



# FIFTY-QUID BIKES

Secondhand hack bikes and discounted flat-packed bikes have one thing in common: price. So which is cheap and cheerful and which cheap and nasty?

**Chris Juden** compares

**Y**ou may have heard of bikes for as little as fifty quid, but as a keen cyclist I don't suppose you've ever aspired to own such a cheap and presumably nasty thing. You'll have seen them advertised maybe, in all the wrong places, never in proper bike shops – who refer to these cheapies as Bicycle Shaped Objects. With this article I aim to discover whether BSOs are as bad as the bike shops make out. What are the problems and can you fix them?

Why bother, since no self-respecting cyclist would want one anyway? To your friends, relations and colleagues, as a cyclist keen enough to join CTC, you are the bike expert. Someone's probably asked your advice already on buying, assembling or mending a BSO. You doubtless recoiled at the prospect. Next time this happens you'll be better informed.

Buying secondhand may get you something better just as cheaply, so we challenged three CTC staffers to get the best bike they could for under £50. By 'best' we meant most useful, a point that one participant chose to ignore! A friend of mine found a bike in a skip that he now rides to work every day, so that really can happen

– although I know Paul Holmes spent more than £50 on doing it up. Well, it was a genuine Raleigh Lenton Sports.

Another true story – an actual £50 bike – is the 1940s Raleigh 'All Steel Bicycle' I saw propped against a dustbin on my way to work one morning. The elderly lady owner hadn't been able to ride it for years. I took it home, gave it a polish, new tyres and tubes, greased all its bearings and flushed a whole can of Sturmey-Archer oil through its four-speed hub. My son found it a happy new home in Cambridge with a fellow student.

I also built my son a bike entirely from bits of old bikes, plus a few new parts I already had. That cost me nothing, but to buy all those parts, even at cycle jumble prices, would likely have cost at least £100.

The biggest problem with secondhand is that cheap bikes are wanted, in the main, by people who do not have enough knowledge of bicycles to avoid buying a heap of trouble. A fair amount of cycling knowhow is required to spot a real bargain and to make it roadworthy. So this way of getting a cheap bike needs the helping hand of a friendly local cyclist. Sounds familiar?

## THE BICYCLE SHAPED OBJECT

Universal Fusion, bought and reviewed by **Chris Juden**

Since it's only £50, I didn't try to cadge a free test on a Bicycle Shaped Object. We simply bought one. The first thing I noticed upon unpacking the bike was they'd sent the wrong model, but no complaints: we got an upgrade! It seems that [www.sterlinghouse.co.uk](http://www.sterlinghouse.co.uk) just sold their last £39.99 so-called mountain bike. This would've come with only 12 gears and steel rims, compromising performance uphill and down (especially the latter when wet!), but it met our £50 budget including delivery. That bargain basement model has vanished from their website and wasn't in the catalogue enclosed with the slightly more expensive model (usually £59.99) they actually sent – without explanation and at no extra charge!

New bikes for £50, whilst they do exist, are not that easy to find, not when you add delivery charges of up to £20. Sterling House charged only £9.95, giving them the edge over other suppliers with lower headline prices. You could say this isn't a £50 bike. I say it is if you're a really canny shopper. The British public is especially reluctant to pay very much for a bike. Although we're one of the wealthier European nations, our average new bike spend is on a par with Portugal and Greece.

### SELF ASSEMBLY

Our gents Fusion rigid frame mountain bike came very neatly packed, with protection in all the right places and a booklet of clear instructions for attaching the handlebars, saddle, front wheel and pedals. The self-assembly bike trade is much criticised by 'proper' shops, who point out, quite rightly, that one doesn't take to the road on a self-assembly bookcase! One mistake



Our Bicycle Shaped Object cost a princely £39.99, plus a tenner for delivery

that people often make when assembling a bike is to put the fork pointing backwards. I looked for ways to misunderstand these instructions but couldn't fault them. The correct fork position is described twice, very clearly, with illustrations. I guess some people just wade in without reading them.

