



HELL OF THE ASHDOWN



Kent and East Sussex,

Hell of the Ashdown



Richard Hallett

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 underprepared and overconfident alike.

The assumption that I was among the former, having caught this winter's cold-with-chestinfection 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 wend through the Kent and Sussex countryside.



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

Ed Collinge

illy course and he painful cold not sure I have



he snow before - it wa great fun and it was an now cheerful all the ma tayed in the arctic conditions 'Il definitely be back for more gain 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,

"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

Running Club Age: 41 4-05-42

e it more in about half an hour, but I found that event before. It was cold... it was 4-05 and that was incli other issues, so I was p

The Wall: don't look up!

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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,

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

Annlouise

was supposed to be four of us

but one bailed - too hungover

It was his birthday yesterday.

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 fore

ow cold and tough it w

Cawley

Sticky Buns

Club:

Age: 44

5-41-58

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

chilling descent and it preceded

Total metres climbed

Bryan-Low Club: Cosaveli Age: 41 3-35-03 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 t raised \$1.7m for charit year. Actually, I run the e

Niels

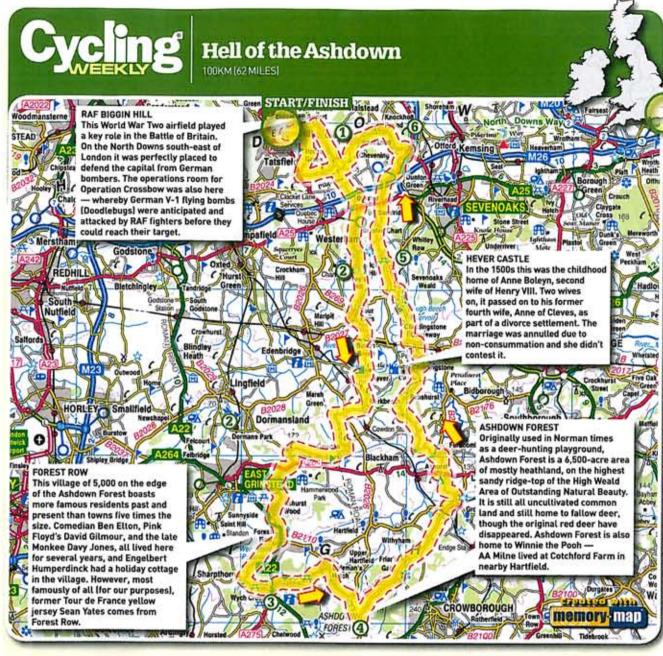
took me that long to reach the first bend. There is nothing good about the hill, which boasts an average gradient of eight per cent over its three-quarter-mile length. On a bad day it feels twice as

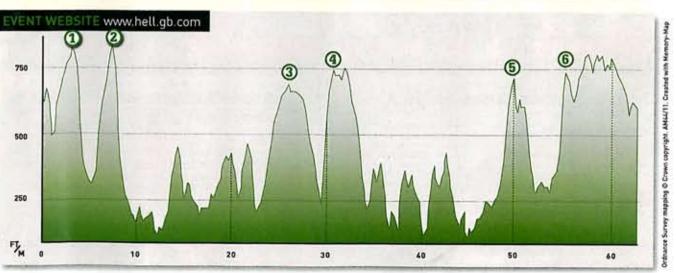
steep. My mood was lifted by the sounds emitted by the woman on my wheel, who nevertheless had the breath to apologise for her stertorous breathing.

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.









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