

GREAT SCOTTISH BIKE RIDES

25 CLASSIC ROAD CYCLING ROUTES
ACROSS SCOTLAND



DAVE BARTER

DOWNLOADABLE GPX FILES CUSTOM MAPS
DETAILED LOGISTICAL INFORMATION

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25 CLASSIC ROAD CYCLING
ROUTES ACROSS SCOTLAND

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→ *Looking down the Bealach na Bà into Loch Kishorn (route 21).*



Dedicated to the memory of
Colin and Jenny Barter



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Download the Great Scottish Bike Rides GPX files from
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INTRODUCTION – GENESIS AND WHY?

We are often faced with difficult questions or dilemmas that require a long pause to consider before answering. Ask someone to state their ‘favourite place in the world’ and you’ll undoubtedly be faced with a long silence while they consider. Do they pick it on scenery, or climate, or the people? Is convenience a factor, does it have to be easy to reach, or is somewhere remote their ideal? Do they need infrastructure and entertainment? There is a lot to consider when this question is posed.

I don’t need any time to think as I’ve debated this puzzle in my head for many years. The answer is simple: Scotland. Scotland is my favourite place in the world and that statement is underlined by a huge amount of evidence. I’ve been visiting Scotland annually for over 30 years. There is nowhere else in the world that I’ve holidayed more. I struggle to think of a pastime that I haven’t enjoyed there, from sea kayaking to dominos. It’s a place I’m constantly talking about to friends and family. I’ve even tried to move there but family and logistical ties have prevented that. But over the years nothing has dulled my passion for Scotland. Typing these words, I can breathe the bracken-drenched air of the Highlands, feel the soft touch of snow as I push my bike over a closed mountain pass and hear the bronchitic thundering call of a stag hidden high on a hill.

Not only is Scotland my favourite place in the world, it’s also my favourite place to ride a bike. Trust me – I’ve ridden bikes in many other countries and many other locations. This world has no shortage of sublime riding, but Scotland has often slipped under the radar due to its quiet modesty. It’s better known for its off-road riding as a plethora of trail centres have sprung up in forestry locations catering for those who like their thrills waymarked and with guaranteed cafes and parking. Yet take a mountain bike to Torridon with a map and a bit of knowledge and you’ll eclipse all of these experiences with amazing riding in a true wilderness. Road riding has become a poorer cousin to MTB. Ask a road rider about Scotland and they’ll invariably refer to the Bealach na Bà or maybe mention Chris Hoy, Graeme Obree or Kirkpatrick Macmillan. They might have done Land’s End to John o’ Groats or ridden round Loch Ness. These hills, people and locations are all part of riding in Scotland but they’re not the reason for it being my preferred destination on a bike.

For me, Scotland offers the perfect combination of challenge, beauty, seclusion, character and variety to cyclists of all genres. The landscape and climate take direct responsibility for the challenge while contributing wholeheartedly to the beauty. It’s hard to find anywhere in the Scottish countryside that doesn’t make you want to say ‘wow’. It’s a surprisingly big place and very easy to get lost in. The tourist and commuter hotspots are concentrated in relatively few places so it’s very easy to find yourself alone. Scotland’s character is etched all over its landscape by geology, settlement, centuries of conflict and a stubbornness to make road and railway building possible. It’s a country devoid of straight lines both horizontally and vertically. The road and track networks have been constructed at the behest of nature rather than in defiance of it. Man has had a relatively light touch here and it shows in the landscape. But if I’m honest the reason why I love riding in Scotland so much is down to the simple fact that every single ride I do there

is a different experience. There's no such thing as a stereotypical Scottish ride as that can only occur when weather and road conditions align perfectly and you meet exactly the same people in the same places. Imagine a tin of Christmas chocolates with every single one your favourite but each one unique. That's cycling in Scotland for me.

