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Rutland Water

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Rutland Water

Someone in the 1970s had it in for Rutland. First they flooded England's smallest county, then they abolished it entirely, absorbing it into Leicestershire.

But 40 years on, Rutland has not only regained its independence, it's come to love its reservoir – quickly redubbed Rutland Water rather than the rather prosaic Empingham Reservoir. And not only is it a mecca for bird-watchers and sailors, it has a terrific circular cycle route.

Rutland Water is pretty much the ideal first day ride for anyone finding their cycling legs. It's not far: just 15 miles round the reservoir, with an optional six-mile out-and-back along the Hambleton peninsula. It's not hilly, but there are enough little ups and downs to keep you interested. And it's almost entirely traffic-free.

What's on the route?

It's a circular route, much of it unsurfaced, which links the car parks around the reservoir. Car parks might not sound like much of a destination, but these are where the cafés, picnic tables and (often) good views of the reservoir are to be found. Oh yes, and the bike shops. Super-successful cycling retailer Rutland Cycling started here in 1981 by hiring out and selling bikes, and now operates two sizeable stores.

The villages of Edith Weston and Whitwell are just off the circuit, while attractive Manton is part of the route and has a pub justifiably popular with cyclists. But don't pass up the county town of Oakham, linked to the circuit by a safe roadside path.

Practicalities

Large parts of the route have a gravel surface. You'll be fine on a hybrid or mountain bike, but we wouldn't recommend it on a road bike.

The nearest railway station is Oakham on the Birmingham–Leicester–Peterborough–Cambridge line, a couple of miles away.

Mile by mile

Starting from **Oakham**, head out along the High Street until you pick up the signs for National Cycle Network route 63. This leads you out of the town on a pleasant-enough roadside path. You can take the circuit either way round, but we'd recommend doing it clockwise: that way you get the first roadside section out of the way, and the compulsory pub stop at Manton is nearer the end.

When **Barnsdale Hill** looms in front of you, turn off to the right through a gate, following a path that hugs the shore. With a lakeside hotel perching on the hill, watch out for the end of the old road running into the reservoir: you'll see several such traces of pre-flood Rutland. A quick pedal uphill takes you to the Barnsdale car park and picnic area, traditionally the most secluded of the four sites around the reservoir.

The route continues as a wooded track with bird hides on the right, popular with the twitchers who descend on Rutland Water in hope of seeing the ospreys (among others). **Whitwell**, the next picnic area, is one of the busiest and the home of Rutland Cycling. The paved path from here to **Sykes Lane**, the third picnic area, is inevitably very busy and you'll be weaving among walkers and nervous cyclists.

Here the route takes an abrupt turn south across the dam which makes it all possible. Stop and look across the water, and you'll gain a sense of how the River Gwash valley was flooded to create this massive reservoir. The little river leaves via a curious pump-house structure at the far end of the dam.

Normanton is renowned for its infilled church, which has become emblematic of Rutland Water and the county in general. The church was originally to have been demolished altogether, but the Anglian Water Authority was persuaded to leave it standing, filled with rubble to just above the water level. For years it languished as a rarely-open museum. Now it has found a second lease of life as a wedding venue – but for civil weddings, not church ones: the church was deconsecrated shortly before reservoir construction began. There's another picnic area here, and a second Rutland Cycling store.

After **Edith Weston** and its sailing club comes a more rugged, undulating section of path, surfaced in gravel and with occasional 'Slow! Steep hill' signs. There are fewer walkers here, not least because the path ends suddenly at the old Lyndon Road. The area ahead is a bird reserve, so cyclists are diverted onto local lanes instead – though a new roadside cycleway ensures a safe arrival in the pleasant village of **Manton**. The Horse & Jockey pub, on the edge of the village, is deservedly popular with cyclists doing the circuit.

Once past the railway, the path becomes a quiet, level, unsurfaced and sometimes muddy route skirting the edge of the nature reserve. The reserve is named after little **Egleton**, the last village on the route; from here it's just a mile until the circuit is complete.

If you have a spare hour, though, do take the diversion along the **Hambleton Peninsula** – the village built on a hill which survived the drowning. The track around the edge of it is more rudimentary than the main circuit, but still very cyclable on a hybrid: alternatively, you can follow the quiet lane through the village, perhaps stopping at the famous Finch's Arms gastropub.

