

# TAKE TO *the* TRAILS

Riding 'off-road' might look intimidating from the outside looking in – but it doesn't have to be, particularly when you're being shown the ropes by Phoenix Trails

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**F**ancy a bit of trail riding but don't know where to start? With centres close to the legal-lane abundant Salisbury Plains, North Downs, West Pennines and Peak District, the good folks at Phoenix Trails have got you covered.

It's a spin-off of the ever-popular Phoenix Motorcycle Training school, which has 20-odd road-focused training centres and has built up an enviable reputation in over two decades in the game. The trail thing's a little more recent, but in that time they've carved out a little niche for themselves, focusing on legal trail-riding and practical skills that transfer to the road, in contrast to the abundance of centres offering more-extreme MX and Enduro experiences.

If you want to hone your skills, search out some top lanes, and have a belting day riding through some of the UK's best scenery, these guys are well worth a look. We spent a day meandering around on some Fantic XEF250 Trails just a stone's throw from Stonehenge, under the watchful eye of the Salisbury Plain Stig. Here's how we got on.

Winding my way through the Wiltshire countryside on the hunt for Phoenix Trails' Codford HQ, I found myself scanning the horizon trying to pick out some of the trails we'd be exploring throughout the day. I'm always doing that, even though it's actually very difficult to work out what's legal and what's not from a cursory glance.





That's part of the beauty of Phoenix; they know the area, they know the trails, and they know exactly how challenging they are. That means they can string together the perfect route, that pushes riders to try new things without being intimidating.

Tucked away down a back lane on the edge of the town, I'd certainly have struggled to find their HQ without the sat-nav and some carefully worded directions in my welcome email. Immediately I knew I was in the right spot though; the line of shiny Fantic XEF250 Trail bikes beckoning me in. A firm handshake from our instructor Justin Trigwell confirmed it. Introductions out of the way and feeling ever more confident that a good day was to be had by all, there was time for a quick brew while getting our gear on – and then we were good to go.

Justin's a cool bloke. Super-friendly, very funny, and clearly a very capable rider; he's been riding in this neck of the woods since he was a boy – and as such he knows it like the back of his hand. He's known locally as the Salisbury Plain Stig (with stickers to prove it) – and when you get him out on the trails, it's easy to see why.

We weren't ready for that just yet though. First, we'd be getting acquainted with the bikes; doing a short loop on a small track-cum-overgrown field opposite. He explained that it's the perfect way for him to assess our skills and make a few pointers about how we could improve, all while helping him work out how to play the actual trail riding section of the day. We'd be there for about half-an-hour in all, after which we'd be getting out into the wilds of Wiltshire. I couldn't wait.

But first, Justin did have a few welcome suggestions to help improve things first. Now, I've done a bit of off-road/trail-riding. I'm sort of confident, but I'm quite often a bit rusty. I spend so much of my time riding on the road, so sometimes it might be as long as





**SKILLS**

**STAND UP AND LOOK UP**

If you're riding off-road, you need to get comfortable with riding while stood up on the pegs. It'll help improve your forward vision and force you to focus beyond your front wheel and avoid fixing on a target (and subsequently hitting it). It'll also help offer better control, as the bike can move more freely beneath you and soak up bumps and lumps more easily. Ensure your knees are straight (but not locked) and your elbows are out to help you and the bike work in unison.

**BE PREPARED**

You never quite know what to expect when you're on the rough stuff, so you've got to be ready to react to changing conditions quickly. Basically, you need to be ready to take some speed off in a hurry should you need to. You can feather the clutch and take drive away instantly, knock your way down the gears and make use of engine braking, or use the back brake.

**RELAX**

Like riding any motorcycle, you need to try and stay relaxed. Don't hold on to the bars too tightly, and don't tense up when you approach an obstacle. Focus on being as smooth and fluid with your movements as possible. When riding stood up, your arms should be relaxed, with elbows out and your palms down – and your legs should be straight, but not locked.

**FORGET THE FRONT BRAKE**

Braking off-road is a much different experience to on the Tarmac – hard, aggressive braking isn't going to end well unless you know what you're doing on the dirt. Instead of using the front brake for around 80% of braking, you should be using both your engine and the back brake to take speed off. It'll be strange to start with, but with a bit of practice you'll soon get the hang of it.

