

Fred Whitton
saddleback CHALLENGE



CYCLING CLIMBS OF THE SADDLEBACK FRED WHITTON CHALLENGE

THE ROADS THAT MAKE THE EVENT

BY SIMON WARREN



Welcome to your exclusive guide to the climbs of the one and only Saddleback

Fred Whitton Challenge. Some events may be longer and some may gain more elevation, but – to put it simply – they’re not the Fred Whitton. The Fred is, and always will be, ‘The Daddy’ of them all. Set against the stunning backdrop of the Lake District, and ingeniously incorporating the majority of its famed passes, the relentless severity of this classic route will test any rider.

Setting off from Grasmere there’s a ten-kilometre warm-up then you hit the first hill of the day: the short but far from insignificant Holbeck Lane. The opening climb is always fun – half the field attack it like Alberto Contador, while the other half drop like lead balloons, then, of those who attack, 75% blow a gasket after about 200 metres, leaving the large bunch that set off together scattered all over the road. This natural ordering of the peloton creates groups of riders who often stick together for the whole event, as they form allegiances with competitors of similar ability.

Once over the first ridge, the next obstacle is the Kirkstone Pass – the first of the really big climbs. This is the easier side of the two and although never really steep, it’s a long one, set on a slope reminiscent of the great Alpine passes. There’s always a rabble of spectators at the top outside the Kirkstone Inn to cheer you on before you get stuck into the fast descent to the shores of Ullswater. It’s essential you find a good group to ride with here to keep out of the wind, but

don’t just sit in the wheels all the time – go and help out at the front too, you know it’s the right thing to do.

Up next is Park Brow and the shock of transferring from the flat to the initial slopes is a bit like coming out of hyperspace. The clattering of chains across sprockets echo around the hills as the necessary adjustments are made to tackle the climb. Once over the hill you must contend with the busy A66 into Keswick (which always seems to run into the wind), then pass through the town. A large crowd of well-wishers will greet you on the last roundabout out of Keswick, waving the riders off into the hills as if they’re heading off to war. Family members shout a tearful goodbye, because they’re well aware of the torment that awaits their loved ones – a torment that starts with the mighty Honister Pass. This road is well over 25% in many places and the orderly groups of riders that hit the base are soon shattered like particles in the Hadron Collider, zig-zagging across the road searching for a kinder gradient. This is the first point on the route that really stings the legs and causes damage you may never truly recover from.

The drop down the other side, especially if it’s wet, is one of the scariest in Britain. I hate it. It is lightning fast, the corners are tight and off-camber, and frankly it’s a relief when it’s over. Next there’s a feed stop just outside of Buttermere that is always somewhat feral and chaotic before the route heads to Newlands Pass. This is arguably the most beautiful climb in England; its single

shard of tarmac bisecting an ocean of green always blows my mind.

Next up it's time for Whinlatter Pass, which in contrast to all the other big passes, is forested the whole way up and so offers a bit of shelter. It's also never too steep, which allows you to spend more time in the saddle. Once dealt with you head round the back of the loop, and although there are no real stand-out climbs, there are plenty of little ones.

Each one robs the legs of some power, and none more so than Cold Fell. Wind direction makes a massive difference on this climb, and if it's in your face while you cross its barren upper slopes you'll be reduced to a snail's pace. After the final feed stop at Calder Bridge it's now time to face the twin perils of Hardknott Pass and Wrynose Pass, once you've got the slightly annoying climb of Bowerhouse Bank out of the way that is.

