



**CYCLEFLEET
LTD**

BUYING THE RIGHT BIKE – 'BSO'S



Please don't do it.

Proposal

The article proposes to show that cheap new bikes are poor value, a false economy, not fit for use & damaging to the environment. After reading through it hopefully you will understand and agree with this proposal and can then make a more informed purchase. Throughout this article this type of bike will be referred to as BSOs - Bicycle Shaped Objects.

Qualifications

I am a bicycle mechanic of 20 years experience. I run a local business that services and repairs all types of bikes (including BSOs). There is no hidden agenda behind writing this. I'm not trying to persuade you to buy a bike from me, as we don't sell bikes. I want to try and make a contribution as I'm seeing more and more people buying these bikes and then discovering that they are useless for any purpose except landfill.

Before we get into bikes themselves, some thoughts and an anecdote:

A truly global economy; the Internet, supermarkets - great aren't they? Delivering better value, lower cost products through increased competition, innovation and efficiency. Enabling the savings to be passed directly on to us, the consumer.

I bought a brand new cordless kettle a few months ago for less than a tenner. Bargain. It's here in the corner of the workshop being used every day. No complaints, it's working perfectly. But then, it's a kettle. It boils water. It has one moving part (the switch), casing and a filament. I don't take it out in all weathers, bounce it around, use it to transport me and other goods, leave it locked up in various locations and expect it to stop in a hurry if a washing machine suddenly pulls out in front of me. A little flippant maybe, but there is a serious point.

Last summer we had a booking from a guy who'd bought a bike on the internet that had come in a box and that he was having some trouble with. I went round to pick it up and knocked on the door. He answered and wheeled out this 'bike' - it was stunningly bad, a brand new cheap suspension bike. It was possibly the heaviest clunkiest, badly built bike I'd ever seen. The components were cheap and nasty, the frame made from huge heavy lumps of metal poorly welded together. It was a tank. Yet he looked at me and said "yeah got it off the internet, only a hundred and twenty quid. Went to a few bike shops but you wouldn't get anything like this for that cost". I was dumbfounded. To this guy, the bike shops were making loads of profit by ripping people off, whereas he'd got a great deal online. The opposite could not have been truer. Ask yourself which is more likely to sell a quality, reliable, well set-up bike: A local bike shop that you could take it straight back to if you were dissatisfied in any way or a business with a web site as the middle man and hundreds of miles between you and them? Don't get me wrong, you can buy excellent value quality bikes online and some bike shops can rip you off. But you cannot buy a new bike of any quality for silly money. You get what you pay for.

What makes a bike?

A bike is not a simple toy. It is a means of transportation, a complex piece of machinery that has evolved over a hundred years. Today there are many types of bikes to suit all users and all purposes.

A basic geared bike with no accessories consists of over a thousand pieces. As well as the frame and forks amongst the parts going into our bike are the stem, handlebars, wheels, tyres, inner tubes, rim tapes, brake levers, shifters, grips, cables, headset, bottom bracket, chainset, cranks, pedals, sprockets, derailleurs (front and rear), chain, brake arms and springs, brake pads, saddle, seat post (and clamp) and more. Some of these parts are in turn made from many other smaller parts, and this is just for a basic bike.

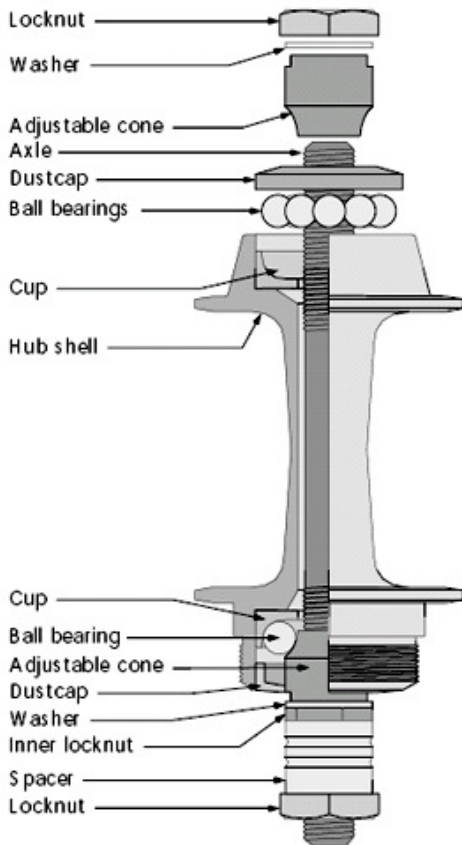
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Let's consider just one of these for a moment: the bicycle wheel. What an incredible invention. Light, strong and versatile. A wheel consists of a hub (made from many smaller parts, see the image), a number of spokes, nipples (these screw onto the ends of the spokes) and a rim. The hub needs to be correctly set up so that the axle rotates smoothly within the hub shell with no play and minimum resistance. Spokes need to be correctly tensioned so that the rim spins round in a straight line with no 'bumps' or 'hops'. Additionally a rear wheel needs to be 'dished' to compensate for the sprockets on the right hand side of the hub. If the wheel doesn't run true the brakes can't work effectively and the bike won't ride well. And this is just one wheel, one piece of the final jigsaw. A bike is a complicated piece of equipment. So for those of you that might need the point clarified; a bike must be built well in order to run well. The parts need to be correctly assembled, bearings greased, components aligned, bolts correctly tightened, cables tensioned, braking and gearing systems correctly set up, etc. This is a skilled process.

