

WALKERS & CYCLISTS

Faced with a shared need to get away from all those loopy cars, cyclists and walkers must get along together – and it needn't be as difficult as some people seem to think, as Robert Powell reports

FEET FIRST

I haven't cycled for years, at least not in Britain. As far as biking goes, I was driven off our roads years ago. But recently I have begun to wonder about getting a bike again, something a bit better than the old rustheap I keep with friends in Denmark for my occasional visits there. The trouble is that for many years, as a rambler on the Pennines and as a pedestrian in suburbia, I have been rather iffy about bikes: all that youthful street-corner posing for the girlies, the wheelies down the middle of the street, the clatter-bang-whizz of mountain bikers hurtling down some fell-side track, the spray-on clothing that shouts: "Hey guys, look at me, I'm colourblind!". No thanks.

Extract from the Sustrans Good Cycling Code:

On shared use paths, please: give way to pedestrians, leaving them plenty of room. Keep to your side of any white dividing line, be prepared to slow down or stop if necessary, don't expect to cycle at high speeds, be careful at junctions, bends and entrances, remember that many people are hard of hearing or visually impaired. Don't assume they can see or hear you, so carry a bell and use it. Don't surprise people! Where there are horses, don't surprise riders from behind – let them know you are there.

But earlier this year I went to County Durham for a bit of walking on some of the old railway lines that have been opened up for walkers and cyclists. Over the course of three days in the area I saw some pretty weird clothes, but I don't think I met a single suicidal show-off; I also came to remember the long forgotten possibility that cycling might be a rather fun way of getting around.

What opened my eyes was the Lanchester Valley Way, which more or less follows the course of an old mineral railway line from Durham to Consett. It passes right through the middle of several old mining villages as well as some very lovely countryside. It does cross a few roads, sometimes at rather nasty corners, where the bridges used to be, but, otherwise, cyclists and pedestrians have a clear run.

What I really love about it is an almost tangible sense of community. In some places you can feel very private and alone, but near the villages you are almost literally rubbing shoulders with a whole cross-section of society – ex-miners out for a stroll with their dogs, mothers pushing baby-buggies, women and girls on horses straight out of a Thelwell cartoon, energetic cyclists commuting to work in Durham or Lanchester, and, of course, the famous colour blind brigade.



Sign on wall of pub in Chester: it just about covers everything.

The thing is, it works brilliantly: everybody's there, but without the cars. I love it. You will have gathered by now that as far as I am concerned shared use of suitable tracks by walkers and cyclists is a good thing, at least in theory and usually in practice. But there are problems, especially in areas where cyclists are using routes once considered the prerogative of rambles and horse riders.

Now I know that most mountain bikers are kind to animals, love their mothers, and just want to have fun. But some will go hurtling past crumbles and small children at 30 miles an hour, and that's not nice. Please don't tell me it doesn't happen. The only question in my mind is what is to be done about it?

Phil Harrison, who runs Trailbreak, a firm specialising in biking holidays, admits that part of the fun is going downhill "quite