



Proposal to Develop Mountain Bike Challenge Area

Wharnccliffe Woods, South Yorkshire.

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Background

Wharncliffe Woods, with its rocky, steep hillside has been popular for many years with fans of Downhill Mountain Biking, and what has recently been dubbed 'Free Riding', pushing the limits of their bikes and skills on technical and demanding terrain.

This type of rider has always not just looked for the best natural features, but also got their hands dirty enhancing those features and creating new and exciting lines. However, these new lines are very rarely built with any mind to users of different skills levels, sustainability of the trail, of safety, or other users of the woodland.

Over time this has caused a number of issues in the woods, including excessive erosion, uncontrolled building of new tracks, trail features built to poor standards, and conflicts with other users of the woodland encountering riders coming down the hill at high speed and crossing public rights of way.

Proposal Outline

We suggest that a small area of the woods is set aside for a Mountain bike challenge area, this area would be self contained, with riders only using other forest trails on their way in and out of the woods at the beginning and end of a session. Once the New cross country trail is complete the people wanting to use the challenge area will be able to access it almost exclusively on trails built for Mountain bikers.

Within the area there will be a number of different descent runs, with defining features such as slower technical rocky trails, to faster open trails with sweeping corners and flowing lines. In the long term we also intend to include some technical trail features (TTFs) made from wood such as slow 'skinnies' obstacles sometimes not much wider than a tyre where control and balance are everything to built up 'drop offs' of various heights. We would also like to incorporate an area of tabletop jumps (type of jump, made from earth which has a sloped take off, a flat top, and a sloped landing, in profile not unlike Tabletop mountain) of increasing size. All the trails will end within the woods, above the Trans Pennine Trail, with a trail to lead people to a designated push up path (this type of rider usually has a bike which is unsuitable for riding up steep hills) for them to go back and have another go.

The local group of riders called 'Wharncliffe Riders Collective' (WRC) part of the volunteer trail building group SingletrAction (www.singletraction.org.uk) will take responsibility for maintaining the area and all building work, working to agreed standards and parameters. The nature of Downhill trails means it is almost impossible to build a sustainable trail that needs no maintenance. The members of WRC will be responsible for not only the initial building work, but also ongoing checking and

maintenance to and agreed schedule, as well as educating other users about unauthorised building and taking down any unauthorised unsuitable structures.

The following Map shows the proposed boundary of the Challenge area, the border encloses the main, most popular down hill trails in the woods.



fig. 1.

Current Situation

At the moment there are a large number of unofficial Downhill trails in the woods, spread along the hill side, the vast majority have been build by small groups of riders with limited tools or experience and with no money. As such they are often not well planned, degrade quickly. Often new lines and trails appear when old ones become eroded, or fail due to lack of planning, the trails spread out as the main line is not clear, again due to lack of planning by the builders. New lines are nearly always built because someone wants something different from what is there, but as there is no official group to go to, rather than change someone else's work, they put their own line in.

While it is impossible for the Wharnccliffe Riders Collective to control all building in the woods, by forming an official group we have already brought together many of the different groups who have built in the woods in the past, further more we will undertake inspections and remove any new unofficial trails or unsafe structures we find. We will also attempt to contact the builders and bring them on board with the official building program. We also believe that as new, well built, and highly enjoyable and challenge trails are developed, riders will not feel the need to build their own lines.

There is also a considerable user conflict issue, most of the trails exit on to the forest road, called Plank Gate, which is now a public right of way, and part of the long distance path, The Trans Pennine Trail (TPT). As most of the trails have not been well planned, they tend to exit straight on to this route, often at high speed, riders then brake on the trail, causing damage to the TPT. Any members of the public around at the time will find this behaviour intimidating, and unacceptable, horses could very easily be 'spooked' throwing a rider. A worse case scenario would be a rider hitting another forest user; this could be a horse, a walker, a child, a family out cycling. So far, this has not happened to my knowledge, but it can only be a matter of time before it does if the current situation carries on unchanged. A much less potentially serious issue with user conflict is other users feeling uncomfortable using the TPT, riders often congregate on the TPT at the end of a run, or just arrange to meet people on this trail. Largish groups, of what are perceived as 'youths' often wearing full face helmets and goggles – so you can't see their faces can be quite intimidating to people, especially when they are spread out across the trail. While as a cyclist, they have as much right to be there as anyone else, I feel that this issue is also one that needs to be addressed to allow different users to enjoy the woods at the same time. This proposal would bring to an end these users conflicts, or at least reduce them to an absolute minimum. By keeping riders in one area in the woods, and making other forest users aware of this area the different groups need never come into contact.

