

Wheels of fortune as cyclists make tracks to hail success of a bike-route revolution

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ROUTE FINDER: David Hall is regional director of the Sustrans cycling charity, which has recently gained permission to build a cycleway in Harrogate's Nidd Gorge.

Published on **Tuesday 5 April 2011 00:00**

IN the face of soaring petrol prices and driven to distraction by the cost of his car, Dave Mark debates a difficult decision.

OVER the past 15 years, a quiet revolution has been taking place along Yorkshire's roads, country lanes and disused railway tracks.

Millions of pounds have been spent and hundreds of miles of new routes established, connecting the breathtaking peaks of Yorkshire's national parks to some of the region's most deprived estates.

David Hall, a 62-year-old former chartered surveyor rarely seen without his fold-up bike, cuts a suitably unassuming figure as the brains behind much of what has happened. But behind the relaxed demeanour, there is a sense of mission to what he does.

David, the regional director for the Sustrans cycle charity for the Yorkshire and the Humber, spends his days plotting how to get people out of their cars and on bicycle, foot or horse to explore the world around them. It is a battle, he says, he is starting win.

We meet in Harrogate, the scene of a bitter and long-running dispute to build a cycleway between Bilton and Ripley over the Nidd Gorge viaduct, which has finally been resolved by a planning inspector in Sustrans' favour after more than a decade of legal wranglings.

"It is wonderful when it goes ahead", said Mr Hall, who has lived in Leeds since the 1950s. "When a new route is opened up and you are allowed to see where you live differently, it is magic. But it was difficult, right from the outset. You do see some zealous people. It is very frustrating when you are negotiating with a series of landowners and you are almost there and then one takes a very severe attitude. Some think they will get a better deal if they stand in the way, some just don't want it to happen.

"People who want to object, always go over the top. If you could listen to some of these objections, you would think mayhem reigns in Harrogate and the Nidd Gorge was like the medieval walls of an old town that should not be penetrated.

"People have tremendous fears. They see a barrier against the viaduct and that is going to be lifted, the public is going to come through, 90 per cent will be fine but they are mortified about what the 10 per cent will do. No amount of reassurance will overcome that fear.

"The worst was a public meeting in Cullingworth, near Bradford. Someone said we were building a paedophiles' park and the local paper put it in the headline. It was awful, the most horrendous headline you could ever imagine and completely unfounded. It was just the most appalling thing to hear, that in the same sentence as the National Cycle Network.

"But ultimately, the work goes ahead, people like it and see the route is well-managed and we are a responsible landowner, then they appreciate what we have done."

What David and his colleagues have done, is establish nearly 800 miles of National Cycle Network across Yorkshire (13,000 miles nationwide) – which the new Harrogate route will now link into. They have also worked in offices and schools to establish a culture of cycling

and alter the impression that Yorkshire's roads are for cars alone.

Announcements such as in 2009, that Calderdale, Bradford and Kirklees were condemned as three of the most dangerous places to cycle in the country, have not helped, nor has, despite fears of climate change and soaring petrol prices, an ever-increasing reliance on cars.

But David says people's perceptions are changing and cycle use is growing at an impressive rate.

"We have gone to communities with disused railways, where people say it is being used for taking drugs or building bonfires, wrecked out cars and graffiti and we are going to make it worse," he says. "But we say, 'no, we are going to make it better – you are going to reclaim this space'.

"Criminals want disused spaces, they don't want public spaces. When the Spen Valley Greenway (which runs between Bradford and Dewsbury) was being built, I went to a very rowdy town hall meeting.

"It was to run through a very challenging part of Dewsbury Moor which had an awful amount of social problems and some people got really upset about our plans, saying they were going to have to put barbed wire over their back fences. We opened the route, the barbed wire didn't appear.

"Then a little bit later, gates appeared in the back fences and people with dogs walked out. Then I got a phone call from a resident saying the whole street had got to know everybody because they all meet on the greenway.

"She said they were going to have a street party and did we mind if they did it on the greenway? It had become an absolute source of community pride."

Sustrans started in 1995 and soon after secured a £43m lottery grant to begin developing the National Cycle Network. All funding was matched by local authorities and more than £200m has since been invested as well as an additional £50m grant secured in 2007.

Former railway routes were seen as the ideal place to start growing the network and due to Yorkshire's industrial heritage, the transformation has been immense.

Cycle routes now stretch across our cities, towns and countryside – the most recent, a 170 mile coast to coast between Morecambe and Bridlington through the Yorkshire Dales and Wolds, was opened last year.

Sustrans says the sheer amount of land it now owns, has led the National Railway Museum in York to regard it as equal curators of railway heritage.

"Yorkshire has a legacy of fantastic railway heritage which we have been able to protect," says David. "Iconic viaducts which are part of the character of the landscape.

"In an ideal world, the railways would have come back. A lot of these monumental viaducts and railways and bridges, were all being demolished because people didn't want the liability of maintaining them, but if you have a reason to maintain them because they are being used as a cycle route, then you have a reason to protect the railway heritage.

"Nobody wants to see a dead monument. Our support base is not only people who want to cycle, but people who want to walk or ride horses."

David's life has not always rolled along on two wheels. It was in his early 30s, while commuting by car from Leeds to Yeadon every day, that he decided to buy a bike – his first since childhood – in order to get fit.

His passion for cycling slowly grew with regular trips out to see friends in Ilkley and Otley.

"I staggered home with this cheap Italian bike", he says. "Those first journeys were terrible, I was terrified of the traffic and buses, there were no bike lanes and I went along a very major arterial road out of Leeds.

"There was an impression if you are cycling, you need a smog mask and helmet and armour plating. We are bringing forward a generation who say it works differently now.

"That work has had to go alongside increasing volumes of traffic, increasing pressure with congestion and competition for road space. I think during the 90s we were losing that battle to reclaim the road space. Now, I think it has changed and most people see the result of good schemes that have been done.

"It's been an incredible journey from the beginning. People say to me, 'are you still cycling David?' and I say, 'yes, are you still motoring?'"

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