

'Just wonderful - two wheels good, Laura Laker brilliant' Jeremy Vine

LAURA LAKER



POTHOLES



AND



PAVEMENTS

A Bumpy Ride on
Britain's National
Cycle Network



'A beautiful homage to a wonky network' Ned Boulting

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POTHOLES AND PAVEMENTS

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A Bumpy Ride on Britain's National
Cycle Network

LAURA LAKER

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CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| <i>Foreword by Jesse Norman MP</i> | ix |
| <i>Introduction: Flight</i> | 1 |
| 1 Falling out | 9 |
| 2 Founding a network | 15 |
| 3 Friendship and wayfinding on the Thames Path | 35 |
| 4 Back to the beginning on the Bristol and Bath Railway Path | 41 |
| 5 Maps, a murderer and mud on the Kent and Sussex coasts | 48 |
| 6 Millennium miles, moss and an omerta | 60 |
| 7 Crime and accidental punishment on the Isle of Wight | 72 |
| 8 Cycling across Cornwall with a shrub | 82 |
| 9 Camel walk | 101 |
| 10 Laker Close, and a reunion of sorts, in Somerset | 105 |
| 11 Progress and flipping Boris the bird | 115 |
| 12 Chris Boardman, Chester and the 'least shit option' | 119 |
| 13 Gung-ho hand-cycling | 130 |
| 14 The mystery of the Coalash Triangle | 140 |
| 15 Thank goodness for Wales | 144 |
| 16 Laker in the Lakes | 163 |
| 17 Caledonian people power | 183 |
| 18 The dream team | 203 |
| 19 Ned Boulting on helmets and a helter-skelter of history | 217 |

POTHoles AND PAVEMENTS

| | | |
|----|--|-----|
| 20 | This path goes all the way to Liverpool | 228 |
| 21 | Going full circle | 240 |
| 22 | They take us because we need to go | 248 |
| | <i>Coda</i> | 259 |
| | <i>Appendix: The founders of a network</i> | 261 |
| | <i>References</i> | 265 |
| | <i>Acknowledgements</i> | 290 |

FOREWORD

Potholes and Pavements is a little gem of a book. Here you will find travelogue, history and autobiography all entwined, plus a deep understanding of policy – and a fair dose of polemic to boot.

By the end, the reader comes to understand not merely the energy and enthusiasm which cycling often inspires, but the reasons for that enthusiasm, including its astonishing but still widely under-appreciated social, medical, economic and environmental benefits. And still more important, what we can do to realise them.

As every page makes clear, Laura Laker is not merely a brilliant writer about cycling; she has made it part of her life. The book charts her journeys around the UK, nominally along and in pursuit of the National Cycle Network, but also down a thousand smaller highways and byways, amid myriad local stories and personal experiences.

But Laura also introduces us to many of the key people and organisations that have made our nascent British active travel revolution possible. These include national figures such as John Grimshaw, Andrew Gilligan and Chris Boardman, but also a cast of dozens of other people moved by the simple desire to transform and reinvigorate their neighbourhoods. The picture is complex, and active travel is not, and should never be, a party-political matter. But as the book shows, it is a matter of political, public and private choice.

Rightly, Laura is especially alert to people who do not fit the standard caricature of middle-aged men in Lycra®: mothers with children, kids walking or biking to school, the elderly, people with disabilities, and those from poorer backgrounds and diverse heritage,

but who are often left out of – sometimes inadvertently designed out of – the wider picture.

As other countries such as the Netherlands and Denmark demonstrate, cycling and active travel generally must be made universally accessible and available in this country.

And they can be so. But that requires central and devolved governments, local authorities, town and city leaders, companies large and small, cycling and walking organisations, enthusiasts and others to work together to create a sustaining culture and an array of new and consistently high-quality infrastructure.

That in turn means long-term investment, effective urban design, training for young people, and leaders at all levels willing to address often ungrounded public worries about such things as ‘15-minute cities’ and the so-called ‘war on drivers’.

The Department of Transport has done what it can over the past ten years, as I can testify from two tours of ministerial duty there. But the unwillingness of British government as a whole to recognise and support the health benefits of cycling in particular remains inexplicable.

As is often pointed out, if the effects of cycling in strengthening our physical and mental health, boosting our cardiovascular fitness and reducing our vulnerability to infection and dementia and a host of other conditions were more widely understood, it would be acclaimed as a miracle cure. Yet both funding and rhetoric remain patchy, inconsistent and low.