If you need further proof, then let me tell you that I live with my family on the coast in South Devon. Logistically this is possibly the worst location in the UK for an author writing about Scottish road riding to live. Yet when Vertebrate asked me to write this guide, I said 'Yes' without hesitation. What else can you do when you're given the chance to work and ride in your favourite place in the world? The series of van journeys up the dreaded M5 and M6 didn't even figure. I simply thought to myself, *what a wonderful year or two that would be, researching and revisiting many of my favourite routes and heading out to discover new ones.*

I have previous form with Scotland. In 2013 I published *Great British Bike Rides* – this includes 10 amazing Scottish loops which firmly cemented my love for riding round Scotland on the road. Each of these are challenging days out on the bike – averaging over 120 kilometres in length and often with over 2,000 metres of climbing thrown into the mix. The new challenge from Vertebrate was to expand these 10 into 25 routes, showcasing the best road riding to be found. That was going to be a lot of weekends in the van and many visits to Tebay Services. Optimistically I thought I could complete it in a year, but weather and a full-time job gently elongated that timescale into two. Don't tell Vertebrate, but I was having so much fun I needed to drag it out over a longer time period; I write these words with some regret as they signify the end of my quest.

I needed to write this book. *Great British Bike Rides* was my clarion call to British riders to stop putting their bikes on planes and start discovering just how great an island we live on for road cycling. *Great Scottish Bike Rides* distils this message down further. I firmly believe that a wheel once dipped in Scotland will yearn forever to return. I know that this country contains the best riding to be had on our island, and I've sought to showcase as much of it as I can through these 25 routes.

Great Scottish Bike Rides has given me such enormous pleasure to research and write along with an equal amount of challenge. At least three of the rides had to be repeated multiple times when shocking weather prevented photography. The route up Glen Kyllachy deserves an extra special black mark as I walked eight kilometres of it due to unseasonal snowfall. I've encountered closed roads, flocks of sheep, errant deer, binding disc brakes, a jammed van door and numerous forgotten items discovered halfway through a ride at a critical moment. However, I'd do it all again in a flash, if only I could somehow replace the monthly commute up the M6.

So let me introduce you to *Great Scottish Bike Rides*. You'll now have a good idea as to the motivations for writing this book and the reasoning for picking Scotland. My next task is to tell you exactly what you'll find within.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my wife, Helen, for all her patience and proofreading expertise.

GREAT SCOTTISH BIKE RIDES

Scotland is old. It began approximately three billion years ago in the Outer Hebrides with the Lewisian complex (named after the island of Lewis) being formed deep in the earth's crust. Scotland becomes progressively younger as you travel from the north-west to south-east.

Scotland's environment has morphed and evolved over the eons, with continental drift causing oceans to open up and lay down sandstones and mudstones, then closing to create the Highlands when Scotland crashed into England causing the rocks to fold and fault, heating them to very high temperatures. Metaphorically speaking, we have a huge argument between Scotland and England to thank for much of the great riding we find in Scotland.

However, Scotland did not rest easy. Continental drift continued to shift things around, creating an arid desert-like environment followed by a lot of water laying down deposits of sandstones and limestones. Then, to complicate matters, volcanoes formed, the ocean continued to widen, the earth's crust thinned, and eruptions created the island chain we know today as the Inner Hebrides.

Then it got colder. Scotland was sculpted by numerous ice ages with huge glaciers ripping across the land. Carving out the glens and valleys, forming lochs, plains, rock outcrops and creating eye-catching vistas. The volcanoes succumbed to the glaciation and weathering – the final act of an immense piece of geological artistry ready for humanity to weave a tapestry of roads and tracks over it.

The Scottish road network was born from two key influences. Let's begin with the Romans who invaded Scotland multiple times and brought with them their legendary road-building skills. They constructed an early road network across the Southern Uplands before deciding that Scotland was a little too rough for their liking. A track network across the country continued to expand throughout the medieval period. These were largely unpaved and were used by foot travellers and pack animals.

'Proper' roads began to spring up in the 18th century. Military engineer General George Wade oversaw the construction of hundreds of kilometres of roads and bridges which were built to suppress unrest in the Highlands and improve military access. These 'military roads' laid the foundation for Scotland's modern transport network. The 19th and 20th centuries saw major expansion and improvement, particularly with the growth of turnpike trusts, government-sanctioned organisations tasked with building roads and recouping their investment via tolls. Thankfully an emerging railway network eroded their revenues, and they became financially unviable. You get to ride on them for free!

