

# The Signpost

Darley Abbey

Magazine of the  
Derby Mercury RC



Issue 153 January 2011

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# Derby Mercury RC President - Derek Wilkins



## Editorial

It always seems a bit late to wish everyone a happy new year at the end of January but welcome to 2011 anyway.

There has been plenty going on since the last mag came out before the AGM. The photographic competition normally follows the week after the AGM but this year, because of the bad weather, it got postponed until January. However, it was still in time to be reported in this mag and the winning photos are reproduced in glorious colour.

Another consequence of the cold weather was that I only got out on my bike two or three times in about six weeks. I hate going out when it's really cold and I was actually obliged to get the turbo trainer out to try to avoid piling on the weight over Xmas - desperate measures.

One branch of the sport that keeps going through the winter is of course cyclo-x and this is now very popular within the club. This month saw the staging of the National Championships at Moorways, organised by John Holmes's consortium of local clubs, including the Mercury. Lots of members put in some hard work to make it a success so many thanks to all those who helped. See Jim's report later in the mag.

The other major event in January is the annual Prize Presentation and Buffet. Once again it was held on a Friday evening at the Rugby

Club and this seems to be a winning formula. I've heard nothing but good reports from people and the talk by Vin Cox on his round the world record ride was excellent. Many thanks to Bette for organising the event as usual. There's a brief report and some photos, selected at random, in this mag but many more photos are posted on the web site.

Finally, the racing season will be well under way by the time the next magazine appears so let me wish everyone a successful season - ride fast but stay safe.

*Dave Ellis*

## Notices

### Membership Subs.

If you have not yet paid your membership for the coming year, Avicé is at the clubroom on Tuesdays waiting to take your money off you. Remember, if you don't re-join by the 1st of March it will cost you an extra £1 and if you don't re-join this will be the last magazine that you receive. That should be reason enough not to delay!

**Cover Photo:** Vin Cox, guest of honour at the club's prize presentation and buffet, with the bike that he rode on his round the world record ride.

# Results of BAR Competitions for the 2010 season

## Derby Mercury BAR

Results are based on the best performances in Open Time Trials for each of four distance categories, ie 10 miles or less, more than 10 miles but not more than 25 miles, more than 25 miles and one ride of any distance. Events must be open to all and the result is calculated as a percentage relative to the performance of the winner of the event on the day.

1	Jim Crew	87.70% overall average
2	Nick Scott	87.66%
3	Pete Turner	84.55%
4	Jim Rigby	76.08%
5	Jim Hopper	73.17%

## Open BAR

Results are based on best performances in open, semi-open and association events at each of four distances, ie 10, 25, 50 and 100 miles. The final result is the average speed over the four distances.

1	Nick Scott	25.56 mph
2	Jim Rigby	22.52 mph
3	Jim Hopper (Trike)	21.10 mph

## Vets BAR

Results as for the Open BAR but the average speed is the expressed as the difference, above or below the standard for the rider's age.

1	Nick Scott	+ 5.21 mph
2	Jim Hopper (Trike)	+ 4.62 mph
3	Jim Rigby	+ 3.55 mph

## A Winters Long Week End

By Jim Hopper

The Audax United Kingdom annual general meeting has for the last few years been held at the end of November. It was moved from January to eliminate the chance of bad weather. For the second year in succession it was held at York and so, as usual, we decided to ride there, on our trikes of course. We always take a couple of days in each direction and then two nights there. This allows time so that, if the weather is not too good we can cut the route short, or if fine we can add some scenic bits on.

