

# OVER THE TOPS

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**Conquering the fourteen 3,000 foot peaks of Snowdonia in under 24 hours has always challenged climbers. But could it be done by mountainbike? Masters of the impossible, Nick and Dick Crane, were determined to prove it could. Bicycle Action went along for the climb.**

*'I know this may sound a little bizarre but I wonder if you've seen two men on mountain-bikes.'*

THE BICYCLE ACTION staff reporter was careful how he phrased the question. The climbers had just scabbled over a mile long ridge of ragged rocks from the summit of Snowdon. Below them lay the rock-face of Crib Goch and a hands-on descent of a few thousand feet. And now in the late afternoon sun they found themselves confronted by a man with a notebook asking about mountainbikes.

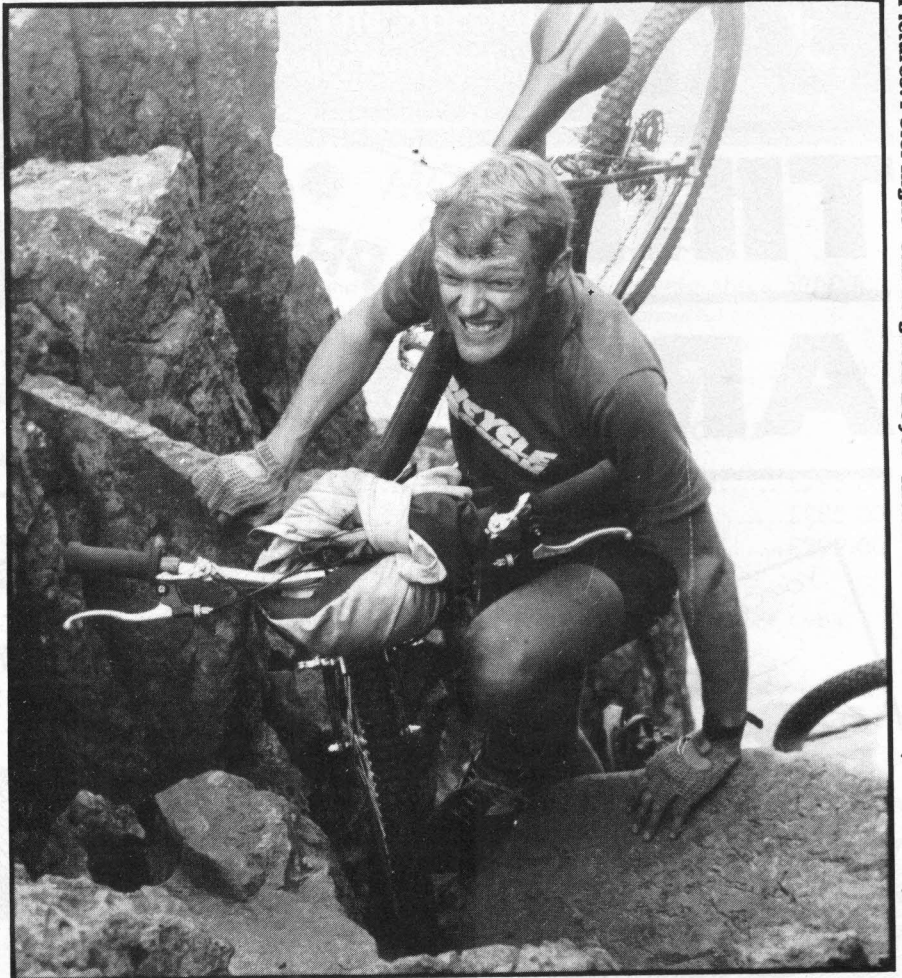
With the English good manners that seem to come to all who share the mountains, the climbers treated the question as if they also believed that a pair of cyclists could somehow make their way up to on a rocky peak accessible only to climbers and with a sheer drop of 1,000 feet either side. After an awkward pause one of them gently questioned as to why anyone would want to ride a bike up an unrideable mountain. The more the BA reporter tried to explain the more absurd it became.

He knew that the prospect of traversing the 14 highest peaks of Snowdonia inside 24 hours phases most walkers. Those that manage it treat the achievement as a personal Everest. The Snowdonia Fourteen is to climbers what the end to end is to cyclists, or marathons to runners.

The BA reporter tried hard: To attempt the 14 peaks, each over 3,000 feet by mountainbike would set down a new marker for the sport of mountainbiking blah blah ....It would show just what could be done blah blah...

The more he spoke the more the mask of polite incredulity slipped over the climber's faces. Then the BA reporter remembered the missing ingredient: The Cranes.