The other major potential source for user conflict is the lack of signage for all users. There are a few signs in the woods asking mountain bikers to slow down at trail junctions, but nothing to warn the non-riding users that mountain bikes are in the area. People simply do not know if the trails are for walkers, horse riders, or mountain bikes. Signage to inform other forest users that an area or a trail has been built for mountain bikers to use, and that, as such, by going into that area, or up that trail they will encounter mountain bikers, and if they do not want that to be part of their day, they can avoid the area.

The proposal for a dedicated area will mean that riders will not leave the area until they leave the woods for the day, as such signs would be needed to remind them they are leaving the area and to ride with consideration to other users of the forest.

Details of the Area

Below is a map with the proposed area marked in, including locations for signage to other users to notify that the area is a Mountain Bike Challenge area as you go in, and notification that you are leaving the area on the other side, marked with blue crosses. These locations are there are obvious trails at the moment, either that are mountain bike trails within the area, or places where existing trails come close to the area. There are no public rights of way within the area, and all the trails in the area are currently predominately used by mountain bikers.

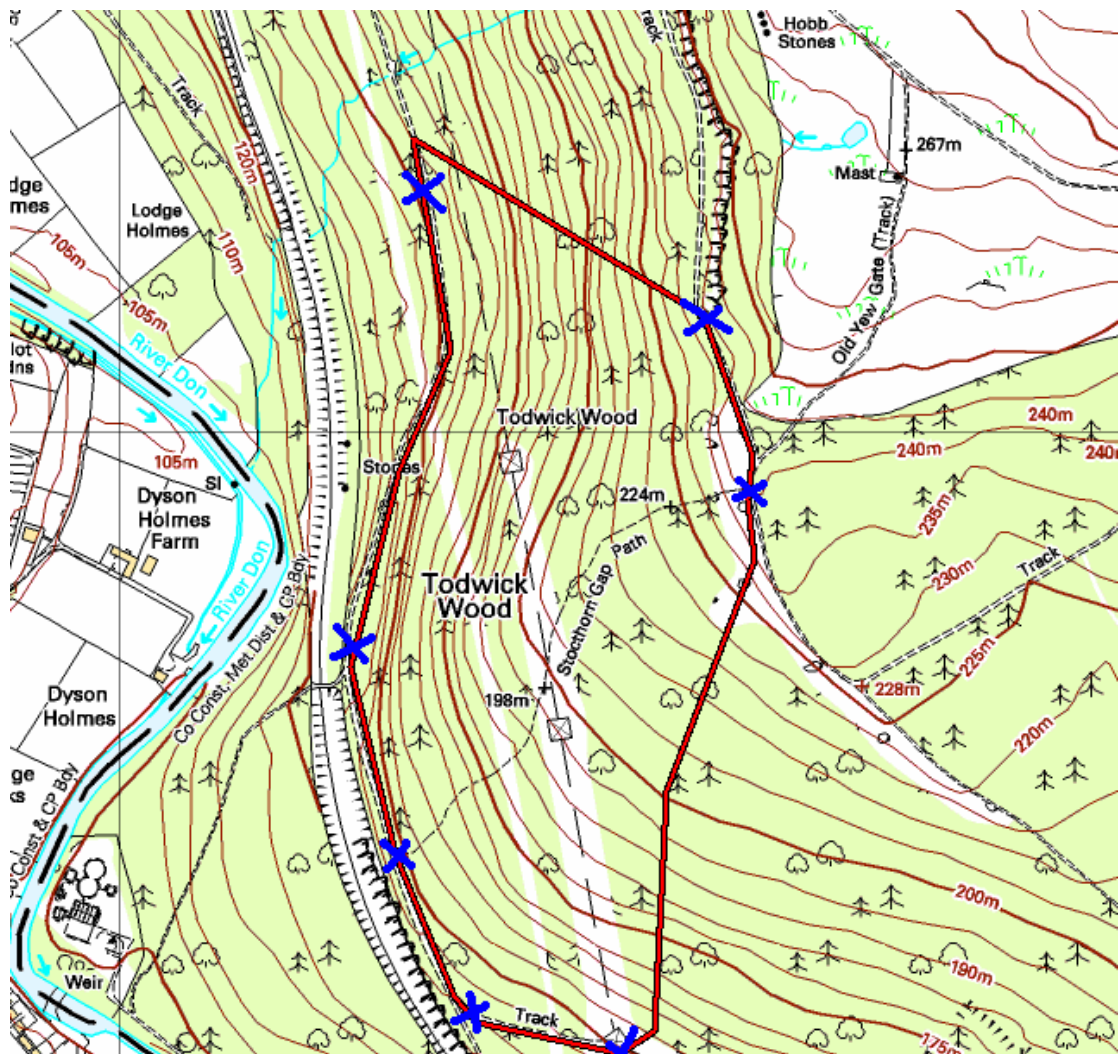


fig. 2.

The following map shows the locations of the current 4 downhill trails in this area – the routes were plotted using a GPS device.

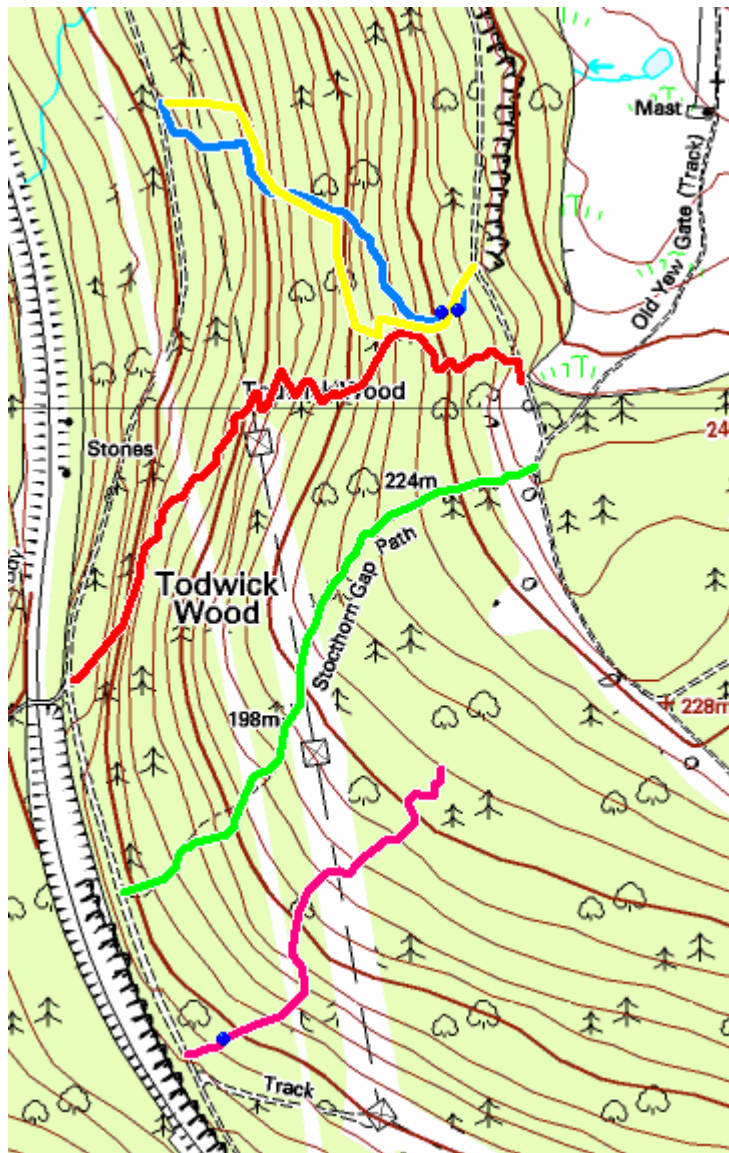


fig. 3.

The Yellow line is a rocky forest road which is used as a push up road, and we propose to continue using it for this purpose.

