

# Happiness on wheels

Cycling is a gift, one that CTC's Cycle Champions have brought to more than 20,000 people so far. **Patrick Trainor** spoke to some of them

**M**aking cycling enjoyable, safe and welcoming for all' is one of CTC's core goals. To achieve it the organisation needs to reach out to groups that seldom cycle. And that's where CTC's Cycle Champions come in.

In 2007, CTC Charitable Trust received a grant from the Big Lottery's Wellbeing fund towards a programme to bring cycling activities to new and returning cyclists. The funding enabled CTC to employ 13 cycling development officers under the title 'Cycle Champions'. They work with community groups and partner organisations in 13 locations across England to promote cycling.

The CTC's Cycle Champions programme is particularly targeted at bringing cycling to sections of society that are known to have lower physical activity levels and are less likely to choose cycling as a lifestyle or transport choice. These include groups like older people, people with disabilities, people with health issues, women and girls, and ethnic minorities.

Each Champion identifies and develops a range of structured activities to suit the needs of their target group with the aim of getting as many people as possible cycling whatever their needs. Sometimes it's just the simple act of lending a bike

to someone to see if they like cycling, which can make a huge difference to their lives.

So far the programme has had over 20,000 direct beneficiaries with more than twice that benefiting indirectly and the number is growing daily. Here are just some of the things the Cycle Champions project have been doing.

## Championing health

Health practitioners and care trusts understand the physical and mental benefits of cycling and are keen to offer it as a rehabilitation tool. Cycle Champions are working with them to get people with a range conditions riding. Cycles to suit everyone are provided, along with qualified cycle instructors. They start with a gentle introduction and gradually increase the amount of cycling each participant does each week.

'It's a brilliant way of getting exercise and meeting like-minded people who understand what I have been through,' said Liz, 67, a recovering stroke patient. She rides with a group led by Wolverhampton Champion Beccy Marston. Liz saw the group riding around a local park when she was confined to hospital and was determined to get better so that should could join in. She is enjoying regaining fitness and mobility, but stresses that it's not solely about the riding. 'I love the atmosphere and the support from

other cyclists. There are so many more advantages of the cycling group than just getting the exercise.'

Another of Beccy Marston's group is John, 53, who became a paraplegic after suffering from a spinal abscess. Confined to a wheelchair, he was told he would never be able to use his legs to stand or walk again. Cycling, however, has kept his legs mobile and helped muscle development, and he is now able to stand for short periods. He too enjoys the social aspect of cycling with the group and the sense of freedom it gives. 'Being able to get out of the house and have mobility out the wheelchair is a great feeling,' he said.

## Championing older people

Among the many successful projects in Swindon is the Cycling Through the Years course run by the town's Cycle Champion, Anna Cipullo. The scheme is an eight-week course for the over-50s, which takes place every Saturday at the County Ground Athletic Track. The courses are so popular that the next two are already fully booked.

Participants receive professional cycle coaching on the running track until the group is ready to progress to cycle paths and low-traffic streets. The course is structured to provide the confidence and skills necessary for cycling in real-world situations and has on occasion plotted routes to work to help with people's

Photos: top right by David Bookling. Others by CTC



# CYCLE CHAMPIONS



(Clockwise from top left): Swindon 'Extra Time over 60s' cycle day. Cycling For Health ride in Sheffield. Emmanuel Apostolic Gospel Choir in Leicester. Greenbank High School girls. Cycling For Health group in Wolverhampton. Caroline from Sheffield. Gospel Choir again.





Girls from Greenbank High School on the start line of the support race for the recent Tour Series round in Southport.

commutes. It also teaches basic bike maintenance. With a range of bikes available from standard two wheels to trikes, hand bikes and quads, all abilities are catered for.

Many on the course are complete beginners who never learned to ride a bike as a child. Several have learned to ride two-wheeled bikes from scratch and then gone on to buy a bike and join one of Anna's leisurely-paced social bike rides.

Cathy is one of those: 'I never had the opportunity as a child to ride a bike,' she said. 'It just never happened. I was a complete beginner at the age of 61 am so glad I have begun cycling.'

It wasn't all plain sailing, however. 'I had a tumble from the bike and sprained my ankle,' she added, 'but I am back and have bought a bike to do some of the organised rides.'

Another complete beginner was Suzanne, who now rides regularly and best of all is now able to enjoy rides with her family. 'I really enjoyed the course and the best bit for me was when I did a 13-mile ride with my children.'

### Championing women & girls

Juliet Jardine, CTC Champion in Sefton in North West England, is focusing on getting more women and girls on bikes. Since many girls stop cycling when they become teenagers she set up a project at Greenbank High School to encourage them to continue.

