

**upGRADES** is an exhilarating challenge that takes in some of the toughest climbs in the Peak District. Inspired by the [Matlock Top 10](#) previously promoted by *\*Dark White Cycling*, **upGRADES** may sound similar to the Spring Classic Sportive which we promote in March, but **upGRADES** is on a well surfaced route and can be ridden on your best summer bike. It is an opportunity to test your hard-earned summer fitness on some of the most feared climbs in the UK.

**upGRADES** is an homage to the National Hill Climb Championships. The championships are promoted by Cycling Time Trials on the last Sunday in October, and they are held on a different climb every year. Four of the climbs on the **upGRADES** route have previously hosted the championships, meaning you will literally be riding in the tyre tracks of hill climbing legends past and present.

If you've never ridden the National Hill Climb Championships, you absolutely must. It is a crazy mix of noise, colour, effort and finding new limits, and with **upGRADES** being just 6 Weeks before this year's championships, it is the perfect preparation.

This is a hard route, and might not be for everyone, so there are 3 points along the route where you can take a short cut to reduce the distance and the climbing. This isn't something you have to plan in advance, as you can decide to take 1 or more of the short cuts along the way. The flip side to this is that the short cuts will also provide a mental challenge by tempting you to cut the ride short!

### **So, what's the route?**

The start is in South Wingfield and upon leaving the village you immediately take on **Potters Hill**. This is steady at the first, but then ramps up. It's nothing too challenging and, with fresh legs, it won't hurt too much. If anything, the challenge will be not to try too hard as there's a long way to go.

Once up on the tops you'll head south to Crich and descend down Bull Bridge, before heading across to the A6. You're now in the Derwent Valley, made famous by Richard Arkwright, and from here the only way is up. There are many ways out of the Derwent Valley, and one of the hardest is **Holly Lane**. This is the first of our Championship Climbs and there is no gentle introduction to this. You're immediately faced with a wall of tarmac which gets steeper as you clamber around the right-hand bend. After the road junction the gradient lessens, and just as the lactic starts to clear, the road rears up again as it goes past the farm buildings before very gradually easing off to the summit. I'd like to say that you will now be rewarded with a descent – but you won't. The road does briefly drop down, but in no time you're back in the granny gears as the road rises all the way to the T-junction.

We now turn right and enjoy a stunning stretch of road to Bolehole (keep to the right of the Maltshovel pub!). Here you will drop down to Wirksworth, where you'll take a couple of left handers to the bottom of **Wash Green** climb. Wash Green is brutally steep at the bottom, but then eases off and you find yourself riding up a beautiful winding road. See the white building? That means you nearly at the top, which is signalled by the Malt Shovel Inn which you rode past just 5kms before. At this point you'll be thinking to yourself "so has Chris sent me in circles just to get another climb in?". Yes – I have.

A shimmy right, a shimmy left and a cracking descent (rough surface!) brings you back to the A6 at Whatstandwell. You'll go over the bridge and immediately take the turn for Crich. The road goes up sharply, but the gradient soon eases and you'll think "that was easy". Only it isn't. Because after a few more metres you'll take a left and enter the wonderful world of **Hindersitch Lane**. I only discovered this little beauty a couple of years ago and on my first time up there were at least 3 occasions where I was sure I must be at the top. But Hindersitch is the hill that keeps on giving, and with gradients of 25%, you'll really wish it didn't.

Finally, you'll see the tramway museum (albeit through blurred vision) and you will then ride across Plaistow Green before dropping down to Lea Green, left to Holloway then down to Lea Bridge and continuing to Cromford. Here you will ride the Via Gellia Road as far as the Pig of Lead where you'll take on the Clatterway to **Bonsall** and then continue up the high street to Bonsall Lane. Steep at the bottom, before easing off, you'll wonder what the all the fuss is about as you enter the village. But this is a climb that doesn't know when to stop, so it pitches up again as you ride through Bonsall, before going up again as you leave the village, then going up again as you leave Brightgate. (Feed station soon after here!). Finally, you drop to the B5056, turn right, and enjoy a swooping descent past Grey Tor. The respite is brief, however, as in no time you are sent right and up **The Miers** to Birchover, which turns into **Barton Hill** as you leave Birchover. Barton is thankfully short, and in no time, you are enjoying the glorious stretch of road across to Stanton-in-the-Peak and then the even more glorious stretch across to Rowsley. Please remember to look to your left and take in one of the best views in the Peaks. At this

point, however, a troubling thought will now be at the forefront of your mind: you are about to take on the climbs of Rowsley Bar, Darley Dale, Bank Road and Riber (aka 'The Four Horsemen of Derbyshire') in quick(!) succession. Now, I'm not suggesting that climbing these 4 monsters will bring an end to the world, but they may very well signal the end of your will power with 723m of climbing compressed into just 18.6km of road (or in old money, 2372 feet in 11.5 miles).

