwalbe Albert 29er tyres. DT spokes, rims and front hub. Alfine rear hub.

Gearing: Shimano 11-speed Alfine with 23T sprocket. 32T chainring on 162.5mm TA Carmina cranks. Royce bottom bracket.

Brakes: Avid Juicy 5 hydraulic disc

Steering & seating: carbon bar with slight rise, old saddle, 27.2mm carbon seatpost.

Accessories: Cascadia 29er mudguards (planetbike.com), Islabikes rear rack, Ortlieb Front Roller Classics in matching orange, Graeme Obree 'Spincal-style' bar extensions used as map-holder.