

Cycling

ACTIVE

RIDE STORIES

Hell of the Ashdown

Is this the south's toughest ride?

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James Shrubsall takes the opportunity to investigate this season-opening staple before the rigours of winter set in





50 shades of foliage: the trio make tracks through an autumnal arena

Garden of England is such a cosy sobriquet. The county of Kent, tucked away in England's bottom corner and functioning for many of us simply as a cut-through to northern France, earned the name thanks to its profusion of fruit and hop farms.

But for me, it's a nickname loaded with charming imagery; lush green rolling fields, trimmed borders and manicured lawns full of colourful blooms all spring to mind.

Perhaps this is just me; it certainly isn't Kent. Not on this November day. A portentous

slate sky paints the heavens, while the landscape is a muddle of dark browns, greys and dirty greens.

Kent is no neat garden; it's hardworking, hard-riding country. From the plethora of inland ridges to the windswept flatlands nearer the coast, it's practically a mirror image of Belgium; a place where there may be long rides, there may be easy rides, but there are no long, easy rides.

As we climb towards the bottom of Star Hill past gritty farmyards and a thundering M25, a mere mile under the tyres, only the burnt orange of autumn visible in the trees stirs the senses. The vivid hues are trying



hard to lift the spirits, but have a lot to compete with. This is Hell, after all.

Hidden charm

That's not to say Kent has no redeeming features. If you know where to look, it has more than its fair share of pretty scenes, from its unique and enchanting oasthouses, to hidden lanes and big panoramic views. And HotA's route planners clearly know where to look.

We've just started our ride, remember, and we're on the slopes of Star Hill. The gradient is unforgiving and only getting steeper, but even today the expansive view southward to the Weald is inspiring, for that is where the

route leads and we'll be there before long. The view also provides a welcome distraction from the ever-growing gap that's opening between Brett and Dan and myself. Should it need clarifying any further — they are leaving me behind, despite the fact that I'm on the rivet. Between the rasping breaths echoing in my head, I'm starting to realise already that this is going to be a tough day out.

At the top, Brett and Dan are waiting. I roll up nonchalantly, wearing my best poker mask, but the damage is done. If there was any doubt before we set out, we all now know that I'm the weak link here, and by some way.

THE RIDERS

James Shrubsall

Having recently gone head-to-head with Lardass Hogan at the Great Tri-County Pie-Eat championship, has just restarted a serious training programme on the bike with a view to proving the winter miles/summer smiles equation.



Brett Lewis Cycling Active's 'New School'

himself takes a break from scribing to lead the way around HotA on what are his home training roads.



Daniel Baines

Whether it's crits, cross or sportives, CA's art chief can turn his hand to all things two-wheeled.





“Toys Hill? Apt. I’m about to throw a load from the pram here”

It’s only 100 kilometres, I reassure myself. Ah, the bliss of ignorance!

Not far up the road we pass the old HQ at Knockholt village. Perched on top of the Downs it often suffered with slippery, frosty roads, a location that also ensured a serious climb right at the very end. The new start down in Sundridge certainly seems less cruel — I’m not sure the devil would approve.

