



Hell of the Ashdown

This early-season sportive through Surrey and Kent demands winter base miles in the bank and low gears on your bike. **Stephanie Rukin** rode it

The Hell of the Ashdown is a ride that quietly earns its name. At just over 93km it doesn't appear intimidating, yet the amount of climbing (1,674 metres) packed into that distance tells a different story. There are no mountain passes here, just a steady succession of short, sharp Weald gradients. Moreover, the annual sportive (helloftheashdown.cc) that I rode is in February. Spring or summer would be a less gruelling day out if you're riding the route independently.

Starting from Westerham Brewery, the loop runs anticlockwise into the rolling folds of the High Weald. The opening kilometres offer little time to warm up before Toys Hill sets the tone: a 2.9km climb averaging 6%, with some steeper sections. From there, narrow lanes thread south through hedge-lined countryside and wooded hollows, rising and dipping with enough frequency to prevent any prolonged stretch of ease. Just as the rhythm settles, it changes.

The route passes near Hever Castle, childhood home of Anne Boleyn, its Tudor brickwork providing a brief visual pause before the climbing resumes. Priory Road and Twyford Lane sharpen the legs, each ramp arriving without ceremony. Then comes Kidd's Hill – known locally



Stephanie on the climb of Toys Hill, near the start

as The Wall – a climb that builds in stages and resists any attempt at comfortable pacing. It isn't especially long, but it commands attention.

As the loop begins to arc back north-west, Bayley's Hill offers another stern test. By now, effort management earlier in the ride starts to feel significant. Beyond, the landscape opens towards the higher ground near Ashdown Forest. A short, optional detour into Hartfield adds extra elevation but rewards with sweeping views towards the South Downs, the pale chalk ridge standing clear on bright days. A pause at

the village's Winnie-the-Pooh café provides welcome encouragement before the final miles back towards Westerham.

The sportive route is adjusted slightly from year to year to reflect road surface conditions, so exact figures can vary. The character, however, remains constant: quiet rural lanes, persistent gradients and scenery that more than justifies the effort. As you finish back at the brewery, there is a real sense of achievement – not from conquering one monumental climb but from having met them all. ●