

CHAPTER 8

Jack Taylor Cycles

Jack Taylor Cycles
Church Road
Stockton on Tees
Cleveland County TS 18 2LY
England

Jack Taylor Cycles is owned and operated by the three Taylor brothers—Jack, Norman, and Ken. Jack Taylor Cycles is unique in that its tandem production is almost equal to its single frame production. In addition to tandems,

the Taylors build other specialty cycles such as triplets and tricycles. Eighty percent of these specialty products are exported, the majority of which find their way to customers in the United States. Today the Taylors have a thriving business. Their success story is not one of circumstances or luck. It is the result of many years of determination and hard work.

The Taylors' interest in bicycles stems from when Jack was a teenager in the 1930s. The first bicycle that Jack owned was a Raleigh Sports model. His grandfather purchased the bicycle at a cost of \$20. With two fixed sprockets and Lucas chrome bell, the bike was an improvement over the "dreadnoughts" of the 1920s and 1930s, but a far cry from today's lightweight bicycle.

Jack loved his bicycle and rode it everywhere. The more he rode, the more riders he met who shared his cycling interests. In his travels, he discovered a hard-core riding group that had "fancy" lightweight bicycles—Merlins and Claud Butlers. As soon as Jack laid his eyes on these lightweight beauties, a new level of interest was opened. In those days, there was a scarcity of good bicycles. Jack soon found that he could not afford a lightweight bicycle that would meet his quality requirements.

Background

Jack's next step was a logical one. Since he could not afford a bicycle of his choice, he would design and build his

own. Although he was an idealist, Jack had the ability to objectively evaluate his ideas. He dreamed of riding the Tour de France with Coppi and Bartali, his heroes. Yet he knew that he didn't possess the ingredients necessary to become a world champion cyclist. Instead of concentrating on the development of his cycling skills, he spent his waking hours refining his skills in designing and building bicycle frames.

Jack started building bicycles in 1936. Because of his enthusiasm and technical skills, he was able to persuade two of his riding friends to go into business with him. For Jack, going into business was a simple process. He and two friends, Lance Bell and Jack Hood, set up a shop in a little green shed in the back of his mother's house on Greta Road in Stockton. During this time, the operation in the green shed was more of a hobby since all three men were employed elsewhere.

Jack Taylor, of course, was the most active member of the threesome. It had been Jack's idea to use the green shed as a frame workshop because it was only a few feet from his house. Fortunately, Jack's enthusiasm was not as limited as his finances. His only source of light in the shed was a single light bulb connected to the wiring circuit in the house. This way, he was able to work at night when he came home from work. Since watches and clocks were luxuries that Jack could not afford, he connected a makeshift loudspeaker to the house radio and ran the wire from the house to the shed. He would become so engrossed in what he was doing that he would forget the time and end up going to bed far past midnight. Since Jack had to be up very early in the morning, he found that his ingenious loudspeaker worked well. Now he could hear the eight o'clock news, the nine o'clock news, and the ten o'clock news. When Jack heard the ten o'clock news he would quit for the evening.

Jack's green shed became the center of bicycling activity in Stockton. He was constantly surrounded by the "elitist" cycling element. With all the activity that was going on in that green shed, it was difficult not to interest Jack's younger brothers, Norman and Ken. Soon Ken and Norman, who were as mechanically inclined as Jack, started helping out their older brother with increasing enthusiasm.

The original threesome of Lance Bell, Jack Hood, and Jack Taylor did not last very long. Jack Hood and Lance Bell loved

bicycling, but they just didn't have the devotion to technical details that Jack Taylor did. As a result, the partnership was dissolved and Jack Taylor Cycles became a family operation. Once Jack started to build his own bicycles and found that he could sell them, he began a systematic plan of building a bicycle factory. Officially, Jack Taylor Cycles became a business in 1945, when Jack and his brothers opened a bank account and each of the brothers put in 20 pounds. Typical of Jack's kindhearted personality, he ended up putting in 40 pounds since one of his brothers did not have the money. In 1946, Jack Taylor Cycles had its first official balance sheet.



Figure B-1: Ken (left) and Norman Taylor inspect a newly brazed tandem frame.

