

Pictures: Tim Leighton-Boyce



# The town t

**Hill riding over the tops to Abergwesyn where (above) time stands still. Dai Jones is faintly amused at all the fuss about 18-gear bikes. He's been riding a single-speed BSA around the area for 30 years.**





**It's officially the smallest town in Britain (pop.500). It's got ten shops, four pubs and a public library that doubles as a billiard hall. It hosts the Man v.Horse race and is now bidding to become the mountainbike centre of Britain. BA went to investigate...**

## that's going off the road

**L**LANWTRYD WELLS SITS in the the heart of Wales, which means that it's in the middle of nowhere. About four hours from London, off the end of the M4 and a right turn up the A483. The Swansea-Shrewsbury diesel passes five times a day and it's a cinch for cyclists to reach. Until a few months ago not many bothered.

But lately the streets of Llanwrtyd (pronounced *Chlan-ooted*) have begun to look like a staging post for the advance party of a fat tyre invasion. Muddy Foxes and Saracens lean up against the front door of the New Inn. Otherwise dour Welsh hill farmers have been known to sidle up to visiting mountainbike fanatics and ask for a quick spin up the local hills. To put it mildly Llanwrtyd Wells is beginning to get the mountainbike bug. And if certain elements get their way, well boyo, before you know it this quiet grey Victorian spa will find itself re-cast into the role of the UK's first mountainbike resort, an off-road riders version of a ski resort.

If it seems all a little far-fetched, gentle reader, bear in mind that the moving hand behind all this is one Timothy Gartside Esq, best known in mountainbike circles for his manic organisational skills and his ability to create out of next to nothing last year's hugely successful Fat Tyre Five series of mountainbike rides.

It was to one of these events, the Hay Bluff Horsehoe, that Gordon Green came. The Llanwrtyd Wells publican had taken time off to check out a mountainbike event. What he saw, he liked.

Mountainbike events he reckoned were an ideal activity for Llanwrtyd and the surrounding hills.

His area of the upper Wye valley is no stranger to rugged remote get-away-from-it-all events, especially ones imported by Gordon Green. Most off-the-wall of them all is the 22 mile Man v. Horse race. (In its five years the horse has never lost, but we're getting close. Last year the leading human was only four minutes behind). On a less strenuous scale Llanwrtyd had hosted the Drovers walks, that follow the traditional geese, sheep and cattle trails, an international four day walk (1984 turnout: 300+) and, even less strenuously,

a beer festival. With the exception of the last-mentioned they were all ideal events for Llanwrtyd, capable of giving the local tourist economy (three hotels, four pubs and 20 guest houses) a shot in the arm without shattering the ruritanian peace.

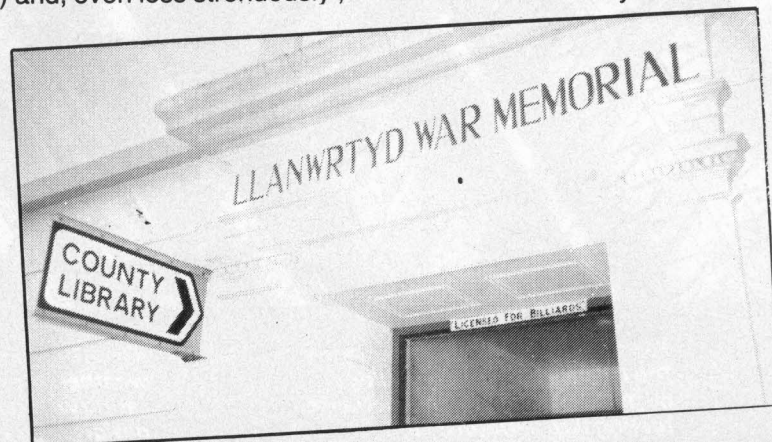
In short, anything that brings people, prosperity and precious little disturbance is welcome in Llanwrtyd. And it was into this scheme of things that Gordon Green could imagine a mountainbike event.

For five months Gordon tried to persuade Tim Gartside to visit the town. On New Year's Day Tim finally arrived to check out Llanwrtyd for a possible Fat Tyre Five event.

