



Your personal challenge

RIDES | Sportive ride

Cyclo-sportives

Old Portlians reliability To hell with tradition!



In this era of slick sportive marketing, Huw Williams "endures" one from the old-school

THE times — as the reverend Robert Allen Zimmerman once ruminated — "they are a-changing."

And how. Once you could roll up to Halstead's tiny village hall at the start of February, wrapped up like an Inuit on an early morning paper-round, sign up for a ride down to the Ashdown Forest and back, fall over on the ice on the first bend out of the start, then endure four or five hours of freezing camaraderie with a few dozen like-minded souls.

It used to be a way of keeping the legs ticking over in winter until spring arrived, and with it the start of more structured training programmes or lengthy leisure rides. But that was then and this is now. That was before global warming and that was before the advent of the cyclo-sportive. Two

My Ride:

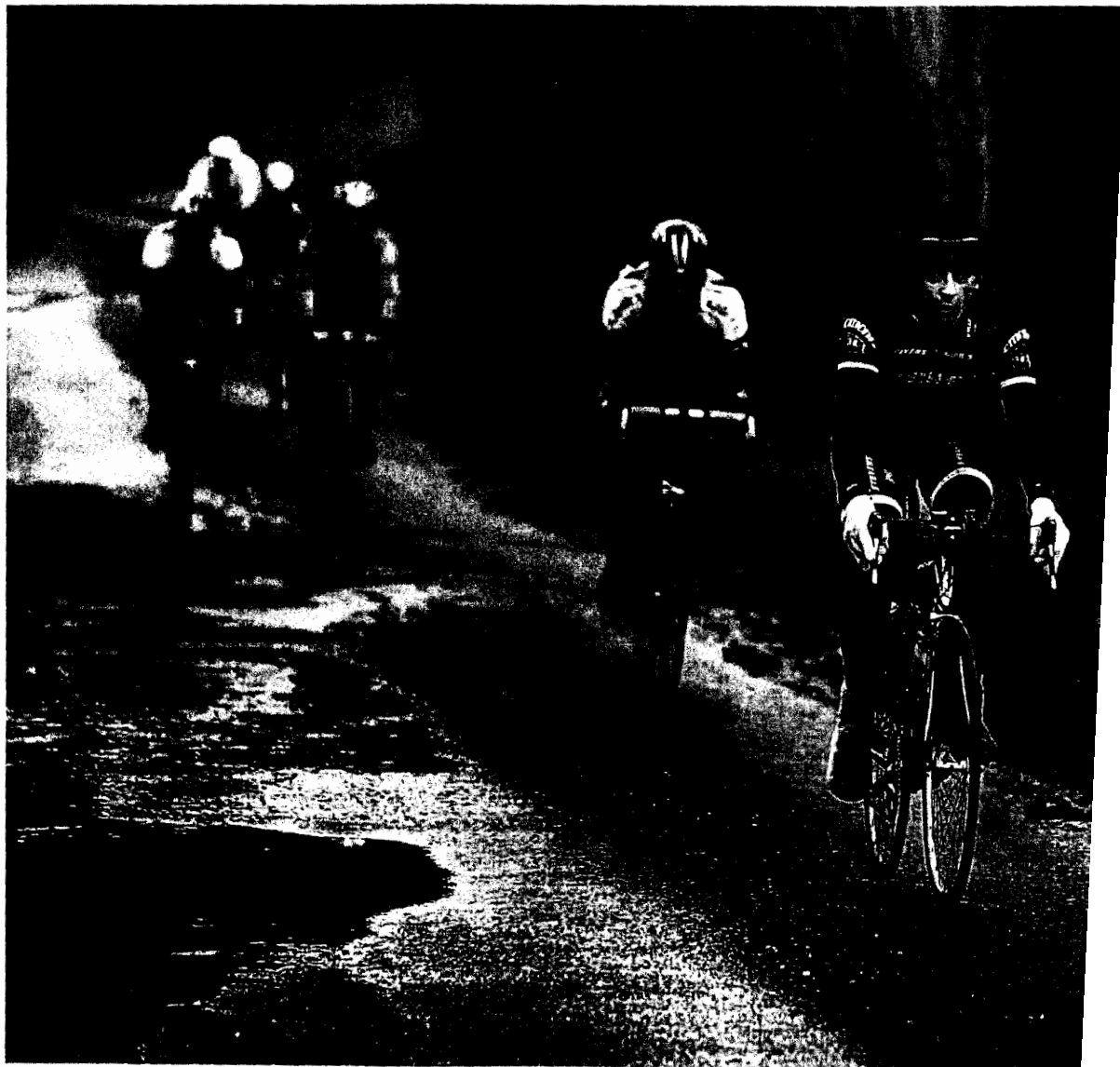
Life-long cyclist Huw Williams saddles up for a local winter reliability ride

