

FEATURE
Making tracks



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Even the best purpose-built mountain bike trails need development and repair.
Journalist **Jon Sparks** talks to the designers and the diggers >

MAKING TRACKS

Mountain biking is full of jargon. One of my favourite bits, ironically, is the term 'natural trails'. Few, if any, of the trails we ride can truly be called natural. They may have existed before mountain bikes were invented, evolved through regular use, or been built for another purpose, but they were made by people.

And the opposite of 'natural trails'? I haven't come across anyone referring to 'unnatural trails'. Instead, we tend to speak of 'purpose-built' or 'dedicated' trails. These are a relatively new phenomenon, but an important one: these trails don't just serve mountain bikers; they actively shape our expectations and the way we ride, wherever we ride.

IF YOU BUILD IT...

Exactly when the first purpose-built trails were created is impossible to say. Riders have been shaping the landscape in smaller or larger ways since the first mountain bikes arrived in the late 1970s – and probably long before that. The North Shore in Vancouver, Canada, became an influential centre from the mid-1980s onward. Its steep and densely forested terrain spawned a distinctive style, with timber-constructed obstacles an integral part of often technically demanding and potentially dangerous riding. Today, 'North Shore' is MTB shorthand for any elevated timber feature.

Closer to home, legend has it that Dafydd Davis created UK trailbuilding singlehanded, starting in 1994 (see *Centres of Attention in Cycle*, Oct/Nov 2011). Of course, Davis would be the first to point out that this is untrue. Arguably, what he did do was create the phenomenon of the trail centre – and at the same time, began to make trail-building respectable.

Today it's big business. CTC's Senior Support Officer for MTB Development, Ian Warby, estimates there are 16 or 17 individuals working professionally as trailbuilders in the UK, along with hundreds of volunteers. Trailbuilding is also a UK export industry. Dafydd Davis has worked as far afield as Australia, and when I tried to contact Rowan Sorrell for this article he was in the Czech Republic. This doesn't happen by accident: UK trails (and by extension, trailbuilders) are regularly hailed as some of the best in the world.

And they have created hundreds of trails. For instance, mbwales.com lists seven major trail centres, plus several other sites with purpose-built trails. Published figures tend to overstate total distances, as some trails may share certain sections and also use pre-existing fire-roads to link purpose-built trail sections. However, there must be at least 200km of purpose-built trail in Wales alone. Scotland undoubtedly has considerably more and England, though slightly late to the party, has seen massive development in the last few years. Purpose-built trails are now a major element of mountain biking in the UK; some people never ride anything else.

TRACK RECORD

When Dafydd Davis began creating trails at Coed-y-Brenin, he had a fight on his hands to persuade even

Photos on pages 49-52: Jon Sparks, unless noted



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his own Forestry Commission bosses that mountain biking was a legitimate presence in the forests. As he says, no argument was more persuasive than 'bums on seats'. Almost before they were finished, the first trails at Coed-y-Brenin drew visitors in numbers that no one, including Davis himself, had anticipated. Within a few years, he found himself spearheading a multi-million pound project to create more centres across Wales. Much more recently, he experienced a few *déjà vu* moments dealing with Coillte, the Irish equivalent of the Forestry Commission.

'Only a few years ago, they were trying to make mountain biking illegal,' he says, 'But we were able to convince them that there was far more to be gained by engaging with mountain bikers.'

It's still true, then, that being a trail-builder often means being an advocate too. But sometimes, now, it feels like pushing at an open door. Local authorities, landowners and managers have learned that mountain biking can bring people (and hence money) to an area. In fact, Davis sometimes worries that the pendulum has swung too far, spawning 'well-meant but heavy-handed' developments. This new eagerness to attract mountain bikers has also occasionally led to the exclusion or marginalisation of other users in the landscape.