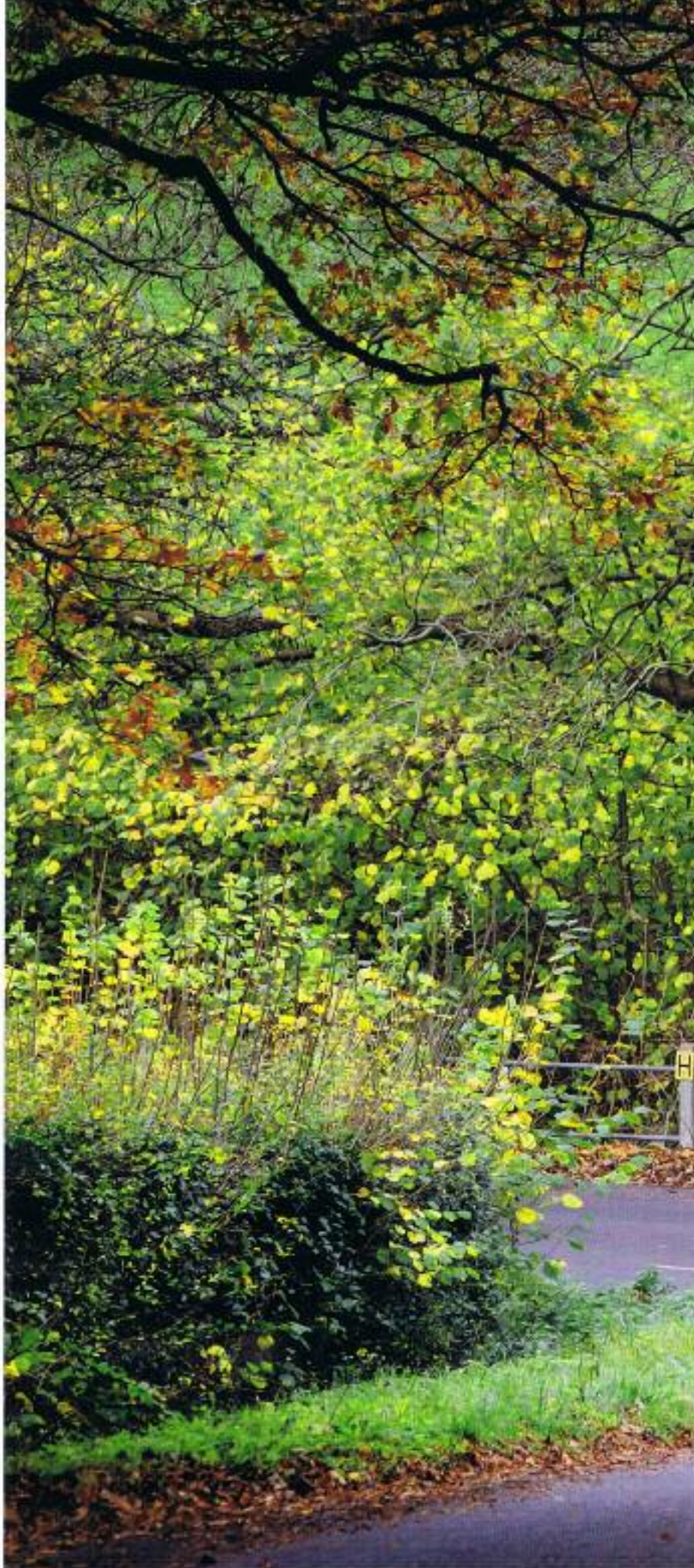
We very quickly descend steeply off the Downs, where we get mixed up in a trail of liquid cow dung left by a muck-spreading tractor. I very nearly end up on my backside when an incautious dab of the brakes reveals that not only is it smelly, it’s very slippery too.

We have now completed the short, northern loop, and with eight miles under our wheels it feels like we can begin in earnest as we cross the busy A25 heading south, ready to tackle Toys Hill.

“Don’t worry, it’s only three miles long,” Brett reassures me with a wink. It doesn’t make me feel better. This is his territory, and he knows the roads like the back of his hand. He’s also put in the hard graft and the miles and is, hence, very fit.

It appears Dan’s going pretty well too, I muse, as the pair of them once more put daylight — oodles of it — between my bike and theirs.

Why this hill is called Toys I don’t know, but at this point it’s certainly appropriate, because there are a whole bunch of them threatening to leave my own personal cycling pram. My





A brief reprieve
before confronting
yet another ascent

EPIC ROUTE
HELL OF THE
ASHDOWN



Fast forward:
splashdown in Ashdown

frustration is at my own lack of fitness, but overriding that by some margin is the worry that I'm going to struggle to complete the ride. However, climbing into a cosy car is simply not an option. For want of a prettier colloquialism, it's shit or bust today.

The steep, snaking descent of Toys rests the legs and puts a smile on all three faces, as we drop down through the trees. A word of caution though: if you do this ride, beware of the first left-hand corner on this downhill. It's a steep bit of road and very easy to go in too fast, with predictably unhappy consequences.

