

The Trans-Cambrian Way, May 2023

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DAY 1: Knighton to Rhayader, 50K, 1300m ascent (8 hours)

A momentary need for inspiration in the middle of a day at the desk lead to some google searches and up popped this route. It grabbed my attention and some two months later, I found myself setting off with my husband Mark on the Trans-Cambrian Way. It's a mountain biking route of just over 100 miles traversing Wales from Knighton on the English border towards the sea at Dovey Junction, near Machynlleth. Unmarked and taking really good bridleways, it traverses the Cambrian mountains. We cobbled together enough information from [TransCamb July2016 \(transcambrianway.org.uk\)](https://www.transcambrianway.org.uk) and various blogs to suss out the route and accommodation. I also got a GPX of the route on my watch which I had checked carefully and this ensured no route issues for us at all. Neither of us had experience of multi-day mountain biking so the 3 day pub/hotel model suited us and with our warm clothes doubling up as eveningwear, we had little more than a day pack with us.



Setting off from Knighton's George and Dragon Pub, an easy five mile stretch of meandering back roads placated any apprehension. An abrupt sharp left turn upwards onto a bridleway and our trip into the unknown



had really begun both physically (with a quick bike push) and visually with stunning 360 degree views opening up. Thereafter there was lots of high rolling moorland hills with the route taking us over grass and tracks, initially following the "Heart of Wales Line Trail" then Glyndyr's Way. We rode past lots of bemused or terrified sheep, I'm not sure which, but either way they had left

enough poo to hang off Mark's bike forks like earrings and lie in wait under my saddle for a squish with my hand later. We didn't care, we were enjoying ourselves too much.



The rolling hills gave way to a fast downhill road that led across the A483 at Llanbadarn Fynydd. Near the junction there's a great community shop with a café, if you only know to turn slightly right. If their sign had indicated this, Steve who caught up with us later, would have enjoyed his cup of tea as much as we did. A quick stop there, then it was time to attempt the first ford. It was deep, it was slippery – there was no chance!

A bit more grassy ascent is where Steve caught us up. He was proper bikepacking with camping kit in rather larger frame bags and yet he was still able to chat and overtake us just before we entered the forest. Suddenly we were whizzing down exhilarating single track. Sadly at the end was a locked gate and also Steve fixing his bike as he broke it



whilst lifting it over, so we stopped and chatted and enjoyed his company until a further community café just as you pop out on the road at Bwlch-y-Sarnau. When I say café, you open to the door to find all you need to make a brew and sit out on deckchairs. Mark also made use of the USB point donated by a young lad nicknamed "Bear" whilst I completed the visitors book. Straight back onto the bridleway and then a quiet lane into Rhayader, it was only about 8 hours from setting off but already it felt strange to be somewhere so busy so we pressed on along the cycle track towards the Elan Valley Hotel for the night. Steve had stopped and planned to camp at Rhayader.

We were doing the trip in style staying at pubs and hotels but this meant we had little more than a daypack with us and my warm weather kit doubled as eveningwear. I don't think too many people noticed the plastic bags I wore over my socks in my sodden trainers either (still wet from either failing on the fords or dipping my feet in whilst peddling anyway).

Day 2: Rhayader to Llanurig, 70Km, 1,500m ascent, 9hours 30.

After enjoying fantastic food and a really comfortable night at the Elan Valley Hotel (book direct folks!) we were on our way by 8'ish knowing today would push us with a longer and more technical day. The first hill is christened "Puke Hill". Well, you will know it when you see it and you are already cycling up-hill at that point! We thought a quick push up was allowed until a cheeky farmer suggested from across the field that we should be peddling, then with a chuckle and a friendly wave, hopped back into his Land Rover and drove



off.

The next bit overlooking Caban Coch Reservoir was familiar to me, lovely downhill grassy bridleway and a joy. Next after some houses, began the rocky technical path, although usually wet from end to end, today it was largely dry save some deep muddy puddles of unknown

stability. With so many miles ahead I'd be tempted to skip this bit for the road to Claerwen Reservoir Dam

that runs parallel next time. The only disappointment would be missing the chance to attempt the ford before climbing up to the dam itself.



The Claerwen Dam is impressive, constructed just after the Second World War and taking 6 years to complete. It is almost twice the size of other dams in the Elan Valley. After reading this on its information plate, we had an enjoyable 30 to 40 minutes ride around its northern shore. This I enjoyed more than I thought I would whilst I could look back over its twinkling blue water and look forward over the vastness of the rest of Wales that was opening up ahead. This felt remote, well apart from reaching a tarmac road, then when we stopped for a bite, out of the blue some council workers drove past and then a random jogger!

We didn't detour to Ysbyty Ystwyth but we were getting low on water by the time we got close to Cwmystwyth and were debating a quick detour into the village. Quick consultation with the driver of the library bus that had just pulled in, confirmed there was nothing there!



Luckily, I caught the eye of a local outside her home and she was happy to help whilst her dog Benjy barked excitedly at possibly the event of the day with strangers leaning over the gate.

