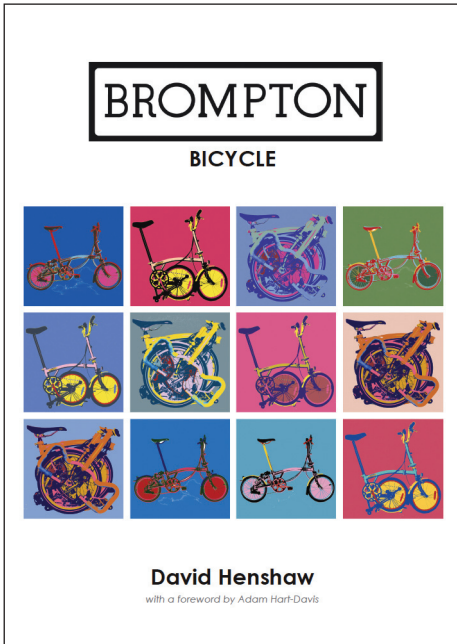


Book Review

Brompton Bicycle

David Henshaw

Reviewed by Tony Hadland



The only folding bike that people fold when they don't need to.' This comment on the Brompton sums up the genius of the design. Created a third of a century ago, the Brompton still sets the bicycling benchmark for compact portability. Now, David Henshaw has produced the book that many have long awaited - a comprehensive, readable, informative and beautifully illustrated history entitled simply *Brompton Bicycle*.

The volume is attractively presented, with numerous illustrations, some very rare, and the majority in colour. The Foreword is by author and TV presenter Adam Hart-Davis, who took to the Brompton whilst filming his television series 'Local Heroes', in the early 1990s. As Adam points out, 'David writes clearly and amusingly ... about the tortuous history of this superb bicycle.'

David briefly describes his own involvement with the Brompton - how he discovered it in 1991 and how it changed his life: 'If it wasn't for the Brompton, I might still be writing books about historic motor cars.'

A short history of folding bicycles then sets the scene. As early as 1878, Grout's Portable 'penny farthing' highlighted the key factor of wheel size. In the post-Suez era, Alex Moulton's development of 14-, 16- and 17-inch rims and tyres for adult cycles established the practical limits for wheel size reduction. Moulton had no interest in folding bicycles as such but the fact that some of his bikes separated for easier stowing stimulated interest in folders. David Henshaw recounts the nest of curates' eggs laid by imitators of the Moulton, including Raleigh's ironically named RSW Compact, the Russian tank of the folding bicycle world.

A groundbreaking development was the Bickerton - lighter and more compact than any previous commercially produced folder but flimsy and wobbly to ride. For some years, the Bickerton represented the state of the art in compact folding bicycles. As David explains, it was also the catalyst that stimulated Andrew Ritchie to try and do better.

Andrew is a gifted but shy person, who has successfully side-stepped publicity for most of his career. This makes his surprisingly cosmopolitan background all the more interesting - his ancestors include a Prussian Count and a Chancellor of the Exchequer. (Read the book to find out more!) Like Alex Moulton, Andrew graduated in engineering from the University of Cambridge, albeit a generation later. David highlights the inventor's initial



restlessness: 'Andrew Ritchie had shown a flair for engineering design, but chose to move into computers; he had a talent for computer programming, but moved into the world of commerce.' For a while Andrew even ran a business selling house plants to housewives.

The story of the Brompton's evolution is an heroic one, full of fascination, both in the technical ingenuity displayed, and in the human drama involved. For a private individual successfully to design and market a new bicycle is a huge and daunting task. It has led to at least one tragic suicide among my own circle of friends. That Andrew Ritchie succeeded is truly remarkable and you will need to read this book to understand just how he did it. It was certainly not helped by the giants of the industry, such as Raleigh, who twice rejected the Brompton. Andrew Ritchie must surely be excused a little schadenfreude now that Raleigh no longer manufacture bicycles in the UK, whereas his output, made by British workers in a British factory,

continues to climb, year on year, decade on decade.

As David Henshaw explains, by 1977 Andrew Ritchie had evolved the Brompton into a form we would still recognise today. From thereon, Andrew demonstrated a remarkable tenacity. The earlier restlessness was harnessed, tamed and directed. Where other designers might be tempted to make frequent major changes, a key aspect of the Brompton story is the continuous incremental development and refinement of the design.

David's book contains chapters on each phase of the Brompton's history. There is also a section on Brompton specials and useful information on using and maintaining a Brompton. The appendices include a detailed chronology, a guide to serial numbers, and charts showing profit and sales figures. At the back of the book, there are short sections on Brompton people and making a Brompton. The book is comprehensively indexed.

'Iconic' is an overused and clichéd term, but it certainly applies to the Brompton. *Brompton Bicycle* by David Henshaw is the definitive companion volume. Whether or not you own a Brompton, you will find this an interesting and inspiring read. I heartily commend it.

'Brompton Bicycle' will be published in early January. If you're intending to buy a copy as a Christmas present, we'll send a card to the recipient on the day, with delivery of a signed copy of the book following as soon as possible afterwards. You can place pre-Christmas orders with us by phoning Teresa on 01305 259998, Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday 10am to 1pm until Monday 21st December.

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