

Building the future of mountain biking was the theme of the CTC-IMBA National Mountain Bike Conference in October. **Luke Webber** was there

# Trailblazing

**I**f you build it – and build it properly – they will come. That was just one of the messages to come out of the first national mountain biking conference, where leading figures from throughout the fat-tired world met at London's Cycle 2008 show to share experiences and ideas.

'Who would have said, in 1990, that today people would be building trails using millions of pounds of tourism money?' asked Dafydd Davies MBE, the father of the UK's trail centre network. The dividends, he said, were clear not just in local economies but in getting people active. 'When I go to Coed y Brenin now on a weekend now there are guys that I went to school with riding mountain bikes, who 10-15 years ago would never have been seen doing anything in the outdoors.'

More people than ever are riding off-road in the UK, yet the conference heard that the potential for growth remains. Such growth could deliver some of the two million more adults the government wants active by 2012.

## Breaking new ground

This conference was organised by CTC and IMBA-UK (the domestic wing of the International Mountain Bike Association) and was the first of its kind. It brought together experts on everything mountain bike. Speakers included Kevin Mayne and Ian Warby of CTC, IMBA Executive Director Mike Van Abel, Duncan MacKay

of Natural England, Mike Nelson from Cascade Environmental, John Ireland of the Forestry Commission, and more.

Discussions focused less on where UK mountain biking is now, but on where it's going. In the early to mid-Nineties, participation in mountain biking was based mostly on competition. Today things have changed. Now attracting its second and third generation of participants, racing is a sideshow to the more popular draw of trail riding, predominantly at mountain bike centres – dedicated areas with marked trails for various abilities, built to withstand British weather.

In Scotland and Wales these centres have drawn in thousands of enthusiasts, provided an easily accessible route into mountain biking and revived local economies. This despite being met with scepticism from local residents in the early years, Dafydd Davis explained.

## Shifting focus

Mountain biking centres today are buzzing on any given weekend, to the extent that the pastime could well weather

"Most children have bikes but can't get to mountain bike centres or are without local areas to use them"



(Top) New riders tackle the Marin Trail near Betwys-y-Coed  
(Above) CTC's off-road day for kids at Dalby Forest (see p50)





the credit crunch. However, the general consensus at the conference was that 'the best is yet to come.' Right now the top tier of mountain bikers are well catered for – those with cars, bikes, and good disposable incomes find it easy to access areas often located away from urban centres.

Focus had been on this user group for long enough, delegates heard; now the priority must be to encourage more participation, particularly among children. Most children have bikes but cannot easily get to mountain bike centres or are without local areas to use them. So the challenge would be to create these safe, local, mountain biking venues while keeping the top tier going.

There are already success stories like Waterlooville, where there is a mountain biking area in an urban centre. The biggest project to date has been the development of the off-road trails at Redbridge Cycling Centre. This will be part of the 2012 legacy developments for London, as the London Development Agency's Vince Bartlett and CTC's Ian Warby explained.

'It was a farmer's field,' said Ian Warby, 'a blank canvas, with very few natural features to work from. We wanted to have mountain bike cross-country, some form of downhill, a road circuit, and a bit of BMX. And we wanted to look at long-term usage and make it DDA (Disability Discrimination Act) compliant.'

Built inside the M25 and catering for London and the Home Counties, Redbridge Cycling Centre is a fantastic launchpad for cycling that's on the doorstep of hundreds of thousands of people. It is also a fantastic community hub and the first of many long-term mountain bike projects.

### Putting it together

In the past most things in mountain biking were created on a fairly ad hoc basis. Lessons about trail provision were learned along the way. The conference heard that this has would have to change. Standards of 'Best Practice' were coming in, led by the UK's largest provider, the Forestry Commission. These standards would encompass everything from building a track in your local park, through to creating a trail centre taking in several mountainsides.

The same would apply to leadership and skills coaching, too. CTC was already rolling out its own system – most recently acquiring the leading mountain bike training company OTC and its programmes with over 4,000 qualified leaders coming on board. CTC now has a comprehensive training programme for the mountain biking sector.

By setting everything within a standard, mountain biking will get something it has long needed: an objective measurement of quality. CTC will guarantee a level of excellence from which mountain biking can grow - an equivalent to the 'kite mark' for quality products and services in the cycling sector.

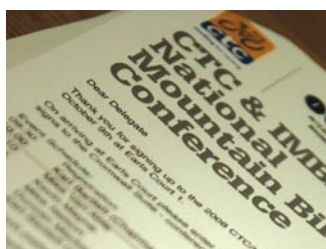
The whole mountain bike community will take ownership of the new standards and is encouraged to update and improve best practices. As these standards are rolled out across the UK, the big changes will begin and we should get yet more people on their bikes, making the most of the UK's many trails.

**Missed the conference? Listen to all of the speakers again at [www.ctc.org.uk/mtb](http://www.ctc.org.uk/mtb)**



Boris Johnson opens the Redbridge Cycling Centre with (L-R) CTC's Ian Warby, IMBA's Tony Williams, and site architect Karl Morrison

## CTC's off-road initiatives



**Since the appointment of Ian Warby in 2006 as a full-time off-road officer, CTC has been making strides in off-road development. For any mountain biker wanting to know 'what has CTC done for me?', here are 10 recent initiatives.**

- 1. Redbridge Cycling Centre (Hog Hill). Development of the off-road trails at this great new cycling facility.**
- 2. Forestry Commission Visitor Safety Review. Working with the Forestry Commission on guidance for the development and management of forest-based mountain bike facilities.**
- 3. CTC Mountain Bike Leadership and Skills Training. A complete package of mountain bike courses for those working with the training sector**
- 4. Working with local clubs, groups and volunteers across the UK to develop**

**a range of mountain bike projects helping to grow and support grassroots mountain biking and participation.**

**5. CTC and IMBA National Mountain Bike Conference at Cycle 2008.**

**6. Waterlooville Recreation Ground. Urban Mountain Bike Park featuring a gravity track, pump track and novice dirt jumps.**

**7. CTC Trail Building Workshops. Coming to a forest near you soon. Best practice workshops looking at the best ways for volunteers to develop their local trail networks.**

**8. South West Wild Trails Project. CTC is supporting Paul Hawkins as he works to develop the south west of England as a world-class off-road cycling destination, supporting tourism and rural-based business and bringing health, wealth and enjoyment into the natural environment.**

**9. Removing Easy-Jet's ban on hydraulic fluid in brakes and suspension so that bikes can go on their 'planes.**

**10. National network of Right to Ride volunteers working to improve the public rights of way network and access for cycling.**