The Department of Health and Social Care has a crucial role to play here, both as regards social prescribing and support for cycling and active travel to boost the health of its own vast workforce. But this is a whole-of-government responsibility, and it demands as its counterpart a parallel process of investment by enlightened companies seeking to enhance the wellbeing of their employees.

Over the next decade, accelerating changes in technology will open up cycling and powered transport of all kinds to more and

FOREWORD

more users. But if we are to take full advantage of them, we need a significantly more serious, vigorous, joined-up and long-term strategy, which draws together public and private energies at all levels of British society. Let's do it.

Jesse Norman MP
*Former Minister of State in the
Department for Transport*

INTRODUCTION: FLIGHT

I'm flying. There's a railway bridge over a gorge, it's early spring, and me and my pink electric bicycle are on a 99-mile weekend adventure. Below us, huge dusky-coloured trees hold their bare branches to the sky and a wind, puffing down the valley like a steam train, briefly takes my breath away. I'm cycling the Devon coast-to-coast route on the National Cycle Network (NCN) and it has, as if by magic, conjured me across an otherwise hilly part of the UK, substantially on flat, traffic-free, ludicrously beautiful paths, following a former railway line. It has whooshed me alongside birds flitting busily down country lanes, past a churchyard bursting with flowers and a ruined Norman prison, from the English Channel to the Bristol Channel.

Momentarily the spell is broken. A liminal space appears between two farm gates plonked right across the path, where a rocky track meanders through a small wilderness. I take a short voyage beyond the looking glass, bumping along between saplings and scrub to a place where the railway never existed, and then, just as suddenly, I'm back, waddling through a farm gate, once more on a railway trail crossing Devon.

By this point, a year into my on/off exploration of around 1200 miles of the UK's approximately 13,000-mile network of signed cycling (and walking) paths, I'm perplexed, but not necessarily surprised that one of the UK's most famous and popular cycle routes is summarily barred by a landowner who whimsically reserves the right to close the path to users if the mood takes them.

I experienced wonderful things in my year exploring the NCN, cycling through landscapes that left me with little else to say but 'wow', from southern river estuaries to highland mountain passes, traversing cross-city cycle routes that each year make millions of

unremarkable, everyday cycling (and walking) trips possible. Along the way I met amazing people and had my mind totally changed about something I thought I knew everything about.

A decade ago, I discovered the NCN for the first time, cycling from Newcastle to Edinburgh along the route romantically dubbed Coast and Castles or, more prosaically, NCN1. Despite leading my friend and me over grassy clifftops, through muddy, rutted fields, along glass-strewn pavements that intermittently crossed busy roads, and more than once describing three sides of a square for no apparent reason, my fascination and frustration with the NCN began there, and has continued ever since. It's a feeling familiar to many who have tried to use the NCN to get somewhere. Somehow you can find yourself five miles from your destination with seven miles of cycling left to do – seven miles that could plausibly involve any of the above scenarios.

Over the years I've witnessed the NCN doing wonderful things for people, like reuniting communities after more than a century with a hugely ambitious walking and cycling bridge. I've looked at plans for an inter-city route that could perhaps replace motorway trips with cycling, walking and public transport. I've met people who have dedicated up to 40 years of their lives to achieving, against all odds, the impossible. I've seen lives unexpectedly transformed by cycling.

The UK is possibly one of the greatest places in the world to cycle. Our tiny island nation is wonderfully compact, with a diverse people, fascinating history and extraordinary natural and industrial wonders all squished together. You don't have to ride far to reach something of practical use or inspiration. Most of our trips are short: the 2022 National Travel Survey found that in England 71% of all trips we made were less than five miles. You or I could cycle that in less than 30 minutes, saving money, and fitting in a bit of exercise and, dare I say it, joy, into our day.

As things stand, we use a motor vehicle for 67% of trips of less than five miles. This is not always out of choice. Between half and three quarters of Brits want to cycle more, both for everyday trips and for fun, and polls say we support investment in everyday routes and leisure routes, even if it means taking road space from cars. The main

reason we don't cycle more is an understandable fear of sharing space with motor traffic. Where cycling does exist in the UK, it does so in spite of the conditions. Funding, leadership and strategic planning have rarely come together at the same time, and yet when they do the results are transformative. As a journalist and cyclist I'm interested in what we could achieve if we let the bicycle, and pedal power in all its forms, reach its full potential.

