

E-biking from Mid Wales to London, **Nick Sanders** chose paths less travelled, avoiding busier roads in favour of quiet lanes, cycle routes and towpaths



On a bicycle, the journey is often more important than the destination. Anyone driving from Wales to London would likely head down the soulless M4. On my e-bike, I planned to

use byways, river banks, canal towpaths and minor roads to create a peaceful route unencumbered with cars. Since I was aiming for a relatively traffic-free route, I took advantage of some of the 12,739 miles of the National Cycle Network (NCN).

I live near Machynlleth, notionally the ancient capital of Wales and the seat of this country's first parliament. (It was formed at the start of the 15th century by Owain Glyndŵr, who led a 15-year revolt against English rule.) My home town – where I often have a coffee in between Glyndŵr's Parliament House and the chippy – was my start point. The end was England's and the UK's capital: London.

The Big Hill to Llanidloes

On a bicycle you carry as little as you need. You are decluttered and plugged into your surroundings. You hear the cooing pigeon, the rattle of wind against standing wheat, the church chimes and the bleat of sheep. It's so peaceful.

The more you carry, the longer it takes to pack and unpack. You can lose hours on tour just taking things out of overstuffed bags, only to put them back in again. I'm too random a character to be precise about my packing but I kept things simple: fairly minimal camping equipment; a few tools; a spare battery and charger for my e-bike; and some assorted bits of clothing that packed around my cameras. Then I was on my way.

Leaving town I headed for Machynlleth's sister town, Llanidloes. This mountain road over the aptly named Rhiw Fawr ('Big Hill') is magnificent. A right turn off the B4518 took me onto on a tiny road that

immersed me in the beautiful Hafren Forest, and I entered Llanidloes via a back road.

It was a hilly start to my ride but was easy on the e-bike, and the Wild Oak Café on Llanidloes high street will let you recharge if you buy coffee and cake. Around here, the NCN routes are numbered 8 and 81. They're well signed and take you along traffic-free farm roads, high on the tops of a range of local hills that form the northern front of the Cambrian Mountains. Rich green fields are lined by rows of conifers, a windbreak for scattered farm houses on a steep landscape dotted with sheep.

Down in the valley, the River Wye is shallow and narrow here but it grows wider every mile until you get to Builth Wells. I didn't scroll through the Booking.com app for somewhere to stay but wild camped instead. While the right to roam scarcely exists in England and Wales, I find that if you ask a farmer and leave no trace, you can generally pitch in a field without problems.

Into the Wye Valley

Builth Wells – specifically Georgie Porgies Coffee Stop – was a perfect spot for breakfast. I then rode back across the bridge and followed the B4567 south. On the north bank of the river, I stopped at the tea room at what was Erwood Station until the Mid-Wales Railway was dismantled in 1962.

The tour was going well. Adventures like this are greater than the sum of their parts. They're →



Above left: Braywick Park, a nature reserve in Maidenhead's suburbs
Left: Wiltshire back roads
Right: Nick at home in Machynlleth