

The Delightful Dales – 200km Audax Ride

The snow settling on the road as we drove through Todmorden was an ominous forewarning of what might lay ahead. It was 6.30 am on a dismal 200km Audax ride of the year. We shivered on the car park as flurries of snow blew in from the northeast. Andy, the organiser, seemed unperturbed. "What do you reckon?" someone asked him. "You'll be fine", he replied, "if it gets really bad you can always turn round and cycle back". His response summed up the essence of Audax long distance cycling. Self-reliance. A brew at the start and off you go; no signs, no manned checkpoints, no feed stations, no support, no rescue. Just how we like it. You navigate yourselves between fixed points (usually cafes or petrol stations) and get timed receipts to prove you were there. Ride enough events and you're awarded grand titles like Randonneur or even Super Randonneur. A sport for cycling anoraks you might think... you may be right, Richard got a medal last year and even got his photo in the Audax magazine "Arrivee" !

Departing at 7.30am we rode north through the puddles accumulating at the edge of the A59. Sleet turned to snow but the roads stayed clear. On country lanes a fast pace saw us overtaking some of the other 25 riders as we passed through Gargrave and Cracoe. The first and biggest climb of the day started in Kettlewell. The notorious Park Rash. "Steep" fails to describe its relentless gain in height. A beast of a climb; probably the steepest in the Dales at 1 in 3, and made much harder for the last 500m of climb by the snow covering the tarmac. We slithered on, skinny road tyres spinning alarmingly as they lost



traction. Somehow we managed to ride to the summit cattlegrid. Sheltering from the wind behind a signpost we watched as other riders battled up, some riding, some pushing. We were in a winter wonderland with a good 10cm of snow on the road and whiteout conditions. "Where's the road?" someone asked. We pootled tentatively down the shallow incline on the other side of the pass, one foot unclipped ready for the sideways slides of backwheels on the odd icy patch. As the road steepened we got off and jogged down, pushing the bikes through the powder. At last, black tarmac showed through, and off we rode again in an exhilarating swoop down Coverdale to our first café stop at Middleham.

Refreshed by tea and bacon butties, and now riding in sunshine, we rode past the artillery range over to Reeth. With red warning flags flapping furiously in the stiff breeze we kept a wary eye out for stray tanks. Turning up Swaledale and the route was now living up to its name. What a delightful valley. The scenery gets wilder as you climb up the spectacular road from Keld before a white knuckle descent into Nateby. Quite a few of the riders had gathered in the Black Bull for sandwiches and a brew. It's not often I go into a pub and order tea! No-one seemed anxious to leave the warm bar but with the afternoon fading we saddled up and headed south by the River Eden to Garsdale Head. The next big climb of the day reared in front of us: the infamous Coalroad. Rising sharply ahead as you pass under the railway viaduct the road gets its name from the many opencast bellpit coalmines dotted along its route. There was little evidence of them under the blanket of snow which edged the road. Towards the top we were confined to two ribbons of tarmac kindly carved out of the snow by a previous land rover. At the summit we paused to take in the wintry view. Nothing moved, apart from a couple of other, similarly obsessed, cyclists. We made a cautious descent past Dent station before another up and over took us to Ribblesdale.

Our headlong dash down Ribblesdale was briefly interrupted by the Three Peaks café in Horton. We got there just before they closed. We craved cycling food. "Have you got any beans?" we pleaded. "No, we've just washed the pan out", the owner told us, "but we have got some puddings left". Marvellous! My dairy free principles went out the window as we tucked into fruit crumble and bread and butter pudding, with lashings of custard. Revitalised we rode through Settle, pausing only to switch on our lights. I had to ride at the back as Geoff complained that my rear light was searing his eyeballs. A bad move; you can't see the potholes at the back. Despite my bone rattling encounter with a black hole we pressed on. There's something particularly surreal about riding dark country lanes after dusk. With heightened senses it's a different world, a hypnotic experience as pulsing lights reveal eerie glimpses of the surrounding landscape. Rathmell, Wigglesworth and Sawley passed by, hardly noticed as we cruised down our own wormhole of illumination.



A final dash down the A59 and we'd finished. Eleven hours, 200km and 3600m of climb. What a ride...and what a delightful way to spend a Sunday.

Phil Hodgson