First up is our next Championship Climb – **Rowsley Bar**. The climbing starts immediately as you turn off the main road, and once around the gentle bend, the gradient is laid out before you. But this is just the warm up, because as you enter the wooded section the road takes you left, right and left again up torturously steep tarmac. After the second left hander the gradient really bites before finally levelling off as you leave the woods. You will be tempted to congratulate yourself here, but the climb isn't done and there is more suffering in store as the road pitches up again to the real summit which seems to be moving away from you as you inch up the final section. Once over the top you'll turn right and enjoy a welcome descent into Darley Dale. The descent is fast, and brief, and in no time you'll find yourself at the bottom of **Sydnope Hill**. Sydnope could be called Rowsley Bar 2.0 as it shares the same elements, only in a different order. The ridiculously steep hairpins come first, followed by a never-ending draggy section. Then comes the false summit, followed by the final pull to the actual summit. Phew. A right turn at the top and another fast descent brings you to Matlock and you will see people going about their business doing normal things, and you'll wonder "why can't I just be normal and do normal things on a Sunday"? Instead, you will turn left and immediately throw yourself into our third Championship Climb – **Bank Road**. This is the shortest of The Four Horsemen, but possibly the most mentally challenging. Most of the climb can be seen from the base and the wide, steep road is laid before you. There is just no hiding place from the relentless gradient, and only as you near the top does the gradient ease. But, trust me, it won't feel any easier. A right turn at the top takes you on an all too brief descent to Matlock Green and the start of our 4<sup>th</sup> Championship Climb, and the biggest challenge of the day.

My course commentary to this point has been deliberately light hearted, but this is where the comedy ends and I have a serious expression on my face as I write. There is no other way to say it: **Riber** is hard. Really, really hard. I have raced it and ridden it, and no matter at what pace, I always have to turn myself inside out just to get up it. The first half softens you up with its nagging gradient, and when you see the left turn you will shortly take, you'll think to yourself "really?" as the road pitches up at an impossible angle. After this wall of tarmac, the gradient *does* ease, but as soon as you swing right it just gets harder. You then hit the switch backs and it gets even harder, and just as you are reaching your limit, the road goes left and the gradient goes up *again*. But now you can see the top, so you push through and reach the summit in a world of pain and relief.

You may wish to pause at this point to take in the views behind you, and reflect on conquering possibly the hardest 18.5km in the UK before heading on and taking the right turn to Lea. From here it is possible to have a reasonably relaxed ride back to South Wingfield, but where's the fun in that? Instead, let's do just one more climb and take the road back down to Lea Bridge, where you will now turn left and enjoy all that the climb to **Upper Holloway** has to offer. Any thoughts of getting into a rhythm will be banished by the rough surface. Then, as you ride past the left turning, the road pitches up, but don't press down too hard as you still have the left hander which takes you up through the sinuous, steep road to the top and your final summit of the day.

And that's it. All that remains is the descent down Wheatcroft Lane and the flat run back to South Wingfield. Back at the HQ you'll be welcomed by the myHill Cycling team who will serve you hot and cold food, drinks and of course, beer. There will definitely be beer. And as you recover and reflect, you will exchange tales and experiences with your cycling brothers and sisters, knowing all too well what they have gone through: 2200m of climbing over 11 climbs compressed into 86km. But the bare statistics only tell a small part of the story; they say nothing about the gradients, the toil and the mental strength to keep going – and it is these things you will talk about as you will be with people who understand.

Contrast this with your work colleagues who will ask you what you did at the weekend, and you won't have the words to explain your achievement in a way that a non-cycling person will fully grasp.

So, instead, can you promise me something? Instead of explaining the ride in detail, simply say "oh, I just popped out on my bike for a few hours". As you say this you will inwardly smile to yourself, because you will know what you have done.

You will have done something that very few people are capable of contemplating, let alone achieve. You will have done something incredible. You will have been magnificent.

*\*Approval has been sought from Dark White Cycling for the promotion of this event.*