



● You choose your own routes between checkpoints, so can avoid most traffic

# HIDDEN BRITAIN

*CTC's British Cycle Quest gives you 402 reasons to explore somewhere new by bike. **Becky Sampson** is a recent convert*

**T HIS WAS a quest. Not a knights-on-horseback kind of quest; I wasn't out to rescue a princess: I wanted a queen. I was in pursuit of Queen Elizabeth, or rather the Queen's Hunting Lodge, which is in Epping Forest on the outskirts of London.**

I wanted to know the name of the public house next to it. I could have Googled it, but that would be missing the point. Finding the answer was my reason to ride. I was on my first foray into the world of the British Cycle Quest (BCQ).

## Escaping the city

I followed the Lea Valley Canal towpath from Essex to London via Her Maj's watering hole. Not being the best navigator, I augmented my highlighter-coloured OS map by asking

passers-by for directions. It worked well, taking me along well-maintained tracks and minor roads... until I met 'helpful' Phil, a local who told me of his short cut to Epping Forest.

Be wary when non-cyclists provide you with a short cut. Phil's route was up a series of steep off-road inclines, the majority of them muddy. Huffing, puffing, pedalling, and eventually pushing my bike up one such slope, I was rewarded with a stunning view. Acres of undulating, cloud-shadowed greenery spread out down below me into the valley. The soft blue waters of the King George V Reservoir lapped against the side of its concrete compound. It seemed incomprehensible that London was a handful of Tube stops to the south.

A glorious swoop down the other side of what I now know to be Daws Hill – obviously named after my splendid Galaxy! – took me into the forest and straight to the pub. Thank you, CTC, for catering to thirsty cyclists when putting the clues together! Quest one: completed.

## Finding the witch-finder

I was hooked. Strapping camping gear to my bike, I headed off into the Essex wilderness. On the trail of Matthew Hopkins, the 17th century witch-finder general, I meandered through biscuit-tin villages, tiny hamlets and beautiful countryside.

Manningtree – Hopkins' birthplace – claims the title of England's smallest town. It also claimed the lives of many women



● The checkpoints aren't hidden, but you'll need to be able to navigate

## “As we cycled from clue to clue, past gorgeous manors, we took in tiny lanes hemmed in by hedgerows, grand estates, and a hangman’s hill”

during his reign of terror.

The following morning, I pedalled across the border into Suffolk, a county famed for strong draught horses and stronger cider. My focus this time was Flatford Mill, a National Trust property filled with timber-framed farmhouses and – most importantly – a tea room. The road out took me through Tudor villages. Undulating hills criss-crossed with mosaic fields swiftly submerged in to the suburbs of Colchester.

Colchester has one of the many fabulous Sustrans way-markers that are dotted around the country. A last look at Essex included a trip to Greensted, and the oldest wooden church in the world.

Whilst doing the BCQ solo is fun, I thought it would be enjoyable to drag others along with me. My friend Jess accompanied me to Berkshire. Jess has a top-of-the-range, ultra-light carbon bike. She whizzed up and down hills at breakneck speed, seeking out clues long before I had caught up on my steel tourer. She had to wait eventually, however: it was me that had panniers filled with snacks.

As we cycled from clue to clue, past gorgeous manors, we took in tiny country lanes hemmed in by hedgerows, grand sweeping estates and a hangman’s hill. This involved tackling a washed-away road, damaged by the recent floods. My fatter-tired Galaxy came in to its own on this >>>

### ▶ COLLECTING CHECKPOINTS

The British Cycle Quest is a great incentive to explore Britain by bike. There are 402 checkpoints scattered across the UK. At each checkpoint, there’s a question to answer to show you’ve been. We give you a list of checkpoints and questions, and you submit your answers on BCQ Answer Cards. There are no set routes between checkpoints. The only rule is that you have to travel to the checkpoints by bike.

Aside from postage, the BCQ is free. And there’s no

time limit: you’ve got as long as you like. You can download the BCQ Question book and an order form to obtain answer cards here: [ctc.org.uk/britishcyclequest](http://ctc.org.uk/britishcyclequest). Or you can get the BCQ Question book by post: just send a self-address A4 envelope with two second-class stamps affixed. For the Answer Cards, you need an order form – also obtainable from CTC National Office (see page 3).

