

Screens please nurse we've got a right one here ...

George Hanna's Crackpot 1000

A friend invited me to a party on 23 June to celebrate the solstice. As this was the date of the Crackpot 1000k I declined.

Come the evening of the 23rd I found myself in Shaftesbury Road Poole with around 30 others from a total entry of 39. **We had all sent** in a schedule to prove we could read and add up. Two hours in a jam on the M25 with Mel Kirkland had got rid of most of my nervous energy. Just enough time before the start for several cakes and some chilli. Despite provocation from a chunky ne'erdo well urging me not to play with my bike, I nudged my brakes to ensure rims and blocks were on touching terms. The bike had been serviced ten days before, **with a new** bottom bracket squeak seen off earlier in the week. My own bottom bracket got a dollop of zinc and castor oil before we whizzed west into the headwind on the A35 at a good pace. Cloudy and cool with the prospect of a dry first night, and more of the same to follow - an ideal weather forecast. Not that I believed it. After 'the wet Brimstone' four **weeks before**, I was carrying all my usual February gear, plus a space blanket.

Dropping into Cheshelbourne after a few small roller coasters, it seemed sensible to put my lights on, as riders in front could now only be heard not seen. It was fully dark on the shaded drop into Cerne Abbas and not much lighter on the dip to the ford at Sydling St Nicholas. **A 100m gap to the riders** in front was in order here for reaction time - plenty of hills to make it up later. Legs and bike behaving well until chain shipped around 15k from the first stop. Hopped off quickly to put it back on, aiming to get straight back on the bunch again. Strange, it's off the derailleur as well. How'd that 'E&E' happen. (I'd been using the 50 x 26 across the block to get the chain off the derailleur that way - drat those ergo levers.) Got some light on it, then dismantled the derailleur to get the chain back through, then put it back together. As my hands fumbled with the tool, made a mental note that the knobby allen keys on the Topeak 21 don't easily do derailleur bolts. Thirty minutes later I was checking the derailleur in the hall at Halstock. All looked OK, apart

from my black palmed mitts. At least they don't smell like over stewed cabbages yet.

Grateful for the usual rapidly served bargain food on offer here. And glad the controllers are able to get an early night for a change, as they usually have to contend with us around 3am. Five minutes out of , and it was gravel time again on a Shawn Shaw special - 1:6 with lots of detritus, and gravelly potholes on the descent. Our group of three disintegrated, and was joined from in front by Stuart from Wellington chanting what became the Crackpoteers mantra 'thought I'd missed the turning, so I doubled back'. Stuart professed to be an audax novice, but rode a stormer throughout. A mile or two up the road, Mel's gears became sluggish - quickly diagnosed as a frayed cable. Head torches ago to get it replaced, then scraped off the slug and got going again. Richard Harding also had transmission problems, and ultimately had to pack - the SPW gremlins were about that night.

Seeing no road markings due to new laid gravel, and phone box, but not the 2nd R opposite the box led to a scenic detour into Ilminster. Hard work keeping up with Mel and Stuart on the A358 bash back on route. As we pored over the map in Creech, PB Bear led a bunch past to confirm we were back in the real world. From there into Minehead was as uneventful as any night ride in a bunch with three fixed wheelers going like trains and three Willesden tops ever can be. Over the first breakfast of the day - as many bacon sandwiches as we could eat before Dr Box got them, and the obligatory bottomless teapot - news was exchanged of a dangerous stony ford not far up the road. Shawn kindly provides an assessment of climb per kilometre on all his route sheets, and most riders were distinctly nervous knowing the next two legs of the ride to Bovey and Culmstock were the most arduous of the lot.