The Blue line is the trail know as Nemba,

The Red trail is called Peaty's

The Green Trail is know as Fastrack

Finally the Pink Trail is known as Road drop, or Jump spot, due to the jumps marked with the blue spot on the lower part of trail.

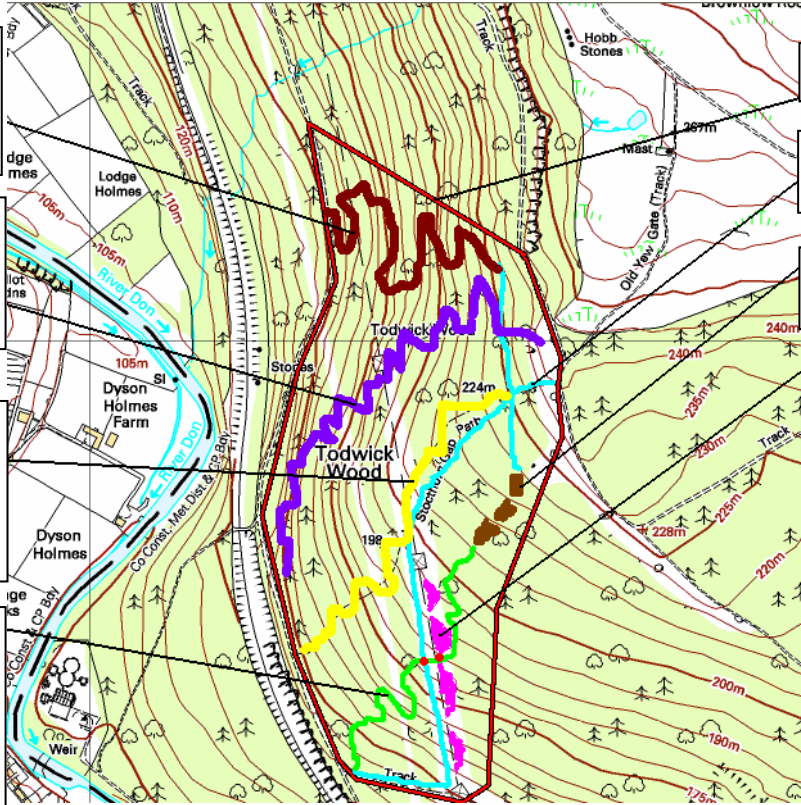
Mountain Bike Challenge Area – Wharncliffe Woods – Sheffield

Approximate line of proposed trail improvement on trail currently know as Nemba, a technical rocky descent

Approximate line of proposed trail improvement on trail currently know as Peaty's, a very technical rocky descent

Approximate line of proposed trail improvement on trail currently know as Fast track, a flowing trail with some drop offs towards the end

Approximate line of proposed trail improvement on trail currently know as Jump Spot below the pylons, this trail will be broken up into two sections as it crosses the tabletops and push up route



Red Line Denotes Boundary of area

Blue line shows access trail and push-up route

Brown Boxes indicate area proposed for wooden technical trail features.

Pink Blobs indicate line of table top jumps in open area under the pylons.

Long Term Goal

On the previous page is a map of the features and trails we plan to work towards over the coming months and years. Work that will take priority will be that keeping riders in the area – sorting out the trail exits, so they no longer exit onto the Trans Pennine Trail, and putting up signage, before moving on to building the push up route, then improving the trails, tackling erosion and trail spread, we also intend to assign a meeting area, as a place to take a break, carry out bike repairs and have something to eat, this will help stop large groups congregating on the Trans Pennine Trail blocking it for other users. Finally we are looking to build a series of table tops jumps, and some wooden ‘North Shore’ style trail features in defined areas, this is however low priority, and we do not expect to start work on it for at least a year. In addition to what is on the plan, we would also put in a trail above the TPT linking the bottoms of the trails to the Push up trail.