Last year when we went we found some good digs just north of Sheffield so we decided to use them again for our first stop. Snow flurries were forecast and we set off into a cold north wind. The usual lanes were taken at first, along to Sudbury and then via Virgins Alley to Clifton and to skirt Ashbourne. Okeover Park and Tissington were next and the descent to the ford was a bit interesting as motor vehicles had driven through the ford and wet the hill and this had turned into ice. Brakes were put on at the last minute to avoid the early bath. Even into the cold wind the climbs of Longcliffe and up to the Miner's Standard warmed us up, but the drops soon chilled us again. A break was taken in Bakewell where we noticed that someone was doing a brisk trade in sledges. Still, the sun was still shining as we continued over to Hathersage and our point of no return at Bamford. A super smooth climb up the Rivelin valley brought us to the Strines road. Dusk was falling and a glorious red sky to the west was impressive. There was a small dusting of snow in places. Another surprise was the number of cars using this road as a cut through toward Huddersfield. Some long and bumpy descents and equally long and bumpy climbs found us in Bolsterstone and then Deepcar. A short busy section to pass under the Stocksbridge bypass found us on the old main road and soon into Wortley village and the digs. Cyclist run and friendly, it makes a good start for the next day.

Our intention now was to miss the old industrial area and go generally east towards flatter countryside. It was a bitter start. A freezing first mile downhill and then a sweating mile up hill. Mainly on lanes and minor roads, we wriggled through Silkstone Common, Darton and quieter roads at Notton. After Ryhill we had to cross a series of roads radiating out of the industrial parts and after Ackworth and Darrington we reached the flatter parts dominated by the huge power stations emitting vast clouds of condensate. The bus park cafe at Selby is recommended. Now with time in hand we chose a circular route around York to use up the afternoon. The normal minor roads to Cawood and Stillingfleet were used before Escrick and Elvington found us on increasingly snowy and slippery roads. The Wolds over to the east were well and truly covered in snow and we decided that in the morning we would have a ride up there and sample some snowy roads. After Stamford Bridge the way became even more slippery and two wheels would have been a bit dodgy, but on three we felt rather smug. We got into York at a busy time but we fiddled our way through and were soon showering and tea drinking.

In the morning our idea to ride up to the snow was changed as it had come down to us. There was about 6", bright sun and a very cold wind. So we set off along the Selby cycle trail, but the going was so stiff with the deep snow that after some time we got off and went along the lanes back to Cawood and then into the wind to Tadcaster for a break. After lunch, the wind had risen a good bit and the first few miles into it produced the "ice cream gobbling" syndrome across your forehead. In York much of the snow was now unpleasantly deep slush. Anyway we had the AGM to look forward to and the dinner afterwards. Only the trike riders got out and again we tried not to appear too smug.

Sunday was bright and sunny again but with an awfully cold wind and more snow on the roads. With the temperature at minus 11C, it was much better when we turned and got the

wind behind us. The party was now five and one was having block trouble which at times meant that we had to stop and bounce it up and down to engage the pawls. The sun was beginning to give way to cloud as we left the cafe in Howden and the flat, open district south of Goole to Crowle and Epworth allowed us to ride in a bunch and chat. Along here two riders had to turn for Doncaster and the train home whilst the others went into the cafe. On emerging it had begun to snow heavily and the troublesome freewheel had finally given up the ghost. So in the blizzard we cable tied the large sprocket to the wheel spokes. This worked well enough and he only had to get to Gainsborough, but had to remember not to freewheel. Our routes divided at Beckingham and the trike riders again delved into the lanes. The falling snow was more like frozen drizzle and the seemingly never ending lanes eventually brought us to our friends place just north of Newark. A late night chatting around the stove was very

pleasant.

More snow and sun greeted us in the morning and again after some social chat we were a bit late leaving. Once across the old A1 we were back on untreated roads, but after Southwell there was less snow about and so we could crack on to Gunthorpe and Radcliffe. Lunch in Radcliffe and we climbed a bit to get back in the snow. The first of two road closed signs was negotiated at bridge work on the A46 and the second similar lot after Cropwell and Kinoulton. The roads were again quite snowy and slippery and lights were put on at Hathern. Now on more local roads we pushed over to Coleorton and the lanes to Measham. The last few miles across to Walton and home held some commuter traffic, but as these were familiar it never seems too bad.

