



There's no cycling experience too wacky, obscure or beyond parody for Autumn Barlow

I first encountered the Rough-Stuff Fellowship while working as a youth hostel assistant. Groups of cyclists would appear from nowhere at dusk, eat all the bread, and vanish at first light, like bog-sprites on bikes.

### The original mountain bikers

I knew they were an old organisation, and I assumed they'd died out like bus conductors and playgrounds with properly dangerous roundabouts. Then I had a chance conversation with a man at my running club, and discovered that these folk were still hauling their battered bikes across the hills and downs of the UK.

Rough-Stuff Fellowship: just the name makes me think of *The Lord of the Rings*, but peopled by male strippers dressed as mechanics. There have always been cyclists keen to get off the metalled roads and out into the wilds, and in the 1950s a group of them formalised this activity.

Of course, no-one had mountain bikes then, or even hybrids, and the emphasis was never on speed or challenge. It was about freedom and exploration and the camaraderie of cycling. And it still is. The 'rough stuff' is simply anything that isn't a smooth road; it doesn't mean a bunch of hard men outdoing each other by cycling over cliffs.

### Essential gear: a bike. That's it.

Fellowship is a lovely word. I arrived at a windswept Pennine car park on a drizzly Wednesday morning, and was bundled into the cafe for hot drinks. Gradually, the place filled with a motley assortment of cyclists. As this was a mid-week ride, the ages tended upwards but the weekend family-friendly rides cater to all; the youngest is four months old.

Before arrival, I worried about my bike and kit. It's sometimes intimidating to walk into a cycling cafe where everyone is in shiny, carbon-fibre bib shorts and talking loudly about their gear ratios. For this ride, I swapped the semi-slick tyres on my hybrid for knobbly cyclo-cross ones,

## THIS MONTH:

# Rough stuff

put my phone in a protective plastic bag, and wore my stained old hi-vis jacket.

It was a huge relief to find that I fitted right in. In fact, I could have turned up on a day-glo mountain bike made from tweed and bamboo with three wheels and a cushion for a seat, and it would have been fine.

After three cups of tea (I'd ended up with a pot, for the heady sum of a quid), we set off. There were 10 of us initially, but this was immediately down to eight as we left the car park and one lady discovered she'd brought a puncture with her. Someone else stopped to help and the rest of us surged onwards along a tree-lined path.

There was no set order of riding. One experienced member who knew the route brought up the rear. The rest of us changed places frequently. At times, we were side by side and chatting away; other parts of the route were narrower and we travelled single file. Never did I feel I had to catch up, or that I was holding anyone back. The pace just fell naturally to that of the slowest rider.

### Riding techniques

When I'm out on my own, I frequently pull over 'to take pictures'. (By a strange coincidence this only happens on hills.) On

this ride, we had to open and close gates, and someone always volunteered to "hold the gate open for everyone," which we took in turns.

Apparently, no-one in the Fellowship ever falls off. As we approached the mid-morning cafe stop, after a leisurely 45 minutes, there was a short stretch where the path had worn so deeply in the rain that it had become a nicely technical single-track. I kept pedalling and tried not to look down.

There was a burst of obscenity behind me followed by a wet, splatty thump.

No — he hadn't fallen off. The rider behind had simply made an unscheduled dismount.

### Endless, endless tea

We trooped into the cafe. My hi-vis had acquired a camouflage effect of mud, and I had another three cups of tea (£1.30 this time). We lingered until we'd fully saturated the cafe with the odour of sweat and dirt, and the two who'd been delayed with the puncture arrived. We continued for another hour to the third cafe of the day. By this point, I was very grateful to find the loos.

I refuelled with yet more tea and a large meat pasty in gravy. Three hours in — and still there'd been no talk of bikes. We had talked about football, prison, teaching, brideways, councils, the weather, Iceland, paintings, living in a tent, speed cameras, lighthouses and snoring.

Most of the route was off road, on paths and brideways. There were some short sections on quiet roads. It was cold, and crisp, and absolutely idyllic. Where the path became steep we simply got off and pushed — "taking the bicycle for a walk".

I was out for five hours and we covered around 20 miles. I truly loved every minute.

### The aftermath

The next day, I found that my shoulders and back were a little stiff. Off-road riding, even though this wasn't hard-core mountain bike racing, uses a whole new range of muscles. I certainly felt like I'd had a proper all-round work-out. You have to stay alert to the track and the terrain, too.

If I have any regrets at all, it's that I didn't see as much of the view as I'd have liked. I was concentrating on not cycling into a hole.

My bike was filthy when I got home, and my front reflector had shaken itself loose, which was a good reminder to check the nuts and bolts of the rest of the bike.

If you think this could be for you, you'd be welcome to try out a ride or two. Any bike will do, and the rides cover a range of distances.

The world needs more Fellowships... rough or otherwise.

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