

It's a long grassy climb and I'm gasping in bottom gear, pushing hard on the pedals and perched right on the nose of the saddle to keep the front wheel down and the back wheel finding traction. But then I catch a big tuffet and I'm off and standing. I look down the hill. There's a line of six riders, split up, pushing bikes at their own pace.

The view across the Howgills on this summer evening is fantastic. There are no trees but the hills are lumpy and imposing, with long moorland grasses stirred by a stiff breeze. Once we're at the top, we can look back to see a beautiful strip of cloud above the ocean, backlit with the descending sun. Hang on a minute: the sea? The west coast? The one we had been riding away from for nearly two days... Well, yes, but this was Morecambe Bay, which takes a great bite (or bight!) out of the coastline. Our departure point, St Bees, was miles away to the north.

Let's get one thing straight: this wasn't the Sustrans C2C from Whitehaven or Workington to Sunderland or Newcastle. The route we were following was based roughly

on Tim Woodcock's 'Wheelwright's C2C', the mountain bike equivalent of Wainwright's original walking route. We would be taking bridleways and singletrack through changing landscapes: the great dark rock of the Lakes; the grass of the Howgills; the white clints and grykes of the Dales; and the seemingly endless heather and peat of the North York Moors.

### **The plan: four days, fast**

In fact, we deviated a bit from the planned route specifically to take in the best riding along the way. Between the seven of us, we've ridden almost every bridleway in the north of England so we pooled ideas to put together the best descents and the remotest locations that were practical.

The record for riding the coast to coast off-road is just under 24 hours (virtually non-stop) but most people take six days, or even seven or eight. We had four. That was my fault. 'Look,' I said to my riding companions, 'it's my 40th

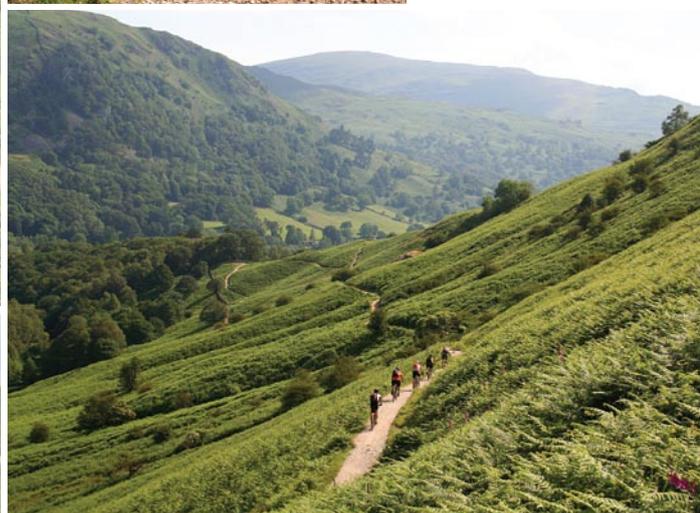
CTC's **Dan Cook** rode from St Bees to Robin Hood's Bay with six fellow mountain bikers

# **coast to coast** *off-road*





(Clockwise from opposite) Garburn climb on day two; above Grasmere Lake on Loughrigg Terrace; passing Ennerdale Water; Loughrigg Terrace again; descending Black Sail Pass



birthday soon and I've always wanted to ride the C2C. But I've only got four days free. Who's in?

To my surprise, the other six spaces in the transfer van filled up fast. We weren't sure if everyone would manage the set route, so built in some easier 'escape routes' on tarmac that would still see everyone reach our booked accommodation.

### Hard riding

Standing there at the summit of the Howgills at 6pm on our second day, we'd reached our highest point geographically. But we were a long way short of half way across the country.

Had we bitten off more than we could chew?

Well, if we had we could at least enjoy the 8km of fantastic wild country descending ahead of us. Singletrack clung to the side of the hill, finding a line between rocks and moor tufts. We sped downwards, aware of how tired we felt from 5,000m of climbing and two long days in the saddle. It was no time to make a mistake and no one did. We reached the tarmac road below grinning broadly, then clicked through the gears for the ride to our overnight stop at YHA Kirkby Stephen.

We knew from the outset that we would need to make time on our third day across the Yorkshire Dales and the Vale of York because there were big climbs on the first couple of days, and on day four we'd be crossing the breadth of the North York Moors.

Behind us were the Cumbrian Fells, some of the best riding in the world. Such steep and rocky terrain is exciting



“The Cumbrian Fells offer some of best riding in the world in steep, rocky and challenging terrain”

and challenging and it's important – even with years of experience – to know when the terrain is too much. From time to time, we had stopped and surveyed the tracks, and even walked small sections.