Add shipping, advertising, profit(!) and all the other activities involved in running a business and you finally get to the cost of the end product.

So can this be done for £LOW?

Considering the description of what goes into a bike, how is it possible for them to be retailed for £69, £99 etc by supermarkets, catalogue stores and on the internet? Through savings achieved from modern manufacturing methods? Computerized stock control? Reduction of costs through retailing online? No. All these are already factored into the very competitive costs of decent quality bikes. Those prices are achieved through cuts in quality at every stage of component manufacture and subsequent bike build. The resulting bike is good for nothing and can be a dangerous death trap.

Another anecdote

18 months ago I went round to pick up a young guy's bike. He'd bought it from a well known high street catalogue store for a hundred pounds or so. It had been marketed as having been reduced from £150, or maybe even as half price (another common trick). Just a few months old, it was already coming apart. He'd contacted the warranty department of this store and had been told to get it repaired and send them the bill. We repaired it (it needed a new wheel amongst other things) and returned it to him, pointing out the poor quality components throughout. Six months later he called again. It turned out the store had refused to refund him the repair bill (citing wear and tear or normal servicing needs if I remember correctly) and now he had further problems. Having already spent money on the bike he was reluctant to write it off. It was hard to believe it was only a year old; rust spots were plentiful and spreading, cheap chrome plating was peeling away in places, the poor quality suspension forks dead - it was a sorry state. But we fixed it up and took it back. After taking it back he said with a rueful expression - "I thought I was getting a bargain originally, but for what I've now spent I could have got a decent bike to start with". A harsh lesson, but further proof that you really do get what you pay for.

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What makes a BSO?

Now I can just hear the cynics out there thinking that I'm some sort of bike part purist. If it's not the latest top of the range, titanium coated, computer engineered, space tested, turboflipZX derailleur, then it's rubbish. Not so, though some of my customers are like that. You can get good quality bike parts for very reasonable prices, but when you scrape the bottom of the barrel you will get rubbish. Here are examples of some of the faults I have witnessed with BSOs:

- Plastic brake levers and arms (these flex, warp and go out of shape) resulting in brakes that, er, don't brake.
- Grip shifters (The gear changers you twist, similar to a motor bike throttle) are the shifter of choice on BSOs, a great invention but a lot more complicated than a standard lever. A gear shifter needs to make thousands of reliable changes and must hold a consistent position if the gear shifting is to work. BSOs use cheap, poorly made versions; they seize or snap at the first sign of trouble.
- Badly routed cables, wrong lengths - won't work.
- Headsets, bottom brackets, hubs poorly installed, not greased, cross threaded, loose.
- Thin, pressed steel derailleurs, warped and bent, unresponsive; won't hold position, let alone shift a chain.
- Forks installed back to front.
- Handlebars on back to front or upside down.
- Loose, loose - saddles, stems, seat posts, handlebars, grips, shifters, everything.
- Warped, untrued wheels.
- Cheap steel hubs where the axles have collapsed in.
- Rust and peeling paint spreading everywhere after just a short time exposed to the elements.

Bike in a box

Often when you buy a BSO you get it in a box. Apparently all that's needed is to unpack it, pump up the tyres, fit the pedals, make a few adjustments and you're away... hilarious. And what do they give you to do this? Da da! Yes, a strange shaped soft piece of metal with a lot of irregular shaped holes in it. Finally you get this heap of junk into a semi rideable state and what does it feel like? Terrible. You ride it down the road and it's heavy, clunky and unresponsive. The braking is poor and uneven. The gear shifting is a joke. Where is the pleasure in riding a bike like this?

