



WHERE South West England
START & FINISH Somerton, Somerset
DISTANCE 340 miles **WORDS** William Wake
PICTURES Pendragon Sports and SportivePhoto



1

HARDRIDERS' WESSEX

Three century rides, back to back over a Bank Holiday weekend? What middle-aged-man-in-lycra could resist? Not CTC member **William Wake**, who signed up with three friends

The Tour of Wessex is one of the tougher events of the UK sportive calendar: three days and 340 miles, with lots of hills and possibly wind and rain. My friend Simon was entered into it by his family as a 40th birthday present. In a moment of madness, I agreed to join him.

I have ridden many events and thousands of miles with Simon. This event would be different, as Simon's large family were there to support him: brothers, sisters, parents, in-laws, children, and nephews. And two were coming along for the ride: Simon's triathlete sister Helene and her partner Steve.

Helene and Steve planned to ride with us for the first part of each day, peeling off to complete the 'short' route as we plodded on for the 100 miler. None of us had done anything of this scale before. We were all agreed on a few points, however: it

was not a race; we'd stay together; we wouldn't chase anyone. Helene, an accomplished triathlete, was adamant on this: 'Remember, it is NOT a race'.

FAST PACE FOR AN UNRACE

On day one, we headed off towards Cheddar Gorge. The gorge is a great climb: beautiful scenery and not very steep. Thus far, the non-racing plan seemed to be working. After the gorge, however, the road started to descend – and something happened.

We spotted a group of female cyclists ahead. Non-competitive Helene dropped low on the bars and shot away, swishing past the group, who dropped low in turn and gave pursuit. A gap opened up between the seven speeding women and a bunch of men behind...

The gap increased as shouts of 'RIGHT TURN!'

IN THE PHOTOS

- 1) Simon (left) and William (lead) climb Purbeck Ridge
- 2) 'Non-competitive' Helene
- 3) The Somerton start
- 4) Feed stops are essential

Photos: SportivePhoto (sportivephoto.com) and Pendragon Sports (pendragonphoto.com)



2



3



4

went unheeded. It's surprising how far someone can travel in a short time when they're doing 35mph...

After some minutes, non-competitive Helene returned. Various female cyclists came past with muttered curses about 'that girl'. Ah, the camaraderie of the road! The other group were from a London club, called something like the 'Peckham Pursuers'.

Back together, we continued our non-race. I couldn't help noticing that we were not-racing just fast enough to be able to reel in any rider who was female...

Steve and Helene turned off at 50 miles, while Simon and I continued. We spent many miles with only each other for company, seeing relatively small numbers of other cyclists. We caught up with people on the hills and at the feed stops, and occasionally someone overtook us. Simon seemed well prepared and in good shape, and we rolled up the miles from Alfred's Tower to Mere.

Around Stourhead and back to Bruton, we paused at a another feed-stop, discovering that we had 30 miles to go. Thirty miles! I was starting to flag. We hooked up with another rider, Simon sat on the front, and we rode on – at six miles from the finish, passing right by the place where we were staying that night. 'Can we please stop now?' I silently wished.

In retrospect, it wasn't so bad. We finished in under seven hours, averaging 16 miles per hour. Our support crew arrived and we were chauffeured to our accommodation, where we were fed and encouraged to recount the adventures of the day. Non-competitive Helene and Steve had enjoyed a 'relaxed' completion of the short route. Helene's

DO IT YOURSELF

› The 2014 version of the Tour of Wessex once again runs over three days, from 24-26 May (the bank holiday weekend). You can choose to ride for three days – either 335 or 213 miles – or ride for just one of the days. Daily distances vary from 57-116 miles, depending on route choice. It costs £105 to enter for all three days or £30 or £35 for one day. Information on the 2014 event can be found on the Pendragon Sports website. Visit pendragonsports.com/tour-of-wessex-2014



second-fastest category finish, ahead of the Pursuers, was not greeted by any whooping at all...

BACK IN THE SADDLE

Day two dawned with the sun shining and Dorset beckoning. Non-competitive Helene packed a left-over baked potato as ride food, the theory being that it would be pleasantly warm after a couple of hours in her jersey pocket. As an alternative to the sweet stuff at the feed stations, the rest of us took ham rolls.

