

Lost Stories from Hog Hill. (The Redbridge Cycle Centre)

This is the story of my accidental involvement in the building of the Redbridge Cycle Centre and unintentional involvement with 2012 Olympics.

I put a short reply to Chris Dines report on the LVRC (League of Veteran Racing Cyclist) race at Hog Hill, which got me reminiscing on those early day at Hog Hill when I found myself as the caretaker manager before Redbridge officially, took over the running of the centre. When Eastway (Lea Valley Cycle Race Circuit) closed I was temporarily employed by British Cycling to find venues and coordinate the running of events displaced by the Olympic development on the old Eastway site. This meant that when the "Eastway Users Group" pressured to open the circuit as soon as enough had been built for the Youth Club to use on Saturdays and Sundays, I found myself in charge of a small group of construction workers huts and 500 m of track which is now know as the alpine loop. This was a lot better than the two containers and a deck chair I had on the earlier temporary circuit on the Albert Dock in North Woolwich. I would turn up fire up the generator and check the septic tank to see if it needed draining, something that needed doing regularly, as it had been built on a spring that regularly caused over spill. This disruption of the local water course became the first dispute with the local farmer who accused us of flooding his field. This led to further delays in the construction as a spring had to be diverted to fill an old drained cow pond, thus feeding a small stream that followed the course of the road.



The deck chair I had on the earlier temporary circuit on the Albert Dock in North Woolwich.



The Youth Club trying out Hog Hill early days.

The next major delay came when the environmental survey discovered that a pond in the middle of the lower circuit contained Crested Newts which are a protected species. Thus, work on the lower circuit had to be stopped until the newts had been counted and a protected zone set up (we had 465 newts). I later discovered that the

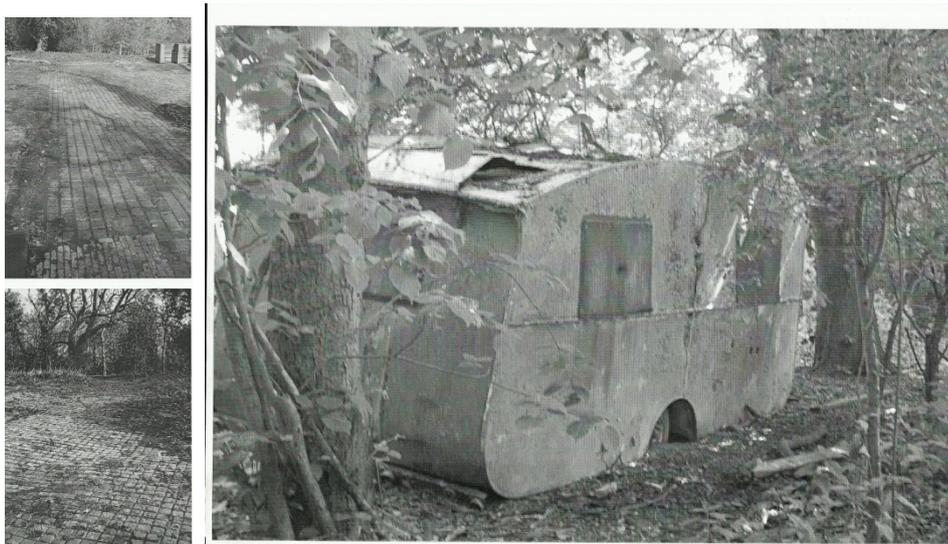
pond had been created in the 1970s for the newts that had been displaced from Fairlop when an old gravel pit was landscaped as a golf course and boating lake. In those early days apart from the youth club and a few curious local clubs I was over seeing an empty building site. I did manage to persuade some members of GS Avanti cycling club to ride some make shift Time Trials thus it was that Dave Marshal christened 'death corner'. It was during this early development that the severity of the climb was discovered and we entered into negotiations over how to soften the climb unfortunately the builders where restricted by the planning regulations imposed by the Crown Estate the land owners. We did manage to reduce the gradient from 1 in 9 to 1 in 10 still a beast of a climb at the end of an hour's race making for a tough finish.



Early days in the construction of the Lower circuit.

