

## Mountain Biking: Settling into middle age – or clicking up a gear?

How time flies! It is twenty one years since *Byway and Bridleway* first covered the then-new topic of mountain biking (*On your bike to the mountains*, B&B 1985/2/7; *On your bike – six years on*, B&B 1990/6/23). Colin Palmer considers how times have changed, and how cyclists may now start to drive change in rights of way provision.

Twenty years have now passed since the mountain bike started to appear in rapidly increasing numbers on the UK byway and bridleway network. Spawned in the US some several years earlier, and later imported to the UK, the recreation has survived to 2006 and continues to develop steadily as an increasingly popular pastime. There are no reliable statistics for current use, but IMBA-UK, the UK arm of the International Mountain Bike Association, estimates that around eleven million UK adults currently own a mountain bike. Only around half of these will actually venture away from the road, and these generate some 80 million off-road rides per year, mostly as a result of the activity of the two million regular users of the bridleway and byway network. However, while road cycling is showing little signs of growth, the use of the mountain bike by all users from families through to enthusiasts continues to grow year on year, encouraged of the development of traffic free rail-trails, Forestry Commission facilities and purpose built trails.

The development of such facilities presses all the right policy buttons – health, well-being and tourism, as well as providing significant economic benefit to often languishing local economies. Parallel to this is a thriving cycle industry encouraged by rapid technological change which has seen frames move from steel through aluminium to carbon fibre, accompanied by full suspension, up to 30 gears, and price tags which can easily reach £3000. The development of mountain bike recreation can be summarised as follows:

- 1970/3: Crude “downhill only” bikes emerged in California, USA.
- 1974: Gears appeared allowing uphill journeys.
- 1979: Early American production mountain bikes (mtbs).
- 1982: Initial mtb imports into UK.
- 1986: Mountain bikes sales overtake BMX & touring bike sales in UK.
- 1987: International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA) formed in the USA.
- 1989+: Sales reach 2m mtbs sold in the UK per year – 70% of all sales.
- 1990+: Increasing public concern over this new recreation.

- 1991: British Mountain Bike Federation (BMBF) Access Section formed.
- 1992: Initial contacts forged between IMBA in the USA and the UK.
- 1993: BMBF Access section transferred to CTC to become CTC Offroad.
- 1996: Forestry Commission “adopt” mountain biking as a key recreation.
- 1997: First of many visits to the UK of the IMBA Trail Care Crews.
- 1998: First purpose built mtb trail opened at Coedy Brenin, Dolgellau.
- 2003: IMBA-UK formed as a focus for recreational mtb development.
- 2004: Forestry Commission Scotland opens the flagship 7Stanes mtb project.
- 2005: Scotland voted best international mtb destination.
- 2006: CTC gains presumed rights legislation for cyclists.

The rapid increase in mtb ownership in the 1990s provided considerable challenges both for land and path managers and for the early mtb campaigners, as a regular supply of “lycra clad louts” stories in the media reflected the views



Colin Palmer with his full-suspension Marin: disk brakes, 27 gears, light weight, and a suspension system that increases rideability and decreases punishment to ageing wheelmen.

of those wishing to retain the status quo. This unease was particularly reflected in national park policies, with Dartmoor making mountain biking a criminal offence, Exmoor decrying mountain biking as an “unsuitable activity” in their draft local plan, and Snowdonia attempting to ban mountain bikers from their bridleways. It is possible that the Snowdonia action provided the turning point in the acceptance of the mountain biker into the rights of way community, in that the voluntary agreement hammered out between the long departed British Mountain Bike Federation and the SNPA has proved robust enough to last until the current day. Gradually the sting was drawn from those striving to block the growth mountain biking, as parents reluctantly came to terms with the illogicality of attacking mtb use – while continuing to purchase sparkling new mountain bikes for their offspring. Pester power can indeed be a significant campaigning tool!

Mountain bikers are often criticised for their lack of engagement with the rights of way process. They are, on the whole, a pragmatic lot, recognising that any change to the rights of way network requires sustained and considerable effort – so why engage with a system which eats into pedalling time but only rewards with a small chance of success?

Nevertheless, some will be motivated to improve facilities for themselves and their colleagues, but here, mountain biking has taken a different direction from traditional users of the path network. In recognising that the byway and bridleway system is a flawed network, and that the processes of change are unacceptably inefficient, most mountain bikers have opted to do no more than pay lip service to the legal processes of change.

The whole business of processes such as map modification orders, public inquiries and rights of way improvement plans is weighted heavily against any user in full time employment, as these processes largely take place during the working day for the convenience of the administrators and not of the user. Most mountain bikers are not retired or self employed, so as a whole they opt not to engage with the system that parliament has designed – but rather, use their spare time in trail building activities away from the PRoW network at a time which suits them – weekends and summer evenings. And it works, producing new trails and riding facilities under the control of the builders and landowners, and largely free from the tiresome hand of bureaucracy. In this, mountain bikers have unconsciously followed the lead of highly suc-

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Left: mtb riders on a volunteer-maintained trail in woodland at Bracknell: not a public right of way.

