

# Electric off-road motorcycling – the unbridled joy of the countryside with zero emissions

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The well-booted rambler is incredulous. We're talking at the bar of the Crown and Garter at Inkpen, deep in the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. I have just told him that I'm here to ride motorbikes on portions of the Wayfarer's Walk, the scenic trail that runs from Inkpen for 70 miles down to the coast. "Seriously?" he says, eyebrows raised. "On a noisy, polluting motorbike?"



© Provided by The Telegraph The author (left, yellow helmet) with the Sur-Ron Light Bee; Steve Ramsden with the LMX 161. The machines are a mix of motorcycle and pedal-powered mountain bike

But the machines I'll be riding bear scant resemblance to raucous petrol-fuelled machines. Indeed, there will be zero emissions. The electric Sur-Ron Light Bee that I will start out on is so light and compact that it fits in the back of a Tesla Model 3 with its front wheel removed and the car's rear seats folded down, and the Model 3 isn't even a hatchback. (The rambler asks to see.)

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what's this?

The Sur-Ron Light Bee shares the mechanical efficiency of the Tesla. There is the space where fuel tanks, cylinders and gears once would be located. There is also the instant torque (familiar because my loan car is the Model 3 Performance). It is this surge of power from standstill that alerted Steve Ramsden to the potential appeal of electric motorbikes. Steve grew up riding motocross in Africa and won the Zimbabwe Junior National Championships in 1985. Four years ago, he started Stag Motorcycles just outside Inkpen, dealing only in electric bikes. He hasn't looked back.

I keep the instant torque in mind as I join Steve at a muddy point of ingress on the Wayfarer's Walk. Unless I keep my weight forward, I risk "whiskey throttling" (gripping the handlebars to prevent falling backwards, such that the bike wheelies out from underneath). A blip of the throttle causes the Light Bee to surge slippily forward. Its six-kilowatt motor is equivalent in power to a 100cc petrol machine. The top speed is restricted to 30mph due to its moped classification, but open up the throttle and it attains that speed faster than conditions comfortably allow.

And yet it is the noise, or lack of it, that proves the real revelation. "I still get excited by that welling roar of petrol bikes lined up at the start of a race," calls out Steve, "but it's also nice to talk." We're zipping along a lushly grassed field edge at 25mph. There is merely a soft whine – just enough to alert dogs and their walkers. The first pair we encounter are surprised, then curious. Mercifully not annoyed.

The Wayfarer's Walk incorporates bridleways and even byway sections allowing greenlaning vehicles, but the modes of transport permitted on any given section can be unclear. Riding with us is Martin Duggan, a local who came to this pastime from the world of mountain bikes – to which these machines bear strong resemblances. They have the same slim front profiles, while the front and rear brake controls are handlebar-mounted.



© Provided by The Telegraph The author on the LMX 161

They are easier on the terrain, as well as the eye. "They won't tear up trails as weightier petrol machines risk doing," says Martin. "For the rest, it's about being mindful of different communities' perspectives." Compared with London, with its increasingly fractious encounters between scooter riders, pedestrians, cyclists and drivers, it's a picture of harmony.

Honey-hued Highclere Castle comes into view. It's as if I've been here before – which I have, via *Downton Abbey* of course. It is not possible to get closer without straying on to the Earl of Carnarvon's land, so we glide past, soon admiring another arresting sight: Beacon Hill Iron Age Hill Fort.

Sur-Ron's Light Bee arrived on the UK market in 2018 as a Chinese-made wonder bike – twitchy yet irresistible. Now it faces stiff competition. The Light Bee I'm riding dates to 2019. Impressive though it remains, it is outpaced by the French-designed LMX 161 that Steve is riding. His bike weighs fully 20 per cent less than mine, is larger (feels more like a conventional motorbike) and houses a nine-kilowatt motor. It costs £5,850, versus £4,495 for the Light Bee.

We swap rides and, as we ascend towards a gusty ridge, the LMX's superior power-to-weight ratio proves beyond fun. It is exhilarating.

The view from the top is of Watership Down, away on the horizon. Richard Adams' namesake novel was one of the most successful books of the Seventies and an ecological allegory in which place names are real. A rabbit called Fiver undergoes a terrifying vision of his warren's imminent destruction at Sandleford (now a suburb of Newbury, some five miles north as the seagull flies). So the rabbit colony's epic exodus to Watership Down begins.

Adams would reminisce: "I can't remember to have done anything – anything at all – more delightful than walking on the crest of the Downs, looking away to the purple, heat-rimmed edge of the horizon." On this bright but chill wintery day, Watership Down appears as distant subdued folds in the landscape – muted and thankfully undisturbed. The wildlife might be dormant but it is possible to imagine stirrings underground, not least because of the vivid childhood impressions left behind by Adams' prose.

On we ride, back down to lower terrain and into a delightful set of tree-canopied glades that might belong in *Game of Thrones*. Dampened by fallen leaves, it is the most comfortable part of the ride and brings a feeling of oneness with both mode of transport and surroundings, as horse-borne travellers might have felt in centuries past.

Too soon we arrive at our destination: the picturesque town of Whitchurch, where Adams lived in a characterful old white house on the road towards the church, until he passed away in 2016. We have ridden 17 miles, a distance my rambler friend from the Crown and Garter might equally have covered in a day, but perhaps not so agreeably.

These bikes can go for approximately 30 miles on rougher terrain before requiring a recharge. There is already a thriving electric motocross scene spurring innovation, which can only mean even better machines down the road, for adventures such as today's.