

# Abbey road

**RICHARD ROWE EMBRACES THE OPEN ROAD AND GETS A TASTE OF BORDERS HISTORY ON THE FOUR ABBEYS CYCLE ROUTE**

**I**would be the first to admit that when it comes to cycling, fat, knobby tyres and hillside tracks appeal far more than skinny wheels and roads. It's not so much the adrenaline rush – though that's fun, too – as the chance to disappear into the hills, leaving the world of tarmac and traffic behind. To me, road cycling has always felt like running on pavement: it's fine but, dare I say it, a little bit dull.

However, the opportunity to tackle the Four Abbeys Cycle Route, a 55-mile journey through 800 years of turbulent Borders history, seemed like a good moment to right a couple of wrongs: my bias against road cycling and an

She was also particularly pleased with herself for having the forethought to ride a hybrid bike with big wheels and thin tyres, while I had foolishly stuck to my trusty mountain bike with its wide, sticky treads.

Many cyclists who tackle the route head clockwise with a start and finish in Melrose, an attractive Borders town nestled below the Eildon Hills. That was our plan, too. But while seasoned road cyclists would no doubt speed round in a day, we planned to break the trip up with an overnight stop in Jedburgh before easing our way back to Melrose the following day.



ignorance of the history that has shaped an area that I call home.

Like its counterpart for walkers, the ride takes cyclists on a tour of the central Borders, stopping at the ruined abbeys in Melrose, Dryburgh, Kelso and Jedburgh – four mighty structures that tell of centuries of political and religious power play in the region.

Fortunately, looking over the map, the route seemed to stick mainly to secondary roads and tracks, straying only occasionally onto main roads. Although Borders traffic is not exactly heavy, drivers in these parts don't hang around and the thought of spending large sections of the journey bracing as cars sped by was not a happy one.

My wife, Jayne, who was joining me on the trip, was ecstatic about the chance to enjoy what she considers proper cycling, rather than being dragged along routes that are promised as wide forest tracks only to usually deteriorate into something barely ride-able.

## MELROSE AND BEYOND

We arrived in Melrose on a slightly murky late-October morning and so decided to take a look around the first of our four abbeys to gee us up. Founded in 1136 by Cistercian monks on the behest of King David I, Melrose Abbey is 12<sup>th</sup>-century construction on a grand scale.

However, in such warring times the lavish building was an obvious target and, in 1322, the abbey was all but destroyed by the English army under Edward II. In an oft-repeated cycle, the structure was rebuilt, helped in large part by Robert the Bruce – a generosity that led to his heart being buried at the abbey – before later being burnt down again when the English pushed David II back to Edinburgh following the Scottish king's invasion of northern England.

Today the pink-hued walls still stand proud, surrounded by a sea of ageing tombs and gravestones. It's a magnificent place and made for a grand start to our trip.

Leaving Melrose, we began a steady climb on







Built to last (clockwise from top): Melrose Abbey; Dryburgh Abbey; Temple of the Muses; a scenic stretch near Nisbet

a minor road that took us past the Rhymer's Stone – the first of many monuments, sculptures and historical artefacts

we would discover on the trip. The Stone is the site of the Eildon Tree where, legend has it, local laird Thomas the Rhymer met the Queen of the Fairies and gained supernatural powers.

There were no fairies when we passed, just a lady walking her dog along a closed-off section of road that, judging by the team names daubed on the tarmac, saw some action during the recent Tour of Britain.

We continued on through Newtown St Boswells, stopping to scratch the ears of the inhabitants of a nearby donkey sanctuary, before arriving at a suspension bridge spanning the Tweed at Dryburgh. It was a classic Borders scene with an angler standing waist-deep in

the river, casting this way and that, searching for the perfect spot.

On the other side of the bridge, tucked away in the trees and easily missed, we could just make out the Temple of the Muses, a monument built by the 11<sup>th</sup> Earl of Buchan in memory of the poet James Thomson. An incredibly serene place to linger, we stayed a while watching the fly-fishing below and enjoying the autumn colours.

We could easily have spent much of the day in this area alone. Once we tore ourselves away from the Muses, there was a huge sandstone statue of William Wallace to visit – the great warrior staring out towards the Eildons – and, of course, Dryburgh Abbey itself.

