



TOAD ON THE TOWPATH

Richard Shortridge spent a day riding beside the Kennet and Avon canal

Canals are an underrated off-road riding resource. While not technically challenging or wild, they are superb at taking you away from roads and between places of interest. They're also easy to navigate!

I followed the Kennet and Avon, an 87-mile waterway connecting London to the Bristol Channel. Constructed in 1810, it was used until the 1960s when its decline meant sections had to be closed to boats. In the 1990s, its fortunes revived through hard work by the Kennet and Avon Canal Trust.

I joined the canal at Kintbury in Berkshire and cycled to Bristol, where I live: 66 miles, off-road. Most of this was towpath, although at the end I joined

the Bristol and Bath railway path. My Toad custom steel 'gravel bike' was fine on the different surfaces.

The towpath on the first leg to Pewsey was narrow and grassy. The River Kennet ran alongside here and was splendid. Dragonflies and damselflies darted across the crystal clear, shallow water. On long rides like this, it is always nice to get into a rhythm. However, the many gates on this section required cyclocross-style dismounts.

The section from Pewsey to Devizes was overgrown. Sometimes the grass was a metre high. It caught in the chain and cassette and meant sketchy shifting. But the dense undergrowth was perfect cover for a young fox who nipped out across my path.

Just outside Devizes, the path improved vastly and became a fast gravel track. I stopped at the Caen Hill Locks café, where I chatted with a bloke on a fat bike. There are 29 locks, which some narrowboat owners told me took two-to-three hours to pass through.

I arrived home happy, despite the drizzle, and gave my bike the wash it deserved.



For more towpath ride ideas, visit canalrivertrust.org.uk



Watchtowers on the Iron Curtain trail recall the past

The Czech Greenways

HEATHER CLARKE RODE FROM PRAGUE TO VIENNA ON QUIET ROADS AND TRACKS

My husband Tim and I spent 10 days cycling the Czech Greenways route from Prague to Vienna, and then along the Danube to Bratislava. With us were my sister Liz, who lives in Prague, and her Czech friend, Eva.

It was a great holiday. The well-marked route follows quiet roads and tracks between small towns. We rode along part of the Iron Curtain cycle trail and learned that during its 45 years, more guards died (mostly by suicide) than people trying to escape. It was moving to visit a preserved section of the fencing with a watchtower at Čižov; Eva explained that when she was growing up, it was the western boundary of her world.

We saw bunkers built by the Czechoslovak government in 1938 in a doomed attempt to keep Hitler out. The next day, by complete contrast, we spent an afternoon in Slavonice admiring the Renaissance façades of the houses. We went through the Podiji National Park, a beautiful area of woodland with wild cyclamen flowering beside the trail.

From the Austrian border, we went due south to Vienna and then along the Danube to Bratislava, from where we got the train back to Prague.

Details: pragueviennagreenways.org





Fuelling up with 'appeltaart' at a Dutch café

North circular

REVEREND G HOLDSWORTH
CYCLED 130 MILES THROUGH
YORKSHIRE AND LINCOLNSHIRE

The pub landlady thought I was slightly nuts. 'I've ridden here from Welton,' I said. 'But *this* is Welton,' she replied. I smiled and told her I knew that, but I'd ridden from Welton on the north bank of the Humber, 75 miles away. I hoped this would be the catalyst for an interesting conversation. But no. People just think long-distance cyclists are weird.

Last year, I stitched together a route that took in the cathedrals of Durham, Newcastle, Ripon and York. Then there was the Angel of the North to the Angel pub in Topcliffe. But my favourite themed ride was from 'Washington to Moscow', both in the UK.

I became inspired to ride longer and longer events thanks to Audax UK. Since becoming a curate in the Church of England, my weekends have become busier, so I now tend to plan solo do-it-yourself events on my day off.

The 'Many Weltons Circular' was this month's themed ride. It took me from Welton in Yorkshire, up the Humber Estuary and up the River Trent, crossing at Boothferry Bridge then Keadby Bridge, before following the pan-flat lanes to Gainsborough. Turning east, I climbed into the Lincolnshire Wolds and rode through Welton-by-Lincoln to Welton in the Wolds. Finally, I enjoyed a tailwind home: 130 miles of wonderful English countryside.



GOING DUTCH

A week in the Netherlands had everything **Phillip Knowles** and friend Charlie wanted

Halfway across the Afsluiddijk, a 30km length of road and cycle path quite literally across the North Sea, the wonder of my situation struck me. We were only on the third day of our week-long tour of the Netherlands, and here I was cycling across the sea. It was heaven.

Uncharacteristically scorching sunshine from dawn to dusk added to the state of wonder. We left Zandvoort and Den Helder's dunes and deserted Northumberland-esque beaches behind us, and had forest trails, quiet lanes and loads more coffee and apple pie to look forward to. We were heading to Arnhem, Nijmegen and Utrecht before returning to the ferry home from Europort.

Everywhere we encountered friendship, unconditional kindness and a willingness to help. Struggling to navigate? No need to ask: the Dutch simply stop and offer



assistance – in perfect English. Need somewhere serving gallons of coffee and tea plus a kilo of cake and apple pie? Places appeared in the middle of nowhere, one thatched oasis after another. 'Eaten us out of house and home once again, gentlemen? Wonderful! That will be six euros, please.'

Thanks to Vrienden op de Fiets, which translates as 'Friends of the Bike', we had 6,000 options for B&B accommodation in a variety of Dutch homes.

We visited Velorama, Nijmegen's Museum of Cycling. It occupied three floors but sadly only a couple of hours. Beautifully preserved machines bearing familiar Dunlop, Rudge, Sturmey Archer and Moulton logos confirmed the UK's significant contribution to the bicycle. There were lamps, speedos, mileometers, and tin repair kits, long since jettisoned by their owners.

Just being on a bike made us really appreciate this amazing country. Vrienden op de Fiets? You bet.

Share your story

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