And so, the road network of Scotland was formed allowing me to undertake this magnificent quest to bring you the very best routes for cycling across it.

Great Scottish Bike Rides describes 25 routes showcasing the very best of Scottish road riding. The routes vary from 44 to 105 kilometres in length with the average distance being around 70 kilometres. I believe 70 kilometres is a sweet spot for a great day out in Scotland as it is within the range of a large spectrum of cyclists and reduces the logistics required for water and cafe stops. Some areas of Scotland are very sparse in terms of services.

Many of the routes are loops, but not all of them. There are a number of rides that include spurs or return legs and I've done this on purpose to ensure that you get to see all the best bits of Scottish riding. The Loch Duich & Loch Hourne route (see page 129) is a brilliant example of this. You'll hate me from the start as it heads up a heinous climb only to take you to a dead end, but what a great dead end it is, one you probably wouldn't have ridden otherwise, especially given the nasty little ramp on the return leg.

Almost all of the routes avoid traffic where they can. I've deliberately sought out the finest of roads and where possible avoided urban areas or busy tourist routes. There are some shared roads with the North Coast 500 loop which can get busy in peak tourist season. I must admit that I prefer to ride in Scotland in the early morning or late evening whenever I can as this provides the best light for sightseeing. It also has the added advantage of avoiding most of the cars.

I probably should mention that these are all road rides. There's a tiny amount of cycle path and one road that is quickly becoming a track (I'll leave you to discover that one). The majority of the routes are suitable for a standard road bike; tyres able to cope with a wide range of surfaces are helpful on some of the routes. Just in case you are interested, I do all of my road riding on a cyclocross race bike with tubeless tyres. I've ridden every single route in this book using this bike with a 1x11 set-up. But we're all different and I suggest you set out on whatever you find comfortable. I strongly recommend a wide range of gears, great brakes and at least 28c tyres with some form of puncture resistance.

Scotland is surrounded by islands, and I'd loved to have included many more than I have in this guide – Harris being a case in point as the Golden Road is a magical place to ride. I've managed to squeeze Mull, Skye, Bute and Arran into these pages, so be aware that you'll need to pack money for a number of ferries if you're going to tick them all off.

RIDING A GREAT SCOTTISH BIKE RIDE

Flick back to the introduction and you'll see the words 'challenge' and 'seclusion' as key elements to any Scottish bike ride. These two words are enough to encourage any rider heading out on to the Scottish roads to make sure that they are prepared.

Being prepared can often enhance the riding experience with delays shortened by the right equipment and the ride made more pleasurable due to correct nutrition and hydration. You'll be hard pushed to find a cyclist who hasn't got a myriad of tales of previous disasters to tell. Rides that were curtailed by forgotten puncture repair kits, lonely walks home after 'the bonk' or navigational mistakes that have led to motorway junctions instead of country lanes.

The mantra of preparation and self-sufficiency should be constantly uttered by the Great Scottish bike rider, even when riding in a group. If all riders are prepared for anything then the group can cope with most incidents. It all tends to go terribly wrong when riders assume that others have brought a pump or will have spare tubes to offer.

I've ridden every single route in this book, and each has been stuffed with incident. I've ridden most of them on my own with no support, and despite numerous mechanicals, closed roads, closed shops, rain/snow/hail showers and punctures, I've always made it

back to the start on my bike. Nothing is worse than making a long trip to complete a ride only to have it curtailed by a forgotten item or an easily fixed mechanical issue. The simplest way to ensure that you are prepared is to follow a 'pre-flight' checklist. The lists on page 14 represent my personal checklist which has stood me in good stead over the years.

Fitness

Many people forget that the single best upgrade for any bicycle ride is personal fitness. Fatigue and effort tend to drag the eyes away from the surroundings and towards the floor as the tired cyclist grovels their way on through a hard ride. Therefore, it is important that you're fit enough to tackle these rides, remembering that fitness relates to your ability to complete it rather than the speed at which it is ridden. Most of these rides are within the reach of any cyclist who has recently completed a distance of 50 kilometres or more.

