

*Feature*

# BETTER

RIDING WITH A GROUP TURNS CYCLING INTO A SOCIAL OCCASION.



# TOGETHER

AND THERE'S MORE, AS CYCLING UK MEMBERS AND AFFILIATES EXPLAIN...



**W**hen you ride by yourself, it's easy to end up in a rut by sticking with what you know. Same well-worn routes. No one to help you out if you have trouble with your bike. No one to lighten your mood if you're having a hard day. A coffee stop becomes perfunctory: drink coffee; fill bidon; leave. There is an alternative, one that Cycling UK was pretty much built upon: the club ride.

Joining a cycling group expands your horizons. You

discover new loops on country lanes or sections of singletrack that you never new existed. You meet new people. You're less inclined to abandon rides because, hey, that ride is happening and your clubmates are waiting. Perhaps most importantly of all, each ride becomes a social event, a chance to kick back and chat in an environment where the pressures of work and life don't apply.

Over the next several pages, a cross-section of cyclists explain what group riding means for them.

Main photos: Joolize Dymond



## BLACKBURN & DISTRICT CTC



**Stewart Clark** joined his local Cycling UK Member Group five years ago

Every cyclist has ridden on their own, nipping to the shops, riding to and from work, or maybe even on a multi-week tour. But what about riding with a local club or Member Group? You might feel a bit apprehensive before your first group ride. Will you be able to keep up? Will you fit in with them? Don't worry. All you need to do is ask to find out what speed your chosen group rides at. As for fitting in, by their very nature cycling clubs are full of gregarious people.

I ride a tandem with my wife, and we joined our local Cycling UK group, Blackburn & District CTC, five years ago. There are many reasons to ride in a group. One of the best ones is the sharing. Clubmates might take you to new café that has recently opened or on a slight deviation from the usual route, showing you something new in your own cycling backyard.

Setting out for a club ride, you'll never

“**YOU MIGHT FEEL A BIT APPREHENSIVE. WILL YOU BE ABLE TO KEEP UP? WILL YOU FIT IN WITH THEM? DON'T WORRY**”



**Top left:** Liquorice Allsorts silage bales near Simonstone  
**Above:** At the coffee stop on a club ride to Lancaster  
**Left:** Heading home, with Glasson Dock and Morecambe Bay in the background

be sure who is going to turn up, and the planned route may go completely out of the window, resulting in a different day from the one you imagined. Knowing that others are likely to be out gives you that extra incentive to join them, even if the weather is poor.

Recently we set off on a frosty morning with the thermometer nudging minus 6°C at one point. Some of the minor roads and tracks were a bit slippery in places but it was a ride of contrasts: clear blue skies on the tops; freezing fog down by the River Ribble. The two new riders that day were amazed at the route, as it was totally new to them despite being local.

Cycling clubs are always full of interesting characters, who very often brighten what otherwise might have been a bit of a dull day. It can be quite a surprise to a novice club rider how much further you can get in a group without

feeling worn out. The miles pass easily beneath your tyres as the group sets a steady pace. You're likely to be deep in conversation with a clubmate, having a chat and a laugh as you ride along, helping to maintain mental health as well as physical health.

### A MIX OF EVENTS

Cycling is sometimes a male dominated pastime but Blackburn & District CTC is a diverse club, with quite a few ladies. Ours isn't the only tandem either, proving that solos and tandems can mix. Our club rides vary from 35 to 80 miles each Sunday, but we also have hostelling weekends and occasional longer tours.

Another aspect of life with Blackburn & District CTC is the social evenings held each week through autumn and winter. Here we have a wide variety of cycle-related picture shows, with tea and cakes provided by our own fabulous bakers.



## CTC FYLDE BICYCLE BELLES



**Karen Hope** is Club Secretary for the women-only CTC Fylde Bicycle Belles

I joined the Fylde Bicycle Belles a decade ago. Before that my Sunday morning ride was basically a ten-mile circular route on my own. With the Belles, I quickly learned there was a whole new world of cycling routes and cafés on my doorstep and further afield. Cycling with a group of like-minded people takes me back to being a young girl and knocking on a friend's door and saying: "Fancy coming out to play?"

Riding with a group helps to boost your confidence and have adventures you might never have thought about. As well as weekly rides, we arrange cycling trips. Everyone in the group is welcomed and we always stick together on rides; no one is left behind. If people are struggling, the ride leader will adjust the route.

I asked some of the other club members for their opinions on group riding. Kate Whitaker (who featured in Cycle's April/May 2019 issue) said: "When I have Harriet



**Top left:** Did you say cake? Harriet (centre) loves her lunch stops  
**Above:** Another hill in the beautiful Yorkshire Dales  
**Left:** Jerseys galore! First outing for the new team jerseys on the Millennium Way at Lancaster

with me, there's always extra pairs of hands and eyes to help me. Besides that, riding in a group gets you out on a day with dismal weather. On your own you might chicken out, but you don't want to let others down when you've agreed to meet.

"If you're not the leader, you don't have to think too much about the route; you can just enjoy the riding and company. An important aspect is the social side. I've discovered great tea stops I wouldn't have known about otherwise."

### SOCIABLE CYCLING

Linda Simpson said: "I joined our cycling group several years ago with some trepidation, but it has been one of my best decisions. We are a very welcoming group, supporting new riders as they come along for friendship, fun, freedom, fresh air and fitness. I'm no spring chicken but have gone from puffing at five miles to comfortable at 50-plus. All down to group

motivation and some inspirational rider leaders. It's very satisfying getting from A to B under your own steam.

