



# Wheeling healing

Devon's miles of cycle paths offer fabulous opportunities for people with mobility challenges, as Freetrike founder Tom Pales explains to  
SIMONE STANBROOK-BYRNE

The wind is in our faces, a massive skein of Brent geese has just flown overhead and Heidi, Tom and I are flying along the path beside the Exe Estuary. Immersed in the great outdoors, we are travelling fast, and very comfortably, on recumbent trikes.

For Heidi, this is something she thought she might never experience. But with the Freetrike Outreach service, the brainchild of Tom Pales, she is out there pedalling with the best

of them. "I used to be very fit," she tells me. "I'd had a 20-year army career and was taking a year out to travel before starting on the next phase. Then this happened."

"This", she explains was a sudden massive stroke that robbed her of her career and impaired her mobility.

Heidi has no use of her left arm and very little use of her left leg. She cannot walk and gets around using an electric wheelchair. But, with Freetrike's service, for a couple of hours a fortnight, her

mobility is restored and she's back out in the world.

"My left leg gets very stiff and to go out for two hours, moving my leg round and round on the pedals, helps to keep it moving. It's fantastic, being out in the fresh air on the trike, it shows I'm not just this 'shell' that doesn't work anymore. I've cycled about six miles today. I can still do it!"

Tom explains how it all started.

"In 2002 my father had a stroke that left him with the same predicament as Heidi and many of

Photo: Matt Austin



our other clients, with no use of his left side. When this happened I was working in London. The aftermath of my father's stroke, and working with his rehab team at the Marden Neuro Rehab Centre in Exeter, inspired me to change career and study physiotherapy. For five years Dad and I experienced what it is to be institutionalized and sofa-bound. And, while he had called "check mate", I was excited about this new avenue of healthcare that I had stumbled upon."

Taking very short walks with his father along the newly built Granite Way, one day they encountered a man using a homemade recumbent trike. The next day Tom and his father visited the Falmouth-based company, Inspired Cycle Engineering (ICE), and this was the start of a new chapter that would have a massive, positive impact on so many people – trikers, their families and carers.

"The first trike we bought for Dad in 2007 was a British-made trike coupled with German adaptations. That gave us the basic 'recipe' that today we change for each individual. The trikes have a low centre of gravity and we've worked to improve the pedalling dynamics, so you get the maximum motion for the effort.

"Each trike, tandem or bike is custom-built. For instance, if the client has a paralysis on one side, we can fit all the controls on the side that's not affected. The braking, steering – everything is one-handed. If the leg that has been paralysed is falling outwards we have special pedals that pull it in to the centre.

"Heidi's trike is the most advanced we've ever had. Made by

**ABOVE:**  
Tom Pales on a recumbent trike

**TOP RIGHT:**  
Tom with Heidi in 2016 at Marden Rehab Centre in the physio gym

**RIGHT:**  
Labrador Sophie with Tom and Ben

## MORE FREETRIKE FOLK

As well as Tom and Hamish, black labrador Sophie has been part of the team since she was a pup, riding in a bike basket.

"She makes everyone smile and draws people in to have a chat with us, before charging down to the water for a swim."

Ben has been triking with Tom and Sophie for over seven years, after having a stroke and subsequently reading about Freetrike in *Devon Life* in April 2012. Tom collects him from home, driving to one of their favourite routes. He says: "Ben has really enjoyed watching the evolution of the trike he uses, as the suspension, the gears and braking system have all improved over time."

The 'trike grins' on everyone's faces say it all!



ICE, all the transmission on this one is Japanese; it has a motor on it so that as she pedals it amplifies her efforts, and the gears are automatic. The seating is the most comfortable in the world, it's like a sofa!"

Freetrike also offers a sales service so that clients and their partners can go it alone. Each month they adapt and perfect all manner of equipment, trikes, tandems and bikes for their clients.

**'It's fantastic, being out in the fresh air on the trike, it shows I'm not just this 'shell' that doesn't work anymore'**

We reach the halfway point. Tom unpacks the 'kitchen': hot water, coffee beans, grinder... Heidi and I relax back on the trikes, Maryland cookie in one hand, cuppa balanced on the trike's mirror that doubles-up as a coaster.

"In Devon we have 10 council-developed paths that offer us over 150 miles of traffic-free cycling," Tom tells me. "Our favourite is this 16 mile Exe Estuary Trail. It has bags of personality, riding through village communities and then out into green stretches on boardwalks, overlooking the Exe Estuary to Powderham Castle.

"We have favourite stops along it, like the 'magical bench' at Turf Locks, where we meet all manner of other cyclists, from Nordic ski instructors to Dartmoor wild swimmers, all to the backing soundtrack of the estuary waterfowl."

In the last couple of years Tom

## OUT AND ABOUT WITH FREETRIKE

Tom believes that almost everyone can enjoy Freetrike's escorted, one-to-one rehab triking.

"If you can steer with one hand you can trike. Any age and disability; we can get people active and outdoors. Everything we deliver is realistic, achievable, gentle and fun. Our first assessment is council-funded and free and can be done in the living room if outdoors is too daunting, like it was for my father."

Recumbent trikes are popular overseas as a means of getting about – for anyone. Because they aren't something specifically designed for disability, but are more of a lifestyle statement, this has a positive psychological bearing on those using them. This wider market appeal creates a demand, so manufacturing companies have the budget to develop design.

If a trike isn't suitable then a specially designed tandem or a hand-trike can be used. Freetrike also uses standard bicycles adapted, like the trikes, to a client's specific needs.

has contracted Hamish to work with him at Freetrike, effectively doubling the number of clients for whom they can cater. They work with all ages and disabilities and by spring 2020 they expect to have covered 15,000 miles with clients.

Freetrike is an inspiring and innovative way of getting people out and about. It deserves to go far – and, on its three wheels, it surely will. ♦

[freetrike.co.uk](http://freetrike.co.uk)



Photo: Matt Austin