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road test:
oval concepts r700 stem
and r710 handlebars

it's amazing what you notice when you're not actually looking. month after month goes by with advertisements appearing for handlebars and stems, and unless you're actually looking to replace same, they are just so much eye candy. but the appearance of an oval concepts advert for their r700 stem clicked past the eye candy level because they looked different. now different doesn't always equal good but the difference here was the four bolts threading in from the back of the stem. you will perhaps agree that most, if not all, the other stems you may have witnessed have the bolts at the front.

if you live near salt sea air that precipitates in a horizontal vector (driving rain) then the two or four bolts holding the faceplate and consequently the handlebars in place, have quite likely rusted - unless they are of the stainless or titanium variety. and probably just as importantly, if you are clumsy oafed enough to strip a thread during the affixation process, it's not the whole stem that needs replacing.

oval concepts are a swiss company manufacturing a wide range of bars and stems from both alloy and the ubiquitous carbon as well as producing aero bars that look as if they were originally made for the american military, and some nifty aero brakes. the uk importers



are upgradebikes, who very kindly responded to my request to road test not only one of these delectable stems, but a matching pair of bars with the highly desirable 'classic bend'. those who may have read my colnago road tests will be aware that i am not at all in favour of the so-called anatomic variety.

but the quality of service doesn't stop there. if you can find a decent pair of classic bend bars these days they seem to have unfailingly inherited oversizeness. oval provide the r710 in both old fashioned 26mm diameter as well as the contemporary 31.8mm. guess which one i asked for? they're available in four widths: 380/400/420 and 440mm as well as two drops (135/144mm). handlebar heaven as far as i'm concerned. the undersizing complements the narrow carbon tubes of the c40 - if



you own a cannondale you may want to think big. these would not look at all out of place on a saronni master x-lite.

the stem that started it all offers even more to the discerning roadie - you can have the old fashioned 26mm clamp or the uber trendy 31.8mm, but obviously you would need the appropriately sized bars to fit. there are also two angles available 84 degree or 73 degree. the latter, placed 'down' the way gives a horizontal stem - the 84 degree would point slightly skywards: not so much my idea of fun. and then there's the length: the 26mm/84 degree is available in a stumpy 50mm to a tom boonen 150mm, while the other two varieties reach from 80mm to 130mm.

despite endlessly droning on about the lack of one inch

steerer compatibility, nothing's going to, or has changed in this area of mass manufacture. all the oval stems are built for a 28.6mm steerer (one and an eighth inch) so if, like the c40, your steerer is the more than adequate one inch (25.4mm) then you need the 'weighs nothing at all' alloy shim to ensue compatibility. c'est la vie.

to make our way back to the reason that the stem was noticeable in the first place - those four bolts - it didn't dawn on me that they might form the basis for an interesting mechanical wrangle. now before you get disappointed, this does have a happy ending based on my honours degree in hindsight. allen bolts i would normally wind into place using my trusty park multi-tool, except the stem gets in the way. employing another park tool with a 4mm angled allen key, all was exasperatingly

bolted into place. of course, those sniggering at the back of the class are saying 'why didn't you use a standard l shaped allen key?' yes that occurred to me the morning after, but using joined up thinking, it might be as well to clamp the bars approximately into position before attaching stem to bike. of course if you're having the local shop fit them then that would explain the yawns. fitting levers to bars was easy peasy, but disappointment reigned briefly on discovering only one nation under a groove. my existing bars had cable grooves front and back, but the ovals only indented on the front. the guides on campag levers allow routing for both eventualities, and after cabling up, wrapping new colnago ribbon over the top, has presented itself as a godsend - hand comfort joy. a negative has proved to be positive. so how has this improved cycling life. well, if truth be



told, i really wasn't expecting any change at all, and was rather gobsmackingly surprised to discover that there was quite a substantial difference (and after around 200km, i'm still aware of it). i don't have a lot of faith in the current trend for stiffness everywhere (usually at the expense of comfort), but the oval bar stem combination exudes stiffness of a magnitude higher than the combo it replaced. yet there is no loss of comfort at all. some of this was to be expected when moving from a two bolt clamp to a four bolt offering. two bolts each side can clamp the bars over a wider area which can't help but be stiffer and ultimately stronger. the two steerer clamp bolts oppose one another with a diagonal vertical split that is echoed in the alloy shim to fit the one inch steerer on the colnago. the shim has a flat top that lets the headset cap exert a suitable amount of pressure on the lower regions of the chris king headset - tightened at time of fitting, the headset has shown no signs of play, despite bouncing over islay's roads and more than a few cattle grids.

it turns out that the four backward bolts are stainless steel which leads me to question why these are not mandatory on every stem in the whole world. we haven't entered the season of horizontal rain up here yet, but happiness is mine that when it does and i emerge at the other side, these four will still be shiny. despite measuring at 130mm, the oval stem is a tad longer than my previous handlebar holder which, it turns out, may have been a smidgeon shorter than the advertised length. this is a good thing.

i assume i must have been experiencing some flex with the previous incumbents, because the ovals (i can call them that, can't i?) have made me realise what i was missing. lifting butt from saddle and wellying it up bowmore main street and flex becomes the cable on a bedside light. nobody of that name here. as stiff and light (stem 120g/bars 219g) as your mitts desired. i don't know if it's sad to relate that new bars and stem can brighten the washing machine post day to day cycling life, but these have. oh, and they're stylish too, in a way that anatomic bars just aren't (opinions expressed in this column are mine and undoubtedly correct:-) dealer availability can be found on upgradebikes website, and expect to pay around £55 for the bars and about £5 less for the stem. there is an optional carbon front plate and titanium bolt kit available if you'd like to be super special. it may be worth mentioning that oval concepts only warranty their bars when used with an oval concepts stem. perhaps unfair, but i really can't think of a good reason not to match both components - the price seems more than reasonable and the quality is unimpeachable.

www.upgradebikes.co.uk
www.ovalconcepts.com

