

The Mille Cymru – MC1K 2014 - One Ride to Bind them All

“What are you up to this weekend?” a friend asked.

“We’re doing the Mille Cymru”, I replied.

“The Mill....?”

Richard and myself were getting used to explaining what the MC1K entailed. “It’s a 1000 kilometre ride round Wales”, Richard explained, “with 16,000 metres of climbing...in three days”

You could almost hear the whirring cogs as they struggled to figure out the enormity of our adventure. “You’re mad!” he assured us. We nodded in agreement. Since we’d done the LondonEdinburghLondon last year we’d been affectionately referred to as the Mad Badgers by friends who viewed our Audax UK super randonneuring as “a bit too far for me”.

Training had not gone quite as planned. Our Easter Arrow team succumbed to injury and illness before the event. We’d managed a few century rides and a 200k early in the year but had to resort to a DIY 400k and a



Welsh grand depart. Were we fit enough for what would undoubtedly be the toughest event so far in our short AUK careers? It was with some trepidation that we set off from Upton Magna at 11am on a drizzly Friday morning with 93 fellow MC1K’ers. We had just 75 hours to complete the ride.

The Fellowship of the Wheel: Upton Magna to Llanwtryd Wells - 270km / 4250m

Despite our best intentions, “Let’s take it easy at the start, there’s a long way to go”, we got caught up in the general excitement and averaged 27kph for the first 40k. Sense then prevailed and we made more steady progress, and were lucky that the forecast for torrential rain and thunder proved pessimistic. We crossed the Gospel Pass in a deluge but by the time we were cruising down the Wye Valley the sun was out. Despite the day’s major pitstop being hosted by Kingstone Brewery we stuck to lasagne and coke. Darkness encroached as we rode up the Usk valley and we were cocooned by our dynamo lights as we climbed the Mynnydd Eppynt. On the way down we were suddenly confronted by a chap in camouflage gear, barring our way. “You can’t go through just yet”, the army corporal explained, “there’s an ambush about to take place, with lots of pyrotechnics”. Despite the late night chill we didn’t argue...he was cradling a fearsome looking assault rifle. Ten minutes later the sky erupted with flares and rockets and the rat-a-tat-tat of machine gun fire sounded much too close for comfort. Having lost 20 minutes of our precious time schedule we plunged on down the hill. Near disaster struck just after midnight as my rear cassette gear cable snapped. Fortunately no steep hills lay between us and our “overnight” stop just 7k away. We were greeted by cups of tea, wholesome food and a willing bike mechanic. “You get a few hours sleep and it’ll be sorted when you wake up”!

The Two Coasts: Llantwtryd Wells to Llanwtryd Wells – 305km / 4200m

Day two dawned and at 7am, a little later than we'd planned, we were off towards the seaside, behind most of the other riders. Today was to be a tour of the Pembrokeshire coast. No big hills but an abundance of short steep ones. We rode in bright sunshine down narrow lanes through pretty coastal towns and villages. Another major mechanical hit us just before the very steep descent down to Pendine. Richard's front brake and light suddenly parted company from the frame, and the dislodged nut was nowhere to be found. Emergency surgery with zip ties held the bits away from the wheel and he then rode the next 100k hoping that the obliging mechanic at Llanwtryd Wells had a spare nut...assuming, in the



meantime, that he didn't end up in a mangled heap at the bottom of a steep hill. It was my turn for misfortune next as, coasting down a dual carriageway into a rain shower, I waded to slow us down to put on waterproofs. I spotted an imminent layby, but not the small kerb edging it, and suddenly found myself diving towards the deck as the kerb whipped my wheels from under me. I shook myself down and was surprised to see little damage, to me or the bike. We joined a couple of other riders as we time trialled up the A40 before climbing in the dark back to Llanwtryd Wells and welcome food and drink and a couple of hours sleep. Yet again the mechanic was a star and when we departed at 5am we both had two fully functioning brakes...but, after only three hours sleep, only partly functioning brains.

