



Making tracks

Having more places to ride your mountain bike is key to CTC's off-road agenda. That's why access expert Colin Palmer has been appointed. **Dave Barter** reports

CTC has been involved in off-road cycling since its inception 131 years ago. At the time there was no national network of surfaced roads, and touring cyclists with a thirst for travel necessarily rode 'rough-stuff' tracks and paths. CTC's campaigning work for off-road cyclists later established in law the right to ride bicycles upon bridleways. To continue to work effectively on off-road access, CTC has just appointed Colin Palmer.

Colin is an off-road access expert. He first worked with CTC on this issue in the early 1990s. Like many CTC members, Colin was riding off-road long before the invention of the mountain bike. But it was the mountain bike's sudden popularity in the late 1980s that drew fire from landowners, making it increasingly necessary for cyclists to campaign for wider off-road access from that point onwards.

A severance deal with his employer in the early 1990s gave Colin the opportunity to dedicate more of his time to access issues, initially working with the British Mountain Bike Federation and then CTC.

Trail centre successes

Colin was responsible for some key developments in off-road access. He played a pivotal role in early discussions with the Forestry Commission, which led to them embracing mountain biking and developing the trail centre network in England, Wales and Scotland. He worked patiently with interested parties to retain access to the Snowdon bridleways. He also developed, promoted and competed in mountain bike orienteering events, cleverly using cycle competition as a way to promote off-road access issues for cyclists.

I caught up with Colin following his appointment to CTC to discuss his views on the current state of off-road access within the UK and to talk about where we should be focusing next.

'There's a real buoyancy in the UK mountain bike scene,' Colin tells me.



"Talks with the Forestry Commission led to them embracing mountain biking and building trails"

‘Scotland is a prime example of how things have improved over the years. The open access laws allow mountain bikers free reign to ride in most places and the trail centre networks such as 7stanes are pouring money into the local economy whilst providing graded trails for all mountain biking abilities.’

Colin’s enthusiasm is evident as he goes on to tell me that the trail centre network in Wales is also blooming as a result of the Forestry Commission embracing mountain biking. Mountain bikers now have 13 trail centres there to choose from, offering a variety of terrain, some man-made, others ‘wild’ trails.

CTC off-road

CTC is deeply involved in many aspects of mountain biking, such as:

- **Skills training.** CTC offers mountain bike skills training and mountain bike leadership training. See the feature in Cycle Feb/Mar 09.
- **Building facilities.** CTC developed the off-road trails at Redbridge Cycling Centre (Hog Hill). CTC also helped with the urban mountain bike at Waterloo Recreation Ground in London. CTC is supporting the South West Wild Trails project.
- **Building bridges.** CTC is a national voice for mountain biking, liaising with the likes of the Forestry Commission and IMBA and hosting a conference on the future of UK mountain biking last autumn.
- **Trailbuilding.** CTC Trailbuilding workshops will be coming to a forest near you soon.
- **Events.** The Marin Roughride takes place thanks to CTC involvement, as do regular off-road rides run by CTC member groups.
- **Campaigning.** CTC won the right for cyclists to ride on bridleways in the 1960s and continues to campaign nationally and locally on off-road access.
- **MTB rescue.** Your bike breaks down in the middle of nowhere – who you gonna call? CTC, which offers breakdown cover for you and your bike.
- **Online information.** www.ctc.org.uk/mtb gives you information on the UK’s best off-road routes, clubs and groups, technical advice and skills training courses. Log on for details.

The bridleway network

As far as natural trails are concerned, Colin points out that the UK has an enviable bridleway network when compared to other countries such as New Zealand. This network provides national coverage across hugely diverse terrain, from mountains to moorland and even in and out of towns.

Colin would like to see more longer-distance routes developed like the Sea to Sea coast-to-coast route and the Trans-Cambrian Way, which hardly touches tarmac in its 100 miles. These trails are ridden by thousands of off-road pilgrims every year.

It sounds like everything is looking rosy for off-road cycling in the UK. Colin disagrees. ‘Currently the situation within the UK is very disjointed. Whilst the bridleway network is extensive it is by no means comprehensive.’

Walkers have many more route options than cyclists, Colin says, adding that in some parts of the country access for cyclists is sparse. He believes that we need to extend the network further, in particular increasing route choices close to towns and cities where off-road cyclists are often poorly served. Additionally, he is keen to develop bridleway routes in and out of the man-made centres to encourage trail-centre cyclists to spread their wings.

Keeping trails open

Colin is also keen to retain the trails that we already have. ‘We are becoming ineffective at fighting bridleway closures and the network is in danger of slowly slipping away from us,’ he says.

Then he raises the thorny issue of open access. The Scottish legislation shows no sign of making its way down to Wales or England. Resistance from landowners is high, a real problem when many of them hold huge political weight. Off-road cyclists have had to make compromises to fit in – the Snowdon agreement limits the times and dates upon which cyclists may ride up or down the mountain.

But Colin is a man with a plan. To improve off-road access and make the trail network better, he says we need two things: an effective campaigns network and success stories. ‘With a strong network we can lobby harder at MP level.’

He knows that we will not gain open access overnight, and he knows first-hand the amount of time and effort that goes into fighting against closures. However, with a comprehensive network of campaigners and trail creators he believes it’s possible to make lots of small, achievable gains, which should both inspire other cyclists and influence political will.

I ask him what his vision for the future of off-road cycling was. ‘A modified version of the Scottish Land Reform Act!’ He acknowledges that it could take some time: ‘After all, it took from the 1932 Kinder Scout mass trespass to 2000 before walkers gained their “right to roam”. But as long as we keep campaigning, we have a chance of getting there.’

Realistically, Colin reckons that in five years time we will have the lobbying network in place, we’ll have a wider trail network than we have currently do, and we’ll be more effective at campaigning and fighting our corner.



(Above & top) Britain’s bridleway network is enviable compared to some countries. Colin is keen to see it linked in to trail centres to encourage centre-based bikers to spread their wings