A lastair Humphreys cycled round the world the hard way. You probably know his story. He rode 46,000 miles across five continents, through 60 countries. He rode the world’s highest mountains and biggest deserts. He endured temperatures which plummeted to 40°C below zero in Siberia and rose to 45°C in Sudan. He left his Yorkshire life to ride out of his comfort zone, and stayed there for four years. Four years of living on the road, him and his bike, through thick and thin.

School children in the north of England have also been riding around the world, if in a different way. Alastair’s epic ride has inspired a lovely cycling promotion project, devised by Bike It’s Kathy Bashford. Following Alastair’s route, the children have been riding through Eurasia, the Americas and Africa. But they’ve been doing it virtually, and collectively, in a contest devised to boost cycling to school.

Like other Sustrans Bike It Officers around the country, Kathy’s task is to promote cycling in schools. She works with ten in north Lancashire each year. Many kids love the idea of riding to school. Bike It Officers are there to help them get onto bikes, and start riding.

In every school, there are barriers to overcome. Is there adequate cycle parking? Do children and parents know about potential routes? Is cycle training available? What about bike maintenance? Does the school recognise the benefits of cycling, and actively encourage it?

Kathy uses different methods to get kids cycling, including Cycle to School Days, when everyone riding to school gets a free breakfast and cycling goodies, like reflective slap wraps. Then there are Wheely Wednesdays, when children arriving by bike receive a ticket for an end-of-term raffle with a new bike as the prize. It’s all about getting schools, teachers, parents and children to give cycling a go.

But Bike It is always on the look out for fresh ways to promote cycling in schools, and Kathy recognised the seeds of a fantastic project lurking within Alastair’s global adventure. Here was a young man just back from four years riding through some of the most extreme
and exciting places on the planet. Not only did he have wonderful stories to tell, he was also a trained teacher, highly eloquent and with a burning passion to inspire others.

It’s too good a cycling promotion opportunity to miss. So, with the help of Lancaster City Council’s Cycling Demonstration Town team, Kathy dreamt up an inter-schools competition in which, by riding to school, children would amass miles and trace Alastair’s route. Schools could follow Alastair, and as a whole, take on the challenge of trying to ride around the world.

It’s a great idea. A project which can motivate kids to cycle to school, and which also has clear educational merit. According to Kathy, teachers embraced the idea from the off, recognising its potential to encourage children to think and learn about the world. To get things going, Alastair visits the schools taking part in the competition, to talk about his adventures. The kids just lap it up. Alastair is a man who can justifiably speak in superlatives. He has ridden a bike through the hottest, coldest, highest and strangest parts of the world. He lives to test his limits.

But Alastair’s is no simple Boy’s Own adventure. He deftly weaves fascinating insights and all manner of wisdoms and provocations into his story. He asks the kids to think about what they really need. He encourages them to compare their lives to those of children elsewhere. His presentation is full of images. His patter prods the children to reflect on other places, cultures, languages, ways of life. History and geography come to life.

The penultimate slide accompanying Alastair’s talk is emblazoned with the words ‘I DID IT’. The last one asks the children, ‘WILL YOU?’. It is received with wild shouts of ‘yes’. It’s beautiful to see so many kids so motivated to get on bikes. The flood of questions at the end of one of Alastair’s shows testifies to the kids’ enthusiasm.

‘What were your favourite countries?’
‘South Africa, Colombia, Russia, Sudan.’
‘Did you get all the Christmas and birthday presents you missed whilst you were away?’
‘No!’
‘How many tyres did you get through?’
‘Twenty sets.’
‘Would you do it again?’
‘No!’
The questions seem inexhaustible, but this man knows about endurance. Besides, he says, 'seeing your stories touching and sparking the lives of young children is tremendously satisfying.'

So how does the competition work? Every trip to school by bike earns a certain number of miles along Alastair’s route. The rate is inversely proportional to the size of the school, so that smaller schools are not disadvantaged. Kathy chooses rates which, she predicts, will ensure that all schools can get around the world well before the end of the school year, so long - that is - as the project accomplishes its goal of increasing rates of cycling!

The competition is not just for the children. Staff count too. In fact, staff cycling counts for double! Kathy explains, 'because they set an example and can inspire the children, encouraging staff to cycle is really important. So we award them double miles as an incentive!' She also jokes that, 'they’re at least twice as hard to persuade!'. Like people in lots of other jobs, teachers often have a list of reasons as to why they can't cycle to work. It's up to the Bike It Officer to help them overcome those obstacles.

Every school gets a big laminated map of the world showing Alastair’s route. This is put on prominent display, and the school’s progress around the globe is marked on it. So progress in the competition is followed by the entire school community. The results? More cycling to school, certainly. However, because it’s just part of a broader cycling push at the Bike It schools, it’s impossible to know exactly what effect the Round the World contest has had. But lots more children are cycling to all the Bike It schools. Importantly, children, parents and teachers now feel encouraged and supported to cycle. And proud children from all the schools get to enjoy a special prize-giving ceremony at Lancaster Town Hall.

So all up, it's safe to say that the project contributes to a growing buzz around cycling. Cycling is becoming, according to one child, 'something everyone wants to do.' Long may that continue. We know the UK is miles behind countries such as the Netherlands and Denmark in encouraging children to cycle to school, but at least, at last, we're on the right track.

More information:
Bike It is run by Sustrans. To find out more, visit www.sustrans.org.uk
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