Strong chill headwind to start along A39 towards Porlock, but you don't stay cold for long when climbing towards Dunkery Beacon. Another mischange on the switchbacks around the cobbled ford, meant I had to jump off again, and remember to engage granny for

the remount. Hands got very cold as we caught the wind on the 400m descent off Exford Common - almost dreamt of a gravel rash to warm them up. More switchbacks followed, including a 1:3 out of Hollowcombe. Well, the sign said that, but it didn't feel so bad and only the half-finished surface and chippings, on which you had to sit to get any rear wheel grip, made it difficult. At Penrynmoor, Exeter Wheelers had arranged a very welcome camper van secret control. The road since Dunkery had been a big dipper across some 15 river valleys - still the worst was over... only seven more valleys before Bovey. An hour later found us coasting along B1393 for a few flat miles, before the sharp right up and more up and down into Bovey Tracey. It's only after you've climbed for 10 minutes between 1,000 year old hedges that you see why Shawn takes you that way - excellent views to West and South which you would miss completely by taking the flat option on B1393.

A long rest was needed in Bovey to let legs recover from the succession of climbs. More excellent food - a three-course breakfast this time, served double quick and including more crunchy nut cornflakes than even Steve Abraham could eat. The bedrooms of Hind Street House were at our disposal, but the carpet felt plenty comfortable enough, and half an hour's kip later had me ready for the road again. Now only slightly dazed by losing a night's sleep. Pedalling towards Chudleigh, and the next gravel, I wondered what forms of blackmail Shawn resorts to persuade people to give up their houses and allow such larceny on their pantries ...? The breathtaking 63kph descent of Bullers Hill, made up for the long climb and allowed Ian Hennessy to overtake and act as guide through Exeter.

Almost missed the R at Yellowford farm as the sign was in the hedge, and I was looking for a bridge height restriction, not weight. Stumpy, Poundland and Red crosses passed quickly. I barely had time to wonder why red cross was black and white before 'at T, R' heralded the next big hill - a stonking and gently steepening straight half mile hill with plenty of debris to lose purchase on. The car on the way down just made it

extra interesting. After 57k in three hours, my legs wanted another long rest. Luckily there was nice comfy tarmac by the war memorial in Culmstock to sleep off my lunch. We formed a quartet from here with John Barkman and Simon Kolka, cheery souls and familiar faces from earlier Wessex rides. After veg chilli, and baked beans this was definitely the windy section of the orchestra. We quickly developed a routine, Stuart and I pulling hard on the ups, then coasting down, to be passed at speed by Simon who would often



Simon Kolka and Simon on yet another Crackpot hill. Photo: GH

shoot off ahead as he got bored riding steady paced. John coasted along conserving energy, never too out of breath for a chat. A scratch formation which worked well together.

Mostly flat on this next leg, except for the west side of the Quantocks at Cothelstone. At least this climb was mostly in trees, so we could suffer in shade, and was followed by a speedy descent with pleasant views of tidy farmland and the muddy Bristol Channel. Chasing fixed wheelers Pedals and Steve A across the levels through Bridgwater to the M5 services at East Brent, we kept just close enough to avoid having to do any route finding. Wind behind (sic)/over the left shoulder (sic) on the Somerset levels, and no real



worry about what it would be doing on the way back as the flattest leg of the event beckoned. After a spell on the levels, chasing Steve Ralphs up the climb to High Ham was a big mistake. The shock for my back had my sciatica playing up immediately. Did a few exercises at a pit stop, and thought that would be enough to get me to the control, but I should, with hindsight, have put my tights on. By the time we reached Ilminster for the second time I was getting worried - Sector Lane and a cold night ride were coming soon, and I was beginning to flinch at every bump on the road. Luckily A358 to Axminster had a much better surface and gradient than the lanes, so I drifted to the rear of the bunch aiming to find my own pace and ease myself to the control with zero effort/back pain.