Separation is often necessary, for the safety and enjoyment of different groups of users; wholesale exclusion rarely is. An unusual exception is Aston Hill Bike Park in the Chilterns, the leading downhill biking venue in Southeast England. Its 40-odd hectares are leased by CTC from the Forestry Commission. Within that small area are five different downhill runs, where riders can be travelling at very high speeds, as well as a 9km cross-country trail. It's also unusual in that riders pay directly to ride here. Most trail centres don't charge for access to the trails; income may come from car-parking charges, café and bike hire and so on. >



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In the photos

1 The Olympic MTB course in Essex used thousands of tonnes of imported rock

2 The Nevis Red downhill track

3 Flowing singletrack at Dalby Forest

“FEW, IF ANY, OF THE TRAILS WE RIDE ARE TRULY NATURAL. THEY WERE MADE BY PEOPLE”

› CTC’s Ian Warby describes Aston Hill as, ‘my baby’. He’s been involved here for over 15 years and at one time leased the site personally, before taking on his present role at CTC. While that role involves much more than trailbuilding, it’s still a key element.

THE ACCIDENTAL TRAILBUILDER

Without Aston Hill, Ian Warby probably wouldn’t be working for CTC today. He describes himself as an ‘accidental trailbuilder’ – adding that the same is true of others too: ‘None of us went to college and did a trailbuilding course.’

He has, more recently, been involved in discussions about developing a professional trailbuilding qualification, and is currently preparing to roll out CTC’s own Volunteer Trail Repair Coordinators course, which has already been through a pilot scheme in Scotland. This is designed as an intensive one-day course. Warby says ruefully, ‘It took me years to learn what we’ll try to teach in one day.’

Like Ian Warby, trailbuilders are bike riders first; they begin by building trails that they want to ride. For Ian, a key factor was the lack of technical difficulty on trails in Southeast England, compared to other parts of the country. Though largely self-taught, he downplays the difficulty: ‘My background is product design, and I could apply those principles,’ he says. ‘It’s really a mix of art, science and engineering.’

Dafydd Davis tells a similar story, though he also pays tribute to roads foreman Will Jones, who taught him some basic principles, like the ‘50% rule’: the average gradient of a trail should not exceed half the gradient of the slope it traverses.

Both Warby and Davis recall a visit from the IMBA (International Mountain Bicycling Association) Trail Care Crew in 1997. It was a seminal moment, though Davis also adds, ‘It told me I was mostly on the right track – pardon the pun.’

There are still plenty of ‘accidental trailbuilders’ today. Tim Sellors is Chairman of Yorkshire-based SingletrAction, one of the UK’s largest and best-organised volunteer groups, with around 140 members. ‘Trial and error,’ is exactly how he responds to my question on how he learned. However, he’s quick to add a tribute to IMBA’s publications on the subject, though with a caveat that ‘general guidance has to be adapted to local conditions.’

THE VALUE OF VOLUNTEERS

Volunteer groups play a vital role in building and maintaining many of the UK’s best mountain bike trails. If everything were left to contractors, costs alone mean far fewer trails would be built. While not exactly typical, the Olympic mountain bike course (a 5km loop) at Hadleigh Farm in Essex cost around £800,000 ›



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In the photos

4 Nevis Range has some very ‘natural’ XC singletrack

5 Gisburn Forest: the trail engineering will be less obvious as it beds in

6 The Lonesome Pine Trail at Kielder Forest



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and indeed manages five centres – as well as Aston Hill, there's Rogate in the South Downs, Stoughton nearby, Tilgate Woods near Crawley, and Tidworth on the edge of the Salisbury Plain.

Tim Sellors is convinced that groups like SingletrAction are vital in passing on the lessons of experience, but adds, 'Volunteer groups could do with a bit more of a national framework. Not to boss us around but to help with networking and co-ordination, the sharing of experience.' Looking at the scene right now, you'd have to say that CTC is the organisation best placed to fill that need.

Volunteer groups do talk to each other already. SingletrAction, for example, has been instrumental in the establishment of other groups such as Pennine Mountain Bike Action and Ride Sheffield.

