

The 'Full Fat Festive 500' ... for the second time

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This is my second outing on the masochist's way of completing the Rapha 500 challenge in one go; last time was a real challenge, and for some reason, I decided it was time to do it again. Weather looked good – mild head wind on the way out and tail wind on the way back, all around 3 – 5 deg C and dry... well, that was the forecast, and you know what they say about forecasts!



A questionable Night's Sleep and an Early Start

I was persuaded by my wife to stay the night beforehand, which was excellent advice, especially considering the nearby McDonald's to the Travelodge, although that might not have been her sole motivation. I arrived at the Travelodge in Emerson Green around 9.30 on Sunday evening, giving me enough time to settle in and get into bed, ready for a 4.30 alarm with my kit all neatly laid out on the bedroom floor. Unfortunately, sleep escaped me, so at 4 I thought, sod it, get up and have breakfast at McDonald's. That's what I did, and on the way out, I met the receptionist coming up, asking if I was room 225, as apparently I'd been jumping in my room!

Went to MCD's for breakfast only to find there was no breakfast until 6. You learn something new every day. Had a burger, chips, and coffee, then headed to my parking spot near Wills' house, which is at a primary school. Everything went smoothly—gates were locked and it was pitch dark, so finding the combination code was a challenge. But it was early and daylight, giving me plenty of time to set up the bike and cycle across the M32 to Wills, whose door I'm happy to say is still orange, making it easy to spot.

I was first on the street, which felt very odd, but before I panicked, others arrived, including my mate Dick Wakefield from a couple of Audaxes earlier this year. The street quickly filled with a throng of 18 riders, of whom 15 would finish. Some were aiming to ride through the coming night, while others, like me, planned to stop at Northampton for a few hours' nap. There was tea, coffee, and some great flapjacks on offer. My larger flapjack lump lasted all the way to Northampton! Come 6 on the dot, the merry throng set off into the street-lit Bristol suburbs.



Rolling Out of Bristol: Darkness, Banter and Early Miles

I started moving through the hills of Bristol to catch up with Dick, and soon after, Ian Lyons asked if he could tag along. All was good — dry, dark, and reasonably quick. Then, after two hours, the light started to appear. Ian spotted that my back tyre was flat; well, I didn't think it was, just a bit soft. Based on the idea that if it isn't broke, then don't fix it, I left it for the whole event. (I did find out after the ride that I'd ridden it at 40 psi — no wonder the potholes didn't hurt!)

We faced a gentle headwind as we made our way through my manor in Highworth to Farringdon. Referring to it as my manor often led to my leg being pulled, with people asking which large house was my summer or winter residence. I had to pretend and lie through my teeth that I owned all of South Oxfordshire, apart from the part that Jeremy Clarkson actually owns in Oxfordshire.



Cafés, Characters and Questionable Decisions

Arrived in Farringdon around 11-ish and parked my bike in an alleyway behind a café I knew well, only to find Ian and Dick had gone AWOL. After what felt like an age, they shot past me, leaving me running up the street while screaming ‘it’s good here!’ They said the delay was caused by a long wee, but it sounds more like an issue of men of a certain age, like mine. It was good to sit down and have a proper feed before moving on again; I was feeling much stronger than I did at the same point in 2022.

As we wandered across and into Oxford, we ended up running a few red lights, and finally stopped at one. I asked, ‘what’s so special about this red light that you stopped?’ At that point, Dick set off only to be met head-on by a rather large BMW and a rather irate driver. Obviously, my sense of humour was going over Dick’s head.

Now, onto the subject of age. I was asked, ‘didn’t you used to ride with Eddie Merkz?’ To which I had to reply, ‘no, I used to ride with his Dad!’ Then Dick and Ian conferred that they were the same age, around 47. I felt quite pleased with that, thinking it’s only a 9-year difference—until I realised that at 65, my maths was a bit off!

We made good progress towards Winslow, and I aimed for the Fortunes cafe I visited in 2022, only to find a rather rude owner claiming there was no food for us cyclists and that there were no cafes or pubs open at all in the village. So we had to endure the wind and grab a meal deal at the Co-Op, only to discover, as we retraced our steps, that there was a nice-looking café on the way out – what a lying B*****D! At the Co-Op, we bumped into a lady rider who was planning to ride through; we passed her, stayed with her briefly, and then lost her several times on the next leg.

