

Blind Lane restoration

Blind Lane (Devon TRF 192-078, GRMUID 5226) is a short, barely 300 yard deeply gullied lane running down towards the Umbourne Brook, in East Devon, a drop of around 20 metres in altitude. The GRM states "A deep gullied lane once severely washed out and closed but reopened following massive heavy repairs by DTRF. *** Aug 2017: Still WIP but rides well downhill./ Uphill the 'stone dams' are a bit high for some riders/bikes.***" There are a number of 'Blind Lanes' around the country and the name is thought to derive from an old name for a dead end lane. 'Blind' meaning "confused," or "closed at one end". This however, does not really ring true for ours as to me as it sits on a line of a number of roads and UCRs which I guess were of a similar age, so a clear thoroughfare I'd have thought. The surfaced road loops around Blind Lane and would have originally run down to crossing points of the Umbourne I presume. May be the deep gully caused by water erosion over time, became impassable for horse and carts leading to the bypass looping around to the south. As water eroded deeper into the Red Devon Clay the lane was 'lost' and may be 'blind' to folk.

It is designated as an Unclassified County Road (UCR) but owing to its washed out condition it had been temporarily TRO'd (TTRO) over the years starting from 15 Sept 2008 to 14 March 2010. Devon TRF folk cleared it in July 2010, but the TTRO was renewed shortly after and rolled on from 8 August 2012 - 7 February 2014 'due to storm damage'. The lane being closed was not just unfortunate for folk like us who love to ride these gnarly old roads, but under storm conditions tons of stone, mud and debris were being washed out of the lane and down the road in front of the house at the bottom and causing an unsightly and dangerous mess on the tarmac surfaced road.

Devon County Council paid a contractor to haul the washed out mess/surface of blind lane to a nearby farm shop in Kilmington next to the A35, Ian knows this as his uncle hauled it there in his lorry! Ideally, the material would have been hauled to the top of blind lane as was the case later on when there was the 'big push' to complete the project. Initially there was a Parish & County Council site meeting witnessed by the local farmer Chris Selway, where there was some discussion about who would use the lane once 'restored'. Suggestions regarding laydee's in their Sunday finery perambulating along the lane were quashed early on; with a sustainable, accessible lane in keeping with its history was finally agreed on. DCC Public Rights of Way estimated £35,000 to repair the Blind Lane, set against a total budget of £30,000 for East Devon, so it was clear early on that without the TRF's intervention, there would be no repair and therefore reopening of the lane.

Devon TRF folk are persistent buggers though, and folk like Ian 'Wacky' Collins, his dad 'Pops' and many other TRF volunteers have a nervous energy that they like to focus on clearing, restoring and conserving our green roads. As anyone who has been involved in major lane repairs (rather than simply cutting back brash or clearing the odd tree) will know. You can't just pitch up and crack on. Firstly, you need full liaison and backing from the local Council Rights of Way personnel. We are lucky because Devon TRF have cultivated a professional, honest but also forthright relationship with the council over decades. They respect our common interest in keeping lanes open for all and proactivity and we appreciate their pragmatism and support. Furthermore, TRF members such as Ian are deeply embedded in the community, supporting initiatives such as the 3 P's – Parish Pathway Partnerships, knows the local landowners and can charm the birds out of the trees. Bring these skills together with people who can source and use big machinery (luckily in rural Devon, everyone has a digger and/or a tractor and trailer), a band of willing volunteers – friends really, amazing people and there is nothing that cannot be

achieved. As with everything, it is the labour that costs so much, so finding people willing to give up evenings and weekends for a good cause is indispensable.

Regarding moving material is where Ian used his 'people skills' to talk John who lives at the bottom of the lane and owns a digger and Brian who lives up the road also with access to a large 5 tonne 4x4 dumper (boys and their toys) to get involved in moving material into the right places within the lane via access from Chris's fields at the side of the lane. Timing of things all revolved around hay cutting in the adjacent fields before serious work could begin.