Suspension

Suspension deserves a section of its own. Suspension in bikes - what a fabulous invention. You can get fixed frame bikes with a suspension fork known as 'hardtails' or bikes with both suspension forks and a variety of methods of having suspension in the frame known as 'full suspension' bikes or 'full-sussers'. The Mountain Bike came along in the 1980s and in many ways revolutionised cycling. A suspension bike is more complicated than its non-suspension sibling. A standard bike is designed to run along a continuous rolling surface, a road or track. A suspension bike is designed for throwing around, riding down the side of a mountain, off ledges, down jumps, across rocks, rough ground and many other surfaces. So guess what? If it's going to be able to take this sort of abuse and still work then it needs to have well made, good quality components or it will just fall apart. Cheap bikes are bad enough but cheap suspension bikes - please! Consider this: cheap bikes have poor quality wheels. For suspension to absorb the shock of riding a bike on an uneven surface these bumps must be transferred through the wheels into the shocks - but cheap wheels are not up to this, they just buckle and go out of shape. A susser frame has moving parts, a standard bike frame does not. Moving parts require maintenance and can go wrong, seize, break. Cheap moving parts don't last. I see suspension BSOs all the time, they don't last 5 minutes. If you want to get into mountain biking (and what a great thing to get into) you need to be prepared to spend a decent amount of money to buy a bike that is up to the task. If you want suspension for riding on the road think about a suspension seat post, a simple invention that can be a real bonus.

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All is not lost!

Modern manufacturing methods have enabled a relative reduction of the price of many consumer goods. The bicycle is not exempt from this. For £300+ you can choose from a range of well-built bikes utilising quality components for almost any purpose. £300 is not expensive. Look at the following table. For further information and sources see end of article.

	Average Weekly Wage	Cost of reasonable bicycle	No of Days to buy
1955	£8.25	£33	28
1980	£110.20	£200	12.7
2005	£518.70	£400	5.4

Today it takes less than an average week's wage to buy a good quality bicycle. Fifty years ago it took nearly a month. And the bike you'd buy today would be a far superior, more comfortable and responsive ride than its counterpart of yesteryear. You can sometimes get reasonable bikes for even less. Still not convinced? You still want to buy a BSO for £99? Believe me, it will not last. If you get two years out of it (no chance) that works out at £50 a year for a heavy, clunky, unresponsive ride. The £400 bike will last at least ten years. That's £40 a year for something that's a real pleasure to ride. See where I'm coming from?

Environmental Impact

By riding a bike you can pat yourself on the back for a number of reasons. Every journey you make is having a direct beneficial impact on the environment. A human on a bicycle is the most fuel-efficient system on the planet. By keeping yourself fit, you're reducing your demands on society as a whole and the health service in particular. People who cycle live longer, happier, more satisfied and better fulfilled lives. Well done. Just one thing though. It takes environmental resources to create the metal and parts for a bike, build that bike and then ship it round the world (nearly all new bikes are built in Asia). BSOs are just landfill waiting to happen. Are you willing to buy a new BSO each time the last BSO gives out on you and isn't worth repairing? Nice one. Some environmentalist. A good bike will pretty much last forever with regular maintenance.

Someone once said to me "why should I get my bike repaired when I can buy a new one for £xx. At that price I can buy a new one each year". So we've reached the era of the disposable bike. One of the most environmentally beneficial inventions of all time has become a source of waste and pollution, part of the throw away disposable culture. Incredible.

Conclusions

Well we've got to the end. Congratulations on getting here. Don't buy a cheap and nasty new bike, it's not good for you or the environment. The only beneficiary is the profits of the short sighted business selling it. If you want to buy a new bike don't short change yourself. Buy a decent bike for a few hundred pounds, A good bike could give you ten years of pleasure with maintenance. £30-50 a year doesn't seem excessive to me. So when you're sailing along one day making silky smooth gear changes, with the wind rushing through your hair and a responsive steed between you and the ground, remember this article and think. 'You know, that guy was right'.

Sources/Thanks/Notes

[Average wage figures](#) - thanks to Richard Hughes at the [Office for National Statistics](#).

Price of a reasonable bike - Figures deduced from a variety of sources. Including Vintage Catalogues at [Sheldon Brown](#) and a [1981 Report by the Competition Commission](#)

Also thanks to contributors to the [BikeBiz](#) industry bulletin board for invaluable assistance.

Disclaimer

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