

## **A gentle ride in the country.**

### **The 2012 Newnham 60 Mountain bike enduro.**

Have you ever had one of those eureka moments, when something dawns on you and it changes the way you think or do things for the better.

Strangely enough, nor have I, the closest I got to it was in July of 2011 realising that I was fat (yes, I know, some may say it was obvious and how come I'd not noticed before) and that in reality, it wasn't good for me, I have blood pressure issues (some may say I have other stranger issues than this) and was finding that stairs, long walks, rapid movements, were effecting me in ways that they shouldn't. I'm approaching middle age, and the spread was well and truly set in on ohhhhhh so many levels. The only thing I could do with this sudden realisation that I was fat, was to attempt to do something about it.

Apparently cutting my throat so as I couldn't eat wasn't an option, and as I'm not quite at the stage where my weight was causing me to wobble uncontrollably like a weeble (how many of you remember what a weeble was, weeble's wobble but they don't fall down) a gastric band was considered as a bit extreme and not really necessary in this instance, hoorah for that I reckon, even hair bands look stupid on me so imagine how I would look with a gastric band.

Therefore, for those of you who know me as this has been much publicised on my Facebook page, I went on a programme (not Jeremy Kyle) of exercise and a diet. Yes, the last one is a four letter word, but a diet it was.

The be all and end all of this yarn is that as a part of my exercise regime, I got in to mountain biking, enjoying both the benefits of the exercise for my health and weight loss, and the benefits of fresh air at the same time, this new hobby for me also sort of inspired a few others (I'm an inspiration to many you know) to join me on some good rides, and since October we have started looking for challenges to compete on, it's a motorsport thing, with the exception that there are no expensive engines or gearboxes to blow up, and its considerably cheaper to go mountain biking than it is to go rallying. Not much cleaner though.

Last year (and I write this on only 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2012 so it wasn't very long ago) a group of us did the Tour De Moor in support of St Luke's Hospice, and raised approx £1000 in total, a 35k non-competitive ride from Plymouth to Princetown and back across the open moors, we also did an 80 mile weekend ride in North Devon taking us along the Tarka Trail as far as Woolacombe Bay, we then did our first proper mountain bike race taking part in the Soggy Bottom 15k mountain bike race in Newnham Park in November (after which we did indeed all have saggy bottoms, oh, hang on, it was soggy, not saggy) and then just after xmas a group of us from Plymouth Motor Club, organised by Mike (I've got a puma with no cam belt) Perkin did the Camel Trail from Bodmin to Padstow (lovely pasties in Padstow if you're interested) and back, some 25 odd miles. During the Camel Trail ride the next challenge was discussed and as we were only a week away from the Newnham 60k Enduro mountain bike, which was described on their website as a chance to blow the cobwebs off after an xmas break, it seemed sensible to have a crack at this, plus a couple of the lads who had joined us on the Soggy Bottom were already entered on the 60k race.

For me, the Soggy Bottom race at 15k was exceptionally hard, at the time I thought it was the hardest thing I'd ever done without the use of Viagra, so I thought that there was noooooooooooooo way I was going to have a bash at the 60k Enduro, so sensibly myself and Roger Henderson decided that the 20k (actually it was approx. 18k/11 miles) single lap would fit the bill, although on the day Roger ended up entering the 60k just in case. Joining us on the ride were Paul "long distance enduro" White and Lloyd "surf dude" Williams, although Lloyd isn't a motorsport man he's still a thoroughly decent chap, so we won't hold his lack of motorsport against him. Both Lloyd and Paul had gone for the big one at 60k, madness as far as I was concerned. Watch this space to see who was right.

January 2<sup>nd</sup>, the bank holiday just after new year, dawned bright yet chilly, although we had suffered much rain over the previous few days, the organisers had made sure that the route was safe to ride and didn't feature any of the really boggy bits (apparently, lying b@@@@@s), the course that they had laid on was essentially the World mountain biking Championship course used at top level by international and professional riders alike, a scary thought in reality for us mere mortals as you don't just give the top riders a few hills and cones to go around, you need to push them to their limits and give them a challenge. I'm not sure where the websites "blow the cobwebs off" came in to this. The event had attracted just over 200

mountain bikers, ranging from amateurs like me to serious professional riders who do this kind of thing for a living almost.

