

I entered late for the Kidderminster Killer 200 – on September 5 to be precise and sent a note of apology to David Pountney along with the entry. On the 5th, David rang me to say he had got my late entry, but it was later than I thought as the date of the event had been changed to September 9, rather than the 16th as stated in the calendar. This had of course been well publicised in *Arrivée*, but I hadn't spotted it. I said I thought it was unlikely that I would come but would see what I could do.

To cut a long story short I loaded the bike into the back of the car at 6am on Sunday to make the trip to the start. In doing so I noticed I had a flat rear tyre. Not a good start. I arrived at the Scout hall in Kidderminster at about 7.40am and was surprised to see it looking deserted. I realised that the start must have been changed as well as the date. My first thought was that perhaps the new start was somewhere near. An extensive tour of the town centre then ensued, to no avail. I phoned home to get my wife to look in *Arrivée*. This she did, but it did not mention the start change, only the date. My handbook I knew was out of reach at work.

With nothing better to do I decided to drive out along the old route of the event, in the hope of seeing some riders or at least parked cars with bike racks as it was now

just after 8am. As I approached Bewdley, my phone rang. It was my wife telling me she had looked at the AUK website and the start was stated as Astley, south of Stourport. A quick look at the map, and I was soon heading in that direction.

In the village of Astley I quickly found the hall, and the car park was full of cars, many with cycle racks. Obviously no cyclists at this time though. Luckily there were still people in the hall and I soon was in possession of a brevet card and a cup of tea (I prefer not to start an event without either). The next problem was that puncture. I reasoned that as the tyre had been OK when I went to bed, it was probably a slow leak and I could at least get started and fix it later. I also reasoned that with the event's reputation for hedge trimmings I would probably soon be changing it anyway.

By 9am I was on the road and needed to get some miles in quickly. Fairly soon I came to some control signs, but not surprisingly there was no one there. I simply noted the time and carried on. After about 15 miles I saw a rider up ahead. A brevet card sticking out of his pocket confirmed he was on the event. He too had started late and said he was not climbing well and would likely pack. After a couple of minutes we parted.

I reached the first control at Craven Arms, with about half an hour to spare. I felt quite pleased with my

progress but by this time my next problem was beginning to materialise. The problem was simply lack of miles in my legs. The last time I ridden this sort of distance was on the same event last year. Since that time I have done 40 miles in a day a couple of times – and this with a nine-hour break (ie, work) halfway through. I normally use a combination of bike and train to get to work, which means I ride about 12 miles a day normally. This is not really enough to be comfortable on a 200. At least, not for me anyway.

Not wanting to stop for too long I ate a malt loaf from my bag, filled up my bottles and pushed on. A few miles after Craven Arms the route heads along a lane that runs along the foot of the Long Mynd. It then takes a right turn at Asterton and goes straight up the Mynd, and I mean straight up. No messing about with namby pamby hairpins, flat bits and stuff on this road. I have always managed to ride this road non-stop in the past, but today I found myself stopping to rest twice in the first few hundred metres. Of course, I pretended to be admiring the view – which is actually quite stunning. A bit further up I started getting cramp in my left thigh (never had that before on the bike) and had to stop again to let it free up. Towards the top I got out of the saddle and both legs got cramp attacks, luckily this went off as soon as I sat back down. I was pretty glad to reach the summit.

Perhaps you are thinking I should have walked and saved all the bother. Perhaps next year I will if I am no fitter. I might also bring my camera.

On previous years the route has taken a left turn on the top of the Long Mynd to descend to Bridges. This year, however, the route sheet indicated that Church Stretton was the next place to visit. I looked at the sheet very carefully to make sure, before committing myself to the 1-in-4 descent. This was not a mistake I wanted to make. The only niggling thought I had was that the route sheet still mentioned Bridges, a couple of lines further on. This could only mean one thing – I would have to cross the Mynd again. I understood the organiser's need to make up the distance due to the different start, but did it have to be here?

The control at Church Stretton had an abundant supply of cakes, biscuits and drink. This went a long way to making me feel better. However, I was conscious of the time and the route ahead so I had to get going. It was also cold. Sure enough my fears were justified. Just out of Church Stretton the route went upwards again onto the Mynd. Thankfully this climb is not as steep as the last one. I was even starting to enjoy myself again as the cake started to take effect. As I turned left at a T-junction the gradient got suddenly steeper and the small ring was called for. Unfortunately the

front clanger would not play ball. I was going too slowly again, I suppose. The transmission locked up and I could not get my foot out. Or perhaps I should say I could not get my foot out quickly enough. It came free at the same time as my shoulder made contact with the road and prodded uselessly at the air trying to stop me falling.

I lay on the road and pronounced to the world in general, and the nearest sheep specifically, that this was definitely 'One of those days'. I dragged myself upright and found that I couldn't bear weight on my foot – the same one that tried so hard to save me. The rest of my leg felt pretty sore as well. I didn't dare remove my shoe. After a few minutes things started to improve and I thought I would at least be able to ride a bit. What a good excuse to take it easy for the rest of the day. It would be all down hill to Church Stretton railway station. Another rider came past and enquired if I was OK. I replied 'I think so', although I was far from sure.

A couple of minutes later I got back on the bike and found that riding wasn't too bad. There goes that excuse. After a few miles and a few more hills my injured leg was no worse than the other one.