Like most mountainbike nuts, Tim spends every available spare moment seeking out new routes. An Ordnance Survey map is never far from hand. In his experience most rural areas have a limited number of routes. There are only so many bridlepaths to be ridden, so many rights of way to be accessed. And on OS Sheet 147 the area round Llanwrtyd Wells didn't look exactly promising.

But maps aren't everything. Standing in Llanwrtyd's main (and only) square in front of Gordon Green's Neuadd (*New-ath*) Arms Tim had only to look west. Where the ten shop main street ran out was the foot of a massive hill. To the north-west he could just make out a forested hillside with some interesting looking firebreaks. Despite the snow cover, his mountainbiker's instinct told him that this was the finest off-road area he'd yet seen. A few days riding confirmed it. The place was riddled with trails. And he'd only had time to explore just one small part, yet there was 800 square miles of what he, an Australian, calls 'wilderness' and can't understand why the British, with typical understatement, still persist in calling 'the countryside.'

Like a prospector whose struck gold, Tim realised that Llanwrtyd was the ideal place for a scheme he'd long dreamed of: a mountainbike centre. It's the sort of dream that wild-eyed mountainbike nuts get after a long day out riding hills. It's the sort of dream that comes out in conversation only after sunset as you ride down for ▶



▷ opening hour and you don't want to forget what a good time you've just had. The sort of dream you trot out when you know there's not going to be another off-road ride like it until the next weekend.

The dream of the mountainbike centre had been around the mountainbikers for some time. It had been kicked over and talked about in pubs after the Fat Tyre Five. The more straightfaced ignored it. Talking dreams too often is dangerous stuff. But it didn't go away.

The version most favoured had a mountainbike centre something akin to a ski resort, a place where you could hire mountainbikes, race them, tour on them, take tuition in off-road techniques, go on guided tours of varying degrees of difficulty or just independently take off into the hills with nothing more than a trail map to guide you. The dream needed a place where you could ride forest tracks, sheep trails, firebreaks, rock screes and gentle country lanes to your heart's content without ever retracing your tracks.

But nobody had tried to make it a reality. Nobody had really bothered to even look at the maps. There was a suspicion that somewhere in the Highlands, like Aviemore, in the off-ski season might be suitable. But it was also going to need a community that wanted it. Over several nights in the saloon bar of the Neuadd Arms Tim unravelled bits of the dream to Gordon Green. It fell on more than receptive ears.

Not far from the town, up in the Irfon Forest (where there are some of the best tracks) there was a vacant timber cabin. Negotiations began to make it the mountainbike centre's first HQ.

Encouraged Tim came back to London and wrote a

lengthy outline and proposal for the centre. Over 100 letters were sent to anyone and everyone who might help. Every Welsh agency, every government department was contacted. The word started to go round Llanwrtyd Wells. Almost overnight 'mountainbike' became the new buzzword among the 500 population. There hadn't been so much excitement since the time BBC-TV had borrowed the town's only vacant shop to film *The Magnificent Evans* with Ronnie Barker.

Tim Gartside started to commute weekly between Llanwrtyd and London spending his time making as many contacts as possible.

An early and significant ally was Major Tim van Rees, a landowner who plays the role of local squire with a degree of self-conscious mockery. There was a curious rapport between the gregarious Australian and the Welsh major. Despite having hardly stepped on a bike in 30 years, the major couldn't resist borrowing Tim's Ritchey. A mountainbike centre Major van Rees pronounced to be 'a rattling good idea'.

The major was an important contact. Doors started to open. Key landowners, the Forestry Commission and the Economic Forestry Group, a consortium of private foresters, became interested. Subject to safeguards and observance of the country code, vast areas of mid-Wales would be open for mountainbikes.

People couldn't have been more helpful if Tim's surname was Jones. His contact book began to read like a Welsh telephone directory. There's Jones the Planning at county hall who's a walking encyclopaedia on rights of way; Jones the Mayor, whom locals say gets 80% of votes at election time because he's related to most of