'You remember those brothers who



Pictures: Peter Inglis Tim Leighton-Boyce Richard Grant Airviews (Manchester)

ran across the Himalayas last year?' A flicker of recognition appeared on the climbers faces. Yes , people who ran the Himalayas might just be the sort to ride mountainbikes across Snowdonia.

The BA reporter went on to explain that one of the brothers was Dick Crane and that his cousin Nick, the other rider, was also a contributing editor to this magazine and that two weeks before they had discussed the idea at a family party and well, decided to give it a go...

The mask of incredulity slipped back again. Trying to explain the Cranes was the equivalent of trying to explain riding mountainbikes up Snowdon. Somewhere in the family's evolution they'd lost the gene that teaches the rest of humanity the notion of impossibility. The Cranes just do not understand it. Their idea of a good day's outing is a near superhuman exercise in flat out endurance , preferably combining a punishing test of fitness, with one of stamina and, most of all, guts. They choose the sort of activities that make the rest of us feel tired even thinking about them. After running the Himalayas with his brother Adrian, Dick had run and the first Quadrathon in the UK. This, incidentally, was a short 24 hour outing involving a long-distance swim, a 50-mile walk, a 100 mile cycle ride and a 26 mile marathon.

Then it was off to Africa with Adrian for a Guinness-sponsored run up Mt. Cameroon, a live volcano and West Africa's highest peak. Adrian wasn't around for the Fourteen Peaks in Snowdonia . ( He's working in the U.S. and, of course , preparing to run the US coast-to-coast later in the year.)

Nick has never quite learned how to stand still either. He has cycled in fourteen European countries, climbed in Africa, North America and all over the British Isles. He's raced bikes, run marathons, triathlons. When the two cousins get together there's a powerful unspoken rivalry which means they would have to be near death before either dare give up.

It's an understanding that's been developed over long years spent fell running and climbing. ( Each year the family used to make a pilgrimage to Snowdonia to go climbing. It was usually in winter.)

In 1982 the cousins decided to ride Ben Nevis, Snowdonia and Scar Fell without stopping. They chose Easter time only to run into a freak blizzard. It was so cold that their water bottles snapped in half. On Snowdonia there was a complete whiteout. But the pair kept going for 46 hours. At the finish a half-frozen Dick had to be lifted off his bike.

So when Nick waltzed into the office



and announced that he and Dick wanted to be the first to ride mountainbikes across the Fourteen Peaks there was a collective eyebrow-lifting around the office. 'Well sure we'll arrange to get a photographer up there' we said. 'Well fine', said Nick, 'but the thing is we won't be able to stop. Dick isn't really interested in doing it unless we go flat out. 'We want to, um, set some sort of challenge for anyone else who wants to have a go.' 'Yes,' we said. We thought we knew what he meant. We didn't know the half of it.

### NICK'S STORY

A WHOLE or a half Mars Bar. That was the question. Dick said a half would do and taped his portion to the centre of his handlebars, where, he said, he could watch it all day and test himself by seeing how long he could last before eating it. This was cousin Dick at his most entertaining: he's a master of ingenious deprivation, happier relying on his wits than on pieces of equipment. About weight, he's obsessive. I was still smirking at his little slice of

chocolate bar when he turned on my two maps and demanded that all unnecessary paper be torn from each side of our intended route. So I grudgingly started tearing up map covers and shuffled out of sight before he spotted how long my shoelaces were. When Dick ran the Himalayas last year he'd saved hundreds of milligrams by cutting buttons and labels off his clothing. Each time I see Dick I'm surprised that he's still carrying his ear-lobes.

**5.30 am** : A soggy mist clings to the khaki slopes like a dewy blanket on a sleeping tramp. Rejected gear is strewn all about and I'm fretting about tyre pressures. Much of the riding will be over rock scree so the tyres had to be hard enough to prevent the rims from getting crunched yet not so hard they'd

lose traction on the steep wet grass. It took an hour and a half to ride gently up to our starting point.

As far as we knew it would be the first bicycle attempt at the 'Fourteen Peaks'



and it would also be one of the toughest mountainbike routes so far tried in the UK.

**7.10 am:** The stopwatch started and we hump the bikes over a boulder field to the start of a grass slope. Below us the mist boils, and as far as we can see, clean grey peaks and ridges stretched away beneath a clear blue sky. It's going to be hot. Adrenalin and early-morning exhilaration power us along those early miles and by nine-thirty we've knocked off six of the fourteen, albeit the easiest ones. The bikes are set up beautifully, with ultra low gearing specially fitted for the attempt. In 'winching mode' (26 tooth front ring and 38 teeth rear sprocket) it's possible to tackle outrageously steep climbs, and on the downhills the bikes handle so well you can fling them into fast turns like a pair of finely-waxed slalom skis.