Another house at our disposal, and a loud firework display as well this time. No problem sleeping through that after 441k though. Dishevelled bodies were strewn liberally around the house, and there were even more when we left around 01:20. After warm food, an hour's sleep in a chair, and two sets of back exercises, I felt much better than on arrival. From last year's PBP I knew that by exercising at each control en route sciatica can be kept at bay. I lose top level power on the flat, so can't push in the big ring except downhill/with following wind, but as long as lower back stays warm climbing is OK. Occasional application of Nurofen gel to knees (where the pain is referred), and lower back also helps.

We regrouped at the top of Sector Lane, some of which I had climbed on LED glow only as light from the Schmidt was close to nil at times when I was almost at a standstill on the final ramp. The lady of the night plying her trade on the outskirts in a skimpy black number was an unexpected sight after the lanes, especially as it was about 4°C. Less surprising when we saw how many potential punters were abuzz in the town below as the clubs furred about. By 3pm, the wheels were coming off our group - Stuart's bum was giving him gyp, John kept dropping off the back, and I had almost fallen off twice. I'd tried following tail-lights and leading the bunch but the effect of dancing tail-lights and white lines were equally hypnotic. We faced the classic dilemma - stop and get cold/lose time, or try to carry on and risk having an accident. Luckily Simon had enough brain cells left to call a halt at Martock, where we shared half an hour's sleep in a space blanket in the market hall. Woken by the pre-dawn chill we set off after Steve Ralphs who had just

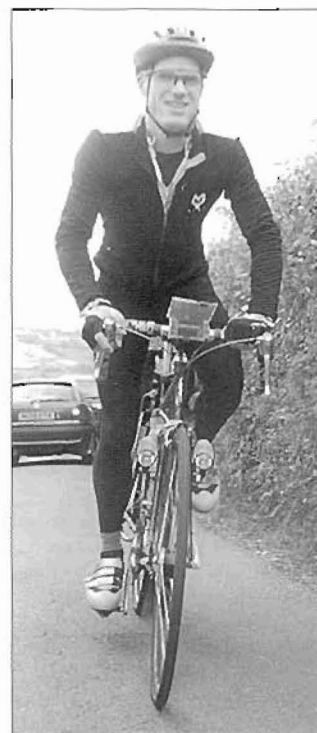
repassed after a sleep in a hedge somewhere. Being unable to refold my space blanket to its original size, I settled for folding it to A2 and slid it up my back between my thermal and shirt and felt instantly warmer. Having been on route all through the night, we went off course again at Ham Street in broad daylight, then compounded the error at the next junction. Shortly after 6am, we heard the low throb of the Glastonbury dance tent still going strong a few miles to the East. A pall of smoke drifting from there towards us unexpectedly proved to be wood smoke. We went the scenic way through Wells and came upon the Old Bristol Road from the wrong arm of our expected junction. No matter, it was just as steep that way, and got progressively steeper until eyeballs were on sticks and Mr Shaw's parentage was in question again.

Equilibrium was restored by the calm of Drew Buck's Springfield House, reached at 07:15. 82k in 5 hours 55mins elapsed from Axminster. Ho ho, we had really lost it on that leg. No matter - we were now past halfway, over by far the worst of the hills, and some four hours up on the time limit. Now it was light we knew we would make up further time to allow a few hours' sleep that evening ... at least that was the positive line we spun. A 3,000 calorie breakfast followed by an hour's sleep and, oh what luxury, brushing my teeth ensured we were well set on exit, still two hours up on the limit. Nice laney route through an 18th century industrial area towards Keynsham where I finally learnt the lesson of not ignoring a signpost pointing where I wanted to go, even though the route sheet appeared to say go the other way. After the lanes of Devon, the B road route via Pucklechurch, Nibley, Iron Acton, Rangeworthy, Cromhall and Leyhill seemed characterless until I scarfed my piece of Buck's patented restorative flapjack and perked up. Nice shady streamside lane and a steep hill to finish the leg at Michaelwood Services at 663k. First pasta of the ride here - at a price, plus the usual puzzled expressions from the motorists who can't figure how a bunch of cyclists can be at an M5 service area.

