



Riding for the dawn

Nightriding has an enduring appeal. **Dave Atkinson** describes last year's Exmouth Exodus, while **W Daniel**, writing in the Teesside CTC logbook of 1943, recounts a midnight run to Malham

JOIN THE EXODUS

The Exmouth Exodus is a point-to-point overnight ride. It's 100 miles long, starting from Channing's Hotel in Clifton, Bristol, and ending at the

Harbour View Café in Exmouth. It's not a sportive or a race – riding through the night is enough of a challenge without having to worry about times or positions.

The 2011 ride takes place on the night of 13 August. It's free to enter and you can just show up and ride. There's a not-quite-compulsory £1 donation for a route sheet and you'll

need a bit of cash for food at the tea stop in North Curry and your breakfast in Exmouth.

Visit www.exmouthexodus.co.uk for details, including a route GPX and a ride forum.

The Exmouth Exodus »»

It creeps up slowly, but the realisation is a sudden one. You're not following a tunnel of light any more, the periphery lost in inky blackness. There are trees now, and a distant horizon. There is birdsong. It is dawn. There's nothing quite like riding through the night, and the moment it's not really night any more is the most magical of all. Especially if it's stopped raining...

There's a growing number of night rides around the country. The daddy of them all is the Dunwich Dynamo, which sets off from London Fields to the distant shores of north Suffolk, 120 miles distant. On a good night there'll be up to 1,500 riders rolling up to the Pub on the Park start. The Exmouth Exodus is its West Country cousin, smaller, younger and hillier, snaking south from Bristol over the Mendips and the Blackdown Hills towards the coast and a fry-up. Mixing some sharp climbs with big flat sections, it's both a good test for a fit rider and an achievable challenge for newcomers.

Farewell to streetlights

On a good night you can expect up to 150 riders to keep you company on the dark Wessex lanes. Tonight is not a good night, as evidenced by the BBC's choice of lurid rainbow colours on the rain map instead of the more usual blue. That's put some starters off, but cyclists are hardy souls. There are still about 70 hanging around Channing's Hotel, looking out at the gathering gloom. Most look like serious cyclists. Some look like they might have bitten off more than they can chew. One has Sainsbury's shopping bags tied over his trainers and a fortifying pint on the go. But everyone's up for the challenge and at some point someone decides it's time to go, and group dynamics take over: everyone's clipping in, turning rear lights on and heading towards Clifton suspension bridge and the unlit beyond – in the pouring rain.

The Exodus has had its share of weather over the years as it hops around the calendar following the moonlight. I've seen it all, as part of the organising committee: still August nights, biblical early

June downpours. Whatever the weather though, there's always a camaraderie at the start, a sense of doing something special, unusual. Incredulous faces from the other inhabitants of the bar as you detail the evening's activities. A slap on the back and wishes of good luck.

Clifton Suspension Bridge is a magical start to the ride, the twinkle of bike headlights mirrored by the myriad glow from the lights on the suspension cables. We're ushered out of the city and, almost immediately, into the quiet countryside. We pass a sign warning of a flood, and then ford the flood itself, nearly a foot deep. Any notion of dry feet for the ride extinguished, we press on into the night, under heavy skies and rain in summer-sized drops that slicks the roads and masks the potholes that might claim the unwary in the dark.

The Somerset dark

The first climb, Burrington Combe, is a long slog, one of those annoying ascents that doesn't stop at the 'top'. We can almost touch the clouds as we crest the Mendips, before the ultimate test of nerve, tyre grip and brake bite: Cheddar Gorge, in the dark, in the rain. Solid walls of rock don't forgive mistakes of speed and line, so it's a night for tiptoes, and sucking the wheel of the rider with the best lights as they illuminate the cliffs and the closed-for-the-night tea shops, cider emporia and cheese caverns.

Shooting out of the back of Cheddar onto the Somerset Levels is like going back in time. Some of the tracks across this reclaimed marsh date back to nearly 4,000BC, and in the witching hour, rolling along the ancient avenues with no traffic and no houses, you feel more isolated than it's ever possible to in the light of day. It's just me, and a few other souls, a tiny pool of light inching across the map. The soggy map.

It's still raining and it doesn't look like stopping, but after a damp tea stop, suddenly the outlook is brighter, and so are the eastern skies. The monolithic grey clouds take form, then part, there's just a glimpse of golden-tinged blue as we drag ourselves up Blagdon Hill in the emerging dawn. This is when it hits me: the night is over. We've ridden into the dawn. Something



(Clockwise from opposite) Electroluminescent strips on both wheel rims! Morning in Exmouth. Clifton Suspension Bridge. Mid-way tea stop

happens to your body at that point; you're tired but the light of the new day wakes you up, a second wind. And I needed it.

Breakfast blowout

Across the flat tops of the Blackdowns there's a fierce headwind. My legs complain at the pace, 70 miles in. But the back of the ride is broken, just the Devon lanes to navigate and a final climb over Woodbury Common. Conditions are improving, and so are spirits. In the end, it's a beautiful morning as we roll along the Exmouth promenade, sunny and bright and calm and quintessentially British-seaside-holidayish, as if the struggles of the night were a dream.

One thing's for sure: I'll never have so fully earned a fry-up, and the Harbour View café delivers in magnificent fashion. We're a ragged bunch, eating with the grim determination of the really hungry as the usual Sunday morning clientele look on in bemusement.

There's one thing left to do: dip my toes in the sea, so I've really finished. Well, two things – if you count falling asleep on the beach.

