



Riding the Ridgeway

Mark Waters takes to the oldest 'road' in Britain for his first proper mountain bike tour, accompanied by Chris Juden and Mark Reynolds

Go back 50 million years and the Alps buckled upwards, sending out geological ripples that formed chalk downs across southern England. We were left with the North and South Downs, Salisbury Plain and a line of hills from Dorset to Yorkshire. The Ridgeway is a part of this chalky chain and is the oldest 'road' in Britain. Ever since the Iron Age (5,000 years BC), people have used it as a natural highway. Ancient monuments close by the route give evidence to their passing.

Today the Ridgeway is an 87-mile route of tracks, bridleways and roads, forming a continuous route between Ivinghoe Beacon in Buckinghamshire and Overton Hill, near Avebury in Wiltshire. It's one of Britain's classic bike rides. And it's thanks to earlier members of

CTC, who helped secure the right to cycle on bridleways, that we can ride it.

A ride of two halves

The Ridgeway is cut in half by another historic artery, the Thames. The two halves are different in character and right-of-way status. On the open downs west of the river it is the 'byway' you might expect of Britain's oldest road. In the wooded and more populated Chiltern Hills to the east its status has declined to a mixture of bridleways and footpaths. The latter spurred the creation of an alternative 'Riders' Route'.

Most of the Chiltern alternative goes under the name of Icknield Way, as the Romans named the Ridgeway when they adopted it. Then the Swan's Way links up with the



Thames at Goring Gap. Both use as much actual Ridgeway as they can, linked by other bridleways and lanes.

Perhaps because of its stitched-together, not-quite-the-real-Ridgeway nature, the Chiltern half is a bit neglected by cyclists, but we found it just as much, if not more fun to ride. There are not as many sweeping views, but the surroundings and terrain are much more varied than west of the Thames. The big problem for riders here is poor signposting. On the Icknield Way it's okay, with frequent little pictures of a stone-age axe and big 'Riders' Route' signs where this diverts from the Ridgeway. But we only ever saw one Swan-in-a-horseshoe sign. For added confusion the Swan's Way has yet another suggested route, the Chiltern Way, weaving in and out of it!

Fortunately Chris had programmed the correct route into his GPS, so we had no trouble. Without this or Harvey's excellent Ridgeway map on your handlebars, it would be easy to lose the way.

Kites over the Chilterns

Logistics for a trip of this nature are not easy if you want to avoid carrying large amounts of gear. We set off early in two cars from Godalming. Chris's plan was to leave our luggage at the first night's stop and a car at each end of the route. This took some time to sort out. Nevertheless, we were ready to ride by 11 o'clock.

The Icknield Way has an inauspicious start, where the Ridgeway crosses a lane below Ivinghoe Beacon. Walkers hike up a nice grassy hill, while cyclists use the road. But things looked up as we climbed a densely wooded ridge that the Ridgeway misses, crowned by a monument to the Duke of Bridgewater (the father of inland navigation).

(Above left) Quiet track through the Chilterns, southwest of Watlington on the second morning
(Above) It's a cracking route when the sun's out. This is the view north across Oxfordshire, not far from Wantage

Tips for the ride

THE RIDGEWAY is a pleasant ride for most abilities. You don't need to be a skilled mountain biker. However, the chalk does become very slippery when it's wet, which makes riding difficult. So try to pick a dry period.

WE TOOK THREE DAYS because we wanted time to stop, explore, investigate and take photographs. Two would be adequate for many, stopping overnight at Goring or Streatley.

NAVIGATION is easy with the Harvey Ridgeway map. It's clearly printed, has all the things on it you need (including the water taps provided by the friends of the Ridgeway but excluding one pub), and it's waterproof. Our GPS helped too, and you can download the route from www.ctc-maps.org.uk

ACCOMMODATION is adequate but not plentiful so you might want to book ahead. It's a ride you can do using public transport with rail connections within ten miles of either end and slap in the middle at Goring.

