

CW
Difficulty
rating:
4/10

This
year's
event:
November
20

Essex Season Ender



72
miles

824
metres
ascent

Quaint villages and bucolic surroundings abound in this late autumn challenge

Essex: the land of boy racers and white stiletto heels that has brought us great TV shows like *The Only Way is Essex*. Maybe not. But let's face it, Essex generally gets a bad press and rather unfairly as it is a county that is full of surprises. For starters, at 350 miles, it has the longest coastline of any English county. It's also the county with the most islands, at 35. It's home to one of Britain's smallest towns, Manningtree, while Tiptree is one of the UK's largest villages. ▶

Where is it?

The Redbridge Cycling Centre is nestled on the edge of the Hainault Forest Park on the very southern edge of Essex, tucked just inside the M25. The route travels north in an anticlockwise direction, on quiet lanes that delve into mid Essex, threading through quaint villages; typical tranquil Essex countryside.

Why ride it?

It's late autumn, it's dark and cold and motivation is lacking. Signing up for an event is a sure way to encourage you out on the road. With fast, flat roads and just enough climbs to get the lungs working without having you hanging over the bars, it's a pretty good recipe to help you maintain your form through the colder months.

History

The Essex Season Ender started life back in 2013 when the sportive calendar was crying out for events past the summer months. Sportive UK now has seven events in its sportive series, which takes place throughout the year, and also includes the Herts Easter Hunt, Suffolk 100 and the Bucks Bumps.

How to enter

Enter through the event website www.sportiveuk.co.uk/essex-season-ender/. Entry is £25.

Getting there

The entrance to Redbridge Cycling Centre is on Forest Road, Ilford. It can be easily accessed from the A12. From London or the south take the M25 and leave at jct 28. From the north use jct 26 and follow the A121.

Where to eat

Miller and Carter is a steakhouse in Ilford or if you want entertainment with your meal then head to Fiskardo, which serves Greek cuisine with a side of belly dancing. For a curry, Birashwamys is in Fairlop.

Where to stay

There are two Travelodge hotels, the London Chigwell and the London Romford both under five miles from the start. There is also a Premier Inn Romford West. Ten miles away in Epping is the Elmcroft Guest-house, and you'll also find the Thatched House Hotel there.

Bike shop

The Cycle King in Chadwell Heath is the place to head to should you leave any important kit sitting in your garage at home.



Essex: flat but fun in November

But what really makes the county a delight and makes the Essex Season Ender such a joy to ride is the fact that, after Devon, it has the most roads officially designated as country lanes.

While maybe best known for its urban sprawl, 70 per cent of Essex is rural and it's the most northern part of this route that really showcases this. After leaving the rather built-up area around Redbridge it is as if you have been transported to another world. Moving through the charming villages of Pleshey and Great Canfield, to name a few, you'll be greeted with painted cottages topped with thatched roofs. Red telephone boxes adorn pavements and quaint churches with stained glass windows sit proudly in a mostly flat, arable landscape.

While this section of the route is the most charming, the most fun part is definitely when the routes drops south after the village of Moreton, made famous when the 2014 Tour de France passed through during stage three.

Heading back to the finish line you hit the Epping Forest District where the tarmac rises, falls, dips and twists. The North York Moors it's not, but as far as these flat Essex roads go, it's something to get your teeth into.

The good times start after you cross the A414 on to Blake Hall Road. There's a gentle pull to

warm up your climbing muscles before it rises again more abruptly. The gentler climb of Toot Hill Road leads you, gradually, over the M25. The thrum of cars on the motorway will make you feel like you're about to head back into the Essex traffic but a little right turn onto Coopersale Lane affords you more quiet time and another assault that is sure to get the lungs working. This section culminates in the final ascent of Hoe Lane.

Autumn air

The chit-chat on the finish line will probably be held in breathless tones thanks to this quartet of climbs. And while they generally never break the seven per cent gradient barrier it's the close nature of them, lungs filled with cold November air, that will take their toll if you're up and out the saddle and really going for it. That, topped with the circuit of the Redbridge Cycling Centre (which will be timed separately on the day) could see you with a good winter ride tucked under your belt.

Jeremy Bonn of SportivesUK has done a good job of finding the area's lumps and bumps and you'll discover a few (albeit small) ramps as you make your way north. There's the quick ascent on the four per cent gradient of Nine Ashes Road and the pull to Pleshey. There's even a small rise up to Good Easter.

But for the most part the route is unapologetically flat. It's the type of route that in summer would leave you wanting more, but in the darkest depths of November it'll be just what your legs are longing for. This fast flat network of roads — a friend to your average speed and a saviour to help keep the legs warm with that increased cadence — and the sprinkling of climbs that feature on the route's finale make this a solid winter training ground.

The challenges

1 Noak Hill Road

This is really your only climb in the first half of the course. Once you leave the mainly residential section behind and hit the leafy end of the road, it ramps up in classic Essex style — our Garmins flashed at eight per cent.

2 Blake Hall Road challenge

After crossing the A414 you hit a nice gradual pull to help remind you what climbing feels like. After dropping down and over the small bridge it ramps up again a little more fiercely.

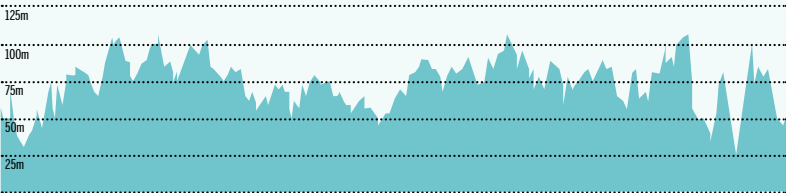
3 Coopersale Lane

A lovely twist of quiet road, a haven that pulls away from the M25 and over the M11. The first section is open so soak in the last of those rolling farmland views before the climbing starts with a gradient of six per cent.

NAIL IT

4 Hoe Lane

This drag is a great bit of road that takes you away from the main Essex traffic, which could be starting to build up come Sunday lunchtime, and on quieter residential roads. There are a few speed bumps to contend with but after the white fencing, just a few hundred metres in those rolling fields are back. The road climbs for one mile and if you're visiting from a hillier part of the country we suggest you get up and work yourself hard on this last pull to the finish. It's an average gradient of five per cent that is maintained for most of that mile.



Event website www.sportiveuk.co.uk/essex-season-ender