

Purest Green

A Tour of The Yorkshire Dales

Words and Photos by Ben Haworth

I will not cease from Mental Fight
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant Land.

And Did Those Feet In Ancient Time
by William Blake.

Rocking down into Wensleydale



A classic grind out of Swaledale



At the end of last year I went on a bike ride with a bunch of old men (see issue 32's 'Fish Out Of Water' article with the Rough Stuff Fellowship). There was something about why they rode that must have struck me quite profoundly.

I had been spending my riding time searching about the next show-off challenge, the next hit of adrenaline - always far too brief and with ever diminishing returns as is typically the case with junkies.

The gents from the Rough Stuff Fellowship weren't blinkered thrill seekers. Despite their riding being almost devoid of clichéd Pepsi Max-style excitement I got the distinct impression that they spent more of their time in the saddle smiling than I did. The scenery 'n' socialising side of riding bicycles was what I had been missing.

The Yorkshire Dales was the obvious place to go. Big hills, bigger skies, friendly folk, tracks built for side-by-side riding, real ale in real pubs. Perfect.

“Patriotism is your conviction that this country is superior to all others because you were born in it”

As luck would have it, long-time Singletrack supporter Stu Price of Dales Mountain Biking had always had plans to offer a multi-day tour of the Dales. So this was the perfect chance to give it a go.

Day One: Reeth to Askrigg

Somewhat miraculously we arrived at Stu's house a bit early. With bleary eyes and a full English sitting uneasily in our bellies (the first of many ahead) we changed into our riding gear and assembled our bikes. My long time riding companion and partner on this adventure, Jim, was clearly intent on keeping an old-skool vibe going; he pulled out his trusty old 1996 Kona. And all our good intentions at arriving early quickly counted for nought as Stu laboured and tutted over Jim's shonky bike for a good 20 minutes.

The Dales has always been a special place for me. It was the scene of my first mountain bike rides. It doesn't hurt that, when the conditions are right, it is the most beautiful place on Earth. Even on a bad day I still think the Dales epitomises all that's good about England.

Whenever the word 'England' is used positively it can create a frisson of tension. Thanks to the likes of the BNP or (worse still) The Daily Mail the only people you hear 'bigging up' England are hateful morons.

As George Bernard Shaw once wisely said "Patriotism is your conviction that this country is superior to all others because you were born in it". But just because it may not be the best country in the world (nowhere is) that doesn't stop it being pretty darned good really.

Eventually Jim's heap of junk - sorry, classic steel hardtail - was roadworthy and it was time to get going. The conditions were perfect: mild with a light scudding of fluffy clouds across the big sky. It had been atypically dry for a couple of weeks beforehand so Stu decided to call upon his extensive knowledge of 'his' valley and diverted the route slightly to take in a tufty up 'n' over section that is usually too sodden to bother with.

Initially I was a bit bemused as to why we were being dragged up this faintest of sheep tracks but I had ridden with Stu before and I suspected it would all become clear eventually. And so it did. After a brief rest and chat at the top Stu headed off between a couple of anonymous heathery



Making the most of the blessed tail wind

tufts and like the Pied Piper's dream clients we all duly followed behind. What followed was an instant reminder of an aspect of Dales riding that I'd forgotten I love so much: pumping and freewheeling along a just-downhill-enough rollercoaster trail with that special kind of sheep-manicured grass coating firmly sprung earth. As fun as riding a golf course but without the risk of taking a Titleist to the temple.

Swaledale is probably the Dale with the most Bastard Climbs in it. The problem/beauty about them is that they all manage to stay just about on the side of rideable; loose enough that you can't lose concentration and long enough to make your calves and lungs burn but without getting quite steep enough to warrant getting off and pushing. Exquisite torture. I love 'em.

At the top of the climb was a shooting barn. The inside was kitted out better than most people I know's houses: a huge dining table, lovely antique chairs, rugs and lots of stuffed dead things on the walls - the piece

de resistance being a full sized sheep situated on top of the sideboard. Why shooting folk would want a stuffed adult sheep handy is probably best not contemplated.