Probably the most picturesquely situated of all the Borders abbeys, Dryburgh sits in wooded grounds within a bend of the Tweed. Again, the abbey was a frequent target of English armies, although much of the structure looks to be in remarkably good shape. Many

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visitors come not just for the abbey itself, but also to visit the grave of Sir Walter Scott, the author of *Rob Roy* and *Ivanhoe*, whose favourite viewpoint of the Eildons (Scott's View) is just a few miles away.

## HEADS DOWN

After all the exploring during a stop-start first few hours, we needed to get some miles under our belts and so pedalled on without distraction to Kelso. The route took us through rolling Borders farmland and we were able to settle into a steady rhythm, albeit with me having to work a little harder as my chunky tyres stuck resolutely to the road.

Approaching Kelso we skirted along the giant perimeter wall that guards the grounds of Floors Castle. A staggeringly grand building with two heavily-turreted wings on either side of an equally ornate central building, the castle sits on a terrace overlooking some of the most sought after beats on the Tweed. The castle dates back to 1721 when it was built for the 1<sup>st</sup> Duke of Roxburghe and is now home to the current (and 10<sup>th</sup>) Duke.

On another day we would have had a nosy round, but time – and daylight – were against us. Instead, we stopped for a bite to eat in Kelso's pretty main square, before paying a visit to the nearby abbey. Once the grandest of all the Borders abbeys, Kelso's proximity to England meant it was rarely left in peace. Having suffered badly during the wars of independence at the start of the 1300s, the town and its abbey were later attacked repeatedly by the Duke of Hertford during the 'Rough Wooing' of the 1540s when the English did their level best to destroy the abbey altogether.

Our heads full from another slightly bloody history lesson, we pedalled over the Tweed for the final time before heading south to follow the River Teviot towards Jedburgh. Now it felt like the character of the ride had begun to



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change. The countryside was still rolling, but the land felt more open, allowing the wind to gather strength.

I then remembered one of my main grumbles about road cycling: veteran road warriors might like to explain just why this is, but there seems to come a point on longer rides when it doesn't matter in which direction you travel, the wind is always in your face. How can that be? And with long stretches of road with nothing much else to occupy the mind, all you can think about is the blasted wind and how unreasonable it is that even on the downhill sections you need to pedal to make any progress.

It was with this sense of mounting injustice and mental fragility that we pressed on in the gathering gloom towards Morebattle before starting a steady ascent to Cessford Castle. Set on a wind-swept hill with panoramic views across the surrounding landscape, the thickset ruins of the castle are as uncompromising as

Straight as a die: en route to Kelso (top); Kelso Abbey (below)

its location. With walls that are more than 12 feet thick in places, it is clear that this was a structure

built to withstand the brutality of the times.

The bleakness of the location made us think about the hot meal and comfy bed that awaited us in Jedburgh just a few miles away. We descended to a crossroads at Crailinghall before pausing ahead of tackling what looked like an unforgiving hill. By this time the light had faded badly so we rigged up our 'just in case' lighting system, which involved Jayne riding ahead wearing a head torch and me tucking in close behind with a second head torch strapped to my rucksack.

Although the map had warned of one of the longest hills on the whole route, the stretch was steady rather than brutal. Even so, the effort was such that we missed the point at which the route crossed Dere Street, a Roman road that

once linked York with a fort at Trimontium near Melrose.

At the summit, we were rewarded with a descent along a narrow lane bordered by an almost continuous beech hedgerow that even in the low light radiated glorious autumn colours. As we rode along, startled rustlings hinted at life within, while every few minutes a pheasant would explode from cover.

Descending steeply into Jedburgh, the lights of the town were a welcome sight. We had only ridden 36 miles, but it felt like much more. It was also a slightly alarming last few miles for Jayne, whose disc brakes had become progressively more spongy during the ride and which by now were on the verge of giving up altogether. With dodgy brakes and makeshift lights, it was definitely time to call it a day.

## HOMeward BOUND

We should have bounced out of bed the following morning refreshed and raring to go. Instead, the decision to join our welcoming hosts for a few nightcaps at our B&B suddenly didn't seem too smart. Fortunately, we had less than 20 miles to go so, with a solid breakfast and plenty of coffee inside us, we jumped back onto our saddles with renewed vigour. **D**