Heather Edmundson said: "Group cycling is very sociable. Everyone is so supportive and friendly, and new members are made to feel welcome. It's not cliquey at all. There are friends to cycle with on different days. I'm not confident about punctures, but there is usually someone who is happy to help. I definitely couldn't ride as far on my own, and it's more fun with company. My fitness has improved. It's nice to get out and blow the cobwebs away."

Founder and chair Sarah Crozier said: "As a ride leader, it's wonderful to show others a network of roads and country lanes on their doorstep and open up new cycling territory. There's also the pleasure of seeing people's confidence growing and friendships blossom. Riding all year, we notice the seasons change. Being close to nature makes for a great ride."

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## BERKS ON BIKES



**Brennan Peyton** rekindled his love of mountain biking with this Cycling UK affiliated club in Berkshire

I had ridden mountain bikes a lot in my twenties, even raced a little. I had cycled in Europe and in the jungles of Asia. Yet like so many, ten years later and with three kids and a busy life, things had lapsed and I had fallen out of love with riding.

### FINDING A CLUB

After a little research, I decided to join Berks on Bikes Mountain Bike Club. I was approaching 40 and had not ridden a bike for a few years. Riding with others meant that I quickly fell back into the swing of things. Bikes had changed a bit – suspension worked much better and bars had grown a lot wider – but the thrill of heading out into the woods and riding was just the same.

What made a huge difference was being part of a club. Now, whenever we went out, my son eagerly wanted to ride with the adults despite his age, and there was someone who knew all the

“**NOW THERE WAS ALWAYS SOMEONE WHO KNEW ALL THE COOL TRAILS AND COULD ANSWER QUERIES ABOUT NEW BIKE TECH**”



**Top left:** BOB trip to Morzine in France  
**Above:** Club members at the top of Dunkery Beacon in Exmoor on the annual away ride

cool trails and could answer questions about new bike tech.

### EVERYBODY KNOWS YOUR NAME

Someone asked me, “Why ride with a club when you can download the route or follow a marked one?” The simple answer is, like the bar in the sitcom Cheers, when you turn up for one of the five or so weekly regular rides, there is always someone to ride and chat with – someone who knows your name.

Similarly, when you are out riding it does not matter what people do for a job or the type of bike they have; it is simply about having fun with people with a common interest. I have made some fantastic friends and improved my fitness over the years, and I strongly believe getting out in the forest and mountains is great for your mental as well as physical wellbeing.

With more than 100 members, the club is going strong. Members are interested in a diverse range of mountain bike disciplines: downhill, enduro, gravel biking, bike bivvying, and fat bikes. The club also organises a number of ‘away’ rides to destinations as far flung as Scotland, the Alps, and Finland (in winter!). Closer to home, we’ve ridden in the Peak District, Exmoor, Shropshire, the Cotswolds, Wales, the Surrey Hills, and more locally in Swinley Forest.

Over the years my riding has improved a little and my son’s a lot. He has progressed to racing in the Expert category – he terrifies me on downhills – although he still loves to lead club rides for all abilities. We believe it is all about getting out and riding. It doesn’t matter what pace, as long as you finish the ride with a smile on your face.

## HANDSWORTH & HAMSTEAD PAVILION CCC



**Sam Sahdra is a ride leader and instructor with this Community Cycling Club in Birmingham**

Handsworth & Hamstead Pavilion CCC has leisure-focused led-rides every Wednesday and Sunday. Some of our members come with us to be more active, others to socialise. The common denominator is that they probably wouldn't go out cycling on their own.

Most of them are new learners, ranging from children to pensioners. The atmosphere is welcoming and friendly, so they keep coming back. The rides we take them on give them a feel for cycling on the road with traffic. It instills confidence as they learn about positioning – how and where to ride on the roads – and about observing their surroundings.

There's no pressure on anyone who comes along because they're riding with a small group of cyclists who are at their own level. No one gets left behind. To stay together, we have the slow riders at the front and the fast riders at the back, and there's no overtaking.

I think that's why our group is popular:

“ I LOVE CYCLING AND I LOVE TAKING PEOPLE RIDING. YOU CAN SEE HOW IT CHANGES LIVES FOR THE BETTER ”



**Above:** Wednesday ride to Aston House in Birmingham

**Left:** Sunday ride to Cadbury World at Christmas

because we cater for beginners and improvers alike.

### BEING BEGINNER FRIENDLY

When someone arrives, we check their clothes, helmet, and bike before we set off. We don't want to put them off cycling by requiring lycra; participants can wear whatever they want as long as they feel comfortable and safe cycling in it.

After our members have been on the road with us for a few weeks, they can do their National Standards Level 2 training. That all takes place on the road. So with that training and qualification under their belt, they should feel more confident riding in traffic by themselves.

Our group is not just about cycling. We ride for an hour then have a break at a café, so we can have a chat and get to know each other and make friends. People can share their knowledge about riding and exchange cycling tips with one another.

I love cycling and I love taking people riding. You can see how it changes lives for the better. I want to give back to the community the things I've learned in the last three-and-a-half years with Handsworth & Hamstead Pavilion CCC. We've got one lady who comes across from Coventry every Saturday to join us. She's 64 and is learning to ride. Hopefully she'll be riding in a group soon. That's what I want to see: more people on bikes.

**i Join the club**  
 For more about any of the groups featured, plus information about setting up and running your own cycling group, visit:  
[cyclinguk.org/local-groups](http://cyclinguk.org/local-groups)