LUGGAGE will need some thought, unless you're riding with the bare essentials on your back. You could taxi it between night stops, or use a rear carrier or big saddlebag to carry it on the bike. A touring bike with knobby tyres would manage the route but it's easier on a mountain bike.



(Clockwise from left) Conditions were at their worst near the end; Mark, Chris & Mark set off; Uffington White Horse; Riding ruts near Ogbourne St George



A cut in the trees gave a glimpse of Albury and the vale beyond, as we whizzed along well-maintained paths before taking a lane down to the Chiltern summit of the Grand Union Canal at Cow Roast Lock.

Much of the first day involved similar riding, up and down on a variety of tracks, including some singletrack. There is some tarmac to ride but not a huge amount. Neither is there any shortage of refreshment stops. We diverted for lunch just a few yards off route to the King & Queen in Wendover, but with an earlier start might have reached the Rising Sun, which is actually on the Way. We found it deep in the woods at Little Hampden, but not on Harvey's otherwise faultless map.

The route changed character after the tea stop at Princes Risborough, flattening and broadening out as we passed a long string of disused chalk pits. We could imagine Romans marching this long straight track, the hills on our left and farmland rolling away to the right. Circling one field we counted nine red kites, which are more common than crows in the Chilterns. With the weather much improved we enjoyed this easy stretch, calling a halt after 32 miles at Orchard House Cottage, a cycle-friendly B&B on the edge of Watlington and only 600m off route. Hosts Charles and Ronnie even transferred our luggage for us.

Through golden wheatfields

Bright sunshine and a big breakfast put us in the mood for day two, the first half of which would take us, via

easy tracks and some tarmac, to Goring on Thames: the midway point of the ride. During the morning we found by chance a curious tomb or monument in a small wood, Leyland's Copse. John Thurlow Reade had left Ipsden for India in 1817. In 1827, his mother became anxious for a letter having not heard from him for quite some time. Walking one evening she saw John's ghost and persuaded the vicar to pray for his soul that night. The anticipated letter arrived soon after, advising that her son had indeed died of dysentery at Sehaarunpore. John's brother had the memorial erected near the spot where their mother saw the apparition.

The Ridgeway is a ride where you barely pass any habitation so it was a pleasure to ride through the lovely village of North Stoke and to spy the Thames through the trees on the short stretch before Goring, where we had lunch at the John Barleycorn. There's a YHA hostel just across the river at Streatley, which is well placed for

“You could see for miles. Over there was Uffington Castle and the adjacent White Horse, and just a short way on, Wayland's Smithy”

speedier riders doing the Ridgeway in two days. Both Streatley and Goring have B&Bs too.

A long easy climb out of the Thames Valley followed. We were now in classic Ridgeway country with broad sweeping views north and a huge sky overhead. Didcot power station blighted the view in one direction, but otherwise we were surrounded by golden brown wheatfields, almost ready for harvesting. It was a beautiful summer afternoon, with hot sun crackling the corn and rich smells rising from the chalky earth. We stopped to rest at a pillar commemorating the life of Robert Loyd-Lindsay, Baron Wantage, a hero of the Crimea (where he won a VC) and a founding member of the British Red Cross.

With 28 miles ridden, we reached the Court Hill Centre (the old Ridgeway YHA), perfectly located only 600 metres off route. It's converted from an interesting group of old farm buildings and in a beautiful spot right on the tip of the scarp above the Vale of White Horse.

Summer storm

Day three and a beautiful morning saw us make good progress along the top of the downs. It was easy riding and you could see for miles. Over there was Uffington Castle and the adjacent White Horse and, just a short way on, Wayland's Smithy, a long barrow predating Stonehenge and also a place of legend. It was said that if you tethered your horse overnight and left a silver coin, when you returned the next morning your horse would be re-shod.

We expected to be able to have lunch at the Shepherd's Rest, near Liddington, where the trail is on-road for the first time since Goring and Streatley, but the pub was boarded up. Maybe it will re-open one day.

