

Adventures of Tintern

Escaping the city for the day, **Ruth Brooker** heads out of Bristol and across the Severn Estuary to Wales and the fascinating ruins of Tintern Abbey

Being of a lazy persuasion, it's been a while since I really pushed myself on a bike, but a visit from my mad-keen father-in-law means I need to think big. On a day of clear blue skies and sunshine, we decide to leave the city behind, pop across the Severn Bridge and head up the Wye Valley to the ruins of Tintern Abbey.

Bristol 1 is Britain's first 'cycling city' and has cycle routes heading in all directions. A lot of pre-ride faltering means that we're late setting off, so we ignore the more meandery path up the Avon Gorge and instead head up

and over the Clifton Downs, joining NCN Route 4 to Henbury, before crossing over the noisy M5 and joining the regional route 10. Honking horns and car engines are replaced with twittering birds and cows calmly grazing in the fields around **Hallen 2**.

Peace descends and chatting begins as we pootle along the village lanes. The route then picks up a rough track and the more, er,

Peace descends and chatting begins as we pootle along the lanes

unusual element of this journey begins. What look like the sails of a tall ship loom into view on the horizon, but it's actually our first glimpse of the newer of the two Severn Bridges glinting in the midday sun.

This track leads into a weird patch of scrubland, where horses and their foals are frolicking about in front of ugly industrial units; it's all a bit weird. The route then weaves through an industrial estate where we

pick up NCN4 again; this is a rocky, offroad path which makes me glad I'm not riding a pristine racy road bike.

There's some confusion over the directions and lots of finger waving at the map but we eventually emerge at **Severn Beach 3**, which looks like a set from *Thunderbirds*. With the huge bridge dominating the muddy estuary and the domes of industrial Avonmouth in the distance, this is probably the most surreal landscape I've ever visited.

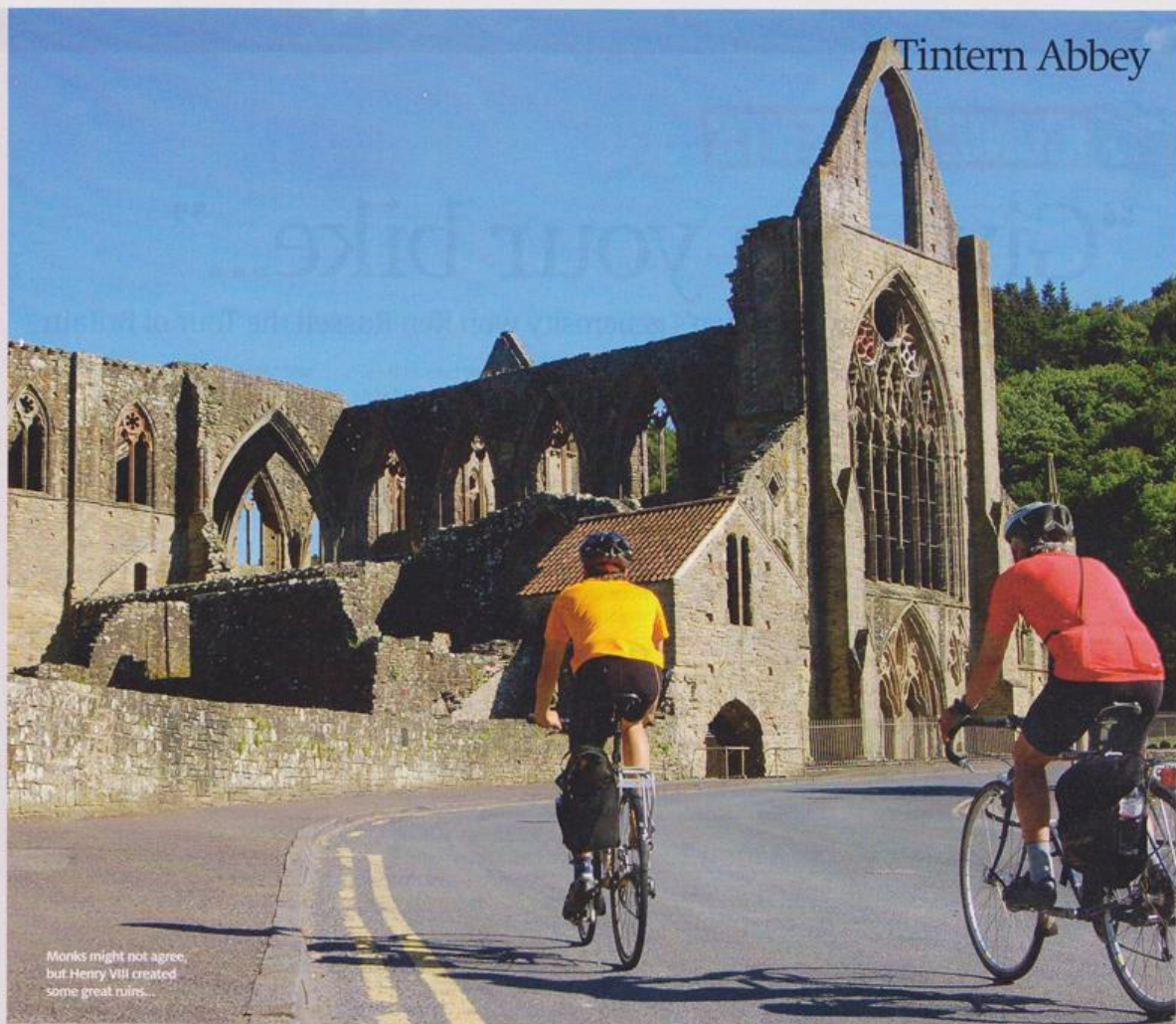
It's curiously satisfying to explore unusual places on your doorstep, even if they aren't an obvious holiday destination. And appearances can be deceptive: this area is a Site of Special Scientific Interest because it supports a diverse range of wildlife, even seals apparently. It is also a popular hangout for twitchers because a huge variety of birds come to make the most of the mud.

