

# Reservoir Cogs

Big scenery, deserted roads, and curse-inducing climbs... This 60-mile loop in the Cambrians has them all in droves, says **Giles P Croft**









**W**ant to know a secret? The best cycling in Britain is in Mid Wales. Here you can find endlessly winding roads along

spectacular valleys, past placid lakes and through silent forests, all devoid of traffic. The hulking mass of the Cambrian Mountains sits midway between Wales' two renowned National Parks – Snowdonia and the Brecon Beacons – yet receives only a fraction of their publicity and consequently their visitors. It all harks back to a disagreement in the 1970s between the Countryside Commission and the locals that saw a proposal to designate the area as a National Park aborted at the eleventh hour. The result is a sparsely populated and undeveloped swathe of valleys, gorges and moorland just asking to be conquered on two wheels. My local guide, Jeremy Rees, took me for a taste.

## Braveheart start

We begin in the market town of Llandovery, an old stopping off point for the drovers moving cattle eastwards. It's a peaceful cluster of pastel-painted buildings nestled at the meeting of three rivers and overlooked by the ruins of a Norman castle. It was here in the town square that the spectacularly named Llywelyn ap Gruffydd Fychan of Caerllion earned the moniker of 'Welsh Braveheart' when he met a grisly end as punishment for deceiving Henry IV's English troops, leading them on a wild goose chase to enable the Welsh resistance leader Owain Glyndwr to escape to safety. Today he's remembered by a haunting 16ft polished steel statue that stands guard over the town.

Under heavy skies we head off into the Cambrians, pushed along the Towy Valley by a pleasant tailwind we know will become our foe later in the day. Signs of habitation quickly become sparse. This southern road up onto the high plateau is one of the more gradual climbing routes, allowing us to fully soak up the ever-building scenery. By the

The spillway of Llyn Brianne is an impressive sight when heavy rain causes water to 'spill' down it



village of Rhandirmwyn it's already making me feel quite dwarfed, with twin valley heads snaking off to our left and the promise of a vertical challenge looming ahead.

The road climbs in fits and starts, never too steep but always steadily upwards, first along

## We're taken on a rollercoaster ride through dense and fragrant pine forests

lanes wooded with oak and alder, then out into the full grandeur of hills rearing steeply on either side. There's an RSPB reserve here, reminding us to be on the lookout for red kites and peregrine falcons, but our eyes are always drawn back to the land around, particularly when we arrive at the spectacular Llyn Brianne. Completed in 1972 to quench the thirst of a burgeoning South Wales population, at 300ft this clay-core construction is the UK's tallest dam and reputedly the largest of its kind in the world. There's an impressive view of it on a right-hand bend – take the left-hand turn to the car park overlooking the enormous spillway and if you're lucky it will have been raining hard enough in recent weeks to be overflowing. It's testament to the summer we've had that, barely into autumn, we're rewarded with cascades of waves flowing down to the modest hydroelectric facility at its base. During droughts you can still see the

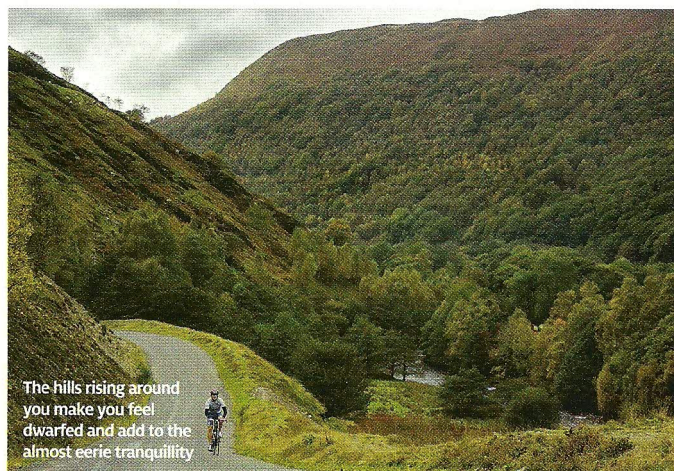
roofs of a couple of houses that have only fish for residents these days.