Building Philosophy

It must be remembered that Jack Taylor started building bicycles in his green shed as a hobby. Bicycles were very expensive compared to the wages of the day, and as a result, Jack started building bicycles because he allegedly couldn't afford to buy one. This is only partially true. Jack had invested his money in a Claud Butler tandem and a Butler racing frame. A lot of Jack's inspiration came from owning the Claud Butlers. In later years when Jack finally met Claud Butler at a London Bicycle Show, Claud asked Jack what had made him start building bicycles. Without being solicitous Jack told him: "It was partly from buying one of yours. We were that keen on the way they were



Figure 8-2: Ken Taylor fits the bottom bracket on a custom tandem.

made. We got so much pleasure out of them that it fired our imaginations and we wanted to do it."

What started out as a hobby in 1936 became the beginning of a lifetime occupation in 1942, when Jack Taylor bought a parcel of land in the center of Stockton from the Stockton Corporation. Jack had plans of a giant complex which would mass-produce bicycles in Stockton. His bubble burst in 1951 when bicycle sales started to



Figure 8-3: Norman Taylor in his workshop with the simple Taylor-design fork jig.

THE CUSTOM BICYCLE

rapidly decline. "It didn't matter what we did, how much money we spent, we just couldn't sell bicycles to people who wanted to sit in a motorcar."

In 1939 England declared war on Germany, but the Taylor brothers were fortunate in that they never did see the front lines. They remained in Stockton for the duration and were assigned to war work. During the war, there wasn't a good bicycle to be found at any price. As a result, the production of the garden shed was now really in demand. The Taylors were, however, running into supply problems. They couldn't buy lugs, for instance. Jack had previously taken some night classes in bronze welding and decided to try to build the bicycles without lugs. The bronze welding worked so well that today most of the Taylor's bicycles are still bronze-welded.

Although the Taylors were seriously involved with bicycle building, they still found time to train and race with the Stockton Wheelers. The Taylors' first introduction to racing came in time trials; however, this event did not interest them because it was a "cloak and dagger sport." The races were always run at six o'clock on a Sunday morning when the least amount of traffic was anticipated on the road. Dressed all in black, each rider would leave at one-minute intervals.

The Taylors found this to be very boring and when Percy Stallard of Wolverhampton formed a rebel movement of bicycle riders in 1942, the Taylors were among the first to join. This rebel movement was quickly suspended from the National Cyclists' Union, the controlling body of racing cyclists in the United Kingdom.

Percy Stallard's group then formed the British League of Racing Cyclists. They held regular road races using road bicycles as opposed to the fixed gears used by the time trialists. The BLRC was exactly to the Taylors' liking. Jack openly admits that he was a horrible time trialist but found that he was decent as a road racer: "I was not much good at time trials when I went with all the crack riders. In fact, we weren't much good at anything. We were just very enthusiastic. Of course, when you got into the first half dozen in a race with the top guys from all over the country you thought, 'By golly, I'm better than I thought I was.'"

The road racing circuit that the BLRC developed filled a vacuum in Jack's riding career. Jack and his brothers could

actually ride races "continental style," as a team, Jack says, "We called ourselves 'independents'. We broke all the rules of the amateur classes, our jerseys had Jack Taylor Cycles on them."

Probably the most important race ridden by the Jack Taylor Cycles team was the Brighton to Glasgow, the forerunner of the Milk Race, England's most prestigious road race. The Taylor brothers rode this race as a team five times from 1945 to 1949. The Taylors loved "getting all dressed up" in their special embroidered jerseys that they had ordered from Belgium. Each team member had two jerseys to insure having a fresh one every morning during stage races.

After the 1945 Brighton to Glasgow race, Ken lost his job as a result of being absent five days. Since the Taylors had already partially constructed their "bicycle factory" on the land they had purchased from the Stockton Corporation, Ken went to work full time at Jack Taylor Cycles. Business was good and a year later Norman, and then Jack, joined Ken.

Development of the works progressed quickly in both the expansion of the facilities and in the production of bicycles. At one time, there were nine employees. Once the bicycle boom after World War II ended, so did the rapid growth of Jack Taylor Cycles. The large factory that Jack had once envisioned never materialized, but something else did—a friendly custom frame shop with a six- to eighteen-month waiting list for its specialized products.

The Taylors are the nicest, friendliest people you'd ever hope to meet. After 40 years, they are still enthusiastic riders. Norman rides centuries with his friends every weekend during the season. He jokingly claims he gets 100 miles to the gallon because on the 100-mile rides they invariably stop and visit some of the country pubs along the way. Jack still rides the same bike he rode in the 1949 Brighton to Glasgow race! He also rides it to work.

