

# The only way is Essex

WORDS Anna Gardiner

PHOTOS RideLondon



For 2022, Essex stepped into the breach left by Surrey's exit from RideLondon, Britain's largest sportive. **Anna Gardiner**, in her first 100-mile ride, joins in the fun...

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century sportive is one of those events within the cycling community where you don't feel you're a proper cyclist until you've completed one. So what better way to get my first under my belt than to ride May's RideLondon-Essex 100, not the toughest 100 in the country but without question the biggest?

The 100, along with other events across the weekend, including a three-day women's pro race and FreeCycle family ride in the city centre, was resurrected this year. It followed an uncertain period, brought on by both the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced the event's cancellation in 2020 and 2021, and the withdrawal of both Surrey County Council as the host of the sportive and Prudential as a deep-pocketed title sponsor. It was originally established in 2013 as a legacy event of the 2012 London Olympics, and that version of the 100-mile sportive traced the tracks of the road race through Surrey, up the likes of Box Hill and Leith Hill. For 2022, the sportive, in its longest configuration, remains 100 miles on roads closed to traffic, but now heads from central London and Victoria Embankment into the leafy ▶



lanes of Essex, on a course that might lack the iconic climbs of RideLondon mark 1 but is by no means flat, with 1,100m of climbing. Across the three distances – 100, 60 and 30 miles – over 20,000 people were set to take part, with 23% of starters in the longest event women – up 40% from last time.

### Triple whammy

The RideLondon 100 would be the final event that I'd need to complete the London Classics triptych, three physical challenges in the capital made up of the 100, Swim Serpentine (a two-mile swim in Hyde Park's famous body of water) and the London Marathon. At the outset I'd pinned the swim as the toughest event for me, but having ticked it off my to-do list it was the 100-mile ride of RideLondon that was beginning to feel like the biggest hurdle, particularly as ride day barrelled towards me and my training for it had barely spluttered into life. Three hours was the most I'd managed on any single ride all year – around half the time of what would be needed in London. I'm still new to this sport and I don't yet feel in my comfort zone with it, especially when it comes to riding in large groups – which is perhaps the defining characteristic of RideLondon. To prepare I'd taken myself off to my local race track, which has helped sharpen my skills in this respect. While I may not yet have some of the bike skills needed for these events, I do at least have an idea of the dark places your mind must visit on long endurance events and I'm a firm believer in mind over body.

Which all meant that, as I made my way along the salubrious streets of Westminster to the start line, I had the confidence and mental toughness to sustain me over the next 100 miles. Below clear blue skies, if not quite the temperatures at this hour of the morning to match, thousands of us clipped into our pedals amid good natured and slightly nervous chat before we got underway in earnest. Clipping in followed a mass wobble as hundreds of riders crammed in cheek by jowl tried to avoid a domino calamity, though it took just a mile or so before everybody was spaced out nicely and relaxed into the ride.

Having skipped breakfast, I soon began to think about when I should delve into the myriad foods stashed in my jersey pockets. As a vegan I have learned not to get caught out by the lack of suitable nutrition at feed stations. At the only other sportive I'd done, several weeks previously, I ruefully watched everybody else tuck into cake while I had to make do with a banana.



With distances from 8 to 100 miles, there's a ride for everyone



## “After skipping breakfast, I soon began to think about when I should delve into my food stash”

You'll soon be out into the leafy Essex countryside

These musings on food were cut short when I suffered an untimely flat tyre at mile four as we descended into an underpass. I did a make-do inflation just to get me out of the tunnel but once I was into daylight the big tear in my tubeless tyre was obvious, with glue escaping through the hole. Where I might have stored a spare inner tube was taken up with, yes, food, so I was delighted when Alan, an event marshal, swooped in to my rescue, spinning my wheel until the glue sealed and advising me to limp on until reaching better-equipped mechanical service. I thought fitness might be my only impediment to completing the London Classics this year and hadn't bargained on a mechanical nightmare potentially being my undoing.

When I managed to look up from the road while avoiding debris and cat's eyes, we were soon deep into the countryside. Passing through a green avenue of trees with hints of sunshine piercing through, I saw that Epping Forest (20 miles into the ride) was stunning. Aside from a hum and clatter of bikes moving at pace, it was a hushed atmosphere. A couple of inclines got my heart rate up, though nothing compared to the Wiltshire hills at home.

