



WHERE Dorset **START** Blandford Forum

FINISH Blandford Forum **DISTANCE** 32 miles (long) or 20 miles (short version) **WORDS** Clive Andrews

PICTURES Clive Andrews and Jim Robertson



MUD, PIES & OFF-ROAD HIGHS

Sportives don't only take place on tarmac. **Clive Andrews** and **Jim Robertson** rode the muddy version of CTC's Ride to the Pies

What d'you reckon, Jim? Summer shorts or Roubaix three-quarter-lengths? Dark lenses or orangey ones? I stood, baffled, over a gaping holdall I'd deposited in the car park of a Dorset secondary school, containing virtually every item of cycling clothing I own. My riding buddy Jim is used to my religious observance of the mountain biker's pre-ride faff. But at this time of year, and on this particular day, the air was especially thick with indecision.

When we left Sussex two-and-a-half hours ago, a chilly sea mist was rolling in along the coast, feeling quite wintry in the early hours. It was only as we drove west that the sunshine made itself known. As with all springtime rides, there's some uncertainty about the ideal combination of clothing needed. So I took everything.

My winter had been distinctly low mileage, due to a busy job and winter apathy – the usual excuses. A good start to springtime was called for, a decent ride to dust off the cobwebs. The Ride to the Pies sounded perfect: lovely Dorset countryside on the cusp of spring, a route planned by a local off-road expert, and a guarantee of food at the finish.

1) Shorts in February – though the bikes needed their winter tyres

2) Short tarmac sections linked the off-road trails

3) Back at Blandford school

4) Not as flat as it looks!

The Ride to the Pies is one of a growing range of sportives that have become popular across the UK, offering recreational riders a brisk ride with dedicated support and a sporting atmosphere, but without actually racing. Road riders are well catered for, and there are increasingly events for off-road riders too. With Ride to the Pies in its second year of tarmac fun, this time the event became a two parter: off-road on the Saturday and the larger road event on the Sunday.

Blandford School made a great venue for the start of such an event. As we arrived, the start area was being prepared for the next day's skinny-tyred hordes, and walls were bedecked in CTC's banners with the bold 'Great Day for a Ride' slogan. In unexpected sunshine, it was hard not to agree.

We lined up for a route briefing. Participants were in baggies rather than Lycra, looking like casual riders rather than would-be racers. Being in our mid-30s, Jim and I were around the middle of the age range.

FOLLOW THE ARROWS

We rolled out en masse, negotiating junctions amid good-natured drivers before hitting the open road,



following the blue-and-white CTC route arrows.

At the village of Pimperne, the rural A-road gave way to narrow lanes and farm tracks. We climbed beside ploughed fields and along muddy bridleways. The sunshine strengthened. We shed layers.

Though the sun persuaded our shoulders that summer had come early, for the muddy ground beneath our wheels it was still winter. Many trails were heavy going. Our eyes were telling us to make the most of lovely flowing tracks, but our wheels were having trouble keeping up with our enthusiasm.

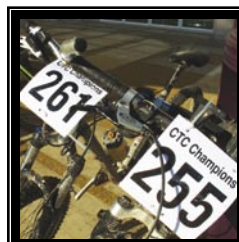
From time to time, a marker arrow would send us off into winding narrower trails – lovely paths through wooded glades. When drier underfoot, I'm sure these trails would be even better, but on this particular day, determined pedalling was required to maintain enough momentum to feel the flow.

RIDE, EAT CAKE, RIDE

At Stubhampton, around 12 miles into the ride, a feed station appeared in a scenic lay-by. A table piled high with cake, bananas and energy bars sat next to a barrel of sports drink. Not having ridden an event of this kind before, this felt like a real bonus.

For me, mid-ride feeds usually fit into one of two types: a tattered mushy banana salvaged from the depths of my backpack; or an hour-long pub lunch, with its associated lack of momentum. Part way into my third slice of tasty cake, still stood astride my bike, I realised why the roadies have fallen so in love with the sportive format.

This was also the point at which the off-road Ride to the Pies split into its two options. Large yellow signs made clear the directions of the long or short routes: 32 miles and 20 miles respectively. Feeling fortified and



DO IT YOURSELF

» You can download a .gpx file of the route from ctcchallengerides.co.uk.

» Click on 2012 events and then Ride to the Pies.

» For more off-road ride ideas in Dorset, get 'Mountain Bike Guide Dorset' (£10, ISBN 978 0 948153 877). It was researched and written by Colin Dennis, who designed the Ride to the Pies off-road route.

» For details, see enroutecycling.com.

“Though the sun persuaded our shoulders that summer had come early, for the muddy ground beneath our wheels it was still winter”

refreshed by the generosity of the guy running the feed station, we set off towards Ashmore, up a trail marked 'Long Route', with several riders ahead of us, and, curiously, ostriches and pigs grazing to our left.