Eventually Redbridge took over the circuit and appointed a full-time manager Ian Coles and between us we got the finished circuit up and running. After the pomp and ceremony of the official opening we got down to establishing a circuit ethos. It was during these early days that the myth of the Hoggenberg cobbles was born. In the early days we were thinking up names for different parts of the circuit. We found a battered old caravan hidden in small wood at the bottom of the circuit this became the "Scary Caravan" on Beastway Mountain Bike trail. Trevor Madden jokingly suggested if the climb was cobbled it called be on a par with a classic berg on one early season continental classic. Thus, the nick name Hoggenberg was born. It was at this time I was exploring the site and during one of my forays I came across the site of "Hog Hill House" that was in the adjoining nature reserve. At the back of the site was an old, cobbled courtyard I extracted one of these and this became the infamous Hoggenberg cobble that is presented to the winner of the LVRC Hoggenberg classic.

The rumour about building a new cut through even steeper than the finishing climb became part of those early day, so Ian put a story on the circuit web site that Redbridge's twin Town in Flanders was to proved the circuit with a section of Pave that was to be broken up to make way for a new high speed railway. This story was put out on 1st April the result was an official Email from British Cycling H/Q to inform us that they had to approve the laying of cobbles on a road circuit. Several others got in touch to confirm this story they had all swallowed the joke. Ian had to write a disclaimer on the web site. The irony is that the idea of a new cut through stuck, and eventually along with the other suggestion to improve the circuit such as lighting and a BMX track, have been put in place. These new improvement only came about after the Crown Estate extended the land lease so that Redbridge could raise the money (not a fictitious donation from Flanders).



Hoggenberg Cobbles and the Scary Caravan

Lost Stories from Hog Hill (continued).

Hog Hill becomes an Olympic/Paralympics training venue.

After much haggling with the ODA over how the cycle centre at Hog Hill was to be use during the Olympics/Paralympics it was agreed that the circuit was to be open to the public in the afternoons and the Olympic riders would use it in the mornings. The Olympic Committee wanted exclusive use of the circuit for the duration of the Olympics and Paralympics this brought about violent protests from the Users Group. It was argued that the circuit had been built because the Olympics had closed the old Eastway and Hog Hill was a replacement venue and to close it to the public during the Olympics was a breach of the condition agreed before closing Eastway. The Users Group had a very strong influence in high places due to Michael Humphreys there spokes person, thus they got the site split with the changing rooms and clubroom end of the clubhouse being enclosed with security guards checking anyone entering. Only one member of staff was given security clearance to enter this end of the building the rest of us had a limited security pass allowing us on the site to use the office and the workshop and bike stores. The riders would use the secure area to change and as a rest area they would then use a 13km circuit around the local lanes. When the Olympic riders where on site no members of the public could use the circuit we had extra security at the gates to check passes, after mid day the riders would leave and the public could use the circuit. All well and good but in reality the flaws in this arrangement appeared on the first day.

1. The local youth cycling club LUYCC, wanted to act as leaders to show the riders the route but that didn't suit the powers to be "too much of a security risk".
2. The only workshop for bike repairs was in an unsecure part of the site so out of bounds for rider and their mechanics.

3. All vending machines food available for rides/officials had to be Olympics branded Coke Cola McDonalds. All the sites own vending food sources etc. had to be hidden behind screens.
4. Riders had to be transported to the site on official busses.

The first training day a small group of local riders appeared at the gate waiting for the riders to come out on to the training circuit. The Lorries with the bikes arrived, the trainers and mechanics arrived, we wait the riders would be arriving in busses soon. We waited no busses we waited still no busses the mechanics got the bikes set up the trainers got fed up with drinking Coke and moved into our office for a cup of tea/coffee and watch the Olympics on our TV. Still no riders arrived then after nearly two hours a message that the busses had just turned off the M1 and would be in Manchester soon. Local knowledge couldn't be trusted British Cycling had provided the drivers with a route map directing them to BC H/Q at the Manchester Velodrome, thus ended the first days training. The Colombian mechanic used the time to re-cable his riders bikes using, the out of bounds workshop and our supply of cables, after making enquires as to where the local cycle shop (Ciclos Uno). The official transport wouldn't take them there.

The following day the Lorries arrived, but where empty the busses arrived empty and the rides rode out on their own and met up at the gate with the local gang and the riders from the smaller countries with only one or two riders formed a typical train group with local hopefuls joining in. The big countries rode out on their own with the team cars behind, from then on the official transport would turn up empty until the Paralympics when the riders used the circuit rather than going into the lanes of Essex, for safety reasons.

The Olympic committee had also decreed that local volunteers could not be trusted to sign post the training circuit so they had appointed a young Australian official to do this task every morning. First day he found his way round with help from the local riders who had devised the route. All was well but after a couple of days he got a bit lacks, in his hurry to get round the circuit he left the car to put up a sign. To save time he had left the key in the car with the engine running. Unbeknown to him it was in the entrance to the largest illegal traveller's site in England. Whilst he was walking across the road to put the sign on a post he heard his car driver off down the lane. Needless to say it was the last he saw of his first official car, so they provided him with an official Mountain Bike which went the same way a few days later. His excuse was that it was a quiet English country lane not down town New York. We pointed out that these where Essex country lanes, and there where areas that you treat with care, he never did get the subtle difference.