So, a cold few days, good company, unseasonable snow and around 400 miles. We will most likely do it all again next year.

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## **WCTTCA & LTTCA 12 Hour Time Trial – 22 Aug 2010**

By Jim Crew

Four riders from the Mercury rode the West Cheshire and Liverpool TT Association 12 hour on Sun 22 Aug – (ultra) Veteran Jim Hopper on red trike, Mark Gray, Jim Crew and a first timer at the longer distance TTs – Martin Wimpenny.

With riders off from 6-01am onwards, a 12 hour TT is a ride that's completed in daylight – unless you were to get hopelessly lost! A 24hour TT is, for me, so much harder - as the night progresses, the body tends to want to go

to sleep, hitting rock bottom at 2 or 3am for me – before any lift as daylight approaches at about 4-30am in the case of the Mersey Roads. No such problems today. I have strangely heard 12 hours being described as harder than a 24 – ‘on a 12 you have to race it throughout – a 24 can be ridden into for all but the very fastest riders’ – a bit like comparing the sprint of a 400m with an 800m run. I just think whoever said that – Richard Thoday, Matlock CC is just a mentalist. In fact I know he is – anyone who's prepared to endure a racing tandem for 24 hours or attempt LE to JoG with Chris Hoppo sniffing round their backside on the same combo is one sprocket short of a groupset.

This 12 uses a similar course to the Mersey Roads – centred on the A41 Prees Heath roundabout and the Raven Café – which was very conveniently used as the event sign on. But no fry up for the intrepid riders today. Helpers are a different matter – my lot were straight in for beans on toast as soon as my back was turned. Harry had lent me his carbon deep section Corimas (ex one H Schofield) which at least made the Planet X (complete with dented top tube) look presentable.

The course initially heads north, bypassing Whitchurch towards Chester for 2 out and back loops, making up 75 miles before passing the Raven and starting on the southern loop, past Hodnet roundabout to Shawbirch, on the outskirts of Telford then returning to Prees Heath. These loops are around 40 miles each – taking around 2 hours for me. The terrain is by no means flat – rolling would be a reasonable description. Surfaces are the usual mix of good dual carriageway tarmac, all the way down to mud strewn farm roads with rough broken surfaces – thanks Shropshire County Council.

The first 75 miles went well for me – I needed a wee from the off, but managed to last 3.5 hours before taking a foot out of a pedal. I caught my minute man inside 10 miles and then my 2 and 3 minute man and woman (Denise from Congleton who I seem to see everywhere – Audax, penny farthing races... she did a highly respectable 216 mile) Also passed Martin somewhere in the first 20 miles. Can't remember where. Also got overtaken by a Congleton rider quite early – although he only beat me by 13 miles or so – which didn't seem to tally.

100 miles came and went in about 4.5 hours. Feeding was a bit of a problem on the first northern section – Harry had cadged a lift off Edwin – Jim H's helper and they were stationed in a good lay-by to catch me twice on each loop. Drinks bottles were passed up no problem – amusingly with a little girly run from the boys – banana milk shake, plain wa-

ter or weak energy drink for me. But Harry in his wisdom (he is 13 don't forget) decided I needed a bottle with no top on, crammed with energy gels, jelly babies and all sorts of goodies. Great idea, but I couldn't get anything out of it at 25mph whilst on the tribars. It did look good though. But I wasn't stopping for anything this early on.

On the first leg down to Shawbirch, about 90 miles/ 4 hours in I finally got some food – Debbie passed me up a few squares of chocolate. Heaven. It was Dairy Milk too. Thanks Debbie. Another 10 miles up the road my support crew – Caroline, Harry and Isobel – were waiting for me – one tall tin of rice pudding and half a melon later I was on my way, feeling much better. Estimated duration of stop – 1.5 minutes.