While we'd expect a national highway system or rail network to follow consistent standards, with cycling in the UK anything goes. The NCN is, uniquely for a piece of national infrastructure, run by a charity, Sustrans, and its thousands of volunteers. They lack the powers to insist on certain standards and get by without reliable, long-term funding. You could think of the NCN as a strategic network, a series of spines across the UK with other connecting cycle routes delivered by councils, National Highways (the trunk roads body) and sometimes even local residents. What these routes have in common, other than a lack of consistent funds, is a historically spooky design approach, involving phantom bike lanes that disappear and reappear seemingly at random, just when you need them, say at busy junctions, or the poltergeists that shove cyclists on and off pavements with little warning. If you've ever wondered why cyclists don't use bike lanes, it's because of decades' worth of routes like this that are sometimes worse than nothing. Adding to its ghostlike appeal, only 26% of us have ever heard of the NCN.

None of this is deliberate. It's more a function of prevailing conditions. All Britain's cycle routes, NCN or not, are subject to the caprices of whether current politicians understand cycling or not (and they often don't), whether local authorities are willing to reallocate road space from motor traffic (many aren't) and whether a patchwork of landowners object to cyclists rambling through their estate.

In 2019 I attended Sustrans' opening of a mind-blowingly beautiful, off-road, loch-side NCN path outside Oban whose construction a caravan park owner had hampered for a decade because of concerns about passing path users' potential impact on holidaymakers. In the meantime, local children attempting to cycle to school had to choose

between a muddy, unlit and overgrown path that became impassable in winter or a busy main road. This also happened to form part of the iconic 234-mile Caledonia Way, a jewel in the NCN's crown, a gorgeous adventure route crossing Scotland from Campbeltown to Inverness, which I then rode north-east over three days. It was frankly so ridiculously beautiful its memory almost brings a tear to my eye even now.

Despite my griping, what stayed with me most about my first NCN journey north to Edinburgh was its beauty, its wildness, and the way, with its tiny blue and red signs, it ushered me and my friend to some truly gorgeous parts of the UK. Over three days we struggled through windswept sand dunes and pedalled in wonder along a still-damp causeway to Lindisfarne Island at low tide as three swans flew low overhead, honking gently. We camped in high winds, passed epic castles and ended the ride, delighted, on Edinburgh's Royal Mile.

Along the way, long-distance cycle routes like these connect villages and homes, towns and even cities. In some countries, such routes have melded with fine-grained networks for cycling and walking, spreading, like fingers, into towns via a grid of safe, protected cycle routes and low traffic streets – just like roads. You can (and I did) cycle around the Netherlands predominantly on such separate cycle paths. In France, Germany and Denmark people enjoy such networks, from school age to old age – it's just another part of the transport network; the part that actively improves people's health and wellbeing every day.

While this book is about my journeys on the NCN, it is about cycle routes of every stripe: those built by councils in towns and cities, and by volunteers in rural areas. It is also about people. The NCN matters because it's emblematic of cycling routes up and down the UK. And even if you don't cycle, how we get about every day matters. When the traffic snarls up on our local roads because driving is the only option available, whether we're travelling for one mile or 50, it can make our daily lives needlessly frustrating and stressful.

Millions of Britons are trapped into car ownership, because of a lack of alternative transport options. We spend, on average, 13% of

our gross income on them, according to research, rising to 19% with finance deals. Taxpayers have forked out roughly £80 billion since 2010 in fuel duty subsidies, which, research has found, has increased our carbon emissions by 7% by making driving cheaper than other options. Transport is the single biggest contributor to our carbon emissions – 34% of our total with road transport most of that – and it has remained stubbornly high, largely because we've failed to adequately fund the alternatives.

More cycling, walking and wheeling – which includes mobility aids like wheelchairs and handcycles – is always a positive; 'active travel' could improve a litany of societal woes. That includes our finances, but also our health: physical inactivity is responsible for one in six deaths in the UK, a toll equal to smoking. Aside from the heart-breaking emotional cost of losing loved ones early – something I've experienced first-hand – this costs the UK £7.4 billion annually and the NHS almost £1 billion.

Getting active can help prevent colon cancer by 30%, heart disease by up to 35%, type 2 diabetes by up to 40%, depression and dementia by up to 30%, and hip fractures by up to 68%. If we make exercise part of our everyday lives, we don't even notice we're doing it and we're much more likely to stick at it – not least because it's plain fun. There is barely a thing that couldn't be made better if cycling and walking were a viable part of our everyday lives – and that's just one of the things that makes it so great. It also makes the places we live and travel to fairer and far more pleasant.

