

## Mid Devon Cycling Club Classic Stage Race – 1981 to 1991



Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in the United Kingdom there were hundreds of run-of-the-mill road races, but there were only a handful of major bike race promotions; the former generally enjoyed by the competitors, officials, and a relatively small band of cycling enthusiasts, while the latter were very high profile, big budget events played out before a much larger audience and with significant responsibilities to sponsors and the public image of cycle sport. The Mid Devon Cycling Club's annual Totnes/Vire twinning race began the transition to a major promotion when, in 1981, it attracted financial support from Launa Windows. However, with no media portfolio with which to impress the Newton Abbot based company - and no track record for the type of event ultimately envisaged by the organisers - the initial sponsorship was a little restrictive, allowing only modest progress for an event which had been running as a popular regional fixture since 1973.

The first event under Launa's patronage followed the established, two day, two stage, format of previous Totnes/Vire events and was, after months of planning, an immediate success. It boasted a few hundred tabloid style programmes, for the media and general public, an advance publicity team and a champagne spraying, yellow jersey presentation complete with podium hostesses. It was also a hell of a race with MDCC riders filling the top three places on general classification; a podium place for the club would become much rarer in the years to follow. However, the biggest difference was the amount of local newspaper exposure the event achieved, culminating in it being the headline sports story in the following day's Herald Express and a centre spread feature 24 hours later. The key to this exposure and other razzamatazz elements lay in the early decision by the organising team to split the responsibilities of race organisation and event promotion, thereby ensuring that the club would have something tangible to show the sponsors that they had received some excellent publicity for their initial investment.

Armed now with a respectable book of press cuttings and publicity photographs, the club returned to Launa to outline expansion plans for the event and request an increase in the budget for 1982, with subsequent increases in funding as the event grew. With Launa now sold on the publicity benefits of a big bike race promotion the organising team embarked on their ambitious plan to elevate the event to national status.

Past financial constraints and limited organisational clout had restricted the Totnes/Vire's area of operation to Torbay and The South Hams but now there was freedom to cover a larger geographical canvas, with first Exeter and Newton Abbot added to the itinerary and, by 1984, Plymouth. The Classic was now a top class, three day, six stage affair and the event was being taken to the sponsor's potential customers, with city centre starts at peak shopping times, closed road criteriums and

ongoing media exposure which included regional T.V. and national newspaper coverage. There were pre event studio interviews, regular audio broadcasts and result updates in the quality broadsheets. The budget was such that star riders and national squads could have part or all of their expenses covered, while for others the very lucrative prize list was sufficient attraction.

The Launa now had a great presence on the road. It had its own Police Liaison Officer, co-ordinating squad car and Police outriders wearing their best leathers! Car dealerships competed to supply, free on loan, a fleet of vehicles for officials and publicity teams. St John's and The Red Cross worked side by side and followed the race in their ambulances and three neutral service vehicles provided mechanical cover for the riders. Publicity teams were kitted out in uniform clothing provided by one or other of the sponsors. They now distributed thousands of glossy illustrated programmes to roadside spectators and ensured that hundreds of full colour posters found their way into as many public places as possible. At the daily podium presentations each stage victor received a stage winner's jersey, champagne and flowers, while at the start of the next stage the overall leader would don a new yellow jersey and be introduced to the crowd. Each stage start and finish was meticulously set up and decorated by a dedicated road crew, who saw virtually nothing of the race but spent the duration humping barriers, scaffolding, banners and staging in and out of large vans.

Such was the scale of the operation – as it had now become - that it was consuming vast amounts of the key organisers' time, with the planning of the next edition starting one month after the current event's bills had been settled! In addition to those who were the main driving force in progressing the event there were over forty officials listed in the race manual, which ran to over twenty pages and of which two hundred were printed. Further, on the weekend of the event, dozens of other helpers were called in for duties as diverse as manning public address vehicles, providing road crew support or undertaking any number of administration tasks. Many of those involved, listed or not, came from beyond the membership of the club, travelling to Devon from London, Liverpool, Manchester, Bath, etc; without them it just couldn't have happened. By 1986 the event was firmly established and ranked as the fourth biggest stage race in the country and, given that the top three were organised by either professional agencies or regional associations of clubs, the MDCC could be justifiably proud that their event was the biggest single amateur club promotion in the country.

