

Cheshire's cobbled classic

Far from the Hell of the North, *Cyclist* unearths a hell of a cobbled ride in the leafy Cheshire countryside

Words **TREVOR WARD** Photography **LISA STONEHOUSE**

I once ran away from a failed love affair by joining the crew of a three-masted schooner that sailed from Dartmouth to France in the teeth of a force nine gale. The sensation of being sent up the mizzen mast or out along the bowsprit to trim sails while fierce winds and huge waves tried to dislodge me – a mixture of terror, helplessness and awe – has stuck with me ever since.

I thought nothing would ever replicate that feeling on board the *Malcolm Miller* training vessel, until Francis Longworth invited me to ride some hidden cobbled climbs with him in the depths of the Cheshire countryside.

Francis is not your typical cyclist. He's a professor of philosophy with a penchant for pavé. To him, Paris-Roubaix is less 'Hell of the North' and more 'Thrill of a Lifetime', so much so that he took his family on a summer holiday to northern France just so he could ride his favourite sectors.

To him, riding over cobbles is 'a massive overstimulation of the senses coupled with a sense of danger from fear of crashing, with the bike and rider continually being thrown this way and that'.

He goes on: 'It's very similar, I imagine, to white water kayaking, skiing over moguls or rally driving. And then there is the pleasure and satisfaction of being able to control and overcome the instability and fear by being strong enough to pedal hard and keep upright – and go fast.'

White water kayaking? Rally driving? Just how big are these cobbles going to be, I find myself wondering. Very big, turns out to be the answer. Very big indeed.

Merciless mugging

The first sector comes 9km after leaving the beautiful National Trust-owned grounds of Lyme Park on the outskirts of Manchester. It's a narrow, 300m stretch with a gradient that maxes out at 30%. This is less of a gentle ▶

Right: Taking on Swiss Hill – playground of Team Sky's Classics squad – in the rain

Below: Checking the maps before the Grand Départ from Lyme Park





▷ introduction and more a merciless mugging.

To reach the foot of it we first have to plunge down a descent that, Francis warns me, is 'probably the most dangerous part of the whole route'. It's stomach-churningly steep, twisty and narrow. And every few metres there are deep, crumbling craters where the road surface used to be. It's such a scary descent I'm almost grateful when I see the grass-tufted wall of cobbles that is Start Lane looming in front of me. Almost.

Francis leads the way, followed by Graham Clark from the National Trust, with me bringing up the rear. I've ridden lengthy cobbled stretches of road all over Europe, so I'm reasonably confident about my abilities. But Start Lane's cobbles are something else.

These aren't the famed 'babies' heads' of Classics folklore. They are monstrous, malevolent boulders set unevenly into the hillside at a preposterous gradient with

It's like nothing I've experienced before. 'Don't speak too soon,' Francis says. 'We've still got the Corkscrew to do'

seemingly just one purpose in life – to unseat me in as violent a manner as possible.

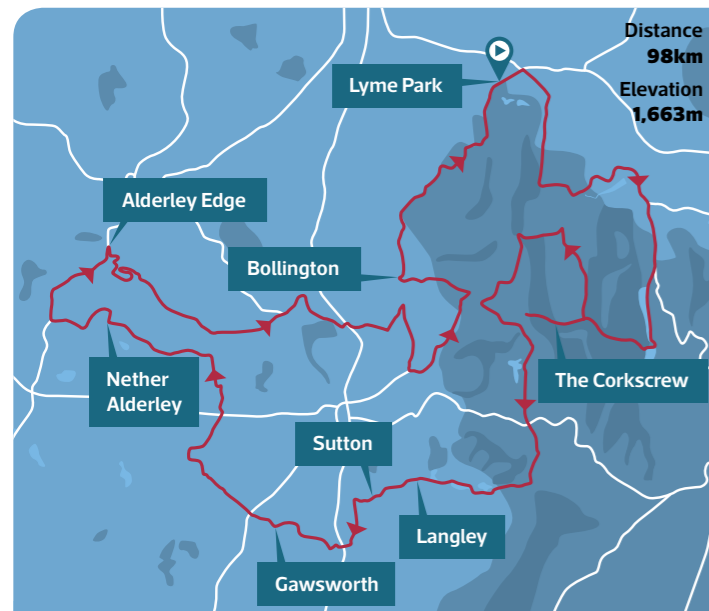
It's the gradient as much as the unevenness and size of the cobbles that shocks me. I'm on a high-spec, feather-light bike, and the front wheel is rearing beneath me like a frisky foal.

