

# YOU MUST BE MAD!

*When Tamasine Gilbert, who has cerebral palsy and partial sight, proposed riding round the island of Anglesey, off the coast of the UK, with her expedition-cyclist brother Cass, nobody believed her...*



"Cycle round Anglesey in January? You must be mad!" And then: "Are you sure you're fit enough?"

Such were the comments made by friends when I announced my (or rather, my brother's) intention of embarking on a five-day tour on a recumbent tandem trike.

"We'll only do about 15-20 miles a day," he assured me, and warily I agreed, unsure how I would cope. I'd barely reached three miles on the recumbent exercise bike in the gym!

It's not that I am unadventurous – I have already scuba-dived and canoed – but due to my co-ordination and dexterity problems I have, up until now, been unable to ride a conventional bike. The idea of leaving the gym behind and taking to the open road appealed enormously, but my overriding concern was: how would I keep up with my expedition-cyclist brother? The chase was on.

As our departure drew nearer, my anxieties deepened. It was not getting any warmer, and the forecast of wind and rain in Wales didn't help matters much. I was determined not to be defeated by the challenge however, and told myself I could do it. I would not give up on day one if I could help it...

On reaching our base, our godmother's house in Trearddur Bay, we could not have hoped for a lovelier day on which to depart. It was a beautiful morning, the sun was shining, and I felt excited, knowing that our trip was truly beginning. A photographer came from the local paper, and after I was made to feel appropriately important by having my picture taken from all angles, we waved farewell to civilisation and were off!

As we ventured forth I sat back and let my feet do all the work. With a cushion behind me, I felt amazingly comfortable. Aside from a brief test-run the previous month, this was our first ride on the trike. The first few moments were hair-raising. I was sitting, almost lying, low in the seat, with my feet firmly clipped into the pedals. I had been told that the bike was very good for my balance, as there was no chance of falling out. But as at the beginning of every new experience, I felt slightly scared. Still, we proceeded with only a few shrieks at turns, and after two or three miles, I took the role of indicator.

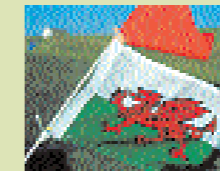


Instinctive to the experienced cyclist, indicating can prove to be a lesson in itself to the disabled novice. To begin with, turning right seemed particularly difficult: because my left side is weaker, I found it hard to hold on with only one hand. It was easy to lose control and sway from side to side when negotiating a corner. My head had a tendency to bob up and down, but wearing a helmet stopped this, as apart from the safety aspect, it helped to keep my head straight and still.

Leaving Trearddur behind, my fears subsided too, and I felt only a strange mix of relaxation and excitement. I began to concentrate on how we worked to move the bike as a team, developing coded signals to tell me what to do, or how to act. "BO!" – Big One – meant we were ascending a huge hill, and "bogie on our tail!" warned that traffic was behind. In good weather, I loved to hear Cass shout "NPR!" – No Pedalling Required – and we would race downhill, letting the wind carry us to the bottom.



**ABOVE:** Cass and Tam on the road: the 'Oglemobile' got them plenty of attention



**BELOW LEFT:** Where there are windmills, wind can not be far behind...

**BELOW CENTRE:** Flying a Welsh flag is good politics; Welsh is the first language here

**BELOW RIGHT:** The longest station name, and almost certainly Anglesey's longest trike





## THE TASTE OF FREEDOM

Riding such a machine gave me an exhilarating freedom that I have never felt before. Due to my partial sight and cerebral palsy, I am unable to drive and have to rely on friends and family to convey me to where I want to go. It felt refreshing to be the co-driver, as opposed to the passive passenger, and I even wondered whether I would eventually be able to manage steering the bike myself.

I felt proud to be seen in possession of the tandem and our early nickname, ‘The Oglemobile’, could not have been more appropriate. Throughout the trip I was not the only one to be enthralled by its novel shape. Even the animals

seemed baffled by our strange mode of transport and one Dulux-style sheepdog could not believe that the bike was the perfect height to leap over! I am not a great dog lover at the best of times, and being practically sat upon was slightly unnerving, but it all added to the cycling experience.

Everyone we met seemed just as intrigued, and more than ready to talk to us about our travels. The proprietor of an arts and crafts shop kindly stopped work to show us round and gave us plenty of information about his life on Anglesey. The pace of life bikes generate is a slow one, and it comes as a shock to suddenly realise you must hurry or you will lose the light.

Unlike Cass, as a non-cyclist, I never expected to be waved to and hooted at by passing cars so often. Late one afternoon, we were stopped by a man who turned out to be a keen cyclist. He agreed with my brother that we’d better move on, or I would catch cold, but in the event he kept us talking for over an hour!

I never failed to be amused by such incidents, and remembering people’s reactions still makes me smile.

“Look at that!” they would murmur. “Is it safe? So low down, and near to the ground! You can’t even see over the hedges!” Then the women would take me aside: “Oh, I do worry about you” they

## WEATHER AND WINDMILLS

In fact, Anglesey proved to be the perfect terrain for cyclists. Thanks to the new dual carriageway that runs across the island, traffic is diverted away from the smaller roads, leaving them free for exploration. We were able to use main roads as well as lanes, and often sped along for hours, undisturbed by traffic. What’s more, the island is also very historical, rich in burial mounds and standing stones where druids once gathered.

