



**WHERE** The Pennines, Northern England  
**START** Derby **FINISH** Berwick-upon-Tweed  
**DISTANCE** 355 miles **WORDS** Mark Waters  
**PICTURES** Mark Waters

# ALONG ENGLAND'S BACKBONE

Eleven CTC members accompanied **Mark Waters** on a CTC tour along the Pennine Cycleway this summer


**T**he Pennine Cycleway runs for 355 miles along the spine of England, from Derby to Berwick-upon-Tweed on the Scottish border. Sustrans founder John Grimshaw calls it 'the best National Cycle Network route of the lot'. That it's hilly goes without saying, and it was the water draining off these hills that provided the power that made England the manufacturing capital of the world a couple of centuries ago. The signs of that industrial heritage are still there, particularly in the South Pennines.

The ride is not all hills, however. After we left Derby, the twelve of us followed quiet lanes to Ashbourne, then joined the first of three old railway tracks en route: the Tissington Trail. We stayed on it almost all the way to Buxton. It was a spectacular start to our journey, a gentle ride up across the roof of Derbyshire, with expansive views of the beautiful White Peak.

Later on, we'd ride two other rail trails: the Longdendale, north of Glossop; and the South Tyne, which runs from north of Alston to Haltwhistle, near Hadrian's Wall. There were two serene canal towpath sections too. Aside from these flat bits, the Pennine Cycleway involves some hard graft. The compensation is the world-class scenery you pass through.

## PEAK DISTRICT CLIMBS

It's a common misconception to think that National Cycle Network (NCN) routes are traffic-free. Most are on



**DO IT YOURSELF**

»Sustrans produce a series of three maps covering the whole of the Pennine Cycleway (which is NCN route 68). Visit [sustransshop.co.uk](http://sustransshop.co.uk). You can find more information about the route at [pennine-cycleway.co.uk](http://pennine-cycleway.co.uk). To discuss the route in detail, contact the CTC Helpdesk on 0844 736 8450.



Photos: Mark Waters

minor roads. The Pennine Cycleway is no exception, although there are a number of short off-road sections, in addition to the towpaths and old railway trails.

Most of these off-road sections are rideable on any bike. No so the one outside Buxton. We climbed a steep hill out of the town, then the route turned off onto a tiny tarmac lane that was even steeper. This soon disintegrated into a rough stony track that no bike other than a full-bore mountain bike could cope with. Thank goodness for the two-foot gear! Luckily, we had only a couple of hundred metres of walking before tarmac returned.

Most of our group rode touring bikes of some description, but there were a couple of small wheelers: an Airmimal and a Brompton. Neither rider struggled, and in fact John, the Brompton rider, was the strongest of the group and rode most of the off-road sections easily. The Pennine Cycleway requires strong legs more than a specific bike. If you don't have them, you'll find out on days two and three.

Day three began with an outrageous hill out of Holmfirth, of 'Last of the Summer Wine' fame. We rode uphill through the interestingly named village of Uppertong. On the top, we hoped that the route might remain on high ground. It doesn't, and soon drops down into Melham, before another up-and-over to Slaithwaite.

We left this nondescript small town on a steep, mile-



long climb, only to find ourselves once again amidst a bleak and unremarkable upland. This time we didn't descend as far, only down to Scammonden Water, a reservoir that lies next to the M62.

The Pennine Cycleway crosses this motorway. But how? Poor signposting confused us, and we wasted precious energy hauling bikes along improbable tracks before someone spotted a small tunnel under the motorway. A steep descent into Sowerby Bridge followed.

### **NORTHERN DELIGHTS**

We had two options from Sowerby Bridge: a tough climb out of the town; or the canal towpath to Hebden Bridge (on NCN 60). Everyone chose the towpath, and very pretty it was too. Similarly scenic is Hebden Bridge, once a place of mills, clogs and industrial endeavour, but now one of traipsing tourists, street buskers, gift shops and ice creams. As for us, there was no time to dally – we had the infamous Hebden Bridge cobbles to ascend.

My first encounter with these had been while walking the Pennine Way in the early 1970s. To climb them with a heavy rucksack is one thing; to push a bike up them is quite another. Somehow we all managed to grovel our way up the slimy stones. Then all we had to do was get back on our bikes and ride up the remaining mile of hill to Heptonstall, where there were more cobbles –

**1)** Canal towpath sections enable you to miss out some hard climbs by road

**2)** Like most Sustrans routes, the majority of the Pennine Cycleway is on quiet lanes

**3)** The further north you go, the better the scenery becomes

### **CTC TAKES YOU THERE**

» This article describes a CTC tour (ref: 1129) that took place from 25 June to 2 July 2011, costing £290, inclusive of hostel accommodation, all breakfasts and some evening meals. Almost all tours for the forthcoming year are advertised from the end of November. Many book up very quickly. See [cyclingholidays.org](http://cyclingholidays.org) or the advert on page 83.

surfacing the whole of the main street.

The scenery changed dramatically when we found ourselves on Widdop Moor. It was our first real taste of remote uplands and it was stunningly beautiful. This took the edge off the headwind and distracted us from the remainder of the day's climbs. It was a relief to reach Colne. There's even a bike shop there, right on the route – some new brake blocks, perhaps?

The final section of the day's ride changed again: the route suddenly became a rural idyll. We cycled along small lanes with dry stone walls, in a landscape dotted with sheep and cows, through brilliantly green fields and picture-postcard villages. We looked out on big skies and dramatic hills. Cake-filled cafés appeared in just the right places at just the right times. It's a route you don't ever want to end! And it carries on like that until Berwick-upon-Tweed.

If you were pressed for time, you could start the Pennine Cycleway by riding north from the Colne Valley. It's simply fantastic from then on. But that would miss out the preliminary two days of climbing, which earn you the 'right to ride' and enjoy what is undoubtedly one of the best routes ever.

Just don't pack too much in your panniers, and make sure you fit low gears! 🚲

*Discover more route information and touring ideas at [ctc-maps.org.uk](http://ctc-maps.org.uk)*