

With a bit of planning, cycling is the perfect way to explore cities. **Andrew Stevenson** is your urban tour guide

Manchester Sightseer

Of course there's more to Manchester than Coronation Street, indie music, old cotton mills and football teams. And no, it doesn't always rain. But when a short train ride will take you into the Peak District, the Lakes, North Wales, or the lanes of Cheshire, why would you get off in the middle of England's seventh biggest city? Because, like London, there's so much to see, and a bike is a great way to explore.

This 15-mile loop takes you from Piccadilly Station onto a whistlestop tour of the city's sights. It connects a network of recently designated cycle paths and calls at all its cathedrals of sport, cuisine and culture. For non-Mancunians, it's a chance to sample a few surprises and challenge some stereotypes about the city.

Manchester is my home city, but with nothing but riding for its own sake in mind, free from the obligations of commuting, I was surprised at what I saw. As the rumble of the railway arch faded behind me I was soon pleasantly sheltered from the sounds of the city, pottering along the Ashton canal towpath.

This well-surfaced waterside route combines old and new Manchester. The canal, which is over 200 years old, fell into disuse in the 1940s but has recently undergone an urban renewal programme whose legacy is an eye-catching diversity

of architecture. Original low, brickwork bridges combine with 21st century innovations like environmentally-sustainable galleries, apartments and offices.

The re-branded New Islington development has transformed former squalor and disrepair into one of Manchester's real success stories. Local developers Urban Splash take the plaudits for this canal renovation scheme, and the term also describes what can happen if you don't look where you're going on this part of the ride!

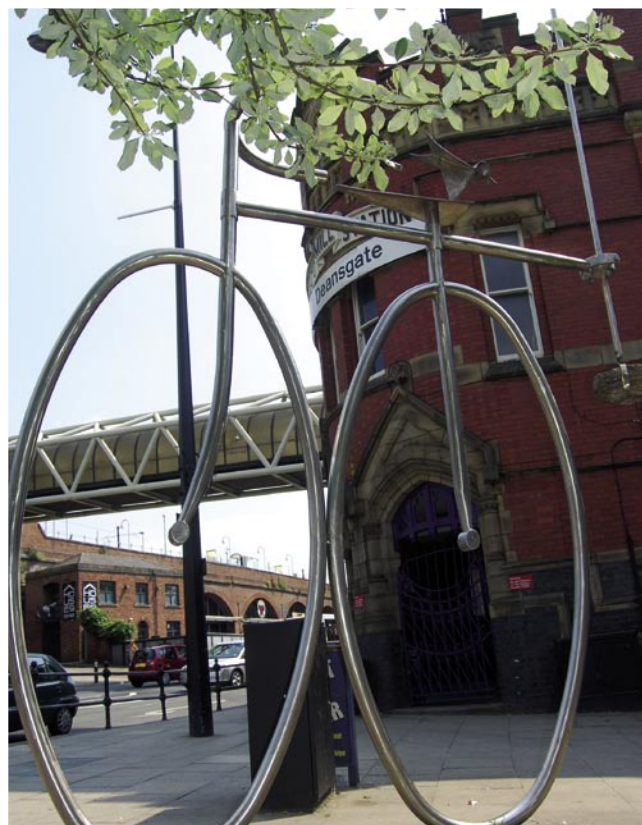
Track-riding taster

Out of the watery, leafy seclusion of the canal rises another impressive spectacle, familiar to all fans of Manchester City FC. The Sportcity complex hosts several sports to an international standard. Though magnificent, it does rob hapless British athletes of much needed excuses for Olympic and Commonwealth failure in track, field, tennis and squash. ('Not enough facilities', they used to cry.) Still, the cycling team did Britain proud in 2008 and their success owed much to the National Cycling Centre, which is next up after leaving the canal.

Velodromes are thin on the ground in Britain and this one is certainly worth a visit. If you feel like a bike ride within a bike ride, there's a very reasonably priced track taster session for beginners (£10, including tuition and track bike rental). Book ahead, though. These tasters have become very popular since Hoy, Wiggins, Cavendish, Pendleton and Jones took to the world stage.

(Above) A handy cycle route alongside the Manchester Ship Canal
(Below) 'Sportcity' is where you're headed; it's next door to the velodrome





The curry mile

After the rarified atmosphere of canals and velodromes, the ride into Belle Vue and Rusholme is more frenetic. Alan Turing Way (thankfully complete with separated cycle path) is named after the Manchester University mathematician and computer scientist who, while working at Bletchley Park, famously helped to crack enemy ciphers during WWII. Turing is also credited as being one of the inventors of the modern computer.

Reminders of Manchester's past continue to whiz by on this speedy section. Look left for Belle Vue dog track. Despite regular protests from animal rights campaigners, as well as several closures of similar facilities nationwide, 'the dog's' still opens its gates three nights weekly.

For most Mancunians, Rusholme is synonymous with food – curry, to be specific. Before following Manchester Cycleway signs on Dickenson Road, you might take a short detour straight ahead onto Wilmslow Road (past Bicycle Doctor) and have a sniff around (and probably another taster session) on Manchester's so-called 'curry mile'.

Old railway route

Fully nourished and back aboard the bike, the Manchester Cycleway takes a secluded route through the leafy south of the city. The railway line that once graced the Fallowfield Loop was closed in the wake of the Beeching Report in the 1960s. The nation's local railways were decimated around this time, much to John Betjeman's dismay. However, part

(Clockwise from above) Manchester's canals are why it gets called – honestly! – 'the Venice of the north'. The bridge to the Lowry Centre. Deansgate station

of this route is soon to re-open as part of Manchester's tram system. For cyclists, this idyllic route links Fallowfield with Chorlton, which has more culinary treats on offer. Bakeries are always popular with cyclists and Barbakan Delicatessen is one of the finest around.