### The right bike

We had started our C2C traditionally, by dipping our wheels in the Irish Sea. We then climbed gradually inland on lanes and old railways before riding alongside the first of the lakes. Approaching from upper Ennerdale, the hulk of Great Gable loomed dark and foreboding.

Black Sail Pass was one of the best bits of the trip. It's a mountain biking classic: a long rough grass climb, a big rock clamber and a few hundred yards of pushing before the testing, twisting, cracked and cambered descent to Wasdale Head. Bits of this descent will test any rider, though most is rideable by the average mountain biker. It



(Clockwise from far left) Mist over the Howgills; climbing Black Sill on the first day – too steep to ride; finishing on the beach at Robin Hood's Bay



“The storm turned and came right at us. A bolt of lightning cracked to the ground 100 metres ahead”

gets easier further down, and comes out by the Wasdale Head pub.

My long travel Orange had made light work of it. I'd been due to do the ride on a lightweight Trek Top Fuel. But the courier firm seemed to have sent it to every depot in the UK and back again without ever reaching me. It eventually turned up at the Dales Bike Centre in Reeth, 30 minutes before we were due to leave to be dropped off at St Bees.

'I tried the door last night,' the driver said, 'but no one answered so I stayed in the van in the Tesco car park down the road.' I stood there, jaw open. That's what I call devotion to duty! There wasn't time to set a boxed bike up for such a ride in 30 minutes. I swapped bikes when we reached the Dales Bike Centre for lunch on the third day. In comparison to my big Orange, it felt like a rocket and it was much more suited to the flatland lanes of the Vale of York.

But maybe the bike swap was a bad omen. Thunder cracked and rain hammered as we left Reeth. A 14-wheeler sped past us, drenching us even further.

### Into the storm

It wasn't the last time we saw such rain. Skirting around the northernmost riggs and dales of the North York Moors on the last day, we could see a summer storm coming. There was a deep, defined blackness with clear grey lines beneath indicating the power of the cumulonimbus. At this stage it just looked like heavy rain...

We kept a weather eye out as we continued across what I consider to be the most fantastic natural riding: long singletrack through heather and rock, the trail heading away for miles, uninterrupted and empty.

'It'll run south of us,' some said. 'We'll get caught in its edge,' others contributed. It didn't. The storm turned and came right at us. Raindrops the size of tuppences hit the ground – and us. Within seconds the trail became a river, several inches deep. A bolt of lightning cracked to the ground about 100 metres in front of us. Another crack and a light cut across my eyes like a welder's arc. We were in the midst of the storm. Everyone was moving fast, riding by feel as the rain river hid the trail surface undulations.

The third bolt was even closer. The bang behind made my hair stand on end. The back of my neck crackled. I jumped. My whole bike jumped. “\*\*\*\*!” was the only thing to say. I said it several times, but only after hitting the biggest gear I had and ramming the pedals round so fast that when I recovered and the lightning began to feel a safe distance away, I was scared by the speed I was riding.

Everyone else had done the same. We stopped at a gate. It took a few moments before anyone could say anything. We concluded it had been rather too close for comfort!

### Moors and coast

One of the characteristics of the East Coast hills is their severity. Running mostly north to south, it means that you

have to cross several valleys before the final run down to the sea. Most of them are 1 in 6 or steeper. After four long days of riding, it was hard work, even those that were on tarmac.

At last we crossed over the last great section of Sleights Moor, riding under the tall pylons. Fylingdales early warning station stood out of the horizon like an upturned titanic bowl. We dropped down past Falling Foss waterfall and up the final climb, and then the end at last felt in reach.

We crossed the A171 and took a steep tarmac road down through Fylingthorpe towards Robin Hood's Bay. Whereas we could see the sea for miles when we were on the west coast, we couldn't see the North Sea until we were almost upon it. When we did at last, we were elated, tired and satisfied.

Fingers hovered over brake levers as the descent went on and on, steeper and steeper, down to the red roofs of Robin Hood's Bay. Even at 30mph, it felt like the sea would never come. Then the road narrowed and signs indicated that cars should turn off. Round another corner and there it was: the North Sea.

The tide was out so we rode straight onto the beach. I reached the water to dip my wheels in and complete the trip, the biggest smile on my face. Back up at the quay, the other riders were wearing the same daft grins.

