

HAMPSHIRE HORRORS FOR THE FRANTIC FIVE

by Richard Thomas

A tale of woe, woe and thrice woe (with apologies to Frankie Howard) on the Whitchurch Winter Wind-Down 106km Audax

'Twas a couple of weeks ago when Chris Colyer suggested I join him, Ian Landless, Tony Gale and Peter Price on this gentle potter through the Hampshire countryside. Being easily led, I agreed and so it transpired.

Early on Saturday 10th November I loaded up my car and drove to meet Chris at his house in Saltdean, and from there we travelled in his car to the event HQ in Catherington, north of Portsmouth. Arriving in plenty of time for the 9am start, and having unloaded the bikes and donned the necessary garb, we ventured inside the hall, picked up our Brevet cards and partook of the tea, coffee and cakes on offer.

The five of us met up in the car park, where Tony Gale was putting on a spare pair of Ian's overshoes, having left his at home. Such was his state of awareness at this early hour that he had started to put them on over his ordinary shoes before realising his mistake.

Meanwhile, his two teammates were posing for the photographer (see right) and Chris, see below, was modelling the latest in waterproof helmet coverings!!



Eventually we were ready to leave, and we let the majority of the field of around 50 riders depart before setting off, only to stop 100 metres down the road for Chris to have a faff. The light rain stopped some 15 minutes into the ride but the lanes were very mucky from the rainstorms overnight. The route undulated through villages such as Chidden and Meonstoke



before we missed a right turn, descended a steep hill and, upon reaching a junction with a main road, realised our mistake. Fortunately another rider came to join us, a local young lad, who had deliberately come this way to avoid the mucky lanes. So he set off, with us charging after him and trying to hang on so that we did not get lost! I formed the advance party and eventually suggested he slow down a bit as we were all pensioners and were strung out and struggling! Back on route we reached the one and only information control, at 12.6km into the ride, and duly wrote the answer down in the Brevet card. The next villages were Kilmeston and Cheriton, very picturesque with babbling streams running alongside the road. We were in watercress growing country near New Alresford, well known for its steam preservation railway line known as the Watercress Line.

Many of the roads were familiar to me from several Audax rides I have done over the years, including Dave Hudson's longer rides from West Sussex to Wales and back. Not long after this we were obliged to pass under a bridge carrying the main road over the top. Well, our way ahead was completely flooded, so we took the line of least depth, being the crown of the cambered road. The water was navigable at a gentle pace, so as to reduce the bow wave that inevitably ensues.

We got within 6km of the turn Control at Whitchurch (being just under half way at 50km) when Chris's front tyre was attacked by a flint, with the inevitable deflationary aspect for both us and the tyre. Opportunity for some faffing by the rest of us, including time for Peter to adjust his dress, whilst Chris struggled to put his rigid beaded Gatorskin tyre back on the deep section rim.



Meantime we discussed the merits of using heavier tyres, such as Schwalbe's "Marathon Plus", in the winter and tried to look cheerful as the tail enders rode by with a cheery, "Are you OK?". Has anyone

ever replied, "No not really!" Then passing us and the reverse was to be a continuing theme throughout the rest of the ride as punctures caused each of the groups to stop en route to the finish. Having lost some time with the unplanned stop we arrived at the Control, got our card signed and went inside the pub for some sustenance. The organiser had, on several occasions before the ride, enquired of the pub management whether they could cope with up to 50 hungry cyclists, as well as their normal level of custom and they assured him they could.

Well, dear readers, something must have gone awry with the communications down the line. Not only did we wait a considerable time before our order was taken, we then waited another length of time before it arrived, minus the teas and coffees that we had ordered. Staff were rushing here and there, so no opportunity to ask where these were, so we finished our food, paid and left, as we had been there for over 90 minutes, which is a big chunk of time out of a 100km ride. We had just 3 hours to do the 56 km back to the finish. This was manageable despite the hills in between, and if we rode at an average of 20km/hr we would do it comfortably provided nothing else went wrong! We soon passed the group which had passed us before the control, they had suffered a deflationary moment, and we thought one all now!

Our feeling that justice had been done was not to last long, as Chris suffered an impact puncture on the front, good old 23mm tyres eh! Whilst we were amusing ourselves the aforementioned group came by, as did four other riders, so we were the lantern rouge now.

The situation was getting desperate for us, as the clock was ticking and we weren't moving. Eventually we set off again, at a now more urgent pace and did pass some of the riders who we had seen go by us earlier. The road undulated, which is never helpful in the pursuit of a bit more speed, yet we began to recover some time.

We were still doing OK when, with 14km to go, yours truly got a flat in the back tyre. Well, I thought that was it, but I was undeterred. I accepted my fate with dignity and told the trio of Wanderers to go so at least they could have a better chance of finishing within the 7hrs 4 mins time limit. Meanwhile Chris kindly stayed with me, held my bike as I did a speedy "Formula 1" style inner tube change, not forgetting to remove the large sliver of flint from the tyre before putting the new tube in, and put the wheel back in. Then further disaster struck, as on pumping up the tyre the push on valve bit sheared straight off the pump, leaving me with a still un-inflated tyre. It was very fortunate that Chris was there, I used his pump and we were on our way, "bit and biting" it as fast as we could go, struggling up the long climb on Hayden Lane and then going hell for leather through Clanfield and Lovedean before the right turn into Catherington Lane and the 0.8km climb to the finish control. At the bottom of the climb we had just 8 minutes in hand, but we were now sure we would make it, and did so with 4 minutes left on the controllers clock.

Elated and relieved, we were treated to a fine spread of sandwiches, cakes and tea or coffee to round off a truly memorable ride, which was on a lovely route spoiled by the muckiness of the lanes on the day. There is another ride by the same organiser from the same start point next March and I am sorely tempted by the opportunity to ride there again to lay some demons to rest!!!

I have now fitted a 25mm Schwalbe Marathon Plus to the rear wheel for the rest of the winter! I also discovered later that the tube I fitted on the ride had a leaky patch, so we were lucky to get back without further delay. When I got the bike out of the car at home the tyre was flat! It is now in the bin, along with the one cut by the flint as the gash was too much for a patch to hold.

Our ride statistics were as follows; Ride time 4hrs 58 mins.; Ave riding speed 22.0km/hr; Max speed 57.5 km/hr, Distance 109.26km (nominally 106.7 km but we did that detour early on by going off-route).