

CHASING



YESTERDAY

Like vinyl and mullets, the retro stylings of the season-opening reliability ride continue to endure, with some very modern flourishes. John Whitney takes on Droitwich CC's 2024 event

Words John Whitney

Images Joseph Branston

“**Could the group** going off first move forward to the front please,” bellows Philip Whiteman, events organiser and club stalwart at Droitwich CC and architect of this morning’s reliability ride. With Philip’s instruction, a telling parting occurs, as the riders with rapid deep-section carbon wheels and sleek carbon racers accepted the invitation and those with winter steeds rigged up with mudguards stood their ground, waiting for a group better suited to their form and ambitions today.

Some 70 riders had pitched up at Salwarpe Village Hall, to the southwest of Droitwich in Worcestershire, for the club’s second-ever reliability ride. It was an excellent turnout, too, for a club only five years old and, pleasingly for Philip, a more manageable number than the 170 riders who’d expressed interest on the club’s Facebook page after an advertising push that got a touch out of hand. With a £5 pay-on-the-day entry, Philip didn’t quite know how many would show up. “I am fretting about the ride,” he told me over the phone a week prior. “We’re registered for 140 with British Cycling, so 170 is, frankly, too many. If the weather is appalling, I don’t expect to have that many.”

Opposite The front group drove a ferocious pace at Droitwich CC’s reliability ride

The weather on your average reliability ride is often just that. Traditionally held at the back end of winter on the cusp of racing season, driving rain, billowing winds and icy roads are accepted features of these anachronistic events of the cycling calendar. Treacherously slippery roads beset *Cycling Plus*’ previous report on the subject (issue 313), on the dawn of the 2016 season. In fact, we had to find another ride on the day, an hour’s drive away, as the planned one was cancelled. That ride, however, was hundreds of miles north of Droitwich in Stirling, Scotland, as well as a month earlier than Droitwich’s mid-March date. Today’s weather was set fair, though: damp underfoot from overnight rain but dry overhead, low double-figures temperatures and very little wind. In fact far too pleasant, some would argue, for what can be one of the most bracing, brutal days out on the bike all year.

Plus ça change

Though technological advances in cycling continue apace, the long history and traditions of both the sport and the bicycle itself still shapes its present and future.

Below Fast kit and even faster riders on the start line at Salwarpe Village Hall

Bottom left The ride was a chance for a social after a long winter

Paris-Roubaix, the pro race that began in 1896 in northern France and predates even the Tour de France, may well now be run on cutting edge bikes that still travels over the same cobbled terrain that, in places, is as gnarled now as it was over a century ago. Modern cycling clubs such as Droitwich CC still enthusiastically dip into creations of a distant past to practise their sport today as well. Reliability rides fall into this category, even if few of the reasons for their invention still exist. Dating back to the early 20th century, such rides, or 'trials' as they were then also known, were meant as a test of both rider and bicycle on the verge of the racing season. Back then, it was very much a 50:50 balance. The rider, with few ways to track their form aside from time and feel, could have a testing ride out ahead of more challenging days to come

that season. The bikes of the day, too – far more modest propositions than those we ride today – could have a thorough examination, over grizzly terrain. Having 'ride' in their name, rather than 'race', also served as notice to the authorities – in a time when road racing was less accepted – that the sight of scores of riders in a group was nothing to be concerned about.

Fast-forward to 2024 and the size of groups on the road was still uppermost in Philip's mind, setting us off in groups of 20 at three-minute intervals, the speediest setting off first. Having welcomed my first child at the end of last summer and riding little outside of work assignments, I was happy to head out in the final group. There was little reliable about my capacity to get round a lumpy 75km course at speed in March.

The route would take us southeast of Salwarpe, over the M5 and into the part of Worcestershire (and for a spell Warwickshire) that's always up and down rather than ever long or steep. Even riding in the third and final group, I quickly got the measure of Droitwich's reliability ride as we climbed a long drag out of the village hall to the main road, activating long dormant muscles as I rocked in and out of the saddle.

They've always been pitched somewhere in the space between club ride and race. You're riding largely with clubmates, or friendly faces of neighbouring clubs, on local, familiar terrain, but stripped of the niceties of the club ride such as lunch stops and easy chat. And while you're having a substantial workout, there are no points or prizes on offer; just a few bragging rights.

