

Wales on two wheels

A four-day ride from Cardigan to Hay-on-Wye, gives Robert Penn the chance to savour some of Britain's most beautiful scenery – and convert his son to cycling

On top of the Cambrian Mountains, the world stood still. There was no sound or sign of life. The wind had dropped. The view was staggering. Ahead, flat treeless moorland covered in tussocks of ochre and umber grasses stretched to the horizon. The singletrack road snaked round the hill and disappeared into blue sky. Behind, the Ystwyth Valley fell away, cutting its serpentine path through serried ranks of hills to the west coast, 20 miles away. I looked round slowly, until I felt sure the view was etched on to my memory. This is Wales, I thought: a perfectly formed realm with the power of a spell.

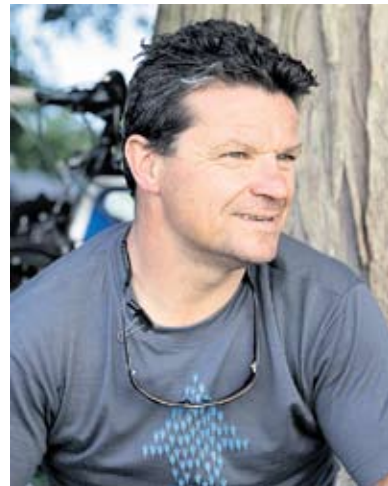
We were riding from Cardigan, the pretty town beside the Irish Sea, to Hay-on-Wye, on the English frontier. I'd devised the 120-mile route across Wales – through the Teifi Valley, over the Cambrian Mountains and south following the Wye – to take in some of the most beautiful countryside in southern Britain. The ride could be done in one long day, but that would be missing the point. This is a place to linger. Our plan was to break the journey up over four days. Our aim was to cycle slowly.

For many, cycling is all about riding fast – across the city to work, around a sportive course against the clock, or over Alpine cols in the tyre tracks of the professionals. There's nothing wrong with this, of course, but it was not always thus. Sixty years ago the British countryside thronged with cyclists. The postwar era was a golden age of cycle touring and every weekend hordes poured out of the cities on two wheels bearing flasks of dandelion and burdock, bound for youth hostels in the hills. Bike rides then were all about slow

cycling: they were about lying in hedgerows, reading maps, savouring the physical and emotional fellowship of friends and being profligate with time; bike rides were about having a good appetite, quiet market towns, pints, picnics by the river and the rhythm of two spinning wheels.

To try and recapture some of the magic of this era, we – a gang of five – had met in Cardigan. It's a difficult place to get to, but cyclists get repaid for travelling to the remotest corners of the UK – the roads are quiet. I'd taken the train to Carmarthen where Ade, a friend who works for the Cardigan-based clothing company Howies, collected me. After a fortifying lunch in Fforest Café, we turned our backs on the sea and started east, along the Teifi River.

Between Cardigan and Llandysul, the Teifi reveals its variety of moods: as well as sluggish coils, miles of meandering calm through meadows and dark pools, there are crystal riffles where sunlight and water flit like glitter. At Cenarth and Newcastle >



"This is massive. Cycling is way better than TV and Xbox combined": near the top of the Ystwyth Valley in the Cambrian Mountains. Left: the author Robert Penn

Emlyn, white water roars over falls through narrow gorges in breakneck haste to reach the coast. When our route drifted away from the river, up the steep sides of the valley, we rode through woodlands of hazel, oak and birch, passed neolithic burial chambers and medieval churches, following lanes so quiet we wondered if something had gone wrong.

In fact, everything was going right. We reached Nantgwynfaen, a farm in the hills north of Llandysul, as the sun was painting the land orange. Amanda billeted us in bedrooms and the Glamavan, a converted caravan with bags of style. We ate dinner of homemade burgers, salad from the garden and local cheeses sitting outside studying the moon.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY, a keen cyclist who rode round Europe in the 1920s with F Scott Fitzgerald, wrote: "It is by riding a bicycle that you learn the contours of a country best, since you have to sweat up the hills and coast down them..." I thought of this the next day as we felt the landscape alter beneath our wheels.

