

A view from the lanterne rouge

PBP year creates a huge level of interest and attention, not to mention useful column inches in the cycling Press at large. I finally joined Audax UK in 1999 after reading an article in *Cycling Plus* about the 1995 edition of the epic French event. I was swept along on the tide of qualifying rides, ultimately reaching Paris in the early hours of 27 August 1999 with my mission successfully completed. And what a great buzz!! According to my plan at the beginning of the year, that should have been the end of over-distance riding. With the challenge completed, I would return to more leisurely rides and occasional tours with long lunch stops, enjoying to the full the local culture (or alcohol as some people call it).

But it didn't quite work out like that and I was soon casting about for a big ride in 2000 to set my sights on. In contrast to the PBP, the Crackpot 1000 is low profile. Not too many people enter it and less start. A completed Crackpot brevet can be an elusive thing with fewer still finishing (in 1996, 11 finished from 21 starters, in 1998, 17 from 24). And yet, knowledge of the event and of its tough reputation is strangely widespread. This all helps lend the event a slightly mythical quality and when rumours of its appearance in the calendar for 2000 were confirmed, it seemed the logical 'big 'un' to attempt.

No formal SR series was required by way of entry qualification, but an SR was a given reality and I built up the miles in very similar fashion to the previous year. Weekend Audax rides of gradually increasing distance occupied most weekends from March through to June, supplemented by a 30-mile round trip commute about three times a week. In other ways, preparation was more difficult due to the lack of people who had done the ride and could be tapped for useful hints and tips. There wasn't very much to go on in my limited *Arrivée* collection, and the Net didn't uncover much info.

Even the entry in the calendar

was brief and to the point. It seemed to undersell the ride but it did contain the three vital statistics – distance, altitude gain and minimum speed. 1000kms, three days and three hours to complete, climb and descend 13,370 metres (an Everest expedition, followed by another to the top of Mont Blanc). What more could you need really? The route sheet would be of help, and this was distributed by Sean Shaw, the event organiser, at the start of his Porkers 400. After a long winter layoff from night riding, the Porkers was a big enough challenge. Was Sean trying to psych us out at this early stage in the season with thoughts of three full days in the saddle when the imminent reality of a 400 was enough to give most of us the collywobblers? Not sure, but I refused to look at the route sheet until a day later, when, with Porkers complete, I was sitting in the warmth and comfort of the London train. It didn't look too bad – quite detailed.

Highlighting the route on the map was quite a drawn out process. It's always worrying when it takes a few hours to trace a route which you are going to have to ride at some point. Time spent at this stage is always saved later though and in any case I was quite pleased with my map. I thought it looked quite artistic in a funny sort of way – very functional with lots of colour – and I was keen to show my flatmate. He commented that it looked quite a long route – did I really want to ride all that way in three days. I replied that I wasn't sure but that I thought the map looked very artistic. He left shaking his head. I got a similar questioning response when I showed my girlfriend, although she did offer to drive me round when we had a spare day so I would know my way. I left shaking my head.

An approximate ride schedule was required by Sean to ensure riders had considered their strategy carefully and weren't over ambitious. I built into my schedule what I thought would be lots of extra time in an attempt to ensure that I would always be ahead on the road and thereby give myself

the upper hand psychologically. That was the theory anyway.

With schedule dispatched, and 4200kms of fairly soggy audax complete by the start of June, including the battering Brimstone, I was ready to throttle back in the few weeks remaining before the Crackpot and relax a little. The time to roll ... and roll ... and roll some more across the Wessex landscape would arrive before too long. Sure enough, before I knew it, it was time to perform one of my least favourite Audax tasks. I try and calculate a benefit-to-weight ratio for anything I pack to help speed the process but it's a rather wobbly science. Anything that prevents the cold, the wet, hunger, mechanical trouble or navigational difficulty has a high benefit-to-weight ratio and gets packed. This approach generally results in my pannier being stuffed full whether I'm on a 100 or a 1000. This time, however, I also squeezed in a secret weapon, never before used. Although it only weighed a few ounces, I wasn't sure it would have much effect. Anyway, confessions come later...