Had a bit of trouble with my lock here, but as brain didn't think it might just want some oil, I lobbed it in a fit of pique - a sure sign of fatigue. Not my usual D-lock you see, knew I should have carried that I said to myself as we zig-zagged past more old water mills on the next leg. As the bunch closed on Mel Kirkland, who had sped past us while we snored at Drew Buck's house, brain switched

off again, and we used Mel to route-find. Bad move. For despite having a map and compass on his Chas Roberts, Mel is a lover of the big ring and scenic extra miles. Before you could say 'what happened to HORTON, and the At T, L?', we were off course again and had established that Hillsley was well named. Only 1:5 according to the signpost, but it felt like 1:4 and worthy of Cotswold Corker. Flattish miles on the A46 were followed by a completely safe 66kph descent off Foss Way. Cars behind waited patiently knowing they could not legally better the bikes on the curvy drop into Batheaston. A363 to a refreshment break in Bradford on Avon was surprisingly hilly to legs softened up by hills then flat/downhill miles. Off course again near Rudge just after the breather, but with the sun now shining and the land dropping away towards Frome, the pace picked up. Even the climb to 900ft at Malden Bradley did little to disturb our rhythm and we reached the tea shop in Zeals at 18:00 feeling fresh and looking for a quick turnaround.

The setting was quaint. The food was excellent. The service was not, and our quick turnaround took an hour. At least the Shawn Shaw information service was working - the advance warning of gravel around the A30 crossing ahead was timely. News that Chris Avery had packed was less welcome. A line through Rob Grey's name also suggested his demise, but after eating his dust on a York Arrow I knew Rob - third super fixed wheeler in the bunch - would be around somewhere. Zipping along the flattest roads in Dorset around Kings Stag we were quickly back in the groove, stomping over rises in the big ring averaging close to 30kph on the leg and thinking ahead. Having had a rest at Zeals, a quick bite to eat was planned at West Stafford, then straight out again for a four-hour/81k night ride to Codford by 02:00. Then sleep through the coldest pre-dawn hours of the night. Pasta, tea and pud worked its magic, however, and dozing off over my food convinced me I needed at least 10 minutes kip. Set alarm for 22:00 and lay down on the couch. It went off, seconds afterwards. Just thinking about getting up to go when Simon came in to suggest a change of plan: Three hours' kip, then off with several others planning to high tail it at 01:00. Asleep again before he'd stopped speaking and let my subconscious reset the alarm. Woke before 01:00 for more food and a cuppa. On went Goretex, scarf, thermal hat, neoprene gloves, newspaper breastplate and folded space



John Barkman crests a Crackpot hill. Photo: George Hanna.

blanket around my back to keep out the chill night air. Only overshoes left in the bag.

Within 10 minutes in the pitch black lanes we were off course. 10k later we were back 2k from where we started. Having tried other options logic finally prevailed over riding fast in the wrong direction to keep warm and we followed NNE compass bearing in the correct direction. Mr Grumpy was close to coming out again as we flirted with the wrong carriageway on the newly dualled A35, then the wrong turning at the next roundabout. Eventually Cheselbourne, then Melcombe Bingham after a steady 15-minute climb and further dancing lights through Ansty. Enjoyed the climbing so much we almost missed the L for Bulbarrow. Flat past the radio mast at 699ft, then rapidly picked up momentum on the descent to the A357. As fatigue was high, we all had to concentrate hard not to brake and trash following riders on the descent.