Before you set out to complete any of the rides, have a quick look at yourself and your recent performance. Are you happy with the distance and amount of climbing involved? Is everything working as it should? The smallest niggle can turn into screaming pain after 60 hard kilometres. Let common sense be your guide – if you're not entirely sure about your ability to complete the route then maybe elect to take a shorter option instead.

Nutrition and hydration

Eating and drinking is often the Achilles heel of so many otherwise well-prepared cyclists. Even the fittest of riders will struggle to complete a long loop without regular food and water. There's a wealth of advice available for cyclists and an even larger market full of eclectic energy bars and powders claiming to make you go faster for longer. However, cycling nutrition is not something that you can abdicate responsibility for. It's your body – you need to know how much food and water you require before, during and after each ride. As a cyclist you'll work this out over time and the most important piece of advice is to stick with it.

I ensure that I eat well before each ride and that I get on the bike hydrated. I always carry enough food to eat every hour and then add an extra couple of hours' food for when things go wrong. I live by the maxim that a cyclist should drink before they are thirsty and eat before hunger sets in. Both of these symptoms probably indicate that you've got it wrong. Hydration becomes increasingly important as the weather conditions improve. If you allow yourself to dehydrate in the heat, you'll suffer badly and potentially put yourself at risk of collapse. Therefore, it is important to sit down and plan your fuelling strategy before you set out. By all means consider a shop or cafe stop, but equally plan for it being closed as has often happened to me.

Clothing

Nobody knows more about climatic variability than the cyclist in the Scottish countryside. Cyclists who venture out must be prepared for a whole range of weather conditions. A number of these rides climb above 300 metres in altitude where the chill factor and temperature can be remarkably different from those at lower levels. The best approach

is always to dress in layers, carry a waterproof and ensure that you're able to keep yourself warm if forced to stop by the roadside for an extended period of time.

There's often a high probability of getting wet. Look for clothing that is designed to shed water quickly – it's probably best to avoid the woolly jumper which will become a huge weighty burden once waterlogged.

I never leave home for an extended ride without a base layer, arm warmers, a waterproof and a gilet. Even on the hottest day it is possible to get cold fixing a puncture in the shade in a breeze. I never ride without gloves; having been the victim of a number of falls I know the damage that the road can do to an outstretched hand. Equally, I'd always recommend riding with a helmet.

Tools and spares

This checklist is simple. Stare at your bike and imagine what you would do if each individual component failed. Balance this against the probability of failure and you'll be able to mentally construct a decent packing list. In my experience, most failures tend to occur around the wheel area – particularly punctures – so I always carry the following:

- at least one spare inner tube
- two sets of self-adhesive puncture repair patches
- a puncture repair kit including chalk, a tyre marker, rubber adhesive and 10–20 patches of assorted sizes
- a tyre boot to repair splits in the tyre
- a thick sewing needle to dig glass and flint out of tyres
- a set of tyre levers including a spare (I've broken one in use before)
- a spoke key for straightening wheels

It's not only wheels that go wrong – gears, brakes, pedals and anything else not welded to the bike can go out of adjustment and require some tinkering. I always make sure that I am in possession of:

- a cycling-specific multi-tool featuring a chain tool, Allen keys and screwdriver
- cable ties and cycling glue; can be used as a temporary repair for many failures
- a long length of electrical tape wound around the seat post; useful for handlebar tape repairs or other fixes where cable ties will not help
- a small pocketknife
- a set of latex gloves (to keep hands clean when fixing things)
- a set of hand wipes, for cleaning grunge off the bike
- a small length of chain and some powerlinks or chain pins

Finally, there are a few items worth having for when things really do go wrong. I always carry a tiny set of emergency LED lights just in case I am delayed and end up benighted. I carry a card with my name, along with the name, address and phone number of my next of kin in case of an accident. I also bring some money and a credit card for those rare occasions when the bike or rider cannot go any further and the services of a taxi is required.

This all sounds like a lot of gear, but I manage to squeeze most of it into a single pouch that fits nicely into a rear cycling jersey pocket. The inner tube is separately wrapped to ensure that the tools do it no harm in transit.