Even if we cycled just once a week, one study found, we could cut our carbon footprint by a quarter, as well as reducing congestion. Because even electric cars produce harmful particulates from their brakes and tyres, we would improve air quality, no matter which car we drove.

The year I sat down to write this book marked a little over 10 years since I started writing full-time about cycling. After various unfinished courses, firings from jobs I didn't like and changes of direction, journalism, and writing about cycling, and transport more broadly, was the only thing that I found I could stick at. The more I learned

about it, the more I saw its potentially transformative impact on our lives. The more I did it, the more I loved it.

As a child, I disliked sports lessons with a passion. If another kid or a teacher yelled at me to run for a ball, I would stubbornly walk. This meant that formal exercise wasn't part of my life until almost adulthood. I fell into riding a bike while at university, as a means of getting about London. I'd moved from Cardiff to London to complete a degree in health and nutrition. I noticed one day my course mate, Szilvia, had arrived damp and gleaming from the rain. When I realised she'd cycled in, I was perplexed. I couldn't understand why anyone would voluntarily get on a bike in wet weather, let alone why they would look so happy about it.

I had a lovely new blue Trek bike, thanks to an insurance claim, and Szilvia persuaded me to cycle in with her one day. We lived near one another in north London and as I struggled to keep up with her alongside Regent's Park on the way home that afternoon my mind was entirely changed. Suddenly London was available on my schedule and in a far more vivid way than I'd ever experienced it. I can still remember the distinct smell of a coffee roastery I passed on the way to uni. I was hooked. Soon I was cycling in all weathers. You couldn't stop me, and my blogs from those early days speak of a newfound zeal for London, life and cycling that others who have rediscovered cycling in adulthood will recognise.

I slowly built myself a career as a freelance journalist while working at various temping assignments across London. I now spend most of my working life writing for a variety of specialist and national titles on transport and active travel, as well as co-hosting a well-loved podcast on active travel, *Streets Ahead*. Despite being an eternal amateur in the act of cycling, I clock up thousands of incidental miles in London each year, occasionally heading off, ill-equipped, on poorly thought-out cycling adventures.

The COVID-19 pandemic saw a cycling renaissance, as roads suddenly emptied of motor vehicles were reclaimed by people on foot and on bikes. During the first months of lockdowns, cycling grew by 100% on weekdays in England and 200% on weekends, and

visitor numbers on the NCN rose by 19%. Around the world, governments' interest in two-wheeled transport accelerated, including in the UK. Acknowledging cycling's value in keeping people healthy and moving, at the behest of the UK governments, councils rolled out emergency cycling and walking infrastructure, from pop-up bike lanes to widened pavements to low traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs), some of which were made permanent.

In Leicester, one of the many cities to embrace the challenge, a mile per week of new main-road bike lanes were rolled out at their peak, at just over £29,000 per mile – a bargain basement price when you consider a trunk road comes in somewhere at around £1 billion per mile. England and the transport-devolved governments of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland all increased their cycling spend and ambitions. What followed was a time of change for the NCN too.

While our national road and rail networks enjoy dedicated government-backed bodies, with regular funding for maintenance and improvement, the NCN enjoys the loving support of a charity and its dedicated staff and volunteers, with a ragbag of stop-start funding from government, donations and private funds. The NCN is a network connecting a slightly random selection of towns, cities, places of beauty, hilltops and villages across the country, where conditions allow, and it is incredibly patchy in nature, with a correspondingly patchy reputation.

In 2020 I broke the news that Sustrans, the charity in charge of the NCN, would cut 25% of the network, or de-designate it, while improving 55 sections, because it was no longer up to a safe standard. This was long overdue: in the network's 40-odd years the once-quiet roads cyclists had shared with motor traffic had become busier and, in a rush for network miles, some thoroughly unsuitable sections had been added – along with more than 16,000 barriers on its traffic-free routes.

Chicane fences and odd-shaped bits of metal, added with good intentions to prevent motorbike riders using the network, inadvertently locked out wheelchair users and those with non-standard cycles, like cargo bikes or tricycles. If you can't lift your bike, these barriers can be a struggle to navigate even with a standard cycle. A

pledge to cut those miles and remove those barriers was an honest recognition of the flaws, and an attempt to ensure novice cyclists who started a journey on the NCN would be able to finish it. Two years earlier, in an article I wrote for the *Times*, Sustrans' CEO, Xavier Brice, admitted to me many of the NCN's paths were 'crap' – an acknowledgement something urgently needed to change.