Arrival at the SS HQ

The train down to Poole was unmemorable except for the increasingly apparent onset of indigestion. Stuffing a huge amount of pasta into my stomach on the train when I had just gorged myself an hour earlier at home was always going to be counter-productive. Arriving at Sean Shaw's house (I'll call it the SS HQ), I witnessed lots of joviality and conversation. I wondered if the event had possibly been cancelled. Apparently no ... maybe the tasty-looking nosh that Sean Shaw had prepared had some special ingredients. Due to my indigestion, I never found out, but when the time came to put the wheels in motion, everyone suddenly became hesitant. 'It's OK, it's past eight, you can go' Sean seemed to say. 'Are you sure, Sean?' seemed to be the response. I had at least expected the fast fixers Steve and Pedals to whiz off with a 'Smoke us a kipper, we'll be back for breakfast' kind of determination. But no ... nobody seemed to want

Danny Fisher's
personal account –
looking back on
the Y2K Crackpot



Danny settles for a couple of pints at the finish

to go. The 30-odd riders set out incredibly slowly down Shaftesbury Road and through Poole, but the snail's pace was soon replaced by the more customary flat and flat-out main road dash into the twilight. What a relief to be moving finally after the past six months of building the ride up and preparing.

The flat main road soon gave way to winding, bumpy country lanes, whilst my legs soon ensured the high speed had also given way, and I found myself solo, riding off the last vestiges of indigestion through some wonderfully picturesque Dorset villages. The pub in the lovely village of Cerne Abbas had a particularly inviting glow, but temptation was resisted and as I reached the first control at Halstock, a number of others were already leaving, setting a pattern for the ride. At least I wasn't last on the road though ... yet.

Departure for the next 92km stage to Minehead was delayed. As the temperatures were dropping to 4 or 5° C and company and food at the control were good, I didn't feel the need to rush. Not that I didn't want to get to Minehead. *Au contraire*, I very much wanted to be in Minehead, I just didn't want to have to cycle there. Fairly pathetic eh? 'Where's your spirit?' I hear you ask. Well, I must have been saving it for later. The initial euphoric feeling which accompanied the start after such a long build up had now given way to misgivings about

the whole enterprise, and I suspect I wasn't the only one with similar feelings. I had fatally allowed my mind to wander to thoughts of the 900+ kms to go instead of just the 92kms to the next control and once you allow thoughts like that to cross your mind, it's very difficult to put a lid on them.

Finally back on the road, the next stage was alternately punctuated by dozy spells, at which point I would stop and rest over the bars, often followed by a red tail light whizzing past accompanied by a friendly 'hello!' This would see me back into action and on I would go until the next dozy spell struck. The night is all a bit of a blur now really, but arrival in Minehead as a cold, blustery and overcast dawn broke was a relief. A large group were awakening and preparing to leave as I arrived at the control. Rash and foolish thoughts of jumping straight back on the bike to join them were soon abandoned when I remembered what lay ahead. After a brief nap and some good food, however, I was ready to do battle with the Exmoor bumps.

Or so I thought. The ups and downs soon became relentless and severe as soon as the route left the A39 near Porlock, and my already tragic pace was reduced still further. I knew this ride was supposed to be hilly but nobody had warned me that steeplejack skills were required. On top of this, my GPS system (route sheet + eyes + brain) which usually works pretty well, suffered a failure near Hawkridge and required the backup system (map) to be deployed. Nonetheless, the riding was scenically gorgeous and back on route, a magical VW camper van manned by two friendly folk [Pete Luxton and John Thacker] dispensing food and warm tea came into view near Pennymoor. With about 10 minutes to spare before this secret control closed, I moved on and was advised that I was last on the road after some retirements in Minehead.

Putting that thought to the back of my mind, I was really rather enjoying myself on the next section, into Bovey Tracey at 251km. The weather was warming and I could finally remove my longs. The sun also began to make inroads on the thin layers of cloud and the views and scenery were superb. A group were preparing to leave the control as I arrived ...