The Teifi Valley widens upstream of Llanybydder. The climbs became gentler – a relief to Sarah, who was riding a restored single-speed "butcher's bike" with swept-back handlebars and a wicker basket. Older than any of us and as hefty



"That's it, I'm moving to Wales...": Dan and Sarah outside Conti's Café in Lampeter. Below: Jamie orders another pint at the Talbot Hotel, Tregaron

as a dead pig, the butcher's bike set a steady pace for us all, ensuring Dan, aged nine, kept up with ease.

At the end of a long descent to the unspoilt town of Lampeter, we pulled in at Conti's Café for lasagne and an ice-cream sundae. The weather was brightening by the hour: by mid-afternoon it was warm enough to jump in the Teifi for a swim. In Tregaron we sat outside the Talbot Arms in hot sunshine. "That's it," Jamie said, putting his second pint to his lips, "I'm moving to Wales."

FROM THE MID-1600S for three centuries, Tregaron was a thriving market town and an important meeting point for drovers – the itinerant men who shifted livestock from all over Wales to feed the burgeoning, industrialised towns of England. Droving was then a central pillar of the Welsh economy: Bishop John Williams of Bangor described the drovers in the 17th century as "the Spanish fleet of

Wales which brings in what little gold and silver we have", much of which was presumably spent on ale in the Talbot Arms en route home.

Fresh blood arrived at the hotel in Pontrhydfendigaid that evening. Our little peloton grew from five to nine, now including George, aged nine, and my 10-year old son Lucas. Anxious not to put Lucas off bicycles forever, I've never pressed him to undertake an adventure on two wheels, and I had to restrain a yelp of delight when, the next day, on the long ascent out of the Teifi Valley, he announced: "This is massive. Cycling is way better than TV and Xbox combined."

In the Ystwyth Valley we left the road and followed forest trails across the Hafod Estate. Thomas Johnes, a farmer, landscape architect, writer and social benefactor, inherited 10,000 acres of Ceredigion uplands in 1780 and set about transforming it with extraordinary gusto. He ran an experimental farm, built houses

ON THE WEB

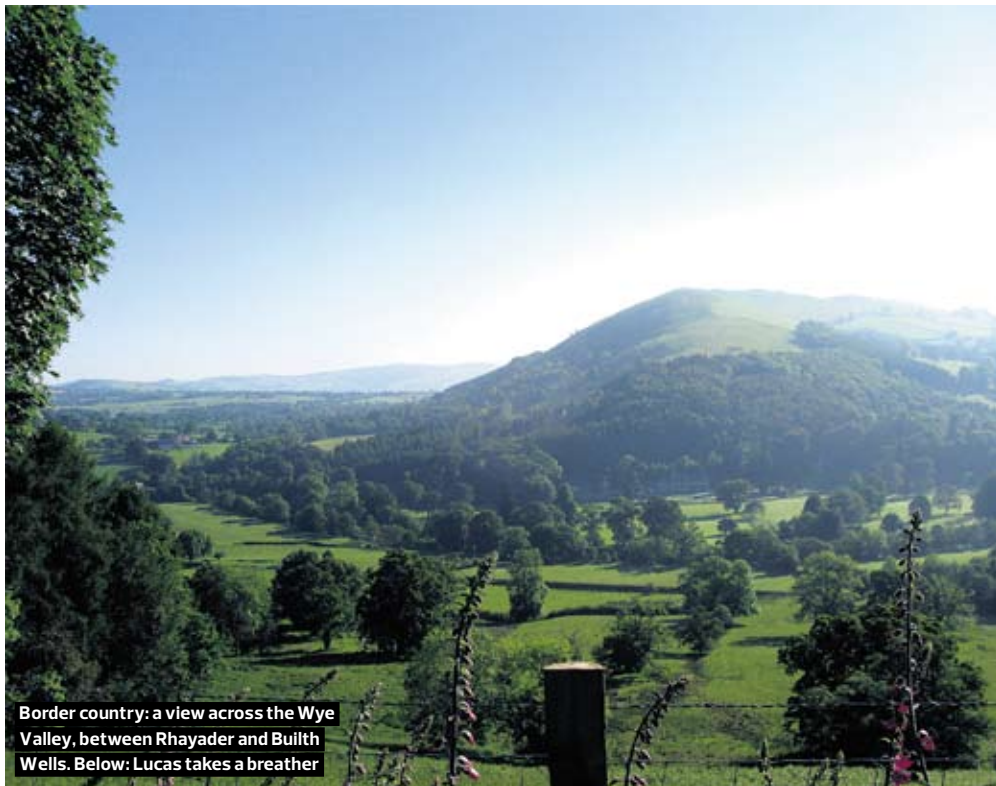
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and schools and planted some 4m trees. He also turned the house and grounds, full of waterfalls, grottoes and hanging gardens, into a place celebrated across Europe, a sort of Welsh Xanadu. The stately home fell down in the 20th century, but the beauty of the landscape Johnes created remains as powerful today.