By this stage I was struggling to stay low on the aero bars. I'm pretty sure this is kidneys, not back pain, as after the food I was comfortable for another half hour on the tribars. When the pain kicked in again I made a decision to forget the tribars as constantly fidgeting would cause me to lose focus. So I rode with my hands on the base bars – much wider than the tribars, but at least I was low and fairly comfortable. All things being relative of course – ie it wasn't exactly watching the golf while swigging a can of beer.

Six hours in I ditched the aero helmet in favour of an even more aero club cap – worn backwards with the peak down. High fashion. Not. Edwin suggested I ditch the shoe covers – in club colours of course, but I declined in the name of club loyalties – my shoes are a very uncolour co-ordinated white and red. I passed Jim H at around this time – he looked to be suffering a bit.

After two and a quarter Shawbirch circuits (165 miles/ 8 hours) and back at Hodnet roundabout I was pretty disappointed to be 1<sup>st</sup> rider to be sent up towards the finishing loop – based on Quinna Brook. This is a 12.6 mile circuit based on smaller roads and a country lane – twisty turny and with a couple of

draggy hills – not mountains but impossible for me to maintain anything like 20 mph on. The reason to turn riders here is made to keep the field closer together – rather than sending riders to the very southern end of the bigger Shawbirch loop. By now my support shifted up to the Prees roundabout – a fresh bottle every circuit – preferably milkshake as I know milk suits me on long rides and I stopped a couple of times for a handful of melon, including one stop from Edwin somewhere over the far side of the finishing loop.

At least I managed to get into some kind of rhythm on the finishing circuits – but Mark passed me close to the 12 hours – he was going much better than me. About 4 hours into the ride my speedo had packed in – so I had no accurate measure of my distance or the time – but I knew I was close to 230miles. I couldn't find any kick in my legs for the final 20 minutes and when I thought my 12 hours was about up, I checked with a timekeeper. He told me to carry on to the next timekeeper – a couple of miles up the hill. I figured I had to be out of time by then, found a gateway and pretty much collapsed off the bike. I couldn't have pedalled back to the start. Thankfully Edwin was right behind me in Jim's car. He's a veteran of 24 hours – being a previous Mersey Roads winner – so he knew how I felt.

Back at the Prees roundabout – they shovelled me onto the grass – but I couldn't get comfortable – sitting, lying, leaning – it didn't work. A lady from Kidsgrove Wheelers gave me a can of coke – that helped a bit, and eventually, after probably 40 minutes I felt OK enough to drive to the results HQ.

My aim for the day had been 200 miles – I'd only ever ridden one 24 hour before, and never a 12 – so I thought this could be a challenge. Also to spend no more than 5 minutes every hour off the bike – 11 hours at 19 mph average would give me over 200 miles.

I was pretty pleased with 230 miles. Ecstatic to be honest. And I guess my time stationary was 10 or 12 minutes – including 3 wee stops

and that fast food tin of rice pudding. So I really don't think I could have saved much time there. I never actually got off the bike – I think my right foot stayed clipped in the whole 12 hours.

Im going to work on food and hydration for next time (there will be a next time for a 12, but never another 24) including carrying some gels – which is easier said than done in a skinsuit. Also tribar position – I need to raise them a bit to give me a fighting chance of staying on them for closer to the 12 hours. Can anyone remind me why I cut the steerer of my bike? I think it was to save about 2 ounces of weight – but at the expense of being able to raise my bars by flipping the spacers underneath. Doh. Another inch or two would make all the difference.

Thanks to all organisers, my helpers - Caroline, Harry, Isobel, Edwin and to Debbie for that chocolate. And support from our other riders. Even Jim H. In fact especially Jim.

