



# Youth centred

Cycling enriches lives – and Bike Club supports schemes that provide it to young people. **Clive Andrews** explains

**A**t Hamsterley Forest in County Durham, a group of teenage boys are nearing the top of a steep wooded track. Their ride has been tough, but it's not without reward: there's now a rocky descent with stream crossings, and they tackle it with skill and confidence.

Several of these teenagers have been involved with anti-social behaviour and most have had contact with the local police. However, over the last few months, they have become accomplished mountain bikers, thanks to their commitment, the expert tuition of local police volunteers and some support from Bike Club, a programme set up by CTC and its partners.

## What trail riding teaches

Richmondshire Off-road Cycling Initiative (ROCI) is a scheme for young people who have been identified by the police, by social services or by schools as being in need of a positive experience. After being referred, young people must themselves apply to join the initiative, detailing what they feel they will gain from riding with ROCI.

ROCI has been operating since May 2008 and is run by Graeme Gale, a Police Community Support Officer working in the area of Catterick Garrison in Yorkshire. Graeme and his police colleagues volunteer their own time to run the programme.

Graeme applied to Bike Club for funding to train ROCI's volunteer leaders in off-road leadership. Bike Club development officer Patrick Carr welcomed the group's application and helped make arrangements for the officers to receive CTC leader training.

'We're trying to get these lads away from anti-social behaviour,' Graeme tells us. 'We give them a chance to ride in an area they'd never normally go to. We're introducing them to a healthy pastime with real benefits to their lives.'

Do some young people find mountain biking difficult? 'We encourage the lads to challenge themselves. Once they've got the hang of riding down a steep rocky slope, they'll feel better next time. They grit their teeth and get on with it. The important

thing is that we've brought them out of a pattern of causing trouble and given them a worthwhile activity, rather than smashing up windows or scaring old ladies.'

Graeme points out one youth in particular: 'Ryan is on the fringe of anti-social behaviour. We've had to deal with him on several occasions, as the group he hangs around with tends to get into trouble. Since we took him on board at ROCI, he's really learned. He's had to listen to instructions and not get distracted.'

Graeme explains how ROCI is changing the relationship between young people and the police: 'These guys are used to seeing us in uniform spoiling their fun and telling them off. I've dealt with most kids on the course at various times, largely for issues related to anti-social behaviour. But once we've ridden together, things change. They see a human side of us, and we see a focused, determined side of them. Now we have a common ground, we're able to reason with each other.'

As for Ryan, he has begun to show signs of leadership, and is often asked by



PC Mark Reed leading young people through the skills loop at Hamsterley Forest



(Above) Kentisbeare Junior Cycling Club from Devon, a long way from home in the Western Isles

(below) The Richmondshire Off-road Cycling Initiative gives the young riders focus and a sense of responsibility

a venture looked beyond the means of the club's finances. In order to make a Scottish tour a reality, Stuart applied to Bike Club for funding to support the trip. Lizzie Evered, Bike Club's development officer for Bristol and Exeter, assisted Stuart with his application, ensuring that the previous success of the club, and its long-term sustainability, made it a strong contender for Bike Club funding.

Stuart describes what young people gain from this kind of cycling: 'This is about freedom and self-determination. The young people are in charge. We're there if it goes wrong, but it's essentially their own responsibility. We help the children to develop their skills, then we trust them to keep themselves safe. We're careful not to be over-controlling and we don't micro-manage them. As adults, we need to learn about letting go in a controlled way. We're around if the children need us.'

Why does Stuart feel there's a need for clubs like Kentisbeare Junior Cycling Club? 'Our culture has changed. Increased traffic levels mean our streets are not as safe as they were. Cycle training helps children to develop the assertiveness needed to control situations and take the correct position on the road. It's important that they get to grips with independence and using their own initiative.'

Are the rides difficult? 'Many young people aren't used to being physically extended. If we're riding with an older group, and everyone has energy to spare, we extend the rides to go a little further and give everyone a challenge.'

Erin Fisher is nine years old and has benefited from the training offered by Kentisbeare Junior Cycling Club, as have her sister Rhianna, 11 and her brother Mitch, six. Why is Erin a member? 'Well, it's fun,' she begins, 'but it also helps my



Graeme to assist with younger groups, talking them through safety checks. 'He's been given that responsibility and he takes it in his stride,' says Graeme.

