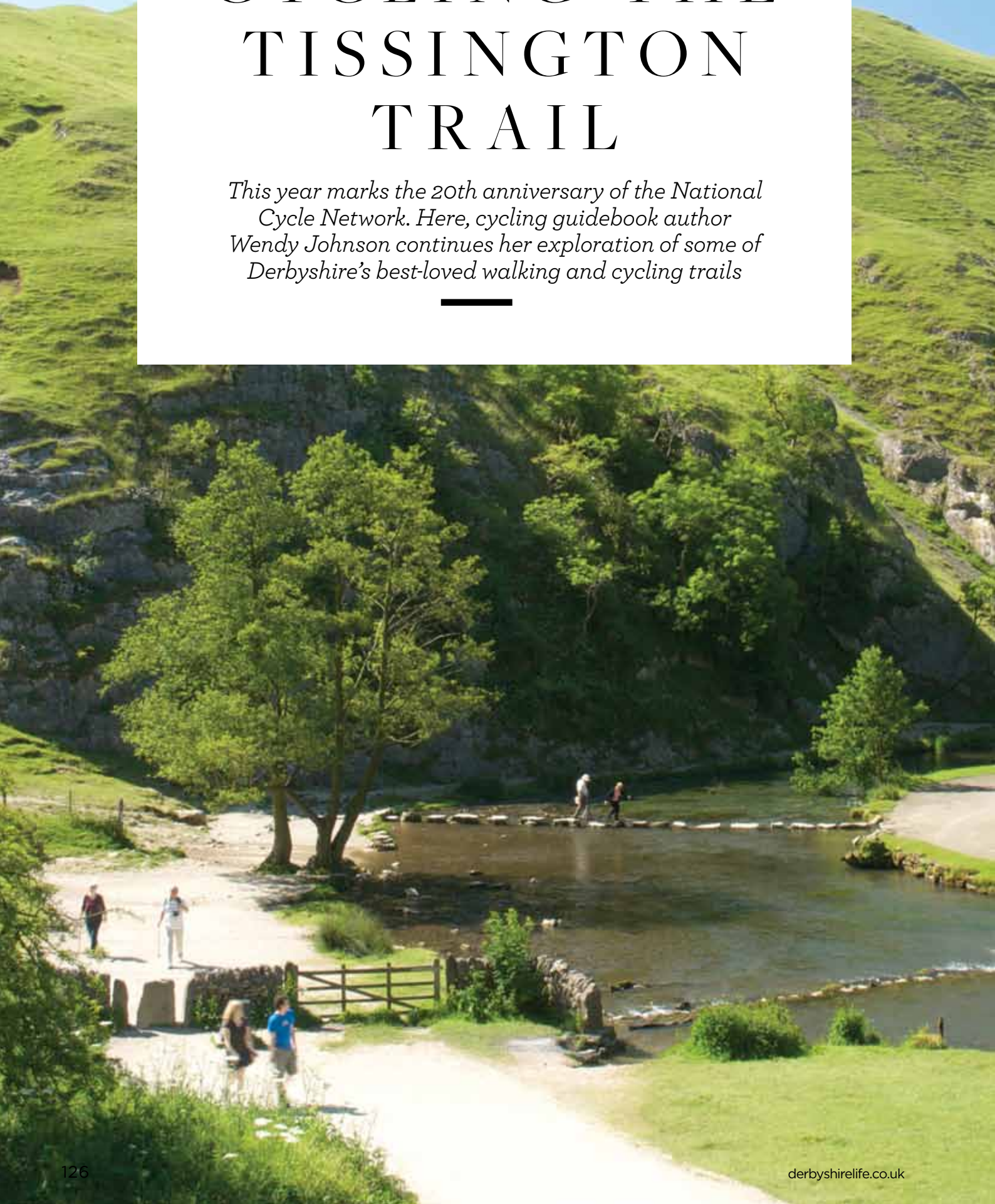


CYCLING THE TISSINGTON TRAIL

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the National Cycle Network. Here, cycling guidebook author Wendy Johnson continues her exploration of some of Derbyshire's best-loved walking and cycling trails





On the Tissington Trail Photo: John Grimshaw

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to speak of the Peak District's 13-mile Tissington Trail without mentioning its big brother and neighbour the High Peak Trail. There are few cycle rides that complement one another as beautifully as these two old railway paths, each weaving a scenic path through the limestone landscape of the White Peak.

Like tea and biscuits or Fred and Ginger, both of these classic routes can comfortably stand alone, but they truly shine when you put them together. Not only do they intertwine at their northern ends near Parsley Hay, meaning you can easily combine the two into a 30-mile day ride, but the effortless gentle descent of the Tissington Trail as you follow it south to Ashbourne is the perfect antidote to a challenging slog up the three steep inclines of the High Peak Trail.

