

Diary of a novice Wheeler, aged 51¾

Dateline 1300 hours one Saturday last October. I approach the final bend to the Fermain Club with no little trepidation. Here would be assembled some of the finest cyclists Macclesfield could muster. Perhaps I'm early: there are just two riders here, one of whom must be a professional, judging by the plethora of foreign brand names he's sporting on what looks frighteningly like racing kit. The great day has arrived and my first ever club run is only minutes away.

Ten days earlier I had plucked up the courage to call someone called John J, offering to join the famous Macclesfield Wheelers Road Club Run that Saturday. John's gentle probing revealed that this might not really suit a first ride. 'How far had I cycled before?'

'Er, actually only to work,' I admitted.

'No longer runs?'

'Well, it is nearly nine miles'. I paused to allow my questioner to express admiration, and, this not being forthcoming, added 'and back again, and every day'. I played my trump card 'and that means coming up Alderley Edge hill'. No, John was polite but sure: they would be going over Bosley Cloud, probably twice (!), on towards Stoke, and it might be best to start with an easier ride next week.

So here I am at the Fermain, watching the two become a dozen or more serious cyclists, all looking frighteningly fit with very fast bikes. One refers to his 'commuting bike', so, recognising a kindred commuter, I ask him where his journey takes him.

'Congleton to Manchester,' he replies. Picking my jaw off the car park surface, I ask how far that is.

'25 miles: well, it is only South Manchester.'

Only! What am I doing here? I am about to go cycling with a lunatic who does 50 miles a day. My brain is still processing this when he adds 'but of course it's never really 50 as I usually take the scenic route so it's more like 60'.

We're off. The big question continues to threaten: will I be able to Keep Up? We wiggle through the back streets of Macclesfield and make for the hills. John warns me: 'you'll need a low gear in a minute'. John is not kidding. We labour up what must certainly be the most formidable ascent in the Peak District, if not England. I give silent thanks when we pause at the top as one maniac rides back down to encourage any stragglers. Off again. These roads bear only passing resemblance to those I've often driven: the scenery's familiar but God has fiddled with the gradient. We shoot down a long hill. Actually the others shoot while I squeeze my brakes so hard that my hands hurt. I assume that a) they know what's round each bend; b) they have a more disposable attitude to their bodies than I do; or c) both of the above.

Suddenly the road climbs alarmingly: I fail to change down fast enough, stop, can't get my foot out and fall ignominiously onto the road. No car behind me and no cyclist either: being the last down the hill at least means no loss of face. Later I confess my mishap to another rider who reassures me 'don't worry: that bit catches out quite a few.'

At last I ask John, as casually as possible, how far we're going. He tells me we're about half way. (We weren't, but thank you John for making me believe we were).

After several lifetimes we turn sharply into a farmyard at the frontier of civilisation. Would this be some arcane initiation ceremony in a cold, lonely barn where I'd be stripped of my inner tubes as an induction to the Ancient Order of Wheelers? No, even better: we'd arrived at that Holy Grail of all club runs, the fabled Tea Stop. But here's a surprise. Hercules himself wouldn't have been ashamed of the athletic exertions I've witnessed over the last two hours. But with their helmets off, I realise that some of these guys must surely be almost as old as me. There's much beaming and steaming as a princess dispenses life-sustaining nectar in the form of industrial quantities of tea and cake. This ride, I'm told, is officially designated as a 'Two Caker'.

As we head home, John points to a distant speck of cyclists a couple of counties ahead of us and explains that the group often splits after tea. I can't believe that they can have got so far ahead, up such a huge hill, and I don't want to believe that, where they lead, I must follow. But they have and I do and I continue on as the light starts to fade, getting home to demolish the contents of our fridge and taking thankful residence in the most welcome hot bath I've ever had.

Enjoy it? Of course I did. Coming back for more? Try stopping me.