Back on the road, we pedalled through Cwmystwyth (according to the Ordnance Survey, the centre point of Wales) and climbed steadily into the Cambrian Mountains. The reward is a road once described by the AA as “one of the 10 most scenic drives in the world”. It’s a long ascent on a bicycle – four or five miles – but whenever the boys flagged, we stopped for a snack on the grass verge or jumped in the river.

People began mining for copper in the Ystwyth Valley 3,500 years ago. There is archaeological evidence of excavations from Roman times to the Middle Ages, as well as the remains of more recent enterprises: heaps of waste rock, waterwheel pits, and crumbling buildings date from 19th-century efforts to extract zinc ore. Since then, communities have dwindled, becoming home to a handful who have grown tired of the “real” world.

Halfway up, at Blaenycwm, where the road crosses the river, we left all forms of human habitation behind



Border country: a view across the Wye Valley, between Rhayader and Builth Wells. Below: Lucas takes a breather

and entered the mythical land of the Mabinogion. Near the top of the climb, we saw the turbines of Cefn Croes, once the biggest and most controversial wind farm in the UK. One last pull and we were on top of Mid-Wales. Here the road swings southeast, skirting a large upland bog: half turf and half water, and full of meadow pipits and skylarks in summer.

“Who climbs with toil, wheresoe’er / Shall find wings waiting there,” Henry Charles Beeching wrote in his poem *Going Down Hill on a Bicycle, A Boy’s Song*. From above Graig Goch, the uppermost dam in the Elan Valley, we followed the old railway line for a seemingly effortless nine-mile descent to Rhayader. The boys were not the only ones whooping.

The Elan Valley was a noted beauty spot long ago (Shelley lived here in 1812), but it was the massive Victorian dam project built to provide water for the people of Birmingham

that put the place on the map. The dams were completed in 1904 and opened by King Edward VII. They are now used to produce electricity from hydropower.

On our final day we were joined by more cyclists, to ride downstream through the Wye Valley. With 35 miles to go and a deadline to meet – I was giving a talk at Hay Festival – we left early and rode through the moist chill of an immaculate summer morning. The boys loved the drama: would we make it in time? We checked watches and recalculated distances in Builth Wells, Boughrood and Glasbury.

The talk at Hay had been a source of mild anxiety for weeks. In four days, though, I’d pedalled across a country and over a mountain range. I’d eaten well, slept deeply, lay on the grass, swum in the rivers, seen my boy laugh and heard my heart sing. I’d caught the music of the earth and for now, no concern could touch me. ■

Robert Penn is the author of *It’s All About the Bike: the Pursuit of Happiness on Two Wheels* (Penguin, £8.99)