As you take the left-hand turn in Eskdale Green a sense of foreboding will envelope you. The mixture of excitement and trepidation that fills the body on the flat approach turns to fear as you first catch sight of Hardknott. It always demands a double-take – does that really

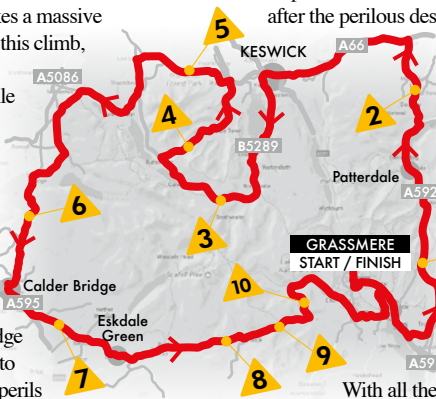
exist? Did they really build a road up there? Oh hell! Its savage right from the base. Through the first cattle grid, it's only 25% – I say only because there is much, much worse to come. It relaxes a touch in the middle, so take this opportunity to ready yourself for the onslaught ahead. The upcoming 30% ramp demands everything you have, and the wails of anguish from stricken riders can be heard cascading down into the valley below. Once through the slope returns to a more mild 20% then after the perilous descent down into

the valley you line up to tackle Wrynose Pass. This is the 'easy' side of Wrynose, but it is always tackled at a shade under walking pace as you nurse your now broken legs over its stiff slopes.

With all the big beasts tamed, it's time for the run in, but not until you've crossed a new climb for 2017, up to Blea Tarn.

Yet more 25% gradient is NOT what you want, but it's what you have, so just hope you can keep pedalling through it. Then, finally with this over it's time to head home and the rush

of adrenaline you get from knowing the worst is over gives you the necessary boost to finish the job. Good luck!



- 1 Kirkstone Pass
- 2 Park Brow
- 3 Honister Pass
- 4 Newlands House
- 5 Whinlatter Pass
- 6 Cold Fell
- 7 Bowerhouse Bank
- 8 Hardknott Pass
- 9 Wrynose Pass
- 10 Blea Tarn

LEGEND

UNDERSTANDING THE FACTFILE AND RATINGS

LOCATIONS

On each factfile you will see a small graphic of the 2017 Fred Whitton route and on that graphic, highlighted in white you will also see the location of each particular climb. On the map adjacent you will see in more detail the start **S** and finish **F** points for each climb and also how they fit on the route in relation to surrounding roads and towns.

TOP TIP

Each Factfile includes a brief tip to help you get to the top of it in the best shape, together with the climb's key statistics and of course the map to show where the climb starts and finishes. Also is the approximate time needed to ride each hill, timed over the distance marked, this time will be slow for some but fast for others, so see how you fair.

FACTFILE

TOP TIP Stick it in a low gear, stay seated, and spin through the flowing bends like a Grand Tour rider in the Alps.

LENGTH 3320m
HEIGHT GAIN 231m
AVERAGE GRADIENT 6.4%
MAXIMUM GRADIENT 15%
APPROX CLIMB TIME 13mins

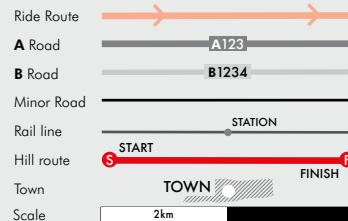


RATINGS

The climbs are rated from **1/10** to **10/10** within the context of the book. The rating is an amalgamation of gradient, length, the likely hostility of the riding conditions and the condition of the surface. All the climbs are tough, therefore **1/10** equals 'hard', and **10/10** equals 'it's all you can do to keep your bike moving'. Some will suit you more than others, the saying 'horses for courses' applies, but all the **10/10** climbs will test any rider.



