

DEVON LIFE

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Three-wheeling HEALING

Confronted by his father's disability, Tom Pales discovered a novel mode of transport

Freetrike is a cycle coaching service for people with disabilities living in and around Devon. The service uses a variety of traffic-free National Cycle Network paths to deliver achievable, one-to-one coaching on your doorstep.

It was when my father had a stroke in 2002 that the idea for Freetrike came about. When he finally returned home from hospital it became clear that a great many challenges lay ahead. My father, an experienced sailor who had recently retired to restore a cottage in Lydford, now sat stranded in the living room with one side of his body paralysed. Despite all our efforts we were unable to separate him from his sofa sanctuary. My mother was overwhelmed.

At the time I was 25 years old, living in London with a career in property management. I would never have guessed that my father's stroke would lead to the idea of a service that would help people in Devon challenge their own disability.

When Devon County Council developed a stretch of disused railway path close to my parents' house, an opportunity unfolded. The Granite Way formed part of one of the greatest cycle routes in Europe, Route 27, which runs from Devon's south coast to north coast. Each week I would drive my father to the tarmac path for a short walk, leaving a marked rock at our furthest point. Over the months the rock travelled 150 metres from the beginning of the path, but no further.

My relationship with my father was tested to the limit, until one day a man cruised past with a wide smile on what looked like a sofa with pedals. We had seen our first recumbent trike. Within the week we had visited Inspired Cycle Engineering (ICE) in Falmouth and made a purchase. The three-wheeling healing had begun!

The first hurdle was getting my father to transfer onto the trike. Once we had overcome this I would run alongside the trike until my father felt confident to go it alone. We flew past the marked rock every week, journeying to the end of the path through stunning embankments, cuttings, bridges and woodlands. We experimented with different routes and gradually my father's world opened up again. On rainy days we triked indoors, with a roller on the rear wheel, our black Labrador Jess looking on bemused.

A man cruised past with a wide smile on what looked like a sofa with pedals

I soon realised that this was where my future lay. I relocated to Devon, completed a Health and Social Work degree before working for the national head injury charity, Headway as a Community Support Worker. I then worked for the UK's cyclists organisation, the CTC, and Devon County Council as a Cycle Development Officer and a National Standard Cycle Instructor. I then felt that I had gained the necessary skills to set up Freetrike.

My office is now Devon's National Cycle Network. I regularly use the Exe Estuary Trail which runs alongside the river Exe. The Granite Way, The Drakes Way and the Plym Valley trail give access to the countryside in and around Dartmoor. The Tarka Trail runs north from the Granite Way up the River Torridge to Bideford and then along the River Taw to Barnstaple. However, I'm not limited to these pathways, I have used stately home driveways and horse racing service tracks.



Over the last couple of years I have worked with people of different ages and disabilities. Obstacles such as paralysis, high tone, poor balance, visual problems, chronic fatigue and fear of falling can all be overcome with the right equipment and support. I source equipment through a variety of suppliers and manufacturers and have the necessary training to make adaptations to suit the individual. A recumbent trike is lightweight, can collapse down and easily be placed in the boot of a normal car. Some clients may progress from a recumbent trike to an upright trike then on to a 2-wheel bicycle. With time, some will develop the confidence to go it alone.

My first official client was Kirsty, a young lady who had suffered a series of strokes, leaving her in a wheelchair. Using an adapted recumbent trike we regularly used the paths at Berry Head to explore the surrounding countryside.

Robbie suffered a brain injury when he was 20 years old. This affected his balance, limiting his mobility and independence. Using the latest model recumbent trike and regular one to one coaching, Robbie was soon flying along the Tarka Trail. Over the next couple of years I hope to build up the business, working with more people to challenge their disability. My love of the outdoors and bikes will always motivate me to give this opportunity to those who might be overlooked. □

freetrike.co.uk