Contact and emergencies

It's a good idea to let someone know where you are going every time you head out on a demanding ride. Many of these routes visit remote locations devoid of mobile phone signal, therefore leaving behind a copy of the route and an expected arrival time means that a concerned friend or relative can raise the alarm should you not return within a reasonable time. If possible, carry a mobile phone. This is for a number of reasons: you can summon help or moral support in case of any problem or incident you or someone else has on the road, and phone boxes are increasingly hard to find so it's not wise to rely on them.

Before you head off

I've lost count of the number of times my rides have been 'altered' by road repairs. There's nothing worse than committing yourself to a remote location only to find a road closed along the way and a huge diversion required. It's rare that diversions take cyclists into account and often you'll find yourself miles out of your way on a highly unsuitable main road. You can search for road closures along your planned route on the National Highways website: www.nationalhighways.co.uk

Check for events in the area as well – you may not want to cycle through the middle of the annual carnival, or maybe it would be an added bonus! Finally, it's always worth checking the weather forecast one more time and using this to plan the timing and direction of your ride. The wind direction can be used to plan the best start/finish point on a loop. It's always good advice to finish with the wind on your back to aid your tired legs home.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book contains 25 road cycling routes across Scotland. The routes are roughly ordered from south to north. Each route provides you with the following information.

- An introduction telling you a bit about the area and some brief details about the ride.
- A detailed route description, which includes details on the climbs and descents, road surfaces, the views you'll enjoy and where is good to stop for food and drink, along with information on any interesting places passed on the route.
- Essential information to help you plan your ride including distance; ascent; route grade (see overleaf); timings; start/end locations; and where is good to park.
- A bespoke map.
- An elevation profile.

Route grades

- ○ ○ **Moderate** A ride that is manageable with relatively even effort throughout. May contain some extended climbing but nothing too difficult.
- ● ○ **Challenging** A harder ride due to either its length or amount/difficulty of climbing. Will require some extended periods of effort.
- ● ● **Epic** A much harder route that's going to require good fitness and climbing ability to complete.

Maps and navigation

Alongside the route directions and maps, GPX files can be downloaded for all the routes (see page 7). You can sync the GPX files directly on to your GPS device (i.e. your smartphone or bike-specific GPS navigator) and make route navigation a breeze.

What could possibly go wrong? Well, quite a lot as it happens. Roads can be closed, turnings can be missed, batteries can run out, or your GPS device can detach itself from the bar and smash upon the road. All of these have happened to me which is why I always carry a paper map.

A good digital mapping solution such as the Ordnance Survey app ([osmaps.com](https://www.osmaps.com)) will allow you to print customised maps fitted to your planned route. These can then be laminated, rolled up and stuffed into a back pocket for use when required. This eases the problem of carrying large maps while giving you the flexibility to change things on the fly if required.

Many Audax riders carry route cards with navigational prompts to aid them along the way. These can be a useful solution if you do not possess a GPS device or smartphone and wish to navigate 'au naturel'.

I strongly believe in 'pre-flying' the route before riding it. Trace the line around the map and familiarise yourself with the notable features, points of navigation and potential shortcuts should anything go wrong.

While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy within the directions and descriptions in this book, things change and we are unable to guarantee that every detail will be correct. Please treat stated distance and elevation as guidelines and exercise caution if part of a GPX file or some information in the text appears at odds with the route on the ground. A comparison between the GPX file and mapping should see you on the right track.