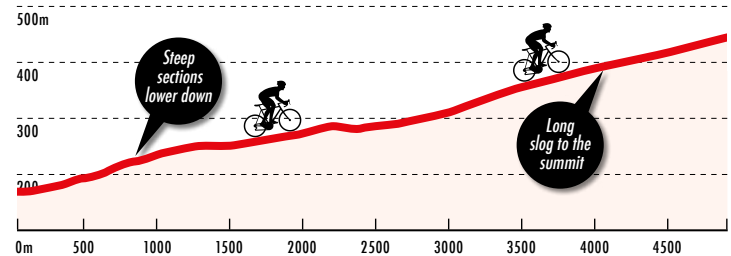
MAP KEY



KIRKSTONE PASS

TROUTBECK

Following the climb of Holbeck Lane, up from the shores of Lake Windermere, which like all the insignificant climbs on the route will add your fatigue at the end of the day, you drop through Troutbeck to join the A592, The Kirkstone Pass. This side of the mighty pass is significantly easier than the fearsome north face but it's still the first big challenge of the day and must be treated with respect. Of course, this early on the route the key is to be conservative, to ride well within yourself, and not get carried away trying to chase faster riders. On the lower slopes there are some stiff ramps of up to 16% gradient as the climb ebbs and flows, weaving through the trees hemmed in by robust stone walls. Climbing higher the trees fade but the stone walls continue as the road crosses the empty hillside towards the 'V' on the horizon. Set on a consistently testing but not overwhelming gradient the reminder of the climb allows you to settle into a nice rhythm all the way to the famous Kirkstone Inn at the summit.



FACTFILE

TOP TIP Set yourself a nice steady tempo and try to stay in a good size group to stay out of the wind on the upper part.

LENGTH 4900m

HEIGHT GAIN 273m

AVERAGE GRADIENT 5.5%

MAXIMUM GRADIENT 16%

APPROX CLIMB TIME 17mins

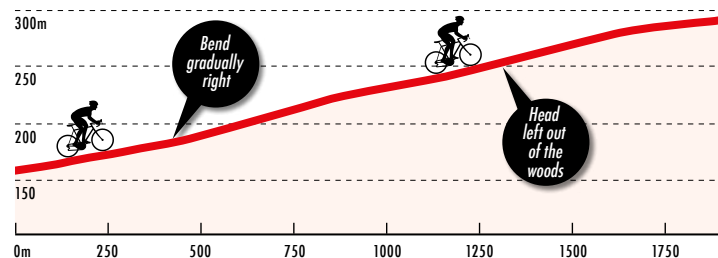




PARK BROW

ULLSWATER

If you've ridden wisely you will have sheltered in a big group along what is just about the only benign part of the route tracing the shores of Ullswater from the base of Kirkstone Pass. It's essential you use as little energy here and sit in the wheels as much as possible to stay fresh and out of the wind. After this long, pan-flat passage heading north, it's a shock to turn left, drop off the big chain ring and abruptly begin climbing. The swift introduction of the tough gradient maximises the impact of the transition, but as it's never that steep you soon acclimatise. Climbing away from the lake the road first kinks slightly left then bends right, allowing you to enjoy the views below while you head up the ridge. Riding into the trees ahead the slope eases slightly, then on exiting the wood it ramps up again. With the accumulative effort of the climb in your legs, this stretch bending left on the approach to Dockray will sting as you strain for the summit, so back off a bit to minimise its impact.



FACTFILE

TOP TIP Continue to ride conservatively, especially on the first part of the climb, then make good use of the descent.

LENGTH 1900m

HEIGHT GAIN 135m

AVERAGE GRADIENT 7.7%

MAXIMUM GRADIENT 11%

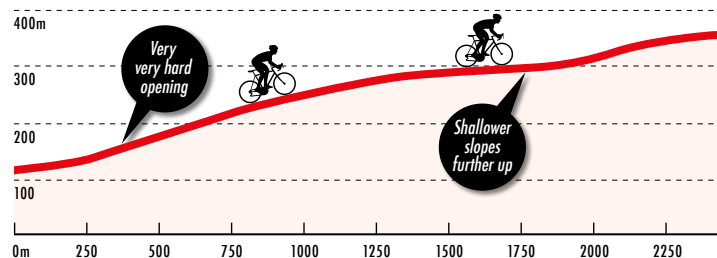
APPROX CLIMB TIME 8.5mins



HONISTER

SEATOLLER

Now things get serious. Everything up to this point has been the warm up, you should still be feeling fresh and ready to take on the world, because if not, you're going to be in big trouble. Well, actually, even if you are feeling fresh you're still going to be in big trouble, this is the Fred Whitton! Heading through Seatoller the road ahead bends left and almost right away ramps up to 25%. Click down to your smallest gear and pick your way up this savage incline running alongside the beautiful stream below, under the partial shade of the gnarled trees above. Keep your eyes peeled for riders unclipping in front of you as the gradient gets too much for them and try to pick the cleanest line out of the trees to where the gradient subsides. The middle section of the climb is very gentle allowing you to regain some composure before you get stuck into the last third, as ahead you will see a line of ant like riders inching upwards beneath the grandeur of the towering hills to the giant stone gates of the slate mine.



