



Cambrian mountain biking

The Trans-Cambrian Way runs 100 miles from the Welsh border to the coast, mostly off-road. Route designer **Jeremy Atkinson** spent three days riding it again last year

Before trail centres took off, cross-country mountain biking meant exactly what it said: riding point to point on remote tracks. Routes like the off-road Coast to Coast and the South Downs Way were what mountain bikers aspired to. At that time, in the late 1990s, it occurred to me that I could define an off-road route across Wales.

I'd been researching unsurfaced roads for Powys Highways. A rideable route across the Cambrian mountains from Knighton to Dovey Junction looked feasible, using bridleways and other rights of way. The project stalled due to a lack of sponsorship. It finally got off the ground thanks to the volunteer efforts of Colin Palmer and Martin Johnson, both CTC and IMBA members. We had a mapped route running 100 miles over hills and

moorland, through one of the most sparsely populated parts of Wales.

RIDGE ROADS

The Trans-Cambrian Way starts, as it ends, at a railway station. Knighton station is in Shropshire, unlike the rest of the town and the route, which is in Wales. I set off up the Teme Valley on a quiet back road to Knucklas with riding buddy Stuart. We winched our overweight bodies up past the gothic railway viaduct of the mid-Wales line and through a gate onto an untarmacked road.

Edging away from the remains of Knucklas castle onto a stoned lane, we freewheeled down a steep descent losing much of our hard-earned height. The climb back up to Beacon Hill and the moors, up a track littered with leaf mould, is so steep that we didn't mind walking.

Up on top, the track is the old ridge road to Newtown. It's hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years old. Ridge roads were the main routes

"Up on top, the track is the old ridge road. It's hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years old. The view is stunning"

once upon a time, being drier and safer from ambush. Once on the ridges the going was easier than in the valleys – at least until we could build roads as well as the Romans.

The views on these ridge roads are stunning. We could see right up past the Long Mynydd. We passed the remains of Beacon Lodge, popular with grouse shooters in years gone

It's literally cross-country mountain biking, with big skies and bridleways

by. Larks sang. Meadow pipits flittered in and out of the heather. Ravens kept their distance.

The track is easy to follow apart from one junction at Stanky Hill. The route notes say 'take the track less travelled' to the left. We dropped a little to a narrow road bisecting the moor, then across and on past a ragged line of European larch. Before long we were in Llanbadarn Fynydd, which was as far as Stuart and I were going that day. If you're only 'healthy fit' rather than lean-machine cycling fit, you can break the Trans-Cambrian into five stages rather than three or fewer and stop here too. There's a shop, hotel and bar.

RED KITES

From the moor road one would normally go straight through the ford opposite on another of the 'discovered' untarmacked roads. If the River Ithon is running high, however, you need to loop down and back through the village.

On to Davids Well, which doesn't even qualify as a hamlet. It's an odd area. There are few hedges and oddly regular fields. It suffered as Ireland did from the Potato Famine and became barren. When it was re-populated in the 19th century, the Inclosure Award maps bore almost no resemblance in homesteads, field patterns

and place names to the older maps.

It was an Inclosure Award public road that we followed to Brondre-Fawr forest. There's nothing on the map to signify that this is legal – and without a claim it won't be in 20 years' time, thanks to the Right to Roam legislation. For the present we're okay. I was on my own on this section, apart from the red kites in the sky above. The route zigs and zags about in this high valley, ending up at Bwlch y Sarnau. Beyond that, a deep, rutted road took me back up into the forestry. It was followed by a fast tarmac descent to Rhayader.

Rhayader is a good place to refuel – there are loads of tea shops. It's also home to the only bike shop en route. There's accommodation both here and just beyond in the Elan Valley, and if you're doing the Trans-Cambrian in three or five days it's a good break point.

From Rhayader I took a cycle trail out to the Elan visitor centre just beyond the hotel. The hard surface is easy going and in the summer this section is full of family cyclists. Just

before the Elan visitor centre, the Trans-Cambrian veers off over the river. It's soon anything but easy going. I climbed first on tarmac, and then followed a way-marked Powys mountain bike route (route E). More climbing followed, up a hill that's just the wrong gradient: not *quite* steep enough to force you to dismount. I stopped anyway to talk to another a mountain biker. A grey hawk – male hen harrier – drifted past on the breeze.

I emerged from a high valley near Gro Hill. There were a few water splashes where the route crosses streams, and then a grassy climb next to the forestry land. Every autumn there are ceps (mushrooms) to be found up here, growing among the pine roots. Gates and a gravel track took me past farms and towards a reservoir.

The old road that the Trans-Cambrian



It's known as the Central Welsh Desert because of the lack of roads, towns and people, not rain

follows predates the dams at Penygarreg and Claerwen reservoirs. Claerwen dam is massive. It was built only last century. Back in the 1970s, an RAF jet went in not far above the dam wall, its position now marked by a raft. I don't know if it's still down there but it doesn't take much imagination to see how bad things could have been if it had hit the dam. In times of high alert it's not unusual to see fit-looking civilians 'wandering' about this area...