Distance:

100km

Challenge:

To complete the course with no outside assistance, within a given time frame



by Phil O'Connor

things, which have contributed greatly to raising the bar for once traditional events, like the Old Portians CC reliability trial.

These days, winters rarely start before March (if at all) in the South-East, and the hunger for organised rides is not satisfied among growing numbers of cyclists up for serious challenges, and year-round racers are common. Two weeks earlier, Catford CC's version had taken place after re-branding itself as the 'Hell Of The Ashdown'. Striking red and yellow posters had appeared in the local bike shops and on websites, very much in line with the trend in marketing modern sportives. Gone are the days when you had to scour the small print in *Cycling Weekly* with a powerful telescope in order to find any organised rides in the depths of winter.

Consequently, 210 riders turned

up, the sun shone in a manner more akin to April and three or four mini-pelotons of racers, who clearly hadn't let a little thing like winter get in the way of maintaining their fitness, tore up the 60-odd mile course up in little more than three hours 15 minutes. In fact, the fast group that came past me on Groombridge Hill were dancing up the climb like pups in May.

One from the old school

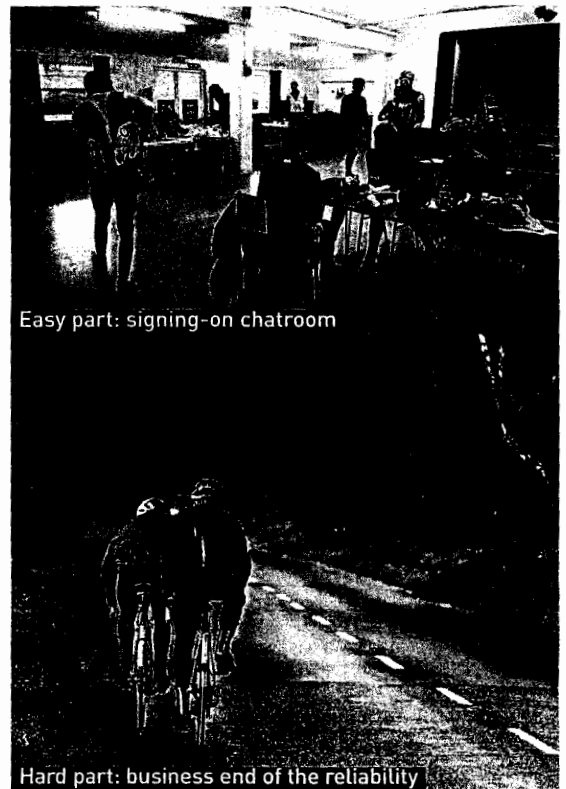
The Old Ports, of course, are a proudly traditional club and above that sort of thing, so there was no Saatchi and Saatchi marketing campaign in the broadsheets, just the usual, welcoming sight of ride-coordinator Ian 'Bashers' Bashford's smiling face at the sign-on and his ever reliable team of volunteers and kitchen staff, making the meeting as warm and cosy as it ever has been. It's good that you can depend on some things in life, and the Old Ports CC is one of them.

But that's where tradition began and ended on this most harrowing of occasions, for despite the trusted format of offering riders three start slots depending on their stated aim of completing the 100-kilometre course in either three and a half, four, or five hours, it was clear that not many riders were paying any attention to what it said on the tin. Consequently, the first group out, of which I was a part, found itself under the cosh after all of two miles as the pace was driven relentlessly high, heading east along the Pilgrims' Way. The culprits — a team of lads from Glade CC — were driving the first group out at speeds very close to 30mph on the flat.

Oh joy. February 11, second organised event of the year and I'm already having my legs ripped off. The 'Glade' are from Essex and they have local rivalry in the shape of the Glendene CC. There are a few of them in the group, and the two clubs seem hell bent on knocking seven bells out of each other around the lanes of Kent.

