

The Brompton

Most cyclists regard folders as good for a novel test-spin around an empty parking lot, but when it's time to ride, get a real bike. I did, for 30 years, but the Brompton straightened me out.

Andrew Ritchie first developed the Brompton more than 20 years ago, and the one you buy today is fundamentally identical. When you ride a Brompton, you are riding a highly evolved, thoroughly fine-tuned product of a guy who's really smart and has had lots of time to make it right. For what the Brompton is intended to be, it is perfect.

For me to actually like the bike, I had a few hurdles to get over. For one, I'm an idiot when it comes to internal gears, and the Brompton has Sturmey-Archer internals. So, when I flatted the rear tire and went to take off the rear wheel to fix it, the mess of weird plastic that comprises and encloses the gear shifting mechanism and the chain tensioner was as foreign to me as a lug is to Klein. I tried and failed to fix the flat while the rear wheel was still on the bike, so I was forced to read the Owners Manual. To make a long, long story short, I removed the wheel, had loose pieces everywhere, and still managed to get it all back together and working perfectly. If I can do it, anybody can.

The Brompton is not a folder in the same league as an S and S-coupled bike, or even a Bike Friday. Those are more normal-like, and if you're after a bike that feels 95 to 100% like a regular bike, and you're willing to spend 7 to 18 minutes folding it, and you're prepared to carry a bigger folded package, then they're good ones. But not all folders have that goal.

The Brompton is best suited to sub-ten mile rides, commutes and errands. It's a quick, tough, clever little luggage carrier that's a blast to ride and handles great. It's quicker than a lot of bikes, partly due to its small wheels. At first ride, it's startling, but you get used to it right away and come to like it. At least, I did.

Folding

It folds designed to fold to the size of carry-on luggage in just 20 seconds, and they're 20 simple, stress-free seconds. If you're slow it'll take you 30. If you're blind it'll take you 45. The Brompton folds fast and



The Full Brompty, with the front pannier, stuff on the rear rack, and duded up with a Brooks saddle. This bike is a gas to ride and useful tool.

gets small, so you can take it almost anywhere.

Lights, Fenders, Action

You can get it with fenders and mudflaps and a generator light and a rear rack and a front bag, so you can ride it in horrible weather. You can get it with neat, easy-on/easy-off capacious bags, so you can carry more than a grocery-bagsworth of groceries. If that's not enough, use the rear rack and haul up to 20 more pounds of gear. The Brompton is the worker-utility bike that just happens to be the smallest, easiest to fold folder out there. For luggage-hauling trips of 10 miles

or less combined with quick and easy folding to an incredibly compact size, the Brompton is the bike to beat.

I ride it a minimum of 120 miles a month. It's not my main bike, but for certain things, it's just right. I keep a front pannier on it, and the rear rack is ready for most things unexpected. It has fenders and lights, and I've made many nighttime shopping trips on it. My 12-year old Kate, who is 5-foot 2, alternates between it and her Priest-barred mountain bike on her rides to school. We can ride the same bike, because the Brompton fits riders under 5 feet and up to 6-5.

I have about seven bikes, and I'm glad one of them's a Brompton. For a fun-to-ride, quick-folding, superstar utility bike, it's the one to beat, and is a true original.

DETAILS

FRAME. Steel. Some of it is Reynolds 531. Made in England.

WHEELS. Two, 16 x 1 3/8-inch. Alloy rims, schrader valves, spokes. Various options available, wheelwise.

GEARING. Internal, 3- or 5-speed Sturmey-Archer. One chainring stock, but you can fit a double or triple. Stock gear ranges vary with the model and options, but generally are from the low-to-mid 40s to high 80s or low 90s. If you get the 3-speeder, you get the classic Sturmey-Archer trigger; the 5-speed, being more high tech, comes in resin, looks terrible, and works fine. Sturmey-Archer just went out of business, may not be back, and Andrew Ritchie is looking at non-British alternatives.

COST. Between \$800 and \$1500, depending on options.



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OPTIONS

REAR RACK AND GENERATOR LIGHT. There are lots of options on the Brompton, but they're based on just two models, a Light and a Touring. The Light lacks a rear rack and generator lights; the Touring has both. The rack looks capable of carrying heavy loads, but I've had just 25 pounds on mine.

