Chipps and Jenn look at three bikes you need to look at when considering your next UK trail bike.

***Words** by Chipps and Jenn, **pictures** by Singletrack.*

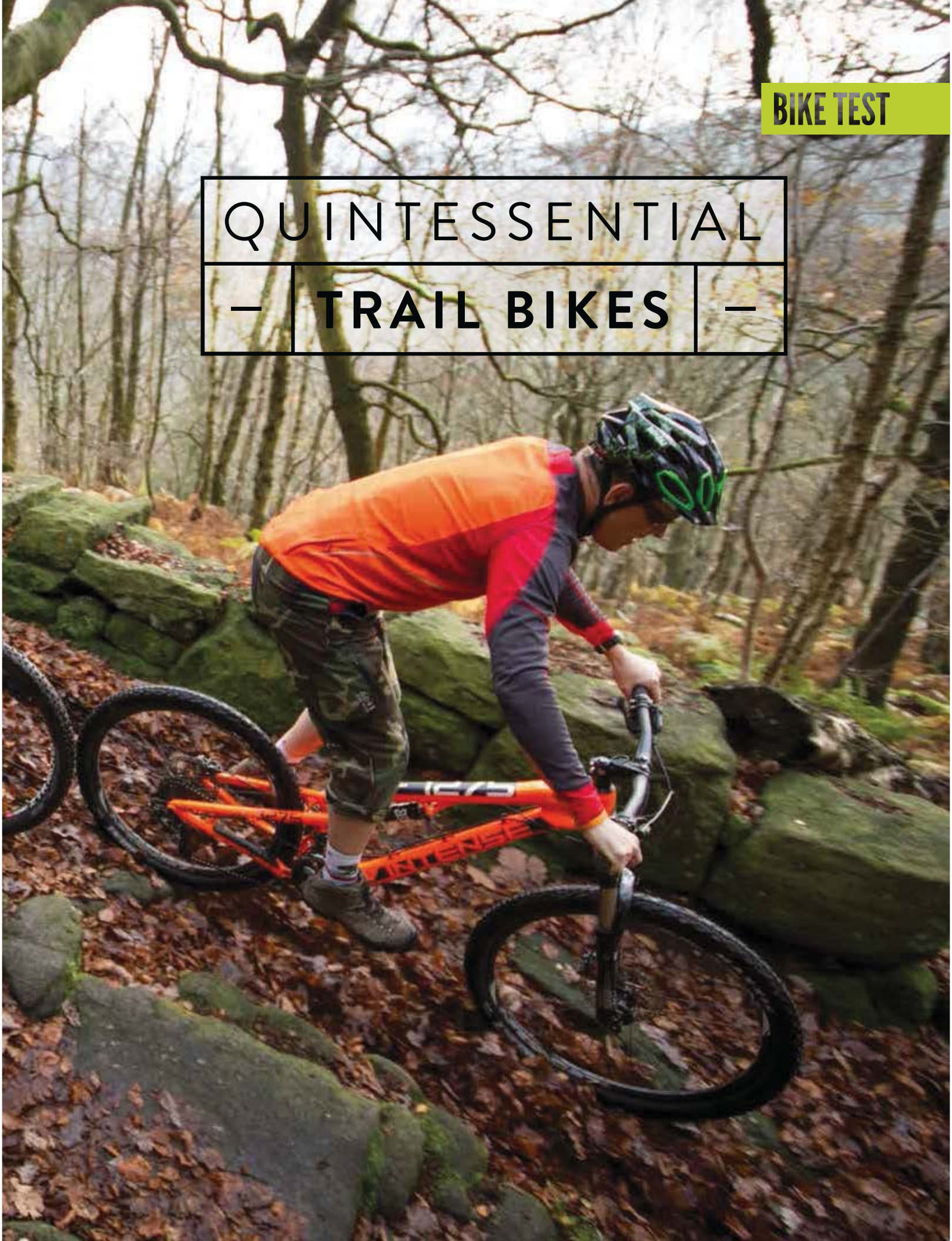
We're a funny bunch in the UK. We demand that our mountain bikes carry efficiently over a huge range of terrain, in all weathers. They need to be capable on long fire road climbs, nimble in Surrey Hills singletrack and bombproof when shown a 'real' mountain. Quite often they'll be used and put away wet (or at least still damp) and expected to work perfectly the next day. They need to be light enough to skip up hills (or to slog up with them on your back) and still solid enough to take on slatey Welsh descents repeatedly. Components that work well in California might not necessarily be great in Cumbria.

With so many interpretations of 'trail bikes' out there, we figured we'd pick a benchmark that most riders would know. The venerable Orange Five has proved itself very capable at answering the needs of UK riders and is what many people think of first when looking at trail bikes. It has a simple, single pivot and a rugged exterior, plus it's made in the UK and you see a ton of them out on the trails and at trail centres around the country.

We thought we'd take the Orange Five (in 'S' spec) as our benchmark of popular trail bike and see what else was around with similar 140mm travel for near the £3,100 budget that would get you a base level, 27.5in Five. Here we present three other contenders to put on your shopping list to demo and see how they compare.

