



Geoff Apps: MTB pioneer

Carlton Reid examines the contribution to MTB history of **Geoff Apps**, the 'English Gary Fisher'

The mountain bike as we know it was born in the 1970s in Marin County, USA. Yet an English version of the mountain bike already existed. It was crafted by Geoff Apps, who had been tinkering with his off-road bicycle since the late 1960s.

Apps now lives in Scotland – he moved to Coldstream when *New Cyclist* magazine, on which he was a technical writer, upped sticks there from York – but he was formerly based in the Chiltern Hills. His first commercially-available bike was the Range-Rider Cross Country Cycle in 1979. The upright Range Rider – later to form part of Apps's Cleland Cycles brand – was built for riding through mud, for hacking up and down wet, slimy hillsides. It had mudguards and obscure studded tyres from Finland.

Aside from those tyres and an eclectic mish-mash of international components, some from the world of trials motorcycling, the Range-Rider was English through and through. Apps sold a few but missed the mountain biking wave. Nevertheless, the Range-Rider turned heads, got people thinking.

Apps was also in touch with the Marin County pioneers from the earliest days. His 700C tyres from pre-phone Nokia were shipped to Gary Fisher and Charlie Kelly. They had a frame built for the wheel size by Tom Ritchey: if it weren't for Nokia's supply problems all MTBs today might have been 29ers and not the 26-inch standard.

I rode with Apps in the 1980s, trying out the successor machine to the Range-Rider. Apps's Wendover Bashes were among the earliest MTB events in the UK and helped fire up an enthusiasm for mountain biking from the early adopters like me.

By the time I was writing about the Wendover Bash, Apps's Aventura mountain bike was already losing ground to the likes of the first Ridgeback, the Dawes Ranger, the Specialized Stumpjumper and the Muddy Fox Courier.

Geoff Apps faded from view, but has continued to develop his bike (see picture). Some of his original ideas later became standard



“Apps sold a few bikes but missed the mountain biking wave. Yet his Range-Rider got people thinking”

on MTBs, such as twist-grip gears and sloping top tubes, and he was using big rear blocks in the 1960s. Apps doesn't fully agree with this, as not all of the features on Cleland Cycles were adopted: 'Although many mountain bikes do have sloping top tubes and twist-grip shifters, they do not feature hub gears, roller-brakes, full-length mudguards, a chainguard, a skate-plate, a high centre-of-gravity, short-reach handlebars, a hub dynamo and lights, nor swing pedals.

'By 1986, the height of the boom, I'd been developing my ideas for 20 years. I'd had to think through design solutions on my own. Once millions of mountain bikes appeared, which differed significantly from what I thought to be the

most logical design solution, the majority went with the majority.'

Apps swam against the tide for many years. He rode with Rough Stuff Fellowship members (it was his appearance in a RSF journal that alerted two RSF members in America, Fisher and Kelly, to his work) but even RSF members thought his ideas were odd.

'The attitude was that riding off-road was, at best, a necessary evil. Even the RSF would wax lyrical about the experience of finding themselves somewhere remote, but if the ride experience was ever mentioned, it was to say how difficult or inconvenient it was.

'The idea of seeking out and delighting in riding rough terrain was utterly alien to all the cyclists I met and talked to. Rough Stuff riders would get off and walk when I was able to keep riding.

'Cycling as it is now was inconceivable [in the 1960s and '70s] but I had my own fantasies about machines, the capabilities of those machines, and fantasies that it would be really popular.'

The fantasies came true but it is Fisher and Kelly who are always known as the 'fathers of the mountain bike'. That there was an English 'father of the mountain bike' is a lot less well known.

For more information about Geoff Apps's bikes, visit www.cleland-cycles.co.uk