

LEL 2005 - Preparation

I had first heard of the London – Edinburgh – London Audax ride reading an article on Moulton bikes in CTC's Cycle magazine in 2001. At that stage, I had never heard of Audax rides let alone completed one.

A year later, I met Dave Atkinson, a NYDA member from Northallerton whilst doing a coast to coast ride - my first overnight ride - with Pete Gray. The following year saw me completing my first Audax ride – Keith Benton's Wigginton 'illy, a 130 km ride from Wigginton round Bransdale.

2004 was spent steadily increasing the mileage whenever I could, including midweek rides with the Wednesday Wheelers and the start of Thursday rides with Andy Kirby, John Smith & my girlfriend Elaine.

I never really considered attempting such a long ride as the LEL – 1417 km - until New Years Day 2005 when a group of us from York met at Dave Atkinson's house for a ride with the Swaledale section for lunch @ Constable Burton. On the way round, I discussed with Dave riding some longer events which eventually led to talk of the LEL itself. Dave had ridden various long distant Audax events including Paris – Brest – Paris in 2003, so it seemed sensible to listen to what he said. Eventually it was decided that I would ride a 400km & 600km and see how I got on. My idea being that if completing them, I would then put in for the LEL.

Just talking about riding the event with other cyclist seemed to generate interest, but it did seem others had more belief that I would attempt it than I did.

Decision time came sooner than I thought when in late March, it was pointed out that the closing date for entries was 31 March. Without having tried the planned 400km, I had to decide whether to part with the £90 entrance fee and risk not being ready for the start at the end of July.

Eventually, lack of common sense prevailed and I sent in the entrance form together with photo ID, the cheque and extra money for the LEL cycle shirt – well you have to the shirt – in for a penny etc...

After a few e-mails, May saw me meeting Dave and a friend of his, Gordon White from West Yorkshire DA, in Beattock for Tom Hanley's 'Ower the Edge' 400km. We met on Friday evening at the village hall for a 6 o'clock start Saturday morning. On inspecting the bikes amassed in the hall, and their respective owners, it soon became apparent that we were amongst serious distance cyclists. No lightweight cycles here – all bikes were equipped with mudguards, an array of lighting on customised brackets, various designs of route sheet holders and many other home made gadgets. My idea to remove the dynamo to save weight now seemed rather poor. Most of those present seemed to know each other & talk was of previous events, one even had a laptop & DVD showing scenes from his bike on the PBP set to music.

The ride itself went surprisingly smoothly, once everyone else had shot off out of site, the three of us set a steady pace and just enjoyed the ride. The organisation was excellent with every control point manned with food available, the notable ones being one run by a cyclist who after talking to him for 20 minutes realised was over Ninety, the control reached @ 11 o'clock at night which was someone's kitchen, and a genuine 24 Tescos reached at about 3 o'clock Sunday morning which had a steady stream of clubbers passing through. The only real surprise happened on the way home, but that's another story.

June's rides included a one week tour of Normandy organised by John Savin, a friend of Pete Gray's from Guildford, where cycling interrupted the eating, and of course, the CTC rally @ York with it's Ron Kitchin challenge ride.

The final test / warm up was another event in Scotland in early July – the Three Firths 600km starting from Dalmeny just outside Edinburgh (Forth, Solway & Clyde). This time Dave, Gordon and myself were joined by Paul Outhwaite, another friend of Dave's from Worthing. This was an altogether harder ride than the Ower the Edge.

The event was run solely by Mark Shannon using commercial controls including 24 hour service stations and pubs. Starting @ 9 o'clock Friday evening we rode through the first night through the Borders to Newton Stewart then up to Ayr through the Galloway Forest then retraced our steps. Somewhere in the second evening we lost Gordon who had suffered wheel problems. The hard part for me was after 10 o'clock cycling into the second night, with darkness and light rain falling, the next control was Mark Shannon's cottage somewhere up a dark lane miles outside of Dumfries at 450 km. Tiredness and bonk took it's toll and I was soon trailing the other two loosing them from site. Thankfully they waited on the road into Dumfries and it was all I could do to follow their lights, any notions of map reading were long gone. The cottage was difficult to find but the welcome was worth it. Mark is a man who knows what tired cyclists want – tea & ambrosia rice pudding and cheese rolls – in that order. We slept where we had eaten.