Trail Grading

There is always a great deal of discussion about how hard trails are, grading systems have tended to follow a similar system used in ski resorts, ranging from easy green routes via blue, red, black, right through to double black diamond. There are always arguments going round, people saying such and such trail is too hard for it’s red grade, this trail is too easy for a black grade as what is easy or hard is very subjective, and what is actually difficult to ride often depends on as much how looking at the trail affects you psychologically as it does how challenging the trail is physically. The colour coding system is well accepted and easily understood in the mountain biking world, and easily interpreted outside the mountain biking world as we are all used to colour coding systems, even if the fine details are argued over in this case.

With this in mind we propose that the whole area is graded ‘Black – experienced mountain bikers only – severe technical terrain’. This sets the grade as high as possible (double black diamond is not really recognised outside of America) even though there will be trails that may will argue should be graded lower.

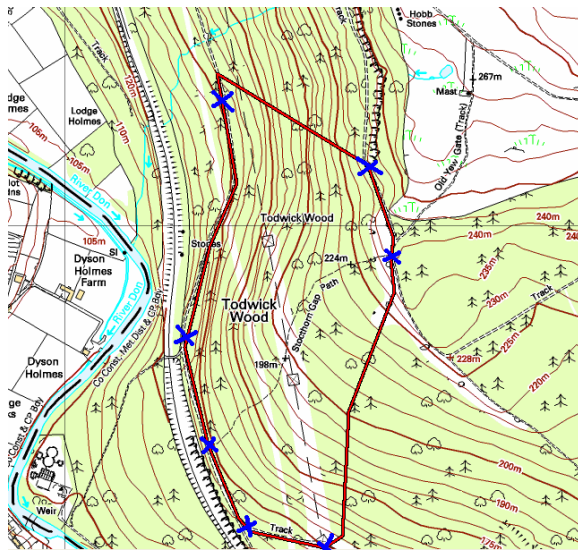
This grading should be put on the signs at entry points, with the advice to look before you ride, and to never ride alone. In addition to this the signage should include the advice that the trails should only be ridden on a suitable well maintained mountain bike and full safety gear should be worn. At the very least a helmet and gloves, though full face helmet, gloves, along with body armour (Knee, shin, arm and elbow pads, along with back shoulder and chest armour) would be recommended.

Work Schedule

It should be first emphasised that this proposal is an outline plan, what we are looking to achieve is 'Out line planning permission' if you will, an agreement that what we are proposing is acceptable 'in principal'. We will submit detailed schematics for all major changes before undertaking any major work.

Signs

The first work that should be undertaking is to define and mark out the area. Fig 2, below, and larger on page 5 above shows the recommend location for signs with the blue crosses.



These locations have been chosen as they are the areas where there is natural entry and exit routes to the area. Due to the steep ground and dense tree coverage elsewhere it is very difficult to enter and exit the area other than where shown; meaning that we do not see that there is any need to add additional physical barriers such as fencing. In the long term, if entry and exit from the site by other routes starts to occur we will tackle the issue by blocking the entry points with dead fall barriers, and extra signs if needed.

The signs will serve two purposes as describe before. The first will be to tell users of the site that they are leaving a dedicated mountain bike area and to ride accordingly, keeping speed down and to give way to horses and pedestrians on the trail multi user forest trails. The second purpose will be to provide information that the area is a mountain bike area, this will include the grading advice to riders and a warning to anyone choosing to enter the area of the risk they are taking, by entering an area where they are likely to encounter fast moving mountain bikers.

We believe that this small improvement will go a long way to reducing user conflict in the area and increasing safety and understanding.

In addition to this information key signs should include contact information for the club, the clubs name 'SingletrAction', the website address, where e-mail contact details can be found, or messages left in the forum.

Trail Exits

The second priority should be to change the exits of the four current trails indicated on the map above. At the moment all the trails exit straight on to the Trans Pennine Trail, people often go across the trail or join it at full speed, this is potentially dangerous, and cannot continue.

We propose to change the exits to all the trails by adding large banked corners (known as berms) to turn riders parallel to trail and then slow them right down within the woods. We intend to link these with low speed flat trails linking up to the push up route. This will mean that riders using the challenge area will not be going onto the Trans Pennine Trail except when they are entering or leaving the site.