"We're using this as preparation for the Wally Gimber," revealed one of them later. Everyone else in the group is getting caught in the crossfire and the collateral damage, by the time we reach Peshurst an hour later, has decimated the group.

Conditions are appalling. Deep mud lines the edges of the road, there's gravel littering the bends and long stretches of standing



Easy part: signing-on chatroom

Hard part: business end of the reliability

"The culprits — a team of lads from Glade CC — were driving the first group out at speeds very close to 30mph on the flat"

water conceal the pot-holed surfaces which are a feature of the narrow lanes on the opening miles of this ride. There's a dull grey pallor to the sky. It is windy and drizzling. I have no idea who's left hanging on to our group as all I can see is Satan dressed in a pale blue Lycra jersey with the words Glade CC written on the back. Actually there are three devils in this pack and when one of them gets tired of attacking, one of the others comes through and picks up the cudgel with which to smite the rest of us.

Shock and awe

Everything else is a blur of pain and suffering. I'm actually praying that we get to the hills soon so that the speed will ease up. The first big climb at Fordcombe scatters us like marbles

Huw (second from right): mortified





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Young blades: driving a point home

and I look around to see only a handful of riders have managed to maintain the pace. Down the normally picturesque descent into Groombridge we dive, ridiculously fast in worsening rain. Risks taken behind loitering motorists are foolish but necessary to regain the group, which had split on the climb. Next up is the big climb over Ashdown and the rain has started coming down in sheets, blown in on the strong headwind. But it's a climb long enough and hard enough to keep us warm. It's hell, the *real* hell of the Ashdown, not that pussyfooting around the edges, which we did a fortnight ago on the Catford. That was hard, this is hell.

Get thee behind me, Satan

There's the halfway checkpoint at the top which is the only reason everyone gets back together again, and after a brief stop to admire the sweeping views over the lower forest, it's a near 40mph drop into the village of Hartfield. After a series of attacks (by the usual suspects) on the mind-numbing, rolling drags into Edenbridge, half the group have gone out the back, leaving six riders at the front, with me, solo about a hundred yards back and the remains of the group in pieces somewhere behind. I fight like a dog to get back on the group before the steepest climb of the day at Toys Hill.

Unluckily for him, one of the

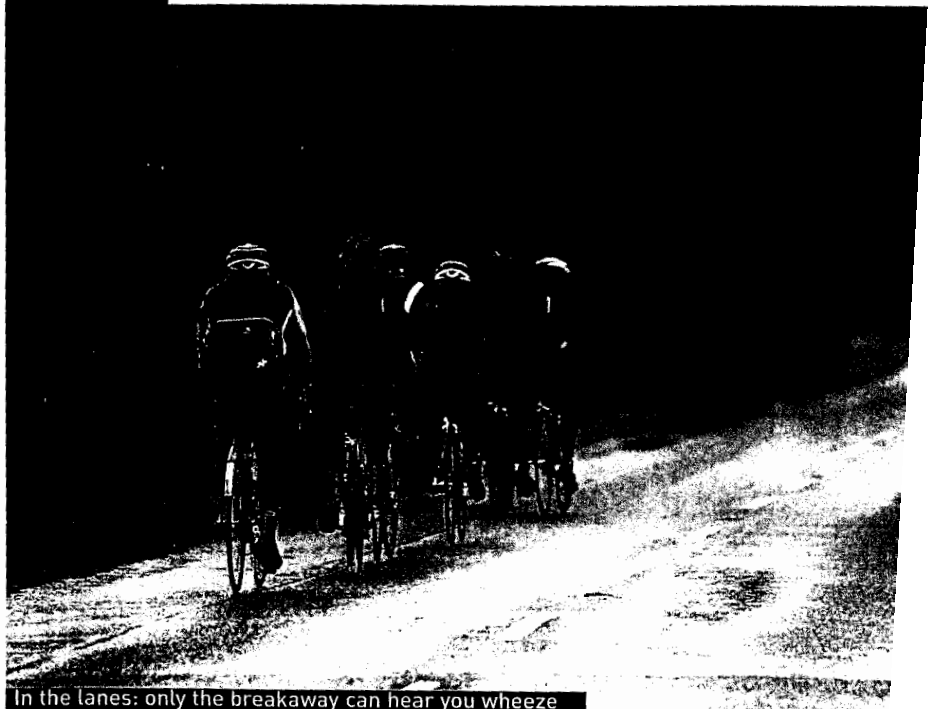
"It may seem old-school in these days of timing chips and online registration, but that's all part of its appeal"
Huw Williams