I'm forced to unclip and gingerly coast back down the 30m or so to the foot of the climb. This time I'll be prepared: I'll be in the biggest sprocket, remaining seated and keeping my weight over the bars. I start the grind upwards. Leaning over the bars, I see the cobbles looming towards me. They form a miniature mountain range, with channels of earth of varying widths and depths between them.

I've got my weight distribution under control, I'm getting decent traction and I'm spinning in the right gear. But I'm being constantly tossed from my intended trajectory. As the gradient slackens a little, I dare to stand up. There's a faint twitch from my back wheel, but my cadence increases and soon I am bouncing over the remaining stones with conviction.

'How was that?' asks Francis.

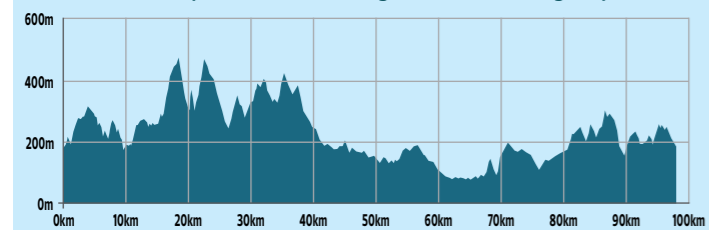
'Like nothing I've ever experienced on a bike



Cobble, cobble, toil and trouble

Get ready for a bumpy ride in Cheshire

To download this route go to cyclist.co.uk/54cheshire. Leaving Lyme Park, turn right at Buxton Old Road and again onto Mudhurst Lane. Continue through Whaley Bridge then take the right fork onto Chapel Road to Fernilee reservoir. Turn right across the dam then right at The Street towards the Corkscrew. On exiting Macclesfield Forest, pass through Langley and Sutton and join National Cycle Route 55. Turn right through Gawsworth and head north west on Dark Lane. Turn right at School Lane, then left onto Hocker Lane. Pass through Nether Alderley, then to Alderley Edge via Chelford Road. Leave Alderley Edge via the B5087, cross the A523 then turn south in Kerridge. Join the B5470 and fork left onto Smithy Lane towards Bollington before returning to Lyme Park.



Above: The rude awakening of the 30% cobbled incline that is Start Lane

Right: Some smooth stuff at long last



before,' I reply. 'Don't speak too soon,' he says. 'We've still got the Corkscrew to do.'

Today's route covers most of a sportive organised by Francis called the Cheshire Cobbled Classic. Having been inspired by the Tour of Flanders, he spent weeks researching the most obscure and treacherous stretches of cobbles he could find – plus several generous helpings of gravel and chewed up tarmac. The result is a 100km parcours that, in just two years, has earned a reputation as one of the toughest in the UK.

Between the three of us, we are packing enough weight to challenge the England front row props, but this is another reason to celebrate cobbles, according to Francis. 'More heavily built riders often really like cobbles, as they can usually go quite a bit faster than the skinny riders who always drop them on climbs,' he says.

That may be the case on the flat, but I'm feeling slightly chastened after my encounter with Start Lane. For now, we're back on terra firma – though the gradients remain intimidating as we thread our way along undulating country lanes overlooking the Goyt Valley.

The next sector is a nice flat, car-free stretch of hard-packed stones that runs for 2km alongside Fernilee Reservoir. Francis takes no prisoners, pounding the pedals across potholes and ruts, arms bent at the elbows at a perfect 90-degree angle, head thrust forward like a charging bull. It's a shame a line of dawdling rambblers at a narrow gate brings him to an abrupt halt.

Calm before the storm

We cross Errwood Dam before beginning the long drag up The Street. Even though the gradient nudges double digits in places, this is actually the calm before the storm, the storm being what awaits us at the bottom of the descent on the other side – the Corkscrew.

The support vehicle transporting Lisa, our photographer, was a last-minute replacement and is probably not the most suitable for today's terrain: it's a vintage Citroën H Van belonging to Birmingham-based Urban Cycles that looks – and sounds – like the one in the French cartoon *Belleville Rendez-vous*.