Day two was lovely. I actually felt fitter than on day one. There were some beautiful climbs, the highlight for me being the Lulworth Ranges; I used to work at Corfe Castle. Riding over the Purbecks, bathed in sunshine and surrounded by the almond scent of gorse, was one of those times when you know exactly why you ride a bike.

What about any jostling for position on the road, and specifically those Peckham Pursuers? Well, the main event on day two was something we later branded 'potatogate'. Non-competitive Helene assured us that she was trying to re-position the potato in her pocket. That it flipped out and into the path of the Pursuers, causing consternation, swerving and braking, was not intentional. Any time advantage was lost in any case, as Helene had to retrieve the potato, it being needed as food. Non-competitive Helene subsequently dropped to seventh in her category on day two.

I was surprised by how fit I felt after 70 and then 80 miles. It was so different from day one. But I was conscious of my bum, the first aches and pains from which were to signal problems later on.

GREAT Tour of Wessex RIDES



5

› Somewhere near Cadbury Castle – Arthurian fort, not a chocolate-based theme park – we got into a big group and were swept along at over 20 miles per hour. I was a few riders ahead of Simon, nicely tucked in and scarcely pedalling. It was great: take me home, London Phoenix! I made the occasional check to see if Simon was still there.

We took a couple of turns and breezed alongside Yeovilton air base. Over 100 miles done, and fewer than ten to go. Day two was in the bag! The rider ahead of me slowed and pulled to one side, unable to hold the pace. I picked up speed and crossed the gap.

Simon wasn't with me. When we took a right-hand turn at a big roundabout, I took a wide line to look back at the following riders. Twenty of them had vanished. What had happened in the last few minutes? Crash? Cake? Kidnapped by aliens?

I let the group that I was with go and pootled along. Gradually, I was overtaken by the riders from the splintered group. Eventually Simon reappeared. While I had been swept away in Phoenix-powered luxury, he had been left in no-man's land. Three miles later, however, we were home: 120 miles in 7 hours 20.

FAIL TO PREPARE...

Day two had all the ingredients needed for a great ride – sunshine, scenery, no punctures, and potato-related drama. Sadly for me, it also resulted in a sore, skinless contact point on the saddle that I hadn't anticipated, and a balloon-sized right ankle. Day three for me was scuppered.

Two other friends joined Simon for day three. On a hilly, windy and sometimes wet day, they completed the route ten minutes ahead of the broom wagon.

Non-competitive Helene and Steve completed all three 'short' days, a total of over 200 miles. And not being a race, no one (certainly not Helene...) really noticed or commented that while the Pursuers may have been chasers, they weren't catchers. ☺

IN THE PHOTOS

- 5) Note the triple chainset. There's a lot of climbing in sportives like the Tour of Wessex
- 6) Despite the numbers at the start and finish, riders spread out thinly en route. Go with friends



6

FACT FILE THE TOUR OF WESSEX

When: May Bank Holiday weekend.

Where: Each day starts and finishes in Somerton, the ancient capital of Wessex, and the ride heads out on consecutive days into Wiltshire, Dorset and Somerset.

Distance: There are different route lengths available and riders can choose to ride one, two or all three days. The longest routes are 100 miles or more each day.

Accommodation: Camping is available at the start and finish location, and luxury tents can be hired. There is plenty of choice of B&B and hotels in the area, and the venue is close to Glastonbury and Street. We stayed at Sleepy Hollow self-catering cottages and the Old Vicarage B&B in Barton St David.

I'm glad I had: People to ride with. We did team up with other riders for parts of each day but it's surprising how 100 miles of road can absorb several hundred cyclists. A solo rider could find themselves alone for long periods.

I wish I had: Checked my bike's position more carefully before the ride. The slight misalignment of my saddle appears to have been the cause of my pain. Consecutive 100-mile days will find any flaws in your kit or preparation.

Photographs: Most sportive rides now have on-course photographers to capture your agony and ecstasy. They are often near the top of a long climb – try not to look too distressed as you pass! Photos can be purchased post-event through the organiser's website.