Glade riders punctures on the run-in to the hill and one of his clubmates stops to assist him so we are offered the respite of not having the two best riders in the group tearing us apart up Toys Hill. It's still misery incarnate, though. I'm feeling reasonably OK in the legs at this slower, grinding pace over the climb but there are grown men close to tears all over the road, remnants of the groups that took the softer option of the 60-kilometre ride. Finally, it ends with a sweeping descent to the base of the last long drag up Poll Hill to the finish. Of course, we race, try

to get away, and make half-arsed attempts at a final sprint through the lanes to Halstead, but the truth is we are spent and going very slow. My legs are rippling with cramps and I'm glad the torture is over after three hours 21 minutes.

Faces lined with pain

Soon the later-starting groups are entering the hall with mud-encrusted faces. It would appear that the rain showers have been moving around haphazardly, as some riders have been rained on all ride, others only intermittently. The food at the end costs pennies but is priceless, as is the sight of riders covered with road spray, heartily tucking in to cheese and bacon rolls washed down with hot tea. The Whitehorn brothers, Richard and Edward, were two of the Glade CC riders putting us to the sword all day. Watch out for their names in the results pages this season, along with Tony Couchman and Mark Porter, Redhill CC's Leigh Smithers and Addiscombe CC's Simon Haylor. We shared one of the finest early-season ride experiences it's been my (dis)pleasure to endure, sorry, enjoy. The course is a classic and the excellent organisation a reflection of the enthusiasm of a dedicated team from the Old Ports, which forms a valuable cog in the growing machine of great challenge rides in the South-East. It may seem old-school in these days of timing chips and online registration, but that's all part of its appeal

