

Words Charlie Allenby

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WORLDS COLLIDE

Charlie Allenby heads up hill and down dale in a mixed-terrain taster of this September's first-ever Struggle Borderlands road and gravel weekender in Yorkshire



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All the gravel sections are tough." Halfway up the first off-road climb of the day, and Struggle Events' guide and co-founder Victoria Mannakee's warnings are ringing in my ears. If the 10% average gradient doesn't get you, the technical terrain will. In fact, I've already been forced to quickly unclip and dab my foot down twice – the first time because rocks the size of grapefruits made the narrow singletrack path impassible; the second due to deep and loose shingle that punished poor line choice with wheel spins on every pedal stroke.

This is gravel, Yorkshire Dales-style. Ascents drag for kilometers at a time – in less than 10km, I'd already climbed 400m – while the 'flat' sections would be considered undulating on my regular training rides in London.

I'm up in the northern limits of God's Own Country to try out a route that features tasters of two brand new Struggle Events. Renowned for their notoriously tricky Struggle Dales and Struggle Moors road sportives, co-founders Matt and Victoria Mannakee have launched the late-summer Borderlands weekender: a two-day celebration of Yorkshire borders riding that features a road event (174km/3,000m+ elevation or 100km/1,640m+ elevation) on day one, and a gravel-focused ride (100km/1,712m+ elevation or 50km/950m+ elevation)

on day two. Participants are invited to take part in one or both events, with camping, pizza and pasta parties, and expo-style stands from sponsors also onsite.

Road cyclists at heart, the Mannakees wanted to offer a gravel event that lived up to the reputation of their other rides. They turned to the Dales Bike Centre's Stuart Price, an advanced mountain bike leader with huge local knowledge, and together they've crafted a course that will push riders to their limits without straying into out-and-out mountain bike territory.

The pair believe that their new Borderlands weekender will test the hardest of cyclists over two days of brutal, if beautiful, riding. If my 65km sampler (and its 1,050m elevation gain) is anything to go by, they aren't wrong. They're keeping the event's routes under wraps for now, to tempt you all to ride it!

Savage start

Arriving at the route's start point at the Dales Bike Centre in Reeth, it's clear that today's ride is going to include some climbing. Situated in the valley between Wensleydale and Swaledale, the only way to avoid elevation would be to hug the banks of the river Swale. But that wouldn't scream 'struggle' would it?

After a swift bike set-up in the car park, flat white from the centre's cafe, and an obligatory team photo,

Above left Good line choice is paramount if you want to make it through the tough gravel sections

Above right Charlie (second left) with the group pre-ride outside the Dales Bike Centre

the group is ready to go. A short stint on the asphalt leads us onto the Swale Way – a 130km path that follows the river of the same name from its source in Swaledale to where it meets the river Ure near Boroughbride.

The gentle nature of the ride is shortlived though, the first pitch of the day arriving shortly after 3km. Veering south off the river's bank, there are three different options to tackle the grassy hill but the only way is up. Feeling confident (read: cocky), I go for the most difficult path – the aforementioned rock-strewn sheep track. Approaching three-quarters of the way up, the boulders have sapped all my momentum, and I grind to a halt. I realise this is going to be more difficult than I'd thought...

The first ramp is a mere appetiser of what follows. Turning off of the drystone wall-lined Swale Hall Lane, we continue our ascent up onto Wensleydale and the peak of Apedale Head. At 6.4km long with an average gradient of 4.2%, this would be a slog on the road; throw in a terrain that literally shifts beneath your tyres, and the difficulty is amped up.

The panoramic views take some of the sting out of the proceedings though. At this elevation, it's possible to see out across the whole of the Dales – a picturesque scene of rolling, luscious hills as far as the eye can see. The sun even breaks through the cloud once the worst

of the climbing is over. In this light, I could be in the depths of Tuscany on the white gravel roads made famous by L'Eroica. The undulating course cuts across the crumpled landscape, dipping out of view at the summit of each hillock before reappearing again further in the distance – a beige scar on the mottled panorama.

A rustle in the heather snaps my attention back towards the ground. A curlew and its chicks make a break for cover, heading deep into the wildflowers. These long-billed ground-nesting birds are known to take refuge in the Dales' protected uplands. Then, passing through a disused mine to reach the climb's summit, I feel like I've been transported to a Martian landscape, the pockmarks of industrialisation juxtaposed against the sheep-cropped grass around it.

What goes up must come down, and the descent is even more technical than the climb we've come up. Flying down a twisting gravel road, I aim my tyres for the hardpacked tracks compressed over decades of use by heavy industry, fearful of getting bogged down and sliding out in the shingle up the middle. My brain tells me to loosen my grip on my handlebars and go with the flow, but my white knuckles suggest that my survival instinct has other ideas. The gravel is replaced by grass, but it's hardly a respite, the still-damp surface causing me to skid if I pull my Scott Addict



Above Wide open views stretch for miles from the gravel tracks across the tops of the hills

Right The occasional industrial site is an eyesore in amongst this beautiful rural landscape



Left The ride even took in the well-preserved medieval Bolton Castle in Wensleydale

Below We enjoyed some smooth downhill on the blacktop as well as bone-shaking gravel ones





Above There's a rewarding combination of ascents and descents with stunning scenery to keep you going

Gravel's disc brakes too hard; the rutted descent sending harsh vibrations through my whole body, setting my teeth chattering.