We push on into the wilderness, tackling an impressive set of lazy hairpin bends before finding ourselves being buffeted along the road overlooking the reservoir itself. From up here it's hard not to be impressed. The many-fingered mass of inlets lying below is postcard perfect: big Welsh sky brooding over a huge vista of dark, icy water with bulky, pine clad hills plunging down to the lake's edge. In the summer you'll find the odd picnicker up here, enjoying the view. Today we meet another cyclist before we see any cars, and it's the sort of terrain where you've just got to stop and trade routes.

## Stairway to hell

Faced with a sweeping descent around the far corner of the reservoir, you may be forgiven for thinking this is where you lose the 1000ft of altitude you've gained over the last 15 miles. Think again – the fun's just beginning! The shape of the water means we're taken on a rollercoaster ride through dense and fragrant pine forests that keep us sheltered from the wind, offering unexpected glimpses of Llyn Brianne round innumerable corners.

Just around one of these is another of the reasons Jeremy is so keen to get me out this way – the aptly named Devil's Staircase lies between us and the way home. Made infamous by the Milk Race, it caused chaos on several visits during the 1980s and 1990s, and is one of those perilously steep climbs



The hills rising around you make you feel dwarfed and add to the almost eerie tranquillity





The varying scenery and deserted roads make it seem like Mid Wales was designed with cyclists in mind

## Mid Wales



that every grimpeur should have on their CV. It's no surprise that it's tackled by two annual cyclosportive events and local audax rides too. Arguments will rage about which side is harder: suffice to say they both pitch up to around 25 per cent and will both have you out of the saddle, balancing in your lowest gear, struggling to maintain traction and probably swearing a fair bit too. The pros always attacked it from the east side, which has a dramatic and eerie lead up along the Irfor Valley before you're cast helplessly against the bottom of a 1km wall of near-vertical hairpins. We come up the west side, where the pain you're about to be dealt is laid out straight in front of you in a series of breathtaking steps from which the climb takes its name.

Because of its inevitable conclusion (there's no way out other than the Staircase), only the brave or the foolhardy enter the remote Irfor Valley knowingly on two wheels, but the rewards are great, particularly later on in the year. The road, which clings to one side of the valley above the babbling river, scores a line through a carpet of bracken in autumnal decline – when the sun peeks out

### **The pain you're about to be dealt is laid out in front of you in a series of steps**

from behind the clouds, the oranges ignite and we're treated to the impression of a valley ablaze as we bowl along.

Arriving in Llanwrtyd Wells – allegedly the smallest town in Britain, and home to the bizarre annual events of bog snorkelling and the man v horse cross country marathon – we feel as if we've done a full day, but we're merely halfway round. Time to get some carbs and caffeine in and, given that we've spent the last few hours shouting at sheep to get out of our way, it seems fitting to stop at the 18th century Drivers Rest.

It's a good job we're refreshed, as the next 15 miles are spent leaning into a block headwind, just as the terrain turns into exposed moorland. The views are massive and long ranging, but they're seen through watering eyes and with gritted teeth.

As the village names become more and more exotic – Tirabad and Babel sound like they've been shipped in from the middle east – we begin a long slog up onto the MOD's Sennybridge Training Area, a 12,000 hectare plateau complete with mock village, low-flying aircraft and the occasional skirmish seen off in the distance. However, there's a 'presumption in favour of public access', which means it's only very rarely that the road from Tirabad to Llywel is closed. It's another seldom used but rewarding route. Still, it pays not to linger – I stopped up here on a previous ride to put on a jacket, getting the fright of my life when I suddenly noticed a soldier lying camouflaged in a ditch not 3 feet from my bike. Good job I hadn't stopped to relieve myself...

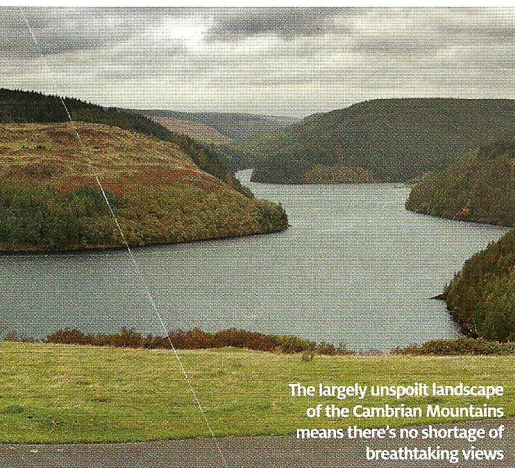
Plummeting down off the range at 50mph and crossing the trunk road takes us back into the Brecon Beacons National Park and onto our next reservoir – the Usk. Not quite as dramatically situated as the first, but just as tranquil, it sits in a remote, high corner and is almost completely surrounded by dense conifers.

