

In more than 20 years riding Audax events, Stroud cyclist **Steve Brawley** has experienced plenty of highs – but an equal number of lows, including exhaustion, hyperthermia, hallucinations, and even an inability to speak. Here he reflects upon the paradox faced by so many riders who have asked the question: Why do we do this?

I VOWED NEVER TO RIDE ANOTHER AUDAX BUT THE NEXT DAY I CHANGED MY MIND

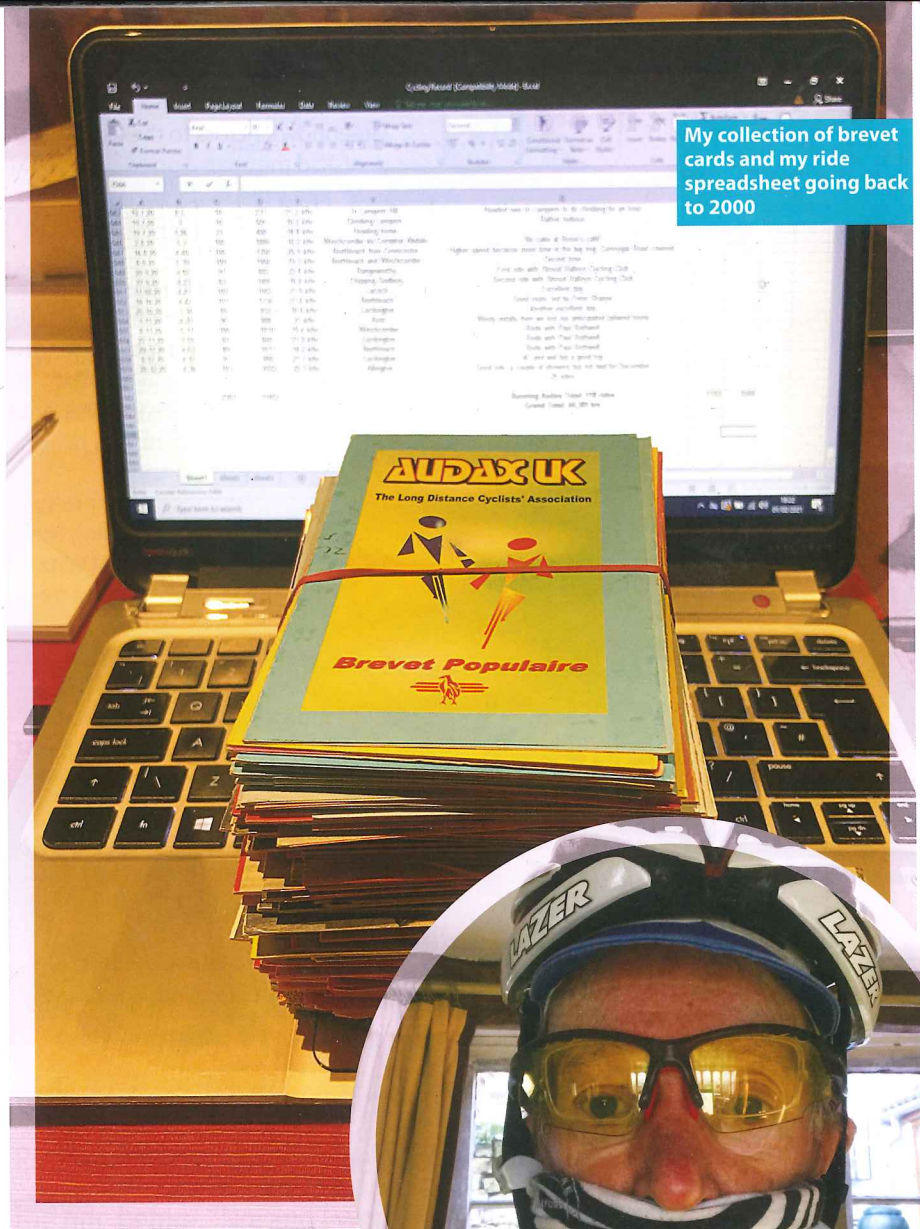
YOU CAN SPEND a long time on your bike, especially if you are an unremarkable chap like me – a full value rider. Since joining AUK in 1999 I've spent the equivalent of five months actually in the saddle, on Audax events.