The path goes under the new bridge and hugs the estuary coastline, but it's too boggy to cycle directly to the old Severn Bridge, which means a busy section on an A road with trucks whizzing past. Annoyingly there's also a strong headwind; my father-in-law is sneakily tucked in behind me, drafting on my back wheel.

I don't normally get excited by engineering but the Severn Bridge is impressive when you examine it up close; it's enormous, and it wobbles up and down as we ride and takes ages to cross.

I'm nearly bonking through lack of cake when we reach Wales, so we stop in





Tintern Abbey

Monks might not agree, but Henry VIII created some great ruins...

Chepstow 4 for a late lunch and a relaxing drink at the river's edge.

Post-lunch the pace is ploddy, but after a dose of uphill grinding there's an incredibly long and satisfying descent following the edge of a steep-sided gorge. But my pleasure is tempered by the thought that I'll have to pedal back up this later on.

The road offers tantalising glimpses of our destination, **Tintern Abbey 5**, as we snake downhill towards the valley floor where it's gleaming in the low light. It was ransacked in the 16th century by Henry VIII, which led to its demise. It's just a shell now, but it's still one of the most spectacular ruins in the UK, inspiring poetry from Wordsworth and featuring in an Iron Maiden video filmed there in 1988.

After a quick cultural fix we turn around and start back up the long drag. Despite it being uphill, it's actually pleasant. I'm shaded

by the trees and the cooler air is refreshing. Unlike the boys, who've shot off ahead, I stick to a low gear and take my time; at this pace, the gradient's not too bad.

Once we're pedalling back over the **Severn Bridge 6**, though, it feels like I'm not moving. It's mostly because we're cycling into the wind but it's little consolation. I'm starting to get tired but father-in-law is powering along, despite being in his mid-60s. He is living proof that if you keep fit and cycle regularly, age is irrelevant; it's quite humbling really.

We're still a long way from home, which is disconcerting. I consider begging the others to take the most direct route back, even if it is along a main road. I didn't think I'd be finding 50 miles this challenging, but I am.

We retrace our route to Northwick, then turn off to go through Pilning. As we crawl – almost literally in my case – into **Easter Compton 7**, everyone appears to have

stopped talking, so I can't be the only one struggling. NCN4 takes us back into Bristol, where there's a final sting in the tail. To avoid the shame of defeat I ruin myself getting up the last hill, safe in the knowledge that it's all downhill from here, and make a mental note to do a few more training rides... **PLUS**

RIDE ESSENTIALS

STARTING POINT Bristol

DISTANCE 50 miles/80km

GRADE Medium

MAPS The route straddles two maps: OS Landranger 172 Bristol & Bath and 162 Gloucester & Forest of Dean

NEAREST STATION Bristol Temple Meads
www.nationalrail.co.uk

FOOD & DRINK In Chepstow there's The Boat Inn ☎ 01291 628192 by the river; or next to Tintern Abbey is The Anchor ☎ 01291 689582

ACCOMMODATION Try www.parsonsgrove.co.uk – and there are youth hostels at both ends, in Bristol and at St Briavels www.yha.org.uk

BRIDGE CROSSING Before setting off, check the Severn Bridge is open at www.severnbridge.co.uk

TOURIST INFORMATION www.royalforestofdean.info/wye-valley, www.visitbristol.co.uk

BIKE SHOPS Specialized Concept Store in Bristol ☎ 0117 929 7368; 559 Bikes, Chepstow www.559bikes.com ☎ 01291 626126

RIDE PROFILE