FACTFILE

TOP TIP Stick it in your lowest gear right from the start and try to avoid getting stuck behind riders who stop to walk.

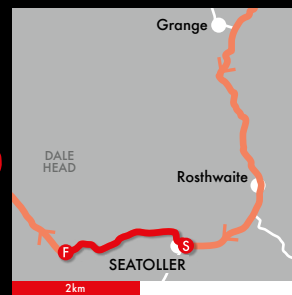
LENGTH 2375m

HEIGHT GAIN 246m

AVERAGE GRADIENT 9.9%

MAXIMUM GRADIENT 25%

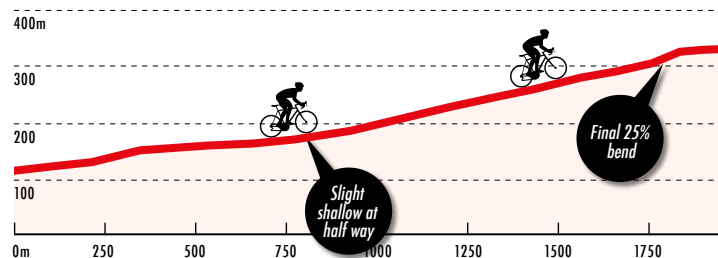
APPROX CLIMB TIME 13mins



NEWLANDS PASS

BUTTERMERE

After the first feed stop of the day comes my favourite climb on the route, the majestic Newlands Pass. Your legs will now be sore after climbing Honister and this will just make them feel worse. The narrow road rises almost immediately to 20% from Buttermere, bending left and right across an uneven surface. Past a clump of trees, the gradient eases and the landscape opens up. There's then a slight dip for a brief moment's rest before the hardest section. The road ahead bisects the epic grassy slope, climbing straight, long, and very hard. With the steep bank to the right and the abyss-like valley to the left, you will be dwarfed by the incredible scenery as the road rises up to a right-hand bend. Round this and it's steeper again, the surface clean but still bumpy and the road narrowing further, eventually levelling for the briefest of moments. You have just enough time here to size up the final 25% vicious right-hand turn that leads to the car park at the summit.



FACTFILE

TOP TIP Make good use of the shallower parts to get some rest before the slope rears up steep again.

