

KING ALFRED'S WAY
CYCLE RIDE 9 – 13 SEP 2024
Five days with King Alfred was he a friend or foe!

Reference: Kings Alfred's Way Cycling UK/Guy Kesteven dated 2020
<https://www.cyclinguk.org/king-alfreds-way>

Introduction

Please note that this is my point of view on the ride. Two people may travel on the same journey but could end up with a different perspective! Much will depend on what type of bike you have used, load carrying, fitness, off road experience, accommodation, camping, wild camping, hotels etc. On this occasion I did this ride by myself.

History

Without a doubt I was immersing myself in 10,000 years of history by cycling 220 miles/350km of historic Wessex, the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Alfred the Great. The route starts and ends in Winchester where Alfred is buried, and connects iconic monuments including Stonehenge, Avebury stone circle, Iron Age hill forts, Farnham Castle, Winchester, and Salisbury Cathedrals. The name of the trail is inspired by Alfred the Great, who ruled the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex in the late 9th Century.

Planning

Quite frankly I did very little planning (unusual for me!) mainly because my journey was going to encompass staying at either recognised campsites, wild camping or on the off chance I might stay at a guesthouse/hotel/pub, so this gave me the option to choose my own nightly abode. However, if you are travelling light and relying on hotel/guest house accommodation, then I would strongly recommend that you book well in advance.

Remoteness

Despite being easily accessible from cities in the south of England, I felt that I had escaped from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. During many phases on the route, I hardly saw anyone, but from the Ridgeway I could see Swindon in the distance and the obvious continuous hum of motorway traffic on the M4! Reading, where I stayed in a Premier Inn, was the only major conurbation that I went through. So dodging rush hour traffic rather than potholes, tank tracks, steep and gravelly tracks was now the main focus.

For long stretches on the route there were no amenities e.g. cafes, shops pubs etc. but I carried enough vittles (high energy bars/biscuits) to compensate for this.

Weather

This was a mixed bag. Mild to start with, then getting much colder towards the end of the week. Light rain and hail on the second day, with strong winds and torrential rain by late afternoon and during the night. Fortunately, I had my small bivie tent up in time. Really a very snug evening in my light weight feather filled Nordic sleeping bag, more geared-up to deal with Arctic temp of about -25 degree!

My journey/Route

I started and finishes my journey in Winchester. My reasoning:

1. It is the main recognised route – start and finish
2. My RWGPS was already set up for this. Going in a clockwise direction, Westerly towards Salisbury.
3. I have friends who live in Winchester, so was able to leave my car there

The start point is at Westgate, just outside Winchester Castle. My journey and overnight stops.

Mon 6 Sep: Recognised campsite at Orcheston, near Stonehenge - 46 miles

Tue 7 Sep: Wild camped in small wooded copse on the Ridgeway, near Ogbourne St George - 39 miles

Wed 8 Sep: Premier Inn Reading- 43 miles

Thur 9 Sep: The Devils Punch Bowl Hindhead – 52 miles

Fri 10 Sep: 40 miles. Finishing at Kings Alfred's statue Winchester

Total: 220 miles

I was averaging circa 7.8 MPH

Terrain

The terrain was not overly technical, a mix of gravel and slippery chalk tracks. There were woodland and heathland trails, grassy fields, bridleways, and canal towpaths. The route also included flint-furrowed tracks, sandy heathland, remote ridgeways, barrows, and byways. Really all based on bridleways, where it was easy to open gates. In parts it was exceptionally steep, slippery, deep ruts, tree roots and greasy chalk surfaces. On a few occasions I decided that discretion was the better part of valour! so decided to dismount from my sturdy Trek Mountain bike and walk. Appropriate footwear was important...not sandals!

Camping

Really this was one of the highlights for me. Loved wild camping, it gave me a real sense of freedom and kind of a carefree daily adventure, not having to worry about getting to a set destination, hotel, guest house etc. I had many choices of suitable bivouac sites, which were in small well sheltered remote woodlands. My small tent, a Phoxx1 v 2 1x person tent weighing about 1.6 kg, was ideal. A little tight, you could just about sit up in it, but big enough to store all my kit comfortably. Camping is a little time-consuming setting it all up and taking it down, but if you are well practiced and reasonably organised it can be a slick procedure. Important that I left the bivouac site as I found it....no rubbish, or signs of human habitation.

Hotel

I had not planned to stay in a hotel, but it was quite late when I got to Reading. There were no campsites or wooded areas there, camping in one of the public parks was out of the question. By sheer coincidence I passed a Premier Inn, so decided to book in, but my goodness it was a palaver, had to do it online, which had its problems, but got there in the end!

Navigation

The route is not signposted. Much of it follows clearly waymarked trails such as the Ridgeway, South Downs Way, Shipwright Way and Surrey Hills. That said, this is a complex route and it is easy to go wrong, so for me a mounted GPS (Wahoo element bolt) with the route on it was essential, **but make sure that you have enough battery power**, I brought a couple of attachable spare battery units, also when stopped at a café/pub I asked the proprietor if I could charge/top up my devices was never a problem. If you are only going to use a map, then I suggest it works in tandem with a route card, this method is going to be time consuming as you will need to stop regularly to check your bearings.