Coming off the Penyrole-wen we hit our first bit of tough going. For 2000 feet the rock falls away at an ugly angle to the A5 at Ogwen Cottage. Hanging off the back of the bike with both brakes jammed isn't

enough to check the speed on this mess of rubble, and with huge rock steps every few metres it becomes a real slither, slide and dive. After losing some skin we swap wheels for feet. The idea is still to ride as much as possible. Later we calculate we rode about 60 per cent of the total journey. We either shouldered the bikes or rode them. There was nowhere we pushed where we could've ridden.

**9.40 am:** At Ogwen Cottage we snatch a jam sandwich and tin of rice pudding before riding through the bogs to the foot of Tryfan.

**10.30am** This is the first of the really difficult sections. Tryfan is the sort of mountain normally reserved for rock-climbers. A thousand feet of very steep rock climbing. The sight of two bicycles travelling past ropes of fiddling gymnasts causes a minor sensation. It isn't easy. The bikes keep jamming in chimneys and threatening to topple us from narrow ledges. In a couple of places we are forced to stand on tip-toe and hang the machines from a projecting rock spike before climbing up ourselves. Bristly Ridge follows. More scrambling,



with some hairy traverses above huge drops, and then we were on top of the Glyders. It's still impossible to ride, as the tops of these peaks are a wild jumble of car-size rocks thrown about at all angles. And we're getting a little sick of carrying the bikes by now.

'How best to carry a mountainbike' becomes a favourite conversation topic. Pushing is too clumsy because the wheels tended to jam in cracks, and the pedals had an enraging habit of clacking your bare ankles from behind. Carrying the bike over one shoulder cyclo-cross fashion looks stylish and for the first ten feet works a treat; any further and the top tube begins cutting in your shoulder blades a slot the size of the Corinth Canal. Dick, ever the innovative non-conformist, pioneers the final solution by wearing his bike round his neck like a giant cravat, the weight spread across both shoulders.

**1.30 pm:** At Glyder Fawr things improve. For the next few miles the gradients and rocks ease enough for continuous fast riding. We are roughly half way along. It's a fragile moment. As we tip the front wheels over the edge of Glyder Fawr we agree to lift the pace to 'maximum fog'.

Y Garn and the long ridge falls in a blur numbed effort. Communication between us has now narrowed to snatched glances to check the other hasn't dropped over the edge and the odd shouted warning about tricky rocks and jumps. Some seconds of euphoria take us round a foot-wide track which curls up



level and fast along the flank of whale-backed Elidir Fawr, below us a 1000 foot slope to a glimmering stream. We - and the bikes- feel in our element. In a manic surge of energy we shoulder the machines for the final hands-and-feet scramble to the summit, skim the cairn and turn for the valley.

**3.30 pm:** What follows proves to be the maddest of the day: nearly 2000 feet straightlining down very steep hummocky grass. We just point the front wheels and hang on, saddles right down and backsides as far back as anatomically possible. We come close to simulating what it feels like hitching a unicycle to the back of the 8.10 to Paddington and being towed over the sleepers at 90 miles an hour. It's exhilarating, nerveless and Dick hates every minute of it. Reaching the road proves to be an excuse for uncorking some high-octane in-

ter-cousin competition; it's never far below the surface and, without a word to each other, we are soon tearing ourselves apart trying to reach the top of Llanberis pass first. It's a grim sweat-lathered duel fuelled by pig-headedness rather than available energy. We reach Pen-y-Pass dizzy with dehydration and, in a state of elaborately disguised near collapse, re-open conversation as though we've just rolled down to the pub for a lunchtime drink rather than raced demonically up 800 feet of melting tarmac.

**4.30 pm:** Dick's accident happens on the rocky path up the lower slopes of Snowdon. The bike nose-dived down a vertical step and he hit the ground hard. Dick picks himself up with blood coming out of an elbow and a leg and limping theatrically carries on up the path. The bike seems fine.

We'd chosen to finish the outing by using the knife-edge ridge of Crib Goch to reach the summit of Snowdon. This is a dangerous ascent and usually claims a fatality or two during the climbing season. In some places it is only a few inches wide with sheer drops on each side. We chose it because it was the shortest route to the top. Dick was bravely pushing on although I knew he was in pain. After riding the first fifteen feet (Dick affecting a one legged style) we spend the best part of an hour feeling our way along the crest.

**7.36 pm:** We reach the top. We hug, lift the bikes onto the triangulation point and watched the valleys fill with shadow. 