By now, my strategy had been modified in the light of circumstances. The schedule was completely out of the window and had been giving me the lower hand

psychologically, instead of the upper hand intended. I knew that the worst of the humps would be over by the next control at Culmstock though. Providing I could keep slugging onwards without over-stressing anything, the going would then get much easier to the Axminster control at 441kms. The bumps would then return but the minimum speed would drop from 15 to 13.3 kph.

Secret weapon deployed

After another superb control, I headed north. A 57km stage with over 1,000 metres of climb can lead to fatigue at the best of times and just outside Exeter, I began to feel a boost of some sort was required. I reluctantly reached for my secret weapon which had been stored away for use much later in the ride. OK, you can all fall about with laughter at this point if you wish but I'm not bothered. Attaching a photo of my girlfriend to my map holder was a pretty effective morale booster. A better benefit-to-weight ratio than I had imagined.

Onwards to Culmstock and I began to get into the rhythm of the ride. Maybe the pasta had finally been digested, maybe it was the secret weapon, maybe the pleasant weather and scenery. Not sure, but either way, I wanted to make the next control a quick splash and dash to maybe allow me to catch some of the others. As I arrived, a group was leaving ...

Eating by the general store, I saw a familiar sight approaching – a stuffed teddy, with Tim Wainwright alongside? Presumably they had just suffered GPS malfunction as I expected them to be well up ahead. Pit stop complete and feeling strong, I cranked on to Sedgemoor at a good pace. Once past the Quantock Hills, the terrain eased considerably into and beyond Bridgwater. Not to say it was flat, of course.

The next stage should have been easy. 70kms with not too much climbing. Yet we had all been on the road now for 24 hours and still had a looooooong 630kms to go. On top of that, the dry weather which we had enjoyed was being threatened by an ominous black cloud, and flat or not, I for one wanted to snooze. On the positive side, I wasn't at the back anymore and left with David Sachs, whilst a few more riders were still re-energising at the services behind.

A few miles into the stage and we became unsure of our whereabouts and halted to reconfigure our gyroscopes. As this work was in progress, we were passed by Chris Beynon and one other who appeared to know what they were doing. We quickly followed but at another junction further on, as they disappeared full steam ahead down the road and out of sight, I was convinced that they had gone wrong and duly got myself and David completely lost. This time we needed outside help and a local doing a spot of noisy DIY with a blow torch on his front porch in Catcott seemed a safe bet. I unintentionally gave him a fright when he turned round to see me standing in his drive trying to attract his attention. Could have been nasty but initial shock gave way to relief all round, on my part



to see that he hadn't blow-torched himself and on his part to see that I was just a cyclist asking for directions. Back to Weares Lane and correct line of route, I remember thinking how great DIY must be as a hobby – always in sight of home, in reach of the kettle, etc – just shows how audax can turn your mind. On the plus side, the nasty cloud had scudded off elsewhere.

Attack of the dozies

Some miles on and we reached the well named High Ham as sunset fell. In spite of the uplifting views to the east, a mutual attack of the dozies was getting the better of us. David managed to get to the telephone box first leaving me a telegraph pole against which I snatched 40 winks. It was remarkably comfortable, but we were soon chugging on through the night again. I had problems keeping my wagon rolling though and this time urged David onwards. I had the feeling that this would be a long night. Another roadside kip just beyond Curry Rivel and my oomph finally returned on what was a very level and chilly run into Axminster. Arrival at the control was achieved within the 13.3kph limit but outside the 15kph limit. Nonetheless, I was still in the frame. A few riders were milling about preparing to leave ...

I realised here and not for the first time on this ride, how privileged all the riders were. Controllers were inviting complete strangers into their homes, smelly strangers at that, and were cooking and generally providing everything

required, often at completely unreasonable hours of the day. This was really fantastic and my hat goes off to them all, and to Sean of course for finding such super people.

