

Isla in Ludlow with an eJanis. Spares remain available for all Islabikes



## Interview

# ISLA'S BIKES



**VICTORIA HAZAEL**

Victoria is a journalist who has previously worked for Cycling UK

**Islabikes has stopped making bikes but that isn't the end of the company's story – or that of its founder, Isla Rowntree. Victoria Hazael spoke to her**

**A**s a customer of Islabikes, I received an email in October 2023 letting me know they were ceasing the sale and production of bikes. I was gutted: these were our bikes of choice, our go-to brand. I have interviewed Isla Rowntree before for Cycle, so I picked up the phone to find out what was happening – and where I could get spares.

First some history. Islabikes began as a small start-up in a barn in 2005. Before then, children's bikes were heavy bicycle-shaped objects, built to a price point using parts designed for adults. Islabikes became the brand that cyclists bought for their children and grandchildren.

This popularity forced the wider industry to raise its game. The design of children's bikes in 2024 owes a great deal to Isla's attention to detail and commitment to incremental design improvements.

### THE PANDEMIC BIKE BOOM

From the barn in Staffordshire in 2005, Islabikes transformed into a thriving 10,000-square-foot business based in Ludlow in Shropshire. Then the pandemic hit. During this time, Isla briefly took back over the running of the business.

"I hadn't been the managing director of the business for some years," she said. "I'd got to the stage where actually running an operation of that size and being responsible for it was something I didn't want to be doing, so a couple of other people had been the managing director, and that led to a management buyout at the end of 2020."

This unfortunately coincided with a turbulent period in the bike industry. At the time of the management buyout, when the majority shareholder would no longer be Isla (she would still retain a minority stake and position on the board), there was a huge boom in bike sales. But the new setup was soon tested.

"It was the bike industry's toilet-roll moment," Isla said. "We sold out, the supply chain across the world couldn't support the demand, but that prompted over ordering. That led to long lead times of two or three years, because there is a finite production capacity. Across the industry, I suppose those orders were placed because people hoped that the spike in demand would be sustained and that this was our new normal."

### INDUSTRY-WIDE ISSUES

Reflecting on this time, Isla who is clearly saddened by the situation not just at Islabikes but across the industry, said that in hindsight: "Everyone in the industry should have been dialling down our forecasts, not putting them up. The problems for the industry are probably going to take another couple of years to get through fully... We as individuals made those decisions in good faith at the time, but yes I think we are victims of our own actions." ▶