In the afternoon we eventually left Swaledale and dropped into Wensleydale down a fun rocky chute of a trail that was garnished with yellow gorse and pink tree blossom - like riding down a funky Battenberg cake. The cake theme continued with a lunch stop at Castle Bolton. Cups of tea, some cakes and doilies in the shade of some ancient historic building - how very English.

As a result of various open cast mining, Henry VIII's boat building fetish and sheep farming, the Dales doesn't have very many trees. This absence of shelter combined with the whaleback profile means that the wind can have a major effect on your day. The final leg of the day's route passing underneath Ivy Scar into Askrigg was made a whole lot easier by a particularly benevolent tailwind.



Drystone walling in Ribbleside



Nice driveway



Going for the green

Day Two: Askrigg to Austwick

There are very few climbs more horrendous looking than the old Roman Road out of Bainbridge. Approximately 6km of straight gradualness fading out ahead of you into the morning haze. Despite it being a car-width track it wasn't something I felt like riding side by side chatting away with someone. Partly due to hangover grumps and partly due to it always being much harder riding something so steady at someone else's pace.

So it was time to tilt my helmet peak down and plod away lost in my own thoughts. Getting lost in my own thoughts was something else that I'd not done on a ride for a while either.

The Yorkshire Dales are as green as Spinal Tap's 'Smell the Glove' album is black – none more so. Green strikes the eye in such a way as to require little adjustment whatever and is, therefore, restful. Being in the centre of the spectrum, it is the colour of balance – a more important concept than many people realise. It has been argued that on a primitive level when the world about us contains plenty of green, this indicates the presence of water, and little danger of famine. We are reassured by green.

Green is also said to be good for you heart. Green relaxes our muscles and helps us breathe deeper and slower. There might be something in this theory actually; I found myself reaching the top of the Roman Road surprisingly quickly and feeling quite fresh. It wasn't until I stopped that I realised that I had been the beneficiary of another blessed tailwind.



Chilling at Clapham Bottoms

The group was brought out of its collective solitude (if there can be such a thing) by a dark shape-shifting creature dashing across the track ahead. What the Hell was that? Everyone had seen it but each of us had a different theory as to how big it was and what animal it was (my suggestion of a half-fox half-badger creature called a 'Fadger' was roundly dismissed).

It was just as well we were on a heightened state of alert because the subsequent descent required our full attention. Fast, big ring-spinning along 'Cresta run' ruts that contained hidden surprises like microwave-sized rocks and fridge-sized holes. It was made all the more difficult to maintain concentration with the views of Ribblesdale Viaduct and Whernside vying for attention ahead.

Lunch for the day was at Horton-in-Ribblesdale. It was while we were sitting outside on the benches enjoying our ice creams that we noticed the first signs of the classic English cyclist sultan beginning to appear: lilywhite hands and upper arms with raspberry pink forearms and neck. Reminiscent of that other icon of Englishness – Bagpuss.

Post-lunch the route passed over of the unique and essential Dales spots – the exposed limestone pavement of Clapham Bottoms. A pale grey expanse amidst a mass of green that is deeply beguiling and strangely beautiful. Even though no one appeared to be in need of a rest, we all dismounted our bikes for a while to stretch out on the meadow and soak up the oddity.

The last section of the day's route took us down to Austwick along Long Lane. Time to chill out over some tea and cake (and beer).

