

DETAILS

- **WHERE:** Hertfordshire, Essex and Suffolk
- **START/FINISH:** Stevenage
- **DISTANCE:** 62-210km
- **PICTURES:** Tony Upfold





Great rides

SUMMERTIME BEGINS

Cycling UK's new Challenge Ride Series kicked off in Stevenage in the late March sunshine.

Tony Upfold was there

It was England's green and pleasant land at its unbeatable best. Cambridge sparkled in the distance as we rode along a ridge in the north Hertfordshire countryside, the sun burning with all of its March might in a cloudless sky. A pair of red kites soared and swooped in search of prey above the field to our left. Beneath them, and definitely not on the menu, was an overcooked, lycra-wrapped, trussed-up turkey on two wheels who envied their freedom! Yes, it really was that hot: **Cycling UK Stevenage's Start of Summertime ride lived up to its name.**

For 24 years, the Stevenage group has staged a series of rides on the Sunday morning when the clocks go forward. And this year there was an added attraction, as it was the first event in Cycling UK's new Challenge Ride Series – which features 16 handpicked rides throughout the country. The series ends back in Stevenage with 'Emitremmus' (summertime reversed) in October.

WARMING TO THE TASK

Winter cycling gear seemed a must on 26 March when I drowsily left home at 6.30am, bound for Hertfordshire, having lost an hour's sleep (along with 65 million other people,

admittedly). At dawn on that Mother's Day morning, it was two degrees; wearing shorts would have risked a sharp frost forming on the knees. By midday, and 10 miles into my ride, my three top layers and full-length leggings were surplus to requirements as the sun shone and the temperature climbed to 14 degrees. Bearing in mind there was snow around for this event in 2013, it seems churlish to complain that this really was the start of summertime!

Cycling UK Stevenage provided a choice of four rides for the 200 cyclists who descended on Fairlands Valley Park to make the most of the weather. Twenty-four hardy riders set off at 8.15am for the 210km (130 mile) trip to Lavenham in Suffolk and back. At 9am, I had the privilege of being asked by event organisers Jill and Jim Borcherds to start the 100-mile (160km) ride, which crossed over the border into Essex.

The Deputy Mayor of Stevenage, Councillor Pam Stuart, was on hand to start the most popular ride, with 87 people tackling the 115km (71.5 mile) outing to Thaxted and back. Last but not least, 56 of us – myself included – set off on the 62km ride (38.5 miles), on a loop that took in Walkern, Reed, Barkway, Buntingford and Benington.

After climbing away from the lake at

THE SUN BURNED WITH ALL OF ITS MARCH MIGHT IN A CLOUDLESS SKY, WHERE A PAIR OF RED KITES SOARED AND SWOOPED

Do it yourself

CHALLENGE YOURSELF

See page 18 for more details about the Challenge Ride Series. Remaining events are:

SUN 4 JUNE: Bamburgh Summer 100 (100 miles, Tyneside and Northumberland CTC)

SUN 11 JUNE: Cumnock Canter 100km/Glespin Gallop 100-mile (Cycle Ayrshire)

SUN 25 JUNE: The Des Radford 100 miler (Swansea CTC)

SUN 9 JULY: Diss Dawdle/Diss Dander (100km/200km, Diss CTC)

SUN 16 JULY: Devon Delight (100km, Devon CTC)

SUN 20 AUG: Tour of the Hills (115km, West Surrey CTC)

SUN 27 AUG: Wild Wales Challenge (85 miles, Merseyside CTC)

SAT 2 SEP: Momma's Mountain Views (130km, Chester & North Wales/Caer a Gogledd Cymru)

SAT 16 SEP: Discovering Shropshire (Blue Remembered Hills). (120km, Shropshire)

SUN 8 OCT: Gridiron 100 (100km, Wessex Cycling)

SUN 29 OCT: Emitremmus Desrever (Choice of distances, Cycling UK Stevenage)

For more information and links to the events, visit bit.ly/cyclinguk-challengerides2017



Above: Start of the 62km ride

Below: Jill & Jim Borcherds with Deputy Mayor Pam Stuart & Tony Turner

➤ Fairlands Valley Park, we were soon taking advantage of a cycleway to access the rolling Hertfordshire countryside. Stevenage was designated the UK's first New Town in November 1946, providing housing for 60,000 people and, eventually, a substantial cycle network which now extends over 45km. Even though it is in poor condition in places, such Space for Cycling is still the envy of many UK towns 71 years later.

My main source of envy, on the other hand, was seeing all those fellow pedallers who'd had the good sense to wear shorts as the thermometer climbed. The sunshine brought the countryside to colourful life. Pink cherry blossom, brilliant yellow daffodils and blue seas of grape hyacinth mixed with the vivid greens of new grass and young hawthorn leaves. Surrounded by such beauty,



it was hard to believe this event takes in the villages of Ugley and Nasty!

QUIET LANES AND CONTROL POINTS

I spent the early part of the ride alongside Alan Timberlake, who was on his recumbent. Alan lost over nine stone in weight in 18 months thanks to a combination of cycling and joining Slimming World. As we crossed the Icknield Way, cruised downhill and chatted about his story, we managed to miss a turning – adding another mile to our journey and an unscheduled extra climb up to the peaceful village of Sandon.

