

HELL OF A RIDE



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Photography Joseph Branston



Charlie Allenby gets in deep at the Hell of the Ashdown, Kent's cruel February opener to the sportive season



Left The HOTA has lots of grimace-inducing ascents

Below Just what the entrants felt on finishing...

Bottom Former pro cyclist Brian Smith offers words of encouragement

its elevation profile resembling a concertina doesn't leave me worried. "Sounds great. Count me in," I swiftly reply. Little did I know what I'd let myself in for.

Cold climbing

Arriving at the start on the outskirts of Westerham before the rest of its residents have risen for the day, there's an excitable buzz despite the Arctic chill in the air. Riders have been

steadily congregating in the car park of Westerham Brewery since 7am, with the first setting off an hour later once the course has been checked to make sure it's clear of ice. An orderly queue of entrants has formed (this is the UK, after all), and a steady stream of bike lights flows in the direction of the start line's inflated arch.

A quick safety briefing from event organiser Paul Haley ("the descents are fast, but take it easy as you don't want to be missing your riding come summer") and a wry pep talk from Brian Smith later, and we're off.

Conditioned to put the power down from the start after a hairy experience at the Alé La Merckx Gran Fondo in Italy, where I felt like I was riding through treacle as a swarm of locals surged ahead of me, I find myself as a group of one after less than a minute. Unconcerned by being on my own due to doing most of my riding solo (out of choice, honest), I settle into a steady rhythm.

At 2km, the route turns sharply onto Chart Lane and the first climb of the day – the aforementioned Toys Hill. The ramp kicks up to around 7% early doors and I shift down to the small chainring. Determined to treat



the sportive as the reliability ride it once was, I plan to try and stick to some red lines – keep my heart rate below threshold (around 170bpm), leave my cassette's biggest cog in reserve, and take a leisurely approach to the course's two feed stations. Dancing on the pedals and feeling good, shouts of, "He's attacking!" follow me up the hill from the riders I'm leaving in my wake. Cresting its summit, the asphalt immediately lurches downwards for a rewarding 5km to the village of Four Elms. One down, nine to go.

Rolling roads

According to my top-tube, the next obstacle of note is Priory Road (2.7km at an average of 3.2%) in another 20km. "I can use the next 40 minutes to properly warm up," I think to myself. Kent, though, has other ideas. Winding south along country lanes through the villages of Hever and Markbeeck in the direction of Ashdown, the rolling valleys of the Kent Downs and High Weald offer up their extreme interpretation of 'undulating'.

The smell of a log burner and the yellow blur of daffodils on a verge as I pass through the narrow streets of Cowden distract me from the ups and downs momentarily, and I'm reminded of how early in the year it is to be doing this sort of ride. The temperature is just above freezing, a steady northerly is blowing making it feel much colder, and I'm glad that I threw a thermal gilet and Merino wool neckwarmer on 'just in case'. And then it starts sleeting. Although it's a light shower and over within five minutes, I'm starting to see how the distance, elevation and conditions combine to make HOTA worthy of its demonic name.

Approaching the start of Priory Road with just over an hour gone, I'm slightly under a third of the way through, with a similar amount of the total elevation gain ticked off. A gentle climb in comparison to what went before, it transports me to Ashdown Forest proper.

Helter skelter

Now onto single-width roads with high hedges and a sprinkling of light gravel down the middle, the descents take on a more treacherous feel. I flick my Garmin's screen to the map,

“YOU’VE SIGNED UP FOR AN EVENT WITH HELL IN THE NAME IN FEBRUARY AND THE ONLY FLAT BIT IS THE 30 YARDS UP TO THE FIRST JUNCTION - WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?!”

Scottish former pro cyclist-turned-commentator Brian Smith is standing on the start line at the Hell of the Ashdown sportive, trying to gee up the group of 30 riders I find myself among in the start pen.