There are no strict rules as to what constitutes a reliability ride. Of course, we've outlined the idea of what it is and how it developed but, like anything that gets passed down through multiple generations, the idea has been tweaked to suit the prevailing trends of the time. They're often time-limited, follow routes without signage and demand self-sufficiency. Droitwich CC's take on the reliability ride is very much a product of its time: shorter, sharper, more focused and conscious of the time pressures that people are under in their private lives these days. It's also perhaps reflective of what Philip describes as the club's "youthful membership... I'm probably the old fart on the club committee. A lot of cycling club committees are populated by the establishment who are getting on a bit. I'm the oldest

Below The ride in the front group operated more like a race than a weekend club chaingang





HISTORY REPEATING

Three icons of cycling's past still delighting the faithful



AUDAX Also with origins in the late 19th century, audax ('bold' in Latin) fills a gap between racing and touring. With an emphasis on long distances at slowish speeds, the idea began in Italy in 1897 before Tour de France organiser Henri Desgrange produced the first regulations. Ride veterans formed the Audax Club Parisien (ACP) before a fallout with Desgrange in 1920. The ACP created Brevets de Randonneurs, the rules of which allowed lone riding at your own pace, with minimum and maximum speeds, and these rules are still followed today.



SIX-DAY RACING Dating back to Victorian London in 1878, six-day racing in velodromes was conceived as a carnival of excessive endurance riding over six, very long, days. Its popularity soared with the first Six Days of New York in 1891, watched by packed crowds in Madison Square Garden. The faster motor car was a big part in its demise there, but it hung on in Europe and continues to be big business across the continent, particularly in Belgium at race like the Ghent Six (pictured).



PENNY FARTHING The bikes under the riders of the very first Six-day races in London, they quickly became a more niche concern with the invention of the bikes that dominate today. Penny farthing racing has long existed in the shadows, however. In the UK, the Knutsford Great Race pulls in riders from all over the world for its penny farthing race, held every 10 years. 2021 saw the inaugural 3 Days of Sweden penny farthing stage race, mirroring those first Six Day meets in London almost 150 years ago.

here so they do have a young membership," he says with a wry smile.

Riders of yore accustomed to 100-mile reliability rides and transported to Worcestershire in 2024 would likely scoff at the meagre 75km routed today. For modern riders raised on a high-intensity winter diet of cyclocross, track nights and Zwift racing on the turbo, it suits them perfectly though. Marcus Bufton, who went out in the first group and, as club chairman, is part of the club's organising committee, agrees: "Me and others in the club did 'cross for the first time this winter and everyone agrees it's put our fitness on another level this spring. You can also spot the riders who've spent the winter racing on the turbo. For some riders today was their first time on the road this year and they're flying!"

Having trained for many a winter on Zwift – just not the most recent – I can vouch for its abilities to

Above left Blue skies and sun are not typical reliability ride conditions

Top Right It wasn't all about group riding – getting around the course was the key thing

Above right The quiet Worcestershire lanes were a treat to ride on

send you into the new season on a flyer. And crawling up the wretched slope of Shoots Hill at Crowle, legs like jelly, 9km in, I could see just how sharp people are even before the season has started. It's a mirror of what we see in the pro peloton these days, whether you're Mathieu van der Poel, winning all year round on the road and in cyclocross, or Tadej Pogačar, mopping up in the Spring Classics and Grand Tours. Winter is no longer a time for treading water or for any prolonged time off the bike.

While my ride partner Ben and I continued to chip away at the course, averaging an unspectacular but still out-of-our-comfort zone 23km/h, the first group were in imperial form. Quite literally, in fact, averaging 23 miles per hour across the full route. Philip's route was a mix of twisting backroads and larger B-roads, but he made every effort to only take the ride down quiet roads. For those riders up front, it turned into a fiery but friendly workout. Marcus, who would lose contact with the pack when he got caught out by a red light, says it "wasn't organised like a chain-gang is, it was more like a race with people going off the front (and being reeled back in)... It's the first real club test of the year and gets everyone in the mood. I did a race the weekend before and was short of the level needed, so I benefited from today's workout."

Above everything, however, the Droitwich CC reliability ride was a chance for a much-needed social after the drag of winter. "For regular club riders, it's really a chance to catch up and ride as a group again," says Marcus. "It also signals the return of our regular weekly club runs, rather than the infrequent winter rides held when weather allows."

Social Network

It was opportunity, too, for some inter-club fraternising. It pulled in riders from neighbouring clubs, such as Bromsgrove and Tewkesbury, and the invites were reciprocated at their own reliability rides at other points in the late winter. "It's a good mix of different clubs getting involved in each other's RRs," says Marcus.

Personally speaking, 75km had never felt so tough. In the final run-in to Salwarpe, attempts to climb out of the saddle are comprised by my legs feeling like soggy spaghetti. My bike, freshly minted with some new wheels, a tune-up and a drivetrain so clean I could eat my post-ride cake off it, proved far more reliable than the barely-functioning body propelling it. I'm sure others felt the same. For me and them, it'd been both some undiluted type-2 fun – fun recognised only after the event – and a catalyst for bigger, less painful rides further down the road of 2024. [GMB](#)

Above The front group got round the course at a sprightly 23mph

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