These issues didn't dampen the network's popularity, however: by 2020 4.9 million people took 765 million trips on it. While more than half of trips on the network, per traffic-free mile, are cycling ones, the rest are made on foot. That's right: while it's called the 'National Cycle Network', it actually carries more walking trips – 410 million in 2018 to 377 million cycling trips – and most of the time those users share a single path, which brings its own issues.

The enormous growth in cycling, both on and off the UK's NCN and indeed around the world, was a change in wind direction made possible only when we put our cars away for a few months. It swept away the noise, danger and pollution on ordinary streets, revealing just how much space had become dominated by motor traffic. The sight of all kinds of people pedalling tentatively around their neighbourhoods, and then slowly further afield, reminded us that with safe, quiet roads, people will choose to cycle. New pop-up lanes into town and city centres expanded the bicycle's potential further, demonstrating that not only would we ride in our free time, but we would cycle to work, to the shops and to school.

The trouble was, once the traffic started returning, and some of the pop-up routes were dismantled the wind shifted once more and we got back into our cars. Bikes, momentarily liberated, were relegated back to their sheds and garages. The window that briefly blew open, though, offered a beguiling whiff of clean air and birdsong; an alternate reality in which we could perhaps do things differently or even – dare we say it – better. However, would we remember this time once the bustle of life had returned? And would we have the collective courage to keep that window open?

1

FALLING OUT

In early 2022, emerging from lockdown and having barely left London in two years, I was longing for adventure. I desperately needed to reconnect with the things I loved – not least cycling. I was stressed and in debt from some major emergency work on my roof, and each time I got a whiff of the open road or a view of some countryside I would sigh pathetically. I perhaps didn't fully realise it at the time, but I desperately needed a break. I'd witnessed a pandemic transformation of my home streets in east London into a Low Traffic Neighbourhood (LTN), and a lot had changed in the wider city for walking and cycling. It felt like a good time to get out on the road.

In fact, since May 2021 the huge growth in cycling had been subsiding amid resurgent motor traffic levels. There was a sense that active travel gains, and all the benefits they brought, were slipping away as pop-up cycle routes, introduced by councils in 2020 by government edict and with government funding, were removed by local politicians fearful of a growing backlash from small but vocal parts of their electorate. Some residents were concerned road changes would stop them going about their lives, while business owners worried replacing parking with cycle lanes and expanded pavements would harm footfall.

While understandable, many of these fears were unfounded – no-one would be prevented from reaching their homes in LTNs,

for example, and where businesses are concerned, research shows people on foot and bikes spend more in shops than those who arrive by car. However, fuelled by hyperbole and misinformation on social media, local campaigns and messaging groups, the flames of worry were fanned into mild panic. Budget cuts meant councils lacked the staff and expertise to hold the public conversations needed to allay those fears, and cries that the changes, albeit experimental, were an undemocratic assault on freedoms took hold. At the time, representative polls found more than three quarters of people supported reducing traffic in their local area, and more than two thirds the reallocation of road space for walking and cycling, but those who opposed them shouted loudest and those were the voices we heard. Meanwhile, the cracks in the UK's transport system were about to be revealed by a summer of rail strikes and the looming threat of funding cuts to already decimated bus services.

It was 45 years since the first NCN route was built and, while it is a broad network, crisscrossing the country, it is not the entirety of the UK's cycle routes. However, if the NCN is emblematic of cycling in the UK, exploring it by bike seemed a good way to take the temperature of our nation's cycle provision as a whole. Looking at the map of the NCN, available as a layer of the digital Ordnance Survey map, I realised it was possible to follow it roughly around the outside of the country, tracing the coastline. I both love the sea and have an incredibly poor sense of direction, so keeping the water on my left seemed, if not foolproof, then at least helpful.

The vague idea was to travel from my home in London via the Thames Path and keep going around the outside of the country. I wouldn't attempt to ride it all – I didn't need to be completist and anyway at the time the NCN totalled more than 12,000 miles – so I'd pick up some sections where I left off over multiple days and other parts I'd skip, depending where the wind blew me. I wanted to use my pink electric bike – it has a motor that gives you a boost when you pedal – for some of it and my 'gravel' bike – basically a road bike with slightly chunkier tyres for use off-road – for the rest.

