

National Hill Climb Championship 2011

An inauspiciously opaque blanket of low cloud hunkered down over the hills surrounding Buxton. What a dreary day it was to be. But what's this.....mild temperatures and no rain? With only a sluggish breeze occasionally ruffling the hairdos of late rising Buxtonite matrons as they potted down to the fancy deli on the corner for an impulse purchase of honey-roasted salmon flakes, one might have been forgiven for believing that conditions were more or less perfect for the NHCC 2011.

However, as I ascended out of Buxton to the finish line of the NHCC course it soon became apparent that the wind was a tad stronger at higher levels, and seemed intent on chasing itself up and down the dips and bumps of the fells. Was there a headwind or a tailwind? Nobody knew, but it was certainly gusty. The flattened grass at the roadside at the top told its own story.

The 4.4 mile course starts just south of Whaley Bridge and follows the contours of A5004 as it winds its way up the side of the fell at an average gradient of 3.2%. Vaguely alpine in nature, it consists of a flatter bit, a steeper bit, a long straight, a dip, a few bends and then a steeper bit to the finish. Whatever! It's a hill, a big one. What is the name of this climb? Yes, you guessed it, Long Hill. Another good name might be Traffic Hill, as it is a well used route across the Peak District from Manchester to the south. Indeed the contrast between the ghastly grimaces on the faces of the competitors as they bust their guts on the ascent and the bovine expressions of MPV drivers inappropriately muscling by on blind corners was certainly a sight to behold.

Standing 500 feet down the road from the finish it soon became apparent to me from the chill around my buttocks that there was a headwind on the last bit. Good news if you like to see people suffer on the bike like I do! The tailwind-assisted course record was 12:26, but it looked unlikely that it was going to be broken this time. I waited with my wife at the roadside, both of us resplendent in club colours. Some riders came by slowly, some came by fast. The leaden skies clung on as the sun tried to punch holes in the clouds. Every now and then a patch of blue sky appeared, and then disappeared. I checked my watch. Some more riders came by. I checked my watch again. Ho hum....I began to fantasize about the hot chocolate I would have in Buxton later. Now, would it be marshmallows or cream, or both!? I checked my watch again.

Then a vast column of light cracked open the clouds and a swathe of golden sunlight bathed the hillside. My pulse quickened. I gazed into the middle distance. Suddenly, there he was, a dancing, impish figure sliding between the shadows and the glare, pounding his way up the hill in a ferocious frenzy on his uniquely adapted Hewitt. Who was it? Who was it? Yes, it was our Ken, Garstang CC's very own hill climb specialist. You know, the one who puts the rest of us lazy slugs to shame with his competitive exploits? We shouted encouragement as he sprinted by but he was totally in the zone, glaring balefully at the tarmac disappearing beneath his front wheel. In an instant he was gone, with just the rhythmic coursing hum of his solid rear wheel lingering in the thin air.



KEN CONQUERS CLIMB

I approached him respectfully just past the finish line. He was lying sprawled on the grass verge, a friend holding his trusty steed for him. As I looked down at him he appeared suddenly vulnerable, his wan face drawn, his limbs splayed awkwardly.

"How was it Ken?" I asked him.

"Dreadful," he replied with a gasp, "My heart rate never went below 170 all the way up".

I think that just about sums it up, don't you?

By Justin Lindsey-Noble