

# Bicycle belles

How do you get more women cycling for fun? **Sue Booth** of Chester's Fabulous Ladies' cycling club shares her experiences

**W**omen make up a minority of club cyclists, and perhaps cyclists as a whole. This imbalance was the spur for CTC's 'Five Miles to Fabulous' initiative, which ran from 2005-2008 with the aim of showing women how achievable and enjoyable it is to ride just five miles. It's also how the Chester Fabulous Ladies' group was born.

I ran a Five Miles to Fabulous event in Chester in 2008. While only two ladies and two helpers turned up, we had a really good time. 'I could do this each month,' I thought.

If you run suitable rides, it seems, riders will come. Now a dozen or more of us meet every month for a social ride. Most are new or returning cyclists. I asked the Fabulous Ladies why they thought fewer women cycled than men, what hurdles they had encountered themselves, and what were the best ways to remove any barriers.

**Concern 1:** lacking fitness or confidence

It's a sweeping generalisation and there are some very fit and experienced women



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cyclists, but men are often fitter – or at least more eager to push the pace. By making our group women only, there's no pressure to ride at any pace but ours. Ride distances are modest, usually 15 miles or shorter, and always include a café stop. In true CTC style, we always wait for everyone to catch up after a hill or at junctions.

The Fabulous Ladies also said:

- 'Having tried a few regular cycle clubs I'd been scared off by the testosterone, lycra-clad brigade. Even the thought of a gentle CTC ride was out of the question.'

- 'For me it was being able to ride out without the pressure of speed. An all-girls ride more interested in the quality of the cakes than the speed or the distance was exactly my cup of tea.'

- 'The group is so supportive. When I have been slower than everyone else I have never been made to feel that I was holding back the group. It has opened up a whole new world of cycling experiences for me.'

**Concern 2:** family commitments

I don't believe that 'a woman's place is in the home', but as a family arrives and grows, it »

(Above) It's not critical that everyone can fix bikes – as long as someone can



## CTC MEMBER GROUPS

The Fabulous Ladies' rides are deliberately short and easy paced



» is often mum who stays in and dad who keeps cycling. Of course, some people go cycling as a family and that's fun too but it's a different dynamic from cycling with friends.

Many ladies put housework, children or shopping ahead of their own pastimes. If, like me, you work full-time, then weekends can become very short, and catching up with chores or spending time with the family take up most of that time. Spending a whole Sunday out on the bike may be unrealistic.

I started the ladies' rides on a Saturday morning because that was when I had a few hours free. But it seems to work for others in the group too, as it leaves the majority of the weekend free for other family pursuits. Two of the group with younger children now meet midweek as it is easier for them to manage, but it was coming out with the Fabulous Ladies that gave them the confidence to arrange this.

• 'For me, coming out with the group is about the opportunity to meet new women who share my interest in cycling and may have other interests in common.'

• 'I think as women we tend to prefer to have a friend along with us when we do things, especially new experiences. It is not that we lack confidence but we enjoy sharing experiences with our friends.'

### Concern 3: breakdowns and accidents

There is not that much that can go wrong on a bike, but the fear that something could happen and 'What would I do then?' may put some women off from venturing out without their other halves – who may have been largely or exclusively responsible for seeing to their bikes.



Rides don't repeat the same loops but explore the local area

I was fortunate to be offered a free cycle maintenance session from a local bike shop. Within a group, of course, it's not essential that everyone is proficient at repairs, as long as someone is. We've only had one ride fraught with punctures – six of them! – but we fixed them just fine.

• 'My initial worry was that cycling in a group I might crash into another rider and cause mayhem! I'm now far more confident about group cycling since braving a few CTC rides and joining the Fab Ladies.'

### Concern 4: fear of traffic

If you're coming back to cycling after a lay-off of 10-15 years, cars are more abundant and seem faster. It can be a challenge to get your confidence back. It can only come with experience and advice from experienced cyclists. But it's also important to use smaller, quieter roads as much as possible.

As with all CTC groups I have ridden with, the Fabulous Ladies favour quiet country lanes where other vehicles are rare. We also negotiate side streets, as we did on an Urban Rhino Hunt this summer (you will have to see the blog!). Most of the group are still at the stage where they are asking 'Where are

## Starting a new group

- **Spreading the word is the hard part. Once people are out it is easy to demonstrate the slow pace, friendliness – and cakes.**
- **Identify a good local meeting spot if you are leading. Parking is useful, and a café is a great idea as a place to come back to when you finish.**
- **Run through and remind people of the communication used and road safety aspects before you set off, and pick someone to ride as a tail-ender.**
- **Take junctions with caution – stopping beforehand if necessary to tell people what you are doing and what needs to happen.**
- **Take photos and start a blog. It is really easy to do and free. Or maybe one of your riders can do this? It is a good place to share information about the rides, and to show newcomers who you are and what you get up to. Mine is: [www.chesterfabulousladies.blogspot.com](http://www.chesterfabulousladies.blogspot.com)**

we?', or 'How did we get here?' as we emerge from the lanes to cross the main road, before disappearing down another lane or track.

### Concern 5: where to go

If you have not grown up riding with your local CTC group, you may not be aware of the extent of 'traffic quieter' options, such as lanes, byways, tracks, towpaths, bridleways etc. Traffic-free routes can be very popular on weekends, but there's only so many times you can go up and down the same route before becoming bored.

It's a cliché that women don't get on with maps as well as men. But with some exploration ahead of time and some local knowledge, it's not difficult to plot a great range of routes. In the past two years the Fabulous Ladies have not yet repeated a route, and we have visited 17 different cafés.

Ultimately, the best way to convince women (or men!) that cycling is do-able, safe and enjoyable, is to get them out on a ride. I keep a blog about the rides, and direct potential riders to that, so they can see what we do and where we go. I always enjoy riding out with the ladies: it's different each month.