

WINTER SOLSTICE 200 16/12/2012

Peter Bond's Birthday ride

This is a Peax Audax event run by Mike Wigley. It starts in Bredbury, near Stockport and strikes out across the Cheshire plain to the delightful village of Bruera before heading south, via Whitchurch, to Market Drayton, which is just over halfway. The homeward journey goes almost directly north to Middlewich, then does a right-wheel-forward towards Poynton and the finish.

Unsurprisingly, this event has suffered drastically from icy weather for the past few years, but the forecast looked good (light winds and 5oC with sunny spells) and there was an entry of over 70 riders. Anticipation of a good day out conspired with the facts that it would be my 100th Audax and my birthday to make for a restless night. I had planned to ride the fifteen miles to the start but as wakeful hours ticked by I re-set my alarm and resigned myself to the drive and an under-powered ride. 99 Audaxes and I still get excited! Wish I could say the same about my birthdays - also fast approaching 99.



When I arrived at the start (Mike's parents very kindly donate the use of their garage for formalities and tea and biscuits), many riders had already taken advantage of Mike's flexible start time and there were just a few of us preparing to set off at 9am. The flexibility was intended to ease the pressure on the cafe at 70k, which turned out to be a good idea.

Although I had seen several riders I know, it wasn't long before I was riding on my own, though there was a fair amount of passing and re-passing in the first few kilometres. I very rarely manage to stay with a group because I rely on the route-sheet and I lose the gps riders when I stop to turn the page! I admired the municipal Christmas lights in wealthy Wilmslow. In Rochdale, where corporation cash is tight, they are not turned on until dusk.

Although the outward journey was into a southerly wind, I was making good progress when I was flagged down near Lach Dennis by Chris Smith. I hadn't even known he was on the ride and it was great to see him and Lindsay (the stoker) after their accident on the Venetian Nights ride in October.

Unfortunately, they were warning of a sheet of ice which extended for hundreds of metres down our route. Lindsay was tending to a man who was obviously in some difficulty and there was another rider limping towards us. Chris and Lindsay had decided to abandon and subsequently spent some time looking after casualties and warning following riders, which was very decent of them.

I and several other riders, including Andrew Brennan (who had also helped fallers) and Ian Ryall, decided to use the Northwich bypass and pick up the route again in Davenham. This worked out fine. However, just as we were turning on to the off-road section through Vale Royal River Park, pedestrians warned us of more ice on the rough track which goes through the tunnel under the London - Liverpool railway. The darkness persuaded me and a few others to dismount and we came up to Don Black, also erring on the side of caution. Several people chanced it though, without mishap, and we were all riding again by the time we crossed the greasy bridge across the River Weaver, which at this point is canalised as the Vale Royal Cut. I think Andrew may have ridden the track because he was away in the distance as I stopped to change my route-sheet.

I was not long past Whitegate and approaching Little Budworth when I saw John Radford approaching from the west. He advised that there was a lot of ice ahead. He was abandoning, understandably, as he had lost a whole season because of a fall on ice a couple of years ago.



Forewarned, Ian Ryall and I rode cautiously on, through the lovely woodlands surrounding Oulton Park motor-racing circuit. There was still a beautiful russet background to the scene, so I'm guessing there are beech and oak trees in the wood; I was concentrating too hard on the surface to take real note. Many riders, including some on their club-runs, reported later that this stretch had been very icy but, apart from the occasional crusting in the verges, Ian and I saw nothing. Perhaps a few minutes extra sunlight had made the difference but most of this section is in shade. Very curious!

Before long I was cruising past Beeston Castle which is an astonishing landmark, perched on a great plug of rock jutting out from the plain. It's also remarkably ugly but is at least a real castle, unlike its prettier neighbour Peckforton, which is a Victorian construction, I think.

Pulling in to the first control at Old Ma's Coffee Shop, near Tattenhall, it was obvious that stopping to eat here was going to take longer than I really wanted. There was a queue of cyclists from the counter to the door. After cleaning my misted-up glasses I found Mike, got my proof-of-passage and, after eating something from my saddle-bag (I think it was a sandwich but my specs. had steamed up again, so it might have been an inner-tube) I rolled out onto the route, heading for the turn south at Bruera, which is a lovely little village of a few red-brick houses strung along the road and a fine little church, with, I think, an old yew tree.



As I mooched around in the village, looking for the information control, Julian Dyson came up and suggested I had downloaded the earlier version of the routesheet and so was looking in the wrong place. We rode the next forty minutes or so together and it was a marvel to me to observe Julian's efficiency on the bike. He just seems to spin a lowish gear with a clockwork rhythm. This is a style that has seen him through ultra-long distances all over the world. Although my bike is otherwise well-maintained, I was having trouble with gear

changes and so was frequently turning a bigger gear than I would have preferred, just to avoid changing.

Somewhere on the way to Malpas, Julian and I were caught by another group and somehow I got sucked into their slip-stream. The group included Amy, from Horwich, a Wakefield rider and, I think, one from Pendle, strong riders all.

