



Feature

WORDS & PHOTOS JON SPARKS

CENTRES OF ATTENTION

In a little over 15 years, purpose-built UK trail centres have transformed mountain biking – and mountain bikes. Outdoor writer **Jon Sparks** assesses their pros and cons, and wonders how they'll develop further

In dappled forest light, a rider swoops left and right down a trail like a slalom skier. Others follow, some tentative, others fast and smooth. The youngest might be seven years old, the oldest over 60. Yet as they roll out at the bottom of the trail, each face of intense concentration relaxes into a wide grin. This is Glentress.

Glentress is the biggest of what has become a big business. If you're not a trail centre regular, it's easy to overlook how popular they are. Visit a forest with a trail centre during holidays or weekends: you'll find car parks full and trails alive with bikes.

Tom Fenton's *Mountain Biking Trail Centres – The Guide* lists 67 centres across England, Wales and Scotland, and there have been several new additions since its last revision

in January 2010. For Scotland alone, recent figures showed mountain biking annually generates more than 1.3 million inbound visits, almost half to trail centres.

Trail centres range from well-developed hubs like Glentress and Coed-y-Brenin, which have cafés, bike shops, bike hire and a wide range of trails, to other spots with a few kilometres of trail and a car park. The unifying factor is the existence of purpose-built cross-country trails, often graded like ski runs: green, blue, red and black (green being easiest, black hardest).

IF YOU BUILD IT...

As Ian Warby, CTC's Senior Off-Road Cycling Development Officer, observes, 'Trail centres are now part of the fabric of

UK mountain biking.' Yet they were only established in 1994, when Dafydd Davis began work at Coed-y-Brenin in Snowdonia. He wasn't the first to develop trails for mountain bikes, but most had previously been for racing (downhill or cross-country). Dafydd was the first to conceive dedicated recreational cross-country trail networks.

It's all legend now: a lonely visionary building Coed-y-Brenin's first singletrack trails with pick and shovel and a shoestring budget; riders discovering the results in ones and twos and then in droves; visitor numbers jumping five-fold in a matter of months. With such a huge latent market, within a few years Dafydd Davis was managing a half-million pound project to develop four more trail centres in Wales. The

“THE 7STANES CREATE 400,000 VISITS ANNUALLY, MAKING THEM A TOP 20 SCOTTISH ATTRACTION”



From left to right
Many centres want to attract more women; The Witch's Trail in the Nevis Range has a natural feel; Rock bridge at Gisburn Forest in Lancashire; Newcastleton doesn't feel very 'man made'

phenomenon quickly spread to Scotland (and, more slowly, to England too).

If Scotland was playing catch-up, it did so in style. In 2001, work began on the 7Stanes project, creating seven centres spread across southern Scotland. Arguably, there are really eight, Glentress being bundled with nearby Innerleithen under the 'Tweed Valley' banner – but 8Stanes doesn't have the same ring.

Spearheaded by Forestry Commission Scotland, with a wide range of partners (including Scottish Enterprise, VisitScotland, Dumfries & Galloway Council, Scottish Borders Council, Scottish Natural Heritage and Solway Heritage), the 7Stanes project has now created over 400km of cross-country trails. Most of the centres also have skills loops and several have freeride and/or downhill tracks. Collectively, they attract around 400,000 visits annually, making them one of Scotland's top 20 visitor attractions. In 2007, they were reckoned to

generate at least £9m annual local spend; the figure now is surely higher. The 7Stanes project is credited with creating over 200 full-time-equivalent jobs.

WHAT BIKING BRINGS

That trail centres bring people and money into rural areas is clear, but the initial investment is high. Andy Wardman, mountain bike ranger at Glentress, says a high-quality trail typically costs £20-£25 per metre. Some centres save by using volunteer labour, but building high-quality, sustainable trails always requires professional oversight as well as design expertise.

Besides the trails themselves, there's a minimum supporting infrastructure: car parks, signposting to the trailhead, waymarking on the trails. Many centres offer far more, such as a bike wash, a bike shop with hire facilities, and of course, the café.