BAGS. There are 3 options for front carrying bags:

- 1) An open-topped folding "basket" sized to carry a bag-and-a-half's worth of groceries;
- 2) A zipper-topped "pannier" bag that's not quite as deep, but at least won't let stuff get wet in the rain (I have that one);

3) A new, bigger pannier that carries a lot more stuff.

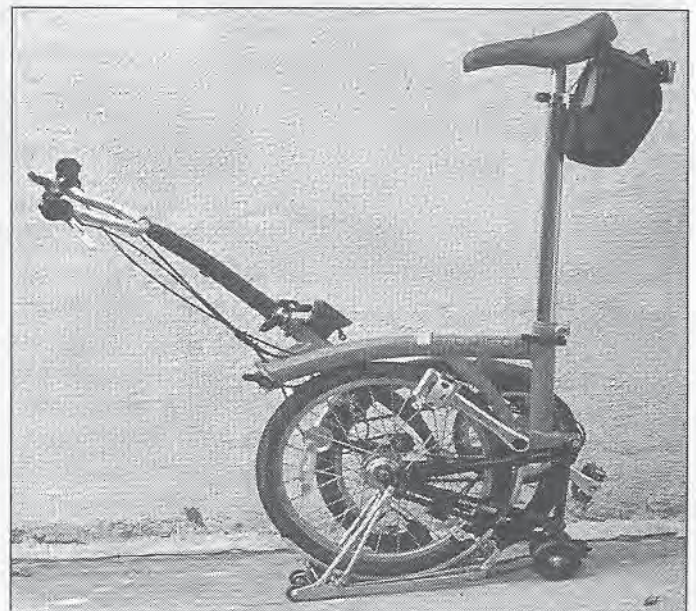
The bags are made by Carradice; the rack, by Nitto. The rack has a built-in handle for easy carrying. The saddle pouch in the picture below contains a cover, useful when you're packed on a train with a muddy bike. There's also an Ortlieb-made backpack option, and a Samsonite hard case you can trail behind the bike for even more stowage room, and stuff the bike inside when you need to. That way, you can check it in as luggage and not get stung for the bike fee.

GEARS. Either model can be had with 3 or 5 internal gears—82", 62", and 46" on the 3-speed, and 92-78-62-49-41 on the 5-

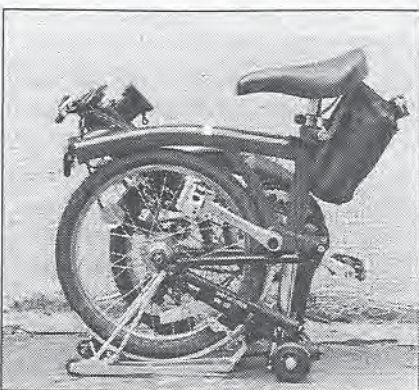
FOLDING



Step 1. Lift the bike and let the rear wheel flop underneath. Turn the front wheel a bit to the left so's the rear don't hit it. The bike rests on roller wheels, and is stable and ready for further folding.



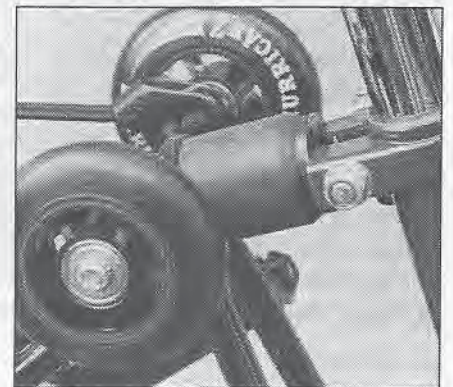
Step 2. Loosen the main frame joint and flop the front half of the bike backwards, hooking a special clip on the wheel axle over a chainstay.



Step 3. Loosen the handlebar joint and flop it down, engaging a clip that prevents it from loosening. Step 4. Then lower the saddle to lock it all in place.



Front view of the folded Brompton. The left pedal (as an option) folds flat.



The skate wheels become rollers for the folded bike. The black cylinder behind the seat cluster is a bumper-suspension.

speed. Either model can be had with the same swoop of gears reduced by 18 percent. I assume that's with a different chain-wheel or a bigger rear cog.

OTHER. The brake is a Taiwanese-made Brompton-design dual-pivot sidepull, quite powerful. The crank is cheap-style, but works fine. The standard pedals are Taiwanese plastic Unions, but others will fit. There's a folding left pedal option, and that

one's aluminum, made just for Brompton.

There are many Brompton-specific parts, and all spares and replacements are available.