### **Mythical Myddfai**

After another gradual moorland ascent at the mercy of whatever the weather decides to throw at us, a right turn plunges us once more into an isolated backwater along roads seldom taken. I'm exhausted, concentrating too much on the stunning view to my left of a hidden valley opening up as we fly down a very steep, very straight lane, which has an unannounced and almost 180° hairpin at the bottom. I lay down several feet of rubber and am shocked into wakefulness, just in time for our arrival at the village of Myddfai.

Lying just three miles away from our destination of Llandovery, it's a quaint little place with more than its fair share of access roads (six) and history. Legend has it that a local farm boy was cast under the spell of a lady emerging from a nearby lake, who he married and had children by. These were then endowed with gifts of healing and went on to become the 'physicians of Myddfai', mentioned in records as far back as the 14th century. The area is renowned for its unusual herbs, which may partly explain the myth, and also Myddfai's latest resident: Prince Charles. Apparently intrigued by the story of natural medicinal cures, he bought the nearby Llwynywormwood estate in 2007.

As we leave the village via the last steep climb of the day, the 60 miles we've covered seem like so much more, probably due to the variable terrain we've enjoyed. Lakes, hills, beacons, woodland, moorland and forest. Mid Wales really is a cyclist's paradise. »



The largely unspoilt landscape of the Cambrian Mountains means there's no shortage of breathtaking views



# ROUTES

CLASSIC  
RIDE

## RESERVOIR COGS

**DISTANCE** 59 miles (95km)

**DURATION** 5-6 hours

**GRADE** Expert climbs, medium distance

**MAP** OS Tour 11 South & Mid Wales

**GEARING** There's more than 1600m climbing and enough of it is steep. While you can get up to 25 per cent gradients on a double, it's less arduous with a compact or triple

**NEAREST STATION** Llandovery (on the Manchester to Carmarthen line) [www.nationalrail.co.uk](http://www.nationalrail.co.uk)

**FOOD AND DRINK** You'll need to take provisions for the first half of the ride, as you won't come across a café or shop en route until Llanwrtyd Wells, 30 miles in. There you'll find four pubs serving food, three restaurants and a well-stocked shop. Trecastle has a café and hotel/pub, and Llandovery has a small supermarket as well as a wide selection of pubs and restaurants.

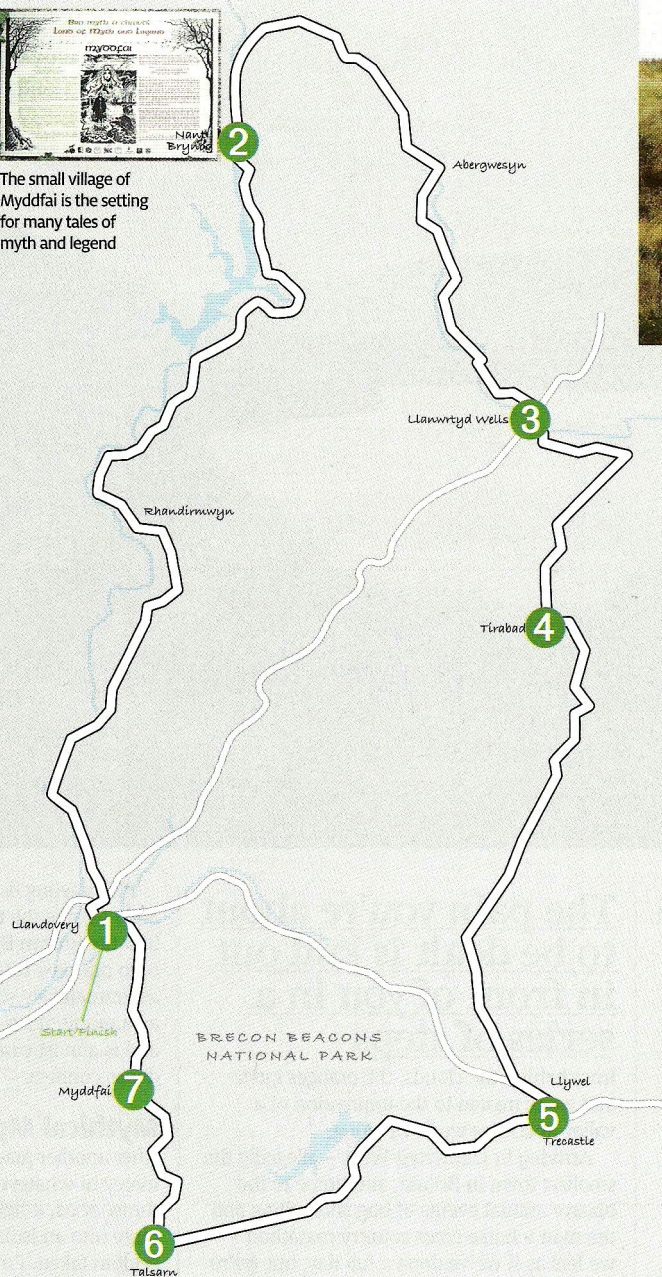
**WHERE TO STAY** The Drovers B&B in Llandovery [www.droversllandovery.co.uk](http://www.droversllandovery.co.uk) ☎ 01550 721115, the Neuadd Arms Hotel in Llanwrtyd [www.neuaddarmshotel.co.uk](http://www.neuaddarmshotel.co.uk) ☎ 01591 610236, and the Castle Coaching Inn in Trecastle [www.castle-coaching-inn.co.uk](http://www.castle-coaching-inn.co.uk) ☎ 01874 636354. The Wales tourism site [www.visitwales.co.uk](http://www.visitwales.co.uk) has links to all types of accommodation in the area.

