

Cracked, Potty or What?

by Mark Waters

One of the most "audacious" events ever devised took place for the first time in midsummer 1996. For the 21 self-confessed nutcases (well, most of us were – still are for that matter!), who entered, the prospect of a 1,000km 7AAA point ride was clearly too great a challenge to resist. It really all began in 1987 when, to quote, "an absolute pig" of a ride was added to the audax calendar. It quickly acquired cult status. This was the "Hard Boiled". Several years later the instigator of the ride devised another longer and harder one. It crossed so many contour lines it had to be given 3 AAA points. This was the 400km "Porkers". Still no mercy was shown with the creation of a ride to complete the ultimate tough Super Randonneur series – a 600km event with 2½ AAA points – the "Brimstone". Once achieved, could tough hill lovers be allowed to rest on their laurels? Not a chance! The demon in our midst went out and concocted his pièce de résistance.

An extract from the introductory notes to this "next greatest challenge" makes terrifying reading:

"The Crackpot 1000 is the severest test of stamina, endurance, determination, grit. It is not a challenge, it's worse than that....The Crackpot is the impossible come to haunt you, to gnaw at your marrow, to eat into the very fibre of the *raison d'être* of long distance cycling....At best you will struggle, at worst you will suffer the agonies of the damned."

It will never be known exactly how many people, on receiving their 1996 calendar, spotted this new event and grimaced. Some, like me, will even have had a ruined Christmas because they saw the draft calendar at the 95 AUK AGM the November before. One wonders how many people, on seeing this new 1000 km event with seven AAA points, came immediately to the realisation that the whole coming season was going to revolve round having a go at this monster.

The demon creator is of course none other than the very likeable Mr Shawn Shaw, who took the trouble to emphasise very strongly the need for preparation for this monster challenge. and this did not merely involve getting lots of miles in; it meant doing a spot of homework. We were asked to submit a rough timetable, stating when we expected to reach each control – in fact a very useful exercise, because it meant you had no option but to do your homework. You had to sit down with a map and work out the route and plan your itinerary. It was important to look carefully at the terrain and ascertain the degree of severity of individual sections – a route worthy of 7AAA points was going to have just a few hills! Add into the equation how you think you might be feeling at any particular time of day based on the knowledge you have of your own natural rhythms; then the time of day or night that you think you will be riding

each section. Next anticipate how long you think you will need to spend at any particular control and when you think you will need to sleep and for how long. Four hours later – if you're lucky – you'll have your "plan". Alan Pedliham actually took a week's holiday prior to the event and did a lot of the route as a kind of tour. His account did not fill any of us, who heard about it, with a great deal of enthusiasm. Seemingly it was rather hard.

Those who have ridden any of Shawn's events will know what I mean when I say that his route sheets are models of brevity. This unfortunately leads to the occasional route finding problem. (Had he written the route sheet the way I

like them to be written, the word "sheet" would have had to be changed to the word

"book"! As it was, it was quite a

sizeable item.)

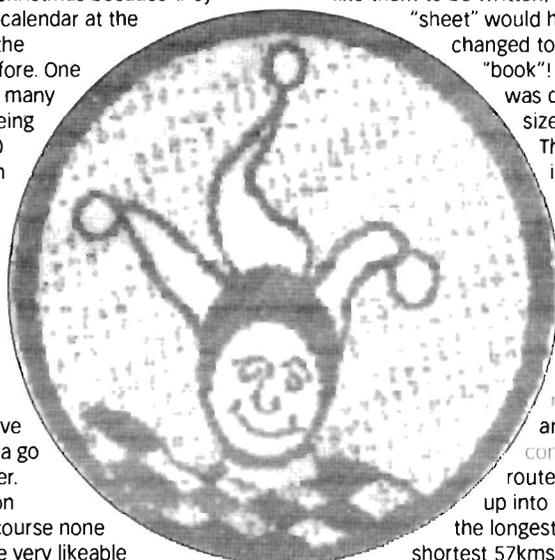
That aside, and it is only a personal view, you understand, it was impossible to fault the meticulous planning, the route itself and the controls. The

route was divided up into 14 sections, the longest 88kms, the shortest 57kms, good

distances; and although the route avoided all but a few sizeable towns (Devizes and Marlborough spring to mind) it was never hard to find sustenance on the route (except at night of course). No stage felt overly long and only one felt overly difficult.