With the front wheel I found a problem: one fork end was slightly crushed so the axle wouldn't fit properly. The box was probably dropped in transit, as the fork protector was also damaged at that point. It could happen to any bike at any price. It's just one of those things that a bike shop would easily tweak, as I did, but could result in Joe Public failing to fit the front wheel properly – with potentially disastrous results.

The other self-assembly howler is wrong side pedals. However you'd need to ignore six written instructions, plus colour coded stickers on both cranks and pedals, to make that mistake.

Apart from a screwdriver to align the reflectors and bell, all the tools needed were supplied and up to the job. The spanner didn't look great but fitted fine and was not made of cheese – hardened steel, I'd say. Obviously it would be safer if – as in France – it were illegal to sell bikes in kit form, but as long as Britain permits that practice it seems to me that Sterling House do as much as one reasonably could to avert mistakes – more, I reckon, than those who sell kit bikes costing ten times the price of this one.

### DOES IT WORK?

CTC office colleagues insist I mention that the first, most noticeable thing about this bike was an overpowering smell of cheap rubber. It may seem a trivial point, but is something to consider if you'd planned to keep a bike indoors. They wouldn't let me!

The tyres were already inflated at half pressure. Pumped up to maximum they rolled better, but still felt rather sluggish. More expensive tyres roll easier (and are less aromatic). However, my usual one-hour commute took only five minutes longer.

The wheels were round enough not to drag on the brakes, which were correctly adjusted and really worked. The gears worked too. Rear indexing was vague and needed a little adjustment, but shifting was more hit than miss. I think it's amazing to have any indexing at all at this price.



This is about as 'off-road' as you'd want to get on a flat-packed bike costing £50



The BSO's instructions were surprisingly good – especially regarding fitting the pedals

Cheap galvanised cables are okay when new, but corrosion can be expected to degrade the performance of brakes and gears quite soon, unless they're well greased. These cables seemed quite dry to me, and to have a shop strip out and re-lubricate them all would cost nearly as much as the bike. Towards the end of our short testing period the brakes already felt less effective and the plastic levers bent alarmingly under the force required to make an emergency stop.

The handgrips were thin and uncomfortable, but I've sat on far worse saddles. This one even had bag loops, albeit plastic that looked likely to snap, but they held onto a lightly loaded saddlebag for all of 24 miles.

Although any mountain bike is far from ideal transport (unless you live up a mountain), our BSO is at least half-way practical. If you're a fair-weather rider and can carry your few necessities in a small saddlebag, it'll do as it is. You could fit better tyres and if you wanted to do more it has the minimum necessary fixings for addition of mudguards and a luggage carrier.

At 14.8kg it's heavy for a bare bike, but not unreasonably so. The 18 gears span a range from 26 to 89 inches. It's enough to cope with steep hills and give this mountain-bike-shaped-object some genuine off-road capability. A sticker on the stem warns against jumping, but one seldom needs to do that on the average British bridlepath.

**DOES IT LAST?**

The first actual mountain bikes didn't have suspension either. You can have a suspension bike from Sterling House for only £79.99, but don't expect to enjoy it! Suspension adds weight and – if it works – absorbs more of your energy than the bumps you may meet en route to school or work. But suspension this cheap does not work, not efficiently and not for long – before rusting up, seizing up, or losing its damping. An indication of that is the single year for which Sterling House guarantee any suspension model, compared to the lifetime guarantee on the rigid steel frame and fork of the bike we bought. The lifetime of whom or what is not specified, but it's surely a whole lot longer than one year!

Other parts of this bike are likely to wear out or

cease to function properly a lot sooner than on a more costly bicycle. And when they do, they'll be harder to fix – although I didn't find any evidence of the soft-as-lead bolts with easy-strip threads of popular bike shop folklore. The main difficulty in fixing this bike is that a few replacement parts, at bike shop prices, will soon add up to more than you paid for it in the first place!