The next morning we woke with everyone else and found Gordon had joined us during the night. We set off together but had cut it fine – Paul punctured and we arrived at the next control minutes before it closed.

We finished just before midday Sunday and went our separate ways – Gordon cycling to Edinburgh to catch his train.

That was the preparation over with, the next time the four of us, Dave, Gordon, Paul and myself met, was on July 23 at Thorne for the start of the LEL.

LEL 2005 - Ride.

Saturday 23 July 2005 – the start of the LEL. The idea was the four of us would meet up at Thorne and attempt the whole ride together but had all realised our first mistake. We entered individually and received our number for the event in order of applications received. The start was then staggered to prevent the 111 Thorne starters from creating a rolling road block as we headed North. Tandems & recumbents were set off at 0800, then groups of roughly 30 set off at 15 minute intervals grouped by event number.

Dave (58) and Paul (67) set off at 0830, Gordon (94) and myself (99) set off at 0845. Rather than wait, we had decided we would probably meet up sometime before the first control at Hovingham.

Our group set off at a brisk pace on the flat roads from Thorne – 885 miles to go and we found ourselves at the back of our group at evens (20 mph). It was rather obvious we would not be keeping that sort of pace up so duly sat up and watched the group disappear up the road.

On arriving at Stamford Bridge, we found Dave already doing what he does best – eating, and Paul taking an impromptu break. Each section between controls was roughly 80 km so really some additional stops made sense.

Departing Stamford Bridge we found our group had swelled to six, being joined by Dave Robinson from West Yorks DA and Paul from Bolton Clarion.

Hovingham Control came and went; it was good to see familiar faces from our own DA, and we were joined by Elaine and Andy Kirkby who had ridden out from York to see us. They rode with us across the Howardian Hills where they got their picture taken with us climbing up through Coxwold – pictures now on the Audax UK website.

Eppleby Control passed without event, and we headed on through Barnard Castle up Teesdale. Passing through Langdon Beck, we received our only public encouragement of the event, a family of four cheering us as we climbed through the village. Everyone else we passed was probably oblivious to what we were doing.

Again, our passage through Alston Control was uneventful and we climbed out of the Tyne Valley towards Brampton as dusk fell.

Our arrival at Canonby just over the boarder was where things became interesting. Like nearly everyone else from Thorne, we had decided to make this our first sleeping stop – Dave had provided us with a game plan for the event including estimated timings at each control and where we should sleep. The food provided was exactly what was required but the sleeping accommodation was already full. No blankets or even a dark corner could be found. Out of our group, I think I got the most sleep – 30 minutes on the hard wooden floor with a hand towel over my face. Even this was interrupted by one of the Control helpers talking to anyone who was listening, and despite efforts to the contrary, we were all listening.

We eventually decided to cut our losses and headed on in the very early morning, doubts now seriously being raised as to how far we could get on such little sleep.

Surprisingly, we made good progress through the boarders, through the Control at Etrick and on to Dalkeith, landing here at about midday, and promptly falling asleep at the table where we ate our meal.

Setting off for our 700 km ride South, things were going well. Our group of six loosely stayed together all the way back to Canonby. Here, we lost Gordon, he had punctured somewhere en route and on examining his rear wheel, found it seriously out of true. Much to my surprise, one of the controllers produced a truing jig and set about Gordon's wheel as the rest of us departed for Alston.

There were concerns on leaving Canonby as the route sheet which had given an alternative route heading north, now only gave one route south via the back lanes. These were said to be hard to navigate due to poor signage, but rumours abounded that there could be a secret control. We took advice and retraced the way we came. The secret controls mentioned on the event's information sheet never materialised.