**STICK TO THE RUTS**

Picking the right line is essential when riding in the dirt, but in some cases you'll find yourself walled in by a deep rut with nowhere to go. Don't worry though, just ride the rut, keeping a close eye on what's coming up ahead and you'll not go far wrong. If you need to paddle to feel comfortable, that's cool, but you're always going to be better off (and in greater control) by standing up on the pegs and getting your weight over the front end of the bike.

**KNOW THE RULES**

Strictly speaking, trail riding is not 'off-roading'. All routes used are public highways with vehicular rights, and as a consequence, both bike and rider must be fully legal. By law, motorcycles are allowed to ride on Byways Open to All Traffic (BOAT) and Unclassified County Roads (UCR), so be sure to check your local OS map before heading out. It's also important to remember that it's not a racetrack; keep the speed sensible and remember you're sharing the trail with other people (cyclists, horse-riders, walkers and more). Be respectful and you'll not go far wrong.

Riding off-road gains significant bonuses when some tutorship is on hand





a year before I whip out the knobbies and hit the rough stuff. When I do, I love it, but on my own it can take me nearly a full day to actually get in the groove and feel good. But not today.

Justin's quick, concise tutorials and gentle suggestions had me up to speed in no time. He told me to slow down and pick my line more carefully, showing me that I shouldn't just follow the tracks left by whatever's been here before. Instead, I should consider finding my own line, where there might be more grip, better forward vision and less chance of tearing up the ground.

Suitably skilled up, it was time to make a move and have an explore. Now, I've never really been to this neck of the woods before, but I've heard lots about it... It's the home of the infamous Salisbury Plain, a whopping 300 square mile area that the MoD owns half of. For as long as I've been riding trails, I've wanted to ride here. It's a proper playground, with endless trails spanning through its heart, round its edges, and beyond.

The Codford base is the perfect starting point; after a couple of minutes on the road, we soon found ourselves winding our way through a short wooded section, before bursting out on to a narrow track between cornfields, with the Plains off in the distance and a section of deep ruts fast approaching. Time for lesson number one.

And that's the way it worked all day. Justin would lead us on a brisk, but sensible, run, allowing us time to get a good feel for the bike and cover some distance. But then he'd spy something a bit challenging and make a beeline for it, but not before stopping us beforehand, talking us through how to approach it, and then showing us how it was done. It's a brilliant way to do it, and my riding had improved noticeably by the end of the day. I was buzzing.

**The trails and green lanes of Salisbury Plain are many and varied, as these two images show**

## Phoenix Trails

There are four different levels of training to choose from across the four centres. You can opt for a 2.5-hour 'Taster Session', which'll see you tackling ruts, steps, inclines and declines in a closed environment, to build a solid foundation of skills ready for you to take to the trails.

The beginner 'Level 1' course covers all the same stuff as the 'Taster Session', but also includes a chance to hit up the local Green Lanes so you can practice all your newly-acquired skills in real world conditions.

The intermediate 'Level 2' day takes things a step further. In an ideal world you'll have completed either a 'Taster Session' or 'Level 1' course, but there's a bit of flexibility if you are a decent rider and feel confident in your abilities. It's better to be honest with yourself though, and if you're not sure you'll be able to cope with a full day on the trails, you'd be better off opting for one of the more beginner-focused sessions. It involves a briefing to go over key skills, and a chance to practice on a private training area, before you get the chance to venture out for an extended ride on the local lanes.

The extended 'Level 3' follows a similar format to 'Level 2', starting with a quick briefing before getting straight out on to the lanes. It's a long day on the bike, covering big miles – with fitness and endurance just as important as technical ability.

Prices range from £99 for the 'Taster Session', up to £270 for a full day of Level 1, 2 or 3 training. For your cash you'll also be able to borrow all the kit you need: helmets, boots, gloves, jackets, trousers, and even motocross-style body armour is available. You're welcome to wear your own approved riding gear, too, though you'll need to make sure you've got some high-leg adventure-style boots (at the very least). And lunch is included, too.

If you fancy something a bit more intensive, Phoenix also work together with Trailworld.co.uk, offering three or four day trips to the Andalusian mountains in southern Spain. If you want to know more, the best thing to do is give them a shout direct. For more information, visit: [www.phoenixmotorcycletraining.co.uk](http://www.phoenixmotorcycletraining.co.uk)