QUINTESSENTIAL

TRAIL BIKES



Empire ***MX6-EVO.***

Price: £2,929.97 as tested. Base model starting at £2,499.00, frame only at £999.00
From: Empire Cycles, *empire-cycles.com*

Frame //	Empire MX6-EVO
Shock //	Monarch Plus 150mm
Fork //	RockShox Revelation RLT 150mm, QR15
Hubs //	Hope Pro2 EVO
Rims //	Stan's Arch EX 650
Tyres //	Schwalbe Nobby Nic 2.2in
Chainset //	SRAM 2000, Hope 34T Retainer Ring
Front Mech //	n/a
Rear Mech //	SRAM X9
Shifters //	SRAM X9
Brakes //	Hope Tech 3/E4
Stem //	Truvativ
Bars //	Renthal Fatbar Lite
Grips //	Renthal
Seatpost //	RockShox Reverb Stealth
Saddle //	San Marco/Dirty Zero One
Size Tested //	M
Sizes available //	S, M, L
Weight //	31.5lbs (without pedals)

The Empire MX6-EVO cuts a formidable silhouette. With its low-slung frame, single pivot and bolt-on seat mast, it's instantly identifiable and it shares much of its DNA with Empire's clever, cast aluminium-framed downhill bike. The MX6, though, is more of a hybrid, for practical and expense reasons, but is still 100% made in the UK.

The heart of the bike is its single pivot, running on needle bearings, essentially downsized from a motocross bike. The cast aluminium swingarm offers 150mm travel through a Monarch Plus (with natty splash guard). The front end of the bike has a formidable-looking CNC machined 'headstock' that is the key to one of the clever bits of design with the frame. Using an external headset lower cup and a different shock shuttle, the MX6 frame will happily run 26in wheels without any compromise in geometry and ride height. This would allow you to swap 26in forks and wheels over from your old bike and get riding immediately, putting off the 27.5in revolution until you're good and ready. Even the dropouts are modular to allow 135 or 142mm wheels. All that's needed to switch to 27.5in is to run an internal headset and swap the shock hardware. Clever.

The square top and down tubes are welded solidly between the headstock and bottom bracket, and the headstock and the hollow structure that houses the shock mount and seat mast. We measured the effective top tube as being over 25mm longer than the spec sheet, which gave a nice, roomy 600mm – perfect for a shorter stem.

Empire's website allows you to take the basic £2,499 model and tweak bits and pieces. Lots of Hope gear is available as an upgrade, with colours no extra charge. Our bike was specced in the style of someone looking to perhaps do a bit of enduro racing and hard trail riding. In addition to the basic SRAM X9 spec, we have a 34T Hope Retainer thick/thin chainring and 40T add-on sprocket to give a wide-range 1x10 cassette.

The wheels have been hopped up with Hope floating rotors on the Pro2 EVO hubs and Stan's Arch EX rims. Other additions to the basic spec include a Renthal Fatbar Lite and matching grips, as well as a Reverb Stealth dropper post on that beautiful cast seat mast. All in all, it's a bike that's ready to ride or race out of the box – and still comes in at £150 under our arbitrary target price. For this you could upgrade to a RockShox Pike fork if you had harder-hitting rides in mind and you'd end up with a very well-specced bike for the money.

Trail Notes.

It was interesting to note that all three of our bikes weigh exactly the same. The MX6 certainly wears that weight proudly and jumping on the bike, the sheer girthy look of the frame implies that it'll be a bit of a beast to ride, but thanks to a decent wheelset and the platform damping on the Monarch, the bike climbs tenaciously. Empire had specced the 34T chainring partly (over the more-common-round-here 32T) to highlight that some other frames can only run a 32T single ring before fouling the frame or pivots; however, this did make long climbs hard work. The bike does seem to need the shock's platform too, as there was a lot of bump and rider-induced bobbing with it switched off. The 66.5° head angle made the bike wander a little on climbs, but no more than any other 6in trail bike in its class and it's a low price to pay for stable descending.

With the shock switched on, the bike was great fun when the climbing got rougher, chewing up bumpy sat-down climbs and really using the suspension. On fast and flowy trails, the bike felt like it needed a little dominating; it's not one for the sit-and-steer brigade. Given some firm direction, the Empire starts to come alive and give some hint at its potential.

On the first few big downhills, the bike's performance was undermined a little by the Hope brakes. There wasn't the fingertip power available from Shimano's current brakes, and so last-minute, controlled braking was substituted by various amounts of brake dragging and death gripping. As the brakes wore in and improved a little, the ride of the bike improved with it, showing how closely all the elements are linked. With braking less of a worry, we could start to ramp up the speeds.

The Empire proved worthy of just about anything we could throw at it. The chunky front end gave a lot of steering confidence (and we'd love to try it with a Pike in place) and throwing the bike onto dodgy lines became a new sport.

Ker-click!

No gritty stanchions here.