

Exploring the National Cycle Network

About 40 years ago the charity Sustrans (short for 'sustainable transport') started to map out the National Cycle Network in the UK. One of the first routes was the Bristol to Bath Railway Path, a traffic-free cycle and walking route along disused railway lines, a concept that has since been copied in other places.

It's been at least a couple of years since I've had my Sustrans maps of cycle routes, but it was only this year that I've started to really make use of them.

One of the national cycle routes ventures almost past the Meeting House, and this was the one that I used for a day trip to a fellowship group meeting just outside Castle Combe. Route 254, in Northern direction, goes past Avonleigh (home of JJ's organic veg and the Avonleigh vineyard and orchard) on to Great Chalfield Manor, past Corsham Court and then to Biddestone. Most of the route is on roads, but they tend to be fairly quiet backlanes (except for the busy section at the very beginning of route 254 out of Bradford on Avon), and the route navigates through some calm neighbourhoods of Corsham rather than the town centre. From Biddestone, I followed a 'yellow' route on the map (not an official cycle route, but recommended by local cyclists) on to Ford, then crossed over the A420 and - well, got off at this point, and pushed my bike up the steep hill to our Friends' farm. Altogether it took a little less than 2 hours to get there. How useful the route recommendations are was something that I found out on the way back: Missing the turn to the recommended route from Ford to Biddestone, I ended up on a very busy and quite steep B-road, the most unpleasant section of the day's ride. In the end, I turned around and returned to Ford, this time finding the turn to the correct route.

In August I spent several days exploring other parts of the cycle network. I started off on the already familiar route 4 from Bradford on Avon to Devizes (along the canal towpath), then, after a lunchbreak, continued on this route - now on quiet country roads - via Pewsey to Wootton Rivers. It only took me 5 hours (including lunchbreak and at a gentle pace), a lot quicker than I expected.

The following day saw an even shorter ride. I continued along route 4 to Great Bedwyn and Little Bedwyn, then took route 254 to Ramsbury and from there on to Marlborough. Only 3 hours this time, although a little bit exhausting towards the end, as the road from Ramsbury to Marlborough went up and down all the time - not too steep though. (If you've paid attention to route numbers, you may recall 254 being the route from Bradford on Avon to Corsham etc. - well, it's, in fact, an odd-shaped semi-circular route from Frome via BoA, Corsham and Malmesbury to Marlborough and eventually Little Bedwyn.)

The third day was the most scenic section. I started off on route 482, the Marlborough and Chiseldon Railway Path. Like the Bristol to Bath path, it was built along a disused railway line, but it's mostly non-tarmaced. It's a nicely sheltered route, surrounded by trees most of the time, so that the noise of the parallel-running A-road from Marlborough to Swindon is rarely noticed. At the end of route 482, I made almost a U-turn onto route 45, another mostly traffic-free route that follows part of the Ridgeway. It offers stunningly wide views, but the terrain is sometimes challenging. Even with a mountain bike, I would have had to push the bike for a mile or two - with my old-fashioned town bike, there was no question of even trying to ride it through this part of the route. Towards the bottom of the hill, I joined route 403 to Avebury. This goes right past the standing stones, so I took the opportunity to wander around a bit and visit the pub before continuing along route 403 into Calne, the final stopover on the journey.

Route 403 continues mostly traffic-free to Chippenham, then winds its way rather complicatedly through Chippenham's town centre and along various multiple roundabouts before making its way

out of town along quiet(ish) country roads via Lacock to Melksham where it then joins up with the canal towpath near Semington. Under normal circumstances, I probably could have managed the ride from Calne to Bradford on Avon in about 3 hours. However, I got terribly lost in Chippenham (not only because of the sometimes missing or confusing signage, but also because I didn't trust the signs when I should have done!), and after 2 hours of going back and forth, I was about to abandon all hope of ever getting out of Chippenham, when I finally found the way to Lacock! After this ordeal, it was obviously no longer an option to cycle all the way without a break, so I stopped at Lacock for a little while, and suitably refreshed, reached the familiar canal towpath at last, to my great delight. Soon after, however, a thorn chose my rear wheel as a resting place, and my reward for removing it was to have to change the tube. Without this mishap, I would have missed the only serious rain I've had on the entire four days on my bike - the downpour came just as I was on the towpath between Trowbridge and Bradford. Total journey time: six and a half hours (instead of the expected 3).

Overall, it was still a very enjoyable experience, and I can certainly recommend the signposted national cycle routes for anyone who prefers a safer and more pleasant way of cycling. And if you have plenty of time, you may choose one of the major routes all the way: route 4 stretches from Southwest Wales to London (via Bristol - Bath - Bradford-on-Avon - Devizes - Hungerford), and route 1 - you may have guessed it! - from Lands End to John O'Groats.

For a custom map / directions: <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/ncn/map>

Paper maps from <https://shop.sustrans.org.uk/maps> or any good bicycle shop

(Ordnance Survey maps often include NCN route numbers and may be helpful for more details)

Klaus Huber