It is perhaps a mistake to even consider repairing this level of bike. What other possession, costing less than £100, would you not simply replace? This bike may not last very long, but at that price it doesn't have to. Set against the exorbitant cost of public transport in Surrey, this bike pays for itself in a mere 200 miles. I'd be in credit after only a fortnight of pedalling to work. After that I needn't care if it falls apart or gets stolen, just buy another. No need to repair it or to insure it. Why even bother to lock it? I don't like the throwaway society any more than you do, but that is where we're at right now and this bike fits right in.

**IS IT GOOD TO RIDE?**

We swapped around our £50 challenge bikes, commuted to work on them, and even went on a short group ride. Comparing notes afterwards, nobody really enjoyed riding the BSO but couldn't exactly put their finger on why. The saddle even got a few compliments. I guess we're accustomed to riding much nicer bikes: lighter ones with better tyres, and on which everything works more smoothly and positively. All of which combines to make cycling easy and fun, rather than merely okay.

"Most people don't want to pay much more than £50 for a bike because they don't know if they'll enjoy it. So they end up with a bike that almost ensures they don't"

One fork end was a bit crushed and needed fixing

Most people, i.e. non-cyclists, don't want to pay much more than £50 for a bike because they don't expect to do much cycling and don't know if they'll enjoy it. So they end up with a bike that almost ensures they don't. That's the Catch-22 of cheap bikes.



## OLD RACER, FREE TO GOOD HOME

Sun GT – sourced by Chris Peck

My first impulse to get a cheap bike was to look on eBay. I've bought bikes from there before but they tend to be overpriced and can even be stolen. I had located a decent 3-speed on one internet auction site but in the end I managed to find another one – for free – through an online cycle forum. The owner was about to send it to the dump and helpfully gave me a range of dates to collect. He was only too happy to see it going to someone who would be able to use it.

This 1970s sports bike cost almost nothing – just the train fare to fetch it plus a few spares



I live in London; the bike was in Kent. The train took about an hour (£9) and luckily left from five minutes walk away. It was another five-minute walk from the station to where the owner lived. I don't own a car and if the bike had been miles from a railway station there would have been no way I could have made the pick-up as easily as this.

The bike was a cheap road bike from the 1970s equipped with a pannier rack, a five-speed block, brake protector mudguards, and sturdy 'plumber's' tubing. There were some problems with it: the front hub had loose bearings; you couldn't reach the lowest gear; and the cables were fairly frayed. But as a bike for nipping to the shop without the slightest danger of it being stolen, it's perfect.

It's amazing the number of cycles out there mouldering in garages. When I volunteered at the Bike Station in Edinburgh, deliveries of these aged steeds were occurring several times a day. Once a bike recycling scheme becomes well known in an area it is astonishing how many bikes appear that just need a little bit of work to get them back on the road.



Apart from some fettling, I gave the Sun GT a new (old) saddle, handlebar tape and toe straps. Total estimated cost (including train fare): £20.

### REVIEWED BY CHRIS JUDEN

Chris is right: old mass-produced 'racers' (we called them sports bikes) are still easy and cheap to find. In the '70s every teenager had one, but when mountain bikes became the fashion you couldn't give them away. Yet they can be pretty useful bikes. An ex-CTC colleague commuted 10 miles each way on a succession of them. After riding his current steed to the point of no repair, Adrian would simply find another in the local paper's free ads, never paying more than £20. It's a very cheap and pretty quick way to travel.

The Sun GT comes from the beginning of that era when the only way to offset the stigma of cycling was to pretend you were training for the Tour de France. Its sporting pretensions are undermined by the joke shorty mudguards and extension 'safety' brake levers – rather unsafe if you reach for those when you need to make an emergency stop. Steel rims are also notoriously slippery when wet and the 26x1¼ size is not a good choice if you want a long-term relationship with your old racer. It's an obsolete size and replacement tyres can be hard to find, rims near impossible. This frame, however, has just enough clearance to squeeze in a pair of narrow 700C wheels.

Raleigh supplied a lot of these bikes and Sun is one of their many brands. As such it has Raleigh's 26tpi threads that make headsets and bottom brackets hard to find. The easiest source of spares for an old bike is often another old bike. But you need storage space for all the scavenged parts.

