



Kent and East Sussex,
February 24

Hell of the Ashdown



THE CLUE IS definitely in the name for this bracing early-season test of fitness run on some very tough roads

Richard Hallett

"**T**his," I told Simon firmly as we left the event HQ, "is going to be a measured ride." Noting his unusual readiness to go along with this plan, I slowed still further from the easy pace first adopted; there was, after all, a long way to go so early in the year.

The Hell of the Ashdown is one of the UK cyclo-sportive scene's season openers; run as winter prepares to yield unwillingly to

spring, it comes at a time when many road cyclists lack the miles needed to push hard on a demanding course. It may run for a mere 100km, but the Ashdown Forest's Hell is assuredly hard enough to punish the under-prepared and overconfident alike.

The assumption that I was among the former, having caught this winter's cold-with-chest-infection good and early, saved me from finding later on that I was one of the latter. This was my first attempt at the event, which replaced the promoting Catford Cycling Club's revered early-season reliability ride some five years ago. Avoiding the major roads followed by its predecessor, the sportive route sticks largely to the quiet back lanes that wind through the Kent and Sussex countryside.

Early test

Many of them are notably hilly. The event gave participants an

Ed Collinge

Club: Unattached
Age: 37

This was my first ever sportive and despite a seriously hilly course and the painful cold — not sure I have been cycling in the snow before — it was really great fun and it was amazing how cheerful all the marshals stayed in the arctic conditions! I'll definitely be back for more again next year.



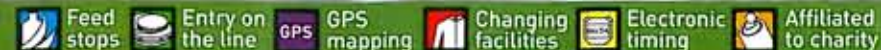
early taster with the ascent of Cudham's Church Hill. The 25 per cent stretch at the top doesn't last long but comes at the end of a climb that forced a couple of riders to dismount; given what was to come, this would have made me abandon on the spot.

At least the icy conditions that have troubled the event were largely absent this year. The few patches of ice that could be seen were enough to instil caution,



1,508
number of
riders

KEY



The Wall: don't look up!

"The first half of the ride felt surprisingly cosy"

but air temperatures just above freezing meant that the roads were largely ice free. Indeed, a steady tailwind meant that the first half of the ride felt surprisingly cosy, with hands and feet warming nicely by

the top of the many short climbs on the way to the first feed stop.

Well stocked with gels, bananas and a tea stand fit for an open time trial, the Ashdown Forest feed station marked the end of the easy stuff. Just a mile down the road was the Wall, one of the ride's great challenges. The reality is not quite as awful as its name and reputation imply; for the most part, it is a steady ascent notable mainly for the direct

David Staton

Club: Serpentine Running Club
Age: 41
4-05-42



That was awful. Awful. I loved it! I will love it more in about half an hour, but I found that very hard. I've never done the event before. It was cold... it was hard. I went out a bit too fast as well, which didn't help. I did 4-05 and that was including a few stops to deal with gloves and other issues, so I was pleased