

Inside Transport

Electric bikes provide a thrill on even the steepest hills, writes **Alastair Dalton**

Seventy years ago, my mum and her brothers spent their summer holidays cycling over what's now part of the North Coast 500 near Lochinver.

The single-track roads proved challenging terrain for the teenagers, who encountered many steep hills, some with gradients as high as 1:3 (now signed as 30 per cent).

A few of these proved too much, and they had to walk their bikes up the slopes, albeit with the fun of freewheeling down them in the opposite direction. Unsurprisingly, there are still few cyclists on such roads, which offer little respite between the severe inclines.

However, that could be about to change for locals with the arrival of electric bikes. These promise to revolutionise cycling in such areas.

The Lochinver-based Assynt Development Trust (ADT) is one of nearly 50 organisations across the country to have received Transport Scotland funding for these marvel machines and is among the latest to put them into service.

Others have gone to universities and colleges, housing associations and community groups, along with dozens for the Glasgow and Edinburgh public bike hire schemes later this year.

The ADT's six bikes are principally aimed at encouraging local people to "try before they buy" – to test them out so they might buy one themselves and in turn cycle more.

Last week, I was privileged to be given the opportunity by the trust to be one of the first people to put the bikes through their paces before their launch shortly.

I've tried out various e-bikes in both Glasgow and Edinburgh, including the ones to be used in the former's public hire scheme, but the steepness of the roads in Assynt are on a different scale to the most daunting in the two cities.

It was with considerable anticipation and expectation that I took to the saddle in Stoer, seven miles north of Lochinver – but the run did not disappoint.

Approaching one of the toughest inclines, an unsuspecting passing cyclist warned me: "Have fun getting up that hill!" How I laughed.

But riding an e-bike on such hilly roads also made me realise how versatile they are.

Sure, you can turn it to the highest power setting and effortlessly glide upwards as if you were pedalling through the air, like in ET.

But you can also vary the amount of effort you put in – and your speed – by changing gear and altering how fast you pedal. In that respect, as my fellow e-biker soon observed, it's a bit like driving a car.

We were initially worried about draining the battery and ending up at the bottom of a hill, but found we only needed to use the highest of the four power settings on the toughest stretches.

But turning it up to "turbo" for the last part of the ride was a joy. Downhill even became the boring bit, albeit we had to check our speed approaching 30mph zones.

The trust reckons the bikes' range is at least 30 miles, even on the local terrain. The bikes also iron out the lesser inclines so much I didn't realise I'd been climbing on some sections until I found myself freewheeling down them on the way back.

Electric bikes are now available for hundreds rather than thousands of pounds, but I haven't yet been able to justify buying one, especially as I have a traditional bike and don't encounter many hills on my usual routes.

However, I'm excited at the prospect of much more readily available e-bikes to hire, and expect that will encourage many others to try them too – maybe even my mum.