It struggles up hills and, in the case of getting ▷



The last stretch of surfaced road before arriving at the Corkscrew

No matter how hard I try to force my weight down on the handlebars, the gradient and unevenness of the cobbles are trying to shake me off

lost, can't do a U-turn on the narrow roads we are using. All of which means we often arrive at the next sector well ahead of Lisa.

I would usually appreciate the chance for some recovery time, but now, as we look down upon the vertical ribbon of broken rocks climbing up the next hill, I just want to get it over with as quickly as possible.


Francis explains how the Corkscrew is the remains of a centuries-old cart track that was once used by mules transporting salt from nearby mines to the docks at Manchester.

To the right is a gravel track that zig-zags upwards at a more leisurely gradient, built by the landowner to service his house halfway up the hill. When Francis asked the farmer if he could include the Corkscrew in his sportive, he was told that riders could climb the cobbles for free – they remain a public bridleway – but that if he wanted access to the gravel track to descend, he would have to 'pay a contribution towards its maintenance'.

'I had to pay,' Francis tells me. 'Riding back down those cobbles would be just too dangerous – they max out at 45%.'

By now Lisa has arrived in a cacophony of gear crunches and engine belches, but we have to wait for her to complete the rest of the journey to the Corkscrew on foot, as the road is impassable in our cartoon van.

Eventually we set off, one by one. I'm first, and after the experience of Start Lane I'm bracing myself for a good battering. As the climb starts and the gradient rears up, I stay seated and hold on firmly to the hoods, even though I'd earlier watched Francis with his hands wrapped expertly around the tops of the bars. I feel that if I try to change my grip now, I'll be tossed overboard.

It's like riding a rodeo bull. No matter how much I try to force my weight down on the handlebars, the gradient and unevenness of the cobbles – an image of Shane MacGowan's teeth comes to mind – are trying to shake me off. 





But then my front wheel plunges into a rut between stones and, in an attempt to extricate it, I'm knocked off balance.

The rider's ride

Lapierre Xelius SL700, £3,300, hotlines-uk.com

This was FDJ's bike of choice for the Tour of Flanders and also helped the team to victory at the 2016 Milan-San Remo and the 2015 Alpe d'Huez stage of the Tour. I never doubted its climbing credentials but feared it would be too puny for the cobbled tsunamis awaiting me. Equipped with Mavic Ksyrium Elite hoops, the whole kit and caboodle weighed in at barely more than 7.3kg thanks to innovations in the frame design like the seatstays bypassing the seat tube altogether and joining the top tube instead (meaning they can be thinner as they are not supporting the rider's weight). But the oversized head and down tubes, bottom bracket and chainstays meant there was no compromise in rigidity, ensuring a ride that was, under the most demanding of circumstances, comfortable and efficient. Instead it was me who let the side down.


Man overboard

I'm going down, and all I can do to mitigate the oncoming hurt is manage a further quarter turn of the pedals to take me nearer to the soft landing zone of the grass verge. I'm unhurt, but I've bent the front derailleur. I'll be stuck in the small ring for the rest of the ride.

As we push our bikes up the remaining 100m to where Graham is waiting, Francis tells me that less than a third of the riders on his sportive make it up the Corkscrew, and that even pros Owain Doull and Andy Tennant were forced to walk.


The next few cobbled sectors are, thankfully, flat, taking us past the luxury homes of footballers (Wayne Rooney), pop stars (New Order's Bernard Sumner) and assorted other millionaires in the rarefied, leafy environs of Prestbury and Alderley Edge. At one point an ornate gate opens electronically and we wait expectantly for a famous face to emerge. However, the personalised number plate of the Bentley that drives out - CTC1 - is the only clue we get, as the windows are tinted.

With 70km under our belts, we're approaching the last major challenge of the day, the 25% cobbled slope of Swiss Hill, and it's raining.

This 600m-long climb is regularly used by Team Sky's Classics squad as training for the Tour of Flanders. The cobbles are relatively uniform in shape, but it's the irregular camber that causes problems, to the extent that Sky's Ian Stannard has said the climb is 'tougher than a lot of Belgian Classics'. 