Midnight run to Malham »»

The long-awaited Saturday night arrived. After dozing fitfully in bed for an hour or two, I was awakened at 10.30pm by the roar of our heavy bombers as they were taking off for a raid on Germany. I dressed whilst looking out anxiously at the weather, and found that although it was a fine night, the wind which had been north east for the whole week had suddenly changed right round, meaning a headwind all the way to Malham. Half asleep, half awake, with an empty, depressed sort of feeling, I had my supper.

You hardened midnighters – have you experienced that awful feeling when you compare the attractions of a nice warm bed you have just left with the hazards of riding through the night into distant parts? This was my sixth venture on such a ride and I have had this feeling each time. I believe it was only shame that made me wheel out my cycle this time and potter along to Kirkleavington.

I arrived at the meeting place with a few minutes to spare so I sat on the fence and smoked a cigarette. I was surprised no one else had turned up, and I was beginning to wonder (or hope?) if I had got the wrong weekend and so could go back home to bed. However, two headlamps, behind which sat Les and Pete, soon dispelled that idea and away the three of us rode into the night.

Dawn at Ripon

For a while nothing was heard save the whirring of tyres and the grating of Peter's dynamo. We passed through villages now deserted and asleep and the only sound of nature was the cry of a lone peewit. Every bend in the road brought us to fresh perfumes, of honeysuckle, bean blossom and wild roses, while the ever-intruding new-cut hay out-perfumed them all.

The stars were peeping out from behind thin clouds as we approached Thirsk, to be greeted by noises and moving stars which were anything but nature's. They were the first planes returning from the bombing raid. During the time we had had supper and jogged



Teesside CTC members in the 1940s, taking a break in Farndale

along to Thirsk, here were hundreds of lads who had been across the sea to the Rhine, caused widespread devastation there, and travelled back again. What a tragedy that man should use such wonderful gifts and inventive genius to destroy one another.

It did not take us long from here to Busby Stoop where we picked up Joe Kilborn from Darlington. Joe had come down through Northallerton. After five minutes' chin-wag we pushed on into the increasing headwind to Baldersby Gate; here Sam joined us, he having journeyed through Catterick. It was a grand warm night, the first all-night ride I've had when gloves and scarves could remain in the saddlebag.

Our route took us on through Ripon, still in the dark, and not a

sign of life was to be seen. Two miles further on, at the first glimpse of the cold grey dawn, we halted for our first snack.

We reached Pateley Bridge in daylight after some stiff climbs and wind-buffed descents, and rested a while at the foot of the fearsome Greenhow Hill. Peter was now feeling a bit sorry for himself here as he had both a bad head and bad tummy. He really was pale and looked ill, and although we all pulled his leg and made jokes at his expense we were sorry for him. We urged him on.

At the top of Greenhow Hill, I pushed on ahead of the others as we were a bit behind schedule and we were to meet Ron and Nora in Hebden, where they were spending the night in the Youth Hostel.



I arrived in Hebden to find no one there, so I sat down on a bench and immediately dozed off to be awakened shortly after by the lads who had caught up with me. There were still no signs of the hostellers, so after chalking on the appointed corner we carried on through Grassington.

Malham Cove and back

Through Threshfield and Skirethorns we went, and up the long rough push to the moor top where we joined Mastiles Lane.

After a bit of switchback grass-track riding, we soon struck a metalled road and were swooping down past Gordale to Malham, which we reached about ten minutes to nine. Here we did justice to ham and eggs, which we had previously ordered.

A wash and breakfast revived us all considerably and Peter was looking much brighter as we set off on foot towards Gordale Scar. The sky all morning was overcast but the rain held off. Past Janet's Foss we sauntered, over Gordale Bridge and behind the house leading to

Gordale Scar in the Yorkshire Dales, as seen by W Daniel in 1943

the Scar. I have been here several times before, but the grandeur of this mighty cleft with its waterfall tumbling through a hole in the rock and its overhanging sheer walls of limestone lost none of its impressiveness.

We left the path on the top and made our own way across the springy turf, carpeted with ling and the vast fields of limestone layers and slabs, until we came to the top of Malham Cove, a huge semi-circular limestone cliff with a sheer face towering some 300 feet. The view down the valley from here was grand and, as Les put it, standing on the cliff edge, like looking out of an aeroplane.

Our sightseeing stroll now over, we made our way back to Malham village to satisfy the inner man again. Here we met Ron and Nora who had slept in at the hostel and arrived in Malham after we had started our walk. Happily, they had had time to visit the Cove and Scar.

Home alone

After dinner we set off on the journey homeward via Malham Tarn, after passing which we hurtled along the cross-country road to Arncliffe in Littondale with the westerly wind blowing strongly at our backs. This is a grand stretch of upland country with the heights of Fountains Fell and Darnbrook Fell looking down upon all from the left, and to the right the ravine of Cowside Beck. The tailwind and easy gradient soon helped us to the junction of Littondale and Wharfedale, where we turned up through Kettlewell and Buckden. We arrived in West Witton for tea.

Afterwards Joe, who had to go to work at midnight (and nobody envied him!) and Sam pushed off ahead, to be followed by the Eaglescliffe contingent, while Tris and I went for a glass of ale. I soon pulled round and was as fit as anyone again on the homeward run, which lay through Leyburn, Patrick Brompton, Catterick, Scorton, Entercommon and Worsall, where we parted company.

I was left to finish my journey alone as I had started it, and what a store of sights and memories I had collected in those 23 hours between – and need I say that I slept that night?