

Brisbane Valley Rail Trail 70KM July 15

Perhaps I should state here that I don't consider myself to be dirt rider but having tackled the Birdsville Track in 2016 and the Dirt Series in 2017 the thought of riding a section of the BVRT that I hadn't seen before was strongly tempting.

The problem with not considering myself to be a dirt rider was that I had reinstalled the rigid fork on my ancient Trek, having removed the after market suspended unit that I had fitted for the Birdsville adventure and left on for last year's Dirt Series. The Rockshox fork is longer than the rigid fork and alters the geometry of the bike.

Having contrived to miss the recent 100KM BVRT and, therefore, another Dirt Series being out of the question there seemed little point in swapping forks for a mere 70KM ride so, after an email exchange with Simon, I fitted my fattest tyres and registered in spite of my misgivings.

One of the joys of the online system is that you can see who else has registered for a ride and I was surprised to see that there were 17 riders already on the list. On the day, there were 20 of us, most of whom were new to Audax. Well done Simon!

The weather at the start was bracing.



Some may have regarded it as a welcome change from the long, hot summer but I felt as if my ears were going to fall off. There was a group of walkers starting from the same point at around the same time and they were dressed in all manner of Arctic wear; anoraks, beanies, balaclavas, heavy gloves etc. It was like a group of Michelin men with walking poles.

We assembled roughly on time for Simon's ride briefing and set off away from the sunrise. The variety of bikes was interesting; dual suspension in some cases, hard tails for most, a couple of FAT bikes and my not so fat bike.

My earlier misgivings seemed to have been realised in the first kilometre. The track is mostly tussocky grass for that distance and my lack of suspension made for a very uncomfortable ride, exacerbated by the low tyre pressures causing the sensation of pedalling through treacle. (I've never actually pedalled through treacle but I think I know what it would feel like.)

I had to stop two or three times to adjust a few items of gear and was well behind the field by the time the surface turned to gravel but things improved considerably after that. I decided that it really is possible to ride on gravel surfaces without suspension and then remembered that that's just what we did when we were younger and suspension hadn't happened yet.

Before long we were at Coominya where the station buildings have been preserved and that brought back more memories of the days before suspension on bicycles. The last regular steam hauled train service in South East QLD ran from Ipswich to Yarraman on Friday nights and crossed at Coominya with a steam hauled goods train running back to Ipswich. You might be able to use this at a trivia night.

Past Coominya, the trail surface is surprisingly good and the only impediments to progress are the detours past bridges that are fenced off, having fallen into disrepair since the line was closed. These detours consist of short but steep descents to the creek bed and a short and sharp climb back to the trail. Proficient riders have no need to dismount but I do.



The route climbs steadily for about 12 or 13 kms to Mt. Hallen and then descends roughly the same distance to Esk. Being engineered for rail in the era of steam, however, means the maximum grade is

around 2% so it's not too daunting to climb and doesn't need braking to descend. Goldilocks would approve.



Although I was at the tail of the field, I did manage to overtake a few riders, mostly because they had stopped for various reasons such as shedding clothing as the day warmed up or to take photos. There are a few gates to open and close as well, which assisted me in closing the gap.

Arriving at Esk, I joined the earlier arrivals at the bakery enjoying morning tea and admiring the (dead) stag in the back of the ute parked outside. It was, presumably, headed for the kitchen table and the antlers would have made a fine trophy.

While we were taking nourishment on board, Raoul reached under his gilet and removed the high tech wind proof item that protects him in sub zero temperatures – a plastic Bank of QLD sample bag. It was rather reminiscent of those old scenes of Le Tour where the riders tuck sheets of newspaper down their shirtfront and showed that it really is possible to love a bank.

The return trip was a little faster than the outward journey, accompanied by Raoul and Peter. I only made one unscheduled stop, which was to pick up a souvenir in the form of a dog spike lying in the dust. What better memento of a Rail Trail?



We discovered that three is the optimum number of riders to cope with gates – one to open, one to ride through and one to close. It works best if you can consistently be the second rider.

At around 60kms I discovered that my “Armstrong” front suspension was starting to feel the strain but just as I was beginning to appreciate why the suspension fork had made mountain biking so popular we were overtaken by a blur of three riders on drop bar bikes. As I was walking up out of a creek bed at the time, I had the opportunity get a good look at them and I have the impression that these were not cyclocross machines but “gravel bikes”. They certainly seemed to prove that you can make good time on rough surfaces with drop bars, comfortable geometry, 40mm of rubber and lots of carbon fibre although I suspect that a certain level of skill helps. I have since discovered that some versions have (short travel) suspension cunningly concealed in the head tube.

We arrived back at the Lowood Bakery with about an hour to spare, which gave me time to reflect upon the joys of riding the route less travelled. I could almost develop a real liking for this sort of riding with its lack of exposure to motorised traffic.

Those gravel bikes look interesting....