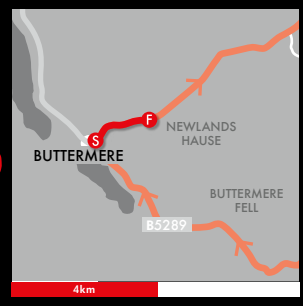
LENGTH 1905m

HEIGHT GAIN 205m

AVERAGE GRADIENT 10.7%

MAXIMUM GRADIENT 25%

APPROX CLIMB TIME 9mins



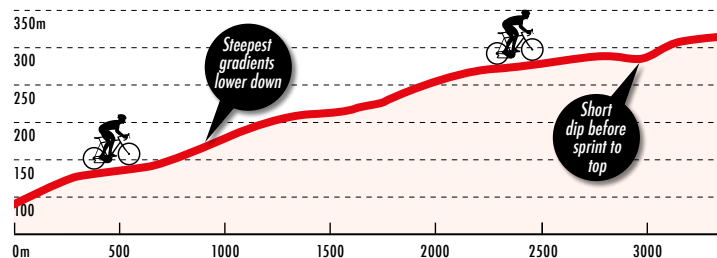


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WHINLATTER PASS

BRAITHWAITE

After the at times hair raising descent off the back of Newlands Pass you ride into Braithwaite and it's time to head up again, right away. I'm not saying this is an easy climb but it's the least fearsome of the major Cumbrian passes and a pure joy to ride, and also always attracts a huge gathering of supporters at the top, which is great for moral. Almost completely tree-lined, and kinking left then right, its steepest section comes right at the start, then after a punishing opening stretch, the gradient eases and the surface improves as the climb begins snaking its way between the beautiful tall conifers. The road levels out at Noble Knott before a small descent, and then another section of climbing takes you on to a flat past Mass Mill. One more dip leads to the final push, a section of 15% that finishes at the forest's visitors' centre. Short enough to attack with force and if there's a crowd you can do some showboating, this last stretch finishes off a beautiful climb of unique character in the UK.



FACTFILE

TOP TIP Stick it in a low gear, stay seated and spin through the flowing bends like a Grand Tour rider in the Alps.

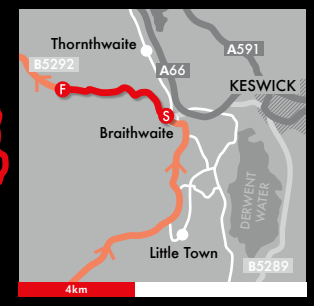
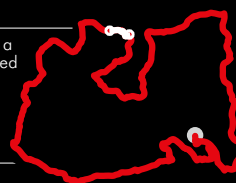
LENGTH 3320m

HEIGHT GAIN 231m

AVERAGE GRADIENT 6.4%

MAXIMUM GRADIENT 15%

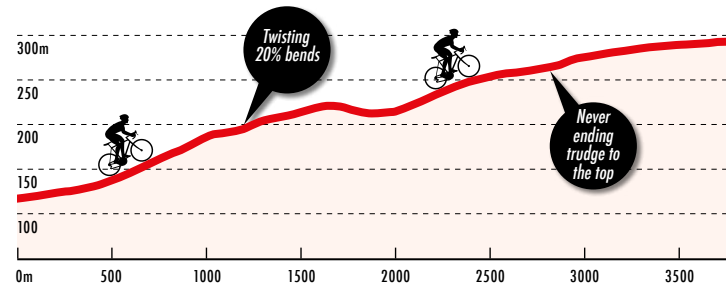
APPROX CLIMB TIME 13mins



COLD FELL

ENNERDALE BRIDGE

When you do eventually reach the top of Cold Fell you still won't believe it – the climb cries wolf so many times that you simply resign yourself to the fact that you'll be climbing for a very long time. Isolated round the back of the course, and exposed to the elements, the wind can hurt you here more than the gradient, so be ready to grind. It starts with the steep, straight ramp of Scarny Brow, which then eases as it approaches some woods on the left. Levelling past the trees you arrive at a wonderful set of sweeping bends, as kind on the eyes as they are hard on the legs. Push through, cross a cattle grid, and head out on to the open moor. Here you'll see the road disappear into the distance and it's really tough to the brow, but once over this, things ease up. As the road rounds the next corner, once again it disappears over yet another horizon. Still climbing, round the next right and you're almost there – it's just a few hundred metres before you top-out just shy of a small wood.



FACTFILE

TOP TIP Give it some welly up the harsh ramps then try and find some company on the exposed upper slopes.