My weapon of choice is a basic Specialized Hardrock Sport mountain bike purchased locally at about £350, many of the top riders were on machines costing in excess of £5,000 plus, so as you can see, there are different levels dependent upon skill and money in mountain biking. Skill is also, perhaps more so, the key factor in mountain biking, pretty much anyone can drive a rally car at top level given enough money, only the super fit and super talented compete at the top level of mountain biking. And, I have to say, I have the greatest of respect for their fitness levels and commitment on their bikes, truly amazing to watch. You will notice that my bike puts me in the league of poor and unskilled. But keen though, you can't knock keenness.

The start venue situated right in the centre of Newnham Park on the outskirts of Plympton saw all 200 riders set off together, along the level and uphill to a hairpin right, an exciting start but one fraught with problems if, like me, you were starting near the back, as in front of me attacking a very slippery course, was a band of keen riders who were off and gone, and a band of riders like me who were going as well as they can but some were falling, some were slipping, but all were trying to funnel through the first hairpin, and 200 in to one hairpin doesn't go, so a traffic jam occurred as we all moved slowly through the hair pin and on towards the first of the big hills, where once again the traffic built up whilst we were all bunched up in the early stages. The first big hill was going sort of ok for me until the chap in front of me missed a gear and fell off, and I crashed in to him and had to stop, thus my momentum was gone and I was walking again.

Since the rest of the local chaps were faster than me (actually they were already gone by the time I managed the first hill), I was going to amble along at my own pace and ride my own race. For the next mile ish or so I probably walked more than I rode as there was a long stream of riders trying to make their way through various tight and twisty sections, all of which were covered in very slippery mud which caused either the back wheel, the front wheel, or both wheels to go in a direction that was different to where you wanted to go. As you can imagine riding conditions were difficult, with many of the riders saying how they had never ridden in conditions like this, in some areas it was equally as hard trying to stand up as you pushed your bike, in the queue in this particular first section that was on a slight hillside, along which we were feeding through a narrow route strewn with trees, and the ground underneath the muddy surface was firm, so the top layer of mud was like walking

and riding on oil, very entertaining to watch as it was normal for someone to either fall over while pushing, or to fall off while trying to ride for a short section. Eventually our group of 30 ish riders simply walked through the section until a more open part of the route appeared.

After this section we started to spread out a little and generally speaking it now became more about riding your bike than pushing it, as we approached some slightly wider sections, the going wasn't any easier, as the ground beneath you was incredibly muddy, with the mud blocking the tread in my tyres and seemingly making you ride on slick tyres, but with slightly less congestion a steady (for steady read slow) pace was adopted and we rode on towards the most northerly parts of the park in Fernhill woods, just to the east of Boringdon and Cann woods (Cann woods is now officially for softies), and up through the paintball park, thankfully no paint ballers were shooting us today, before dropping steep downhill through Hookworthy Woods where the long steep downhill sections were simply the slipperiest thing I've ridden on (not that I've had a long career you understand) where I had my worst offs, the first where the bike just threw me sideways and off to the left, luckily landing on a pile of well-placed leaf mulch, smelly, but safe and quite dry, before just a few hundred yards further down the slope as I turned slightly to the right to follow the track and avoid another biker who had fallen, the bike went away from me and threw me over the top, landing in one of those running landings flailing my arms and legs generally trying to stand upright kinda landings. Luckily a tree provided me with an anchor to grab to stop myself from going down even further without my bike. Funnily enough the first thing you do when you fall off is to look around and make sure that no one saw you, in my case there were about 20 others close behind me, but they were having their own fight with the conditions to care about me falling off, although the next few through did make sure I was ok as I remounted the bike. By this time, and considering that id been sat in bike traffic and had fallen off more than a few times, I was riding near the back and the group were starting to spread out across the miles by now.

Leaving the forests of Newnham behind for the time being just below Portsworthy Farm, where we joined the tarmac lane so often used on 12 car rallies, the route took us up the long hill towards the crossroads on the Lee Moor clay pits road before cutting right back on to the moors for a 2 mile loop across the soft open moorland, this short section started out as physically sapping as the ground underfoot was very wet, and riding on the boggy grass just took your energy away, hence there were

many who walked this section, I did attempt to ride it but when I was overtaken by a group who were pushing their bikes, I admitted defeat and joined their small group for a gentle walk and a chat as we made our way around the softer bits. One of the lads was a somewhat geeky looking fluffy ginger bearded fellow who would have looked more at home working in a dungeons and dragons shop, but truth be told he was a really nice chap, even though he was ginger. He pushed on quite hard as we got to the end of the soft section, only to find him sprawled in a ditch within the next few hundred yards, he was unharmed other than a very muddy ginger beard, very amusing for us all generally.

