

# EL and back?

*Sandy Vigar*

On Sunday 26 July, 520 intrepid (crazy?) souls set off from Lea Valley, outside London, for Dalkeith near Edinburgh and back. 1400 km to be completed in 116 hours 40 minutes—an overall average of 12 km/h including stops. LEL is Audax UK's flagship event, run every four years. Its popularity has been growing and the 2009 field was twice that of 2005 and capped because of checkpoint constraints.

This year, the time limit was extended by two hours in recognition of the atrocious weather (worse than PBP 2007 but more of that later!) but over 400 finished within the time limit including, I am told, five of the six riders “officially” listed as Australians: Nick Dale, John Evans, Hari Goonatillake, Eamonn McCloskey and Martin Pearson. Very sadly, Barry Stevenson had to pull out at a bit over 900km due to back and leg injuries received when another rider crashed into him after hitting a pothole.

Riders registered on Saturday and systems limitations meant that all riders were channelled through a single registration point, resulting in queues of 4+ hours for some in the yard of the Lea Valley Youth Hostel. Luckily the weather was fine, warm and calm that day. Still, it did give people a chance to meet, swap stories and compare pre-ride nervousness levels. With about half the field being non-UK riders from 25 different countries, there was a terrific international atmosphere, with larger rider

contingents from Italy, Belgium, Germany, France, Sweden, Denmark, Canada and USA and riders coming from as far away as Brazil, Costa Rica, South Africa and Australia!

LEL doesn't require qualifying rides, and for some riders it was their first Audax ride, and for some their first ride over a distance longer than 100–200 km. Interestingly, there is also no bike check or requirement to wear helmets (an issue which raises a

The very dashing Western Australian contingent: Rob Godkin, Nick Dale, Eamonn McCloskey, Hari Goonatillake, Wayne Hickman and Colin Law.



fairly enthusiastic debate on both sides) and while ankle reflectors were issued I did notice that many riders chose not wear them or reflective vests despite the crazy weather. The view appears to be that riders are responsible for their own safety and equipment/gear and are expected to be sufficiently competent and fit to manage themselves over the distance.

Being summer, the sun sets late and rises early and there seemed to be two major ride plans, sleep while it's dark every night (effectively doing 350 km each day) or ride through the first night to get 500–600 km under the belt and then “relax” a bit after that to match the time available with a buffer in hand. There was a third option that saw the first riders back in about 65 hours but that was pretty extreme (although it did miss the worst of the weather). Because many of the afternoon starters chose to ride through the first night, the two starting fields tended to merge quite a bit from Monday on, and this, together with the weather making it unsafe or undesirable for riders to keep going, meant that controls in the north became very crowded with limited places for people to sleep (I saw one chap fast asleep on a window ledge and another in the middle of a hallway to the toilets with people stepping over him).

There was a morning start and an afternoon start on Sunday, with riders leaving in groups 15 minutes apart in each start. The Western Australian contingent looked very dashing in their convict-themed jerseys. Most Australian riders started at 8.30 am or 9 am and enjoyed fair conditions and a tailwind for the first 200–300 km. After that, things deteriorated fast with the worst conditions being in the hilly areas around the Scottish border over Tuesday afternoon/night, Wednesday and some of Thursday. During these stages, riders experienced torrential rain, flooding, hail and gale-force winds, sometimes at the same time. The “secret” control at Traquair with hot porridge, whiskey and warm blankets was very welcome. There were times when the wind was so strong that people had to pedal downhill and walk their bikes (including recumbents) uphill to cope with the crosswinds and headwinds. A number of riders hadn't come prepared for wet weather and alternative cycling fashion included garbage bags, plastic bread bags for hands and feet, and brevet bags for hands. They cycled on unless forced out by physical or mechanical circumstances and generally maintained a high level of



*Martin Pearson dressed for the conditions at Washingborough*

positivity and determination. Fires and stoves were in high demand to warm bodies and dry clothes!



*“...and counting” Directional sign at Middleton Tyas*

I was privileged to be able to help out at registration and at several of the controls along the way, and was able to see first hand the huge effort and heartfelt care offered by the volunteers and organisers of

LEL. They went to extraordinary lengths to assist riders who were very wet, cold, in some cases disoriented, and whose bikes had fallen victim to the extreme conditions. Much of the ride was in very rural areas with little in the way of support facilities and volunteers cannibalised their own bikes, made “creative” repairs (including extensive use of cable ties in some instances) and drove large distances to get needed spares to get riders back on the road. They also took people badly affected by the cold into their own homes and offered an assortment of dry clothing, towels and blankets at controls when they were overwhelmed by the numbers. Local people along the route also helped out unasked with riders being offered warm drinks, places to stay “out of the weather” and in Martin’s case free milk from the local milko out on his rounds who said the conditions rivalled anything he’d seen in the Royal Marines and he was surprised to see people out in it by choice!

The weather fined up on Friday when it was all over! I’m sure you’ll hear more of the ride and ride reports from the riders themselves, but I certainly take my hat off to all the riders, organisers and volunteers at LEL2009—an amazing effort!