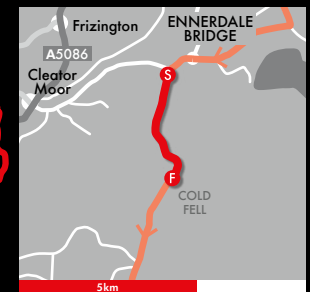
LENGTH 3750m

HEIGHT GAIN 167m

AVERAGE GRADIENT 4.8%

MAXIMUM GRADIENT 21%

APPROX CLIMB TIME 14mins

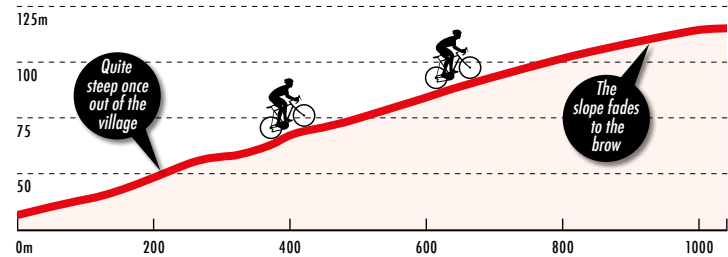




BOWERHOUSE BANK

SANTON BRIDGE

The moment you leave the last feed stop at Calder Bridge, you'll have one thing on your mind, Hardknotts Pass. You will have glanced at the profile and seen that between the feed and the famous climb it appears there's a hiatus in the severity of the profile, a chance to relax and recuperate maybe before the onslaught begins. Looks like, but there isn't. This is the Fred Whitton, every lump takes its toll, every single one and this climb up Bowerhouse Bank is no different. Physiologically I have always struggled with it as my mind is focused on the giants ahead and I just don't need another climb in my way, but here it is and it has to be crossed. Leaving the centre of Santon Bridge the road tips up and gradually increases in pitch as it turns slightly right. Here's the steepest slope and as you'll be tired it will feel like an effort, just take it as steady as you can to save all you can for further on. Winding up through the woods it's a beautiful road, just an unwelcome obstacle at this point on the route.



FACTFILE

TOP TIP No heroics here, there's big trouble ahead, just get to the top using as little effort as possible.

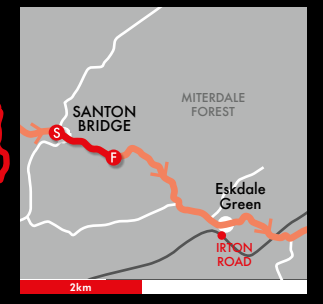
LENGTH 1040m

HEIGHT GAIN 86m

AVERAGE GRADIENT 8.6%

MAXIMUM GRADIENT 12%

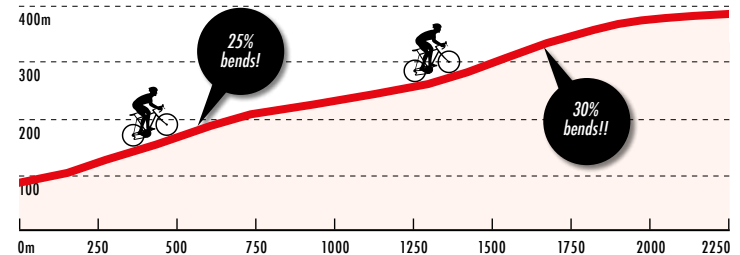
APPROX CLIMB TIME 4mins



HARDKNOTT PASS

ESKDALE GREEN

With close to 100 miles in the legs, few sights are worse than that of Hardknott Pass cutting its way across the ridge ahead of you. The king of climbs, and arguably the hardest road in the land, this amazing sliver of tarmac is why you are here and you must conquer it. Passing the phone box at the base, the point of no return, it's very steep into a small woodland and over a cattle grid, and then you see the enormity of your task, and shudder. Enter the first of two sets of brutal switchbacks and wrench body and bike through the 25% corners. What follows is a brief levelling, where you can take a drink and stretch burning limbs before the onslaught begins once more. The second set of switchbacks are steeper still, and these now 30% slopes will have you straining every sinew as your front wheel desperately searches for a kinder gradient and weaves all over the road fighting to stay upright. If you can ride this, you can ride anything. Just keep going, then head down the terrifying descent into the serenity of Wrynose Bottom.



FACTFILE

TOP TIP Search out every inch of lesser gradient and make use of it, it's all about survival from start to finish.