This short section finished with a real sting in the tail as the end of the section was very technical, where we had to follow the route through some of the biggest bomb holes and pot holes I've ever seen, with tricky steep sided trackways, rocks (lots of them) large craters, technical corners and general slippery conditions to boot, and if I'm honest I walked the more difficult bits as a man of my talent would have come unstuck had I attacked this area as it was intended. From here we took to the road for a few hundred yards and then cut back in to the eastern side of Newnham at Bude Farm before cutting across a slushy field and in to a long gloopy muddy section taking us along the border of Newnham, and it here that I must have slipped off the bike probably half a dozen times before I gave up again and pushed, by this time I was on my own again having somehow lost the group of fellow walkers on the technical section, and there really was no one to see me fall, so blushes spared on this section.

By now I was only just at the half way point, I was very muddy, although quite dry, the bike was caked in mud to such an extent that the gears required clearing on a regular basis and its fair to say that I was starting to wear out, only 5 miles in and I was knackered, the mud was doing a good job of beating me today. But it didn't win, I pushed on still going as the riders were now spread out it was easier to keep going, even though I was now starting to be lapped by the quicker lads on the 40 and 60k runs.

The route from here basically followed a similar vein, with some excellent downhill sections which you attacked as hard (for me, not very hard) as you dare, it was normal to come across people who had either fallen off, or were repairing their bikes, punctures seemed to be a problem at this stage for many as we followed the route down to the main parking field, taking us as far south as we could go, almost to the entrance gate on the outskirts of Plympton, on a long easy section alongside

the river, before heading back through Elfordleigh woods and running alongside the golf course for a mile or so, followed by a very (very very) long climb up parallel to the road that runs through the park to the highest section in the actual park climbing to some 580 ft in just over a mile, and considering by now that I was already on my limits, this was a killer of a climb taking us to the 8 mile point.

The final flourish was to take the riders through a section across another boggy muddy field, again energy sapping, and on further into the woods on the western side of the park, where we attacked the soggy bottom route in reverse for a while, before heading back down the hill and taking the route alongside the bottom of the valley once again, but on the opposite side, thankfully taking us in to the final couple of miles where the route was initially quite straightforward and truth be told easy, which was a real relief, the sting in the tail was the section just below the finish which took us through a short section of approx 500 yards along a narrow track and up towards the finishing line, for me this final section was a real relief as I knew by then that if it had been much further I would have failed in my challenge to do the 2012 Newnham Enduro, so I was very pleased to see Paul Price (team lightweight and cheerleader) and Roger (could only do one lap not three) Henderson waving me on in the final few yards as I approached the end, the end of a very long 11 miles, an end which felt more like twice that. But the end it was, I had managed a lap of the Newnham Park World Mountain Bike course.

Was I fast, no, did I enjoy it, yes, would I do another lap, no. My time was in the region of 2 hrs 43 minutes, so an average of approx 4 miles per hour, I wasn't completely wrecked, but was certainly feeling the pain at this point, Rogers time was approx. 1 hr 45 minutes, he kicked my ass by nearly an hour. Did I care, also no, as I was simply elated to finish. If I'm honest, I was very very pleased, in fact proud, that I had been able to actually take part and complete this event, something that 6 months ago would have had me in a cold sweat just thinking about it, prior to losing weight and improving my fitness I would have thought that entering something like this was both mad and way beyond my limits. But I had done it. I had achieved something that I couldn't have done before.

As it turns out the faster riders doing the three laps, the elite riders, were doing a single lap in 1 hr 04 minutes at best, and the winner did his three laps in 3 hrs 11 minutes. They are truly awesome athletes for whom I can only have respect for after having ridden the same route that they have done. They were averaging approx 12 miles per hour. Simply outstanding.

At the finish you were awarded a very fine cup of tea and a jam and cream scone to go with it, slightly unusual considering it wasn't really cream tea weather, but hey ho, I downed it gratefully. I waited at the finish for Lloyd and Paul to come through, who completed their two laps calling it a day, the conditions were far worse than any of us could have thought beforehand and two laps for people like us is simply a superhuman effort so well done to Lloyd and Paul.

The question is, what's next on the list of mountain biking greats that will be my next victim. Congratulations to Roger, Lloyd, and Paul, they all whipped me in every way, but we all had a similar sense of achievement at the end, we all had a smile, and we all felt like a rest.

All I need now is a £5000 bike and I'm sure I could win it next year. Wife, where's the cheque book.

Alf Chanter - Bike No 10

Mountain biker extraordinaire.