Initially, none of the pupils cycled to school. They said they didn't feel confident. To overcome this, Juliet arranged cycle training for them, and more than 160 pupils were instructed in one day alone. She set up an after-school club to continue the training and 23 girls achieved Bikeability's Level 3 standard.

None had cycled much before, and one of them – Jemima – was very nervous because she had fallen off her bike the year before and broken her leg. Her parents thought she would never get back on a bike but

**“It's about more than just the bikes. Cycling encourages people to get out together and communities to bond.”**

she did and has never looked back. In fact, she became a driving force behind the club arranging rides and has encouraged other girls to join in. The scheme itself has become a flagship for other cycling towns and schools wanting to introduce cycling to girls.

To encourage more women to cycle, Juliet established the Southport Cycling Belles, who now go riding once a fortnight. Many of the ladies are complete novices with a few more experienced riders providing help and advice.

One member of the group, Hildah,

started cycling again because of bad arthritis. 'I hadn't cycled for many years but found it great exercise before and after my hip operation,' she said. 'I couldn't walk much and it provided a chance to get back into the countryside and breathe fresh air. I've come on so much that I'm doing the Coast to Coast Challenge later this year.'

### Championing community groups

People from ethnic backgrounds are under-represented in cycling. Some don't see cycling as part of their culture. The Cycle Champions programme has had great success working alongside many groups to make it an option.

The Emmanu-El Apostolic Gospel Choir in Leicester had a few children who cycled when they started working with the Cycle Champions programme. However, with some free recycled bikes and plenty of ongoing advice and encouragement, 25 members now cycle regularly to choir practices and all over the city. The 50-strong choir caused a stir when they pedalled through the 2009 Skyride in Leicester, singing all the way to the main stage.

'Without the Cycle Champions project we would not be cycling,' said Pastor Samuel. 'Bikes cost quite a bit so when we got some free bikes people

became interested and more and more started riding. We ride as far as we can to places we wouldn't see otherwise. It's good voice training as well – riding up the hills. Cycling and singing go well together.'

Members of the choir come from all parts of society, including disadvantaged backgrounds. Some are kids who were excluded from school, others had been from jail to jail – people who felt they had no hope. 'The choir is bringing people into something not excluding them, and the bikes are part of that,' said Pastor Samuel.

'It's about more than just the bikes. Cycling enables people to go out together and encourages communities to bond together. Without the project, we wouldn't be staying together as much as we would like. Cycling has become something

the choir does. We had a big ride where we sang and raised funds for the Special Olympics.'

## Championing inclusivity

Cycling is accessible to everyone, including those with disabilities. Special cycles – often trikes of one kind or another – are made available to participants in a range of Cycle Champions projects.

Cycles for disabled riders are relatively rare and are seldom cheap, so for many participants it's their first chance to try one. Once they have done so, many find a new lease of life from something they never thought they could participate in. For some, this can be a life changing moment as they realise that there is a cycle to suit them and that it can be used in their everyday lives.

Caroline, 43, is a case in point. Her story appeared in Cycle last year, after she was introduced to cycling by Sheffield Cycle Champion Steve Marsden. A year on, she is as upbeat as ever.

'I suffered brain damage resulting in left side paralysis, impaired vision and epilepsy,' she said. 'My marriage broke down as a result and I now care for my 7 and 11 year old children alone. I was on a downward spiral until I was put in touch with the Champions programme and was introduced to cycling. I tried a trike and it literally changed my life. I got my freedom back and a whole new world of friends.'

'I now give regular talks to community groups about cycling and how it helped me and because of my success and confidence. I have also started working for the Self Directed Support team. One of the best knock on effects from me cycling is that I can influence not just fellow brain injury survivors but many others. To know that I help folk feel as positive about life as I do is just immense!'



## And that's not all

**CTC's Cycle Champions are based in 13 locations across England:**

Bradford – *Ginny Leonard*, [ginnyleonard@ctc.org.uk](mailto:ginnyleonard@ctc.org.uk)  
Colchester – *Richard Monk*, [richard.monk@ctc.org.uk](mailto:richard.monk@ctc.org.uk)  
Derby – *Amanda Salt*, [amanda.salt@ctc.org.uk](mailto:amanda.salt@ctc.org.uk)  
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To find out more or to see what the Champions are doing in your area, please visit [www.ctc.org.uk/cyclechampions](http://www.ctc.org.uk/cyclechampions) – or contact programme manager Steven Bailey on [steven.bailey@ctc.org.uk](mailto:steven.bailey@ctc.org.uk)

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