The malevolent forces trying to unseat me are overpowering, and I bottle it halfway up the first ramp

 As my pedalling grinds to a halt, I'm forced to unclip and try again. Rather than attempt to walk back down the cobbles in cleats, I take the safe option of the grass verge.

On the way down I manage to shout some encouragement as Francis grinds his way past me. He has a more compact body shape than me and, with his hands clasped securely around the tops of the bars, he easily makes it further up the slope before the steepest section forces him to dismount.

For my second attempt, I follow his example and hold on tightly to the tops of the bars. But the sensation of malevolent forces trying to unseat me - just like all those years ago on board that schooner in the English Channel -

is overpowering and I bottle it halfway up the first ramp again.

While I retrace my footsteps back and make my way down the hill for a second time, Graham flies past. He's a big unit - each of his calves looks about the size of Nairo Quintana - yet he's the only one of us to make it up the entire 200m slope. He concedes afterwards that having a 32-tooth sprocket on the back - unlike the 28s Francis and I are using - was a big help.

For my third and final attempt at conquering the Corkscrew I decide to ignore conventional wisdom about staying seated and gun it out of the saddle. I remember to keep my weight as far forward as possible, and over the initial stretches of the climb the approach seems to be working.

Above: The feared 45% ramp of the Corkscrew...

Far left: ... and how it pitched Cyclist's own angle from the vertical to the horizontal





Francis finally emerges pushing his bike, a snapped pedal in his hand. The cobbles have claimed another victim

By the time we arrive there it has been raining heavily for an hour and the surface is shiny and slick. This time I'll definitely be keeping my weight over the back wheel.


We complete the steepest section in close formation, but then a terminal-sounding clunk from Francis's bottom bracket brings him to a sudden halt. Graham and I continue around the next bend, where a canopy of trees gives us some dry patches of road to aim for.

Before completing the final section – a short, crater-strewn stretch of cracked bitumen – we stop and wait for Francis. He finally emerges pushing his bike, a snapped pedal in his hand. The cobbles have claimed another victim.

The final couple of tests involve a short but steep cobbled climb up Beeston Brow and a long drag along Jumper Lane over broken tarmac and gravel. But first we stop off for a cup of tea at the home of Reg Barrow, who Francis met when receiving the route of his sportive. Reg loves cobbles, so much so that he produces a set of photographs showing me a cobbled section of road outside his front door that was exposed

when the council came to lay some water pipes. He has worked in the quarries on the ridge overlooking the Goyt Valley all his life, and has researched their history even further back.

At one time 350 men were employed excavating the stone that would be used to build the network of cart roads that are now largely overgrown and forgotten. 'It would be soft as jelly when they dug it out, but would harden when the air got to it,' he tells me, though I find it difficult to reconcile such a benign image with the suffering and indignities the cobbles have inflicted upon us today. 'They were beautifully made things. They found a lovely set of big cobbles up in Bakewell the other day,' says Reg. 'But I don't understand why anyone would want to ride a bicycle over them.'

By the time we arrive back at Lyme Park, with one bike damaged, one rider embarrassed and another forced to abandon, I'm feeling pretty much the same myself. 
Trevor Ward is a freelance writer and is thinking of running away to sea again after his experience on the Corkscrew

Do it yourself

TRAVEL

The closest mainline station to Lyme Park is Stockport, with local trains stopping even nearer at Disley.

ACCOMMODATION

Though more rural retreats are available, we opted for a slice of city centre luxury in the form of the five-star Lowry Hotel in the centre of Manchester, which is just a 30-minute train journey away. Offering large rooms, secure bike storage and an extensive breakfast menu, the hotel was a deserved indulgence after being beaten up by Cheshire's cobbles. A double room starts from £140 a night. Go to thelowryhotel.com for details.

THANKS

Thanks to Francis Longworth for coming up with the route and being our guide. Francis organises the Lapierre Cheshire Cobbled Classic, which features all the cobbled sectors we tackled. The 2017 event takes place on 11th June. Full details at cycleclassics.co.uk. Also thanks to Graham Clark of the National Trust, owners of Lyme Park, and Andy from Urban Cycles (urbancycles.org.uk) for driving our photographer around in his beautiful, eccentrically vintage Citroën H Van.