15 minutes after the dawn chorus began, a November grey squeezed through the low mist around Child Okeford. A map check and breather was needed at the L&R on A350 to ensure we stayed on course. Lovely spot for half an hour's sleep too, on the well-worn bench in a brick bus shelter. Thatch and cob would have been more traditionally Dorset, but smelly beggars can't be choosers. Off again around 04:45 for the grind to Compton Abbas airfield. Magical misty views in all directions at this time of the morning, and completely different to the same views at mid-morning,

afternoon or evening. The poor fools loafing in their warm beds just do not know what they are missing. More ups across the downs to Wyllye Valley on autopilot, then accelerated on the familiar flat road to the 800k point at the George pub at Codford. Initially thought the strong smell of paint was the landlord's way of ensuring his later customers weren't put off by the rando-stench. In fact, as only the Super fixed wheelers had been through so far, the controllers had amused themselves by painting the bar overnight. An hour allowed last night's bunch to refuel, grab a little more sleep, and regroup before crossing Salisbury Plain. Average speed down to 21.5kph after the night ride, but now it was light, the pace would go back up again. And with only 200k and some 15 hours to go, it should be in the bag...

The bunch was back up to eight as we left Codford and included Richard Cutler, a Newburyite who advised saving some energy for one hill before

Marlborough and a couple around Aldbourne. The early morning chill had long gone by the end of the first climb past the tank ranges (or did those signs mean beware of ducks with extra long beaks?). Another steady climb at a good pace on A360 from Tilshead, then the three main hills across the Wiltshire downs, each with good, fast, flat sections in between.

A few turns after leaving Membury services in pleasant sunshine we were surprised to see Mel Kirkland grimping towards us as we descended toward the Berkshire Avon. Not so puzzled to carry on down though, and after a quick U-turn and map check we saw the R sp Lower Denford in the hedge which had been completely invisible from the other direction. After one more steep climb onto the Berkshire Downs at Ham, west of Inkpen we regrouped, then tore off down the lee slope. Mel reappeared again having a rest on the signpost as we crossed the A342 - turned out he'd lost his map. None of us could keep up

with Mel's thigh crunching exploits on the flat, or up the hills if he decided to push it, and he yoyo'd off into the distance a few more times. The miles passed quickly as the land dropped steadily away from us through north Hampshire. Nearing Mottisfont we did a bit of tractor chasing. With 900k in our legs that proved easy, and the farmer must have been surprised to find us overtaking and pulling away from him on a rise. After the speedy sections came some pain, as Shawn laid on some lumps - at least 250ft - to get us in position for the services at Ower. The last two miles on the A36 were unpleasantly busy after the lanes.

Said a quick hello and goodbye to Jeremy in the garage, before he beetled off to catch the evening ferry back to Guernsey. He'd have to go some but had that look in his eye (he made it). Very warm by late afternoon, time at last to switch into a short sleeve warm weather shirt and clean shorts. Only 57k to go - if sciatica plays up now, I could freewheel in.

After two wrong turns in quick succession on the busy roundabouts, we set off west onto B3079. At Fordingbridge we halted briefly as Simon had a dozy patch. To save everyone from losing their rhythm, we agreed to regroup at the info control in a few miles. From there it was plain sailing through Horton Heath and Wimborne Minster. By Merley, sinews and cleats were being tightened in readiness for a bunch sprint. On the A349 we were near evens. Oakdale traffic lights were close to red as we flashed through, and the less said about the right turn at Shah of Persia the better. I'd like to be able to say who won the bunch sprint, but I wasn't close enough to tell...

My sleep and eating patterns took two-three days to stabilise and two weeks later my sciatica hadn't settled down completely. This was strongly rumoured to have been the last Crackpot, however if Shawn decides to stage another one, I for one, may be tempted again.



Honourably How to Avoid the Crackpot

Having ridden the Hardboiled, Porkers and Brimstone, and admitted to enjoying them immensely, I was dismayed to hear Shawn announce the Crackpot, which I considered a ride too far. How could I decline? Then Shawn asked me to find a control near Dorchester, 720km into the ride. My salvation had materialised. Have the control at our house!