The security of the site was provided by G4s who had all night security in place, two young African lads who had a small gazebo as a base and had to patrol the site all night. These night time vigils led to the start of the Hog Hill ghost stories. One morning we arrived to find one of the guards in a state he had seen a ghostly pair of legs walking around the circuit in the night, he also said that a herd of Antelope came out of the woods every night. We never found out what was behind the ghostly legs but the Antelope turned out to be Deer that have moved across the road from the Hainault Forest. We had our suspicions about the Deer, as soon after we opened we

had found a dead deer that had been hit by a car on the lower circuit and suspected they regularly visited the site. What we didn't realise was that we had our own resident herd hidden in the woods. As with the Hoggenberg April fools prank, the idea of the site being haunted took hold. Soon other ghostly phenomena were being reported, on one occasion I was operating the photo finish at a race, another judge took a photo with his camera. On the photo finish there was one lone rider crossing the line when we checked the image from the other camera there appeared two riders a second ghost ride was crossing the line in the opposite direction. Was it a reflection in the window? Never the less it started a number of fake ghost pictures such as a headless rider on a trainer bike in the Gym. Some old sacking that had got blown in the trees behind the Club house, from a certain angle became a ghostly monk beckoning as the sacking was blown about in the wind.

During the Olympics I was only required to be on site for the afternoon and evenings when the site was open to the public, this meant that I missed out on meeting the riders, but I could get a morning ride in before work. I had devised my own 20 miles loop which didn't go on the Olympic training route. To get back to the circuit there is only one way that avoids going through Hainault town centre so I had to follow the Olympic training route for about five miles. Most days I got my timing right and missed any groups that might still be out on the road only on one occasion did I miss time it I looked over my shoulder at Navstock to see the Belgium squad in team formation with following car rapidly approaching. I let them past but soon after them was the add-hock group of lesser Nations lead by members of the LVYCC. It was "come on Smiffy get on" I tried to drop back but one of the South African mountain bike team hand slung me into the pack. Over the five miles back to Hog Hill if I tried to drop back he pushed me back in and we arrived back as a group.

Quote from my diary:

Tuesday 31st July 2012.

I went for a ride in the morning as I was working in the afternoon and evening. I went round the Olympic training route on the way back I met up with a small group of riders from South Africa we went back to Hog Hill together a hard finish to my ride. Working until 8:00 as there was no racing it was quiet, so we got away early 47 miles.

I scoured my diary this is the only time I got directly involved with the Olympic training in fact for all the disruption it caused it was such a short period of time. There was a temporary army camp set up in the Hainault Forest Country Park that took over a year to dismantle with that section of the Park out of action for all that time. Fortunately Hog Hill got up and running as normal very soon after the last Paralympics rides had left. About this time the local Farmer started to complain again this time it was not that our water was flooding his field, that problem had been solved with the creation of a new pond. This time it was our Rabbits that had invaded his field and destroyed his crops. Until the Crown Estate had paid him compensation to lease the land to Redbridge Council our rabbits were his rabbits, but that's not how farmers see things. As had happened with the Japanese Knot Weed at Eastway, we found out that we had unintentionally broken the law. What had

happened with the Knot weed was that we had allowed Mountain bikers to ride through the areas infested with knot weed without decontaminating the bikes afterwards. This spread broken stems from the plants which can take root where they fall. The intentional planting the Knot Weed is illegal with a possible £1000 fine if prosecuted. The Olympic Development took up the tab for this during the first stage of their decontamination of the sites 8 hectors of knot weed. Unknown to them it had been encourage by the mountain bike trails and the regular burning of patches by the previous manager (Japanese Knot Weeds natural habitat is a volcanic caldera where it is regularly burnt by hot ash which encourages new growth).

Back to the Hog Hill rabbits, Ian at first thought the farmer was being a bit of a complaining nuisance but Redbridge legal department pointed out that we did have responsibility for animals on the Hog Hill site and rabbits are considered a pest that must by law be controlled. They couldn't be trapped, as that was illegal, we had had the RSPCA investigating traps set on the Eastway site I remembered. Thus, it was Ian hired a gunman too discreetly keep a nightly vigil which he did free of charge as long as he could sell the rabbits he shot to a local butcher. Thus, as we lock up at night the rabbit shooter moved in with his lights and snipers riffle.