At dawn, with an hour or so of kip and some much needed beans on toast, I was ready for the long slog up Sector Lane out of Axminster and onto the rolling roads to the Mendip hills. During the 15-mile B-road stretch to Crewkerne, I didn't come across a single car. Maybe everyone was at the Glastonbury festival. As I neared, everything had gone quiet. I did, however, come across one lone wanderer, presumably from the festival. He looked even more wasted than I felt which I have to confess made me feel better.

A grinding climb out of Wells lead onto the Mendip hills, and soon past the Hunters Inn near Priddy, a regular haunt of speleologists, cyclists and other roughnecks in the area. I was relieved not to be passing during opening hours, the desire to get to the next control just about overcoming the temptation to wait for the place to open! I was descending towards the leafy control shortly afterwards, Drew Buck's house situated off a quiet and wooded country lane. As I arrived, I thought I had become delirious at first, but as I entered the control, *Bicycle Race* [Queen] really was playing on continuous loop in the kitchen. This was a spooky place. The sort of place where crazy plots are hatched such as riding 1200kms on a Pedersen. After a filling full English, I was quickly back on my way.

The following leg, skirting to the east of Bristol to the most northerly point on the route at Michaelwood Services was make or break time. I was forced to break more than make, and finally stopped for a quick roadside snooze and a change of clothes, which helped a lot. As Michaelwood was approached through glorious wooded lanes, strength and resolve returned and a quick turnaround made up for all the stops on the previous leg. Just keep rolling now and the ride will be in the bag I kept telling myself.

I've been struck off!

The next stage passed pleasantly in good weather and I started to think I might catch some riders at the Zeals Tea Room control. No such luck and I had the Tea Room to myself. This was in fact fortunate as I was to discover later. The agreeably relaxed speed at which I was being served had,



when slowed further by multiple orders, been the source of some anxiety earlier in the day apparently. I was in no great hurry though, and after 48 hours, much of it spent riding solo, I was beginning to feel as though I had entered some sort of parallel universe. The ladies running the control stamped my card and let me look at the times which preceding riders had passed. I noticed my name had been struck off, so I mentioned the fact that Daniel Fisher was still very much on the road and standing right in front of them. No – not possible they said. But, but ... I said. Argument seemed futile so I loped off to my bike not quite feeling all there.

Onwards to West Stafford and the countryside was soaked in the late evening sun revealing the most wonderful colours. Nightfall came and extra layers were added at Kings Stag, but the sun, though now set, was to continue to provide a gradually fading backlight to the starry night sky for some time yet. Nightfall didn't come completely until some time after 11. There are some compensations to riding alone. Apart from being able to set and fine-tune your pace to exactly

there. Incompetence. Mystery resolved, they continued to ride steadily into the night whilst my rhythm and tempo were all at sea. This stage was to prove hard work, with hills, GPS breakdowns and roadside naps in abundance. Dawn broke as I passed over the bumps to the east of Shaftesbury, with atmospheric low-lying mist in the valleys. Lovely as it was, I was really relieved that this would be the last Wessex daybreak I would see for some time to come.

Reaching Codford pretty much on the time limit caused me some concern as there were 200kms of this epic left to ride, but there was a large group of riders still here. Of the 21 riders left on the road, 10 were here – imagine 50 per cent of the riders on PBP all being at the same point after two days. Unlike Minehead two days ago, the end was in sight now, so I left ahead of the bunch with the aim of getting some photos down the road. Unfortunately, everyone overhauled me *en masse* so I only got one photo, but riding over Salisbury Plain with the familiar faces of John Barkman, George Hanna and Simon Kolka plus others in a large group of eight or nine riders made a very pleasant

A grinding climb out of Wells lead onto the Mendip hills, and soon past the Hunters Inn near Priddy.

what suits, enjoying to the full the absolute stillness and tranquillity of that dusk as I glided down the Piddle valley was probably the highlight of my ride. Nonetheless, by the time I neared the next control at West Stafford, the temperature had plummeted and I was really looking forward to some food, warmth and human contact again. In my befuddled state, I banged on the wrong door. Fortunately I had the right house though and was enjoying food, warmth and good company soon enough.