The wobbly front wheel was cured by adjusting the cone, after flipping it around so this was on the left side. Doesn't a wheel have two cones? Yes, but only one can be adjusted on old, cheap hubs and it must be kept on the left as there are no locknuts. On the right it may tend to screw inwards and crush the balls – ouch! It's just one of the traps for the unwary restorer of old bikes.

At 13.5kg the oldest bike was also the lightest, with a frame of slim steel tubes brazed into lugs. Bike snobs may sneer at plain gauge, unbranded tubing, but lugged-and-brazed is a quality way of building a frame that you'll not find nowadays on bikes costing under £1,000. After I'd dismantled the down-tube shifter and hammered its bent cable stop back into shape, removed, greased and eventually re-inserted the frayed

"Old mass-produced 'racers' are easy and cheap to find. In the 1970s, every teenager had one. When mountain bikes appeared you couldn't give them away"

cable, bottom gear became just within reach of the bent and worn rear mech – as it gently caressed the spokes!

With five gears from 42 to 85 inches, the Sun GT, like any old racer, was not one for steep hills. My commute isn't flat but the Sun GT proved its worth by shaving five minutes off my usual time; and on our bike-swapping rides it was unanimously voted the quickest by and of our motley bunch. The rear carrier, although a bit flimsy, also came in handy and though 32mm tyres are not designed for off-road, it even handled a bit of roughstuff.

Our favourite cheap runabout, by a country mile, was the old racer.

## LOT 254, ABANDONED HYBRID

Mongoose Crossway 200 – going, going, gone to **Debra Rolfe**



I had imagined police auctions to be shadowy affairs, conducted sporadically at remote industrial estates with only word-of-mouth publicity. This seemed to be corroborated when a simple internet search for 'police auctions London' did not turn up anything useful. A friend found Frank G. Bowen Ltd, auctioneers to the Metropolitan Police, listed on the website of my local cycle campaign. Against my expectations, Frank G. Bowen's website announced that their auctions were held every other Thursday on the edge of central London.

I arrived early to view the bicycles. This was not easy, as they were piled rather than displayed. Most of them were very cheap and not exactly new. I found a bike that looked promising, but then I noticed the undone rear brake. Was that because the wheel was buckled? I could not get close enough to the bike to tell.

The bidding began at noon. It took over an hour to get to the bikes. The first one was a new-looking name-brand mountain bike. People went crazy. It sold for about two-thirds of what it would have cost new in a shop. This continued with each new lot.

I won the auction for a Mongoose Pro Cycle hybrid with my bid for £41. On top of that I paid VAT and 'Buyer's Premium' and VAT on Buyer's Premium. The total came to £52.88. But for that I got a bike with full mudguards, a rack, and a working rear light!

A few hours after the end of the auction, I returned to collect my bike. I inflated the tyres and did a safety check in the car park. Then I rode home. The gears skipped every time I pulled away from a traffic light. The bike was impossibly heavy and sluggish.

The bike I purchased was of low quality to begin with and it had been ridden hard with little maintenance. If I had taken it to a bike shop, I would have walked out another £100 poorer.

I'm sure that it is possible to get a great bike at a police auction – but it helps if you know a lot about bikes, have the patience to sit through perhaps multiple auctions, and have a good deal of luck.

The police auction bike cost £52.88 after the 'buyer's premium' and VAT

### REVIEWED BY CHRIS JUDEN

Debra's right about the weight: 16.3kg. But considering that includes mudguards, carrier and light, it compares well with the BSO and took about the same time for me to ride home on.

I'm sure you could spend a ton in a bike shop doing it up, but with some oil on the chain, more air in the tyres and a few adjustments, it went okay. The gear shift still needed two clicks forward and one back to deliver the next gear, but I think this could probably be sorted for under a tenner with new cable casings. The chain is also worn, by about 1% (20 links i.e. 10 inches measure 10.1). Replace it now and a new chain might still run okay on the sprockets. If it didn't I'd put the worn one back on and get maybe another thousand miles out of it.