After a couple of days I felt adjusted to cycling though not even the windmill and many windfarms we passed en route could prepare me for the terrible weather for which Anglesey is known. We were fortunate to be able to start and end our trip on beautiful days, but at other times, although it did not rain while we rode, it was very cold and blustery.

One night I awoke to torrential rain and a raging gale outside. I could not fall back to sleep, and I faced a dilemma: I felt no inclination to cycle under these conditions, but I knew we had to leave the B&B somehow! Even my experienced brother seemed a little perturbed but by morning the rain had stopped, although it was still quite blowy, luckily it was in our direction! My prayers had been answered and we were on our way again.

For me, this showed another side to cycling that differed from our more sedate days. It was so windy that if we were at a standstill, I had to control the handbrake the whole time to keep the bike from moving. Sometimes I could not even open my mouth to talk and Cass’s instructions went unheard! At this point I was particularly grateful we were riding a tandem, as we were able to divide the hard work. I was also glad I could cling onto the handle bars – positioned at my side – to keep myself stable.

At the end of an exhausting day, there was nothing I looked forward to more than reaching the warmth and comfort of our chosen B&B. But before we could adhere to our own replenishment – teacakes, cinnamon bread and endless cups of tea proffered to us by hospitable landladies – it was important to make sure that the Oglemobile had a warm and dry place to sleep as well. Once we had established this, we would retire to our rooms, I would peel off my layers of clothes and a heavy tiredness would steal upon me.

Whilst out riding I felt healthier than ever. At one time, my brother complained that his knee hurt, so we had to stop. Of course, this could happen to anyone who had been cycling as hard. But I found it especially ironic since he has toured the world while I am supposed to be the disabled one!

However, journeying from place to place, carrying only the essentials, can get a little tiring and my legs were certainly feeling it by the end. Every mile brought us a little closer to home, and I was able to climb the steep hill to our Godmother’s house, with the comforting thought that a hot bath and hair-dryer awaited my arrival.

Even now, two weeks after our return, I can’t quite believe it was really me who went cycling in

Anglesey. I exceeded all my expectations, as I was unsure whether I would realistically be able to physically manage a single day.

Above all, the trip has shown me that cycling, unlike the other activities I have tried, is the one sport that with a little help, allows me to travel independently. I am able to ride in harmony with an able-bodied person and not worry that I must hurry to keep up, as the pace is set by me.

I feel so much fitter for the outdoor exercise and the knowledge that as a first-timer I was able to cover eighty miles over five days really inspires me to continue. My feet are itching to get back into the pedals – hopefully I will enjoy slightly warmer weather for my next expedition!

Tamasine Gilbert contracted viral encephalitis at the age of 3 months, causing a near miss cot death, and resulting in cerebral palsy and partial sight. She has recently completed a Degree in English Literature at the University of Kent at Canterbury.

Cass Gilbert has cycled from Sydney to London and ridden a tandem across Central Asia. His websites are [www.cyclesydneylondon.com](http://www.cyclesydneylondon.com) and [www.tandemtoturkistan.com](http://www.tandemtoturkistan.com)

**All pictures by Cass Gilbert.**

## THANKS TO:

### Westcountry Recumbents

([www.wrhpv.com](http://www.wrhpv.com), 0870 740 1227) for lending the Greenspeed tandem trike.

### U-Drive

([www.u-drive.co.uk](http://www.u-drive.co.uk)) for loaning a Transit van.

### Gill Bike Gear

([www.gillbikegear.co.uk](http://www.gillbikegear.co.uk)) for supplying warm clothing.

## RESOURCES

Although the Greenspeed GTT is not designed as a special needs bike, there are several companies who offer a range of bikes for people with all kinds of disabilities. The best way to research the possibilities is on the internet.

Some useful sites, particularly for the UK, are:

- **Pedal Partners:** [www.pedalpartners.co.uk](http://www.pedalpartners.co.uk)
- **Chevron Hand Cycles:** [www.chevronwheelchairs.co.uk](http://www.chevronwheelchairs.co.uk)
- **Pashley Trikes:** [www.pashley.co.uk](http://www.pashley.co.uk)
- **Special Bikes:** [www.specialbikes.co.uk](http://www.specialbikes.co.uk)
- **UK Handcycling Association:** [www.handcycling.org.uk](http://www.handcycling.org.uk)
- **Bromakin Wheelchairs:** [www.bromakin.co.uk](http://www.bromakin.co.uk)
- **Wheels for All:** [www.cycling.org.uk/wfa\\_index.html](http://www.cycling.org.uk/wfa_index.html)
- **ICE** (make another recumbent tandem trike): [www.ice.hpv.co.uk](http://www.ice.hpv.co.uk)

Some overseas manufacturers:

- **Greenspeed:** [www.greenspeed.com.au](http://www.greenspeed.com.au)
- **Freedom Ryder:** [www.freedomryder.com](http://www.freedomryder.com)
- **Varna Handcycles:** [www.varnandcycles.com](http://www.varnandcycles.com)