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SPORTIVE

HELL OF THE ASHDOWN

Kent and East Sussex,
February 24

Hell of the Ashdown



THE CLUE IS definitely in the name for this bracing early-season test of fitness run on some very tough roads

Richard Hallett

"**T**his," I told Simon firmly as we left the event HQ, "is going to be a measured ride." Noting his unusual readiness to go along with this plan, I slowed still further from the easy pace first adopted; there was, after all, a long way to go so early in the year.

The Hell of the Ashdown is one of the UK cyclo-sportive scene's season openers; run as winter prepares to yield unwillingly to

spring, it comes at a time when many road cyclists lack the miles needed to push hard on a demanding course. It may run for a mere 100km, but the Ashdown Forest's Hell is assuredly hard enough to punish the under-prepared and overconfident alike.

The assumption that I was among the former, having caught this winter's cold-with-chest-infection good and early, saved me from finding later on that I was one of the latter. This was my first attempt at the event, which replaced the promoting Catford Cycling Club's revered early-season reliability ride some five years ago. Avoiding the major roads followed by its predecessor, the sportive route sticks largely to the quiet back lanes that wind through the Kent and Sussex countryside.

Early test

Many of them are notably hilly. The event gave participants an

Ed Collinge

Club: Unattached

Age: 37

This was my first ever sportive and despite a seriously hilly course and the painful cold — not sure I have been cycling in the snow before — it was really great fun and it was amazing how cheerful all the marshals stayed in the arctic conditions! I'll definitely be back for more again next year.



early taster with the ascent of Cudham's Church Hill. The 25 per cent stretch at the top doesn't last long but comes at the end of a climb that forced a couple of riders to dismount; given what was to come, this would have made me abandon on the spot.

At least the icy conditions that have troubled the event were largely absent this year. The few patches of ice that could be seen were enough to instil caution,



1,508
number of
riders

KEY



The Wall: don't look up!

"The first half of the ride felt surprisingly cosy"

but air temperatures just above freezing meant that the roads were largely ice free. Indeed, a steady tailwind meant that the first half of the ride felt surprisingly cosy, with hands and feet warming nicely by

the top of the many short climbs on the way to the first feed stop.

Well stocked with gels, bananas and a tea stand fit for an open time trial, the Ashdown Forest feed station marked the end of the easy stuff. Just a mile down the road was the Wall, one of the ride's great challenges. The reality is not quite as awful as its name and reputation imply; for the most part, it is a steady ascent notable mainly for the direct

David Staton

Club: Serpentine Running Club

Age: 41

4-05-42

That was awful. Awful. I loved it! I will love it more in about half an hour, but I found that very hard. I've never done the event before. It was cold... it was hard. I went out a bit too fast as well, which didn't help. I did 4-05 and that was including a few stops to deal with gloves and other issues, so I was pleased



MY RIDE



Bigfoot riders give it big legs

Niels Bryan-Low

MY RIDE

Club: Cosaveli
Age: 41
3-35-03



"It was good; it went pretty quick but the downhill were pretty scary. I haven't ridden this one before, but I'm training for the Trois Etapes, which is the world's leading charity pro-am. I'm going to be riding with Carlos Sastre and Evelyn Stevens this summer in the Alps and it's going to be an amazing event. It raised \$1.7m for charity last year. Actually, I run the event."

approach to the summit implied by its name.

At the top, the ride turns right onto the route of the old Withyham road race circuit. On the long descent, the wind, now from the left, began its work. Despite spending several miles sheltered on Simon's wheel, I could feel the cold start to bite. A succession of short climbs did nothing to warm sluggish muscles and I was glad that the new 'Nouvelle [sic] Col de Groombridge' was pretty, rather than especially challenging.

Bowled out

Not so the climb out of the Medway valley past Top Hill Wood, which has the profile of a bowler hat. From here to the foot of Ide Hill, the bitterly cold wind nagged away, steadily eroding precious strength just as it was about to be needed most. Doing solid work on the front, Simon towed me to the foot of the second worst climb of the day but could do nothing to ease the suffering it inflicted on now-hurting legs.

Reluctant to waste time, we rode across the timing mat and straight past the feed stop just short of the top of the hill and dropped down to Sundridge. This was yet another long,

chilling descent and it preceded the long drag to the foot of one of the most hated hills in Kent.

I once rode Star Hill in 3-18 when it was used for my club hill-climb; on this day it probably

"The sounds emitted by the woman on my wheel lifted my mood"

1,735
Total metres climbed

took me that long to reach the first bend. There is nothing good about the hill, which boasts an average gradient of eight per cent over its three-quarter-mile length. On a bad day it feels twice as steep. My mood was lifted by the sounds emitted by the woman on my wheel, who nevertheless had the breath to apologise for her stertorous breathing.

Any hope that the top of Star meant the end of the punishment was misplaced, but a well-chosen last few miles meant that it was of the mild sort. This was just as well, as my measured ride had signally failed to reduce the suffering I experienced on Star and Ide Hills. Hell of the Ashdown? Hell of the North Downs, more like.

Annlouise Cawley

MY RIDE

Club: Sticky Buns
Age: 44
5-41-58



"It was tough and cold. Three of us rode round together. There was supposed to be four of us but one bailed — too hungover. It was his birthday yesterday. After the first feed station they were saying the wind chill factor would be -7°C but it felt a lot colder than that. Would I do it again? Yes, once I've forgotten how cold and tough it was."



Star Hill: the grand finale

Cycling WEEKLY

Hell of the Ashdown

100KM (62 MILES)

RAF BIGGIN HILL
This World War Two airfield played a key role in the Battle of Britain. On the North Downs south-east of London it was perfectly placed to defend the capital from German bombers. The operations room for Operation Crossbow was also here — whereby German V-1 flying bombs (Doodlebugs) were anticipated and attacked by RAF fighters before they could reach their target.

HEVER CASTLE
In the 1500s this was the childhood home of Anne Boleyn, second wife of Henry VIII. Two wives on, it passed on to his former fourth wife, Anne of Cleves, as part of a divorce settlement. The marriage was annulled due to non-consummation and she didn't contest it.

ASHDOWN FOREST
Originally used in Norman times as a deer-hunting playground, Ashdown Forest is a 6,500-acre area of mostly heathland, on the highest sandy ridge-top of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It is still all uncultivated common land and still home to fallow deer, though the original red deer have disappeared. Ashdown Forest is also home to Winnie the Pooh — AA Milne lived at Cotchford Farm in nearby Hartfield.

FOREST ROW
This village of 5,000 on the edge of the Ashdown Forest boasts more famous residents past and present than towns five times the size. Comedian Ben Elton, Pink Floyd's David Gilmour, and the late Monkee Davy Jones, all lived here for several years, and Engelbert Humperdinck had a holiday cottage in the village. However, most famously of all (for our purposes), former Tour de France yellow jersey Sean Yates comes from Forest Row.

START/FINISH

memory-map