**BIKE SHOPS** None en route. Nearest are: Bike Base, Abergavenny ☎ 01873 855999 and Brecon Cycle Centre ☎ 01874 622651

Hills and open moorland give way to towering pine trees. This route really has it all



The small village of Myddfai is the setting for many tales of myth and legend



### The route

**1** From Llandovery Castle car park, take the A40 towards Llandeilo, turning right along the A483 towards Builth just before the level crossing. After the row of houses, take the left turn signposted to Llyn Brienne Reservoir. This road will take you through Rhandirmwyn, past the reservoir and into the heart of the Cambrians – just stay on it.

**2** Coming out of the trees at the very top of the reservoir is a junction. If you're feeling particularly masochistic you can hang a left over the bridge towards Tregaron, looping back to the route by eventually turning right at what must surely be the most remote telephone box in the country. Be warned though: this additional seven miles is exceptionally hilly (it takes in another infamous climb called the Gamallt) and there's a ton of climbing still left to do. To stay on route, carry straight on here, turning right at the remote T-junction signed to Abergwesyn.

That wall in front of you is the Devil's Staircase with a gradient of 1:4. Take care coming down the hairpins of the equally steep gradient on the other side and turn right when you get to the T-junction in Abergwesyn, towards Llanwrtyd Wells.

**3** In Llanwrtyd, turn right onto the A483, then take the first left to Cefn-gorwydd, where you practically double back to the right after coming up and over the hill.

**4** In Tirabad, turn left immediately after descending and crossing the bridge, climbing sharply along the tree line, before taking a right turn onto the MOD's Sennybridge Training Area (in the highly unlikely event of it being closed, you've no alternative but to follow the road from Tirabad over towards Cynghordy, and cycle straight into Llandovery). The road over the range twists around a lot, but don't take any of the numerous turnings as you're likely to get shot! You'll plunge down a bizarre

section of steep dual carriageway into Llywel, where you turn left onto the A40 to Trecastle.

**5** Take the first right turn in Trecastle (if you reach the Castle Coaching Inn, you've gone too far) which winds its way slowly, and occasionally steeply, up to Usk Reservoir. You'll skirt along the southern edge of it before turning into the woods and arriving on the Trecastle to Llandeusan road. Turn right, heading out onto the moor, before dropping back down again.

**6** At the cluster of buildings that is Talsarn, take the right turn to Myddfai, staying on this little road until you reach the village. Watch out for the very sharp left hander at the bottom.

**7** In Myddfai, turn right into the village, keeping right of the church, then take the left fork and head towards Llandovery. Eventually you'll reach a T-junction where you turn left back into Llandovery. **PLUS**



If you do come across another vehicle, it's more likely to be a bike than a car



Severe climbs make for challenging riding