WEIGHT. About 24 1/2 pounds for the 3speed Touring model.



H. Here's the part that gives me the willies—the weird and unfamiliar chain tensioner and internal gearshift mechanism.

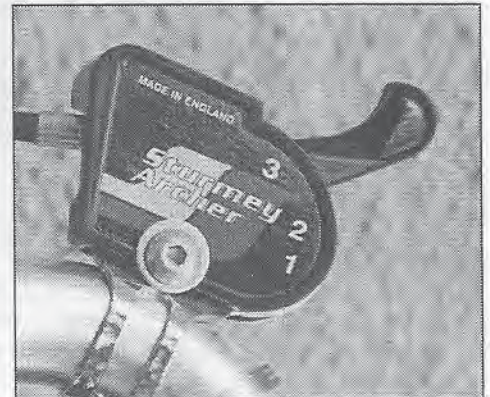


J. Here's the stout metal rack of the front pannier sliding solidly over the block. There's a trigger release below it, cleverly hidden from criminals who would have what is rightfully yours, yet convenient enough for a 2-second quick release.

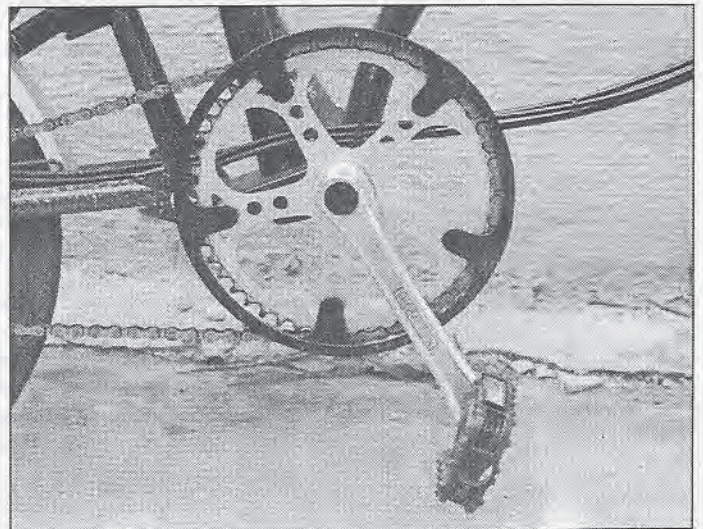
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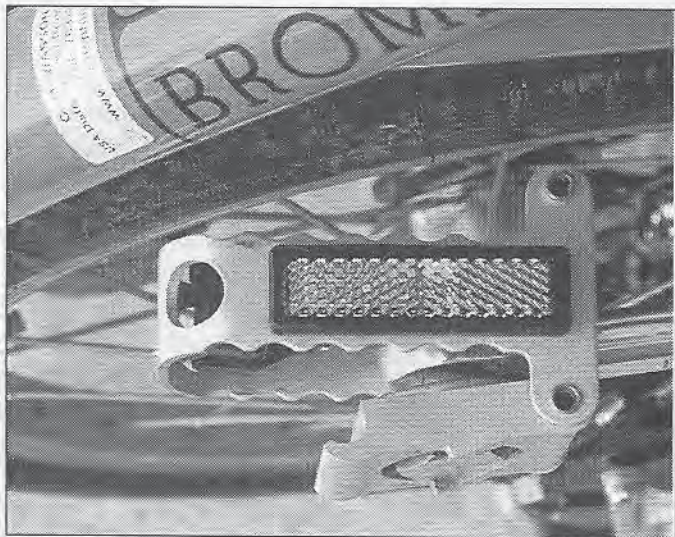
I. Here's the front pannier mounting block. It's a heft hunk of plastic.