In 1996 eleven made it to our control, plus Andy Seviour who rather took us by surprise to say the least, taking a short cut back having packed. I've never seen such tired riders. Then in '98 our work was cut out with 18 to pamper, and also a 10 month old baby to put Pampers on. 2000, word got around that it could be the last Crackpot ever, and 38 entered. Help! What if they arrive en-masse! I make a long list of food to buy. Its hard working out quantities, especially as Steve Abraham has entered. Make use of Iceland's free home delivery service to save on wear and tear on my panniers.

Friday evening and the Crackpot starts. As I'm giving Imelda a bath Shawn leaves an answerphone message announcing 11 "Did Not Starters". There are 11 sensible AUKs anyway. Spend Saturday afternoon making a vat of

pasta-tuna gloop, and nip up the road to borrow a microwave, despite wife telling me they are bad feng-shui; the sacrifices one makes....!

The first rider is expected 3.30pm Sunday, but that morning Shawn announces 7 retirals, including Jason Clark, and now the first riders are expected at 8pm. Have some of the pasta-gloop for lunch, and take the family out on the tandem instead.

Just as I'm putting the final touches to the Controle signs, Andy Lander-Stow and Brian Callow turn up from the wrong direction, having turned the last mile into seven. They blamed the routesheet, but in Shawn's words, "preparation, preparation is the key to success". None of the other riders made that mistake!

I admired Brian's new Shimano sandals, and his new bike, a blue Argos, looked familiar. His story was that just as Jason's knees gave up, Brian's bottom bracket collapsed, so a swap ensued, leaving Jason with a knackered bike as well! Caught slightly on the hop, Andy and Brian were keen for a quick re-fuelling, fearful of being caught up. Thought AUDAX was non-competitive! Andy accused me of being disorganised, as I slowly got up to speed in the kitchen.

30 minutes later Dai Evans turned up, followed by the fixed aficionados Peddles and Steve, who launched into the cornflakes with a vengeance. Having looked forward to "the cyclists" since breakfast time, our daughter Imelda (now 2¾) was intrigued by the activity, and kept escaping from her bedroom. Her job was to ask "Tea or Coffee?", but shyness prevailed.

Just got rid of this lot when 8 riders, including Dr Box, who graciously offered to be served last as he intended to loiter, turned up. As I struggled to cope with the insatiable demand for stodge he came to regret this magnanimity. The next couple of hours merged into a scene of controlled mayhem, with pizzas, pasta, rice pud and beans jockeying for position in the microwave, and mountains of washing up cluttering everywhere. I had intended to seat the riders in our spacious conservatory, but everyone chose to park in the kitchen, which became very cosy!

By now it was dark, and getting cold outside. The lure of the sofa, armchair, chaise-longue and carpet became too great, and AUKs crashed out left, right and centre. At last the pasta-gloop ran out. Sorry Ian Hennessey, we ate your portion for lunch! For a brief

moment everything was quiet save for gentle snoring. I heard a rustling sound. Someone grappling with the toilet door? I heard a faint voice - maybe they're stuck. But no, Daniel Fisher, the last rider, was trying to quietly attract attention outside the front door, and thought that I had shut up shop. Back to the microwave.

By now riders were waking up, demanding more sustenance, reluctant to leave the relative warmth of the kitchen; it was 5C outside, and 85km and numerous hills to the next control. Had to wake a couple up, but I bid bon voyage to the last riders at 02.10 Monday. By now our cat Cleo was manic, running all over the conservatory roof in her excitement, while I made an attempt at tidying the mess so that Tam would not come down to a bomb-site at breakfast. At last to bed, exhausted after 6½ hours of catering for 21 riders....until dawn when Imelda woke up having wet her bed....

POST SCRIPT

Running a control is enjoyable - the atmosphere of competing without the pain in the legs - but it is hard work! My "donation pot" netted about £2 per rider, but I had lots of food left over, due partly to the DNS contingent. An idea: at controls using volunteers, add £2 per control to the event fee, and don't charge riders extra at the controls. The higher fee may discourage DNSs, and help controls to budget and cover the cost of unused food.

Any thoughts....?

Peter Loakes