From the Long Mynd the climbs just seem to go on and on one after another. Nothing incredibly steep, just relentless and fairly steep. The route was very quiet and I hardly saw any traffic. It felt more like 6am on a Sunday rather than mid-afternoon. On arrival at the amazingly peaceful town of Clun and the next control I

felt exhausted. I partook of a couple of pieces of cake and a pot of tea in the café, which again made me feel a bit better. Talking to my table companion I discovered that he lives about five miles from me. Small world really.

The route onwards from Clun is not as hilly, according to the route sheet, but first you have to get out of Clun itself, which is of course at the bottom of a sodding great valley. As I climbed I remembered the hill from previous years. Isn't it funny how the mind can block out that sort of memory until the pain and effort bring it all flooding back? This is probably a good thing, as most of us would never ride this sort of event a second time if we could remember the bad bits.

Soon I was back on more comfortable roller coaster roads again ('more comfortable' being a relative term). After a long descent into Leintwardine there was a long climb up before reaching Ludlow. This is a lovely road with chocolate box cottages nestling in the trees alongside the road, some of which are hard to spot. The descent into Ludlow is great. All you need to remember is the T junction at the bottom as you hurtle down at forty plus miles per hour.

Once past Ludlow things are considerably easier for a while and I was able to wind it up (another relative term), as I wanted to finish in daylight. I did have lights but only LEDs front and rear. Hopeless for actually seeing with, but OK to get by with, and almost comply with the law.

A few miles before the final

control at Tenbury Wells I saw some cyclists stopped in a side road. When I asked if they were OK, they offered me some food. At first I wondered if this was a secret control, but soon found out that one of them lived nearby and had stashed a load of chocolate, crystallised ginger and dried fruit under the hedge the day before. What an excellent idea! I must remember that one. The ginger was especially welcome as it is good for settling the stomach (hard to believe, I know) and mine was feeling a bit put out by all the work it was having to do.

I rode on with this group who were also trying to beat the dusk. We stopped only long enough to get our cards stamped at Tenbury Wells before pushing on.

There was the inevitable long climb not far out of Tenbury Wells that never seemed to end. We took note of the info control at the top and plunged down into the deepening gloom. The air was particularly cold as we crossed the river at the bottom. The climb from here, it was generally agreed, was the last long one.

I stopped just along the road to strap my front light onto the bars. Disaster, I could not find the rubber strap that holds it in place. I had seen it in my bag at the last control so it couldn't be far away – well, no further than the last control at any rate. I was just beginning to think of alternative mounting methods to avoid holding it in my teeth when I found the strap wedged in the end of my tool roll.

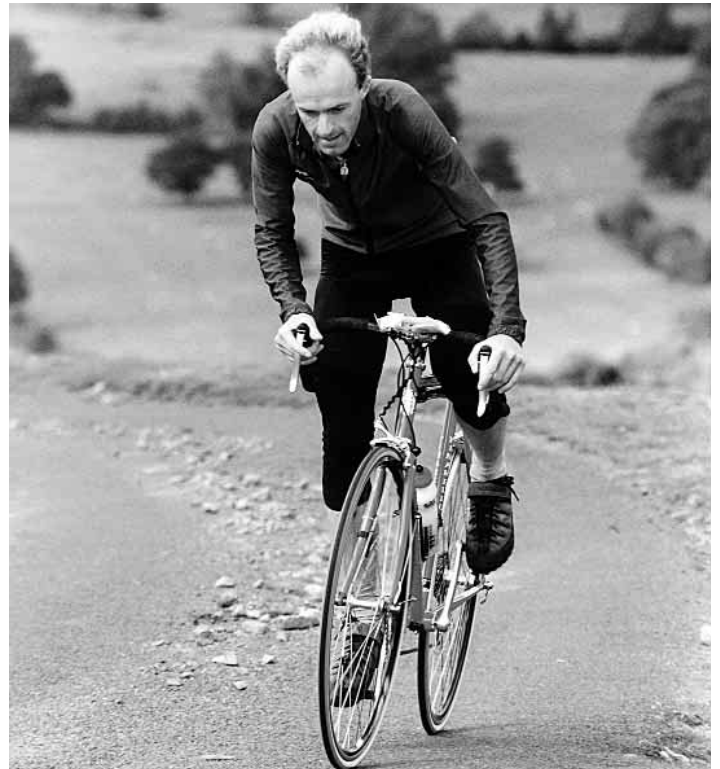
By now it was almost dark and I

was once again alone. The last few miles passed slowly and I began to worry that I had gone off route. I had passed two turns to the finish, which was, after all, only a small village, but neither had quite coincided with the description on the route sheet. I decided to trust the route sheet, as it hadn't let me down yet. The worst that could happen was that I would end up in Stourport town which I would recognise; and I knew the way(ish) from there.

Sure enough, there was the right turn, opposite the garage just as the route sheet said. I was still on course. It was by now dark and the lane was overhung with trees making it pitch black. A runner appeared out of the blackness and told me I would need to get a move on to catch the others. I never even bothered to try, because I couldn't see to avoid the holes in the road – well no, actually I was too tired. A few minutes later I arrived at the hall to find tea, rice pudding, cake and such like on offer. What luxury.

All in all, although it had been one of those days, I had enjoyed it, in that perverse sort of way that is common to audeax events of course. You simply forget the discomfort and pain and remember the beauty of the countryside and the simple feeling of freedom and achievement. The words of a song by Chris Rea sum it up very well. '... and the paradise of going somewhere still a long long way away.'

As for the rear tyre? Well, it stayed hard all day and was still hard a week later. This can only have been caused by dirt under the valve seat.



Guy Lawton and A. N. Other on Asterton Bank, Kidderminster Killer. Photos: Cliff Shakespeare

