Haldon Heroic

CW Difficulty rating: 7/10

Next year's event: March 24

50 miles

1,005 metres ascent

Mix the rough with the smooth in this early season mixed-terrain event

Off-road and gravel events have been picking up in popularity in the last couple of years, especially as most major bike brands are now keenly producing hybrid bikes that occupy the middle ground between a road and a cyclo-cross machine and are able to take on both jobs — the Superior X-Road we used sits squarely in this category. The Haldon Heroic started just ahead of the curve and has been fine-tuned to give you the best experience of the local roads and ▸

Where is it?

Set within the beautiful Devon countryside and based near the city of Exeter, the ride takes place on roads and trails you probably won't be familiar with and tours the area only as far south as Kingsteignton before heading back up again.

Why ride it?

You can't go far wrong riding anywhere in Devon, but the tarmac can only take you so far. You will have the chance to see areas and vistas not normally experienced on your normal road ride as you take the path less trodden in a series of off-road loops. The road will throw up some challenges in short, steep efforts, but it's the off-road stages that will really test your skills.

History

First run in 2015, the Haldon Heroic has evolved over the last couple of years to finely hone the stages and layout to provide the perfect mixed-terrain event. Although the route hasn't changed too much, over time the trails can become unusable at times, so it's an event that can throw up a surprise or two.

How to enter

Entry is online only at www.haldonheroic.co.uk, with entries capped at 300 to keep it manageable and fun for the riders, especially on the off-road sections.

Getting there

With the HQ at Exeter Racecourse, getting to and from the event is easy, with the M5/A38 running past both the city and racecourse, and a train station in the city centre.

Where to stay

We stayed at the Exeter Court Hotel located two and a half miles from the racecourse, with reasonably priced rooms on a B&B basis. Alternatively there are a large number of hotels and B&Bs dotted around the city itself.

Where to eat

Just outside the racecourse is the Haldon Forest Diner, which offers healthy portions of food at good value. For something more exotic you would be best off heading into the city, which offers all of the usual chain restaurants and a large number of independents.

Local bike shop

Colin Lewis Cycles are based in nearby Paignton and will be on hand at the event supplying mechanical assistance for the day.

Blaze a trail through rural Devon

off-road trails in this beautiful area. The start point at Exeter racecourse provides a great venue with full indoor facilities, plenty of parking and is also used as a midpoint feed due to the way the routes loop around for both the distances and off-road sectors.

The tarmac contingent is a good mix of B roads and back lanes, with rolling profiles for the most part and some short, sharp climbs to keep you on your toes. As with most of the UK road network, the surfaces are somewhat variable, but at least if you are riding a bike suitable for the off-road parts this shouldn't be a problem.

The highlight here though are the many and varied off-road sections, scattered throughout the ride over six (for the full route, less for the medium and short) sectors. All of the forest stages are run on Forestry Commission land and well looked after, so for the most part are perfectly rideable in all conditions, while others link up the roads and are generally public paths and greenways. Ranging from fire roads to singletrack and cycle paths, it is an amazingly diverse mix over a relatively short distance. The views of the surrounding countryside from the fire roads on the higher ground are nothing short of spectacular and well worth the trek.

A few sectors are somewhat different to the easy-going fire roads and cycle paths; of particular note are two lengthy downhill trails that are a little bizarre in nature — the area is generally sandy, soft soil but these trenches are filled with large stones and rocks, akin to a dried-up riverbed. We found these stretches to be the most challenging of the day — great bike control was needed along with modulation of speed and braking. Other sections took us across heathland where overgrown vegetation was the main hazard, while another, even when we rode in the summer, was an absolute mud-fest requiring maximum effort to keep the wheels turning through the momentum-sucking quagmire.

Timed loops

While the overall event has timing facilities, the forest stages are looped within a single point of entry and exit, and timed individually to give breakdowns of each that are used to award spot prizes throughout the day — a nice addition. Looking at the route on a map might lead you to think it's a bit haphazard, but with full signage and marshals at the key points you can't go wrong, and depending on the route you choose there are up to two feed stations to keep you going. If you are looking for something a bit different and challenging then give the Haldon Heroic a go. It's the most fun I've had in a long time and I think I might just be hooked on mixed-surface rides. ■

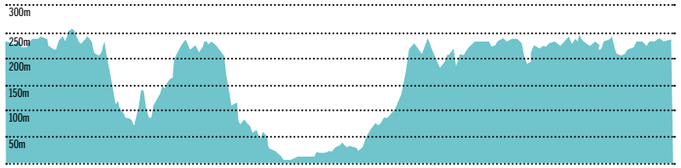
Words: Sean Lacey / Pics: Huw Fairclough

The challenges

1 Milestone Lane Climb
Just as you are getting warmed up, the first of the stiff but short road climbs hit — with an average of seven per cent and a maximum of 23 per cent it's a good indicator of form early on.