Result		
1 <sup>st</sup>	Neil Skellern	Congleton CC 276.89 miles
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Alfred Hilton	Congleton CC 275.34 miles
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Graham Jones	Edinburgh RC 255.30 miles

Merc riders		
15 <sup>th</sup>	Mark Gray	232.30 miles
16 <sup>th</sup>	Jim Crew	230.23 miles
21 <sup>st</sup>	Martin Wimpenny	221.30 miles
27 <sup>th</sup>	Jim Hopper (on barra)	210.18 miles



Teams (best 3 riders to count)		
1 <sup>st</sup> miles	Congleton CC	795.89
2 <sup>nd</sup> miles	Seamons CC	693.56
3 <sup>rd</sup> miles	DMRC	683.83

Another 3.5 miles each and we'd have been in the prize money. That's 0.29 mph more. Each. For 12 hours. Somebody will tell me how many watts that is. I prefer to think of it in terms of cake.



## Photographic Competition

The club's annual photographic competition was postponed from its normal end of November slot this year as a result of the bad weather and was held instead on the 4th of January.

Largely as a result of the late change of date, the number of entries was a bit down on last time but nevertheless it was a good event.

John Horrocks had kindly agreed to judge the entries on this occasion and had plenty of instructive comments to make as he whittled the entries down to the final winner in each of the two categories and selected one of these for the overall prize.

The best in the 'club activity / cycling' category was Derek Wilkins's picture of Jim Crew in the club hill climb. John felt that this shot most powerfully conveyed the action through the effort on the rider's face and his position on the bike. The picture was well constructed, showing the rider's position on the course and placing him well in the frame.

Winner in the open category and also best overall was a picture of orchids, also by Derek Wilkins.

John commented: "I chose the flowers because I liked the diagonal pattern of the three blooms (an ideal number), their uncluttered appearance and the fact that Derek had got down to their level to strengthen the composition: natural history subjects are very often photographed 'on the level'. The side lighting was good with detail retained throughout but I think a reflector to put a little more light into the right hand side would have helped".

Many thanks to John. Let's all think about the competition when we're out and about with our cameras during the coming year and provide a bumper entry for next time.

The two winning photos are shown on the following pages.





**Left:** Photo Competition overall winner - Orchids, by Derek Wilkins

**Above:** Best in 'Club related / cycling' category - Jim Crew tackling the club hill climb, by Derek Wilkins.

# National Cyclo-X Champs

By Jim Crew

Saturday and Sunday 8th/ 9th January saw Derby's Moorways Stadium play host to the prestigious British National Cyclo Cross Champs, organised by John Holmes, with support from Derby CycloCross - formed from local clubs: Derby Mercury, Heanor Clarion, South Pennine and EmpellaCycloCross.com.

Course set up began Friday am, with a few intrepid Mercers starting out from 8am under the watchful eye of course designer Ben Eedy. Maintenance of the course carries on throughout the weekend, re-taping where riders have crashed/ gone off course, re-routing where the ground is too damaged for good racing, then taking the course down again late on Sunday afternoon. Many hands make light work - and it was good to see good representation throughout the weekend from club members. Rewards of bottles of beer (provided by event sponsor Derby Brewing) for all helpers - see me if you not got yours yet - its cluttering up the hall at home.

After snow on Friday, it was felt the close cropped grass over most of the course would cut up badly, but a stiff wind on both Sat and Sun along with no more rain, meant the course dried out to give heavy, but not too heavy going. The course favoured the good technical riders, rather than the powerhouses, with lots of off camber, tight turns on slippery surfaces and short sharp climbs - a proper modern cross course that was popular with the riders.

Saturday saw 2 veterans races - the over 40s and over 50s with Pete Turner finishing 23rd of 45 in the latter . Also the youth races in under 14 and under 16 categories - all using the same course, rather than a shortened version. Hannah Blount finished 15th of 20 in the under 16 girls. It is always good to get through the first event with no significant incidents - shows the course set up etc was all done well.

Sunday was the big day - junior (u18), under 23, ladies and the main event - the senior men as the last event of the weekend. No riders in Mercury kit in these races - but lots of volunteers to marshal crossing points and help out in the sign on area. Also lots of non cycling spectators - a really good sign, at a venue where you can see 50%+ of the course from any single vantage point - one of the benefits of Moorways being in a bowl.