We made good time towards Malpas but I eventually dropped back to ride on my own. Malpas is well-known to local audaxers for its hilly surroundings; nothing hard but just a bit sapping. Throughout history, it has been a strategically important town, positioned as it is in the borderlands between England and Wales and commanding the countryside around.



Jim, Derek, Pete and David on the way to Middlewich

It's thought that the spread and development of nearby Whitchurch enabled Malpas to remain relatively unaffected by urban expansion. It's certainly an attractive place to ride through, with striking buildings, including its church and

an old market cross. Speaking of monuments, I noticed Pete Hammond taking a break for a snack, as I passed through.

Although I was getting through bananas and cereal bars, it was becoming clear, as I rode through Whitchurch and on to the left turn at Calverhall, that I might have been better to wait at the first control and have a meal. I wasn't particularly intent on a fast ride per se but wanted to get home as early as was reasonable so as to make the most of what remained of my birthday.



However, as I reached Market Drayton, I decided I would make the most of what I was doing, instead. So I broke with my usual practice of getting a coffee at the garage and sitting on the tarmac to eat and opted for a proper sit-down in the cafe in Morrisons. This turned out to be an excellent decision. No sooner had I locked my bike up than Pete Hammond and Derek Heine turned up with Dave Jackson and his trike and Derek's Weaver Valley clubmate Jim. We were served very cheerfully with excellent food and spent a jovial half-hour or so in the warm, where I learned that my accuracy with a mushroom is not what it used to be with a cricket ball. I'm guessing that Julian stopped at the garage and was well ahead of us on the road by the time we emerged.

Outside again, we got lights ready and put on our jackets, as the temperature was dropping noticeably from the balmy 6 or 7°C of earlier. However, the light wind was now behind us and the riding was easy as we headed north, past Audlem towards Middlewich. Peter and I had draped ourselves in strings of LED lights and Derek had his display on his saddle-bag.

In the half-light there was not much to show but, as the darkness closed in, our Christmas progress through the slushy lanes became more and more vivid, until we were positively twinkling as we hove to at the control in Cledford on the outskirts of Middlewich. We had been making yearning remarks about cups of tea almost immediately after leaving Market Drayton; I imagine the tasty food at Morrisons was pretty-well laced with salt. So, perversely, we had been pleased to see the towers of the Middlewich salt-works looming out of the dusk, because Cledford was on the run-in.

The control itself was Mike and Minda Wigley's horse-box and a brisk service of mince-pies, teas and coffees was efficiently delivered and gratefully received. With some reluctance, we peeled ourselves away into the night for the last forty kilometres to Stockport. Between Middlewich and Goostrey it is still pretty rural and it was very atmospheric to see the farmhouses and villages lit up with coloured fairy lights. In one particularly resplendent street, a man who was making adjustments to his garden display suggested we park outside his house to augment it.

Pete Hammond knows this area very well and it was at his instigation that we deviated from the route-sheet to take the cycle-path alongside the newly-opened Alderley Edge by-pass. This gave us a few kilometres of relaxed night-riding and we used more of Pete's local knowledge to negotiate Poynton and the A6 just beyond. By this point we were deep in suburbia again and the Christmas lights were practically an Olympic discipline. Certainly they were there for us all to enjoy as we passed through but it was hard not to feel that for many of the contestants it was a case of saying, "I'm rich, very, very ,rich" and I found it ever-so-slightly depressing.

That said, the lights were a great antidote to the rain which fell for the last hour or so of the ride. After the climb out of Marple, we gathered at the left-turn to Bredbury for the last couple of kilometres. I managed to overshoot the turn into the finish but was called back in time. After an exchange of season's greetings

and thanks for the company, we dropped our cards through the letterbox at Mike's parents' and bade each other farewell until the next time.

My ride hadn't been completely without incident. One of my front lamps fell off – twice. I have it fixed below the bars to make room for the map-holder and I think a cable nudged it out of its socket. I retrieved it myself the first time and Dave Darricott picked it up the second time. I also dropped a bottle which Dave Jackson ran over on the trike. Luckily, there was no consequence, except to the bottle! I just missed when trying to replace it in the cage without checking.

So, I completed my 100th Audax and I think it was probably the most relaxed one I've ever done. Sometimes it's good to ride alone (or it happens anyway) but this was an occasion where riding with a group in the later stages just made it seem so easy. It wasn't for the tow, (I could certainly have finished a lot faster on my own, as I suspect could any of the others in the group), but it was for the sheer pleasure of a ride with friends through a Christmas fantasy landscape.

It's the first time, in four attempts, that I've succeeded in doing the Winter Solstice on the stipulated day. I'm exceptionally grateful to Chris and Lindsay for their selflessness in staying to warn riders of ice, which made it possible for most of us to complete the ride safely. And, of course, thanks to Mike for organising one of the North-West's iconic rides and for the support afforded by Minda, and Mike's parents.

I'm expecting that the next Winter Solstice might see a burgeoning of bikes, bulbs and baubles. (I'm off to write Beowulf II, now!)