I don't believe riding a bike needs to involve any suffering. To me, it's there as a tool for exploration and adventure. As with most of my other trips, if I got tired or wanted to change course, I would. I would go where the NCN took me and sometimes where it didn't, and I'd explore as much of it as I could, to understand what makes it what it is and what could make it better. The goal was not to break any records. I'd do the trips around my other work schedules and around train stations.

When the idea of cycling around the country on the NCN occurred to me in late 2021, I instigated a recce along a hitherto undiscovered segment of the network near me, south towards the Thames. It was a mild Sunday in December and my boyfriend, a recent convert to cycling, was tempted outside by the prospect of a mini-adventure on his brand-new bike. I packed a thermos of coffee and two mince pies in a rucksack and off we went. We'd cycle as far as we fancied and then head back, hopefully in time to see the last few laps of a Grand Prix race on TV.

NCN1 runs the length of the UK's east coast all the way from Inverness to Dover. It passes within a couple of miles of my home in east London and I've cycled the 13 miles north along the Lea River to Waltham Abbey scores of times. It's one of my favourite mini-adventures, taking in a nature reserve, dipping under echoey bridges and past morsels of the river's hundreds of years of industrial heritage. However, on weekends when walkers and cyclists are confined to a narrow gravel path with an open body of water inches away, it's less attractive.

Keen to avoid any hint of a towpath, I pick a point on the Ordnance Survey map's NCN layer close to home, after NCN1 leaves the River Lea. We ride my local cycle superhighway, a protected main road bike lane that starts just over a mile from my house, and runs past Mile End Park and all the way into the city. Our first indication we are on NCN1 comes just as we leave the park, at an unassuming pedestrian

crossing; the kind bordered by narrow, fenced-in pavements, where you have to waddle astride the bike to press the button and then wait for the green man.

The NCN is often invisible to the casual observer for two reasons, the first being its signage. When I pull my phone out to take a photo of what feels like a symbolic first sighting, I'm asked what I'm doing. I point out a blue sticker on the far traffic-light post, with a red square containing a number '1'. My boyfriend seems astonished by this discovery. I realise at this moment how weird it is that while drivers get large, dedicated road signs for every occurrence (ducks crossing, anyone?), a fairly significant route traversing almost 700 miles along the spine of the country gets a large print-run involving a lot of sticky-backed plastic.

Undeterred for now, we cross and make our slow way down a thankfully brief section of towpath, stopping to pull into the foliage each time we meet someone coming the other way, because my other half, an uncertain cyclist, is understandably afraid of falling in the water. The second reason people often don't notice the NCN is because it mostly doesn't involve any dedicated cycling infrastructure – it is parasitic – hence the shared pavements, the pedestrian crossings, the narrow towpaths. We meet 'Cyclists dismount' signs at busy road crossings. We budge out of the way of runners and by now my other half is enthusiastically photographing cycling signs, too, half in fascination, half dismay.

After this we are in business, though, finding the NCN at its best: a beautiful segment of cobbled street with the pale magnificence of St Anne's Church in Limehouse and its crown-like tower to one side, and Georgian terraces overlooked by the overground railway. 'Let's live here,' I hear – one of his favourite refrains, whether we can afford it or not. Old warehouses, still painted with names of their owners of a century ago, and gantries with pulley wheels overhead flank a quiet neighbourhood square with a café and corner shop. These give way to newer gated apartments, built during the 1980s redevelopment of Canary Wharf. 'I want to live here,' he calls out again, demanding we stop to look in an estate agent's window.

We finally reach the Thames. I always love the moment of meeting the river, the sudden broad views across the sparkling water, in this case towards Canary Wharf's towers and more former warehouse buildings. We stop for another photo and weave gently among the many people out taking a Sunday stroll. The Thames Path is gorgeous, following the north side of the river before crossing via the Greenwich foot tunnel and continuing towards Erith on the Thames Estuary. On the way it passes old London pubs, expensive apartment blocks and crumbling wooden piers topped with cormorants, which eventually give way to post-industrial dereliction.

We're not going that far today, though; we'll stay on the north side of the river before returning home. A couple of times we miss our tiny blue signs and have to backtrack or check the OS map, but it's shown us bits of London we wouldn't otherwise have seen. We discover a delightful little wharf surrounded on three sides by brick-built warehouses overlooking a tranquil square of water. We pass beautiful houseboats, the homely, adventuring kind that look like they may have even been to sea and made friends with the odd whale.