### Splash and dash

The first official stop didn't come until 32 miles in and, when I got there, my heart fell as I saw a lengthy queue. The glue appeared to be holding in my tyre, though, and as my RideLondon app was tersely informing me that at this pace it was touch and go whether I'd make the cut-off, I decided to keep going.

While the sportive mostly occupied both sides of the roads, there was usually plenty of room for

23%  
The proportion of female cyclists who entered the 100-mile event







**460K**  
The number of participants who have taken part in RideLondon



## “I hadn’t bargained on the elevations ramping up on the final third of the course”

everyone and I never felt worried about a collision with other riders, which had been foremost in my mind beforehand as someone who largely rides solo. There was a stretch through one town where bollards herded us onto a single lane, which meant no overtaking. It was only a problem to those who had come here to race: people who bulldozed their way around the outside knocked the occasional bollard over. The rest of us simply acquiesced to a few moments of respite and soaked up the attention of the people on the roadside who’d come out to cheer us on.

The miles flew by, helped in no small way by the road closures, which gave us the green light to do that thing motorists mundanely accuse us of all the time – skipping red lights. One incident – a medical one – would bring us to a halt, however, and we filed through quietly, sending solidarity to the affected rider.

At 50 miles I took advantage of the second feed station to top up water bottles and use the facilities. I’m not a cyclist who typically enjoys stopping. I find getting back on after relaxing for 10 minutes a fairly arduous ordeal, so these stops were literally a splash and dash. Other riders in less of a hurry than me, and happy to make a day of it, were enjoying picnics with friends, and clearly happy to squeeze every drop of enjoyment they could out of this day of closed roads.

My focus was on the challenge, of completing the distance to the best of my abilities and to earn my sit-down and pizza at the finish. For others, it’s about completing their quickest-ever century, and for those all-important Strava bragging rights. That’s what works so well with this event: its ability to satisfy everyone’s goals.

Who doesn’t enjoy cycling on traffic-free London streets?

Post pee break, I left sharpish, as a threatening rain cloud overhead looked set to deposit its contents over my head, in defiance of a weather forecast that looked to have ruled it out. Riding in the wet is not something I look forward to at this early stage in my cycling development, though having done a triathlon in a monsoon last year, I at least have the experience when it does arrive. I took this squall on the chin, helped out by the course, which was at this point free of any steep descents or technical corners.

### I got five on it

After a brief conflagration, a pinch of the back tyre and a couple of gels I decided to push on through to the end, not pausing at the final feed station at 70 miles. By this point I’d stopped looking at the time – barring complete mechanical or physical disaster, I was in no danger of being outside the cut-off. My riding companion went a step further and upped the stakes, saying that if we cracked on at our current pace, we’d finish in under six hours. I nearly fell off my saddle in shock – I’d hoped for around seven. Game on! I could feel my race face descend and put my head down, taking no prisoners.

I hadn’t bargained, however, on the elevations ramping up during the final third of the course. They weren’t big climbs but relentless overpasses and long drags that hit harder during the final stages of a long ride. By this point we were out of the countryside and back into London suburbia and A-roads, which probably also played a part in sapping my morale.

The last few miles were a real slog, with hunger beginning to knock and cramping in my hamstring. The crowds started to build, right up to the finish at Tower Bridge and the wild cheers on the line is one of those memories that I’ve bottled to sniff in future events when the going gets tough. Despite a stiff neck and jelly-like legs, I still felt better than I have after any marathon or triathlon. As I collected my medals, which was less of a fanfare for completing the London Classics than I’d hoped, my Strava updated and I was elated to see that moving time was 5.55hrs, at an average pace that I’d never achieve in ‘real life’ conditions.

I am aware that many of the more experienced riders in this community don’t rate this Essex route as highly as the Surrey route. There aren’t the big, iconic climbs, so it’s probably easier, but you still get the closed roads, the crowds and the London finish, and if an easier route makes cycling more accessible, that can only be a good thing in my book. [plus](#)



Writer Anna has now ticked off the three London Classics events