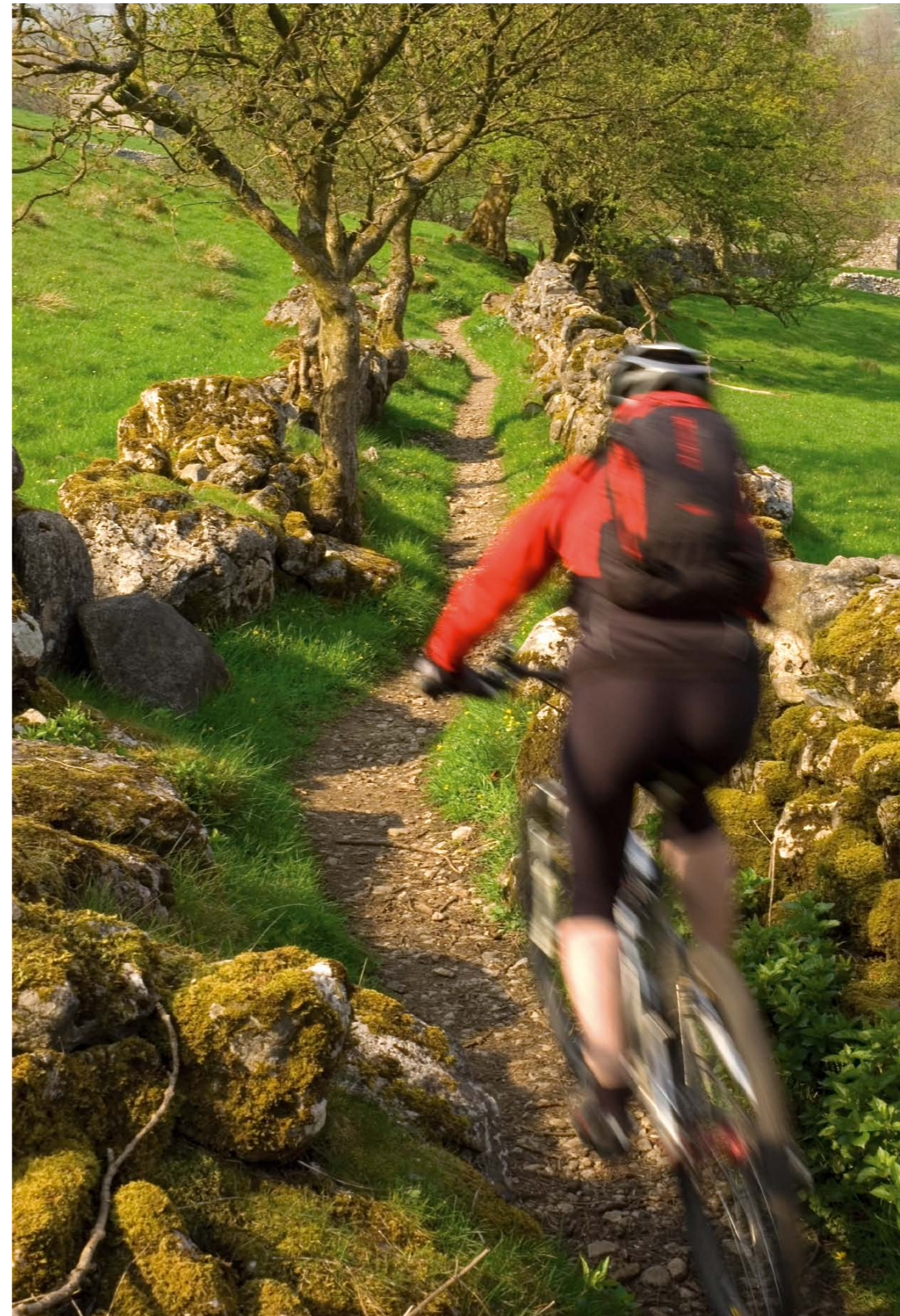
Day Three: Austwick to Grassington

Ribblesdale is the Dale I know best. It was the Dale closest to where I grew up and was the scene of the vast majority of all my first 'proper' riding. I like to think I know its trails very well.

It turns out my knowledge pales into insignificance to Stu's. Day three began with some high speed blasting around tight loops of narrow walled-in singletrack. Wow! I never knew that was there. The trail revelations continued with a brief but very sweet up 'n' over that spat us down an impressive limestone mini-gorge on to the Settle road.

After passing through Settle there was another new experience in store for me: going up Stockdale Lane (I had only ever ridden down it before). As it turns out this track is now more interesting uphill. Another victim of the National Park's trail 'improvement'. Grr... Red mist time.

Red is the traditional enemy of green. Red has been shown to increase blood pressure and is associated with anger. Sometimes it can also make one irritable, defiant, and aggressive. Its effect is physical; it stimulates



Slippery when wet

Ice cream overdose



us and raises the pulse rate. In certain circumstances it can give the impression that time is passing faster than it is.