If the original development doesn't

include such facilities, they often arise spontaneously to meet demand. At my nearest trail centre, Gisburn Forest in Lancashire, where blue and red trails opened in September 2009, official development focused entirely on trailbuilding; 'facilities' at the trailhead comprise an information board. Seeing visitor numbers rocket, the Dog and Partridge pub at nearby Tossie stepped into the breach. They provided bike wash facilities and launched the Whelp Stone Café, named for the highest point on Gisburn's red route. Riders caught on quickly and business is brisk.

THE SOUL OF THE SPORT

Trail centres are a big thing, but are they a good thing? One sceptic is Tom Hutton, Routes Editor at *mbr* magazine. As such, he rides all over the country, almost exclusively on 'natural' trails. He's concerned about the 'fragmentation' of the sport: 'There's now a >



Left Young riders at Dalby Forest in Yorkshire
Right The Nevis Range red downhill run near Fort William
Below Bike hire is part of the package at larger centres (Grizedale Forest)



“I THINK THEY’RE A BIT DULL, STERILE AND PREDICTABLE – AFTER I’VE RIDDEN THEM ONCE”

› generation of mountain bikers who can’t navigate, can’t deal with serious technical stuff, and wouldn’t be seen dead pushing up a boggy hillside. They can only ride one way: flat out for about 15-20km.’

Tom also warns that areas like the Surrey Hills have seen a lot of unofficial trail development as riders try to replicate the trail centre experience. This, he says, ‘has been bad news for bike/walker relationships here.’ And his view on trail centres? ‘I think they’re a bit dull, sterile and predictable – especially after I’ve ridden them once.’

Against this, Michael Bonney of Orange Mountain Bikes (see *Cycle* Feb/Mar 2010) contends that trail centres have brought thousands into the sport. ‘Ten years ago I was predicting that mountain biking had passed its peak. Then Glentress opened...’ He goes on: ‘Trail centres have been great for encouraging people into the sport, but it would be better still if they didn’t just stay in the trail centres.’ Backing words with action, Orange have been supporting events like the Tour de Ben Nevis, which use trail centres (in this case Leanachan Forest) as a jumping-off point for wilder riding.

Similarly, Ian Warby says, ‘I’ve always seen trail centres as a shop window for mountain biking. A place to try, train and get a taste for mountain biking before

putting together that big adventure and riding beyond the limits of the trail centre.’ But he also notes that if many riders stay in the safe environment of the trail centre, it could help ‘keep the wilderness wild’.

There’s an interesting interplay between the development of bikes and the development of trails. When Dafydd Davis started, most bikes had V-brakes and no more than 80mm of suspension travel. Today, disc brakes are standard and suspension travel is often 120-140mm. Even if skill levels had flatlined, riders would be able to ride faster and stop more quickly. Andy Wardman says that this can create maintenance issues on older trails: ‘We’re seeing more people overshooting bends and more braking bumps developing.’ Trails, even established classics, have to evolve.

Of course, the question of skills is not a simple one. Have people become better mountain bikers or just better at riding trail centres? Even on the harder, black-graded trails, the sheer unpredictability of ‘natural’ trails is often missing. Trail centres are, after all, designed to be ridden.

GOING GREENER

Since the early days of Coed-y-Brenin, there’s been a close correlation between ‘trail centre’ and ‘forest’. It’s not just that

initial developments were mostly on Forestry Commission land (one reason why the recent threat to sell off the Forestry estate sent shivers down many spines); there are privately-owned centres too, like Drumlanrig, near Dumfries. Public or private, the logistics of trail centres seem more compatible with forestry than most other forms of land use. CTC’s recent commitment to partnership with the Forestry Commission recognises this.

The forestry connection is one reason why the majority of trail centres, including the best-known, have been established in relatively remote areas; the other key factor is the availability of funding for development in such areas. Yet building popular facilities far from centres of population raises its own issues. Glentress is just 3.5km from the town of Peebles, but some of the smaller 7Stanes centres, like Ae and Glentool, are much more remote. Even at Glentress, most users are travelling considerable distances – from Edinburgh, Glasgow, Newcastle and further afield. Across the 7Stanes as a whole, a third of visitors come from outside Scotland and a further 5% from overseas. A total of 93% of all visitors arrive by car – and you can bet some of the residual 7% have cycled in from accommodation that they reached by car. ›

“WE ARE AIMING AT FAMILIES AND BEGINNERS, AND WE’RE LOOKING TO INCREASE OUR FEMALE BASE”

› Mountain biking itself has a fairly low environmental impact, and trail centre trails are built and maintained to be erosion-resistant. Yet heavy reliance on cars to reach the trailhead leaves a high carbon footprint. There’s a question of social exclusion, too: the ‘accessible’ riding at trail centres is anything but accessible to those without cars, whether they’re too young to drive, can’t afford it, or would simply prefer not to.