Fully refuelled and after a comfy snooze on a sofa, I noticed that there were several riders lingering who appeared to want my *lanterne rouge*. No problem! I knew how to employ underhand tactics to keep my crown. On leaving the control, I promptly took the wrong road. Reaching the A35/A354 maze at Puddletown a few miles down the road having taken goodness only knows what route, I was overhauled by the gang who had been lingering at the last control. Having left nearly an hour behind me, Puddletown briefly became Puzzletown as they tried to work out how I had taken so long to get

change. The sun was warming the day nicely and the high that came with thinking the ride was nearly in the bag provided a great boost. It proved a false dawn though and I had dropped off the back of this none-too-fast group by the time I reached the Marlborough Downs. The short bash along the A346 north of Marlborough was a shock to the system and woke me up – so much traffic!!! – but road and traffic were soon left far below as the route climbed towards Woodsend and on to Membury Services. The group were just departing as I arrived ...

Back on the road, and the GPS suffered another major breakdown crossing Hungerford. The route sheet indicated that the hill climbing on this leg was limited to 10.75m/km, but it seemed much worse than this. I really felt that the end was nigh in more ways than one, and was spending a considerable amount of time honking out of the saddle in desperate attempts to try and raise the tempo. However, on reaching Andover, I had an energy surge (I don't care what they say about Mars bars – I love them!), whilst the route flattened. For the first

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time, I had managed to get ahead of my preride schedule when I reached the penultimate control at Ower. Not before another off-route diversion via Romsey town centre though. Yet again I thought I had been following the instructions but suddenly found myself way off beam with no idea where I had deviated.

Brain and body were perhaps not functioning optimally, but departure from Ower in warm sunshine with just 57kms left to go and six hours to do it meant a big smile was beginning to break out across my face. The New Forest was lovely with horses running across open scrubland, and great views towards the sea in places.

'I suppose you've done a 50-miler'

The final leg into Poole was a bit painful, certainly painfully slow. My knees were particularly sore and had deteriorated significantly since the last stop. I put this down to all the honking on the previous stage, although by rights, any normal pair of human knees should have exploded long since by now so I couldn't grumble really. A slight rise, perhaps a 1 in 25, out of Wimborne Minster saw me resort to my granny ring. A friendly mountain biker breezed past and presumably puzzled by my lack of progress, thought he would comment. 'I suppose you've just done a 50-miler.' Hmmm ... well ... asking him to multiply that by 12 and then add some more may have seemed immodest and in any case, who would believe such a claim?

I was elated as I coasted past Poole hospital and made the right turn into Shaftesbury Road and the SS HQ. I was half an hour ahead of

my preride schedule, and had a few hours to spare, but I was certain that I was last on the road and was looking forward to some sort of special *lanterne rouge* award. Some go-faster strips perhaps. But alas no, a couple of riders hadn't arrived yet. The cunning devils must have been skulking behind a hedge somewhere waiting for me to go by.

The thought of trying to wedge any more food through my system was just not appealing, I only had cravings for a decent pint. Despite the offer of plentiful good food at the finish therefore, I said my farewells to Sean and some of the other riders I'd been chasing around Wessex for the past three days. George, Simon, John and myself popped into a local for a swift half before our London train was due. Unfortunately, we found a pub selling the most foul-tasting, undrinkable beer in the world ... probably. Not a fitting celebration, but we were on a big enough high as it was and didn't really need any alcoholic assistance.

Twenty-four hours later and my very stiff knees were nearly back to normal. No other major aches or pains although my movements were a bit wooden for some time after I'm told. Most useful piece of equipment? Well, apart from the bike, a packet of antiseptic wipes from Boots – critical in helping to keep the saddle zone clean and comfortable, and just generally useful. Most worthless bit of equipment? Joint first prize to my waterproof and tool kit, and I hope they both have much success in future useless kit competitions!

Thanks again to Sean for the organisation, and to Jean for the wonderful Crackpot dolly. 