The sturdy rear carrier was a real bonus, meaning I could commute in comfort and carry shopping safely. With 21 gears from 23 to 94 inches it should cope with the steepest of roads. Yet it was such a lump of a bike that it was universally disliked. Grudgingly, everyone nevertheless admitted that it possessed all the necessary features of a useful and serviceable bike. Mudguards are good, but I'd be happier with safety release on the front, and apropos safety, this Mongoose reminded me that secondhand bikes sometimes have their brakes connected the opposite way to normal.

A few other things irked us about this bike: e.g. the strangely sticky handlebar grips and the general set of the handlebars, which – to be fair – we could easily have changed. In conclusion, I think Debra sourced the bike that came closest to meeting the average person's practical everyday needs.



## EBAY BMX BARGAIN

### Mosh Bad Boy Pro – made by Giant, won by Richard George

Building a bike for £50 is no easy task. My initial plan was to source a cheap frame, or salvage one of the rusty frames that have been stripped of their parts and left to dangle from the railings near my house. But with no cycle jumbles on the horizon, I was unable to get working wheels, tyres and gears for £50 – let alone comfy things like a saddle and some handlebars. It was obvious that I would have to look out for a complete bike instead.

eBay and £56 got this BMX. Practical? No. But some kids (even big kids) might like it...



I turned to eBay, looking for a vintage road bike, which I could convert into a winter fixed-wheel once the challenge was over. Unfortunately, half of London must have had the same idea; even proper rust buckets were fetching over £60.

eBay is a world where City traders forgo their market instincts and pay £150 for a knackered 1960s frame just because it has track ends! Bikes at a fiver with 30 minutes to go would, after ten minutes of frantic bidding, ultimately change hands for £100. There were lots of rubbish mountain bikes for a tenner, but frankly I wasn't interested. A two-ton full suspension 'bicycle' belongs in a flat-pack box or a skip, not my garden shed.

In the end I found a BMX whose owner was off on holiday two days after the auction finished, and needed someone to pick it up straight away. This requirement kept most bidders away, and my bid of £56 won me the bike, which I picked up the next day.

Now you may be dismissive of BMXes, and I'm sure I'll struggle to keep up with the others on our rides, but my bike has the highest build quality of all three secondhand bikes.

It would be perfect for a teenager to tear about on – and far less likely to collapse when enthusiastically jumped off the kerb. After all, anyone spending £35 a year on CTC membership is unlikely to be buying a £50 bike for themselves.

### REVIEWED BY CHRIS JUDEN

Richard's right that this is a child's bike, commonly used not only for stunts but also commuting to school. Richard's reluctance to bring the bike into the office, since he had to ride it nine or ten miles, is some indication of how poor a means of transport a BMX is.

It also limited our test ride, since nobody could bear to go more than a mile or two either standing on the pedals or trying to pedal the single 54in gear with their knees about their ears! You could say we're all too big for it, and yet bikes just like this are ridden by well-grown teenagers, so it's interesting to discover how much they are prepared to suffer in order to look cool. We just suffered!

Another good point made by Richard is the cost of spare parts, especially if you have to buy them new. These can rapidly transform your idea of just fixing up that old bike into something more expensive than a whole new bike. That kind of project works best if, like me, you already have a garage full of bits of old bikes that were too good to throw away.



I'll not attempt to justify using a BMX for transport, just point out that – like many a BMX – ours had no front brake, which made it not only unsafe but also illegal to ride on the road. Stopping distance, even with the best rear brake, is double.

I said we suffered. I lied. I'm sure we didn't look cool but we did have fun! If we'd had to ride further it would've been a different story, but for a short ride, lots of stops and messing around, any bike beats walking and a BMX is good for a lark. Andy Hawes (top) even rediscovered his misspent BMX youth and showed us how it's supposed to be done. So next time you see a teenager on his way to school, on his BMX, please don't sneer: he's on a bike at least...