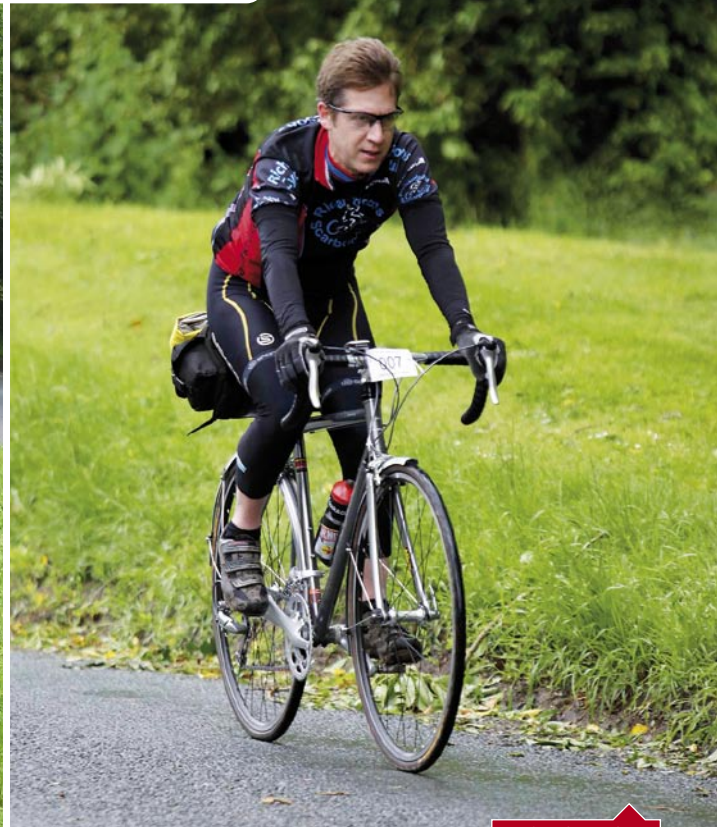


BIKE TEST



DAWES CLUBMAN



RIDGEBACK MERCURY

Near left: by Phil O'Connor/SportivePhoto.com. Others by Dan Joyce

ROAD BIKES FOR NON-RACERS

Audax bikes

For anything but racing, 'audax' or 'training' bikes are a more practical UK choice than their close-clearance cousins. **Dan Joyce** tests a Ridgeback Mercury and a Dawes Clubman

▶ **IT'S THE** wettest June ever. I'm taking part in the CTC Ron Kitching Challenge Ride and Sportive. Water is spraying off the back wheel of the bike in front, up the rider's back and into my face, to the extent that I can't tell if it's raining. In the UK, mudguards are a year-round road bike accessory...

That assumes you can fit them. Most road bikes lack the clearance even if they have the eyelets. You need a frame and fork designed around 57mm-drop sidepulls rather than the usual 49mm, to provide room for the mudguard and a tyre that's 2-5mm fatter. What's perhaps surprising, even though clearance costs nothing and doesn't slow you down, is how rare such bikes are. Trek make some. Most of the rest are designed in the UK because they're designed for the UK.

The Mercury is one of four road bikes from

Ridgeback. There's a cheaper aluminium Radium (£749.99); a higher-spec steel Platinum (£999.99); and the disc-braked Cerium (849.99). All are designed for 'everything from audax to commuting'. The Clubman is one of two bikes in Dawes's audax range. There's also the Century SE for £999.99, with a mix of Sora and Tiagra.

Frame & fork

Fellow Ron Kitching riders at first thought the Ridgeback Mercury might be titanium. It's not it's Reynolds 520 chrome-moly steel with a carbon fibre bladed fork, covered in titanium – or mercury – coloured paint.

Ridgeback call the 54cm size 'small'. I'm average sized and it offered me just the right reach for a less racy riding position, as well as enough seatpost to attach an SQR block.

Even in small, the front centres distance hasn't been unduly compromised: there wasn't *much* room but there wasn't any toe overlap with my size 42 clipless shoes.

There's just space for both mudguards and 28mm tyres to squeeze under the brakes. It's nice to see two sets of eyelets, for rack and guard, at the rear dropouts. While I would use a saddlebag on this kind of bike, a rack will be useful if you plan to use it as a commuter or a light tourer.