For the next 15 miles, the route rolls and tumbles up and down small undulations, and we're treated to our first taste of this ride's many false flats. Often flanked by trees with few other reference points, these stretches of road appear, to the eye, practically level. Yet the speedo is reading 11mph and the legs exhibiting a rather irksome level of discomfort. On this ride such symptoms generally seem to be accompanied by a troubling amount of distance between myself and my riding buddies. Only upon looking back down the road does it suddenly become apparent that we're riding up a not insignificant hill. Sometimes it's preferable to know your enemy...

Steeped in history

By now it's becoming abundantly clear that the Hell of the Ashdown is a ride of polar opposites — namely 'up' and 'down'. There is really very little flat. We encounter one of the rare exceptions just after Cowden as we approach the southern part of the ride. Furnace Lane is a tiny ribbon of tarmac that meanders alongside a stream, past old mills and farms and on this day flanked by trees laden with the most amazing autumnal foliage. It's a highlight of the ride for me — and not just because it's flat.

Into Forest Row, we're getting to the business

THE BIKE

With a sleek, sub-kilo carbon endurance frame and Shimano Ultegra 6800 drivetrain, the Valence is an ideal mount on which to tackle a long day in the hills. On our grimy outing I felt rather sorry for this bike's pristine componentry, and I'd take a punt and say that February will be pretty similar, so you may want to dig your winter bike out for this one.



“It's abundantly clear that the HotA is a ride of polar opposites — ‘up’ and ‘down’”

end of the Hell of the Ashdown. We've reached the High Weald ridge now and Ashdown Forest itself. This is the hometown, and these are the home training roads, of Eighties and Nineties Tour de France star Sean Yates. Famously hard as nails, Yates spent tens of thousands of miles cutting his teeth around here before heading to the Continent to win a Tour de France stage and wear the yellow jersey too. A light rain begins to fall as we make our first ascent onto the Ashdown Forest's windswept scrubland. Yates would no doubt approve.

The trees slowly thin and the sky gets bigger as we climb Priory Road onto the Ashdown's High Weald ridge. Down the other side our speed picks up as we descend towards Sharpthorne and suddenly Brett is out of sight. As the road levels out Dan and I press on a little, trying to catch him, wondering how he has distanced us so quickly. A mile or so later, the answer becomes clear, as Brett's hunched over figure appears, some way behind in the distance, waving for us to stop. It's that age-old cyclo-sportive blooper — we missed a turn-off and he didn't. Thankfully we only add a brace of miles onto the distance, but even they will come back to haunt me later in the ride.

Regrouped once again, we trace the route further into deepest, darkest Kent on tiny lanes flanked by high hedgerows. In the summer, this might be a pleasant place to lose yourself on the bike but today, halfway through a difficult ride with a leaden winter sky above, the road home is the only one I'm looking for. Of course, there's the small matter of Kidd's Hill to be tackled first, as Brett reminds me. “We're getting near the Wall now,” he grins, before mock-sniffing the air: “You can almost smell it!”

I'll be glad when we're done with it.

New additions

But before the small matter of the Wall there's the small matter of a pair of fords to negotiate — another new-for-2016 addition to HotA. I'm more nervous about this than the Wall if I'm honest, because I know how slippery fords can be through unfortunate experience. Thankfully we all make it through shiny-side up, with only distinctly damp backsides and ankles to show for it.

Our tiny, gritty and undulating tarmac ribbon leads us through dense woods and hedgerows back round in a loop that crosses the second ford and then snakes slowly up onto the HighWeald again. Like condemned men offered a short reprieve, we revel in a couple of miles of flat along the ridge followed by an exhilarating descent, before it's time to take on the Wall.

As we approach, a short ramp of tarmac at maybe 10 per cent rears up ahead. “Is that the top?” I offer in jest, knowing full well it can't be. All the same the sheer





heartiness of the laughter from both Dan and Brett takes me aback a little. Clearly it very much isn't the top.

"That's just the start," says Brett.

Damn. I was kind of hoping it might be halfway or something.

In an effort to salvage some pride from this ride I had envisaged myself going full gas up here and surprising my ride buddies by hanging on, maybe all the way to the top. But as the two of them spin inexorably away from me, I revert to plan B: 34x28 at 65rpm and winch myself slowly but surely up the die-straight gradient. There aren't many hills that can outwit a patient rider with a very large rear sprocket, however tired they may be.