As far as the controls are concerned, Shawn located as many of them as he could in people's homes. Quite how he persuaded people to receive into their homes riders who were likely to be close to...well, words fail me...being brain dead...quite likely to collapse in the best chair possibly never to get out again. Nevertheless, persuade them he did and what a wonderful job they were to do.

So that's the background. The homework had been done, the legs were honed to a fine level of fitness, the lung capacity was peaking at an all-time high; all that was needed now was a very large



dose of luck – you don't need to say it was staggering scenic and many of us encountered deer and other sundry forms of life, together with a memorably beautiful dawn. But it was also the stage which was to instill seeds of doubt and worry in many people's minds. By this time, we were getting spread out a bit and I never saw the first half of the field again. The second half to a man almost (apologies to our one lady rider, Anne Learmonth) arrived at the control with literally minutes to spare to closing time – all due to the extra distance. [247kms, 3,653m/12,300ft – almost the height of Mt Cook]

At the final reckoning, there were just 24 entries, of which 21 arrived on a fine midsummer evening in Poole at the home of our illustrious pathfinder and his wife Jean, for a pre-start nosh. Sitting neatly in a basket adjacent to the dining room table were what looked, at first glance, like a nest of migrant leprechauns. In fact they were "Millies" (*mille* is French for 1000 you see), with beautiful jingly bells on each tip of their green tri-pointed hats, from under which sprouted a tuft of straw-coloured hair. They wore red and yellow tunics with black belt and a green ruff and green bootees. Entirely handmade by Jean, they were indeed very handsome, but, naturally, total crackpots underneath the glitzy exterior; and there was one for each of us nutty riders. David Lewis's Millie probably had the worst (or best) ride depending on your viewpoint, since he was attached directly to the rabbit which regularly adorns his bar bag. Kinky stuff, Dave!

At 8.00pm, in perfect conditions, we were off with at least two hours or so of daylight left, such was the time of year. High spirits prevailed as we set about reversing the last stage of the Hard Boiled. People who have done this event will appreciate what that meant in terms of hills. Fortunately for us, the dip and scarp slopes of the hills hereabouts were on our side this way, so the ups were more gentle than the downs. Minor route finding problems were encountered after darkness fell and several riders found themselves alone having punctured. The group I was with rolled in to Green Pond Cottage (Aunty Betty's Tea Rooms) in Halstock just after 11pm, with 66kms covered and 904m (3100ft) climbed (approx height of Scafell Pike, highest mountain in England). This wonderful establishment, stuck out in the middle of nowhere, is definitely worth a visit. If only to see Betty doing her best to satisfy the

cravings of our daddies no matter what time of the day or night they arrive – she manages pretty well considering.

Adequately nourished, we were nevertheless totally unprepared for the lane that was to follow shortly after leaving the control; it had everything you could want in a lane – steepness, length, overgrown sidewalls of a prickly disposition, which had clearly been missed from the council's hedge-cutting rota, and decidedly slippery mud down the middle. We all cursed and swore our way to the top and secretly loved every inch. This was it! The preliminaries were over, we just had 930 kilometres to ride to the finish.

The remaining 80kms to Minehead were not without their ups and downs – a mere 2,500ft (716m) of ascent in total. I arrived at 4.15am at Pam Almond's house to feast on my first breakfast of the day. Our first night on the road was almost over and found us still full of vim and vigour but a little tired nevertheless – some of us already had heads nodding into our plates!

The next stage will be remembered

At Culmstock we ransacked the village store control and sat outside relaxing, enjoying the lunch time warmth and pondering our future.

by every participant for the rest of his natural life and probably beyond! An unremitting line was taken south to Bovey Tracy through Exmoor and the fringes of Dartmoor. Supposedly 74km but in fact nearer 95km, this section contained twice as much ascent as any other section on the event (6,700ft/2033 metres). Mark Houlford, Keith Smallwood and I somehow managed to add an extra loop which gave us a further 200 metres of climbing – we all loved hills but we could have done without the extra just at

this point! Needless to say it was

Breakfast number two was quite excellent and it was a pleasant surprise to find Bill Best helping out – hadn't seen him since losing him in Abergavenny on the Easter Tour. There was lots to talk about and it was at this stage that we began to appreciate just how much communication was going on between controls and our route mentor; we were being watched over very carefully – no one was being allowed to disappear without trace!

We were out on the road again all too soon at about 10.00am for the next 57km stage to Culmstock. We needed to claw some time back if we were to get any sleep later on but it wasn't an easy stage, with the second highest climbing rate of any of the stages (15.4m/km). We bypassed Exeter to the south, with the inevitable need to use a few busy roads. Our thoughts were with Paul (Whitebelly) Whitehead, who was with us for some of the way and struggling with a wheel bearing problem (he packed shortly afterwards).