The Dawes Clubman also has a Reynolds 520 steel frame, here finished with a deliberately retro paint job. There's a reinforcing gusset under the down tube where it joins the head tube. I'm not sure it needs this; steel is tough, as long as the tube walls aren't too thin – and these aren't. There are eyelets for mudguards and a rear rack,



RIDGEBACK MERCURY



although only one set at the dropouts. This carbon fork has straight blades, which doesn't make any detectable difference apart from aesthetics.

The frame, also 54cm since the next one up is a 57cm, is slightly longer in the top tube than the Ridgeback. The front centres distance is the same, however, because the head angle is a bit steeper. So I still had toe clearance.

Equipment

The Ridgeback is 9-speed, mostly Shimano Sora, with a compact double; the Dawes is 8-speed, mostly Shimano 2300, with a triple. Both use STI levers with sideways exiting gear cables that could foul a bar bag.

The cassettes are too small on both bikes. On an audax or sportive ride, you never run out of gears at the top end; you run out of gears at the bottom, when your legs are tired and you hit a long, steep hill. At that point, even one lower gear can mean the difference between enjoying the ride and enduring it – or bailing out entirely, and trudging uphill in your cleats.

The Ridgeback has an 11-25 cassette and a 34-50 chainset. Some road cyclists will tell you that you can get up 'anything' on 34/25. What they mean is: they will. I can too but

don't always want to. It's a shame that the Mercury doesn't have an 11-28 cassette. The Tiagra derailleurs would cope and you'd have a 33in bottom gear, like the Dawes.

If you wanted something lower still, you'd need a Shimano mountain bike rear derailleur and 9-speed cassette. It's a straightforward upgrade and the gears will index fine. In fact, Ridgeback take this approach with the Mercury's Cerium stablemate: it marries a Deore rear derailleur and 11-32 cassette with a Shimano 2300 8-speed shifter.

The Dawes Clubman has an even narrower cassette: a 12-25. But because it has a triple, you gain the 33in bottom gear that the Ridgeback lacks. It's a bit easier on steep hills, although I still missed a sub-30in gear. That would mean a new derailleur for the Dawes as well as a new cassette, as a Shimano 2300 mech won't cope with anything bigger than 26 teeth.

In terms of shifting performance, the 8-speed equipment on the Dawes loses little to the Ridgeback's 9-speed. The triple chainset does contribute to the half kilo extra weight that the Dawes carries. On the other hand, you do get that lower gear, and you don't find yourself double-shifting or wishing for an in-between-sized chainring like

1 You use the drops much more with a compact drop bar

2 Two pairs of eyelets at the dropouts is a nice touch. The cassette is too small, however

you sometimes do with a compact.

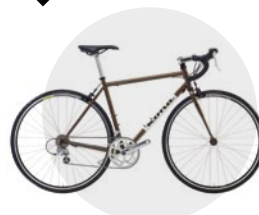
The Ridgeback has nicer tyres. Continental Gatorskins seem tougher and easier rolling than Vittoria Zaffros. There was some spoke unwinding in the Dawes wheels, suggesting they will need spoke key attention sooner, but the wheels stayed true during the test.

I didn't like the Dawes mudguards. They're oddly wide. More significantly, there's no breakaway clip on the front one, so if something got jammed underneath you could take a dive.

The ride

Both bikes have enough steerer tube remaining to put the handlebar

Also consider



1) Kona Honky Tonk £850

Designed at the request of a Kona team rider who lives in rainy Portland, this is similar to the Ridgeback Mercury but with a steel fork. konaworld.com



2) Boardman Road Race £585

Reduced from £650 at time of writing, the aluminium-framed, carbon-forked Boardman has deeper drop brakes, despite its name. Excellent value. halfords.com



DAWES CLUBMAN

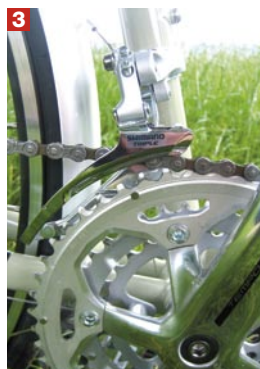
as high as the seat, so can be set up for long-distance or leisurely riding comfort. The shorter reach of the Ridgeback suited me better but a stem change would eradicate the difference.

Contact points are fine on both bikes. A compact drop bar is just what you want on an audax bike, offering lots of hand positions without requiring a radical racing crouch. I preferred the wider bar and thicker tape of the Ridgeback but found the faux leather Dawes and modern-looking Ridgeback saddles equally comfortable.