NO CAR, NO RIDE?

Putting bike racks on the back of buses would seem to be an obvious, and relatively straightforward, step – until you try and take it up with the bus companies. And few of the 7Stanes centres are close to a railway station either. The best is Mabie, 9km from Dumfries. The worst is Innerleithen, 50km from either Carstairs or Edinburgh. Coed-y-Brenin is 22km from Barmouth, while Dalby Forest in Yorkshire, England’s premier trail centre, is 23km from Malton.

These access issues aren’t purely the fault of trail centres; they also reflect the lamentable state of public transport in the UK. We can but envy the easy use of buses and trains to support mountain biking days out in, say, Switzerland. And I could scarcely believe my eyes when I saw youths in full-face helmets toting downhill bikes onto the Oslo Metro, riding the train into the hills to charge back down.

The best way to make trail centres more accessible is to build them closer to population centres. ‘Traditional’ trail centres occupy a lot of space, but do they have to? It’s possible to squeeze a lot of riding into a small area, as shown by the classic switchback descent of The Wall at Afan Forest Park in South Wales. An exciting example is the ‘brownfield’ development of Lee Quarry at Rossendale in Lancashire: Michael Bonney, for one, reckons it’s currently unique not just in the UK but

Right Bike shop and café at Glentress. Trails wind through the forest behind.
Below Bermed trails are hardly 100% natural but they are great fun (Gisburn Forest, Lancashire)



worldwide. Ian Warby believes urban cycling centres will be a new growth area, pointing to the recently-opened Redbridge Cycling Centre as well as the forthcoming A2 Cyclopark in Kent and the Olympic Velopark in London. He also highlights the rise of ‘pocket parks’, noting that this is another area where ‘the UK leads the way’.

FOLLOWING THE SIGNS

Trail centres have come from nowhere to be a major part of mountain biking in little over 15 years. Future growth may be less explosive, but will continue. At the 7Stanes, £2m has been spent on new trailhead facilities at Glentress, including a new café, bike shop and shower/toilet block.

Since 2010, promotion of the 7Stanes has been handled by a not-for-profit Community Interest Company, focused on attracting a broader spectrum of riders. Mari Findlay of 7Stanes CIC says, ‘We are aiming at families, beginners and looking to increase our female base.’ There will be extra green and blue trails to support this, while with red and black trails the emphasis is on maintenance and fine-tuning.

Elsewhere across the 7Stanes, consolidation is also the watchword, with just one major infrastructure project in prospect. Newcastleton’s minimalist trailhead facilities (hosepipe, toilet, small shelter) currently perch on a windy hillside high above the village. The plan is to relocate the trailhead into the village itself,

which should bring more trade to its café and pubs. This requires new trails, mostly across farmland; the funding is available but one or two landowners have yet to agree.

One reason trail centres are so popular is that they virtually guarantee enjoyable riding, and their graded trails give a good idea of the level of challenge. Despite the best efforts of route gurus like Tom Hutton, riding ‘natural’ trails can seem a bit of a lottery – especially in England and Wales, where riding is legally restricted to bridleways and byways. If trail centres generate almost half the mountain biking visits to Scotland, the corollary is that more than half are visiting to ride ‘natural’ trails. Alongside Scotland’s inspirational landscapes, another major factor is its enlightened access situation. Would a relaxation of access law south of the border help entice more people into venturing beyond the trail centres?

Trail centres certainly seem set to continue to grow in number and popularity, but at a time when cycling in general is on the rise, perhaps they could be reaching out even more – not just into wider aspects of mountain biking, but further. With their cafés and workshops, they could be a base or a destination for road events too; they could be places where cyclists of all kinds come together. Trail centres have grown enormously; maturity may be more about diversification and outreach than continued expansion. ☀