

King Alfred's Way is Cycling UK's most popular long-distance route. Member

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decided to explore it for himself this spring

Great rides

King Alfred's Way is five years old this year and already looks like a bikepacking must-do: Cycling UK's guide for it

has been downloaded 50,000 times. The 350km loop of southern England uses off-road trails, taking in diverse landscapes and 10,000 years of history.

There is a nominal start at the eponymous monarch's statue in Winchester, but I decided to begin at Swindon, an £11 train ride from home. Not wishing to rush, I scheduled six days and divided up the journey using the Cycling UK guidebook to plan accommodation.

Day one: blue skies, bad bearings

As I pushed off from the kerb at Swindon, I was feeling confident. The first pedal rotation was met with a sharp click as my right foot passed the three o'clock mark. Then again. And again. The pedals were new. My decision not

to change the bottom bracket was looking like a mistake... As there was no play in the cranks, I continued – with fingers metaphorically crossed.

I joined King Alfred's Way by a battered sign identifying the Ridgeway and the distances in either direction. I began a slow, clicking climb. Swathes of hawthorn blossom flanked the trail. Birdsong became audible, skylarks arpeggiating as they flickered into the sky, a yellowhammer offering his 'little-bit-of-bread-and-no-cheese'.

The first landmark was Wayland's Smithy. Supposedly the workshop of the Saxon god of metal working, it's a 5,000-year-old barrow, shaped like an inverted ship's hull. I walked around it, before crawling inside to feel the damp stone under my knees.

Back on the trail, a hare padded out into the centre of the path, looking me in the eye for a second before loping off into the hedge. It capped a fine day's cycling, despite a bike that had begun clunking instead of clicking.

Riding into