"Enjoyment" is an elastic term. The experience at the time is often less than positive but afterwards you feel a sense of satisfaction and pride in having completed the ride. The toughest rides stay in the memory long after the more straightforward ones have gone.

So here are some reflections on why we ride...

Living in Stroud gives me plenty of opportunity to practice my hill-climbing in the Cotswolds and to travel to the start of the many Audax events in Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Shropshire, Warwickshire and South Wales.

The first Audax I did was the Windrush Winter Warm Up – 100km from Cirencester. The terrain is fairly flat but it is run in January so the weather can be your biggest challenge. I've ridden it eleven times since then.



My collection of brevet cards and my ride spreadsheet going back to 2000

The second was the Gospel Pass Brevet, 150km from Chepstow. It was organised by the late Nik Peregrine and I later discovered that it is an iconic Audax. When I arrived at the lunch stop at the Granary Café in Hay on Wye I felt part of a shared adventure. I've ridden this one eight times since my debut.

Why have I repeated these rides so many times? Because we like to repeat an enjoyable experience, and no two rides on the same route are ever the same.

There are some other Audax rides I've repeated many times. The Cotswold Corker from Bishops Cleeve is a 100km trip involving around 2,000 metres of climbing. It's run in February, so the weather can be a challenge. I rode it four times before it dropped out of the calendar and became a permanent. I've turned it into my own version of a permanent from home and have enjoyed it more than 30 times. Stopping at my favourite cafe in Winchcombe for coffee and a bacon roll in winter, and a cake in summer is always something I enjoy!

Gavin Greenhow used to run some very good rides from Droitwich and one which I found invariably challenging and enjoyable was Across to the Cotswold, a 200km trip down to Cirencester and back. I remember sitting down in Greasy Joe's 24 hour transport café at Cirencester (which is no sadly more) on my first ride. I asked my fellow sufferer, Richard Harding, whether he'd done the ride before. "No, and I won't be doing it again," he replied.

But I ended up doing it again four more times despite feeling wrecked after three hours of climbing and descending on lanes which resembled cart tracks rather than roads.

I'd concentrated on rides of no more than 200km until 2008, when I tried Peter Holden's Heart of England from Cirencester up to the outskirts of Leicester – 300km later I was tired but happy. I've

WORDS AND PICTURES BY STEVE BRAWLEY



The large medal I received on completion of the Raid Alpine in 2006 – a tough but memorable trip

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enjoyed the experience five times since then.

In 2010 I discovered Mark Rigby's incomparable series of rides from Tewkesbury. A particular favourite since 2014 has been Mr Pickwick's January Sale. It's a bargain at £1, and because it takes place on the first Saturday in January it kicks off your Audax year nicely with a varied mixture of adverse weather and darkness on a 200km route. I've got six editions under my belt although I shouldn't really count the one which saw me wander into the Royal Hop Pole 40 minutes after the cut-off.

Mark is invariably helpful, encouraging and sympathetic and he's a mine of information and knowledge about the world of Audax and cycling in general. That takes me on to my next reason for riding a particular event – because the organiser is top notch so you know the ride will be well-organised. The experienced organisers are the real stars of Audax. They put in a great deal of work to make an event happen.

Sometimes they also ride the event, as I discovered on my debut on Gavin

Greenhow's Across to the Cotswold. I asked the chap alongside me if he knew the route. He replied that he ought to since he was the organiser!

A third reason for riding an event is because it will be a real challenge. I put off entering the Kidderminster Killer until 2006 because I'd heard of its fearsome reputation. I felt pretty fit after completing the Raid Alpine (Rod Dalitz was on that trip) but the Killer lived up to its reputation and I was just ahead of the Lanterne Rouge. I rode it again in 2007, when a rider just behind me crashed badly near the start and we had to summon an ambulance because he was unconscious. The late Dave Pountney, who organised the ride then, helped too and I heard afterwards that the lad was in hospital for a week.