Bike and ancillary kit

My Trek off road/mountain bike with wide knobbly tyres performed well. I serviced it before I left, putting on a new back tyre, new chain and back cassette. The pedals were flat and my shoes were cleatless, giving me easy and quick egress from the pedals, which I needed to do on several occasions. My bike had front suspension, which was a godsend, as most of the terrain was very uneven and bumpy, for me that was essential, as it absorbed the all-day incessant vibration through the handlebars, giving some respite to my wrists, arms, and shoulders. Surprisingly I only had one pin prick of a puncture. However, the major mechanical failure that I had was not with the bike, but the pannier rack. One side strut broke while the other bent, this caused the side pannier to slam into the rear spokes especially when I hit a bump. Fortunately this was on the last day, as I had no choice but to divert onto smoother tarmac roads, which worked. Bike, rear panniers and kit weighted about 45lbs, this did make cycling ungainly if not unstable, especially when I got out of the saddle. Also, when pushing the bike, I had to keep one hand on the handle bars and the other on the saddle to keep it stable. Can I just add, quite a few cyclists I met were on gravel bikes (some struggling), but were travelling very lightweight. In this mode the route could be done over 3/4 days, maybe less. I took 5 days, carrying full camping equipment, minus cooking paraphernalia, but lots of energy bars.

Camping kit and general equipment

Mountain bike

GPS/Wahoo element bolt

Rack and panniers with water proof bags

Bum/hip bag, to carry my wallet, credit cards, cash /mob phone/maps/guide book

Water bottle

Lights F&R

Head torch

Spare tube x 2/repair kit/tools/small bottle of chain oil/old tooth brush to clean off chain

Mobile phone

Battery charger spare for mob phone x 2

Sleeping bag light weight

Sleeping mat Therma rest $\frac{3}{4}$ length

Tent small

Snacks – choc/biscuits/energy tablets

First aid kit (small)

Clothing

Footwear. Rugged non cleat cycling shoes/spare light weight trainers/socks

Cycling mitts/cycling gloves

Helmet with peak/sun visor

Cycling sunglasses

Spare clothing

Cycling padded shorts x 2

Cycling tops for cooler weather x 2

Cycling tops summer x 2

Underpants x 2

Fleece x 1

Wool hat

Bottoms long, not lycra, it will rip. Cotton track suit bottoms best

Shorts

Water proof top and bottoms

Toiletries, wipes/loo paper/

Sun screen

Insect repellent

Summary/My thoughts

Can I reiterate, this is coming from my perspective. What worked and did not work for me.

- **Luxury or Camping?**

Hotels: More comfort. You can travel light and cover greater distances. Probably getting away with using a grave bike. But you need to pre book your accommodation. This gives you little flexibility.

Camping: Little planning needed. But would suggest that you have some wild camping experience. You can be a bit of a free spirit, taking as long as you want, stopping and camping when and where you want...well within reason. Hard work on a fully laden bike, which can be a little bit unstable over rough steep ground

- **Take your time,** No need to put yourself under any unnecessary time pressures. Enjoy the ride for what it is, immerse yourself in 10,000 years of history and this unique and quite varied land scape

Safety: I was very conscious that I did not want to get injured or damage my bike so on difficult I did dismount and push my bike. There are some difficult and dangerous road crossings. Red flags flying mean live firing on military ranges (SP).

- **Fitness and off-road experience:** Its essential

- Make sure your **bike is fully serviced**. Bring a small brush to clean off the chain and re-oil. Periodically the drive system clogged up with clay and sand.
- **Solo or group:** Entirely up you. Solo, for long period I hardly saw anyone, but had total control over what I wanted to do. But equally sharing the experience with others would have been fun.
- **Navigation Device:** Follow the route carefully, changes of direction happen very quickly
- **Remoteness/facilities:** There are long stretches of this route where you find yourself very much off the beaten track where there are limited if no facilities, shops, café s, pubs etc. So, bring lots of snacks. You could come off route, but it would mean adding another 3-5 miles onto your journey, losing, and then having to gain height again.
- **Leg protection:** Many parts of this route are very narrow and overgrown with lots of brambles, thorns and nettles sticking out. Frequently my legs were shredded as were many others who were cycling the route.

Thanks

Chris P and Nick C, who did this route a couple of years ago, for giving me the idea and their perspective on their trip.

My long-term friends, Peter and Anne H who live in Winchester, for allowing me to park my car in their drive for the five days that I did the trip.

Toni at Stonehenge Touring Park campsite. For her kind hospitality. On my first night, a Monday, I cycled two miles to the pub in Shrewton, but found it to be closed. Dejected, I cycled back, spoke to Toni, who calmly said to me, 'not a problem, let me order something from the local Chinese take away.' Twenty minutes later, a large portion of chicken chow main and an enormous bag of chips arrived...enough food to last me for the entire trip!

And of course, King Alfred, being my companion for the duration of the trip...I'll let you decide, was he a friend or foe?

Photos From top L – R

Sheep grazing at Avebury

Water filled tank tracks Salisbury Plain...saturated feet!

Pretty stream at Great Durnford

The start Winchester

My Sturdy but over laden bike

Wild camping near Ogbourne St George

Very steep Hartley steps, I dismounted and proceeded with a certain amount of caution!

Wild camping at its best, even in the wind and rain

My nemesis. Salisbury Plain!!

The finish, Winchester. A towering King Alfred.. 'I salute you'

Town of Goring. Had not had a hot meal for 24 hrs. My goodness this was delicious.

Amesbury, was once stationed near there. A place of great historical importance

An unique sense of remoteness, Salisbury Plain.

Legs covered in muddy chalk and some blood, should have worn long trousers!









