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# Cotswold Line

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# Cotswold Line

Cycle as far as you like, then jump on the train home. That's the idea behind the Cotswold Line Cycle Route, a beautiful ride following the scenic Cotswold Line railway from Oxford to Worcester.

From the playground of the Chipping Norton set, through Moreton-in-Marsh and pretty Chipping Campden, to the broad Vale of Evesham, it's a tour of fine Cotswold scenery without the extreme hills found further south. At 77 miles, it's well suited to a weekend break; but with a railway station every 10 miles, you can also choose to tackle the route one section at a time.

## What sort of bike?

Any bike will be fine. There are two short grassy sections at Charlbury and Adlestrop, and two bumpy (car-free) lanes at Charlbury and Hidcote Boyce, where road bike riders might choose to follow the parallel (busier) road instead.

## How many days?

Two days is enough time, but consider taking three and enjoying more of the villages and towns en route. Experienced cyclists could do the route in a single day.

## So what about the trains?

The Cotswold Line runs from Oxford to Worcester. There's a train every hour: almost all start at London Paddington, and some continue to the Malverns and Hereford. So it's an ideal escape from London for the weekend – or from Birmingham, which has regular trains to both Oxford and Worcester.

Most Cotswold Line trains have six bike spaces: a few are 2/3-carriage stoppers where you simply stash your bike in the vestibules. The guards are invariably friendly, but you can help them by waiting at the right place on the platform. On the eight-coach High Speed Trains, all of them are at the country (western) end, and you load your own bikes. On the five-carriage Adelante trains, there are three spaces at each end, and the guard or driver opens the door; we'd suggest standing at the front end, so the driver can see you. The platforms are often shorter than the trains; let the guard know where you're getting off.

Avoid the rush hour on weekdays, when the trains are very busy and most bike spaces are taken up by commuters. At other times, reserving a bike space is optional but worthwhile on sunny summer weekends.

## Is it suitable for a first-timer?

Very. The hills are challenging but humane, there are plenty of cafés and pubs for a rest, and you can always take the train if it all gets too much. A three-day break is the ideal first-time tour.

## Is the route open?

Most of the route was opened by Prime Minister David Cameron in April 2014. There are shiny new signposts all the way from Hanborough to Honeybourne, and again from Evesham to Worcester. That leaves two unsignposted sections – Oxford to Hanborough, and Honeybourne to Evesham – so you'll need to take a map if you're going that way.

From Oxford to Hanborough, the final route needs a new cycle path to be built near Bladon. For now, we suggest you follow the cycle path beside the A40 road to Eynsham, then head north to join the main route. Or, of course, you could just get the train to Hanborough.

*(Note that, as we write in late April 2014, the last few signs*

*between Moreton and Honeybourne haven't gone up yet: they'll be installed in the next few days.)*

## Where to start and finish?

The route can be tackled in either direction. The climb onto the Cotswold escarpment (at Mickleton) is harder if you're travelling from Worcester to Oxford, but we've seen 10-year olds manage it.

# Oxford to Charlbury

**Oxford** is the start of the Cotswold Line railway, and the start of our route to Worcester. Private estates (such as Blenheim Palace) and the rarely bridged River Thames make it difficult to head north from the city without hitting busy roads.

The final Cotswold Line Cycle Route envisages a new roadside cycle path to make this easier, but for now, head north from the railway station car park, following signs to the canal towpath. Leave the towpath at the first road bridge, turning right onto Walton Well Road, and you'll join Walton Street – aka National Cycle Network route 5. Turn left and follow the route; but after two miles, when NCN 5 leaves the main Woodstock Road, carry on along Woodstock Road to the next roundabout.

Here, take the cycle path along the A40 towards Eynsham and Witney. This five-mile plod may not be too inspiring, but it's safe and efficient. At **Eynsham**, cross onto the north side when the signs for Witney tell you to, but then take the next road north – Cuckoo Lane. Congratulations: you're in the countryside at last.

From here, the route follows quiet lanes towards Charlbury. The lane on the north side of the Evenlode Valley, after crossing the railway at Ashford Mill, is particularly delightful. After **Fawler**, take the next left down to the B-road, and turn right along the private Cornbury Park drive after crossing the railway again. The Cornbury estate has generously given permission for cyclists to use this and the footpath that skirts the deer park, which makes for a memorable entrance to Charlbury.