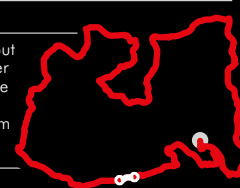
LENGTH 2250m

HEIGHT GAIN 298m

AVERAGE GRADIENT 13.3%

MAXIMUM GRADIENT 33%

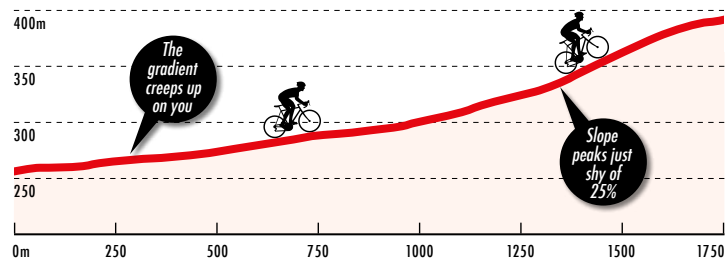
APPROX CLIMB TIME 15mins



WRYNOSE PASS

COCKLEY BECK

After the chaos of descending Hardknott is behind you, and you've wallowed in the utter serenity of Wrynose Bottom it's time to prepare yourself for the second part of the famous Hardknott-Wrynose double bill. This, thankfully, is by far the easier side of Wrynose and also no way near as tough a prospect as Hardknott was but it's still a brute. The slope begins to rear up ever so slightly as it heads towards it's vicious finale, little by little the gradient increases forcing you to click down the gears until you reach that point which is all too familiar on this ride, the end of the cassette. It's now down to brute force as you zig-zag upwards, searching for a kinder slope whilst keeping an eye out for oncoming traffic. With a maximum pitch just shy of 25% forward momentum will slow to a little over walking pace but this final stretch is mercifully short and once the brow comes into view the slope does begin to relax, allowing you to finish with a slight flourish before embarking on the lightning fast descent.



FACTFILE

TOP TIP Just like on Hardknott, search out the slight decreases in gradient and use them to keep you heading forward.

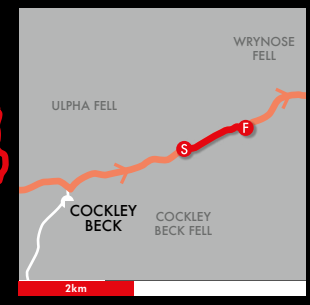
LENGTH 1750m

HEIGHT GAIN 142m

AVERAGE GRADIENT 8%

MAXIMUM GRADIENT 25%

APPROX CLIMB TIME 7mins

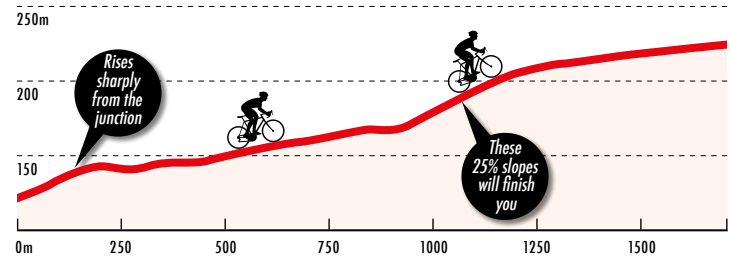




BLEA TARN

LITTLE LANGDALE

This year the sadistic organizers have decided to tweak the route and squeeze one more climb in, and not just a little bump, a proper brute of a road. At this point in the ride you need this extra ascent like a hole in the head and I predict it to be littered with broken bodies, dragging their bikes upwards and cursing its inclusion. Although not quite as spectacular as its northern flank, this route up to the tiny Blae Tarn is a great little road which on any other day you'll love, just not today. It kicks up sharp from the valley climbing hard right away, twisting a little, then settling down to rise very gradually until just after the half way point. It's here that you'll catch sight of the 25% gradient sign and your head will drop. In front of you the slope rears up and bends right, getting steeper and steeper. Lying out of sight, you expect the worse but once round the corner, thankfully it's almost over, you just have to drag yourself to the cattle grid sign and that's the top.



FACTFILE

TOP TIP Just stare at the road about 10 meters ahead and count the pedals revs until you reach the top, 1, 2, 3, 4...

LENGTH 1725m

HEIGHT GAIN 98m

AVERAGE GRADIENT 7.2%

MAXIMUM GRADIENT 25%

APPROX CLIMB TIME 7.5mins





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