As we pressed on, climbing towards the Bronze Age hill fort, Liddington Castle, the forecast rain began to fall. Unfortunately, this is also the only part of the route on which motorised vehicles are still permitted (from April to October). Deep ruts that filled with water made it soggy, awkward going.

By now hungry, we made a tricky descent – chalk is appallingly slippery when wet – to Ogbourne St George and an unfriendly pub. I suppose we *were* soaked and muddled.

The rain abated over lunch but fell heavier and heavier once we were back on our bikes. We were inspired by the sight of two brave ladies pushing cheap bikes up the first hill. We overtook them, imagining that we'd ride briskly along the final section of the route.

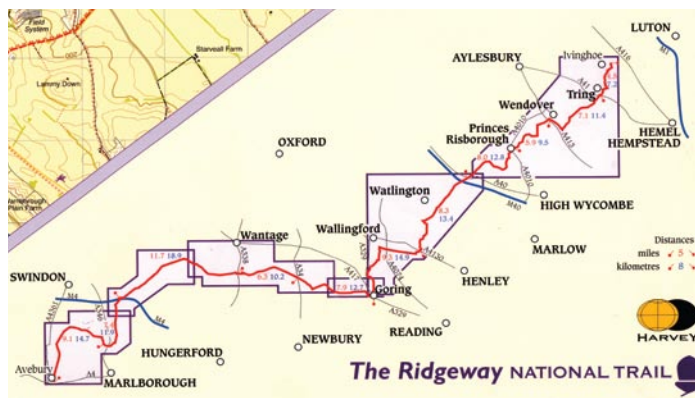
It was not to be. The conditions underwheel got worse. The track was deeply rutted and its dips and bumps were swallowed by a milky ooze. Above, stair rods of rain poured out of a leaden sky, with the occasional thunderclap for company.

Eventually we reached the end at Overton Hill. A short ride, with the magic carpet of tar beneath our wheels, brought us to Avebury. There would be no dallying with standing stones today: we made straight for the car we had left three days earlier, piled everything in and headed back to the last night's stop to collect our belongings (and have a much needed shower and tea, thanks to the kindness of Simon the manager) before driving to Ivinghoe to collect the other car and then home. We had covered just 31 miles but in these conditions it had felt like a long day.



Fact file The Ridgeway

DISTANCE: 90 miles ridden, with 1,760 metres of climbing.
TIME TO RIDE: 2 or 3 days. 1 day is possible at a push.
START: Pitstone Hill car park, nr Ivinghoe, Bucks [GR SP 954 148], nearest station Tring (3 miles) served by London Midland Railways, tel: 0121 634 2040.
FINISH: Overton Hill, on A4 nr Avebury, Wilts [GR SU 118 680], nearest station Pewsey (9 miles) served by First Great Western, tel: 08457 000 125.
INFORMATION: The Ridgeway National Trails Office, tel: 01865 810224, www.nationaltrail.co.uk/ridgeway. Almost all the information you could want is available from this website, including accommodation information.
MAPS: The Ridgeway (scale 1:40,000) Harvey Maps Ltd, tel: 01786 841202, www.harveymaps.co.uk, or OS Landranger (1:50,000) numbers 173, 174, 175, 165, or OS Explorer (1:25,000) numbers 157, 170, 171, 165.
HISTORY/GEOGRAPHY: English Heritage, www.english-heritage.org.uk. Good source of information on the prehistoric sites along the way.
ACCOMMODATION/FOOD & DRINK: See Ridgeway National Trails Office (above). We stayed at Woodgate Orchard Cottage, Watlington, OX49 5EL (600m from the trail), tel: 01491 612675, mailbox@wochr.freereserve.co.uk, and ate at Chequers, Watlington OX49 5RA, tel: 01491 612874. Second night: The Court Hill Centre, Wantage OX12 9NE, www.courthill.org.uk, tel: 01235 760253, info@courthill.org.uk



Left: Extract from HARVEY route map Ridgeway. Copyright HARVEY 2009