I decided to utilise my frustration and take it out on the following descent over to Malham Tarn. Thankfully this section of trail had so far eluded the clutches of the sanitisers. Fast, pumpy with great swooping curves – all set against the magnificent backdrop of Malham Lings. It quickly restored my smile.

As we crested New Laithe we saw the Dales Mountain Biking support vehicle pulling into the car park. How about that for timing? As we pulled up to it, Bren (Stu's better half) began assembling a feast of homemade soup and bread. We eagerly tucked in to the delicious repast. Mmm... what could be better than this I wondered to myself. And then Bren unveiled one of her delicious cakes.

We could have stayed there lying on the grass banking soaking up the sun and eating cake all day but eventually the call was made to saddle up. The next few miles of easy going tracks from Street Gate to Bordley are where you either 'get' what Dales riding is all about it or not. It's not about what's under your wheels, it's about what's all around you and who you're with. And in this case I was with a good old riding buddy, both of us immersed by green fells, perfect drystone walls, fluffy clouds in blue skies and lambs behaving in such a clichéd spring lamb-type way that they'd be kicked out of RADA for overacting.

The descent off Threshfield Moor toward our final destination (Grassington) was a completely different kettle of fish. Very reminiscent

of the wide, gritty, rock-strewn descents you find in the Dark end of the Peak District. It was time to stop gawping around and chatting, time to start covering the brakes and widening our eyes.

Such a thrilling end to the day's ride left us all a bit buzzy. What better, what more English method of chilling down can there be than sitting outside a pub deepening our raspberry suntans watching some Morris Dancing?

Who says the third day is always the hardest on these multi-day tours? The day had been perfect. A great mix of familiar welcoming scenery experienced via the novelty of unfamiliar trails.

Day Four: Grassington to Hubberholme

We headed deeper into Wharfedale along on a quiet back road alongside the river that gives this Dale its name. Jim has an ornithological obsession with dippers and the River Wharfe looked like prime dipper territory. As we spun along scanning the riverbanks for some hot dipper action Jim pointed out plenty of oyster catchers and wagtails (the grey wagtail is yellow apparently). I'm completely terrible at spotting birds, let alone identifying them but I do enjoy it. Even if you can't tell a swallow from a swift you can still appreciate the simple pleasure of watching an agile little bird swoop and dart around.

Today's route was a day for the climbers. The first real section of off-road is up Mastiles Lane from Kilnsey. This is a bit of infamous climb but to be honest I've never really found it as hard as its myth suggests – and I'm sure it's not as scrabbly as it used to be. Having said that, I could feel the previous three days' riding in my calves as I reached the final kicker on to the summit. Ouch.

The next climb was from Street Gate up and over down into Arncliffe. This fell always reminds me of where the Tellytubbies live – but on steroids (the fell that is, not the Tellytubbies). Shaped like an enormous Millennium Dome covered in butcher's grass. The gradient and surface make it oddly exhausting on the way up, yet the very same qualities also make it screamingly fast on the way down. Again, the sensation of riding a perfectly manicured golf course sprung to mind. Woo-hoo!

During the pub lunch stop in Litton I took the opportunity to have a quick doze on the grass. I had a sneaking suspicion as to where Stu was about to take us up – he had dragged me up there last year – and I knew it was going to hurt. A lot.

The climbs out of Littondale over to Wharfedale are fabulously painful things. There are three of them and they each offer a different kind of

No doubt inspired by overexposure to grassy fellsides, limestone lings and big skies, I conjured up the image of the Union Jack flag made up of GREEN, white and blue



Another fantastic Bastard Climb

torment. One is wide, smoother and less steep (although that's not saying much) and rideable if you have the legs, one gets too steep and bouldery to ride near the top, the third one is immediately and consistently granny-ring-and-second-sprocket steep. Starting off on all-too-brief concrete doubletrack before heading up over grassy limestone cobbles and then turning into rutted, loose, rocky, gritty and heathery multi-track.

The worst thing about it is that it is all rideable. Only previously ridden in sections with frequent dabs and re-tries, I knew as I tried to power nap on the pub's lawn that it was never going to be in a better condition than today.