Whilst the High Peak Trail is notable for following one of the world's first railway lines, the Tissington Trail follows one of the very last of the Victorian era. Opened by the London and North Western Railway in 1899, it transported passengers, limestone, milk and other goods until, like many other lines across the country, it fell victim to the Beeching cuts and closed in the late 1960s.

Bought and transformed into a walking and cycling route in 1971 by the Peak District National Park Authority and Derbyshire County Council, the Tissington Trail has had evidence of its former life as a working railway preserved for cyclists and walkers to enjoy.

The line's old stations offer the most obvious glimpses into its past and the finest is Hartington just two miles in, once one of the busiest stations on the line where the platforms and station buildings would have buzzed with life as people and freight shuttled between town and countryside. Hartington's old signal box is all that remains and it has been elegantly restored, with a soldier-straight row of old track levers sitting neatly upstairs and a little information centre and kiosk open to visitors on summer weekends. ▶



Cutting on the Tissington Trail near Heathcote Photo: greatbritishbikerides.net

Other disused stations further south – Alsop, Tissington and Thorpe – may not boast such handsome relics, but have their own appeal nonetheless. Each one has been repurposed as picnic and parking points, with Tissington perhaps the most popular thanks to the Tuck Shop, toilets and the opportunity to deviate into Tissington itself, the trail's namesake and one of the Peak District's most charming villages.

However, the route has a grand finale that offers the most immersive railway experience of all. In the final quarter-of-a-mile the dark entrance to Ashbourne Tunnel looms, reopened for walkers and cyclists by charity Sustrans in 2000. The eerie sound installation inside is what makes this tunnel special. As cyclists glide through its murky middle, they'll be chased by the clunks, chuffs and whistles of a steam train echoing through the darkness at intervals and giving a spooky sense of having pedalled right back into Victorian Britain, when the railways ruled.

TACKLING THE TISSINGTON TRAIL

This trail is easiest if you tackle it from Parsley Hay to Ashbourne, as it's a steady descent all the way in this direction. Leave the cycle hire centre at Parsley Hay and pick up signs for Route 68. Hartington station appears within the first two miles, a popular picnic point with toilets and an attractive old signal box. Hartington Meadows can be found here too, managed by Derbyshire Wildlife Trust and home to wildflowers, grasshoppers, butterflies and skylarks in summer.

From Hartington, you'll sometimes be shielded from the scenery by the high sides of the railway cutting and other times get wide-open views

across the hillsides. On the approach to Alsop station the edges of the deep limestone ravine of Dovedale can even be spotted.

Alsop station has picnic benches if you're in need of a midway break, or carry on to Tissington station, where the little Tuck Shop is a good spot for refreshments. It's also possible to detour off the trail into pretty Tissington village and explore the Jacobean Tissington Hall (it's open to the public on 28 days each year www.tissingtonhall.co.uk).

Fenny Bentley Cutting comes next, another wildlife haven filled with colourful wildflowers in spring and summer, before a short, sharp dip down then up to the car park and cycle hire centre at Mapleton Lane in the final mile.

All that remains now is the short ride through Ashbourne Tunnel to the leisure centre where the trail ends. From here, you could cycle along Station Road into the Georgian town centre to see the beautiful buildings of Church Street and the cobbled market place. ♦

Cycle Hire: Parsley Hay cycle hire centre (01298) 84493 or Ashbourne cycle hire centre (01335) 343156 www.peakdistrict.gov.uk/visiting/cycle



The corner of Victoria Square and St John Street, Ashbourne Photo: Visit England/Visit Peak District

MANIFOLD TRACK

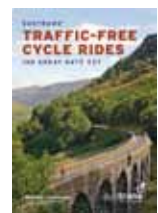
The Tissington Trail is connected to Staffordshire's Manifold Track by an on-road cycle route. Leave the Tissington Trail a short while after Hartington Station and follow Route 548 through Biggin to Hartington. Here, you'll join Route 549 to Hulme End where the Manifold Track begins; a 9-mile, mostly traffic-free route that leads south to Waterhouses, passing the intriguing Thor's Cave along the way.

WELL DRESSED

Tissington's tradition of Well Dressing is renowned. Each spring the wells in the village are blessed and richly decorated with flowers and other natural materials, attracting thousands of visitors. The well dressings remain in place for one week, next year from 5th to 11th May, so time your ride to coincide with this springtime spectacle.

SUPPORT THE TRAIL

The Tissington Trail is owned and cared for by the Peak District National Park Authority (www.peakdistrict.gov.uk/cycling) and Derbyshire County Council (www.derbyshire.gov.uk), along with volunteers from charity Sustrans. If you'd like to join the Sustrans volunteer team that helps to maintain this and other trails around the White Peak, please contact Clyde Hinton clydehinton@talktalk.net.



This ride is taken from Sustrans' Traffic-free Cycle Rides by Wendy Johnson, £15.99 from sustrans.org.uk/shop