LLAMAS AND LEAD MINES

The track here is stony, with solid bedrock in lava-like flows across the surface and loose brick-sized rocks everywhere. It's slow going and hard to 'clear'. Arriving at the dam base, the barrier appeared even bigger, dwarfing the farmhouse and cutting out the light.

Later I got to Claerwen farm having followed the dam-side track up and back on every inlet. There's a timber bridge below the shepherd's house. This is the Central Welsh Desert – so called because of the lack of roads, towns and people, rather than a lack of rain (of which it has plenty).

A cyclo-cross bike or rough-stuff tourer will cope but it's easier by mountain bike

When I was a lad I always thought of it as brownish grey. It seemed greener now, less harsh. Have I grown used to it or has the climate changed that much?

I carried on along the stone road to the Teifi Pools. More loose rock, more bedrock, one ford that can run high, then onto the western end of the Monks Trod. At this point you're on the high plateau, the roof of Wales, exposed and without shelter. Rocks break through the coarse grass, pools glint in the harsh light. The view gives little clue that it's the 21st century. We could be drovers.

Later, past a herd of llamas, I reached the Lethr Valley. It used to be the lead-mining stronghold of Wales. Now there's ruin after ruin beside the track. Rio Tinto came prospecting, but went down the wrong shaft and decided against reopening. Nobody told them. The land's still poor. I hit the road at Cwmystwyth, where there's a B&B.

COASTING HOME

It was starting to get late and I was tired, gritting my teeth and counting my cadence. The forest to my left had been cut bare and planted with wind turbines. More climbing. At the top I went right then left on forest roads as yet unmarked on OS maps. I traversed forest slopes above the Wye. Eventually I dropped out of the forest onto a back road

and the end of day two of three. There's a B&B here. The owner doesn't have a car, going instead to buy groceries on the weekly bus.

The last day began with me following the Bidno River up its narrow valley into the Hafren Forest. Over the watershed, the route goes down towards the source of the Severn. There's a brief tarmac section to Staylitttle. I didn't stay at all, but turned up a ridge road. Below to my right was the Star Inn, which you can stay at on a longer schedule. I pressed on over the wet grass, down a gulley and out onto Glaslyn and its surrounding moor. Another hen harrier went gliding across the foreground. The route turned hard left down a scree and bedrock track. The valley sides are so steep that soil has no purchase. I barrelled down into the valley, losing height *so* quickly.

Dogs gathered in the yard below as I passed, but they didn't bite and never have. I was in a patchwork of folded fields and wooded valleys. I dropped down, turned, climbed, and turned onto a track that took me across a ford on an ancient wooded lane.

Below through the branches I could see rock pools. The track dropped down to join them.

Soon I was climbing again, getting up above the forestry onto another old ridge road. It was one of the way-marked Mach trails, which loop out of Machynlleth and back. I dropped down to a forest road then descended further through surrounding pines, first on

road, then on a helter-skelter ride down a slippery bedrock and pine-needled track to the coast road.

In less than a mile I was cycling on a rubble road to the saltmarsh of the Dovey estuary. There's a junction here, and a platform. There's nothing here save the view, but the trains still come though. And so, from time to time, do cross-country mountain bikers.

There are arrows showing which way to go, but you still need a map and directions



FACT FILE: TRANS-CAMBRIAN WAY

DISTANCE: 100 miles (170km)

TIME: 3-5 days for most people, although it has been done in a day.

TERRAIN: Largely off-road riding through hill country and moorland on stony and grass tracks. It crosses the Cambrian mountains and there's at least 3,700m of climbing.

WHAT TO TAKE: It's possible to do this on a cyclo-cross bike or rough-stuff tourer but it's easier and more pleasant on a reliable mountain bike. Carry decent waterproofs, a compass, sufficient food and water, and tools – you'll be on your own for most of the journey.

MAPS: Download Tracklogs maps and instructions for free or buy the hard copy version – both from www.imba.org.uk. The route is covered by OS Explorers 201, 214, 213, 215, and 23 and by Landrangers 148, 147, and 135.

START: Knighton railway station on the Shropshire border and finish at Aberdovey Junction railway station on the estuary salt flats.

AMENITIES: There are pubs, B&B and shops on or close to the route at Knighton, Llanbadarn Fynydd, Rhayader, Cwmystwyth, Llangurig, Staylitttle and Machynlleth. Bike shops at Rhayader (Elan Cyclery) and Machynlleth (The Holey Trail).

MORE INFORMATION: www.imba.org.uk, follow the 'where to ride' link for information on trains, taxi services, village shops, B&Bs etc.



Most of the streams are easily forded. After heavy rain, some require diversions