After a good feed at Alston, we decided to press onto Langdon Beck Youth Hostel for our second night's sleep having been advised we would get a bed there. Dave left a note for Gordon telling him where we were, and we set off at about half past eleven at night to climb Yad Moss as light rain began to fall.

The control at Langdon Beck was superb. We had misgivings on arrival when seeing the number of bikes outside, but once having found a storage shed to park our bikes and gone inside, found others about to depart. The control team steered us to a table, pushed food at us, pointed us to the showers, physically walked us to our beds (well a sleeping bag on the floor) then woke us up at the agreed time and fed us more.

Gordon turned up in the morning having slept at Alston, departing at first light. We set off as a group of six again setting a fair pace down the valley to Barnard Castle.

I still don't think we thanked the Control staff enough.

Between Eppleby and Hovingham, Dave, Paul, Gordon and myself took a slight detour to Dave's house at Northallerton for more breakfast, and a shower and change of clothes for Dave and Paul, the joined up with the others at Hovingham.

On approach to Thorne, I started to feel quite good. I had had it in the back of my mind that I would be happy just getting back to Thorne. Now, for the first time since that New Years Day ride when I first considered the ride, I knew I could complete it. 800 km down, 600 Km to go.

A shower and change of clothes at Thorne saw us setting off south toward our third overnight stop at Lincoln. We lost Dave Robinson but met up with Steve Carrol from Highlands DA who happened to live at Canonby. We related our story about being kept awake at the control, he sympathised with us – it was his wife.

Steve kept us entertained, his own report of the ride appeared in Arriveé Magazine later that year.

Our overnight stop at Lincoln went smoothly, Chris Crossland making sure we all got a freshly made bed.

Tuesday morning saw us confidently heading towards Thurlby – Gerry Boswell's Control at the local primary school. Our group was now back to six with Steve replacing Dave.

Gerry had certainly pulled out all the stops for the food, a fresh fruit salad replacing the endless supply of bananas favoured by other controls. Another nice touch was that Gerry had written to the school explaining what was happening there during their school holidays, the school children had produced pictures of cyclists, though I rather think they had got us confused with the Tour de France. Some pictures are now on the Audax UK website.

And on to Gamlingay, the longest section. By now I think the memory was going, we lost Steve somewhere, but not before he had displayed his healing skills massaging out Paul's swollen achilles tendon.

The section down to Lea Valley and back was noted only really by the appalling driving and behaviour of motorists. Despite having nearly two hundred cyclists passing through there on Saturday, I don't think any of them had seen a cyclist. The ride back north was particularly hazardous as night fell.

Gamlingay and the last night's stop. Another control short of beds but this time blankets and a carpeted floor was provided. The next morning, Dave noted that someone must have been round with a hammer during the night and hit his knee caps. We all knew what he meant. One nice touch was found as we left, our bikes which had been left outside overnight had got wet, but someone had been round and placed plastic bags over all the leather saddles.

The journey up to Thurlby was noted for being wet. We were now regularly seeing the London Starters heading back south, a sort of conspiratorial glance being exchanged as we passed, both knowing what we had been through and that it was nearly over.

The Control at Thurlby was now being noted for providing an excellent breakfast of cornflakes, curry and water melon.

On to Lincoln, Paul for the first time all ride was now beginning to feel the miles, I supposed we had all had bad patches at some point and it was now Paul's turn.

Lincoln came and went quickly, and for the first time, our group of five began to split up. We knew the way home and now and were starting to push to get it over with. We came together again when I had my first puncture, at approximately 1350 km.

As we started across Thorne Moor, Dave, Gordon and myself found ourselves ahead in our own group of three. It was now about half past eight on Wednesday evening, and like all good endings, we headed into the sunset.

December, I received my brevet card in the post – looking at the stamps of the Controls we passed through brought back the feelings of the ride. The shirt well and truly earned has had several outings on various Audax rides, and the feeling has come back to my hands. Would I recommend the ride to others? I don't know. Would I do it again? I will decide on New Years Day 2009.

Brett Hill