A wide green valley opened up before us as we headed north. It was the kind of terrain typical of rural southern England: visually flat while still managing to sap your energy through a sustained, gradual climb.

We re-entered scenic-yet-muddy woodland and made our way, still climbing, past springtime crocuses and snowdrops. We crested a hill and entered the outskirts of another well-kept farm, as the trail began to twist and turn with more frequency and a narrower profile. Here we had some of the best riding of the day. It was still muddy, but offered enough downhill momentum to bring real smiles.

ROUTING AROUND

Mud became narrow tarmac once more and we reached a junction where things looked very familiar. They were familiar! We'd been here before. We had looped around to meet the same narrow country lane we had climbed before our enjoyable singletrack jolly. Jim and I compared recollections. Relying as we were on direction arrows, it occurred to us that a route map >



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› would have made a good addition to our kit list...

With the sun still beaming down on us, it was hard to worry about such things, so we shrugged, pointed our bikes downhill and took the view that perhaps this was the way the 'long route' made its return to the feed station before rejoining the shorter route to the finish.

As we descended past the ostriches and pigs, we met Colin Dennis, the organiser and route planner of Ride to the Pies, beginning his task of gathering in the route arrows. He was concerned to see us: we were not supposed to have come back this way.

As a local guidebook author, Colin had obviously put much work into creating an enjoyable route. He was puzzled that we had gone wrong, given the signage. Jim and I, however, were still revelling in a great day, so waved goodbye to Colin and scooted off to pick up the route's second section.

HUNTING FOR SIGNS

What had we missed? Well, from what we're told by other riders, the three-mile climb to Wingreen Hill was demanding, but worth it, offering a spectacular viewpoint on such a fabulous day. Some of the faster riders encountered the massed Land Rovers of the Ashmore Hunt, and the sight of a startled fox darting across a field to evade hounds and horses.

It was in this area that Colin found that some important course markers had been removed. But despite our deviation, we didn't feel short-changed as we'd had such a pleasant ride.

Jim and I startled the friendly feed station guy as we approached again from what was now the wrong direction, but his generosity with bananas and cake remained unwavering.

The latter part of the course – that which forms the



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- 5) Like bare skin, snowdrops herald the arrival of spring
- 6) Jim enjoys his promised pie
- 7) Off-road or on-road, sportives are not a race
- 8) Signage was excellent, except where vandals had removed it



BIG DAYS OUT BY MTB

» Alongside sportives, there are enduros and randonnées – all mixing challenging recreational riding with race-style sporting support. The good news is there are a growing number of off-road options to choose from. Booking your place early is highly recommended. See websites for details.

DEVON DIRT

When: 22 April. **What:** A fun 55km route through scenic Devon, with challenging hills and spectacular views. **Entry:** £15. See devondirt.co.uk

GUILDFORD CTC CHALLENGE RIDE & SPORTIVE

When: 26 May. **What:** Another weekend combining dirt and tarmac, with the off-road event on the Saturday. Both explore the best of the Surrey countryside. **Entry:** £17 for CTC members (£27 for non-members). See ctchallengerides.co.uk

TORQ ROUHRIDE

When: 27 May. **What:** A challenging event on the Welsh borders, with around 2,100m of climbing over its 75km. The Roughride is characterised by plenty of open moorland and minimal farmland. **Entry:** £32. See roughride.co.uk

SOUTH DOWNS WAY OFF-ROAD BIKE RIDE

When: 21 July. **What:** Sometimes described as a randonée, this is an appealing event for those seeking a linear challenge. Distances and entry fees vary, with a choice of three lengths. **Entry:** £25-£35. See <http://tinyurl.com/8y97z5z>

› Sold out for 2012, but rides to consider in 2013:

- (March) Wiggle Southern Rough Ride
- (April) Hell of the North Cotswolds
- (May) Dyfi Enduro



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› short route when ridden on its own – was just as good as the earlier trails.

Scenic lanes, dense copses and narrower twisting trails brought us back towards Blandford, passing through picturesque Pimperne, which was familiar from our outward leg.

We arrived back at Blandford School with 27 miles showing on Jim's GPS, five shy of the 32 we'd expected to ride. We were not, however, the first ones home. Several other riders had indeed fallen foul of vandalised arrows, but some, like the lady we found waiting at the finish, had stumbled into higher mileages, rather than our reduced efforts. And she'd returned before us. Chapeau!