Glancing down at the sticker of climbs and their profiles I've attached to my top-tube, I can see he might have a point. The first major ascent of the day – Toys Hill – is just 2.3km in, and its 7.3% average gradient for just shy of 3km will have to be tackled with cold legs. Not for the last time, I wonder what I've signed up for.

Last-minute entry

Less than 24 hours earlier, my weekend plans were looking completely different. I had 80km left of riding to do of the 150km per week target I'd set myself at the start of the year. A gentle loop from my home in north London to the lanes of Essex was on the cards for Sunday.

Sitting down to breakfast on Saturday, my phone lit up with a text from *Cycling Plus* deputy editor John Whitney. "Very short notice but was hoping you'd be up for riding the Hell of the Ashdown sportive in Kent tomorrow? I was supposed to do it but

I'm sick. Please let me know ASAP." I head to the website and am confronted with a photo of Satan and a list of 10 climbs and cols, half of which are classed as 'hors categorie' (a similar difficulty to the ascents of the Alps and Pyrenees) and none below category two.

Originally started by Catford CC as a reliability ride in the 1920s, the Hell of the Ashdown (or HOTA to old hands) transformed into a fully fledged event open to 1,500 entrants. Its USP is that it's the first in the UK sportive season. The Devil's trident was passed to neighbouring club Westerham CC in 2022, but its ethos remains the same – a fun, if hard, day on the bike to test how well you're shaping up ahead of the spring.

After keeping the miles ticking over during the winter on the turbo and outdoors, and with a handful of imperial century sportives and marathons in my locker, my interest is piqued despite the short notice. Sure, the event's got the word 'hell' in its name and packs just shy of 1,800m of elevation gain into 100km, but if I can do it on a cold February morning in Kent, it's a sign I'm making good progress for any backbreaking climbs in sunbaked climes during the summer. Even the route's GPX file and





preferring to see what's around the corner rather than using gravity to try to nudge up my average speed. Hands positioned in the drops and fingers firmly over the brakes on my 2018 Specialized Tarmac SL6, I can't truly trust the wheels of the riders in front of me and take a cautious approach, feathering my way to the base of the valley. Crossing the first of two back-to-back fords, I'm grateful that it's been a relatively dry February as any deeper or faster flowing, and my booties would have their water resistance pushed beyond their limits.

Navigating the switchback that signals the start of Twyford Lane (1.7km at 6.2%), the sides of the road are pockmarked with cyclists nursing punctures like the flotsam on the banks of a meandering river. I cross my fingers that I don't suffer the same fate because my frozen hands would struggle to remove my gloves, let alone prise a tyre off a rim.

Reaching the first feed station at 44km I feel relatively okay. I don't mind my fair share of climbing (I'm one of those masochists who pays to enter hill climbs in the autumn), but the 'flat' sections of Kent and West Sussex are relentless.

Needing a boost of energy, I grab a handful of flapjacks, shovelling one in

my mouth and two in my back pocket. I get a whiff of a sausage roll and decide to follow up my sweet treat with a savoury chaser, its flaky casing and hot filling providing essential warmth and sustenance.

Rookie error

Within 10 minutes, I'm back on the bike and holding on for dear life again as I descend Coleman's Hatch Road. I glimpse the surrounding valleys in a clearing to my left, the peaks resembling the folds of a duvet all the way to the horizon. It's then that I hit 'the Wall'.

Not in the bonking sense, but rather the climb of Kidd's Hill. Just like the first climb of the day, I tackle it with slightly cold legs (post-pit stop and descent). Unlike Toys Hill, I'm also digesting a meaty pastry – rookie error. My red lines quickly go out of the window as its gradient hits 11.8%, and I'm out of the saddle in my lowest gear, heart throbbing in my mouth just to keep moving forwards.

