



Snow turned Neil Hallam's leisurely Trans Pennine ride into an adventure worthy of the Alaskan wilderness

The Trans Pennine Trail is a network criss-crossing the Pennines from all four points of the compass. Our chosen north to south route started in Leeds and ended in Chesterfield.

The forecast was for snow to start around 3pm, turning to rain overnight and clearing by late morning. With this in mind we planned to complete the 40 mile first day before the worst of the snow, then have a leisurely start next morning. Both days timings were wrong.

Tony's wife took us to the start, enabling us to avoid the urban ride from the official start at Leeds railway station. Our start point was Thwaite Mills Museum. This had ample parking and is close to the Aire and Calder Navigation, which provided the first section of our route. As we left the car park at 10.30am the first flakes of snow fell, increasing and settling as the day progressed.

We followed the towpath south along this broad canal, which parallels the River Aire. Soon we reached Stourton, where the map warned of steep steps. These were

very steep, narrow, too. There was no option than to carry bikes down, or face a lengthy detour. Less agile cyclists may have difficulty here.

The towpath was reasonably surfaced, but had many iced-over puddles. These caused trepidation as we crossed them fearing a slip, but all broke with our weight, allowing safe passage.

Eight miles south of Leeds, signs directed us off the canal for a section on

quiet roads through farm land. Presumably the towpath is not rideable for a stretch, as we rejoined it a few miles later.

At Stanley, just north of Wakefield, we were getting cold and ready for a stop. A greasy spoon type café provided a huge mug of coffee and a cream scone, not cordon bleu, but very welcome.

The TPT by-passes Wakefield, going via the conservation village of Heath; with its grade one listed hall and covering of snow, this reminded me of Greystoke on the Sea to Sea ride across Cumbria.

We soon joined the Barnsley Canal. Although ending in a city, this begins in the wilds of Yorkshire. Snow had now reached blizzard proportions and was settling quickly.

In younger days I had contemplated the 1000 mile Iditarod race across Alaska. This race followed traditional Alaskan dog sled trails and was eventually opened to mountain bikes. Our trail was a much tamer experience, but my drifting thoughts helped the miles pass.

The canal is no longer navigable by the coal barges of the 1800s, but I could

Above:
Dreaming of
Alaska

Below:
Tunnel on
the Upper
Don Trail



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imagine Alaskan fur traders paddling their canoes amongst the snow covered overhanging trees.

Lost in these thoughts I felt the heat and saw the flame of an Alaskan oil rig. The warmth from this flame was welcome in the blizzard, although I thought I was hallucinating. A few pedal strokes further and the flame died, revealing a very British chemical plant.

At Barnsley our route was to head west. We were by now desperate for another café stop. The best we could find was McDonalds, my first and hopefully last visit in many years. We were already behind time, having been on the go for five hours, including stops. We set off at 3.30pm for the last 15 miles; this was to prove the hardest section of all.

Our route west followed the Dove Valley Trail, a reclaimed railway line towards Penistone and our overnight stop. Barnsley's hard surfaces soon deteriorated,

with mud and snow clogging brakes and mudguards. I remember thinking "I hope this improves soon", I was disappointed as it continued until we left the trail.

As on the Barnsley Canal, the effort involved in keeping going made me lose concentration. The noise from my clogged mudguards was reminiscent of the steam trains that would have travelled this route before Doctor Beeching had his way.

We reached Silkstone Tunnels, expecting shelter from the snow. They are in fact closed, with a tough detour over the hills they burrow beneath.

Topping out at the high point in Oxpring, the wind had polished the snow to ice causing a lot of difficulty. We decided to leave the trail here and navigate by road.

Our B&B was at Milhouse Green, slightly off our route, but on the west bound trail.

Passing Penistone Railway Station our spirits lifted as their website described it as being half an hour walk. This was along the Trail, our road route was considerably longer. In the end our 15 miles from Barnsley took three hours, giving a total of eight hours for the 40 miles; my hardest day's cycling in years.

The B&B was comfortable and the local pub served hearty food, so we were refreshed for day two.

Contrary to the forecast we set off in sunshine, returning on the section of trail we avoided the previous night. We were soon in Penistone to begin our ride south on the Upper Don Trail, another reclaimed railway line. This was well surfaced and picturesque, providing interest with a section of tunnel which was open and lit.

Soon after the tunnel we turned east towards Sheffield on the Timberland Trail. This was mostly on road, but like most Sustrans routes followed quiet roads, mainly through country estates.

Signage had been good for both days,

with metal national cycle route signs and sturdy local trail signs. This changed as we left the pretty village of Wentworth. Stickers were now the norm and the few metal signs had often been disturbed.

We found our way onto a reclaimed industrial railway to Meadowhall. After Meadowhall there were sections of interest, but in reality were not up to the trails we had enjoyed earlier

At first a red coloured surface made the route easy to follow, despite poor signposting. But this soon ended, leaving us to navigate city estates with an OS map.

It took over two hours to successfully clear Sheffield and reach the network of paths leading to Rother Valley Country Park. These mostly paralleled busy roads, and crossed reclaimed colliery sites. Although better than road riding, they were largely without interest.

At Rother Valley the trail became more scenic, leading onto the Chesterfield Canal and our short detour home.

We had discussed choice of bike. Tony had only a mountain bike, while I had: tourer, hybrid and mountain bike. I chose my new Ghost trekking bike, which in normal conditions would have been ideal. My Dawes Super Galaxy would have managed, but anything less robust would not cope with the surfaces. In the wintry conditions, Tony's mountain bike proved most suitable.

The official 1:50000 linear map of the trail is adequate for most of the route. I would recommend taking OS Explorer 278 (Sheffield and Barnsley) in addition. This has all the route except the section between Leeds and Barnsley, but this is well sign posted and can be easily followed.

In better conditions this has a lot to recommend, but with hindsight, I would finish the ride at Meadowhall, although there is a multitude of options on this well thought out trail network.

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Top Left: Leaving Leeds

Top Right: Aire and Calder Navigation

Left: One of many obstacles