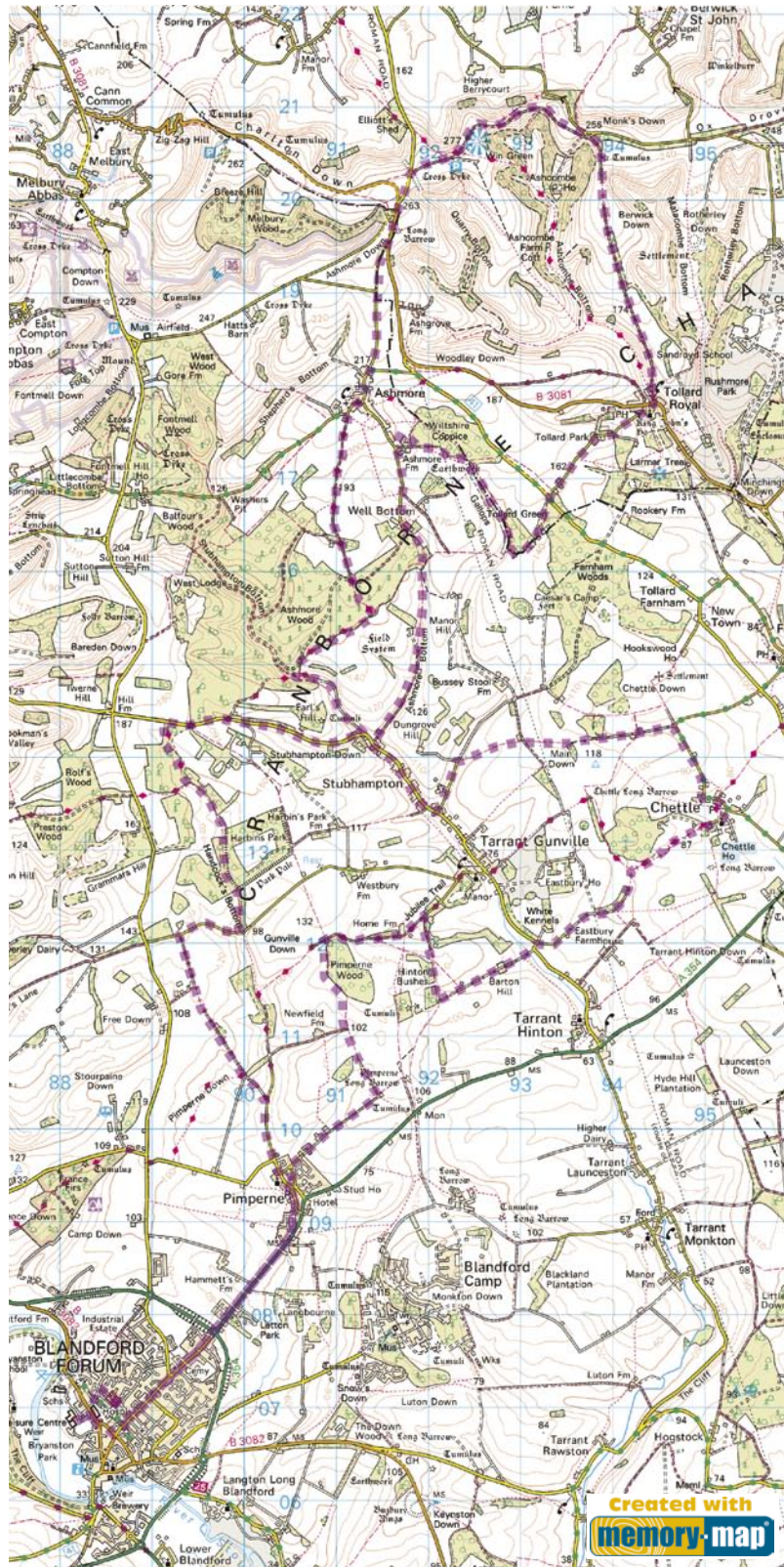
POST-RIDE PIES

So with the 'Ride' out of the way, we swapped bikes for forks and prepared for the second part of the day's endeavour: the 'Pies'.

A savoury reward awaited every rider on their return to Blandford. Jim tucked into a chicken and vegetable treat, while I sampled one of the burgers provided for us veggies.

So after the pies, and a brief detour to stock up with items from Blandford's Hall & Woodhouse brewery shop, we were on our way home, with the winter cobwebs certainly blown away and a refreshed anticipation of what the summer may have in store.

Will I go again next year? Very possibly. And will I do anything differently? I'll shove an OS map in my bag for reassurance, and if the weather's as good as this year, I'll consider taking the road bike too, so I could stay over and make an on/off-road Dorset weekender of it. 🚴



FACT FILE
RIDE TO THE PIES OFF-ROAD SPORTIVE

Length: 32 miles
Time: about four hours
Height gain: 791m
Start/finish: Blandford Forum
Terrain: rolling chalk

downland
When: event was on 25 February. Could be ridden any time, but will be easiest with firm riding conditions.

Getting there: by train, the nearest stations are Holton Heath (11 miles) and Poole (12.5 miles)
More information: ctcchallengerides.co.uk

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