

The Gospel Pass and Lanes and Valleys

Ian Hennessey



Lanes and Valleys 200. Photo Ian Hennessey

It was a cold but sunny February morning in the car park by Chepstow Castle. A queue of cyclists had formed. At its head the organisers, Nik and Jen, were handing out brevet cards for the Gospel Pass 150km. More cyclists were still arriving, others milling about, in conversation or anxious to go.

There were a few comments about the recycled, year-old route-sheet, but, hey, the entry was only a pound.

My watch said eight, so I tagged on to a group and we set off across the bridge over the River Wye and up the first hill. Dave Stevens and I were the only ones of the group to take the traditional short-cut along the cycle-path, which gained us a temporary advantage.

Drew Buck, stoking a solid looking tandem, told me in gruesome detail about his broken leg and the various bits of metal now holding it together – and also about the cage he had kept the leg in for six months, adjustable for height and looking as if it had been made out of bicycle bits. He later found out that it had been designed by an engineer, who built the prototype out of ... bicycle bits.

Phil Chadwick came alongside as we continued to climb. He was on a 68 inch fixed, and I felt a twinge of envy, thinking of mine lying unused in the shed – only a twinge, though.

A couple of fellow Exeter Wheelers rode past – my jersey was hidden under a cape. We saw them heading off left on the wrong road by the information control, and shouted. They turned out to be Andy Thompson, time-trialist and randonneur, and Nick Denning, who

declared he wasn't used to this touring lark (he is the Wheelers' time trial representative). We saw them a little later take the correct turn, small figures in the distance ahead.

The café at Monmouth was doing a good trade – I was going to say 'brisk', but they were understaffed and overwhelmed, and the stamp was self-service. As we left the controller turned up, having been waiting somewhere else for the cyclists.

I sat glued to Sandra Shaw's wheel through the Golden Valley. The sunshine was interrupted by abrupt pockets of freezing mist. We climbed free of them towards Haye, Sandra testing her turbo-trainer fitness and making my legs hurt.

After slightly too much food at Haye, we turned towards the Gospel Pass. As the road went up, so my speed went down. Sandra pedalled lightly into the distance. I concentrated on maintaining an economic pedalling technique and keeping off the ice. Someone went past and stopped further up the road. He passed me again and stopped again. I kept a steady effort going and refused to be irritated.

At last the top came in sight. Sandra was out of sight. I concentrated on enjoying the descent, whilst remembering the chap who had broken his jaw against the front of a car a couple of years back.

Sandra was ambling along the lane towards Llanthony, waiting for me to catch up. We did a complicated detour into Abergavenny and had to ask a passing cyclist where the control was. My stomach advised against food, so I had a pot of tea. Nik

Peregrine came in a little after, having levered his trike over the Pass behind us.

The final leg included the road to Usk which features the Neolithic paintings of bicycles on the margins of the road (interspersed with obviously recent fakes). It seems to be the remains of a prehistoric cycle lane.

It was getting dull and misty as we climbed to Shirenewton, but the Severn and the two bridges were still visible. A quick detour through Chepstow (my fault) took us to the Athletic club and finish. I tried rehydration therapy using orange and lemonade, then started on the beer. Sandra was having none of that, she'd gone home.

Lanes and Valleys

It is the first time I've organised two events on the same day, and, as a result, I had the largest number of people I have ever had queuing for cards.

The factory canteen used as start and finish was barely big enough to cope, but everyone was helpful about moving aside to let others through. When I finally had time to take a look outside I was horrified to see cars everywhere. Fortunately, it being Sunday, no one from the neighbouring factories was inconvenienced, but I shall need a parking attendant next year.

The sun was shining in defiance of the forecasts, and all looked set for a pleasant day.

Most of the 200k riders left as the first of the populaire entrants started arriving. Drew Buck and Nigel Wynter were still fiddling with their tandem in an unhurried fashion. Eventually they potted off out of the yard and headed for the Brendon Hills.

Pete Luxton ran the first control from his van at Wheddon Cross. This was to keep the riders from short-cutting across a spectacularly hilly 'B' road over the edge of Exmoor – as if they needed such coercion.

The café at Watchett had just changed hands, and Frances and André, the new owners were busy demolishing the kitchen and shop.

Nevertheless they opened especially for the event, and set up a field-kitchen in the remains of the dining room to serve food and drink. A sign outside read 'Welcome to Exeter Wheelers'.

The look route turned at Hemyock, where the owner of the Spar shop was very efficient in stamping cards, and the 200k riders continued to Dunkeswell Airfield, where the staff were just a little less organised.

A stiff south-westerly made itself felt on the more exposed roads. The 200k riders in particular had a long section west to Winkleigh, where the staff at the King's Arms provided excellent service and food. Some said they found it difficult to drag themselves away. A few were rained on when they left.

Back at the finish, they arrived singly and in groups, and we dispensed soup and bread, and drinks. The canteen came under pressure again, with seating only for seven. But we coped.

We sat for a while, waiting for the last riders. Bryan Colbourne came in with about half an hour to spare, and told us how he had led a group of five off-course, then abandoned them on a fast descent. They included the Wynter/Buck tandem, and AUK veteran Simon Jones, who, it turned out, suffered a double puncture as Bryan sped off. They arrived just within time.

They said their goodbyes at around ten o'clock, and we gathered up the equipment, the tins, and the boxes, cleaned up, and left for home not much before eleven. Thanks to Pete, Elaine, and Ely for helping out.



Nigel Chadwick and Drew Buck on the Loties (hid V//evs. F00lo. /00)