We stop at a second wharf where a group of windsurfers are practising and I put on all the extra layers in my rucksack. We sit on a wall and gaze across the water, passing the tiny thermos cup between us and trying to stop the mince pie cases blowing away. My other half is delighted with our ride, as am I. It will be a good 20km there and back, which is a lot for him. I ask him what he thinks of the NCN. His answer: 'It's good but it's not a network.'

That festive bike ride was both the beginning and the end of a journey. In early February our relationship exploded in a huge and largely unexpected argument, after which I returned home and realised he had taken everything he valued and moved out. We tried to patch it up over the coming days and weeks, but had to admit our relationship, which had spanned two and a half years and a pandemic, had ended.

The roof emergency had left my bank account at the edge of its overdraft, so I said yes to every bit of work I could. The deadlines kept rolling in and I kept meeting them, if not quite on time, then

forgivably close. In the evenings I'd paint the attic walls and put up wallpaper, listening to podcasts about self-care and compassion. From the start of the year onward, my heart thumped in my chest, accompanied by a constant sense of rising dread, and things stayed that way for months. I'd wake up at 3 or 4 am, not knowing where I was, my heart racing, and lay there for hours unable to sleep. Occasionally, in a daze, I'd catch sight of myself in a mirror looking, as PG Wodehouse would have described it, like an owl with a secret sorrow. I'd pick up objects, turn them over and put them down again, as if unable to solve a puzzle. Outwardly everything seemed normal, and friends remarked on how well I was coping. In truth I hadn't had time to process what had happened, I was just surviving.

Even in the worst moments a bike ride, or indeed any time outdoors, has a supernatural ability for healing, and thankfully I had a lot of time ahead of me outdoors if I was going to explore the NCN for this book.

It was a dry, warm spring, so I began my first forays in March and carried on riding through the summer and into the following spring, catching trains and cycling for anywhere between a day and a couple of weeks. I would end up criss-crossing the country, meeting all sorts of people along the way. I'd meet those I knew and those I didn't. I wanted to talk to people who worked at all levels on the front line of improving the lot not just of people who call themselves cyclists, but of those who don't yet cycle. As well as being a personal process of healing and renewal, the purpose of the trip would be to take the pulse of the NCN; to understand how sick the patient is and, ultimately, how we can put cycling at the heart of how we get around.

2

FOUNDING A NETWORK

Living without a car in the UK can be a challenge, because while roads take us everywhere we need to go by car, the same cannot be said for public transport, walking and cycling. Right now, even using those alternative methods in combination requires a level of determination and a gung-ho spirit that understandably puts most people off.

In spring 2022 I set off for the weekend to visit some much-loved friends near Hay-on-Wye and, because I don't own a car, I had just such a challenge on my hands. It's 20-ish miles between Hay and Hereford Station as the crow flies and 21 miles by the most direct road route, but I'm fascinated to learn, studying the map, that it is a full 49.5 miles via the NCN, detouring along the undeniably beautiful edge of the Brecon Beacons, with three times as much climbing (3625 feet) as the main roads.

I'm a little less fit than usual after winter, so I decide to bring along Lily, my pink electric bike. A former hire bike and pre-named, she changed my life. Even as a regular cyclist, clocking up thousands of miles a year, she makes far more trips possible by bike, including if I need to get somewhere and not be sweaty. However, even with Lily's 50-mile range, such a long and hilly a detour doesn't make sense, so it's a case of studying maps to avoid the worst main roads and hoping for the best. Because we don't have a network of cycle routes, this

means making up my own way, using the roads and any likely looking off-road paths.

My cycle navigation app routes me along a hodge-podge of pavement cycle paths outside Hereford Station. A half-decent cycle lane saves me from the main road traffic out of town and then I'm led along a dirt path on a former railway line. It's boggy from the winter's rain. Birds sing loudly as the bike fishtails through the mud, rolling fields give way to the deep blue of distant hills and I take a deep, grateful breath. I have that feeling I often do when cycling of just being glad to be alive and out on the road.