A welcome cuppa soon beckoned as we stopped to get brevet cards signed at the first control point: the Silver Ball café, a friendly establishment on the A10 at Reed for bikers with and without motors.

By now I had joined up with two more riders (pictured on page 48) who know just how fabulous cycling can be. They were Rona Wightman, Secretary of the St Albans Cycle Campaign and a Five Miles to Fabulous ride

TOURIST COMPETITION
Some Challenge Rides are part of cyclinguk.org/ctc-tourist-competition

leader for CTC South Herts, and Debbie Thorne, now an ardent cyclist thanks to Rona's Five Miles to Fabulous group.

There was an added bonus to sharing the next 20 miles in such delightful company. While Cycling UK Stevenage provided superb directions for each ride, Rona had the route imprinted on her memory, which meant more time soaking up the scenery and less time checking where to turn next! Rona, a Cycling UK member since 1979, doesn't own a car and rides everywhere – on this occasion using her 1978, 10-speed Viscount Aerospace Sport.

We lunched at Hare Street, our second control point, and enjoyed a blissful glide downhill from Great Munden to Dane End before providing the required answer at the Information Control. Next stop, Stevenage.

CHALLENGE COMPLETED

Among those celebrating back at Fairlands Valley Park was Cycling UK Stevenage member Helen Harris, who only bought a bike last October and was rightly proud

SURROUNDED BY SUCH BEAUTY, IT WAS HARD TO BELIEVE THIS EVENT TAKES IN THE VILLAGES OF UGLEY AND NASTY ➤



Above: Setting off from Fairlands Valley Park

Below: Tony Upfold chats to Debbie Thorne

to have completed her first proper long-distance ride. She said: 'I feel a real sense of achievement. I'm amazed at myself, to be honest. Anything that gets people out on bikes is great.'

Accompanying Helen had been Stevenage's Social Secretary, Jackie Cooper, who has led more rides than anyone else in the group over the last three years but had a rare foray as sweeper this particular day. Jackie said: 'Helen did really well. I'm just amazed at the number of people from all over who take part in these rides. A lot of effort goes into organising the event and it's a pleasure to see people coming along and embracing what we do.'

Many others on the shorter rides were also pleased with their achievements. They included 14-year-old Marriotts School student Sophia Morris, who was accompanied by Jenny Smith. Stevenage's Nicola and Jason Morris, meanwhile, both completed their first



100-mile rides. Also involved in the 100-miler were members of the Stevenage Twin Towns 1000 team, training for their fundraiser to Ingleheim in Germany and Autun in France from 9-18 June. Cycling UK members Graham Hoare, Peter Woolmer and Steve Watkins are among those who will cover over 1,000km to Stevenage's twin towns in aid of their local Lister Hospital, where Graham was treated for prostate cancer last year.

Organising Stevenage's 24th Start of Summertime event were Jill and Jim Borchers who, in Jill's words, have a 'Cycling UK marriage', having met at Cambridge CTC in 1998. Jill said: 'It was fantastic to have our event launching the new Cycling UK Challenge Ride Series. It's a brilliant idea and Jim and I are hoping to ride 10 of them.'

Tina Walker, Chair of Cycling UK Stevenage, said: 'The Challenge Ride Series is an incentive to go out on new rides around the country and see different places, and I'm happy it has started and will finish in Stevenage. The day was a great success thanks to the superb organisation of Jill and Jim, plus the 20 volunteer helpers on control points or sweeping.'

Jim Brown, Cycling UK Stevenage Secretary and a member of Cycling UK's Board of Trustees, said: 'The Challenge Ride Series is an initiative that perfectly sums up the essence of Cycling UK and our aim to encourage people across the country to get out cycling. Over 3,000 people are expected to take part in total, giving them the chance to cycle a range of distances in some of our amazing countryside and perhaps discover an area they haven't visited before.' 

Fact file

START OF SUMMERTIME

WHEN: Start of Summertime was on Sunday 26 March, 2017. Next year it will take place on Sunday 25 March, when the clocks go forward.

WHERE: I rode a loop starting and finishing at Fairlands Valley Park, Stevenage. The route headed north-east to Walkern, Rushden, Sandon and Reed, returning via Hare Street, Buntingford, Dane End, Benington and Aston.

DISTANCE: 62km (38.5miles). Three other routes were available: 115km (71.5m), 160km (100m) and 210km (130m).

CONDITIONS: Sun, blue sky, light breeze – a magnificent March day. The route used Stevenage's cycleways and mainly quiet country roads, generally in good condition bar the occasional pothole.

BIKE USED: My 10-year-old Specialized Tricross.

MAPS/GUIDES: Excellent route directions provided by Cycling UK Stevenage's organisers. Also had OS Landranger map 166, covering two-thirds of route, plus the local knowledge of my new cycling buddy Rona Wightman!

I'M GLAD I HAD... Sunglasses, camera, two water bottles.

NEXT TIME I WOULD... Believe the weather forecast, not overdress, and take sunscreen!

FURTHER INFO: stevenagectc.org.uk and bit.ly/cyclinguk-challengerides2017

