

# The Borwell Cycle 2024

## Tom Webbs story

Darren Miller put me - in fact a few of us in Fusion CC - up to it. In mid-December, when too much Zwift and dark nights were starting to take their toll, Darren posted a link to The Borwell on the club's WhatsApp group, with the note "Something to aim for in mid-March, or just too hard?" I needed the former and did some rudimentary maths established that sub 9 hours would require an average speed of ~24.5km/h and so might be possible. I said I was in, rejigged the training plan on TrainerRoad, and continued pedalling with a bit more focus.

A recce of the Black loop in January wasn't confidence inspiring - around 3 hrs 45 for the loop, when it would need to be 3 hrs 30. And the hills were brutal - relatively short, but almost all double-digit gradients and they come in quick succession. However, I had excuses (it was icy at the start, the legs were tired after a lot of efforts in the week, and I was on the winter bike) and so I kept plugging away, mixing in some running, pilates and indoor rowing alongside the pedalling. Sunday rides with Fusion CC (always 4 to 5 hours, usually at a good pace especially on the hills) were great preparation. Three weeks before the event, I rode a 200k Audax on my Brompton faster than the pace required for the Borwell. It was pan-flat, but I could sense I was coming into form.

The week or two before were focused on getting the kit together. An ass-savers 'win wing' was fitted to the summer bike to reduce the inevitable spray, along with new 4 season GP5000's and the 11-28 cassette was replaced with a 11-32. I run a single ring on the bike that I intended to ride (a Giant TCR), so some might have been worried about a 42-32 smallest gear, but I knew that if I couldn't keep that turning it was essentially over anyway. Some short efforts on the bike felt good - significantly sprightlier than my winter steed (it's always a joy getting on the summer bike for the first time each year).

The last thing that needed to fall into place was the weather, and the long range forecast early in the week looked promising. But by the day before, it was clear that it was going to rain - heavily - at least for the morning. Not good, but I got the jacket and spare gloves ready, made my sandwiches and packed the car. I was in Rowsley by 6.30am as instructed and my comrades, Darren Miller, Richard Hatton, and Mark Connaughton were there soon after. Chris MyHill was setting up for the day and showed us to the little room dedicated to those riding the Borwell, with its own door for a swift in / out at the end of each lap. Black numbers were zip tied onto bikes and we were underway.

The hills weren't easy, but that was expected - I just tried to tap away without spiking too high over threshold. I also knew that many of the descents, especially around Uppertown, Littlemoor, etc., would be technical - little roads, potholes, lots of water and mud. However, I'd forgotten how ineffective rim brakes on carbon wheels are in the wet, so the descents required full concentration and a few risks. However, the average speed was just about on point (i.e., 25km/h) and the first lap was done in 3 hrs 19 - about 10 minutes quicker than needed, but providing the buffer for a puncture or similar if needed.

I dumped the jacket, refilled the pockets with food, swapped out the wet gloves and got out on Lap 2 - the 'short' red loop. This is where I started to get into the ride - completing the first lap in the required time suggested the challenge was on, the rain was passing, two ibuprofen had settled the back, and I put some tunes on the headphones and got stuck in. Lap 2 was done in 2 hrs 23 ish, meaning I was 15 minutes inside the cut off of 6 hours for the first two laps. Chris looked a bit shocked when I dashed back into HQ for the refuel -

he was stood with Messrs Warren and Downing who had just finished their Spring Classic. Simon was lucky that there wasn't time to discuss the relative merits of rim brakes.

Chris had said in an email before the event that he thought the last loop would be when things would start to unravel and he wasn't wrong - the legs hurt and the brain now knew how long each hill was and which hill would be next. However, the fuelling was working (more on that below) and although there was probably still 3 hours of riding to do, it felt like the home straight and I REALLY wanted to finish in under 9 hours and be the first to complete the Borwell. This - and some sunshine - was sufficient to keep things moving and I found myself starting to smile as I crested Winster for the final time. A fast descent, a twiddle up the climb to Stanton on the Peak and the last treacherous descent of Peak Tor and I was back at the HQ - 8 hours 39 after I started and inside the 9 hours.

Darren was there to congratulate me, having just missed the 6-hour cut off which would have allowed him the 'pleasure' of the final lap (Richard Hatton had also missed the cut, but again close enough to suggest another attempt might be worthwhile). A photo with Chris was taken, some cider was provided (for a later date) and soup offered and refused (my stomach wanted a rest). The overwhelming feeling was of relief - completing The Borwell had become important to me (perhaps too much so), so it was nice to get it done, so to speak.

It just remains to say thanks to Chris for setting the challenge, his team for running the day smoothly, and the John Borwell Cycles and the Barkley Marathons for inspiring Chris. I look forward to others joining the nine-hour club - it's a great challenge.

If you want my advice, then aside from the obvious (i.e., training to ride up hills again and again [and again]), then I would focus on two things: First, efficiency. Achieving the average speed is only possible if you do not stop. I was moving for 8.33 of the 8.39 time meaning that I only stopped for around 6 minutes - essentially to run in and out of the HQ and to pee [once]. I've done lots of distance events, so know I can eat on the bike, but for the Borwell I got serious - e.g., opened all my bars before the event, had two grab bags individually packed for the stops, used pocket bib shorts for quick access to food etc.

And this leads me to my second piece of advice - eat. A lot. I'm sure many have read about pro-riders eating 90-120g of carbs an hour. As most of my 'long' rides to date have been > 24 hours, my priority has been preserving my guts over hardcore fuelling (hence I've never really eaten gels, powders etc., but typically use bars and 'normal' food). However, as a 'short' (!) ultra event, the Borwell seemed like an opportunity to test the new approach to fuelling. I practiced a bit on shorter rides and then aimed for one SIS Beta Fuel gel and one flapjack bar an hour (probably about 80g carbs), with a couple of (gluten free) cheese sandwiches mixed in to keep my palate sane. Two Veloforte Doppio caffeine gels and a can of Starbucks espresso kept the mind on point.