



The Rough Stuff Fellowship

Off-road riding can be for touring cyclists as much as adrenaline junkies.

Benjamin Haworth profiles a British institution

Riding off-road has been part of cycling ever since the bicycle was invented. It wasn't until 1955 that the Rough Stuff Fellowship (RSF) was founded. For the first half of the 20th century, when most cyclists only owned sturdy touring-style bikes, an element of off-road cycling was a feature of most clubs' rides. But after WWII and the rise in popularity of more specialised, road-specific racing bikes, many clubs stopped incorporating off-road sections in their rides.

The RSF was founded partly from a fear that off-road cycling was becoming moribund; an article in *The Bicycle* in 1954 was headed 'Are the Rough Ways Losing their Popularity?'. A further inspiration in the RSF's early days was the death of the hugely inspirational off-road advocate and writer WM Robinson (1877-1956). Robinson went by the nickname of Wayfarer. 'To Wayfarer, beyond the road's end there laid a wonderful world, which he urged the cyclist to seek out,' says RSF member Steve Griffiths.

The Rough Stuff Fellowship can be defined by who they aren't as much as who they are. They see themselves as distinct from both touring cyclists and mountain bikers, despite sharing characteristics with both. 'Rough stuff begins where the tarmac ends,' they say. So it's easy to see what makes them different from today's more tarmac-based touring cyclist.

How RSF riders are different from mountain bikers is not so easily defined. The key difference between rough stuffers and mountain bikers is that rough stuffers don't mind getting off their bikes and walking. 'We are not obsessed with riding everything and are quite happy to push the bike,' says RSF General Secretary Peter Kenner. 'Rides are leisurely with time to enjoy the country and walk if we want or have to. Criteria for a good day out is the scenery and company not the technical difficulty.'

As with other club runs, café stops are a key feature of every



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ride. 'The café stops are important part,' says Simeon Orme of the South Lakes Group RSF. 'I do get complaints on cycling forums when there no pictures of cakes in the photo reports.'

A lot of rough stuffers still ride touring bikes, but many now ride mountain bikes. These mountain bikes tend to no-nonsense hardtails rather than expensive full-suspension bikes. Given their unwritten rule of walking tricky sections with the bike, the RSF have no real interest or need for modern mountain biking's technological advances. If you're out there for the scenery rather than to conquer obstacles, there is no advantage in staying on the bike instead than getting off, and riding faster would detract rather than add to the experience.

Many rough stuffers don't wear a helmet during their rides as they don't find themselves riding at anything much beyond a social pace, and they don't

attempt to ride difficult trail sections. Arguably, the rough stuff rider's closest cousin isn't any other type of cyclist but rather the rambler. 'I never go for a walk without my bike,' says RSF member Bob Marrison.

The Rough Stuff Fellowship ride in similar parts of the countryside to mountain bikers, often on similar looking bikes. In their outlook, demeanour and fondness for cafés, they are closer to road touring clubs. Yet they are still most definitely – and defiantly – rough stuffers.

For more about the Rough Stuff Fellowship, see rsf.org.uk or to join contact the New Member Secretary, **01457 852090**.