We ignored the odd looks from the holiday makers, took the obligatory photo and headed off to the closest chippy for a full round each of fish, chips, mushy peas and gravy. Finally Stu from the Dales Bike Centre arrived to whisk us back to Reeth, our cars and journeys home.

## CARRYING THE LOAD

We carried the minimum of gear we felt we could. With the Dales Bike Centre two thirds of the way along the route, we had the option to pick up additional kit or spares, and add to our depleted energy bar stores.

### EACH OF US CARRIED

- A 25-litre rucksack containing...
- Lightweight set of 'pub-friendly' clothing
- Spare base layer and spare shorts
- Waterproofs
- Multi tool, spoke key, pump, a couple of inner tubes and spare chain connecting link
- Spare brake pads
- Maps, compass, whistle, lights
- Phone and money

### BETWEEN THE GROUP WE HAD

- Two group shelters (two in case we got split up)
- Two first aid kits
- Small bottle of oil
- Bivy bag

### WE DIDN'T HAVE, BUT NEEDED

- A set of new SPD cleats (we bought a replacement set en route)
- A bleed tube and some brake fluid (we managed)
- Couple of spare spokes (Phill finished on a wobbly wheel)



## Fact File Coast to coast off-road

**ROUTE:** Based on Wheelwright's Coast to Coast by Tim Woodcock. This is out of print but you can get an updated version – The Coast to Coast Mountain Bike Route Companion Pack – for £7.99 (including mapping) from [www.mbruk.co.uk](http://www.mbruk.co.uk).

**DISTANCE:** approx 320km (199 miles) with 9,400m of climbing.

**TIME:** 4-6 days. We did it in 4.

**BASIC ROUTE DESCRIPTION:** Day 1, St Bees to YHA Coniston Holly How (67km) via Cleator Moor, Kirkland, Ennerdale, Black Sail Pass, Wasdale Head, Burnmoor, Boot, Hard Knott and Duddon Valley, Seathwaite and Walna Scar; Day 2, Coniston to YHA Kirkby Stephen (82km) via Tilbethwaite, Little Langdale, Dale End, Elterwater, Loughrigg Terrace, Ambleside, Townend, Troutbeck, Garburn Pass, Kentmere, Stile End, Sadgill, Long Sleddale, Deepslack, Whinfell, Low Borrowbridge, over The Calf to Wath, and Smardale Fell; Day 3, Kirkby Stephen to YHA Osmotherley (100km) via Rookby, Kaber Fell, Tan Hill, Stonesdale Moor, Gunnerside, Grinton, Dales Bike Centre, Marrick, Marske, Richmond, Brompton-on-Swale, and the Vale of York; Day 4, Osmotherley to Robin Hood's Bay (80km) via Osmotherley Moor, Low Cote Farm, Arnsgill Ridge, Chop Gate, Urra, Bloworth Crossing, Farndale Moor, Glaisdale Moor, Glaisdale Rigg, Grosmont, Sleights Moor, Falling Foss and Fylingthorpe.

**TERRAIN:** We chose 'technical' all the way, so steep and rocky through the Lake District, short grass tussocks in the Howgills, smoother limestone clints and grykes in the Dales, then peat and stone across the North York Moors.

**LOGISTICS:** Our base for transfers to start and finish was The Dales Bike Centre, near Reeth in Swaledale. Owner Stu kindly sorted lifts out at each end in the Dales Bike Centre bus. Using public transport, both St Bees and Scarborough have train stations but will carry only two bikes per train.

**MAPS:** OS Landrangers 89-94, plus 97 and 98 (but depends on exact route chosen)

**ACCOMMODATION:** Dales Bike Centre ([www.dalesbikecentre.co.uk](http://www.dalesbikecentre.co.uk)), Coniston Holly How, Kirkby Stephen and Osmotherley YHAs ([www.yha.org.uk](http://www.yha.org.uk)).

**PROVISIONS:** breakfast at hostels, evening meals at hostels or pub, lunch carried or at a café.

**SAFETY:** We gave a friend our contact details, the daily route, timings, and instructions on what to do if we didn't ring in by our Emergency Action Time.

**BIKES:** The route warranted a 5-inch travel bike throughout due to its technical nature, though we actually had a variety of full suspension and hardtail mountain bikes.

**USEFUL LINKS:** Our routes are available as downloads at [www.promtb.net/downloads/c2c/Day1.pdf](http://www.promtb.net/downloads/c2c/Day1.pdf). Just change the 1 for a 2, 3, 4 to get the following days. For a guided C2C over seven days see [www.dalesbikecentre.co.uk](http://www.dalesbikecentre.co.uk).