Incidents like that put any ride into perspective and call to mind Jack Eason's

comment that even some mammoth Audax is "only a bike ride".

I persuaded my young nephew to accompany me on the Killer in 2019 and he was good enough to wait for me at the top of every hill. When we reached Ludlow, the last control, we had to decide whether to time-trial to the finish or have a nice meal and go at a steady pace to complete out of time. We chose the latter and both of us were quite happy with that decision.

I ventured on to my first 400km trip in 2010, when I tried Gavin Greenhow's West and Midlands 400. As a result of poor management of my time on and off the bike I managed to finish 15 minutes after the 27 hour cut off.

Gavin, Roy Bishop and another of the riders met up at his house for a bite to eat before we headed home. After munching our way through quite a lot of food I remember falling asleep sitting on a chair at his dining room table, only to wake up after about half an hour to find everybody else was also fast asleep!

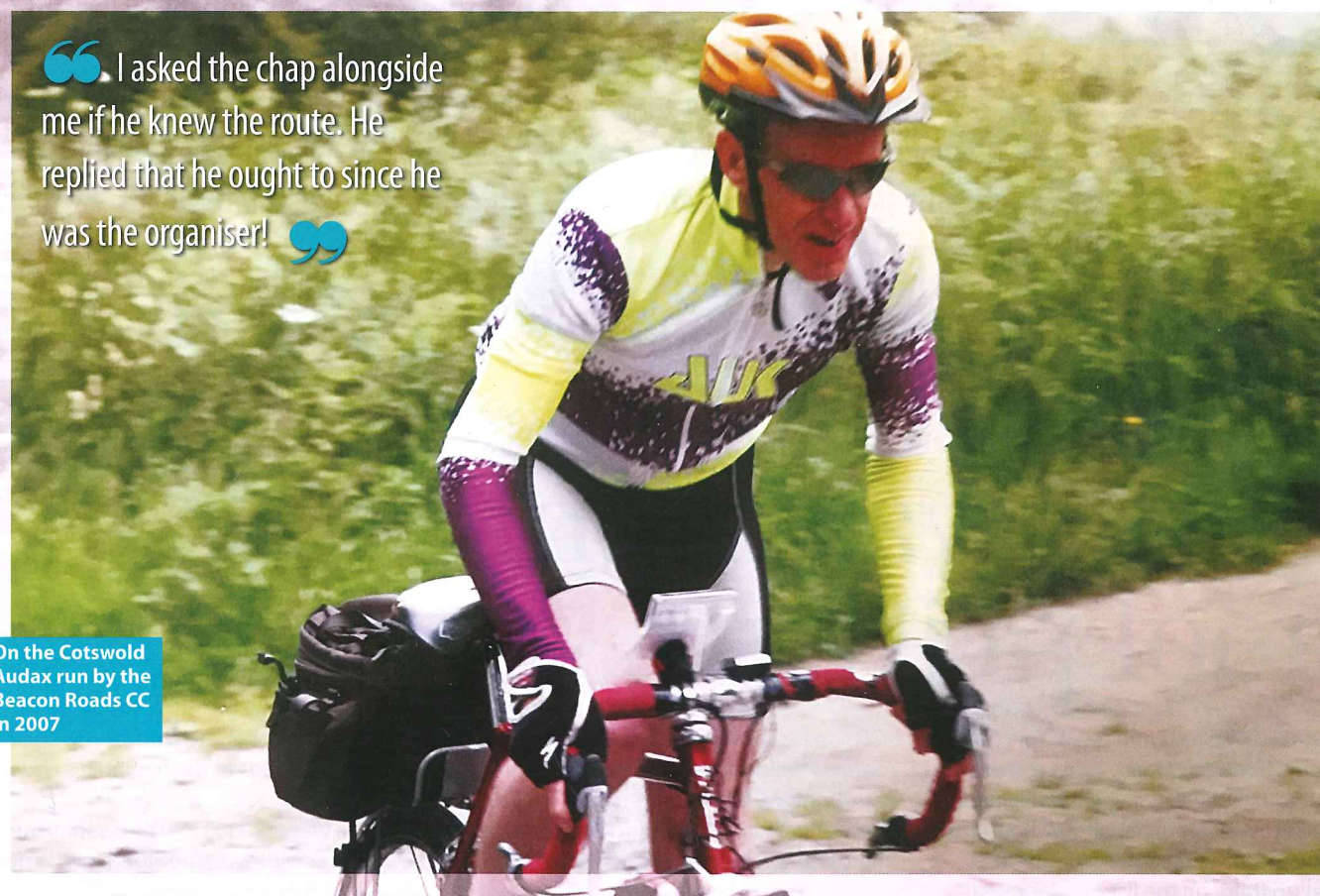
My second attempt at a 400km ride was Mark Rigby's Brevet Cymru in 2011. I started well but went off route at Tregaron and found myself on the dreaded road to