Performance of the weekend from the club point of view was by Hilary Johnson - taking the Ladies National title in one of the Vets categories - well done Hilary. The conditions were pretty bad under the wheels - but with encouragement from the home crowd, Hilary plugged on - even if she missed her chance of flowers and champagne glory in the BC truck afterwards.

The senior men's race was simply awesome - after seeing others struggling on the same course - they made it look easy. Racing wasn't as close as hoped for - Paul Oldham (Hope Factory Team) took advantage of a crash by nearest challenger Jodie Crowth (Hargroves Cycles) in the water splash, and an under par Ian Field (also Hargroves), to take the win. Still lots to marvel at - Crowth bunny hopping the planks to put distance between himself and MTB Olympian Lian Killen (Giant) to seal 2nd place, the awesome - and hugely popular 42 year old Nick Craig (Scott UK), having won the Vet 40 on Sat, then going on to take 5th place in the seniors.

Racing for the younger riders was provided on the adjacent Osmaston Park - organised by Cycle Derby, but with DMRC helpers. They were pretty busy until 3pm on Sunday - with something over 200 riders - so a good effort there

In summary, lots to watch and learn from for any bike rider - especially those who slug it out in the Notts and Derby league over the winter. And its all back in Derby in October for a round of the National Trophy series - see you there.

## Prize Presentation and Buffet

The annual Prize Presentation and Buffet was held at the Rugby Club on Haslams Lane on Friday 21st January and an excellent evening was enjoyed by all. There was a good turnout which, I'm pleased to say, included nearly all the prizewinners.

Guest of honour on this occasion was Vin Cox who told us of his adventures on his record breaking ride around the world. To get the Guinness Record, Vin had to ride 29,000 km (18,125 miles) getting independent verification of his position at regular intervals all along the way and the route had to include two points at diametrically opposite points on the globe. His route started from Greenwich, London on February 4th and took in France, Tunisia, Libia, Egypt, Jordan, India, Thailand, Malaysia, Sumatra, Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand, America, Portugal, Spain, France again and back to Greenwich on August 1st. There's more info on the web at [www.greatbikeride.com](http://www.greatbikeride.com).

Vin completed the trip in 163 days, 6 hrs, 58 mins, beating the old record of 165 days, riding up to 150 miles in a day and supporting the Geoff Thomas Foundation charity supporting Leukaemia sufferers. A great achievement Vin and a very interesting talk.

As well as all the presentations of the usual cycling prizes - congratulations to all the winners, Jim Crew highlighted the achievement in the last year of Sarah Pashley, not for cycling but for climbing. At 15, Sarah was 1st British Girl in the British Open Youth competition and as a member of the British team came 39th in the World Junior Climbing Championships (2nd British Girl). Sarah also came 2nd in the British Lead Climbing Championships (Youth B cat) and then 2nd again in the Youth A category in the British Youth Open to win her place in the 2011 British team. Sarah obviously has a real talent and we wish her every success.

Sarah's climbing achievements are of particular interest since, though many newer members will not know it, climbing was once (a long time ago) a core activity of the Derby Mercury and some older members may remember Ted Upton and others riding to Black Rock, Wirksworth carrying ropes and climbing boots, doing one or more climbs then riding back to Derby again, all in an evening (they had double summer time then).

Some photos taken at the Prize Presentation are included here. To see all of them, visit the club web site.





Clive Lockwood - Clubman of the Year



Bette Wilkins - Organiser



Hilary Johnson - Ladies BAR



Harry Crew - Junior Road Race Champion



Tom Butcher - Evening TT Series



Rosie Blount - Performance of the Year

## L'Etape 2010

By Neville Whitton

This year's Etape was stage 17 of the Tour de France, from Pau to the summit finish of the Tourmalet. By convention, the Thursday before Paris has become the final battleground for the GC contenders and this year was no exception as those who watched it play out between Schleck and Contador witnessed.

