



Quantock Challenge 24&25 October 2009

72 miles

The forecast was for heavy rain spreading from the West, and clearing east during Saturday. Sure enough it was raining as we gathered in the morning, but by the time we were packed and primed for action at the village hall it was almost dry.

The wind that was blowing the rain away was now speeding us on our way to our first stop at the Strand Stores in Culmstock - for a hot drink and some lovely flapjack and fridge cake. Mr Eve and his family and Mr Higgins from Uffculme school, who were there for breakfast, looked a little surprised to see us and more surprised to learn that we were on our way to Over Stowey on the 'other side' of the Quantock Hills.

Our party was seventeen riders, Ian and Elise Ellicott in the support car and our catering crews: Beth and Diane at Nynehead for lunch and Sean and Tina at Over Stowey. Many of our usual riders were off doing other things. Their loss, as we were whizzing along having a great time, with a lovely warm southerly tail wind nudging us steadily north towards the Quantock ridge.

We sneaked under the A38 at Beam Bridge and soon we were pushing up the hill towards Langford Budville. This was the moment for Will Ellicott to jump in Dad's car and pop his bike in the sheep trailer alongside the bags and tuck. Will's legs aren't quite long enough for 75 miles in a weekend. He'd hop out again for the descent.



Langford Budville was the perfect spot to call ahead to the catering 'girls' at Nynehead Memorial Hall. 'We're ahead of schedule' was not the news they wanted but Mary's puncture one mile further on gave them the time they needed to get the sausage rolls hot. The

Nynehead hollow is a most exotic introduction to the village – a deep cutting in the sandstone overhung with trees.

The hall is an interesting story in itself – a war relic auctioned off in 1945 when Prudential insurance, who had moved all their records (paper of course in those days) to Cornwall for safety, no longer had a need for it. Amazing to think that the records it once held could now be stored on computer memory no bigger than a few baked beans.

The sun was properly out now and warm too. Ash Priors common had just been cut. Earlier, in September, on the recci-ride it was painted blue, covered in the flowers of devil's bit scabious – the food plant of the marsh fritillary butterfly.



Bishops Lydeard station was shrouded in steam. We refilled our water bottles for the climb ahead and took in the atmosphere (and some home-baking).

Our challenge rides are aptly named. The next 5 miles to the top of the ridge would be testing, but started with a gentle ascent through the attractive and vibrant village of Bishops Lydeard followed by a brisk ride along the contour to Kingston St Mary. Time for some quick safety notes from Stuart - the road up from Kingston can be a bit of a rat run on a Saturday but today it was quiet. Another puncture (we would have 6 altogether on this ride) provided a welcome break and a chance to regroup.

Riding up hills is 70% grunt and 30% attitude. And riding in a group helps with both. We all did it. Tomorrow we'd do it all again crossing this time at Triscombe stone - another 200ft higher.

Sean and Tina had tea on when we rolled up at the hostel. This was a real Dad's Army hall - timber throughout - snug and well cared for by volunteers and full of the signs of past visiting scout and guide groups. After supper, and a camp fire under the stars we settled down for some well earned rest.

Sunday was a beautiful day. The autumn colours were stunning as we ascended to Triscombe stone. Again we all did it - almost 1000ft. This is a continental climb and for the kids a taste of what it feels like to spend a whole morning pushing to the top of an Alpine col and into the snowline. One gradient, one gear and one way - up. Could we run a mountain tour one day?

Triscombe quarry towered over us as we dropped steeply down the other side. This was when we needed

100% confidence that our brakes were working, which thankfully they were.

Will was in the pack again. Tom Hodgkinson ahead on 'up' traffic control and Jo & Hilary playing sheepdog behind. We couldn't afford to get lost here or there would be some very weary riders crawling back up the hill to find the group. We didn't lose anyone and our lunch was ready at the café in Bishops Lydeard as we sailed into the village.

With the Quantocks conquered the rest seemed easy. But yesterday's tailwind was now firmly in our faces and we'd need some resolve to make it home.



Our target was Sampford Peverell and we would be guided there by little the blue 'route 3' signs indicating the national cycle network. These were beautiful lanes, picking their way through undulating ground, cloaked in Autumn hedges, some uncut for years and dripping hazelnuts. At this end, the northern limit, the canal sparkles gin clear. We stop and watch a shoal of roach in the shadow of a bridge.



The towpath snaked on into the evening sky and a little ribbon of cyclists got closer to tea. Village Halls are great.

Some are fabulous (like Kentisbeare's ;-)) and when you have been perched on a little bike seat for 5 hours and they have hot toast and tea on tap they are heaven. Home before dark, 72 miles on the clock and the whole week of half term ahead to recover. Where next?

Stuart McFadzean