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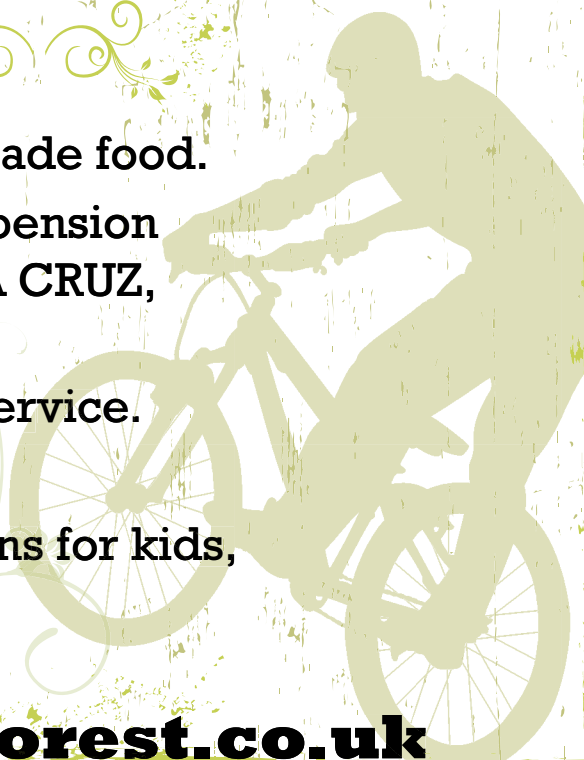
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Our route would take us north through the village of Ancrum, fording the Ale water near Bewliehill before a final strenuous pull up to the summit at Bowdenmoor Reservoir on the west side of the Eildons. From there, it would just be a case of free-wheeling down into Melrose.

First, having dropped into a cycle shop for some essential brake maintenance, we took time to explore our final abbey. Jedburgh is probably the most impressive of all the abbeys thanks to its commanding position and the many intricate archways still standing along its ribbed length. Another abbey to be founded by David I, this time in 1138 for Augustinian canons from France, it is the focal point of a historic town that has been a Royal Burgh for more than 800 years.

The abbey was every bit as impressive as we imagined, but moments later we were treated to an altogether unexpected encounter. Riding out of Jedburgh, the route takes cyclists along a riverside walk that follows the Jed Water through a steep-sided sandstone gorge. At the start of this wild little stretch of water is a fish ladder and gently-sloping cauld (weir). Just as we were wondering whether the salmon would be running, a huge specimen launched itself at the cauld, skimming halfway up before running out of energy and sliding back down. We watched transfixed as a succession of fish tried their luck on both the cauld and the ladder

Home straight (clockwise from above left): Jedburgh Abbey; the Eildon Hills; Melrose rugby ground

– all under the watchful gaze of several herons stationed on the banks.

Exhilarated by our wildlife encounter, our route back to Melrose felt much shorter than the previous day's ride, but there were still plenty of distractions as the miles clipped by. We watched as squadrons of swans took off in stately flight from the Teviot at Nisbet and later stopped for a wander around the craft shops at Harestanes near Ancrum. There was also some adventure on an unexpectedly sharp descent to the ford over the Ale water at Bewliehill.

Of course, like all good journeys, the ride had a sting in its tail: in this case, the steep stretch up to the Bowdenmoor Reservoir outside Melrose. It was as tough a climb as there had been on the whole route, but we eventually ground our way to the summit, stopping to enjoy fabulous views of the Eildons against a near cloudless sky. From there, we swooped down into Melrose with a warm sense of satisfaction at having completed a fantastic ride.

Later, munching a celebratory pie while watching a game at Melrose's famous Greenyards rugby ground, it occurred to me that I'd been a little unfair about road cycling. It had been a lot of fun – only next time I'll leave the mountain bike at home. ■

## Essentials

A free map of the Four Abbeys Cycle Route can be picked up at most Visitor Information Centres in the Borders, although it is recommended that you also carry detailed road maps (OS Landranger Maps 73 and 74).

### FURTHER INFORMATION

Melrose, Dryburgh, Kelso and Jedburgh abbeys are under the care of Historic Scotland.

[www.historic-scotland.gov.uk](http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk)

Floors Castle

Open Easter weekend, then 1 May to 31 October.

[www.roxburghe.net](http://www.roxburghe.net)

Harestanes Countryside Visitor Centre

Open 1 April to 31 October, although the nearby craft shops are open through the winter.

### OTHER CYCLE ROUTES

The Four Abbeys is one of many cycle routes in the Borders. Most towns have a variety of local cycle trails that are suitable for families, while there are also plenty of multi-day options, including the 250-mile Border Loop.

[www.cyclescottishborders.com](http://www.cyclescottishborders.com)