To cut a long, not very interesting story short, I did somehow manage to clean it all the way to the top without stopping or dabbing. It hurt like Hell. There were some heart-in-mouth 'don't fuck it up now' scrabbling moments on the rubbly stuff toward the very end but it went.

I can't remember feeling more satisfied. Cleaning a Bastard Climb for the first time is special. I pity the riders who can't be bothered and who find no reward in technical climbing. It's a different kind of rush to clearing a technical descent – it's not a thrilling shot of adrenaline but more of a longer, purer, cleansing sensation of achievement.

As I lay there on my back gasping for air, waiting for the sound of rushing blood to die down I had a strange vision. A design of a new, better National Flag. No doubt inspired by overexposure to grassy fellsides, limestone lings and big skies, I conjured up the image of the Union Jack flag made up of GREEN, white and blue. Far more indicative of our

country's landscape and much more calming to the eye than the current, Empire-soiled version. I liked it. Would look good on a T-shirt as well I thought.

Eventually I came back to Earth and regrouped with my fellow tourers. I didn't mention my Vision.

I had ridden the first bit of the steep descent off the other side previously and knew not to hit it as full-on as it invites you to – there are loads of hidden 'bunkers' and sudden bends ready to take you down. Proper collarbone breakers.

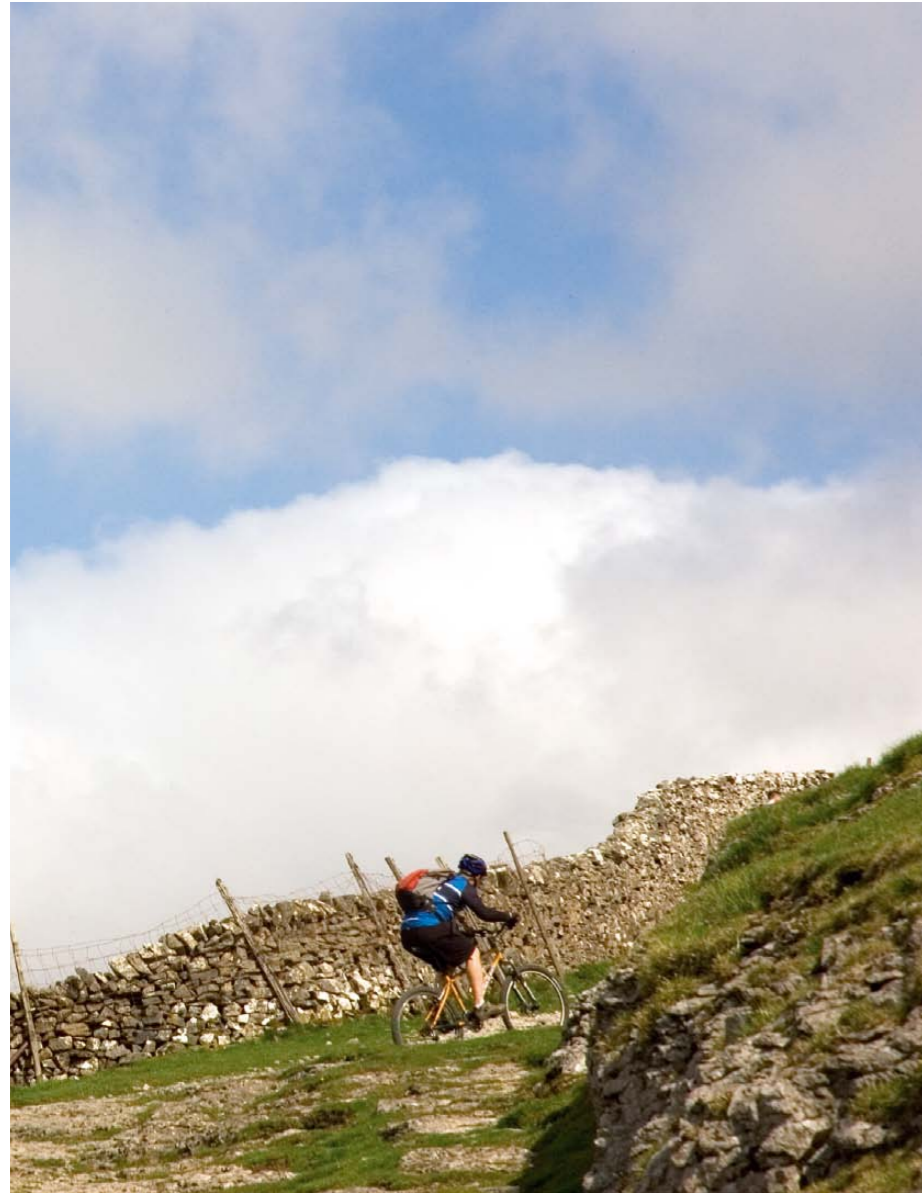
Unexpectedly Stu turned left (instead of the usual right) and shot off down a fantastic pavement-width 'shelf' of a trail that carved its way across the face of the fellside along patches of exposed limestone, this then narrowed and got a whole lot rootier as we entered Fosse Wood. A pair of elderly walkers graciously pulled to one side and cheered us past as we tried not to smash rear mechs on the rockier sections.