Once again riding the High Weald plateau, we can feel the elevation in the elements, and a chilly wind has linked arms with the rain to ramp up the discomfort an extra notch. We're lucky though, that today is relatively balmy for deep autumn, with double-digit temperatures that allow us to warm up quickly as soon as we start pressing on.

For all the friendly banter between us, Dan and Brett can tell I'm starting to struggle, and offer encouragement. "Only Groombridge and Bayley's Hill left now," consoles Brett, and true enough they are the only 'categorised' climbs left on the route, which offers some comfort. But terrain like this is rarely flat anywhere and the categorised ascents are only the tip of the iceberg. I, on the other hand, am close to the point of beginning to dread every vertical metre.

As if in answer to my prayers, the longest, fastest descent of the day follows the Wall, offering some respite before we begin a lumpy section of rolling road on the way to the sixth and penultimate big hill of the day, the Nouvelle Col de Groombridge. Despite the extravagant name, it's a climb that's mercifully free of bells and whistles, bar an initial short, steep huck onto the escarpment. The rest comprises a simple, never-too-steep spin through the trees up towards the ridge.

Groombridge in the bag, it's very tempting to seek solace in the 'only one climb' left deceit, and I'm glad I don't because after a brief descent down to the river at Hedge Barton we are straight into another, equally taxing climb over Fordcombe with a hard-kicking second summit just up the road.

Twilight shift

With less than 15 miles to ride it is starting to feel like we're on the home stretch, which is just as well because while







Over the last hill in Hades: Dan and Brett's impassivity belies a raging thigh inferno

the rain is no longer with us, in its stead a blanket of twilight is slowly descending over the Kent Weald. None of us have lights. Looking at my Garmin, which displays an embarrassingly meagre average speed of 13mph, I feel rather guilty for our slow progress. I blame my legs.

The next few miles are pleasingly free of hills, enabling us to make useful progress towards the bottom of Wickhurst Lane-Bayley's Hill. Which could be good, or bad, depending on how you look at it.

At the village of Sevenoaks Weald Brett leads us

KNOW THIS

Getting there

The start at Sundridge is conveniently located a stone's throw from the M25, junction five. Leave the motorway, head west for half a mile along the A25 and you're there. Sundridge is also just a mile from Sevenoaks, which can be reached on the train from London Charing Cross in 35 minutes.

Staying there

Try the elegant Royal Oak in Sevenoaks, where a double room costs £115. rosevenoaks.co.uk/ / 01732 451109. Alternatively, the

Kings Arms Hotel in nearby Westerham can offer you a double room plus full English for £70. www.oldenglishinn.co.uk/ / 01959 562990

Bike shops

The Bike Warehouse on Sevenoaks High Street is located near the start and can be found at the-bike-warehouse.com/ / 01795 537182 — it's unfortunately closed Sundays, but there is a Halfords too. In Gear Cycle Sport, located halfway round the HotA in Forest Row, is definitely worth knowing about too. ingearcycles.co.uk/ / 01342 823829.

off the main road and onto the ride's new 'rough stuff' section. It's a brave move by the organisers, because Wickhurst Lane ramps up the rough factor from the 'unruly playground' of the average offering to 'Texas maximum security prison yard'. Huge unavoidable puddles and flinty potholes abound, and it's hard to pick a flowing line through the carnage. I can't help but feel a great deal of sympathy for Dan's deep-section carbon rims; if you're taking on this ride, leave your best wheels at home.