Reaching the open yellow expanse of gorse-filled heathland at its peak, I muster the best smile/grimace I can for the event photographer and am grateful to get my breath back while

Above It's not as flat as it looks, trust us

Below A grand day out with fellow masochists

waiting for traffic to clear at a junction. My top-tube sticker suggests there's nothing of note now until Bayleys Hill, 33km away. Two hours in, I know that the sticker's designer plays fast and loose with the truth.

The next 45 minutes pass by in something of a blur. I fly down the wide, straight descent of Black Hill, cutting through Five Hundred Acre



Wood – inspiration for the setting of Winnie the Pooh's Hundred Acre Wood – but my focus is now on counting down the kilometres and trying to do the mental maths of how much climbing remains. A bitter headwind helps solidify my new Eeyore persona and I don't even stop for the second feed station at Weald Memorial Hall, instead determined to just get to the finish.

Bayley's Hill is attacked as much as it can be with 80km of punishment in the legs, while I throw caution to the wind on the narrow descent from Ide Hill to Sunridge, averaging more than 40kph.

Cliff climbing

Approaching the last 10km, I remember something I'd noticed on the GPX file. Among all the ups and downs, the thing that stood out most was how HOTA was bookended by what looked like two sheer cliffs. The final hill wasn't just any ascent, either. It was Brasted Hill – location of the 1931 UK Hill Climb Championships with 600m of elevation gain at an average gradient of 12.3% (and with peaks over 20%). If I was fresh, it's the sort of climb I'd relish testing myself on. After almost 100km, my aim is simply to not get off and push.

Turning off Pilgrims Way, the climb starts to kick. I'm already in my lowest gear with nowhere to go. Getting out of the saddle provides a momentary burst of speed, but you'd need Hawkeye to notice. A fellow sufferer has taken to zigzagging to flatten the



gradient as much as a vertical wall can be, while another has given up and unclipped. I power on up, knowing that the pain is temporary, and thankfully almost over.

The sense of elation on cresting the summit is short lived; the white-knuckle descent down to Pilgrims Way has me closing my eyes and hoping my brakes can stop me before the junction. Spoiler: they do (just), and I'm able to coast to the finish.

Crossing the line at 3hrs 43mins on my computer, it's hard to comprehend what I've just done.

Above One of the route's 10 not-insubstantial climbs

Sitting down with a pepperoni pizza as other finishers trickle in, there's a quiet murmuring as riders let the difficulty of the route sink in.

A sportive with the same elevation gain per kilometre as the Fred Whitton, the Hell of the Ashdown isn't just an early season warm-up – it's one of the toughest rides around. Happy with my time and overall performance, I know if I can do this on an icy February morning in Kent with one day's notice, then I should be able to handle whatever other rides this season throws at me. [PLUS](#)

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EARLY SEASON FORM FINDERS FOR 2024

Kentish Killer

Date: March 2024

If you can't make HOTA (or are feeling particularly sadistic by doing both back-to-back), the Kentish Killer, held on the following weekend to HOTA and closely associated with it, is another great chance to test your winter training's progress down in the South East. At 111km long and with 1,800m-plus elevation gain across a mixture of climbs and rolling terrain, it's one for the puncheurs.

Gran Fondo Strade Bianche

Date: March 2024

Take on the dusty white roads of one of the WorldTour's most iconic Classics. Starting and finishing in the Tuscan city of Siena, the 130km route features seven sectors of gravel and some incredibly punchy terrain before concluding in Piazza del Campo – scene of the legendary Palio horse race, and Tom Pidcock's win in the 2023 edition of the Strade Bianche. Rather than gravel bikes, road bikes are highly recommended.

The Yorkshire Classic

Date: March 2024

Not all spring sportives have to stretch into three figures to be a tough test. This UKCE event has something for all abilities to test themselves on, with three event lengths from short (43km; 285m elevation) to long (128km; 1,205m elevation). All are looped routes setting off from the outskirts of York that take in some of the Vale of York's amazing scenery (and the odd thigh-burning ascent).