



(Left and below) The club's annual Santa Ride raises funds for the local hospice, and this year got the club onto the front page of the local newspaper. Meanwhile, Stourbug's challenge ride each summer raises funds for Diabetes Research. There's also a birthday ride, to celebrate the club's founding.



Photos: John Plant

# STOURBUG

**FORMED JUST SIX YEARS AGO, THIS WEST MIDLANDS CLUB NOW HAS OVER 300 MEMBERS. HOW? DAN JOYCE SPOKE TO CLUB CHAIR JOHN PLANT ABOUT ITS BEGINNER-FRIENDLY FOCUS**

**L**osing weight must be one of most common New Year's resolutions. Often the alcohol-fuelled intentions fizz away like the next morning's Alka-Seltzer. But at a West Midlands party six years ago, the seeds were sown for new cycling club.

'There were comments about somebody's weight,' club chair John Plant told me. 'And a group of ladies challenged each other to cycle from Stourbridge to Stratford. It snowballed from there.'

The ladies formed a club that January and affiliated to CTC. On 12th May the same year, 33 of them completed a 45-mile ride to Stratford upon Avon. There were tears at the finish; these were not cyclists with a capital C but beginners with bikes.

'They were a bunch of ladies who saw cycling as a way of getting fit, losing weight, and enjoying the social side of cycling,' said John. 'Russell Eden, a cyclist and a friend of friends who took the role of chairman at that stage, organised a programme of events and training rides for them.'

The beginners enjoyed their cycling and stuck with it. And perhaps because of their own experiences, the club continues to cater for beginners. 'Nobody gets left behind,' said John. 'There's a rear rider on every ride. It's very different from the clubs we see out with people on the back struggling.'

There are rides specifically aimed at new cyclists. 'One of our members is organising a whole set of beginners' rides,' John said. 'This weekend, they'll do about 15 miles. It's lovely to see. He's built them up from eight miles. By spring, they might want to do some longer rides.'

That sort of advancement is something the club is used to seeing, John explained: 'One member admitted to us that the only exercise she used to do was to walk from the car to the hairdressers every Friday. She's now regularly cycling 100k-plus.'

**“They were a bunch of ladies who saw cycling as a way to get fit”**

'Each year, there tends to be a beginner's programme. This year, we're going to run a "refresher's programme", which will cover knowledge and skills such as maintenance and map reading as well as fitness improvements. And we're going to run a ride leader course – teaching how to plan and lead rides.'

A growing membership means that more rider leaders are always welcome. 'One weekend last May had 11 different rides

listed, ranging from 14 slow miles to 50 faster miles on road, and an off-road ride...'

The Santa Ride each December is one of a few special rides organised by the club over the year. There's also a birthday ride, to mark Stourbug's founding, and a summer challenge ride. And like many cycling clubs, Stourbug organises hostelling weekends during the year.

Most of the organisation is done through the club's web forum. 'It's one of the biggest drivers of the club,' John said. 'It's low admin, low maintenance, and very active. We're getting over 100,000 page views every month, and 40 posts a day on average.'

Their web presence makes Stourbug easy to find and binds together what is now a big, diverse club. It's no longer just for women cyclists. Membership is now roughly a 50:50 split between men and women, of all ages and abilities.

So how has it kept its momentum? 'The growth in the interest in cycling certainly has had an effect,' John said. 'And Stourbug is a very, very friendly club. It's not a competitive group but it does offer challenges. We have members who regularly take part in long audax events, long tours, big mountain bike events like the Hell of the North Cotswolds. But we don't have a racing section.' ☺

**Find out more online at [stourbug.org.uk](http://stourbug.org.uk)**