Welcome respite

Reaching terra firma (aka asphalt), my body is grateful for a quick breather, but where we've come out is surreal. Having spent the best part of 90 minutes going up and over the remote expanse of Wensleydale, I now find myself in the shadows of the 14th-century Bolton Castle that sits on the village green. It's strange to think that this small, unassuming village has been the home of barons, dukes and, for a six-month imprisonment, Mary, Queen of Scots.

Clipping back in, we're set to stick to the road for a while as we make our way west before tackling the beast of Buttertubs Pass. There's still 20km of riding to go before we encounter the 4.6km-long, 5.5% average gradient ascent that featured in both the 2014 Tour de France and 2019 World Championships though. And what a 20km it is.

Cutting through one of Wensleydale's valleys, stunning beauty awaits us around every corner. Loosely tracking the banks of the Ure, the route whizzes us past wildflower meadows that glow golden in the late spring sunshine. The rolling fields are interspersed with chocolate box settlements – Carperby, Woodhall, Newbiggin – while Askrigg's bunting-lined main street brings back memories of watching Yorkshire's Grand Départ on TV. Although there is a false flat most of the way, after a morning of the rough stuff and even more distracting beauty, I feel like I'm floating.

We turn left off of the main drag in the direction of Hawes for a quick pitstop at Stage 1 Cycles' Firebox cafe, getting in some sustenance before battling Buttertubs. It's relatively quiet despite it being the half-term holidays, and in moments I've slurped down a can of Coke with a flapjack chaser.

Hard pass

Refreshed and revitalised, there's no point in delaying the inevitable any more – it's time to embark on an ascent of Buttertubs Pass. After a spring that included stints riding in Italy and Switzerland, the climb's length and gradient shouldn't come as a complete shock to my London-trained legs. But with ramps of 16.8%, it could send my heart rate spiralling.

"That right-hand turn is where the KOM starts," says Victoria. And like a red rag to a bull, I'm off. I might be on a gravel bike (getting my excuses in early), but I have Tadej Pogačar's record in my sights. Even if I know I'm not going to be able to pip the two-time Tour de France winner's 10min, 50sec effort during the 2019 World Champs race, it's fun to see how close you are to the world's best – if your idea of enjoyment is putting yourself through the wringer...

The hill starts gradually, hovering around 2-3%. I find a gear and start to grind out a steady cadence while keeping my eye on my head unit, conscious that I need to keep something in reserve. A short section of woodland offers some respite from the warm sun, its rays breaking through the canopy and dappling the tarmac below. And then it hits.

The gradient suddenly ramps up and I'm forced to quickly shift down the cassette to keep my legs



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spinning. Unzipping my jersey to get any air I can, I'm soon forced out of the saddle, swinging the bike from side to side as I inch myself up. Gulping for breath, I can feel my heart pulsing in the roof of my mouth, but as the summit comes into view, I remind myself that pain and discomfort are temporary.

Rolling over the top, my heart sinks. What I thought was the climb's conclusion was merely hiding its remainder, and there's a still long, painful drag to go before reaching the cattle grid that marks its conclusion. Crossing the staccato finish line at 15:39, I might not have troubled the world's best, but I'm pretty happy with my effort.

Reyt good

Flying down the switchbacks on other side of the pass, I promise myself that I'll definitely be returning to the Dales armed with a road bike. With climbing and descents this good, I can see why the locals are adamant that it's the best place for riding in the UK (or, if they're to be believed, in t' world).

A mix of flat road and riverside paths ferries us quickly eastwards, back to the Swale Way. The rough, technical path that had stopped me in my tracks a few hours before is descended with ease and I only pause to forage some late-season wild garlic to take back home along with the memories.

Back at the Dales Bike Centre, it's smiles all round as we tuck into some hearty baps jam-packed with local produce. And after a day of sampling the Yorkshire borderland's best on and off-road offerings, it feels a like fitting way to end this truly multi-sensory experience. [RUS](#)



LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Getting there

● The Yorkshire Dales are best accessed by car, but it is possible to reach the start point of this ride on public transport. Darlington train station is just 2.5 hours from London and is an hour and two buses away from the Dales Bike Centre.

01 Where to stay

● The Dales Bike Centre (dalesbikecentre.co.uk) has shared bunk rooms (from £46 per night) and a four-person self-catered flat (from £160 per night) on site. The neighbouring Orchard Caravan and Camping park (orchardcaravanpark.com) has tent and campervan pitches (from £21 per night).

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02 Where to eat

● The bike centre's cafe has a varied menu that goes big on local produce from 9am – 5pm, Monday to Sunday. For an evening meal, the Black Bull (theblackbullreeth.co.uk) in Reeth serves pub grub every night of the week.

Tourist information

Struggle Borderlands takes place on 2nd (road), and 3rd (gravel) September 2023, costing from £55. Find out more and book a place at ridethestruggle.com.

Tourist information

yorkshiredales.org.uk



Distance 64.5km Elevation 1,060m

Download the full route
komoot.com/tour/1178190645

Above Stage 1 Cycles' cafe at Hawes provides some welcome sustenance