To do this properly is a big task and will need a large amount of material (rock, some of which may be able to be dug from the ground, along with finer aggregate and 40 mm to dust grade for the final surface) along with the use of machinery – at the very least a mini excavator with a dozer blade and back-actor excavator bucket, and a small dumper to move the material. Without this it would take many weeks of volunteer labour, and this sort of task that can be done very quickly for the right machinery can be very demoralising for a volunteer work crew. Discussions with the Forestry Commission have already indicated that they will support this stage of the proposal and we hope that the FC can provide the machinery and materials for this aspect of the construction. We will be providing detailed plans for each trail exit showing where the berms should be, with photos of the area, sketches and route plans, along with an estimation of the amount of material needed.

Push Up Path

The route of this has been indicated on the map above, the main function of this trail is to increase the safety of users of the area, currently people are getting back to the top by pushing up one of the downhill trails, and while most people are very aware, listening and looking for people coming down and getting well out of the way, it is still an accident waiting to happen. We propose to create a straight forward trail going to the top of the hill taking a fairly direct route, in the long term, if we can get funding support we would like to surface this with hardcore to resist erosion, prevent it from getting muddy and define the trail boundary more clearly, ultimately it would be ideal to get this push up route built by machine, this is another one of the tasks that a volunteer work force will find demoralising and slow, without the motivator of building something fun to ride. Once we have surveyed and marked the proposed trail we will submit details of the route to the Forestry Commission for final approval.

Trail Improvement

Once we have the push up path established and the exits modified the next stage, and where the majority of time will be spent will be maintaining and improving the existing trails. Some of these need little repair work, such as Peaty's and Nemba as they are generally rocky technical trails, and as such do not suffer from erosion or

drainage problems, there is some work needed in specific areas and there is also scope for much improvement to trails, as they have evolved over time with limited planning and limited unorganised labour recourse the best use of the terrain has not always been made. Parts of Fast track and road drop need quite a lot more work, they are less rocky and have suffered from more erosion, get muddy and the original line often disappears as people take alternative routes, these two trails will need more work, but have a great deal of potential for improvement, with some exiting ideas being discussed amongst the volunteers of what is possible with a bit of organisation and dedication. One of the first actions we will take is to re-establish the original trail line with surface maintenance and closing off of the bad alternatives with dead fall barriers.

We will submit detailed plans and sketches for each trail we are going to work on for approval before we start any major work changing the trails. We will be building to or beyond IMBA trail construction standards, attempting to make the trails as sustainable as possible but without losing the technical challenging nature of the trails, for example IMBA recommends that grade reversals are used to naturally slow riders before corners to prevent breaking bumps being formed on the trail and to improve the flow of the trail, but part of the challenge for riders is braking as late as possible while still getting round the corner and carrying speed through, this is why Downhill trails need more maintenance than cross country trails, where possible we will look to armour and reinforce areas that are going to be subject to heavy wear, rather than just allowing them to deteriorate.

Tabletop Jumps

Dirt jumping is increasingly popular, providing this option within the area will prevent unauthorised building elsewhere, and by building tabletops, rather than doubles (where the launch ramp and landing slope are separated by a large ditch so if you don't make the distance you crash badly) it also makes the activity a lot safer to learn.

We will submit detailed plans for this section for approval before any work takes place. We hope to secure sponsorship for these jumps from a bicycle industry sponsor, we aim to get sufficient investment to provide the material needed and a contractor to move it into rough piles so it can be shaped and hand finished by volunteer labour.

Raised Wooden Trail

I have included in the plan an area for Wooden Technical trail features (often called North-Shore after the area of Canada that they first came to prominence), at this point there is nothing planned, and having learnt that there is a new project for this type of trail at Sherwood Pines, along with the recently opened facility at Market Rasen built by the RATZ club, which is far more challenging than anything we would want to put in, these plans are on the back burner, however I have included it in the proposal to reserve the right to have the plan considered if we decide we want to build some in the future. The type of feature that would sit best in the area would be 'skinnies' very

narrow balance beams, relatively close to the ground an 'ladder drops' where a horizontal or slightly downward sloping timber frame work is build out from the hill side to provide a drop off to a dirt landing.

On going Maintenance of the Area

As part of the Agreement members of local Singletraction will not only build the area, but we will provide ongoing maintenance of the trails and features, along with housekeeping of the area itself. We will also put a stop to any unauthorised building within the area as well as endeavour to kerb any unauthorised mountain bike trail building within the rest of the woods that we are aware of.

