



“ One thing that’s changed in the last half-century is traffic. Levels have doubled, and it often feels like the size of vehicle has as well ”

HOW THE BIKE PERFORMED

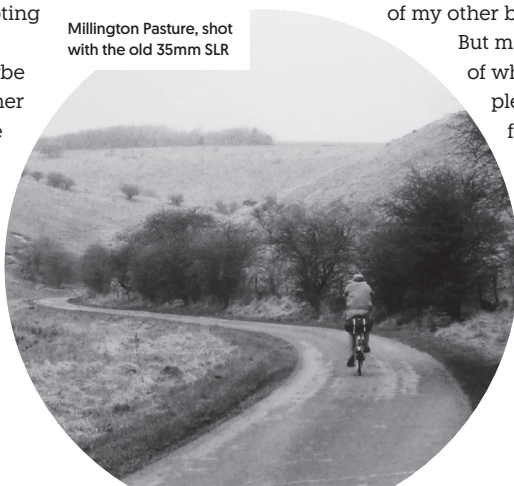
My five-decades-old bike proved a delight to ride. Not just ‘considering its age’, but simply as a bike. It’s nippy and responsive, pedals smoothly, and is especially fun at speed. As ‘tourers’ were then, it’s basically a racer with minor modifications, designed to go fast. It could zoom down those Yorkshire Dales at 40mph (I guess: no computer, obviously) and stay rock steady and reliable, or skim along the long gentle downslopes of the Yorkshire Wolds at a clip (but no toeclips: they were too small for my shoes).

Yet because of that racing background, the gears weren’t low enough – which is still a common problem today for tourers. My Claud Butler’s lowest combination is 28/28. My modern Spa Cycles tourer has a much easier 24/36. No wonder the Claud Butler feels 50% harder uphill.

As for the Carradice saddlebag, well, that was something of a revelation. Its capacity equated to just one of my two mighty Ortlieb panniers, but the Longflap could easily swallow enough tools, clothes, maps, jackets and picnic items for a four-day tour, plus my 1970s SLR camera. There’s a seductive clarity about straps, I found, but the real surprise was how the weight – thanks to being on the seatpost – was unnoticeable. The bike handled differently, more snappily, than my pannier-toting modern tourers.

And the clothes, well, maybe on 70-mile days in midsummer I’d want the wicking, flexible comfort of Lycra. But on 40-mile ambles in a cool April, the cotton T-shirts, shorts and wool socks and Clarks leather shoes that I wore on this trip – as on my first tours back then – were perfectly comfortable.

Millington Pasture, shot with the old 35mm SLR



It chucked it down at times, and I needed my 1970s rain cape. It was a real museum piece: a kind of yellow oilskin kaftan with a hole for your head that covered everywhere from your hands on the handlebar to your back. It worked pretty well, keeping me mostly dry and warm even in torrential downpours, though it had a habit of pooling water and then discharging it in one go. I’ll stick with my breathable waterproofs but this wasn’t a bad experience at all.

The lights were a bad experience: 1970s Ever Readys, the front one the size of a house brick and about as good for road illumination. It required two batteries the size of baked bean tins and gobbled them up like a hungry teenager. They didn’t last two hours. The rear one was little better.

LESSONS FROM HISTORY

So what did I learn? That vintage bikes aren’t just lovely to ride, they’re also talking points. Several times a day a head would turn and someone would come and ask about the bike. (“My brother used to do time trials on that”, “I used to have a Claud Butler”, “My grandad had a Carradice saddlebag”, and so on.) That youth hostels, though far fewer than in the 1970s, are still great sociable places if you put your phone away. That last-minute bargain beds can be worth looking out for.

On the other hand, I won’t be forsaking my modern conveniences of accommodation websites, map apps and digital cameras (one of which I did actually take alongside the old SLR to make sure I had good enough photos for this feature). I learned that my Claud Butler is well worth using for pleasure jaunts and maybe for more tours, and that saddlebag touring would probably work just as well on some of my other bikes.

But mainly I learned that much of what makes bike touring a pleasure is still there. And I found it on my 1970s-style Way of the Roses. Quiet lanes, country scenery, village cafés, chatting with fellow travellers, the joy of self-contained travel... these things don’t change. Never mind the past; here’s to the future. ●

Clockwise from far left: This is a staged shot: the remaining call boxes with phones in them only took credit cards, not cash. Millington Pasture outside Pocklington. The finish at Bridlington



Then and now: what was better in the 1970s or 2020s?

- Accommodation: now
- Beer: now
- Bikes: draw
- Bike lights: now
- Cafés: draw
- Cameras: now
- Friendliness: draw
- Global sustainability: then
- Phones: now
- Pubs: now
- Road surfaces: then
- Saddlebags: then
- Sandwiches: now
- Simplicity: then
- Traffic levels: then
- Trains: now
- Youth hostels: now