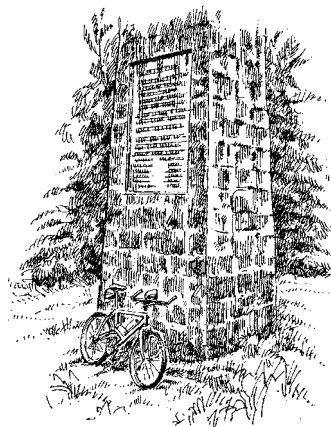
cessful, although sometimes vilified Sustrans, which organisation is savvy enough to recognise that the legal process is stacked against change, and that the choice of cycle transport over car would only be realised through the establishment of routes by the use of agreements rather than legal orders. Their highly focussed activities may tread on a few toes, but it is also a highly effective strategy.

Few would disagree with Mr Michael Meacher in his ministerial recognition that the PRoW network has failed to meet the expectations of the modern recreational user. His remedy, however, the 2000 CRoW Act, while providing greatly enhanced facilities for walkers, did little to meet the aspirations of equestrians and cyclists – and indeed sought to reduce opportunities for the motorised user. In the subsequent NERC Bill, motorised users proposed what appeared to be a perfectly workable byway strategy based on sustainability. Sadly, the herd instincts of parliament discarded this rational approach in favour of a more simplistic solution. However, the enactment of the Land Reform Act in Scotland, and Part 1 of CRoW in England and Wales has proved that relatively radical governmental approaches can be successful if the political will for change can be nurtured.

While mountain bikers pay homage to the 30,000 miles of bridleway made available to them through the provisions of the 1968 Countryside Act, they are becoming increasingly aware that this network is not what they (and possibly equestrians) want in the 21st century. In most areas the higher rights network is fragmented, and where it does exist, it is often poorly waymarked, with surfaces which make it only useful for the minority who have good map reading skills. Even greater selection pressure is then placed on the remaining stalwarts who will need to cope with grass, soft earth or muddy surfaces which while delightful for horses, are

less than ideal for cycles. Little wonder, then, that families wanting traffic- and contour-free, all-weather surfaces, head for rail-trails such as the Dean rail-trail network, the Peak District Tissington and High Peak Trail or the Camel Trail in Cornwall – which alone attracts some 200,000 cycle visits per year. And mountain bike enthusiasts similarly show the same propensity by heading for the all weather usability of the purpose built trails predominantly to be found in the Forestry Commission woodlands. These developments are satisfying a demand which has long been suppressed through lack of suitable trails, with the flagship Scottish centre at Glentworth attracting over 250,000 mountain bikers to its 40km of trails in 2005.

But this is only part of the answer, as most forests are not close to towns and cities. On the urban fringe there is a largely untapped demand for all types of traffic free trails easily accessible from home which can be realised given the political will at both national and local levels.



At the 'Bloodybush Pillar', Kielder Forest, about twelve years ago. Kielder was remote then; it is now a maze of semi-civilised, waymarked 'trails', and not thereby to everyone's liking.

Sketch: Dave Young

The BBT Council is already in the vanguard of such thinking, having considered a targeted approach to the *Discovering Lost Ways* project and the potential of an adapted 'core paths network' south of the border. It is the latter which probably offers the best potential for change. The statutory path network bequeathed to us by the 1949 and subsequent acts does provide an adequate, albeit fragmented, network from which to start, but it is difficult to regard a classification based on historic use as a rational basis for modern needs, preventing, as it does, access by higher rights users to otherwise suitable paths while continuing to encourage the use of plainly unsuitable and unsustainable routes.

The network may be more or less in place, but there is good reason to abandon the bureaucratic labyrinth represented by the non-motorised classifications of footpath, bridleway and restricted byway. Suitability, not historic evidence should be the key, and all we need is a single category of paths, with the user assisted in choice or route through guidance provided by local authorities in liaison with their LAFs. For any such drastic rethink to succeed, a broad consensus would be necessary between ministers, landowners, local authorities and all users, including walkers, and could any rational observer consider that the aspirations of such diverse interest groups could be satisfied? Today, such consensus may appear fanciful, if not laughable. But the successful enactment of CRoW 1 and the Scottish Land Reform Act have demonstrated that over time, ground breaking changes can be put in place – and in Scotland, cyclists and equestrians benefited as well as walkers. When we note how much walkers have recently achieved in England and Wales – and the length of time it took them to get there, then perhaps now is the right time to start to hammer out the possible from the improbable.

International Mountainbiking Association UK:

- IMBA UK promotes environmentally sound and socially responsible mountain biking.
- IMBA UK works to keep trails and public access open for mountain biking by encouraging responsible riding, supporting volunteer trail work and cooperating with trail user groups, land managers and public bodies.
- IMBA worldwide has over 32,000 members and some 800 affiliated clubs and organisations.