The steel frames and carbon forks of both bikes may improve riding comfort a little compared to less yielding aluminium. Mostly it's the tyres, which have bigger air pockets than a racer's 700x23C. That's more obvious on the Ridgeback's 28mm tyres than the 25mm tyres of the Dawes. The former improved confidence as well as comfort, rolling securely down the rain slick cobbles of Micklegate while companions on higher-pressure 23mm racing tyres were hesitant.

Both bikes fall within the normal road bike range in terms of trail. The Dawes has less, due to its steeper head angle, so steers more sharply. I was seldom aware of this but I think if I'd been riding tired I'd have preferred the Ridgeback's slightly more robust steering – a product of its slacker head angle, wider handlebar and shorter stem.

The lower bottom gear of the Dawes is a clear benefit. Riding in the North York Moors, I was often in



3 It's 'only' 8-speed gearing but even entry-level Shimano works fine – and you do get a triple

4 57mm drop sidepulls provide ample room for a mudguard, without it skimming the tyre



the Ridgeback's bottom gear and wanting something lower.

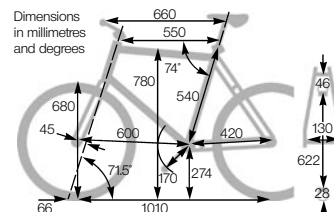
Summary

I'd like bigger cassettes for both bikes, especially the Ridgeback Mercury, and I'd replace the mudguards on the Dawes Clubman. Other than that, these are both nice, multipurpose road bikes. They're not especially light but they're comfortable, practical, and versatile. You could even remove the guards and fit faster-rolling rubber for a summer sportive if you wanted.

The extra £50 for the Ridgeback is justified by the step up from 8-speed to 9-speed. There are other details that would make it, for me, the better buy: primarily mudguards, tyres, and fit. Yet the Dawes offers something that many road bikes these days don't: a triple chainset. That gives you one lower gear and a front shift that doesn't spoil your cadence like a compact can.

Tech specs

Dimensions in millimetres and degrees



RIDGEBACK MERCURY

Price: £899.99

Weight: 10.4kg (without pedals)

Sizes: 52, 54 (tested), 56, 58, 60

Frame & fork: Reynolds 520 CrMo frame, fittings for rack, m/g, 2 bottles. Carbon fibre fork with alu' steerer and m/g fittings.

Wheels: 28-622 Continental Gatorskin tyres; Alex R450 alu' rims; 32x3 2.0mm p/g spokes; Shimano 2200 hubs.

Transmission: Shimano Sora chainset 50/34;

Shimano external BB; HG53 chain; Shimano 11-25 9-speed cassette; Sora front mech; Tiagra rear mech; Sora STI levers. 18-speed, 36-122in.

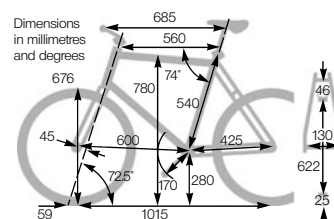
Braking: Tektro R358 dual pivot.

Steering & seating: 420x31.8mm alu' Ergo Audax bar; 90mmx7' alu' stem; 1 1/8in threadless h/set; Road SL saddle; 27.2mm SL alu' seatpost.

Accessories: SKS mudguards.

Contact: ridgeback.co.uk

Dimensions in millimetres and degrees



DAWES CLUBMAN

Price: £849.99

Weight: 11.0kg (without pedals)

Sizes: 51, 54 (tested), 57, 60

Frame & fork: Reynolds 520 CrMo frame, fittings for rack, m/g, 2 bottles. Carbon fibre fork with alu' steerer and m/g fittings.

Wheels: 25-622 Vittoria Zaffiro tyres; Alex R450 alu' rims; 32x3 2.0mm p/g spokes; hubs Shimano 2200 (rear) & Dawes (front)

Transmission: FSA Tempo triple chainset 50/39/30; square taper

cartridge BB; HG53 chain; Shimano HG50 12-25 8-speed cassette; Sora triple front mech; Shimano 2300 rear mech; Shimano 2300 STIs. 24-speed, 32-111in.

Braking: Shimano BR-R450 dual pivot.

Steering & seating: 400x31.8mm alu' compact drop bar; 105mmx7' stem; 1 1/8in threadless h/set; leather-look saddle; 27.2mm alu' seatpost.

Accessories: mudguards.

Contact: dawescycles.com