

Essex Crusade III

4th-6th July 2008

Runwell Hospital Sports & Social Club
Nr Wickford, Essex.

The sign said "welcome to Runwell Hospital – home of the Third Essex Crusade". The thought of it sent a chill down my spine! In fact, the jeers and taunts from the inmates of the "maximum security hospital prison for the criminally insane" were hardly noticeable above the roar of exhausts and the screams of Rally goers...!

The truth is that the Rally site was miles away from the hospital, and the only people we saw were staff members going in and out of the main access road as they started and finished their shifts! The site owners had really gone out of their way to ensure that we had everything we needed to make this (their first, and Essex's fourth Rally), a successful event. The signage on the way to the site was a little sparse, but posting Marshalls on the main approach roads help to ensure that everyone found where we were (eventually).

The bulk of the preparation work had been completed by John Evans and his team on the Thursday before the event, so by Friday morning there was relatively little left to be done. Marquees erected (thanks Kevin), tea urns filled, Portaloos in place, trade stands set up and bands ready to Rock'n'Roll with their make-shift stage, the scene was set.

The first of the party goers had arrived a full day early – they were that keen to get going. Fortunately, we were able to accommodate them without being thrown off the site ourselves..! As the rising summer sun quickly burnt away the early morning mist, it very was obvious that today (Friday) was going to be a scorcher!

With volunteers manning the entrance gates and high-vis yellow jackets on the approach roads, Rally goers soon started arriving. Slowly at first, but as lunchtime approached, the camping field started to fill up nicely. Bikes were not allowed on the camping field, but true to the old tradition of "Essex Barrow Boys" Phil Stevens and others made literally hundreds of trips across the fields portering wheelbarrows full of camping equipment from bike to site!

There doesn't seem to be a really successful way to put up a tent (whilst wearing riding leathers) without breaking into a boot-filling sweat! So the first thing to do was to remove as many layers as possible – not a pretty sight at the best of times. But with modesty thrown out of the window (you know who you were), the tents, gazebos and marquees were soon erected and many happy weary travellers were on their way to the bar. It was there that I caught my first glimpse of the all new VSOC 15-year membership badges (nice one Malcolm).

As night started to fall, Friday's band "Reaper" www.reeper.co.uk struck up their first set, and what a set it was. Having the bands play on the back of a lorry trailer was an inspired idea. The open-air atmosphere of a "real rally" got people rocking in their boots. With the dust of a day's ride soon washed away, people were able to let their hair down (those of us who have any). There were many smiles and nods, and much shaking of hands and manly hugs from long lost friends and old familiar faces. Our European brothers and sisters had arrived by this time, and the Dutch and Belgians put their best feet forward and headed for the dance area. With pints of beer at only £2.50 (which is cheap by soft-southern standards), there were to be many sore heads come the following morning!

Without a formal ride-out planned for the Saturday (due to the horrendous traffic conditions in and around the mid-Essex area), many were to head off to Brentwood for the wedding of Tony Santos (VSOC National Events Organiser) and Helen his new bride, with Centre 19 being represented by Mr.K and his entourage. The weather leaving the site had turned against us, but by the time the bridal party had reached its destination, the sun started to shine and was to remain out for the rest of the day.

The remainder of Saturday was punctuated with the sound of bikes running on and off of the site, some in search of a mini-adventure, and others in search of Alka-Seltzer. The site kitchens coped brilliantly at breakfast (as they had done the previous evening), by putting on a very good menu for very little cash (shame about the toast though). The site was proving to be an excellent choice (well done Chaz & Nicky). The tea, milk and toilet rolls were lasting and the Portaloos were being regularly cleaned and maintained by John's merry band of volunteers (I won't name you all, but you know who you are – well done).

By mid-afternoon there were some very peculiar sights to be seen. The Doctors & Nurses theme sounded like a good idea at the time, but nothing could have prepared us for what was about to happen... About a third of the entire rally attendance had dress up and joined in the frolics and festivities. As the evening progressed, there were more blood-stained surgeons, consultant gynaecologists, modern matrons and naughty nurses than you could shake a tongue depressing stick at – and that was just the men! – the women were twice as bad! There was a short break in the disco for group photos before the Saturday's band – "3 Miles Hi" www.myspace.com/3milesHi struck up for another stomping session with a tremendous party atmosphere. The usual noisy "ride-through" was followed by Otto's ubiquitous cabaret and much drooping of trousers to Tom Jones' Delilah (something of an Essex anthem these days!).

Something had happened on the Sunday morning. Word had got out that the weather was likely to turn really nasty. The wind was starting to pick up, and many were packing away tents and loading their bikes before heading for breakfast. The rain we were promised didn't arrive until lunchtime, but as many rally-goers had hundreds of miles to cover, the site was already half empty by 10am. Most of the raffle prizes had been claimed and even Tosh had disappeared (as soon as his tank was fixed and he was able to put petrol in it again). Dave from the Outriders was still waiting for the AA van man, and the rest of us were left wondering where everyone had gone!

Sitting around the dinner table in the clubhouse after clearing down the tents & marquees and picking up what was left of the site rubbish, we were discussing how it all went and what the feedback had been from our (nearly) 400 guests. It was generally agreed that the site and staff had been excellent, the beer was cheap enough, the facilities were certainly up to scratch and the effort put in by John and his team was commendable. But what next? How could we make the next one even better? I can't wait for 2012 (isn't that the year of the London Olympics)??? - Roll-on 2012 and the *Fourth Essex Crusade*..!



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SKYNET.

Isn't that Lisa Simpson doing something unspeakable to Bart???