At Culmstock (307km, 15,200ft/4608m – the summit of Mont Blanc almost reached!), we ransacked the village store control and sat outside relaxing, enjoying the lunch time warmth and pondering our future. No time to waste though, so the rest was brief before continuing NE and reaching the Quantock Hills mid-pm. I tuned my radio in to listen to the



Smiling faces at the start of the Crackpot



Crackpot 1000: Paul "Whitebelly" Whitehead climbing at dawn on Exmoor. Photos by Alan Pedliham

European Cup semi-final, which kept my mind occupied, probably too much because I got dropped by the rest of my group, resulting in my getting lost in Bridgwater. A reasonably flat section followed as I entered the Somerset levels eventually arriving at the tea rooms in the village of Mark's cider-making factory. Unfortunately cider was not an appropriate thirst quencher, but gallons of tea was. I understand that David and Anne chose the cider at this point and then decided that the attractions of a good B&B were too strong. Who can blame them? However, our gang of four continued (Mark H, Julian Beech, Sean Flynn and myself) turning back towards the south and heading for Axminster.

66kms and 1,900ft/512m later, we arrived, the time being 9pm, to be greeted by Sally Hennessey. We all needed a bit of TLC at this stage and got it in good measure. We were 423kms into the ride with 5,712m/19,200ft ascended (almost the summit of Mt Kilimanjaro). It was good to see Andy Seviour, who had been forced to pack for mechanical reasons and was on his way back to Poole. We also heard that several others had packed for various reasons: Frank Ramsbottom (on stage two with broken forks), Paul Ward (who hit something at speed on the descent into Cerne Abbas on stage one) and then Dave Pilbeam, Roger Philo and Keith Smallwood who were all over or too close to time. Very sad. In fact, it transpired that everybody who was going to pack had done so by the Mark control. Of course we weren't to know this at Axminster, at which point we were down to eleven riders on the road to complete the remaining 577kms. Still on the road were Ian Hennessey and Jason Clark at the front, followed by Alan Pedliham, Jeremy Clegg, Robert Watson and Steve Abraham. Dennis Horwood was somewhere around too and would join the gang of four later on to make it a gang of five - the tail-end Charlies!

We had our first snatch of sleep at Axminster, but it was all too short. At

about 3.30am we headed out into the night and straight on to the steep and daunting Sector Lane. It was a dark night and the roads were damp so care was needed. Thank goodness for dynamos, although my new Nordlicht was not as bright as my old Axa. An atmospheric dawn was accompanied by a puncture for Mark and a "comfort stop" behind a convenient hedge for me. I remember the stage

as being quite flat, but records show otherwise - 3,200ft/960m in the 82km. It was during this stage, heading towards an info control at Ham Street that we achieved our peak of silliness, thanks to a game we played in which you had to say silly things in silly accents. Hours of fun for the brain dead! We bumped into Dennis on a tour of the area in search of the info control and were able to help.

Another day, another breakfast at 7.45am, courtesy of master chef Drew Buck and Jan at their home, the next control, much loved by *anciens* de Brimstone: Tor Hole, Chewton Mendip, together with a few snatched winks of sleep. And then it was off again northwards to Michaelwood services on the M5, on the fringes of the Cotswolds. It was Sunday morning and the roads were quiet as we passed through Keynsham (spelt K-E-Y-N-S-H-A-M - are you old enough to remember Horace Bachelor?). With clear memories of the hills in this area which Shawn saw fit to send us up on the Brimmy, it was a relief not to find anything too strenuous to upset the pleasures of the day. 444m /1800ft only on this 58km section - almost flat! Nevertheless we had scaled Mt Aconcagua by the time we reached Michaelwood [7,116m/24,200ft].

We lounged around the forecourt, cluttering up the place as only audaxers can after three days on the road

Motorway services all look and taste the same. You feel on a different plane to the other people frequenting such establishments - they leave you alone, you leave them alone - it works very well. I think it was here that I had to wait half an hour for my chosen dish. The excuses needed hearing to be believed! All for a plate of pasta, which was needed because there was still another 440kms to go - we had turned the "corner"...