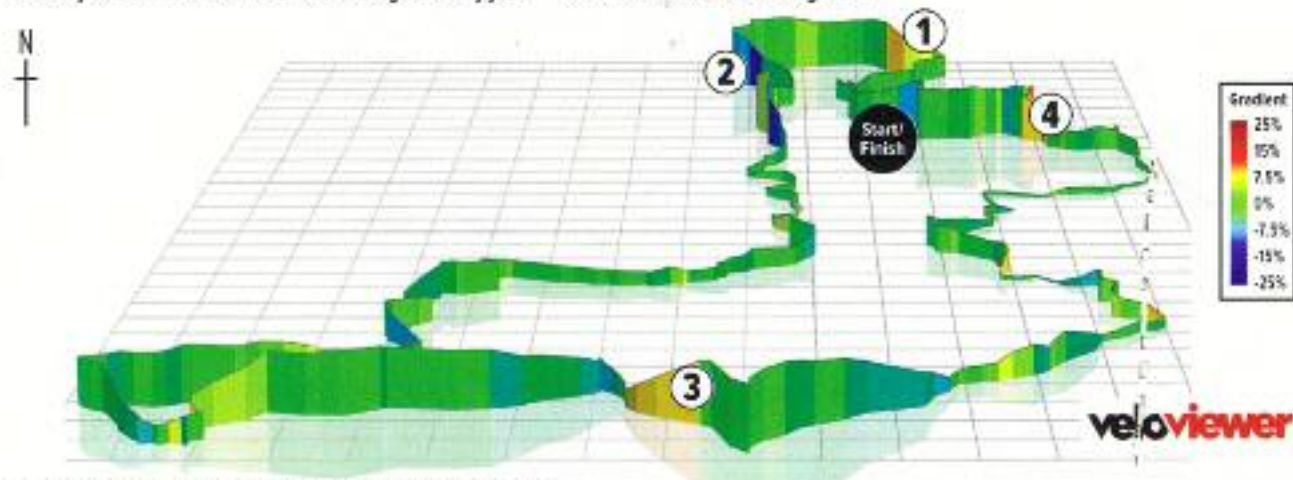
The sighs of relief as the tiny lane morphs from mud to tarmac becomes a rasp of near-asphyxia, certainly in my case, as Wickhurst Lane flashes us its chevrons. We're on the final climb now and in true sportive tradition the organisers have left us a treat to finish with. Between fields, farms and country piles the road winds relentlessly upwards with very little respite on offer. A kilometre or so of hard climbing delivers us to a junction with Bayley's Hill, where we turn right and complete the ascent, steep all the way. I allow myself a little inward celebration at the top. We've conquered every categorised climb and there are but five little miles to go.

By this time most cars are showing at least their sidelights, so we press on quickly towards home. The route shoves a handful of last ditch quad-busting rises into our path before we reach Ide Hill village and, at last, drop off the ridge through the trees in the half-darkness, back into Sundridge and our waiting cars.

THE ROUTE & KEY CLIMBS

The Hell of the Ashdown might fall well shy of the average summer sportive's 'epic' distance, but remember, it's a February event. The air's thicker and the legs are only just

getting geared up for the season, and with seven big climbs, if you're looking for some easy miles you'd better look elsewhere. www.hell.gb.com



For a Veloviewer link go to veloviewer.com/route/6156297580

CLIMBS

1 Star Hill

At the risk of disappointing anyone hoping for a gentle introduction, Star Hill begins within two miles of leaving HQ and is a kilometre-long eight per cent haul onto the top of the Downs. It'd be easy to burn a match or three here, so take it steady, admire the view and think of it as a particularly thorough warm-up.

2 Toys Hill

The second in a vicious early one-two following Star Hill, you can only be grateful that this two-mile, five per cent grind up through the trees is the easier side of 'Toys'. It's never especially steep, and there's an exhilarating descent to follow, but it will make you press hard all the way up.

3 Kidd's Hill (The Wall)

Even if you've never ridden the Wall before, you'll probably

feel you know it intimately thanks to your ride mates telling you all about how difficult it is, not to mention the section on HotA's website describing how Tour de France organisers refused to send riders up it in 1994 because it was "too hard". Admittedly, it's not easy, but ridden sensibly it needn't be any harder than the other big hills here.

4 Wickhurst Road/Bayley's Hill

A double measure of full-strength Kent Weald finest, complete with a rough stuff section to take the clout out of your legs before you even reach the bottom. Winding steeply up past fields and the odd enormous house, Wickhurst Road eventually meets Bayley's Hill where you turn (carefully!) right and complete this gruesome twosome. It's not the last climb, but it is the last big one.



Map data ©2015 Google



[Route map and profile is available at www.hell.gb.com]