Pizza, Rain and the Long Night Push

On the way up through Woburn, the light was starting to fade when I felt a hand on my shoulder, and Ian gave me a bit of a push as I was clearly wobbling. Soon, it was dark—although it was never really light at 9! We discussed what we'd eat, and Domino's pizza came up, but my condition was that we had to have somewhere to sit down. We soon arrived in Cambridge, dodging all the tourists and wondering where to stop, until we finally put our feet down outside the Pizza Pilgrims place. It's a posh spot. Ian investigated and got us a table, and we quickly ordered and paid. Lovely pizza, and after about 40 minutes, we were ready to continue go.



Carrying the pizza our laden digestive systems out of Cambridge didn't cause much discomfort, and we were soon on the busway to St Ives. No problems, still dry, with the headwind now a gentle crosswind. No dramas apart from almost cycling into some rather darkly clad pedestrians. We went into St Ives past what I could not describe as the most interesting of stages, only for the rain to start, but it was time to pop into a shop for the much-needed receipt and the proper night stage out across to Northampton.

This stage was swift, and I struggled to keep up, but we stayed together, and eventually Northampton appeared. We passed the first McDonald's and then knew we'd be close to the Travelodge at Upton Way on the west of the city. We landed at the TL with no navigation issues this time before midnight, ready for the pizza to make its way out of my digestive system (the result was quite explosive and smelly!). We agreed to meet at 5 and set off to our rooms. I have to admit I wasn't keen on the idea, but let's see how I'd feel in the morning.

Dawn, Detours and the Long Road Home

Into the room, kit off, pizza dished out, charging, showered, alarm set, and bed bound I was. Alarm set for 4:30, but I have to admit, I got up, took my time, and thought, 'Let's just have another 20 minutes horizontal!' Long story short, I missed Ian, who left at 5, Dick went at 3 in the morning, and I eventually got up just before 6. Still early, still dark. I passed one rider on a fixie who was repairing his tubes. From the main roads into the dark lanes, which were a lovely place to be; it had stopped raining but was still a bit damp. I beat the big climb of the section, which has a rather nasty pothole-filled descent. All was good until the road disappeared! At the top of one incline, the road was smooth, and there was a traffic signal for one-way traffic, through which the route was meant to go right, right into a gate. So me, being me, climbed over the gate with my bike and carried the cycle the next 200 metres, which quickly turned to pure gravel, with the route appearing to get no nearer. So back I went, feeling very lost and probably leaving my imprint on the ground gates!



Bumped into Jerry on his fixie, and we followed the diversion that fortunately took us back onto the route. We made our way, mostly together, with me drafting to Gaydon, where the corner of the service station appeared above the trees. We stopped for a bacon roll, tea, and loo break just before what looked like a works party from Aston Martin pillaging the same Greggs; gosh, those guys really know how to live it up.

It was now light, and Jerry had gone ahead, so I enjoyed the next section through the Cotswolds villages and into Broadway. I had a good time dodging tourists looking at their phones while crossing the road.

Started to feel much better as signs for Winchcombe appeared before turning right to Tewkesbury and reaching the next control at Ashchurch, just outside Tewkesbury, for another welcome stop and refuel at Starbucks.

I was still feeling quite fresh as the stretch of the A38 into and out of Tewkesbury passed quickly, and before I knew it, I was approaching the outskirts of Gloucester. Traffic was a bit chaotic by now, and on the southern edge, it was a bit risky, but I got through and onto the A38 to Bristol.

This went quicker than in 2022, partly because of the tailwind and no rain, plus the traffic largely gave a wide berth, apart from one roundabout where an idiot decided to squeeze through. Off the A38 after the last significant climb of the day. Took a gulp of water, only to find the top of my bottle was now covered in road dirt, but I managed to carry on and enjoyed the varied route before eventually ending up outside Will's at almost exactly 3pm, and it was still very light. I bumped into Ian, who was on his way out, apologising for my sleepover!



Brief tea and chat with Will and a couple of others and I was back at the car able to take everything apart and store it in the boot before darkness fell.

All in all, a very successful ride; it almost doesn't feel like a 500 — a whopping 80 minutes of riding time faster than 2022. Not bad for an old man! The next day, sleep deprivation hit me, and yes, it really was a 500 and quite a tough one at that. I thoroughly enjoyed it and the company of the first day. Weather permitting, I'll be back again, as that select gang of nutters outside the Orange door are ready for another of Wills' adventures.