Having already paid a flying visit to one of Manchester's footballing 'theatres of dreams', it would be rude to ignore the other one. Look out for hordes of memorabilia-carrying, camera-pointing tourists hanging around Old Trafford. If you like your tourist attractions to be of the quirkier variety, look out for Lou Macari's Chippy, whose façade is adorned by amateurish drawings of former Red Devils (people who have played for Manchester United, like Lou Macari).

Shortly after Old Trafford another detour opportunity arises as you reach the Manchester Ship Canal. Go left (instead of right) down the quayside for the Imperial War Museum and (over the bridge) to the Lowry Theatre and Arts Centre. Even if you don't go inside, the vibrant architecture makes a stunning complement to the 19th century canal, which still carries 6 million tons of freight each year.

Photos by Andrew Stevenson & Paul Gregory

Back into the city

Back on the sightseer route the ride back into Manchester passes the disused Salford Quays cinema. Manchester's first multiplex has stood empty and ignored for over a decade. In its heyday it hastened the demise of many of the city's first-generation picture palaces.

The final section of the ride back into Manchester takes the ship canal towpath. The route is safe and well-surfaced, yet few cyclists seem to use it. This is in sharp contrast, say, to the Fallowfield Loop path, to which they flock. Though the path is locked at dusk, it attracts few during daylight.

The views of Manchester's approaching skyline are quite brooding, and your only company is likely to be a few passing rowing crews. On the Chester Road approach to Deansgate railway station, you may be glad to see crowds again as you head for Piccadilly, or for a drink in one of Deansgate's bars or cafes. You may also be pleasantly surprised at how much peace and quiet you managed to find whilst riding around one of England's busiest cities.



Fact File Manchester Sightseer

DISTANCE: 24k (15 miles) – 26k with side trips

TIME: 2-3 hours allowing for sightseeing

TERRAIN: Roads, paved towpaths and good quality leisure routes

MAPS: Greater Manchester Cycle Network Maps 8 and 9 – Manchester, available from Greater Manchester Transport Unit, tel: 0161 455 2051, gmtu@manchaestergov.uk

BIKE SHOPS: The Bicycle Doctor, 68-70 Dickenson Rd, Rusholme, Manchester, M14 5HE, tel: 0161 224 1303, sales@bicycledoctor.co.uk; Harry Hall Cycles, The Arches, 67 Whitworth Street West, Manchester, M1 5WQ, tel: 0161 236 5699, sales@harryhallcycles.co.uk

REFRESHMENTS: Punjab Sweet House, 177 Wilmslow Road, Rusholme, tel: 0161 225 2960; Barbakan Deli, 67-71 Manchester Road, Chorlton, tel: 0161 881 7053; Pi, 99 Manchester Rd, Chorlton; Knott Bar, 374 Deansgate, Manchester

ACCOMMODATION: YHA Manchester, Potato Wharf, Castlefield, Manchester, tel: 0845 371 9647, email manchester@yha.org.uk

USEFUL CONTACTS: South Manchester CTC, Harry Burnton, tel: 0161 442 5060, smctc.org.uk; Greater Manchester Cycling Campaign, gmcc.org.uk; National Cycling Centre, nationalcyclingcentre.com

Directions

Start Manchester Piccadilly railway station. All distances in kilometres

- 0.0** Undemeath Piccadilly station, London Rd, follow blue route 66 sign along Store Street
- 0.6** Cross Gt Ancoats St, turn right, follow blue Sportcity sign
- 0.7** Leaving Gt Ancoats, go left onto the paved Ashton canal towpath
- 3.0** Towpath ends. Follow National Cycling Centre cycle signs down Stuart Street
- 3.4** Right at the velodrome. Cross the roundabout, turn left onto the cycle path on (but separate from) Alan Turing Way towards Stockport. Stay on this road to Longsight and go under the rail bridge
- 7.4** Cross busy A6 and follow the blue cycle sign for Levenshulme. Right at next crossroads, onto Dickenson Rd
- 9.0** Left at the Manchester Cycle Way sign onto Birch Grove
- 9.5** Right, then left, on the Manchester Cycleway (shared with pedestrians), past allotments (on your right), grammar school (left), 'toast rack' (right), university halls (left and right) and over Mosely Rd
- 10.5** Right at the Battered Cod chippy. Join the Fallowfield Loop cycle path, signed to Chorlton. Cross Wilmslow Rd in Fallowfield and join the former railway line on your left
- 14.4** At the end of the loop follow route 55 signs for Salford Quays, onto Corkland St and Albany Rd to Unicom Wholefood Grocery
- 15.6** Opposite Unicom route 55 takes you down Kensington Rd, then right onto Oswald Rd
- 16.0** Right at the bottom of Oswald Rd (dismounting temporarily). Route 55 leads straight ahead down Warwick Rd South
- 17.0** Cross Old Trafford Metro station (on foot) by the Cricket ground. Continue along Warwick Rd and Sir Matt Busby Way
- 18.3** Pass Old Trafford ground. Right at Manchester Ship Canal
- 19.0** Left over Trafford Rd Bridge, left onto Clipper's Quay, left again in front of the disused cinema. Cross the car park to the canal, go left under the road bridge onto the towpath
- 21.0** Cross the footbridge, ride under the rail bridge, over the cobbles, then left onto Elsmere St (first road you come to)
- 21.8** Right onto Arundel St, across Chester Rd (use the crossing to your left) and join cycle path into city centre, turning left
- 22.0** Bear right towards Deansgate Rail Station and the metallic bike sculpture
- 22.6** Right and along Whitworth St for Piccadilly Station