FUTURE PERFECT

What's the future for trailbuilding? Even in a recession there's a lot going on and there are still some big projects, including 1 South West, which unites a range of partners (including CTC, the National Trust, Devon County Council and others) to develop off-road cycling hubs in the region. Funding is principally from the EU and DEFRA.

There's also a clear tendency to develop trails at a smaller scale and close to centres of population. Tim Sellors waxes lyrical about pump tracks – short, somewhat

BMX-style trails that can be built in tiny spaces and provide a fun experience for almost any level of rider.

Pump tracks are one symptom of diversification. On the one hand, bikes keep getting better and skill levels rise, so there's an increasing demand for harder riding. Trips abroad and a steady diet of DVDs fuel a hunger for more 'bike park' type action. It's hard to pin down the difference between a typical British trail centre and the bike parks more often found in, say, the Alps or North America. However, bike parks often involve bigger features and a less natural aesthetic. They have typically developed as summer use of ski facilities, with a focus on downhill riding, using the chairlift/gondola infrastructure for 'uplift'. Probably the most famous is Whistler in British Columbia; the UK's best known example is Nevis Range near Fort William, with its World Cup downhill course and the easier Nevis Red descent.

At the other end of the scale, there's an acknowledged need to provide better trails for novices, families and casual users, too long consigned to the monotony of forest fire roads. Dafydd Davis speaks of building a 'continuum of difficulty' and there are more and more interesting blue-graded trails, from Glentress to Gisburn Forest.

For a final perspective, I asked all the trailbuilders where they liked to ride and – without exception – they all said they enjoy purpose-built and 'natural' trails equally. Dafydd Davis seems bemused, if not embarrassed, that many riders today only ride at trail centres. Man-made trails can be fabulous, but they're only one side of mountain biking.

CAN YOU DIG IT?



Ian Warby (above) and Dafydd Davis both spontaneously remarked that volunteers' time and energy is one of the most precious resources in mountain biking. If anyone wonders why people would give up scarce riding time to wield an axe or spade instead, here's Tim Sellors' answer:

'Because I enjoy it, first of all. And I suppose there's that notion of putting something back. But it's also about creating trails that I want to ride. And perhaps the thing that keeps me going back is... well, it's always great craic.'

And there can be a real sense of achievement, too. SingletrAction is almost entirely responsible for the trails at Stainburn, west of Harrogate, and had a big hand at Dalby Forest – still probably England's number one trail centre.

'Dig days' may be hard and dirty work but there's something that keeps many volunteers coming back time and time again. Unfortunately there's no central clearing house (yet) where you can locate every local group. The SingletrAction website (singletraction.co.uk) has links to a number of other groups; otherwise try asking around at your local trail centre or bike shop.

to construct – or £160 per metre. Even if £30–£60 is more normal, contractor-built trails are expensive.

But it's not just about saving money or using volunteers as unpaid labour. In different ways, Dafydd Davis, Ian Warby and Tim Sellors all say the same thing: volunteers are the connection between builders and riders. The professionals have the expertise in design but volunteers are experts on local conditions. It's also probably fair to say that professional trailbuilders, by and large, come from an elite riding background. For example, Rowan Sorrell, MD and lead designer at leading trailbuilding company Back on Track, is a Welsh Downhill champion and has competed on the UCI World Cup Circuit. Volunteers represent all levels of ability.

However, making those connections isn't always easy. The mountain bike 'community' is pretty nebulous; it's more a case of numerous overlapping and largely informal communities. These are sustained through local clubs (many of which are not affiliated to any national body), internet forums, trail-centre cafés and local bike shops.

British Cycling is the governing body for cycle sport in the UK, including mountain bike racing, but is not central to the lives of most recreational mountain bikers. It's also fair to say that IMBA-UK has a low level of 'name recognition' among ordinary mountain bikers. Right now, no organisation is playing a more active role than CTC. It's one of the UK's leading providers of mountain bike skills training and is involved in general advocacy and access. And of course it is directly involved in trail development

Above right by George Woodward

In the photos
7 Mountain bike trails can coexist and connect with nature: this is at Glentress (one of the 7Stanes) in Scotland