The stage profile was 181km from Pau in the Western Pyrenees with three mountain cols to ascend: the Marie Blanque at 1035m, Col de Soulor at 1474m and then the Tourmalet at 2115m, the highest road pass of the Pyrenees.

The Tour was paying tribute to the first inclusion of the 'haute montagnes' in 1910 when the father of the Tour, Henri Desgranges was persuaded by a journalist, Alphonse Steins, to stump up 3000 francs to improve what was little more than a goat track over the Aubisque. Legend has it that during a recce, the journalist lost his way, stumbling up the Tourmalet and was directed by a shepherd towards Barege on the Western side - he got lost, was hit by an avalanche and was then recovered half dead by anxious locals. He later telegraphed Desgranges to say there was no problem with a passage by cycles, and so it came to be.

Later, during that Tour of 1910 the leader over the Tourmalet, Octave Lapize was to sight the journalist at the top and famously accused him and the organisers of being 'assassins'.

I had long wanted to take part in the Etape and the chance came this year with several UK based travel companies opening a waiting list for entries - La Fuga eventually supplying one of the golden tickets, on an entry only basis for a tidy sum. (The normal entry is via ballot in 'Velo' magazine, published in French with a time limit for response, making it difficult for 'etrangers' to apply.)

A brief medical examination followed in March, with a certificate from my GP as to

fitness, although she was more concerned by my blood pressure than sanity. She wished me well and waived a fee.

Much training under the guise of the Saturday gang, chaingang and local evening TT's followed but it was difficult to find anywhere that might replicate the gradients and duration of climb, and I had to accept it was do or die on the day - as it turned out it was a bit of both.

The week before was a non-cycling spell - not so much tapering as the full on lay-off as I guessed that it would require a reserve of stamina to finish and the best I was hoping for was to reach the finish line before the dreaded broom wagons that had internet posts buzzing.

The bike was serviced by Samways. A new bottom bracket and brake pads were all that was needed other than a good clean, lube and the usual Audax preparations. I had determined that my Specialized triple was dependable and low geared enough for the rigours ahead and so we set off for Dover on the Thursday before the Sunday depart.

A rough sea crossing, then bright hot sunshine at Calais - how quickly the outlook changes in the 26 miles that separates Europe from the rest of the world. We motored down to an overnight stop in Tours. Dinner followed outdoors in the medieval quartier and then on to Pau arriving at 4pm Friday.

The tented village set up by organiser Mondovelo on the racecourse provided 2 hours of bike heaven as well as booking in and collecting the race transponder and final instructions, but it was quickly on to the Hotel Picors in Aucun for dinner and a few beers - well recommended hotel with friendly staff and good facilities near the foot of the Soulor.

Saturday was misty with low cloud. I took a morning trip up the Soulor just to remind the legs what was coming but took it very steadily-many campervans had already bagged the best spots on the climb for the Tour four



days later as it was the scene of both Stage 15 and 17 in part. I paid particular note of the hairpins on the descent as they were fast and cambered.

A final (beer/wine less) dinner and an early night set up for a 4am alarm and departure for Pau Sunday morning. My partner, Heather had never driven abroad by herself and was more nervous than I, as her task was to get back to the hotel before the roads closed and then to navigate to meet me nearer the finish in Campan. I was nervous enough for her and myself but the dawn was dry and clear and it was going to be a hot one from the start.

Dropping off in Pau and joining the 9500 other riders was a thrill in itself - an entire town dominated by cycles and crackling with anticipation with what was to come. We were penned by our bib numbers. Mine was 9771, at the rear but it didn't matter that much due to the slow start - some 30 minutes to cross the start line at 7am.

