

Hell of the North Cotswolds (H.O.N.C.)

On Sunday 14th April the Hell Of the North Cotswolds reliability trial took place. This gruelling annual event, which is run on the same day as the Hell of the North (Paris-Roubaix), is run over a 100km course in the north of the Cotswolds. Your intrepid reporter Terry Dickerson rode this years event to see what all the fuss was about.

Still half asleep, I left Gloucester at seven to meet my two friends, Tim and Steve, in Cheltenham at half-past. The weather was cool, cloudy and with a moderate breeze; the forecast was for rain by lunch time. Faced with a 150m climb over Cleeve Hill to get to Winchcombe for the start I was glad of an offer of a lift from Cheltenham. Winchcombe School was buzzing, Mountain Bikes everywhere, their riders all impatient to get going. Signing on was easy, sign, pay a fiver and pickup a route sheet. Following the route sheet was not so easy as it consisted of shorthand instructions which all looked the same; the sheet would be useless if one went off route as the instructions were sequential. So the secret was not to stray from the route - easy!

The event started at nine o'clock; we got close to the front of the 450 riders so a not to get caught in the "traffic". A police motorbike led the procession through the pretty town of Winchcombe down to the turning into Corndean Lane - the start of the ride proper. As the police rider turned away all hell let loose with 450 riders all trying to get down a 2.2m (8ft) wide c-road. Luckily, or was it planned that way, what was to come in the next mile sorted the mess out and woke me proper. Corndean Lane ascends the scarp face of the Cotswolds and formed the first and hardest of the climbs in the event. The road, which later turned into a track, climbed monotonically up a total of 679ft (207m). Some were revelling on the climb, but to this Camite and noted non-climber, it was tough. However, the hardware that I had chosen to ride on helped be to be in the top 25 at the top of the hill. Someone turned left into a field at the top of the hill and the rest of the sheep, including myself, followed.

My bike started to show its limitations as I sped through the field. I had elected to use my day-to-day steed, the only concession I had made was to put a 13 to 28 cassette on which gave a 39-28 (36") bottom gear. The mountain bike frame was fine but the road (slickish) tyres gave little grip on the slippery mud. The narrow dropped bars also made it difficult to keep control. The bike set-up that I was blessing ascending Corndean Lane just a short while earlier I was now cursing.

Curse, I cursed again, the peloton stopped and there was much pointing back from the way that we came. Yes, we had taken a wrong turn. Back through the field of slippery mud we went (curse, curse) and rejoined the track. From now on I vowed not to follow so blindly. Of course, by this time we had been overtaken by a hundred riders and it was bedlam again. The track turned into a rough track that turned into a field and we were on to our first real (official) off-road section. I took the mile long descent slowly and I conceded many more places. Rejoining the road though my bike was back on its element and I cut through riders like a keenly honed rapier. The next 20km were mainly on the road and I was beginning to wonder if the claim that about half route was off-road was correct. I need not have because the lack of early off-road sections was made up for later. Down I plunged, off the road onto a track that got rougher and rougher. My bike, and my skills, were well out of their depth and I struggled to keep enough force on the brakes to prevent myself from hurtling into oblivion. A bit more pressure on the brakes allowed me to stop before hitting a huddle of cyclists standing in the track, someone had fallen. The victim of the crash had banged her elbow and shaken, but she was soon back on her bike. Personally, I was glad to give my aching hands a rest from braking. More road sections allowed me to regain many of the places that I lost on the off-road sections. My friends were patient enough to wait for me so I kept catching them up on the road. The ~~miles~~ km started to fly by and soon we were at Guiting Power, the feed station.

If you ever wonder what happened to the food mountains, I know where one went to - the European bread pudding mountain was in the Cotswold that day. Piles of the stuff greeted us as did big notices saying "**TWO PIECES ONLY**". I soon had polished off my ration and several cups of tea and some squash and some water. After ¼ hour my friends were ready to go so I reluctantly followed them outside. Two large containers of water were available to fill water bottles. Unfortunately I did not have the strength to get the top off my water bottle, try and try it would not move so I set off with it half empty. It was now late morning and there was no sign of the promised rain, indeed it was starting to get quite warm.

Off we set, after a few hundred yards we were back off-road and headed up one of the first ridable off-road climbs of the ride. I was soon descending a steep, very rough, muddy, stone strewn track. I was doing my granny bit with my brakes fully on to limit my speed to 15km/hour when WOOoooh, this chap(ess) came flying past me at what I would guess was 50km/hour. When I say flying, I mean flying, the wheels of his full-suspension MARIN™ (I think) seemed to touch the ground momentarily before leaping back into the air. Their speed of decent was rather reckless, nether-the-less it was an impressive piece of bike handling.

The off-road sections became more numerous but not very technical. At one point we came across a motorcycle trial; what a stupid sport, riding a two-wheeled velocipede through muddy water. **SPLAT**, I was not properly looking where I was going (watching motorcycles) so I rode into an area of deep squishy mud. I managed to keep upright and to keep going but my wheels and mudguards got very clogged. Out of the mud I started to ride up the semi-made farm road while bunny hopping to loosen the mud in the guards. Things did not feel right though, or rather my back tyre did not feel right. I had a puncture (curse, curse). Mending a puncture when the tyre is covered in mud is not easy, when your inflator is the nightmare mini-pump from hell it can get very frustrating. The repair took 15 to 20 mins. Meanwhile about 70 riders had passed me and my so-called friends had deserted me.

It was time for nose to the grindstone stuff for the final 25km; yes, I was getting tired now! Most of the terrain was not too difficult, the exception being the last decent. When I turned off the road I could see the town in the valley. The descent was quite difficult with loose rubble on the surface. It was now that the promised rain arrived, it was only a light shower but it was to make things very slippery at the bottom of the track. As the track flattened out the rubble became clay that had a coating of slurry caused by the rain. It only lasted for about ½km but how I managed not to fall off I do not know. The mud yielded to tarmac as I rode the last couple of km back to the school. I clocked in at 14:45h - 5¾h for 100km, 17.4km/h and arrived back in about 150th place.

More importantly than all of those statistics, I enjoyed the ride. I also got to see parts of the beautiful Cotswolds that I had never seen before, even though I lived in Cheltenham for several years. An excellent and classic ride, any one for next year?