After six years of major involvement, Launa decided that the glittering promotion had achieved its marketing goal and it was time for them to give other local sports a slice of their sponsorship budget. However, it was not long before a new main sponsor, prepared to fund the event to the required level, had been attracted. Conscious of the significant contribution the race was making to the local economy – the value of accommodation, restaurant bookings and shopping alone were estimated to be approaching six figures – the Torbay Tourist Board agreed to support the club in its promotional efforts.

With a duty to local rate payers and a mandate to promote the attractions of the area, the Tourist Board requested that all the stages should start and finish in Torbay, that all three towns should host parts of the event and that efforts for further expansion should be sought. Thus, Brixham was added to the race itinerary, a short prologue,



held on the evening before the opening road stage, was introduced and a permit for another increase in the number of competitors was approved.

At a time when U.K. road races were generally restricted to an absolute maximum of sixty riders, the MDCC promotion now had the credibility to request, and be granted, a permit to allow the biggest field ever in the history of West Country bike racing. And so, on May 1<sup>st</sup> 1987, one hundred riders lined up for what was now branded The English Riviera Classic.

While the race had previously attracted British Cycling Federation Divisional teams, Centres of Excellence, one or two of the home nations and, most years, riders from Vire - as well as individuals from as far away as South Africa, New Zealand and the U.S.A. – the field now boasted national squads representing England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Add to these the Great Britain Youth team, a National Cycling Association of Ireland quartet, four Centres of Excellence and the very best of the country's club formations and the event could truly claim its Classic status. The importance of the event now called for some additional refinements; no longer could the organisers solely rely on finish line judges and manually produced stage results and general classification updates. Photo Finish Equipment, electronic timing, a computerised results programme and multi photocopying were all now employed which, at the time, were all cutting edge technology. The Torbay Tourist Board, appreciating the high profile of The Classic, further added to its refinement by hosting Civic Receptions for riders and officials, while the club provided split-stage catering for the hungry competitors.

As the promoting club, the Mid Devon generally exercised its right to field a team, with the years of The Classic broadly coinciding with – in terms of competitive talent - one of the club's golden eras. Nevertheless, after the clean sweep of the top three places in 1981, the best the club could manage was a runner up position by Peter Georgi in 1986 – when he finished equal on time with the overall winner – and a third place for Mike Parker in 1983, arguably a more worthy performance than his victory in 81, given the improved quality of the opposition. Brixham's Andy Hitchens also scored possibly the most impressive stage victory in the race's history when, after a solo break of nearly a hundred miles, he finished alone on Paignton sea front before an estimated crowd of over two thousand appreciative spectators; delighted to be applauding a local hero.

Although the event was now filling a very important roll on the National Calendar and attracting the cream of the country's amateur talent the organisers always looked favourably on applications from any Devon or Cornwall rider brave enough to try and get a place. Despite annually having to disappoint scores of entrants from all over the country – many of them holding 1<sup>st</sup> category licences – it was felt that “the locals” deserved to at least be represented in their region's flagship event. Therefore, without severely diluting the overall quality of the event, it was not unusual to see a lowly 3<sup>rd</sup> category rider rubbing shoulders with National Champions, record breakers, Internationals and those on the verge of professional careers. For many of the West Country boys The Classic was the pinnacle of their cycle racing experience – as near to the-big-time as they would ever get – and they rose magnificently to the occasion; riding courageously and acquitting themselves with great honour.



Traditionally held over the May Day Bank Holiday weekend, The Classic's three-day plus Friday evening prologue format remained unchanged until 1990 when a move to Easter was favoured. This resulted in the event becoming a "genuine" four-day race, with the prologue being axed in favour of an extra road stage on the Good Friday. There was also a one-off change to the event title, as local builders' merchants Inter-Line – a first time co sponsor the previous year - substantially increased their support. This year the banners read "The Inter-Line Riviera Classic", but call it what you like it was still one of the biggest and best bike races in the country.

