

WHERE Home Counties, NW of London

START & FINISH Henley-On-Thames

DISTANCE 170 miles for the full loop

WORDS & PICTURES Anna Cipullo



A TASTE OF THE CHILTERN'S

A mapped and waymarked route like The Chilterns Cycleway makes first-time touring even easier, as CTC's **Anna Cipullo** and **Bruce Dalton** discovered

Neither of us had cycle touring experience or, indeed, a touring bike. I had a road bike fitted with a pannier rack, while my companion, Bruce, had a mountain bike and a trailer. What we did have were a few days to spare and a detailed guide to The Chilterns Cycleway. This is a waymarked 170-mile route through an Area of Natural Beauty: Home Counties chalk hills patterned with fields and woodland.

We started at the riverside market town of Henley-On-Thames, arriving by train. Spring sunshine shone with the first real warmth of the year, and it took every ounce of restraint not to stay and sit by the river. But I knew that sweeter sights were on the horizon, so Bruce and I set off to find our first cycleway sign.

SPONTANEOUS TOURING

Five minutes away from the bustle of Henley, we found it. Already we were cruising down

seemingly traffic-free roads, nipping in and out of English country hamlets where Ford Focuses were rarer than Maseratis and Range Rovers. Instead of urban pigeons, calls came from yellow finches darting through the bushes and red kites circling above. The weather was on our side too. Sunshine warmed our backs and a gentle tail-wind caressed my hair. Bliss.

The first section of the cycleway, up until Tring, treats you to long, open country roads through sweeping fields. It was so quiet we could hear the sound of our tyres on the tarmac. It was, however, hilly. None of the hills is especially high – this isn't the Alps – but you will likely climb two or three each day. I didn't mind. I'd rather have hills and great views than flat, uninteresting landscapes.

As we set off late, mainly due to pre-ride faffing with the panniers and cycle trailer, we decided to stop for lunch before we'd gone very far. Stokes Row, not far from Henley, is

blessed with a local shop with a bakery in the back. We went in expecting modest snacks and came out with handmade, foot-long baguettes.

The plan was to cycle until we got tired and then collapse (hopefully not literally) at the nearest B&B. This meant that we didn't have the stress of getting to a particular location by a certain time. On the other hand, it wasn't easy finding last-minute accommodation in such a touristed area. We spent half an hour at Princes Risborough phoning around for somewhere to stay, eventually finding beds 7km off the route in Speen.

The detour west into Wycombe turned out to be well worth it. The George and Dragon near Speen is a low-ceilinged, quintessentially British public house with exposed beams, wonky stairs leading up to adequate and affordable guest rooms, and a bar complete with eccentric locals. A resident informed us



IN THE PHOTOS
1) The cycleway mostly follows quiet country lanes
2) The Chiltern Hills are just that – hilly – but there are flat bits too
3) Lacking a tourer, Bruce used the T2 trailer we tested last issue



CycleChilterns

Cycle Chilterns aims to get more people cycling in the area, from residents commuting to work to tourists cruising the Chilterns Cycleway and visiting attractions by bicycle. Cycle Chilterns is delivered in partnership by CTC, Chilterns Conservation Board, and Visit Chilterns. For more information, visit the website: www.cycle-chilterns.co.uk

“It was so quiet we could hear our tyres on the tarmac. It was, however, hilly. None is especially high, but you will climb two or three each day”

that we were yards away from the Hellfire Caves. The next morning we awoke to the sight of the ‘Golden Ball’ of St Lawrence Church at the top West Wycombe Hill, which was quite a sight.

THE WHITE HART

With toast, a cooked breakfast and two bowls of cereal in my belly, we set off into the sunshine once again. By this stage, I had developed a smug spring in my pedal strokes, knowing that Bruce, my super-fast companion, was hampered by mountain bike tyres and a loaded trailer.

The roads after Princes Risborough had a lot of exclamation marks on the map, indicating steep hills. Bruce patiently winched up them with his trailer. My road bike’s compact double crankset was more than adequate to tackle the hills provided I didn’t start off in ‘hero mode’ at the bottom. It would have been much more leisurely with some lower gears. Still, each summit rewarded us with some excellent country views.

Lunch was a little detour to The Bell in Studham, Bedfordshire, where we indulged in pie and chips. Over lunch, we planned the afternoon’s miles, chose our accommodation

for the night, and booked ahead. That way we wouldn’t be desperately searching for somewhere before the sun went down. Then we set off into Hertfordshire, the most northerly county in the Chilterns.

On arriving at the densely woody Ashridge Estate, we spotted a rare white hart, an albino deer amidst a herd of 20 or so in the trees. The Estate has also introduced some rare foreign mammals, including glis-gliss (dormouse) and muntjac deer, as well as birds of prey.

A few roads and one slightly muddy railway path later, we arrived at the Macdonald Bobsleigh Hotel just off route in Bovingdon near Hemel Hempstead. We had ridden exactly 99.9km. There was not a bobsleigh in sight, but the hotel staff were kind enough to let us store our bikes in our room.

SHOWERS AND SHORTCUTS

The next morning was a little chillier and a shower blew through half-way along our route. We hid in a pub and ate more food. There we decided that the journey was taking longer than we had planned, so we cut off the top of the loop around Luton up to Barton-Le-Clay. Once the rain clouds had passed over – filling our trailer with rain water – we set off back to

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Henley-on-Thames.

Up until the M40 crossing, the route from north to south was rather urban. Travelling through Berkhamsted and Amersham was more like a pleasant commute than a leisurely tour in the middle of nowhere. After reaching Frieth, however, we were back onto quiet, field-dividing country roads and we were able to pick up the pace a bit.

The bridleway after Latimer wasn't ideal for my narrow-tyred road bike. If it had rained more heavily, we would have been covered in mud. Road cyclists who don't mind busy roads and can manage a bit of navigation would be better advised to take the alternative road route to Chesham.

Returning to Henley-on-Thames was very satisfying. It was the final mark of our adventure and it was the best place to relax and mooch around. We walked along the river to admire the bridges and black-and-white architecture. Then we settled into the Chocolate Theatre Café near the railway station for a swan-shaped cake and an Italian hot chocolate so thick that you could stand a spoon in it. ☺

FACT FILE
CHILTERNS
CYCLEWAY

Where: Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire

When to go: any time, although we postponed our trip due to the cold weather in early spring and were glad we did.

Start/finish: Henley-On-Thames

Distance: 170 miles for the full loop. You could create your own loop from Henley using the southern side of the cycleway.

Terrain: Rolling hills with some steep climbs. Mainly tarmac country roads. Some rough surfaces.

I'm glad I had... My smartphone to seek out pubs and accommodation. Cyclists Welcome is handy: ctc-maps.org.uk/cyclists_welcome/

I wish I'd had... More time to ride the full loop.

Maps and guides: Go to chilternsaonb.org and click on 'Shop'. The £7.99 guidebook will give you all the OS maps you need and ideas on what to visit when you're in each area. You may want an extra list of accommodation if you're not booking in advance.

IN THE PHOTOS
4) Anna managed to fit a rear rack to her Specialized road bike, which was fine but lacked a tourer's lower gears

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