



First time tourers

Cycle touring with children on their own bikes is a big step – especially when one has a condition affecting balance and coordination.

Jane Almond describes their journey

My husband is the cyclist. He's been a member of CTC for 40 years, time trialled in his youth, and did some long distance tours in Europe and the USA. He introduced me to bikes soon after we met over 20 years ago and we've had some super weekend and day tours together over the years.

When our family grew to include our son and then our daughter, my husband couldn't wait for them to be old enough for family cycle trips. We started off with child seats attached to our bikes. Our son's seat was replaced by a bigger version as he continued to grow but failed to ride his own bike independently. He did eventually master pedalling, riding a tricycle and then a bike with stabilisers. Balance remained a huge problem.

Coordination problems often make everyday activities a challenge for children with learning difficulties. He was diagnosed with ASD (autistic spectrum disorder) when he was four years old and the experts said it was amazing he had learned how to pedal at all.

When our son outgrew the largest child seat on the market, we discussed the possibilities. Should we invest in a trailer cycle? Would it be possible to get stabilisers for a larger bike? Should we go for a large tricycle? Should we forget about family cycling altogether?

One Easter holiday we decided to make a last effort to get our son on two wheels. We would take both children for 20-minute cycling sessions every day of the holiday. After the first two sessions our seven-year-old daughter had got it. She whizzed triumphantly round the playground, circling her 11-year-old brother with glee!

On two wheels

ASD children may be socially unaware, but our son woke up to the fact that younger sister had achieved something that he had not. Two days later, he wobbled uncertainly but independently round the playground on his bike. You should have seen the smile on our faces!

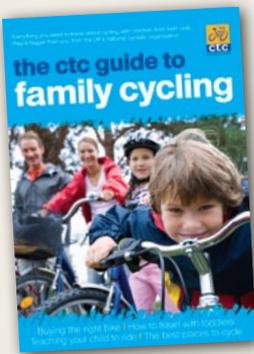
It was a start. We progressed slowly to three-mile rides round the lanes nearest us, then a larger circuit of about six miles. Gear changing and hand signals were a great difficulty for our son, but his confidence and enjoyment were growing.

We had a strict, tight, family formation: my husband in front, then our son, then our daughter, then me. This kept the children safely in the middle and meant that I could shout ahead if I spotted either in difficulties.

We steered clear of busy roads. We adults did all the signalling and kept everybody in the right position on the road. Luckily we live in a quiet country area of

The Sustrans routes in the Peak District are high up but follow old railway lines so are flat: ideal for first time tourers

Main photo: Nick Cotton



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GREAT RIDES FIRST TOUR

Derbyshire, which was ideal for the purposes of practising cycling. Three years later, my husband suggested that we attempt a week's family cycling holiday.

The Tissington Trail

We went in the October half term aiming to do a day's cycling followed by a rest day, and so on. We set off from home along the lanes to

Ashbourne. It's 20 minutes by car but took us two hours by bicycle. However, the lanes were familiar and we stopped at the Shire Horse for lunch and again in Ashbourne for tea and cakes. The last lap for our first stop-over was along the Tissington Trail as far as Alsop, then along the lane to Alstonefield.

There was a brand new self-catering youth hostel there – it was like staying in a lovely country cottage. The final push up the hill to the hostel at the end of the day was too much for our daughter and we arrived on foot accompanied by a great wailing and gnashing of teeth. I was glad that we were not cycling the following day.

Everybody was keen to continue the adventure after a day walking in beautiful Wolfscotedale and Dovedale. We mounted our bikes to cycle back to the Tissington Trail and along to its terminus at Parsley Hay. From there it was fantastic cycling, generally downhill, through the lanes to Youlgreave Youth Hostel, a converted Cooperative store. We stayed in 'Haberdashery' for two nights and were glad that it wasn't 'Women's Underwear'!

High Peak Trail and home

A muddy walk across country to visit Haddon Hall left everybody ready for the continuation of our tour the next day. After breakfast we looked out on a windswept, grey day, which deteriorated rapidly. As we set off uphill back to the trail at Parsley Hay the rain and sleet lashed down horizontally into our faces. The wind was so strong that our daughter couldn't balance.

We finally made it to Parsley Hay and cups of hot chocolate all round from the refreshment booth. Fortunately, the rain and sleet stopped while we were gathering our wits and, once we had persuaded everybody to mount bikes again, we discovered that the wind was now at our backs. We sailed along the High Peak Trail to Wirksworth.

Wirksworth meant a steep hill (pushing the bikes again) but a very comfortable B&B at Middleton-by-Wirksworth. We also had a fascinating visit to the National Stone Centre on our cycle-free day. The children panned for gold and explored the quarries and it was with reluctance that we set off for home on our final day. This was a day through the country lanes again back to our house.

Our first family cycle tour was to be the first of many. We've since cycled to York and Oxford on Sustrans routes, and last summer had our best trip yet: a three-week tour of the Netherlands.

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Fact File A week in the Peak

Distance: about 60 miles over four days.

Terrain: Roads undulating, cycle trails fairly flat, through Peak District and environs.

Maps: OS Explorer OL24 White Peak.

Getting there: Nearest train station – Derby. You can ride to Ashbourne on Sustrans route 68.

Bicycle hire: Tissington Trail at Ashbourne and Parsley Hay.

Accommodation: lots of Youth Hostels in the Peak District – see www.yha.org.uk.

Tips for Mums: pannier pocket stocked with sweets, chocolate bars etc. for comfort stops.