To illustrate this, a measure of The Classic's status can be gauged by its inclusion in a full colour glossy poster style calendar, published by the Michellin Tyre Company. This annual publication listed the cream of international fixtures, such as the Tours of France, Italy and Spain, World Cup Classics like Milan-san-Remo and Paris-Roubaix and selected U.K. promotions including The Milk Race (Tour of Britain), Premier Calendar events and National Championships.

There was however one major casualty of The Classic's success and that was the continued participation of French riders from the MDCC's twinning partner, The Velo Club du Bocage. In the 1970s VCB members were well matched to their British counterparts in what was, with very few exceptions, a clubman's competition. By the early 1980s however The Classic was attracting the standard of rider who regularly competed on the international stage and our friends from Vire felt uncomfortable about not being able to put up a respectable showing against such high quality opposition. Thus there were many years when they simply stayed away. Even a one-off attempt one year to provide a level playing field, by organising a traditional twinning race as well as The Classic, failed to convince them that they would not be overshadowed, resulting in just one Frenchman turning up to represent the VCB.

Although the VCB failed to field riders who would have an impact on The Classic, one of their countrymen did pull off the only overseas victory in the history of the event. In 1988, riding for VC St.Etienne - a feeder club for the then Peugeot Professional squad, a very mature and experienced Pascal Guinot led from start to finish, supported by a team totally committed to his success. Guinot's victory earned him the prestigious front cover of Cycling Weekly, while the back cover photo was also devoted to the event.

Although the Frenchman dominated throughout in 1988, all the other editions saw the yellow jersey change hands several times, such was the ferocity of the competition and the prestige of leading it. However, to name the main protagonists in the Classic's history, or to detail the annual battles for supremacy, would have little meaning to those who read this in the future; suffice it to say that they were the crème de la crème of their era.

This then was the MDCC's Classic of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and, to get a feel of what it was like, picture this scene; a gloriously sunny Monday Bank Holiday afternoon on Paignton sea front, with a massive crowd straining against the barriers awaiting the final showdown. While an on-the-spot commentator keeps the public informed about developments out on the course, an advanced publicity team arrives to hand out the last of five thousand glossy programmes and prepare for the presentation ceremony. A small breakaway group is approaching the outskirts of the town; after a stage of over



one hundred undulating miles there's no way it's going to end in a bunch sprint! Enjoying the benefits of a rolling closed road – controlled by the police outriders – the riders speed through usually busy junctions without hindrance from non-race vehicles. The yellow jersey is back in the peleton and the breakaway's advantage is threatening his lead. First onto the promenade comes the police control car and the crowd lean forward in heightened anticipation of a dramatic finish. Now, the lead car, headlights blazing, horn blaring and flying roof-mounted red flags, turns onto the finishing straight as two police outriders, who have been flanking the leaders, pull away to leave the road clear for the final act to be played out. Now, snaking from side to side across the road come the first small group of riders, followed closely by a service vehicle, chief commissaries car and mobile publicity team. The commentator is going wild as wheel to wheel and shoulder to shoulder the riders jockey for position before exploding into an electrifying sprint. As they hit the line, a diminutive competitor, with Scotland emblazoned on his blue and white jersey, throws his hands up in ecstasy, while the others, heads hunched over the bars, have to settle for being near winners. The clock is now counting; can the yellow jersey cross the line before his advantage at the stage start has evaporated? Seconds later the reserve lead car accelerates down the finishing straight as thirty or more competitors fight out the minor places and a time check shows that the yellow jersey is safe! As stragglers cross the line, individually or in very small groups, the victory presentation and celebrations begin. The public address system blares out fanfares as the winners are escorted to the podium, jerseys and bouquets are presented, cameras flash, T.V. and radio crews continue to roll and journalists start filing their reports. The crowd have been entertained to a great free show, the sponsors are delighted, the riders have experienced a great event and the MDCC have again shown that, when it comes to organisation, they are, as an amateur cycling club without equal! In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, cycle racing didn't get much better than this.