Once we have started the project we will organise regular work days, at least once a month, if there are enough volunteers, then we may be able to have fortnightly work days, or even weekly, this would require there being enough people to take responsibility for planning and organising the activities on work days, as it is not reasonable to expect one volunteer to spend every weekend in the woods organising trail work. As part of each work days there will be an informal inspection of the trails so any unauthorised work or urgent maintenance issues can be reported to the work day leader and dealt with quickly. Unsafe features will be taped off and signed and well as making un ride-able by blocking off with dead fall if the feature is repairable and cannot be repaired there and then. Repair work will be undertaken as the soonest opportunity. Features that cannot be repaired, or which are unsuitable will be taken down immediately unless not possible to do so, in which case they will be removed as soon as possible.

We will also pick up and remove litter from the trails on work days, over time we hope to establish an informal meeting area where people can gather, eat food, repair bikes and have a rest. We plan to make small improvements to an area, by moving in large logs or suitable stones to make informal seating; we will put up a sign in this area with club contact information encouraging people to take their litter home with them. There should be no need to provide bins; if you can carry it in with you then you can carry it back out again.

In addition to the informal inspection we will undertake a regular formal inspection and produce a written report on the state of the trails and features which will be provided to the Forestry Commission for their records, this is in addition to any inspection the Forestry Commission wish to carry out either with a club member present, or independently. We will provide this formal report twice a year, in a format agreed between the club and the Forestry Commission, the first report will be produced 6 months from the start of work beginning.

Once the main construction has taken place and the trails are effectively finished, members of the club will organise less frequent maintenance days and inspections. Club members will organise a rota for monthly inspections of the trails, as well as keeping an eye out while riding. Any issues will be reported back to the club and the work will be included in the next available work day.

It is expected that regular work days will be an ongoing task of the club, even if it is just to pick litter and educate riders who are not paid up members of the club, about us and the work we are doing, to encourage responsible use of the woods and increase our membership base. However the nature of challenging trails means there will nearly always be maintenance that needs doing and improvements that can be made, there will be times when one line is getting worn, and we will have to re-route sections of trail to allow the old section to recover, or we decide to remove a feature that is not working anymore or holding peoples interest and replace it with something different. In the long run this stops an area from going stale, keeps everyone interested and involved and helps to stop unauthorised building of new lines.

Funding

There are several ways which we are looking to bring funding into this project.

The Forestry Commission have been very positive and supportive and have indicated that there is some funding available, and have agreed to provide the signs for the area, and we hope that they will be able to provide the material and machinery to build the basic structure for the exit catch berms, which can be hand finished by volunteer labour. The Forestry Commission have also already provided hand tools for volunteer labour for the club as we have already started work on the cross country trail in the woods.

SingletrAction Membership is £15 a year; in addition SingletrAction has a number of site sponsors who pay a sum of money each year to the club, all this money is re-invested into the trails so there will be some money for materials such as hard core, timber, or the hiring of equipment.

Funding for general improvement work will also be sought from funding bodies such as Sport England, the National lottery and such forth.

The membership funding and funding from organised bodies will be directed into the low marketing appeal sections, like the push up trail, in the first instance as we hope to attract industry sponsorship for the trails and features as already mentioned in relation to the tabletop jumps. This is an extension of a method already used by SingletrAction, where by a corporate sponsor can sponsor a section of trail, normally with a significant feature, in exchange for providing funding, they get to name the section, use it for promotion purposes, the normal cost is £800 for a section, which provides 40 – 60 meters of armoured trail. As the existing trails are already in place and only need maintenance we intend on asking for £2,000 - £3,000 per trail or more if the plans require more funding to bring the trail up to standard, for which the company would get an unrivalled advertising opportunity to promote their company to their market. We intend that the initial sponsorship sum will be calculated to not only build the trail and features, but to provide money for ongoing maintenance for a period of 5 years, then if the company wants to continue sponsoring the trail they will get the opportunity to continue sponsoring at a rate sufficient to maintain the trail in

top condition. If they are no longer interested then we will look to secure a different industry sponsor, who would then get to re-name the trail to suit their company.