Completion of LeJog on 4 August 2000 – I'm on the front row on the right, wearing longs. It is not always hot at John O'Groats in the summer

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On the Cotswold Audax run by the Beacon Roads CC in 2007



Beulah. At least I ended up descending the Devil's Staircase instead of climbing it. I pitched up at the West End café at Llandovery for the second time and caught up with some of the Audax royalty, riders like Ian Hennessey, who I'd only seen before on the start line. They'd actually stayed on the route and hadn't taken my painful short cut.

I felt that the Brevet Cymru was unfinished business and in 2018 I tried again, this time to raise money as a sponsored ride for a charity in my industry. I don't recommend using an Audax ride to raise money for a charity because it places unwanted additional pressure on you – and you can't back out without a cast-iron excuse.

This time I managed to avoid going off route by attaching myself to a group who left the West End Café at around 12.30am. I got through the trickiest part of the night successfully and with only mild hallucinations. I finished back at Chepstow with an hour and a half to spare, completely knackered but happy.

A fourth reason for riding is that being an Audax rider becomes part of your identity. I'm always interested in the hobbies and pastimes people choose. When interviewing candidates for a job I've always asked what they did in their spare time. It tells you something about their personality and character.

You don't have that much choice in the

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career or job you do as it's often determined by your school qualifications. But your hobbies are your own choice and they tell you much about the individual.

If you're looking for someone who'll put in a lot of effort and be reluctant to give up, an Audax cyclist may fit the bill rather well if they have the relevant qualifications and experience. On the other hand, you do need to know when to stop flogging a dead horse. Not every objective in business deserves to succeed.

I've abandoned three rides over the years. The first was completely my own fault, when I ran into Peter Holden on an off road section of Mark Rigby's Dr Foster's Spring Clean in 2010 and broke his gear hanger. He couldn't change gear so we both walked into Monmouth and he got a lift home and I rode home.

The second was Stephen Poulton's New Cheltenham Flyer in 2013. All went well until it started to rain heavily and the temperature dropped to 4C. I don't carry much natural insulation and I started to get very cold because I couldn't generate

enough heat whilst cycling to stay warm.

I went off route in the dark near Tetbury and discovered that I could scarcely speak when I asked for directions in a pub. Hypothermia seemed to be the sensible diagnosis so I called it a day, and my wife picked me up. I vowed never to ride another Audax on my way home. I meant it at the time but of course next day I changed my mind.

The third was another Mark Rigby ride, Helfa Cymraeg Benjamin Allen in 2016, when I had multiple punctures and gave up at Llanwrtyd Wells. A call to my son to rescue me was not greeted with enthusiasm when he worked out that it was a 220 mile round trip!

A final thought... I usually cycle on my own because I am a plodder and it suits me. I like to go at my own pace. I find that I need to concentrate all the time because it's very easy to get into trouble if you have a moment of inattention – and I've come off my bike a few times because I wasn't doing my job properly.

But cycling is an excellent stress reliever. Of course it is also wonderful low impact physical exercise and it's no wonder there are loads of very fit cyclists in their 70s and 80s.

Shortly before I retired I went for my regular health check. I still remember the doctor telling me “Whatever you do, keep on cycling!” I have taken his advice.