Trying to avoid the direct but terrifying A-road, I have the choice of trespassing through a field or taking a farm track. I opt for the latter and end up knee-high in a puddle that looked innocent enough on approach. The ebike motor in the rear wheel is entirely submerged, but somehow keeps on working. I miss the country lane I've been aiming for and woman-handle the bike for a further two miles through waterlogged orchards and field margins. I occasionally pause and consider the beauty of the rolling countryside and fields, and I marvel with some passers-by as a military plane flies so low overhead I can practically count the rivets. I'm pelted with hail so emphatic it rings my bicycle bell and stings my eyelids, and by the time I arrive at my friends' house, a good three hours after disembarking in Hereford, my lips are blue and me and the pink bike are thoroughly caked in mud, although thankfully everything inside my trusty panniers is dry.

In 1977 a group of Bristolian renegades were similarly frustrated at a lack of decent cycle routes in their area. At that time there was almost nothing by way of cycling infrastructure in the UK. The country was entering a decade of rapid growth in car ownership, while cycling rates had plummeted.

In the 1950s, cycling was a very normal means of transport in the UK: around a third of distance travelled was by bike, which was

more than in the Netherlands at the time. However, within two decades cycling had become an outlier in Britain, as with much of Europe. By then, UK roadbuilding programmes and growing relative prosperity had accelerated car ownership, and the roads became deadlier places. Many UK bike builders went out of business as everyday cycling declined and leisure models dominated the remaining bicycle shops – as cycling historian David Hembrow puts it, heavy mountain bikes with knobbly tyres, and not a practical mudguard or pannier rack in sight.

Similarly, rail travel was being sidelined. In 1961, partially cannibalised by the growth in motor transport and air travel, the railways were running at an operating loss of £86.9 million. While vehicle taxes funded roads, the Treasury was subsidising train travel and the UK government believed that transport, unlike healthcare or education, should fund itself.

The Beeching Report, named after its author Dr Richard Beeching and published in 1963, recommended maintaining the profitable intercity services and high-speed lines, and cutting many of the stopping services on single track branch lines. Around half of all stations and a third of all route miles should be closed, it said – and, a few exceptions aside, saved by local campaigns, they were. At a time when less than 12% of the population owned cars, it left communities on the scrapped lines the choice of taking the bus if there was one, buying a car or cycling.

Cycling wasn't particularly tempting. In 1966, as traffic volumes had grown, so had road casualties. That year 7895 people were killed on Britain's roads, the highest peacetime traffic fatality rate. By the late 1970s and early 1980s the situation had improved slightly (even as the population increased by two million in two decades and vehicle miles tripled), thanks to drink driving legislation, vehicle and road improvements, and road safety campaigns, but the roads still claimed almost 6000 lives annually: per mile travelled, road users back then were between two and six times more likely to be killed than today.

Towns, cities and the countryside were being reshaped and bulldozed to facilitate a rise in motor traffic, while new motorways, at

the time tourist attractions in their own right, were rolled out at pace. Pedestrians and cyclists were sidelined and, as motor vehicles were increasingly prioritised, traffic volumes grew, and walking and cycling felt less and less safe or appealing. Public transport was on the decline, too, and access to the streets – a public space – increasingly required access to a car.

Although the cause of death and destruction was clear, public safety announcements turned to the most vulnerable to protect themselves from this onslaught. The Green Cross Code was relaunched in 1978 with David Prowse, the actor who played Darth Vader in the original *Star Wars* films, instructing pedestrians on how not to get run down in the street. This is a trend that continues today in road safety campaigns that hand hi-vis jackets to children walking to school, but fail to tackle the driver behaviour that puts them at risk.

Cyclists weren't always on board with cycling improvements, where they did happen – and some opposed separate cycle routes, fearing it would erode cyclists' right to use the roads. This went as far back as the 1930s, when experimental, physically separated cycle routes were being built in Britain, albeit not always very good ones. As cycling historian Carlton Reid put it, though, 'there was little appetite to provide anything at all for them, despite the fact that they far outnumbered motorists'. This debate, whether cyclists should simply be brave and ride in the road with traffic, has rumbled on ever since. I will say, if that were an acceptable solution, everyone would surely be doing it. The fact is, in a nation with few decent cycle routes, only the fit and the brave are cycling.

In 1977 the Bristol branch of the environmental campaign group Friends of the Earth held a rally calling for cycling provision in the city. At the time the A4, the main road from London to Fishguard, ran right through its heart, past the cathedral where the protesters gathered. It was busy, dangerous and noisy, and made for a presumably fairly hairy cycling experience for the few still attempting it.

One Bristol resident, a tall civil engineer named John Grimshaw, was asked to address the crowd. John, then in his early 30s, was an imposing, well-spoken man with curly hair and a deep voice. He