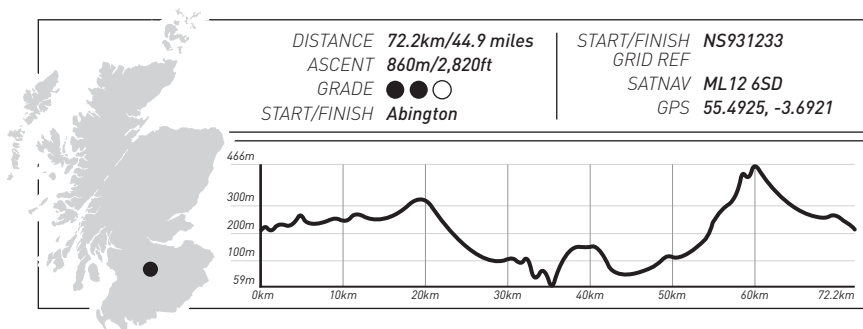
2

LOWTHER HILLS & THE MENNOCK PASS

INTRODUCTION

Wanlockhead has the distinction of being Scotland's highest village and its southern side is reached by a 'must-ride' climb, the Mennock Pass. This pass is defined by the Lowther Hills, a high, rolling mass of grass and bracken that proves an ideal breeding ground for classic cycling roads. The hills deliver perfect gradients for those who like their hills long but not overly steep – it's

a great place to train for long days out in the Alps or Pyrenees. But the ride is not all hills, there's also an excursion to the magnificent 17th-century Drumlanrig Castle, well worth a short diversion. It must be said that a real attraction of this ride is the last 12 kilometres which are almost entirely downhill – not many routes offer such luxury on the way home.



← The majesty of the Mennock Pass.



↖ *An irresistible ribbon of tarmac.*

← *Prepare for all conditions.*

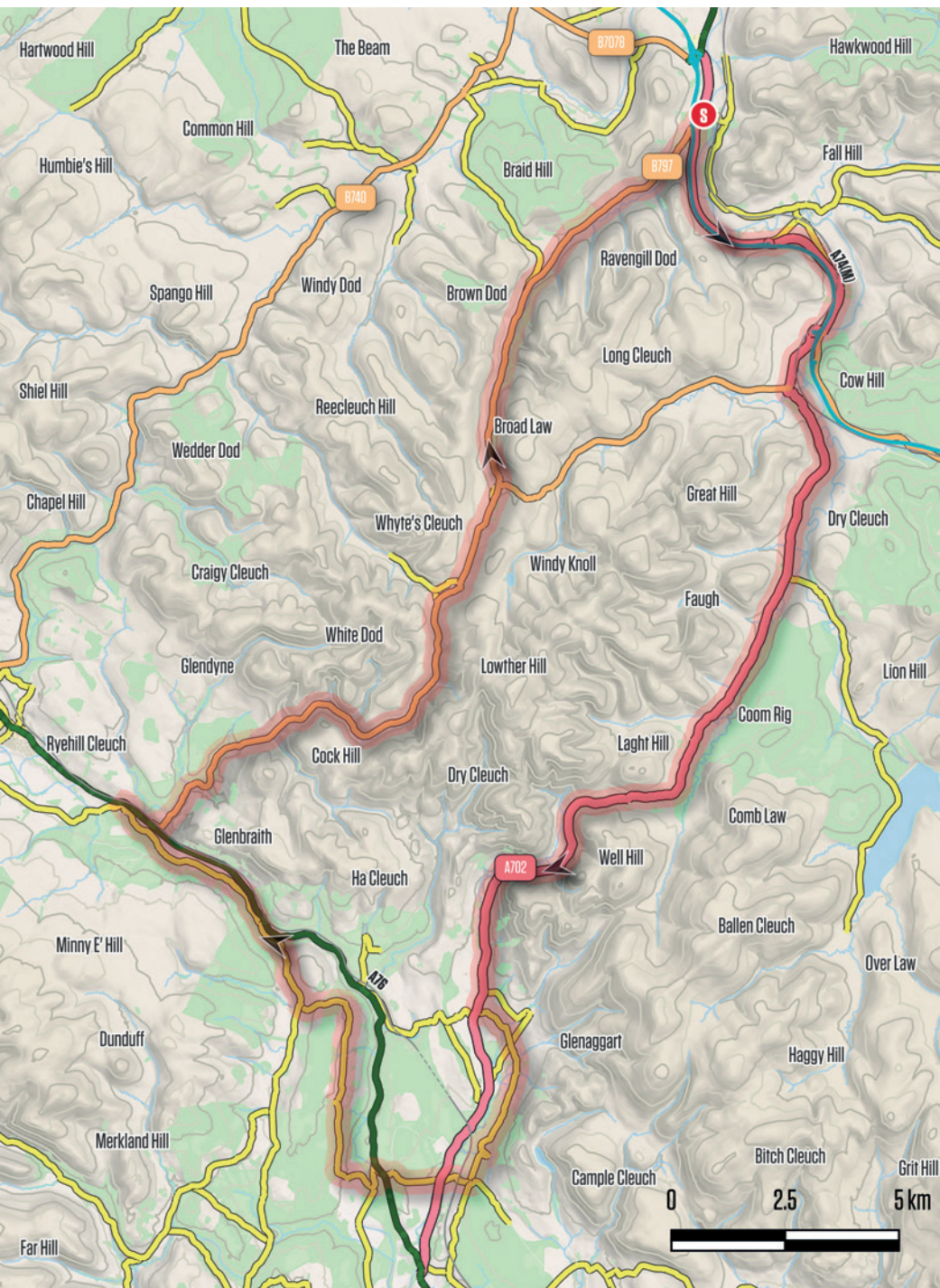
↑ *Always remember to look back when climbing.*