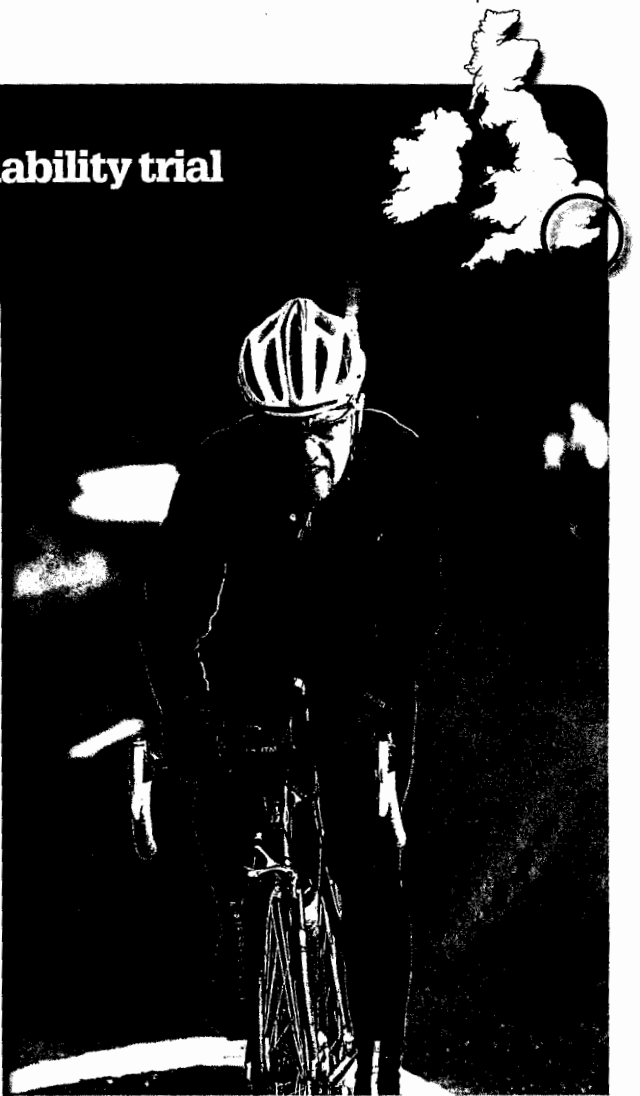
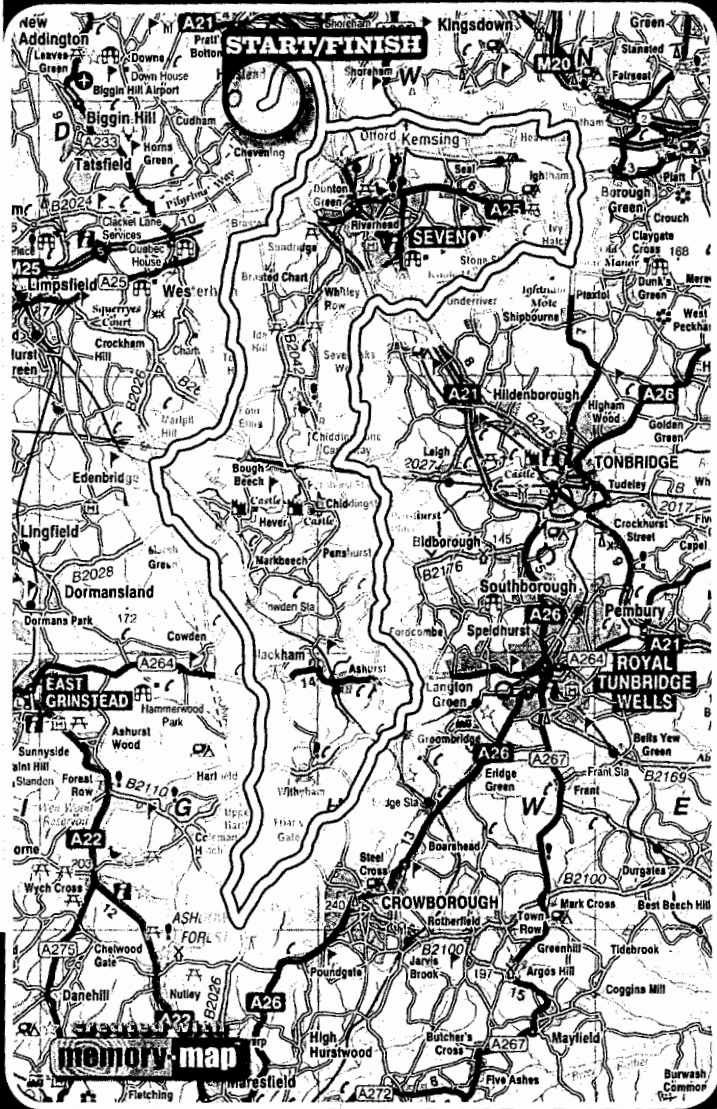


In the lanes: only the breakaway can hear you wheeze

Cycling[®] WEEKLY

Old Portlians reliability trial

100KM (67 MILES)



YOUR POCKET
ROUTEFINDER

| | | | |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------|--------|
| DISTANCE | 67 miles (100km) | | |
| MAIN CLIMB | Toys Hill — it's murder | | |
| BEST BIT | Ashdown Forest. Take it at your own pace and enjoy the view | | |
| ACHTUNG! | The super-fit, er, 'competition' | | |
| SKILL LEVEL | GOOD | BETTER | BEST |
| SPEED (MPH) | 15mph | 17 | 19 |
| TIME | 4hr 28 | 3hr 56 | 3hr 31 |

CW has teamed up with digital mapping specialist Memory-Map so now all our routes are planned using Memory-Map software and Ordnance Survey maps. With Memory-Map software you can program your own routes into a GPS to keep you on the right track and then review where you've actually been on your return. It will also give you your performance statistics such as distance covered, speed profile, total ascent and descent etc. For more information and to download a FREE 30 day trial, visit www.memory-map.co.uk or phone 0870 743 0130.

Route details

From Halstead village hall, near Orpington and the M25 in Kent, the route heads out on lanes towards Crowborough to the south, describing the shape of a collapsed lung as it makes its return leg over some memorably lumpy terrain in the garden of England.

Want to ride it?

Riders should look out for reliability rides from January onwards, in the pages of *Cycling Weekly*.



Mapping sourced from

Ordnance Survey

Next week

Cycling Weekly reader Francis Bailey joins 2,200 riders for the Terra de Remences cyclo-sportive in Spain