So this is how it played out. Ian maintained 'comms' with Chris, John and Brian as well as the Rights of Way and Parish folk to ensure everything kept on track, whilst mobilising the TRF band of brothers. This generated the necessary 'permissions', and identified the kit required to shift an awful lot of large rocks into the lane. Then it was a case of logistics, how to get tonnes and tonnes of stone into a lane barely a few feet wide. Initially the army of volunteers cleared the lane of brash and saplings (typically hazel and holly) which had taken up residence, blocking the route without adding to the biodiversity. Previous lane restorations had involved dropping in dumpy bags of stone to generate water brakes in the lane holding back the flow and preventing washout. They worked well, but it was decided to build the water brakes in Blind Lane using large stones. This is where having Chris the landowner was essential, as his fields adjacent to the lane could be used by the plant equipment to drop in the loads of stone. There was no other way to shift the quantities needed. To ensure everything was above board, Ian held numerous meetings regarding health and safety with appropriate risk assessments to ensure compliance with use of machinery and access.

Once all of the ducks were in order, it was 'simply' a case of logistics getting volunteers, materials and machinery in the right place at the right time. So in early summer of 2016 Devon TRF folk started to clear the lane of debris and overgrown foliage and the Devon TRF stalwart to the top of the lane. Over the course of a number of sessions, including one nine hours on site for quite a few folk, and many TRF members popping in during the day to lend a hand to shovel and barrow 180 plus tonne of material shifted from the bottom of the green road to the top before dropping back in the washed out lane via the field hedge material raked out by volunteers to cover rock 'water brakes' already put in place a few weeks previously. All achieved fuelled by cake and hot and cold beverages. This was effectively Stage 2 of the operation. After Stage 1 of logistics and clearing. There was then a hiatus waiting on the parallel field (which runs the full length of Blind lane) to be cut for hay before it was possible to deposit the remaining rocks located at the lower end of 'Blind lane'.

Even as the lane was being repaired a couple of TRF groups from the Midlands and Bristol managed to squeeze by and commenting on all of the hard work, which went to show (a) how popular Devon is and (b) how the work done by a few willing volunteers can benefit so many other people.

The lane repair was completed by dropping off the the remaining flint and soil material into Blind lane, spreading around many tonne to cover the boulders completely thus raising the lane's height whilst adding stabilisation with boulders. Finally to all's satisfaction, Blind Lane was reopened, being transformed from a muddy overgrown ditch into a 'Green road'. All that was left was for Wacky to offer "*a HUGE amount of thanks to my friends for their help along with big boys & toys to what can only be described as an amazing job! There will be future works to raise the lane even further in the near future ;)* Credit to - John Pearce, Digger owner + driver, Chris Selway, tractor owner + driver plus land owner. Big Bri for the use of his 5 tonne 4x4 dumper

which he handled all day shifting the tonnage needed. Oh and Vic for turning up after work to drink tea when we'd finished (there's always one)."

And that should have been that, happy ever after, trail riders and other users happily traversing a sensitively restored old green road. But of course, there is no such thing as happy ever after is it (says the old cynic in me). And just before Christmas, in the late autumn storms with commensurate heavy rain washed out material from the water brakes exposing the underlying rock and a 'waterfall' effect creating 'steps' in the lane and washout of material from the bottom of the lane. It was recommended not to ride the lane under a common sense restraint approach until it was evaluated. Further consultation with Rights of Way and the Landowners concluded a further 3 water brakes were required at the bottom of the lane. So yet again, in the middle of winter, just after Christmas an army of volunteers were mobilised to shift yet more material into the lane and stabilise the bottom of Blind Lane.

The lane was soon reopened and has stayed open to this day, enduring many storms and regular use. I'd say it has 'matured' over time, the water brakes are stable and where there has been a little washout, boulders in place allow you to bump down over the water brakes. Riding up you need to pick your line, be committed and you certainly need a sump guard to protect your engine, but I can guarantee when I've met riders popping out of the top of the lane, sweating and blowing hard, that all I see is a huge smile under their helmet. Just remember this was achieved by volunteers devoting substantial time to the 'project' and next time there is a call to help repair a lane, stick your hand up :-).



All lane repairs start with willing volunteers and a lot of prep work. Kev was willing – honest... Some folk even turned up in their riding boots ready to be first down the repaired lane....



This stuff does not move itself you know....



The water brakes in place



Vic, Kev, Nick and Pops getting stuck in and having a laugh at the same time, which is the point really isn't it?