**Journeys of discovery**

Further north, in Scotland, a group of 24 young people are part way through the third day of a long distance challenge – to ride 120 miles around Arran, Argyll and Bute. The climbs are long but the determination of the young riders is matched by the encouragement of the parents and leaders riding along with them.

There is a strong feeling of teamwork, as children help each other and parents share the roles of leading, marshalling and following with the group's slower riders. No one is allowed to feel left out.

The riders of Kentisbeare Junior Cycling Club are a long way from their homes in Devon, where the club meets on a regular basis for local rides. A calendar of trips provides a range of experiences, but organiser Stuart McFadzean had an ambition to take the children on a more distant adventure.

He began making plans for a multi-day tour in Scotland, but the budget for such



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confidence and it’s good learning how to work together with my friends. The trip to Scotland was great. It wasn’t always easy but we had such a good time.’

Erin’s mum Siobhan Fisher agrees: ‘It’s good to see the children learning how to cycle properly in such a supportive environment. The trip to Scotland was a marvellous experience for them.’

But there seems to be much more to Kentisbeare Junior Cycling Club than simply giving the children something to do. ‘There’s a feeling of community,’ insists Siobhan. ‘Stuart does a great job organising the rides, so we’re happy to help out along with the other parents.’

### **Bike Club’s breadth**

Young disabled people are one of the groups most frequently observed to be missing out on the benefits of cycling. In many instances, specialist cycles are needed to maximise inclusion. Around 10% of Bike Club projects so far have involved bringing cycling to disabled young people, through a combination of specialist equipment and training for youth leaders and teachers.

Bike Club also supports several schemes involving bike maintenance. Projects like this often involve the recycling of abandoned bikes and focus on the idea of young people learning practical skills. For those with low levels of academic attainment, such courses can hold the key to future employability in a craft or trade.

In urban or semi-urban environments, off-road trails can be many miles away. By supporting the building of facilities in accessible locations, Bike Club is able to bring challenging cycling to children in locations near their homes and schools. Projects like this have positive effects not only on the lives of the children that use them, but on levels of anti-social behaviour. CTC’s trail-building expert Ian Warby is often brought in to consult on such projects.

Many of the skills learned through Bike Club can be accredited through award programmes that recognise commitment and learning. The Youth Achievement Awards are administered by UK Youth, a partner in Bike Club. They allow young people to set themselves targets to achieve at a range of levels.

Similarly, the popular Duke of Edinburgh’s Award recognises the endeavours and determination of young people at progressive levels. Several Bike Club projects involve DofE participation, either as their main focus or as a way of rewarding effort.

### **Where next?**

All over the UK, there are now over 70 clubs, groups and schools that are benefiting from Bike Club’s support. Bike Club will soon have transferred – or agreed to transfer – a total of £150,000 to these groups to help fund cycling. The availability of small grants, in addition to expert assistance from a local member of the Bike Club team, is on its way to helping thousands of children and young people to learn and grow through cycling.

Sarah Troke, Bike Club’s UK manager, is pleased with Bike Club’s progress. ‘By the end of August 2010, we had dealt with 142 applications to become part of Bike Club. So far, 86 of those applications have been successful, with 44 pending. Over the next year, 5,000 children and young people will be involved in Bike Club.’

Sarah sums up what’s being achieved: ‘Bike Club is about recognising that some of life’s most valuable lessons happen not in the classroom, but out on the road, in the woods, up a hill or in the workshop.’

*Some names have been changed for this article.*

## **Bike Club: who, what & where**

**Bike Club is about much more than just cycling – it’s about engaging with young people. CTC could not do this alone, so a partnership was formed with two other bodies.**

**UK Youth is the largest non-uniformed youth organisation in the UK. Bringing together youth clubs and other groups, UK Youth has enabled Bike Club to bring its work to young people and youth leaders, who are now more aware of the potential benefits of cycling.**

**ContinYou is an organisation that provides expertise in community learning, health and wellbeing. Its success with projects like its Breakfast Clubs is being used to find the best ways to effectively involve**

**children and young people. 52% of Bike Club projects are taking place in an after-school or similar setting, so ContinYou’s experience in this field is invaluable.**

**Bike Club was initially funded by the Department for Transport through Cycling England. Further funding came from supermarket chain Asda, whose Pedal Power campaign has enabled the extension of Bike Club into further areas of England and into Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. (In Scotland and Wales, Bike Club is working with Youth Scotland and Youth Cymru.)**

**Further more information about Bike Club, visit [bikeclub.org.uk](http://bikeclub.org.uk) or call 08447 368464.**