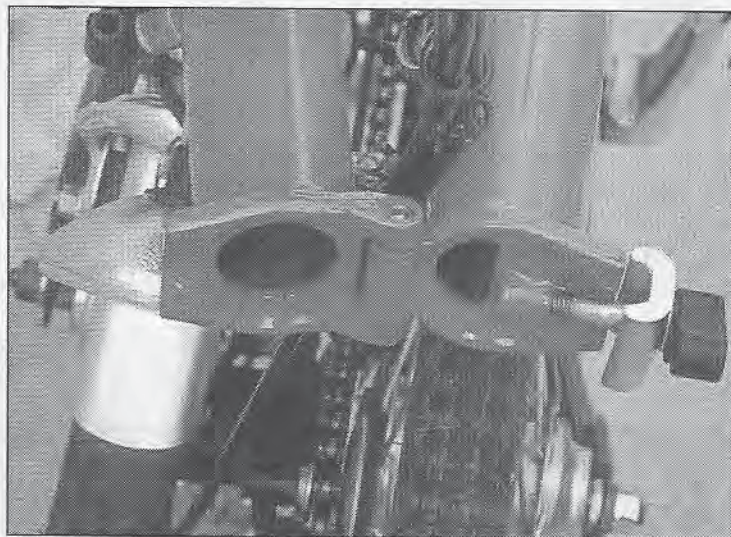
The 3-speed, the classic-and-now-dead-but-there-are-still-many-in-the-pipeline Sturmev-Archer trigger shifter. Unchanged for a century or so. Sturmev-Archer invented the planetary gear, without which your SUV wouldn't be able to wiggle its way through that preschool parking lot.



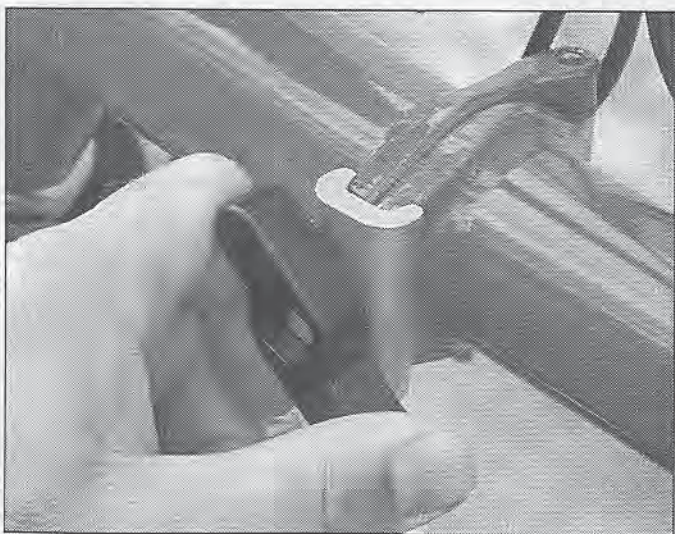
K. The Brompton crank has a good low Q Factor (150mm between the pedals), but other than that, is nothing to write home about; and the plastic pedals won't wow them at the bike show, either. But they work fine. It's a funny folder, after all!



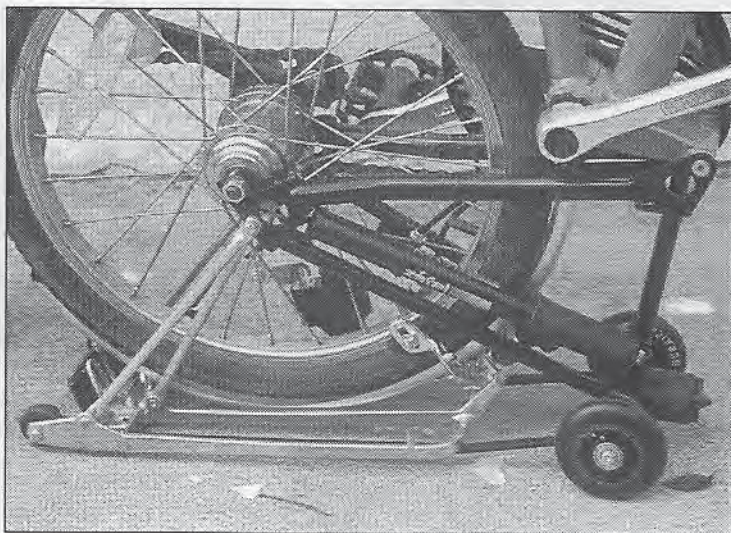
L. The optional folding pedal. The other one is plastic. Forget cycling shoes with these pedals. Rubber soles grip well, nothing else does



M. Here's a hinge, open. Raleigh copied this design many years ago, though not with Andrew Ritchie's blessing. It closes up securely, no problem.



N. Here's a hinge being closed. There's not a lock or anything, but you can tell when it's good and tight.



O. Parking detail. You lift up the rear end of the Brompton, and the rear wheel swings underneath it all.



P. An optional telescopic seat post extension accommodates guys with really long legs. You can also get a longer standard seat post. Oh heck—if you really want to know more, get a brochure from Channell Wassoon.

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