As I exited the treeline and swished down the last bit of walled-in singletrack to the riverside I could see Jim stood waiting for me with the biggest grin I think I've ever seen. "That is the best trail in the Dales" he said. "If not the world" I replied laughing.

As we rode along the road to Hubberholme pulling crap wheelies and excitedly whooping like five year olds on Kia-Ora drips, plans were already forming in my head for a return to the previous three kilometres of intense pleasure and pain.

Maybe we'll even get to see a dipper next time.

A steady start to the last day then!



Day Five: Hubberholme to Reeth

The final day. The wind Gods decided to call in our debt. Headwinds are never good things at the best of times. When you've got a long drawn out 9km+ gradual uphill haul out of Upper Wharfedale over into Wensleydale to deal with they are complete gits.

Thankfully the previous four days' of riding and evening 'refuelling' were taking their toll on other members of the group as well so the pace dropped slightly – I think we all finally realised that there was no point rushing today. It was a day for winding down and taking it easy.

The day's lunch stop in Askrigg was drawn out a bit longer than previous days. Partly due to group lethargy but also partly due to the quality of the homemade organic fare on offer.

Which reminds me of another meaning of the term 'Green'. A cycling holiday like this one with its lack of fuel-burning aeroplane flights

and abundance of natural trails and organically grown local food makes for less of a guilty pleasure than flying out to Europe and doing a week of lift-assisted runs down ugly, groomed bike routes. Definitely one for the Guardian readers out there anyway.

The last day finished in a similar way to how the first day began – contouring along the doubletrack of a Swaledale fellside, chatting away and pointing out er... points of interest.

Despite our best 'slow-protest' riding we eventually came to the end of our five day tour. It was everything we had hoped it would be – and more. It certainly re-ignited my long-term affair with this very special part of the world.

The lure of exotic foreign trails is strong - as the saying goes "the grass is always greener on the other side". But I doubt you'll find any grass that's greener than that in the Yorkshire Dales.

Bren's Swaledale Apple Cake

Mixture

8oz Self Raising flour
8oz Unrefined Sugar
4oz Margarine
2 eggs
2tsp Baking powder
1tsp Almond Essence
12oz Bramley Apples

Topping

1/2 oz Demerara sugar
1 oz Flaked Almonds

Mix all the main ingredients except the apples to a stiff paste.

Grease and base line a round cake tin.

Put half mixture in tin, cut up apple and spread over.

Put the rest of mixture in blobs over the apple

Sprinkle the Demerara and almonds on top.

Cook for 90 minutes at 325°F or 160°C

Best served warm with copious amounts of fine coffee.



Stu's Tour of the Yorkshire Dales.

A word from the man himself:

"This is quite a demanding five day tour with rides averaging 35-40km, mostly off road and involving a number of big climbs on each day. We would suggest riders should be of an intermediate level or above. This five-day supported tour is not an endurance race, timings and the route have been carefully worked out to give some flexibility but an element of companionship and teamwork is key. Essentially the terrain we use is of mixed character with plenty of singletrack, ancient green lanes, moorland tracks and open high fell, any riding on tarmac has been kept to a bare minimum."

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