The Taylors believe that a good frame builder has to have a lot of enthusiasm for his product. Jack explains it best: "We know what we're making the bicycle for and to us it's the most beautiful thing imaginable, a new bicycle. Bicycles have some magic about them to us. You put a bit of yourself into these bicycles, like an artist does with his paintings. Ours are all one-of-a-kind specials for some particular person. I don't say everything you do comes out perfect, but the ideal is that you're aiming for perfection."

Frame Selection

Around 1956, a young couple from Stockton, California, decided to come to Stockton, England, to buy a Jack Taylor tandem. It was the first Taylor tandem purchased by Americans. This couple was the first of many Americans to walk through the doors of the Taylor works on Church Road; now most of the 200 bicycles that are made by the Taylors each year come to the United States. Since the Taylors do not advertise, their sales are generated strictly by word of mouth. The Taylors explain their success with Americans by one simple statement: "Our tandems are built in the way that Americans want to buy them."

The tandems are all built with Reynolds 531 plain gauge tubing. The Taylors have used Reynolds 531DB but found that the frame had too much flex. To insure a more stable ride, all the tandems are built with specially ordered oversize Reynolds tubes. The down tube is the heaviest tube at 18 gauge. The oval bottom tube is 19 gauge, as are the chainstays. The Taylors readily admit that their tandem frames are heavy, but they believe that the tandems have to be in order to be rigid enough for two people to ride.

As a result of the special tubes used on the tandem, there are no lugs made to fit. Consequently, all the tandems are bronze-welded without lugs. This also gives the builder more flexibility in custom-fitting sizes. By not using lugs, a builder does not have to be concerned with stocking a large number of lugs for each different frame angle.

Although most of the Taylor frames are lugless, they do make a number with lugs. These appear only on "single" frames. The lugs and bottom brackets are pressed steel. A cast bottom bracket is available upon request. Norman likes to use the cast bottom bracket because he feels the threads are generally better and it makes the frame more rigid. Norman also likes semi-sloping cast fork crowns. He finds them easy to work with.

Any kind of seat cluster arrangement can be ordered but Norman does not recommend the Italian fastback for touring because of clearance problems. Siffronze is used for brazing, with occasional use of silver for brazed-on fittings. All the frames are tacked and those with lugs are built freehand, while those without lugs (including tandems) are built on jigs.

Something very interesting about Taylor frames is a constant

design feature—the Taylors like to keep the head angle at 73 degrees. They believe this is necessary for good steering. If changes in top tube length are necessary, the Taylors feel it's preferable to make them by varying the angle of the seat tube. The angles on racing and touring bicycles they build are generally similar. The biggest difference is the longer wheelbase for a touring bicycle created by the use of longer chainstays and a larger fork rake.

If you are thinking of buying a Jack Taylor frame or complete bicycle, it is best to send them the exact size that you want. The Taylors make no pretense about being expert fitters. They feel a person should know what size bicycle he or she wants. They consider themselves expert frame builders, not fitters.

If you would like to order just a frame, be sure to tell the Taylors exactly what components you plan on using. This is most important when ordering a tandem frame since their tandem tubing is larger than standard tubing. You must tell them what kind of brakes, derailleurs, and other components, because of the many fittings needed to make a tandem frame functional.

Although the Taylors make racing frames, their specialty is touring and tandem frames. Norman makes all the touring racks as well as all the braze-on fittings used to attach racks, fenders, and lights. When requested, Norman also builds touring frames with special pannier supports.

All the sandblasting and painting is done on the premises. The Taylors even make all their own shipping crates. Their little operation is quite efficient with the work being delegated among the threesome. Norman builds all the frames, Jack does the painting, and Ken installs the components and sends the frames and bicycles out. Once the frame or bicycle is completed and packed, it is airfreighted from Stockton and can be delivered anywhere in the world within 48 hours. As a special touch (the Taylor way of saying thank you), each Taylor customer finds an attractive Taylor feeder bag packed with their brand-new Jack Taylor.

In summary, the Taylors are extremely anxious to please every customer. They will custom-build a frameset to your requested specifications. Most important for the often-neglected tourist, they specialize in touring frames that are designed to accommodate your personal choice of panniers. Jack Taylor Cycles was unique among the many builders we visited. They are committed to meeting the needs of the recreational cyclist.