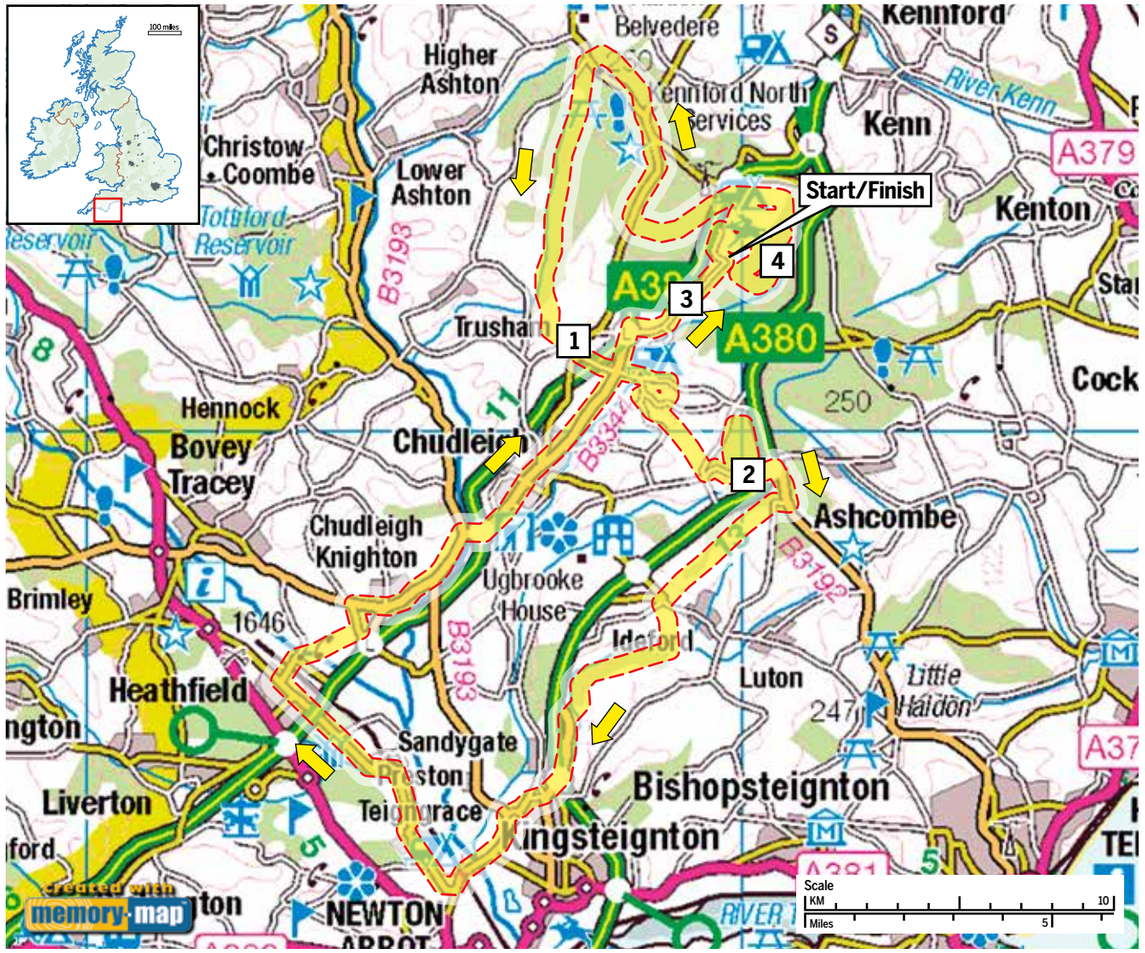
2 Beggars Rise
Narrow, tree-lined and slippery when damp, it's a less stiff climb and not as steep as Milestone Lane as it gradually rises up onto the main road ahead of you.

3 Harcombe Hill
The longest road climb of the ride starts off easy, drops then ramps up to 19 per cent in places, before levelling off nearer the top, allowing for a breather.



NAIL IT

4 The Wall! (Haldon East)
You may well look at this and think, 0.2 miles? Easy! However, this 'little' climb is a real test of man and machine. For a start it's in one of the off-road sections — you will probably be feeling weary by this point and it takes no prisoners. The surface is rutted, muddy, stony and very steep at the bottom, but depending on how firm the lead-in is on the day you may not have the momentum to haul yourself past the 30 per cent ramp. Keeping your legs spinning is the key, along with good off-road handling and brute strength. Since it is a cyclo-cross style ride, running up is an option!



Event website www.haldonheroic.co.uk