When you visit your first 10 checkpoints you’ll receive a certificate – and another

when you visit your first 50. There are also regional certificates for visiting every checkpoint in each of the BCQ’s 10 regions, and medals for visiting 100, 200 and 300 checkpoints. Anyone who visits all 402 gets a trophy.

Several CTC members have completed the BCQ: Alan and Mavis Wallace (2003), Helen Sandelands (2004), Paul Snowden (2004), Damian Hill (2010), Andrew Read (2011), Liz and Ken Gates (2011), Paul White (2012), and Ian Weatherill (2012).

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● (Left) You can create long tours linking checkpoints, or just visit a few if you're in the area  
 ● (Below) While you could Google some answers, getting there by bike is what the BCQ is all about



**“I entered a bluebell wood infused with the scent of wild garlic. It made me realise how lucky I was to have an excuse to be out on my bike”**

» terrain, whereas Jess's precious racer had to be carried like a newborn.

The great thing about having a cycling companion is that two heads are better than one. Theoretically. In fact, it meant that Jess and I could blame each other when we couldn't find the answer to a particularly difficult clue.

We eventually decided that the clue had been removed, gave up and turned in the direction of home. A few minutes later, I heard the squeal of Jess's brakes: she'd stumbled across the missing plaque. I'd made a mistake with the grid reference and we'd been looking in the wrong place!

On my next quest, I asked along two Sampson family members. They joined me on an old, old tandem... up and down the punishing hills of East Dorset. When we reached our destination – Cerne Abbas – we again spent a while looking for the answer in the wrong place. If you go there, you will discover that's quite hard to do.

**Reasons to ride**

My next jaunt – solo – was to Hardy's Monument. The monument, which lies between Weymouth and Bridport, is on a

stretch of stunningly scenic coast road. Josie Dew described this road thus: 'never mind cycling 600 feet up the long steep gradient of Wears Hill, I could scarcely push it to the top.' Fortunately, Sustrans have helpfully marked a cycle route through the adjacent valley, which is either downhill or flat most of the way if you're heading to Bridport. Fortunately, I was.

The roads were quiet: a few farmers on tractors returning from spraying their fields. The brightly coloured crop of yellow rape was a dramatic contrast to the ominous skies above.

Hail started hammering down. I did question why I was out chasing clues, but then I entered a bluebell wood infused with the scent of wild garlic. It made me realise quite how lucky I was to have an excuse to be out on my bike in all weathers.

The certificates you can earn doing the BCQ are really just a bonus. The joy is in exploring, getting you out of the rut of those routes you ride so regularly, and having reasons to go cycling around the countryside in search of things like names on benches or crusader graves – and, of course, the cafés to refuel at en route. ●

**▶ TWICE THE FUN**

Philip & Helen Muir are doing the BCQ on their tandem. As of 1st April, they had visited 161 checkpoints.

'We began collecting BCQ checkpoints two years ago. We now kick ourselves for not starting earlier. It has revolutionised our tandem agenda. You could describe it as the cycle tourists' version of Munro-bagging, on a national scale.

'We are now approaching our second century of BCQs visited on day rides and tours from home in South Warwickshire. The two of us have toured from the Isle of Wight to The Western Isles, and from the Fens to the Pennine Hills and Welsh mountains.

'From home on long day rides, we've discovered corners of Britain we never knew existed, a highlight being a long summer's day in the saddle to Sapperton Tunnel in Gloucestershire – complete with a music festival at the adjacent pub.

'We look forward to our BCQ silver medal and all the yet unvisited interesting places our tandem rides and tours will take us. We're sure they will be as diverse and interesting as the home of cricket or Mary Stuart's place of execution. Maybe we'll have another encounter with a pro rider such as Mark Cavendish, who passed us in the opposite direction whilst we were collecting BCQs on the Isle of Man!'



● Philip & Helen Muir have visited 161 checkpoints in two years