THE RIDE

There's a free long-stay car park at the southern end of the village of Abington. Park here and ride south along the A702. This road is relatively quiet due to its proximity to the motorway; there is a marked cycle lane, but at the time of writing the surface is poor so you're probably better off sticking to the main road. You'll be climbing gradually from the off but will hardly notice. To your left, the River Clyde twists and turns its way down in the other direction. Follow the road under the motorway and stick with the Clyde as you climb ever higher into the Southern Uplands. This feels like a wild

and remote place to be; on the right day you'll encounter very little traffic and can use the solitude to plan your ascent of the Mennoch Pass.

Finally, the road heads downhill as you come into the Dalveen Pass and reap the rewards of all of your hard work. This is a fantastic descent on a road wide enough to allow you some speed but winding enough to give you something to think about. The fun is interrupted at Durisdeermill, where it's time to turn sharp left and head out on to some much wilder roads. You can stick to the A702 if you wish but the singletrack lane to Drumshinnoch is a welcome





contrast to what you've ridden so far. It gently traverses East Morton Hill, nips through a small section of woodland and then drops you down a steep hill and over the A702.

Follow the road across the A76 until you see a sign to Drumlanrig Castle. The next section of road is sublime, climbing up through Drumlanrig Park, becoming a perfect, red-topped road and tempting you to follow it onwards rather than taking a short diversion to the castle itself. But please don't be tempted, the castle is well worth seeing as the approach road is spectacular with the castle growing in

stature every metre you ride along it. The cafe is down this road as well – make sure you've checked the opening hours. Retrace your steps and climb steeply through the park until the road deteriorates and descends towards the River Nith. The surface along this section is not great so I hope you've packed some decent tyres, but it's all rideable on a road bike. Follow the Nith for a few kilometres until you meet our old friend the A76. Join this for a very short spurt to Menzies where you reach the main item on today's agenda, the Menzies Pass.

This is a long climb, around 10 kilometres in length and gaining over 300 metres



← *Today's main agenda item.*

↑ *Sultry hills frame a classic climb.*

in height, but don't be put off by the statistics as it starts off relatively gently and continues in that vein for much of its height. You're soon back into the wilderness as the Lowther Hills impose themselves either side of you. Steep valley walls encroach and encourage you to get on with it to see what you'll find at the top. There's a short steeper section a few kilometres in, but you'll find a rhythm and use this to get yourself ever higher and in sight of Wanlockhead; this comes at a bealach, and you'll drop down to the village thinking you are done. You're not: there's a few hundred metres more of climbing

to be had; it's all over when you see the *Welcome to South Lanarkshire* road sign.

You've now earned the pay-off. It really is 12 kilometres of downhill back to the start, and what a 12 kilometres they are. For the first few kilometres there's no need to pedal at all, just enjoy the spectacular valley that's opened up in front of you. You'll speed through Leadhills where there's a shop and pub if you can't wait until the end. The descent becomes shallower further down and you'll need to turn the pedals to keep your momentum, but what an end to a fabulous ride – please don't be tempted to do it in reverse.