**Charlbury** itself is a pretty Cotswold town with four good pubs and a couple of handy shops; plus, of course, a railway station on the Cotswold Line. It's also the home of *cycle.travel*. Wave at us as you pass through!

# Charlbury to Moreton-in-Marsh

The route out of **Charlbury** is a little circuitous, but follows the quietest and most attractive lanes in this corner of the Cotswolds. The track from the Ditchley Park gates is rough and requires care on a road bike.

After Spelsbury, note (but don't take) the turn to the village of Dean on the right. This is the home of local MP David Cameron; Jeremy Clarkson is building a new house in the next village, **Chadlington**; Rebekah and Charlie Brooks live on the Sarsden Estate, a mile further on, and cheese-making pop star Alex James' farm is just after that. Yes, this is the heartland of the 'Chipping Norton Set', but fortunately the roads aren't too infested with 4x4s and black Audis. In fact, once you've tackled the climb out of Chadlington, the road past Sarsden is beautifully quiet.

**Kingham** is the next station on the line. The village regularly features in lists of the most desirable place to live, and its two gastropubs cater for well-heeled locals. (The Kingham Plough has a milk vending machine around the back!) The ultimate foodie experience, though, is Daylesford Organic, the super-chic farm shop on the lane out of the village.

An unsurfaced bridleway (can be muddy in winter) leads to **Adlestrop**, immortalised in Edward Thomas' poem about the Cotswold Line and rural railways in general:

*Yes, I remember Adlestrop – The name, because one afternoon  
Of heat the express train drew up there Unwontedly. It was late  
June.*

Trains no longer draw up here – the station is long closed. But the old nameboard has been preserved and now adorns the bus stop.

A quiet lane follows the valley from here to **Moreton-in-Marsh**. At Moreton, the main A44 heads into the picturesque town centre. If you're heading straight for the station, you can turn just before the railway bridge onto a tarmac footpath crossing the meadows.

# Moreton-in-Marsh to Evesham

For the most part, the Cotswold Line Cycle Route does a neat job of avoiding hills. But you can't cross the Cotswolds without a bit of climbing – and it's in this section that you'll encounter them.

A narrow footpath from **Moreton-in-Marsh** station car park leads out onto the main Fosse Way. Cross this onto a country lane signposted to Batsford village (doglegging very slightly right then left), and the first climb begins. Batsford is a few yards off the route, but this ridiculously pretty estate village is worth the detour.

The route winds around the hills to **Broad Campden**, where a lovely narrow lane emerges by the friendly Bakers Arms – a proper country pub. **Chipping Campden**, a mile further on, is one of the tourist hotspots of the Cotswolds and an excellent place for lunch if you didn't succumb at the Bakers Arms. The almost cathedral-like church, built on the proceeds of the wool industry, is certainly worth a visit.

The gruelling Dovers Hill, just beyond Chipping Campden, is one of the most famous cycling hill climbs in Britain... and that's exactly why the Cotswold Line Cycle Route doesn't follow it. Instead, it follows a hidden, traffic-free lane along the top of the escarpment, before descending to **Mickleton** on a slightly more forgiving road. Enjoy the descent, but don't forget to stop at the junction at the bottom!

Quiet lanes parallel the railway line to **Honeybourne**, where there's another railway station. From here, the route is briefly unsignposted to Evesham.

The roads and gravel tracks through the Vale of Evesham pass numerous fruit farms and greenhouses. Take care at the crossing of the busy A46 before entering **Evesham** on residential roads. The route doesn't go through Evesham town centre, but instead heads south on back streets from the suburb of Bengeworth; the signs resume at the southern edge of town. However, you can follow the main road across the river from Bengeworth for the town and its station.

# Evesham to Worcester

After a brief spell beside the A46, the Cotswold Line Cycle Route follows a rural road around the bottom of Bredon Hill, via the attractive village of **Elmley Castle**. The descent back to the River Avon at Pershore is enjoyable, and this market town – much quieter since the main road was routed away – has good pubs and an interesting abbey.

It's just ten miles from here to **Worcester**, almost all on rural lanes. Inevitably there's a modest climb out of the town, but it's easy going after that. The entrance to the Faithful City follows a traffic-free 'Pedway', then skirts around the canal basin before arriving on the riverside. The final section, on the River Severn promenade, is glorious. Continue past the cathedral until you reach the cafés at Worcester Bridge. And from here, of course, you can get the train home!