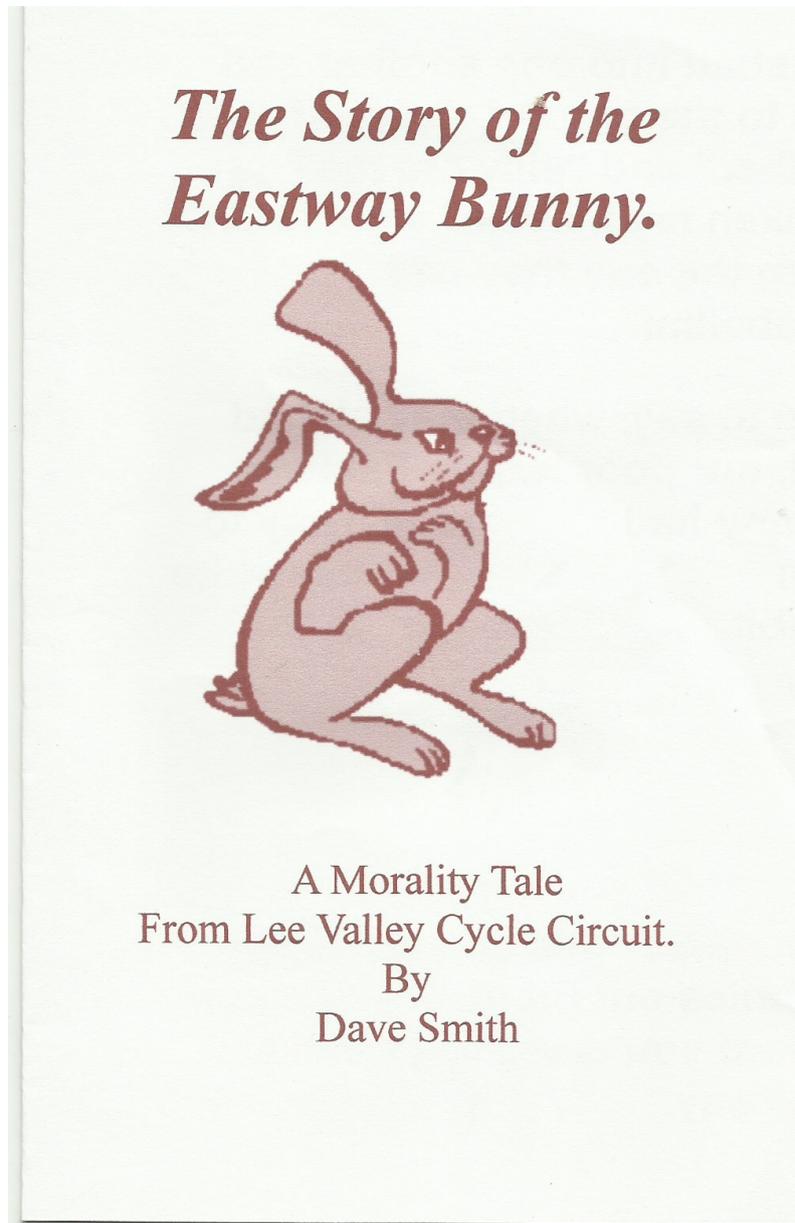
Suddenly my story flits back to the long lost Eastway, the one animal that frequented both Eastway and Hog Hill was the Rabbit were as the Eastway Urban Rabbits were relatively safe, Hog Hills rural rabbits are a pest and had to be destroyed. We had a large rabbit warren at Eastway on opening up for an early shift you would be confronted by 20 to 30 rabbits scampering around the site, on sunny morning they would lay out on the track to warm themselves. That was until we had an outbreak of myxomatosis which left the rabbit population of Eastway devastated it had only started to recover when the bulldozers moved in for the Olympics.



The Sad demise of the Eastway Rabbit.

The Eastway rabbits became legendary after one caused havoc during a Thursday League Race. Dick Wall one of the regular LVRC riders swerved to miss a rabbit

causing a number of riders to follow him into the Channelsea River which dissected the site. Unfortunately, in the mayhem that followed the poor rabbit was killed hit by the bunch, this led to "The Story of the Eastway Bunny".



I was also plagued with Rabbits on the Dockland temporary site. I got the fanciful idea that they had hidden in one of the containers to escape the bulldozers. The truth is they must have been there all the time like urban foxes they are less persecuted on derelict sites than in the countryside and breed "like RABBITS".