...in more ways than one in fact, because, having reached the most northerly point on the course, we had two stages going south now. At Zeals, the next control, they ran out of apple pie and I had to be content with a baked apple, normally lovely, but not when it is bugged about with. I had a foul taste of angelica and the like in my mouth for ages afterwards. We had just had a lumpy stage. (3,400ft/952m in 85kms) but this was followed by a gentler section to West Stafford, just east of Dorchester (1,600ft/400m in 56kms). Lovely scenery accompanied our every turn of the pedals as ever (in case you thought we might not be noticing such things by this stage - we were!).

West Stafford saw us above the summit of Everest - yes we'd conquered it!! - 29,200ft (this according to Robert's computer measuring things in feet - from mine in metres, we were well above the South Col but not quite there yet at 8,468). We had also cycled 697.3kms and it was about 8.30pm Sunday evening.

What is there to say about Peter and Tam Loakes's home in West Stafford control that is not overkill in the praise stakes. I for my part turned up the charm control and attempted to overwhelm them, thus proving that a knackered cyclist can still be a pleasant beast. There are great advantages to being one of the last on the road - it means that you can eat endless platefuls of tuna and pasta bake. It went down an absolute treat. It would be fair to say that we were all not at our bounciest best at this point - before the pasta that is. The question was whether to have our second dose of sleep here or push on to Codford. We decided on Codford, since we felt we needed to get as far as possible and we might be able to claw back some more time allowing us to sleep for a little longer.

And so off we set in the thickening twilight of our third night on the road, bound for Codford St Peter in the lovely Wylfe Valley (not that we'd see much of it at dead of night!), but not before I took advantage of the Loakes' bespoke tailoring service. I tell you these controls had everything. You ask for a well cut black bin liner to help keep you warm and before you know it, you're enveloped in it and feeling a lot happier about facing the chilly night to come. And a chilly 81kms it turned out to be, over some pretty lumpy country (3,100ft/1012m), and not helped by some tricky, laney manoeuvring. We got lost twice, but fortunately not too badly, although we lost valuable time. There were a couple of monster hills, which are always better in the dark because you can't see them. We also had a wee catnap lying flat out in the middle of the road just before Tisbury whilst Sean repaired a flat about a mile back. Fortunately the one car that came by had a noisy engine. At Tisbury I personally delivered my step-mother's birthday card



- on the day (well...night), but, being 2am felt she might object to giving her stepson and four total strangers very early morning tea. And so we eventually reached Codford and the George Hotel at 3.20. Staff to attend to our every need were up and about, but frankly all we wanted at this point was some shuteye, so it was off to the skittle alley to join another sleeping body - that of Robert. We also bumped into champion nutter, Steve (who was doing the event on fixed - naturally).

We woke at about 6 to eat a full breakfast, complete with somewhat dainty pieces of toast served up by mine host himself. He told us that Shawn was trying out the hotel as a possible future control for his other rides which had previously used the Woolpack in Sutton Veny, down the road, and which was no longer going to be able to be a control, so it was a case of upping the charm control again and impressing on the staff what a nice lot we all were. I shall need convincing that the breakfasts are going to be as good though!

And so the gang of five set off once more into the sunshine of Monday morning and in good spirits. A rather heavily trafficked Devizes was our first

port of call. The Marlborough Downs followed, lovely rounded green hills which were a treat to the eye. Then we reached Marlborough itself and break time - ice cream, chocolate bars and a chat with a friendly local - all very civilised. Membury services on the M4 came soon after. 851 kms done, less than 150k to go! The next section was also 73kms long but with less ascent this time - a mere 1,900 metres. There's not a lot to say about these last stages. I don't remember there being that much conversation, the scenery continued to be interesting and we were all cheerful enough, although one or other of us went through the occasional "bad patch" - only to be expected under the circumstances. You tend to shut up and just get on with it, rather than talk in these circumstances. Anyway, no one got left behind and Mark continued to set the pace up the hills! How does he do it?

Ower, near Southampton, was our first (and last) garage control, situated on a busy roundabout. We arrived at ten to four in the afternoon, with the sun shining and the heat of the day reflecting off the tarmac. We lounged around the forecourt, cluttering up the place as only audaxers can after three days on the road, eating goodies from the well stocked shop and

just chilling out. We knew that barring a disaster we would complete the course, but we still had 57kms to go and I don't recall any great urge to get going - for a start it was along a big B road (you get kinda used to lanes!). We had now ascended 36,700ft/10,784m.

