

Peak District rail trails lead to spectacular scenery such as Wolfscote Dale



NCN54 crosses the River Dove as it enters Wolfscote Dale

Winter warmer

The Peak District's rail trails are ideal for day rides, whatever the season.

Chris Juden re-visited his CTC roots with daughter Amy in December

Old railway lines make perfect cycleways. There's no traffic and they're near enough flat. Undoubtedly the sheer steepness of the hills spurred Peak District cyclists to use abandoned railways before it became fashionable, and by 1970 almost all the railways hereabouts had seen the last of their trains.

This route takes me back to favourite haunts of my cycling youth on rides into the Peak District with Burton Section of Derbyshire CTC. Burton-on-Trent is actually in Staffordshire, and this ride also has not just a foot but about 20 miles in each county. Burton Section was particularly given to including stretches of what we used to call rough-stuff, either to avoid main roads or access interesting places. Traffic has only gotten worse these past 30 years, and the off-road trails that used to spice up our Sunday runs have become many riders' meat and drink. In the Peak District they will find a feast. I shall never forget the spooky adventure of a dripping tunnel, or the miles I bumped over trackbed ballast, corrugated by sleepers recently departed.

These ways have now been made safe and smooth for everyone to ride – and on a sunny summer's day it seems like everyone is! The success of the Peak District trails is their only failing. Do not expect to make much speed. Take your time and enjoy the views, which are quite stunning.

This ride combines the wide open spaces

of the High Peak and Tissington Trails with the intimacy of the Manifold valley. To find the best ways of linking these trails together I drew upon the local knowledge of an old Burton CTC friend, Terry Williams. He told me about some recently improved bridleways which resulted in a 42-mile figure-of-eight that I hope you'll find as beautiful as we did.

Trainspotter's corner

The Cromford and High Peak Railway was one of the first in the world, built 1825-30 to link two canals and also built like a canal. Instead of locks, stationary steam engines winched wagons up to the high and dry plateau of the White Peak, across which they were pulled like barges by horses. Most of the route was later adapted to locomotive traction and connections made with other railways at both ends, but its inclines remained the steepest and one of its curves the sharpest on any British 'main' line.

In 1899 the LNWR brought more business to the High Peak by building a connection to the market town of Ashbourne. This link is now the Tissington Trail and in its heyday carried passengers not only to the holiday attractions of Dovedale and Buxton, but through to Manchester and even down to London. But milk, meat, minerals and ramblers were not enough to keep a railway in this thinly populated area and the last train ran on the High Peak line in 1967.

The Leek & Manifold Valley Light Railway

Fact File Peak District Trails

DISTANCE: 42 miles (67km) ridden, 1909ft (582m) climbed (hilly in parts).

TIME: allow 7hrs, inc. stops

MAP: OS Landranger 119 Buxton, Matlock and Dovedale.

ACCOMMODATION:

Ashbourne has plenty and the Station Hotel seems an obvious choice, but Amy and I stayed at Ilam Hall's newly renovated YHA. This historic building is a great place to stay. Join the described route at Calton in 4.25 mls instead of 7. Leave the trail at Thorpe station as described and it'll be 2½ back to Ilam YHA, shortening the ride to 39 miles. Hartington Hall is another well-appointed YHA, also ideally located.

RESOURCES: The Cycle-Derbyshire map shows all the routes this active county is creating and comes free from Call Derbyshire on 08456 058058. Other useful leaflets about the White Peak and Manifold cycle routes can be had from tourist information offices in Ashbourne (01335 343666) and Leek (01538 483741).

USEFUL WEBSITES INCLUDE:

www.visitpeakdistrict.com,
www.peakdistrict.gov.uk,
www.derbyshire.gov.uk and
www.staffsmoorlands.gov.uk.

WHEN: Cup-final day is always good to avoid the crowds and midweek is better than summer weekends. Or as Amy and I did: pick a really nice day in winter.

WHAT BIKE: Despite all the rain in early December, Amy and I could enjoy these tracks and trails on drop-handlebar tourers. I'd recommend tyres of 32mm section or bigger. Racers need not apply and manic mountain bikers will find it rather tame.

GPS: Download the track from www.ctc-maps.org.uk.



Junction of High-Peak & Tissington trails at Parsley Hay



One of the 24 bridges on the Hamps and Manifold Track

was built in 1904, to a narrow (2'6") gauge that enabled the tracks to follow each twist and turn of the Hamps and Manifold rivers as they burrow between steep enclosing hills. The line actually starts at Waterhouses where it was 'all change' from standard (4'8½") gauge into smaller coaches and trucks for the 8 1/4 miles to Hulme End. This pretty route was extremely popular with tourists, but milk was its life blood and when the Ecton dairy closed in 1934, the little trains stopped.

Thanks to CTC!

Cycling on the trackbeds of old railways began as soon as they closed. The first to lose its rails was the LMVR, whereupon its trackbed received a tarmac surface so the valley farms should not revert to isolation. Cyclists and ramblers gained a peaceful route through hard country and were alarmed when in the 1950s Staffordshire Country Council proposed to 'upgrade' it to a public road. CTC lobbied for preservation of the status quo, with members joining ramblers in a protest rally at Wettonmill. Most of it duly remained a private road and public path.