Return of the Dragon: Llantwtryd Wells to Betws y Coed – 300km / 5550m

The initial gentle ride north up a meandering valley did little to prepare us for the steepest hill of the whole ride. We'd heard that the Devil's Staircase was steep but had shrugged it off with a nonchalant "we've ridden Hardknott" arrogance. When finally confronted by the ribbon of tarmac arching above us like a rearing Cobra we admitted our error. One of the riders had told us that his strategy was to walk the steep bits and save his legs. We didn't take much persuading to copy his style on the first of the three "stairs". Other riders bravely rode past us. "Their legs will be trashed at the top" we assured ourselves. (You can be assured that we'll be back there soon to ride the staircase in the manner it deserves...on our lightest bikes). We rode the next two stairs and enjoyed the swoop down to Devil's Bridge, but not the gratuitous descent down a track to the next checkpoint. The hospitality was exceptional but the climb back up to the road was tortuous. The day became a bit of a blur as we cycled up the beautiful Elan Valley in the company of a couple of day riders, rode the steeply undulating lanes of central Wales with brief stops at Co-ops or Spars to refuel on sugary drinks and pastries and relished the oh-so-brief respite from hills as we cruised down the valley and along the coast to Barmouth and Harlech. The hills returned in Snowdonia as we meandered through Beddgelert and Rhyd Ddu. It was after midnight when we reached

Llanberis in the company of an Elliptigo rider (chapeau!). With clear skies the temperature had plummeted. The climb up Pen y Pass warmed us up but soon after starting our descent we passed through the invisible wall of cold air caused by the temperature inversion. It felt like plunging into a deep freeze and, despite the deployment of all available layers, the wind chill was fierce. It seemed a long, long way to our next stop at Betws-y-Coed. By the time we reached the village outskirts our knees were knocking together on our bikes. As we shivered our way into the checkpoint blankets were thrown over us and we wolfed down hot food and tea. Where the sleeping arrangements at Llanwtryd Wells had been meticulously regimented at this, our last stop, it was sleeping chaos. The smaller dimensions of the hall required optimum use of space. Fully clothed bodies on mattresses were randomly crammed into every nook and cranny. As one rider was getting up to depart another collapsed onto the vacated mattress to grab a brief nap. We joined the melee and at 4.40am, after one and a half hours fitful sleep and a quick breakfast of corned beef hash, we ventured out into the dawn half an hour later than planned.

Home to the Shire: Betws y coed to Upton Magna – 140km / 2000m

We were again behind most riders but soon started gaining ground as we worked hard to combat the persistent cold. A sunny day was in prospect as we cycled the narrow lanes over the Cwm Hafodyredwydd and across the moors to Bala. Richard was struggling to eat or drink but there was no prospect of a cafe stop in Bala as time was getting tight. We ghosted through the early morning mist off Lake Bala before starting the steep climb over Bwlch y Groes. By now Richard was away with the fairies and our pace had dropped to a point where the 75 hour deadline was looking tight. "Come on, get some food down you", I chided, "here's some dextrosol". "We need to dig in, come on, it's all in the head". As the sun was behind us I saw the shadow of the clandestine V sign aimed at me from behind my back. Fortunately revival kicked in before the col and our pace picked up again. The road plunged down to the stunning Lake Vyrnwy and, back on schedule, we enjoyed a relatively leisurely cooked breakfast at the final checkpoint. On down the Tanat valley and, as happens on many long rides, our pace quickened as the 20km to go point was reached. The head rules the body and, in time trial mode, we raced the final twisting lanes to the finish back at Upton Magna. What a great feeling as you finish such adventures... we crossed the line comfortably under the time limit. As we devoured a meal the adrenaline wore off and we suddenly realised just how tired we were and felt the excruciating aches and pains which had gone unnoticed only half an hour previously. This was far outweighed by the elation of finishing the legendary MC1K.

What an epic route. It linked together a number of revered long Welsh AUK rides and, it would appear, aimed to do so by the hilliest route possible and to include many of the classic steep climbs in Wales. The 16,000 metres of climbing and the 75 hour deadline introduced an insidious time pressure which allowed little respite.

A big thank you to Mike Hamilton, the organiser and his merry band of helpers for their superb organisation and for looking after us.

As the lager advert opines this is "probably the toughest cycle event in the UK." Both of us have completed numerous running and cycling ultra-endurance events, but this was certainly the toughest physical challenge either of us has ever undertaken.....to date ☺

What's next Richard???

The Mad Badgers: Phil Hodgson & Richard Leonard