We were to hear that we were not alone in being confused about the first instruction out of the control. The result involved us in some mildly dangerous manoeuvres on three lane carriageways, but the combined forces of five addled and exasperated brains eventually sorted things out and off we set along the B3079 which took us on a great circle course around the northern parts of the New Forest, first climbing into the forest up a never ending slow incline. But it was beautiful and it was still being appreciated. Fordingbridge came and went and we hammered on in time trial mode until I came close to blowing up (my legs), at which point I did blow up (my sense of humour) and said a few unnecessarily sharp (and immediately regretted) words, resulting, I'm glad to say, in an immediate reduction in speed. I was going to enjoy this ride to the end or else.

And so, like every good thing, our little ride came to an end as we steamed into

Some comments and conclusions from the questionnaire sent out to all participants after the event:

"Definitely a challenging ride. Only a sadist would put a 100k super grimpeur in the middle of a 1000k...but we all knew what we were letting ourselves in for."

"I thought the Brimstone was hard but this was in a different class...If I rode it again, I would use the widest rims available with Top Touring 100mm tyres." (From the rider who packed with a fractured rim.)

"Almost universally, the worst moment of the ride was arriving at Bovey Tracey with literally minutes to the close of the control. The end never seemed further away than it did then."

"...a superb experience...the standard of organisation, route sheet and controls was excellent...amazingly well organised...Best moments: 1) Exmoor at first light; deer, mist, chased a hare down the road; 2) Bovey Tracey control with Bill, Graham and the others helping out; 3) The leg down to Zeals and meeting Anne and Dave at the caff."

"The passage of time became quite disturbed...68 hours spent doing a Crackpot is quite different to the passage of three days in 'normal' life."

"It is my favourite Audax event of all time - I think all AUK events should be like the Crackpot ...not enough entrants (where were they all?)"

"Please could you publicly humiliate and slag off Alan Pedliham for not doing the ride on fixed...I only managed a 400k the week after - I was so ashamed...worst moment: making a stupid mistake going 15-20 miles in the wrong direction after a kip in a bus shelter...not all hard going - some of it was dead flat...it would have been a nightmare and very dangerous in the wet - especially the first 400k"

"I don't believe fitness or climbing ability is as important an issue as having a bloody-minded approach. If your over-riding (!) thought is to keep plugging away whatever, I think many, many AUK riders could get round. If only they would try!"

"The complete route looks as if it would make an excellent fortnight's tour of Wessex."

"I can usually pick out a few bits of a ride that I really hated, but not so on the Crackpot. The best moments were getting into the controls which were all excellent. The high points must have been the high points - the view from the top of Exmoor, with the sun rising over the mountains of South Wales, casting the Bristol Channel with a red tint that made all the climbing worthwhile. Seeing two badgers during the first night, and the deer in Exmoor at dawn. The views from the top of the Quantocks and Mendips. The mist in the fields after leaving Codford St Peter. The spring water at the Tor Hole control. The view of the ranges of hills stretching into the distance after the Membury control (sorry that should have been a bad moment!). The AUK sign in Shaftesbury Road. And, of course, Jean's cakes at the finish!"





Poole, feeling like kings of the road. We came to the Shah of Persia pub and turned right, up the little incline to see Poole Hospital on our left, the BP station on our right, which was our right turn into Shaftesbury Road and our master routeperson's house – a route that was all too pleasantly familiar by now to so many Wessex eventers. It was the end of the line. We were the last ones to arrive at 6.55pm with four hours 16 minutes of time to spare. We had taken 70 hours 55 minutes. The total ascent was 11,160m by my computer, 38,600ft by Robert's, and when you know that Avocet 50s are reported to under-read by up to 10%, that's a lot of ascent, but did our legs feel done in? Of course not!

That element of luck which you really do need on an event like this was sadly not with everybody who started. Quite a few of the packers did so owing to

Andy Seviour helping his father John prepare for his second crack at LEL

technical problems some caused by collisions with lumps or bumps, which are impossible to see on dark lanes. Punctures at bad moments certainly also contributed to demoralisation and an increased inclination to pack owing to shortage of time. That aside, we were very lucky with the weather – it could not have been better, although the nights were cold. Given rain and/or wind, there's no saying how it might have turned out. That's all part of a ride like this. You need to attempt it with Edward (of Matterhorn fame) Whympers words clearly writ on your brow – "courage is nought without prudence"! It also helps if you can say (preferably at the top of your voice, as often as the need arises – and particularly after reading an article like this which doesn't go nearly far enough in conveying what it's like to be part of such a memorable event):

"What a load of Bo*!@*%*! I don't f* *!x*! care! I just love it!!" (With apologies to a certain Glaswegian comedian.) ?