When Derbyshire acquired the High Peak trackbed in 1971, their plans were even worse for the cyclists who'd begun to use it. Against the advice of Derby CTC's George Brown, they took the ballast away and grassed the trail for the exclusive use of ramblers and equestrians. Horses trampled the grass to the boggy morass anticipated by CTC, and to pacify mud-spattered walkers the County Council had to re-surface with limestone chippings. After further letters from George Brown the bicycle ban was quietly lifted.

Nowadays cycling has become by far the most popular way of enjoying these trails, all of which have been adopted by the National Cycle Network. But next time you ride the Peak District Trails, offer silent thanks to the unsung CTC heroes who wouldn't take no for an answer and so set those wheels in motion.

Whilst Staffordshire could do better (the Manifold track needs resurfacing), Derbyshire County Council has been inspired by the success of its trails to create many more and improve the surfaces of key bridleways in order to link them up. Nowadays Derbyshire is quick to consult CTC's local representative Terry Williams, to whom I'm grateful for much of the information in this article.

The Route

- **0 miles** Start opposite Ashbourne's Station Hotel and pass through a well-lit tunnel to a car park.
- **0.4ml** Leave the Trail. Go right on Mapleton Lane to the Mapleton.
- **1.9ml** Opposite a church, turn left, signed Okeover & Blore, over the river Dove and into Staffordshire. The big climb is rewarded by views of Dovedale, Thorpe Cloud and Bunster Hill.
- **5.4ml** At the A52 turn right on A523 and immediately right again to Calton. (Or walk down the verge.)
- **7.1ml** Through Calton and keep L at a junction with the lane from Ilam via Throwley Hall. Take care down this steep hill.
- **7.3ml** R down A523. From side road in 300yd, use shared path for another 200yd then stop by the Waterhouses sign, opposite the start of the Manifold Track.
- **7.6ml** Cross A523 and follow the tarmac track beside the Hamps.
- **8.8ml** In 1 1/4ml Lee House Farm offers tea and cakes. At 11ml the cliffs of Beeston Tor come into view above the Hamps and Manifold confluence. Lanes cross the valley but it's easy to find the way. If it goes up, you've gone wrong.
- **12.0ml** If you have half an hour, visit Thors Cave: the view is worth it!
- **12.4ml** Wettonmill tearoom is a good place to stop. More caves and a watersplash to ride through. The track is road for 2ml, including the tunnel under Swainsley Hall.
- **15.7ml** Hulme End-of-the-line and the Tea Junction Cafe.
- **15.9ml** Turn R here signed Alstonefield and in 200yd L on National Cycle Route 54 to Beresford Dale. Follow the obvious NCN54 signs to 100yd before the river, where a not so obvious sign on a bridleway fingerpost points to Hartington through a gate and up a track. At the next gate turn L, through another gate, then another, to a bridge over the Dove at the entrance to lovely Wolfscote Dale.
- **18.0ml** Push your bike up a steep and stony path from here.
- **18.2ml** Go L on the lane 1/2ml to where it bends sharp L to make like an X with two tracks. Take the uphill track straight on signed Biggin. In 1/2ml this merges R with another track, and you're back on NCN54. Or you can stay on the lane and NCN54 to visit Hartington.
- **19.5ml** Merge R on a road and 100yd L into Biggin. The Waterloo Inn is a good spot for lunch.
- **20.4ml** Up the hill out of Biggin

- you'll pass under a bridge that carries the Tissington Trail. If you're running late and want to cut the 10½ mile top loop off our figure of 8: take the path on the L that leads up to the Trail and go down it L, south over the bridge. Ashbourne is only 10 miles away – downhill!
- **20.7ml** X the A515 onto a cyclepath R & L on an 'improved' track signed NCN54.
- **22.7ml** L on Parwich lane. In 1/4 ml turn R before bridge, L into Minninglow car park & L on the High Peak Trail over that bridge. The R bend in 1/2ml is that tight Gotham curve. Steer carefully! Back to the R you can see the stone-built Minninglow embankment. There are great views on your R over the White Peak all 5ml to Parsley Hay.
- **27.8ml** After a short tunnel (under A515) we come to the junction with the Tissington Trail. The Parsley Hay It Visitor Centre and cycle hire etc, is just 1/4ml further up the trail. Retrace to this point and keep R.
- **28.4ml** The best views from the Tissington Trail area also to the R: down into Long Dale then Dovedale, and across to the Staffordshire Moorlands.
- **30.1ml** Visit Hartington signal box, if you like. There are toilets here.
- **31.5ml** Cross the '8' above Biggin.
- **33.5ml** On Alsop Moor the Trail runs close to A515 and in case you're hungry there's often a burger van in the adjacent lay-by.
- **37.5ml** Tissington station has all the usual facilities. The village is nice.
- **38.9ml** Leave here for Thorpe, Dovedale and Ilam.
- **41.2ml** You're back in Mapleton Lane car park. Continue through the tunnel to the trail end in Ashbourne: **41.7 miles** total.