From the outset there were crowds gathered at every point to cheer the riders on and, given that the roads were closed and policed by

motorcycling gendarmes, progress was rapid up and over the Cote de Blay and onto the foot of the Marie Blaque at Escot. I was able to move through the field a bit but by the time the 11% gradient hit on the narrowing ascent it was too much for some and eventually the field ground to a halt as it was impossible to ride and everyone had no option but to walk for a while - so much for the new cleats.

At the summit, a quick photo and down the superb decent in the trees, again picking off stragglers and noting the appearance of several ambulances where injudicious cornering had taken its toll on some.

If the M-B was short and sharp the Soulor was long and draggy - 13km at an average of 7.1% doesn't tell the tale of how long and hard this climb was. At half way people were sitting by the side of the road and I noted one man crying (a rider told me that his girlfriend looked concerned but smug).

On and over the top and now a long familiar descent, avoiding the stock meandering up the road (three large horses). You may recall from the TV coverage that a flock of sheep



nearly took out the peleton on the way up in stage 17.

Onto the valley bottom once more and into Aucun I could see Heather waiting patiently on the wall of the hotel. It was the greatest morale boost to see a familiar face and we had a quiet moment before it was off to the final feed station at Argeles-Gazost. By now it was 32C and the worst was yet to come. A quick stop then onto the final leg, a valley section, then onto the Gorges de Luz and the start of the ascent of the Tourmalet.

one off his own bike, waiving away any need to swap addresses. I saw several riders being attended by locals with toolboxes at the ready, although there was good mechanical support on the road from Mavic motorcycle riders.

The final section was from Luz-Saint-Saveur, up through Bareges and onto the summit finish, 19km at an average of 7.4% in heat that could fry the rocks - unremitting, hot, long and disturbing. As far as could be seen a crocodile of on-the-edge riders, silent by now, all lost in a sea of pain and all with one objective, to



Once more the crowds that turned out were magnificent, some in fancy dress, some partying with family and friends, music being played and everywhere a readiness to help anyone in need, even if it was just splashing cold water over hot necks. Heather told me later that outside the hotel she watched one rider with a broken wheel exchange his for a householder's, who nipped inside and took

hang on until that summit appeared.

I was one of those riders, helmet hanging on the stem, grateful for anyone willing to pour cold mountain water down my neck but determined to finish.

The kilometres slowly passed by - 10, 8, 6 then looking up it seemed to be impossible for the road to reach the Col - a neckstrain just to

look at it.

And on it went. A support car went past asking riders sitting it out if they wanted a lift. Most said yes. One or two were being treated for heat exhaustion, drips being dispensed by medics.

A Norbert Dentressangle wagon slowly wound its way past me up the narrow track. On the inside of the trailer (carrying abandoned bikes), half a dozen riders clung on for an uplift, taking out at least one rider unaware of their presence - only he minded as it was now survival mode.

I chatted to one or two, more for my own support. They were dead men walking but as the last kilometre petered out - just 500 metres come on, there it was, the final ramp.

11% but it didn't matter. I was out of the saddle and turning that big cog for all I was worth, then over the finish line and a look back to see the many thousands still crawling up that hill.

Stage time for Schleck and Contador was 5 hours 3 minutes. Mine was officially 11 hours 16, the computer logging the ride time as 10h 20m, and it was over.

A final descent to La Mongie to hand over the transponder, then another 20km to Campan to meet Heather, and here a curious thing happened. Standing on a dusty street corner, waiting for a lift home, another rider appeared and underneath his see-through cape was the unmistakable outline of a Mercury jersey. Max had recently joined the club but is still living in London and hadn't met another member apart from Harvey, hence the jersey. We nevertheless greeted each other as long lost friends - c'est la guerre.

Arriving back at the hotel, it was now 9:30 pm and we thought it was too late for dinner, but nevertheless the hotel had laid us a table on the terrace and provided us with a full service, overlooking the darkening mountains of the Val d'Azur, a wonderful end to a memorable day.