With a very cheery wave, we headed down the road to encounter an interesting mile along the valley with spoil heaps from metal mining rising up. An information board told me that a mile-long seam was famous



for its copper, lead and iron ore mined in King Henry VIII's time. Thinking about this took my mind off the last long hill of the day. Was I on a track or a road? Maybe both, with it's odd deteriorating strip of tarmac up the middle that was perfect to push the wheels on. This took us around to some nonchalant highland cattle and a long cyclable slog upward through the forest. We took it easy and thankfully we weren't caught taking a rest as Steve caught up with us again. He'd picked up another Steve on route and we all chatted and turned the peddles over until they turned off in search of the bothy deeper into the trees.

From constantly checking my days ascent profile to see "if we were nearly there yet?" we got there and enjoyed miles of a long fast descent on wide forest tracks all the way to Llangurig. We just had to find the Bluebell Inn and the best pie menu I have seen for years. I won't forget this place, it's a very lively local pub

and I'll leave it at that! Our toughest day was done in 9 hours 30, we took it easy with many breaks along the way.

Day 3: Llangurig to Dovey Junction, 5km, 900m ascent, 7 hours

We were now in the swing of the morning's routine and ready to leave just after 7am with the aim to arrive at Dovey Junction for a victory train journey of 8 minutes to our abandoned car in Machynlleth!

It is not that we needed to beat the crowds. On a school half term week we only bumped into four cyclists and about five walkers over the whole three days.

A nicely upwards meandering valley led towards another disastrous crossing of a ford and then quite a bit of fun single track through Hafren Forest. Red kites circled upwards on thermals, by now I easily recognised their profile as there was a constant presence of at least one or two in the sky all the way along.



Just outside of the forest, houses denoted that we were near Staylittle and fortunately some 4G so I could

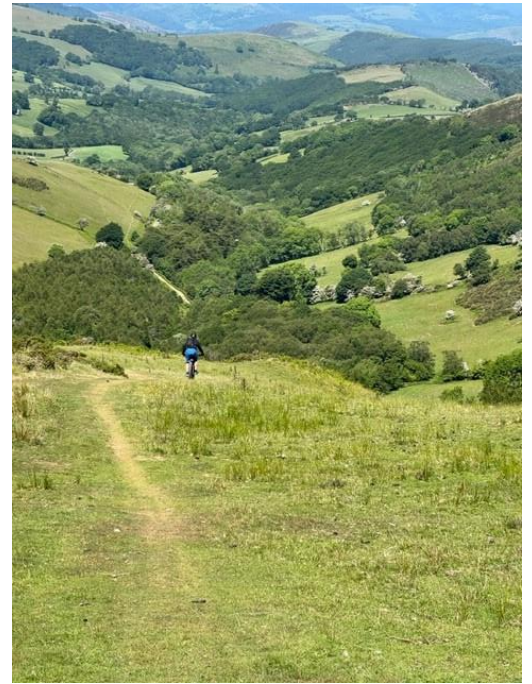
reload the GPX for the day. This was lucky because I doubt there is even a phone signal most of the time on route. We then turned away from the village without



seeing it, to cycle up onto hills joining Glyndyr's Way again and with Plumlimon Fawr in the distance then Glaslyn Water later.



We easily reached the col at Bwlych Oy Greig, the highest point of the day and where the contour lines on the map foretell a sharp descent. I also recognised the stony path from all the blogs and it cannot disappoint anyone. Our wheels flew over the steep stony descent, small stones flying off along with the caked-on sheep poo some now three days old. Just as I felt disappointed to reach a gate, a wonderful grassy descent started the delight all over again and took me swiftly to the valley.



We then picked up signs for the Mach 2 and 3 mountain bike trails, turned left and downwards onto the Mach 1 trail so we could end at Dovey Junction. The enjoyable quiet of the forest was only disrupted by an exclamation of horror from Mark when he rode through an exploding cowpat. They must have laid it as a trap at the optimum time to gain just enough crust to hide what lay beneath. He managed to splatter it not only up his front but also over the top and down onto his behind. Merely taking a slight splash myself, I thought it hilarious. It took the edge off facing the finish, well that and a first glimpse of the sea.



The idyllic last leafy and green track, dappled with sunlight took us to the road. Then there was just a quick bit on the main road and we reached Dovey Junction. This is the strangest train station, with no parking and no cars allowed down the half mile of dirt track leading to the platform, the station is about the size of any city station with a shelter, electronic notice boards and a cycle rack. On a day of train strikes, I checked the app and triumphantly announced this line was still running however, we were at least 90 minutes early!



It was only 2:30pm so we set off pedalling again back towards Machynlleth with a stop worth taking at the Osprey Centre's Café.

The three days on this trail had been a genuinely adventurous and rewarding trip. The route literally keeps you going with either views to delight you or single track to exhilarate you. I had not appreciated how it would pass such remote territory (no mobile signal, shops, people and not that many houses passed). The cycling was all-good and we benefited considerably from good weather on the trip and a couple of dry weeks before. I imagine those grassy tracks on day 1 would be much harder in the wet. Seeing the views unfold and the constant presence of red kites throughout was just stunning. It has left me wanting for more and with the impression that there is a whole lot of Wales away from the crowds left for me to discover.