Falling rocks, corrugations, huge pot holes and loose gravel were par for the course... but once we got off the bitumen, things got much better!
A small (but numerical rounded) group of 10 left Glenorie at 7am in dense fog, which hung around until about 11am. Although this did rob us of some of the views from the ridge, it did seem to add “atmosphere”.

We took the “Pages Wharf loop” which veers off Sackville Ferry Road and joins back again closer to the ferry. A combination of tar and dirt sections through lush farmland.

After crossing the Hawkesbury by the Sackville Ferry, we followed the well worn bitumen route we usually follow to the Lower Portland Ferry. Normally, we’d cross here, but instead, continued on the western side, across “the bridge to nowhere” along the dirt on the lesser travelled section towards St Albans. Great forest lines the roadside on this section with delightful glimpses of the river. The catch was the very steep climb up to the ridge, which could only be done in “granny gear” whilst seated to avoid back wheel burnout... some walked :)

The Fickle Wombat Cafe (as fickle as their name suggests) was closed, so riders refreshed at the historic **Settlers Arms** pub.

Back on the road again, only half of the 20kms to Wisemans Ferry was dirt. This section required some serious pot hole dodging, keeping one eye on the road and the other taking in the great scenery.

From Wisemans we took the “Laughtondale Gully loop” off Old Northern Road (just before that incredibly steep climb). As one of the riders, Tom Carment described it “like doing a bush walk on the bike”. A fantastic section following the creek, up the gully and eventually rejoining the Old Northern Road. We doubled back to Wisemans Ferry, stopping briefly at the lookout, descending the very steep descent we’d avoided on the way out.

Once back to Wisemans we followed the eastern side of the Hawkesbury via River Road and then took the usual road past the turf farms to Windsor.

We had a longer than usual stopover here, due to the unexpected discovery of the **Windsor Ice Cream Cafe**. Ice cream and affogatos all round - highly recommended! Gigantic servings and delicious too.
From Windsor we just needed to climb up from the river flats to the higher country surrounding Glenorie. It took one last gasp effort to ascend the steep bends leading upward from Cattai bridge. Once on the ridge, we were afforded a view of the sunset sky over the distant Blue Mountain range.

A few more undulations into the township and we were done.

The perfect end to a perfect days riding.
This was one ride where the most popular frame of choice did seem to be titanium or steel. Some chose to ride a wider tyre than usual. However, others proved that it was possible to ride their carbon steed with the usual 23cc tyres.

The dirt did slow things down, meant more effort and therefore was more tiring than usual. However, the course did reinforce a common value that many Audax riders share. That is that it's more about the journey than the time taken to travel. This and other mixed terrain rides will be on the calendar next year. With the right following it could even be extended to a kind of series... Please consider. All feedback welcome.

A few post ride comments:

“I rode my new titanium frame for the first time on this one. It's now come of age. A real bike.” Howard Dove

“That was a great ride yesterday, truly memorable. It was nice to do something different to the usual combo of gorges we all know and love. The dirt was quite manageable on skinny tyres (I had Specialized 25/23C Roubaix tyres, completely smooth), even for the climb up through those dirt switchbacks on Bicentenary Rd which certainly got the heart rate up. Who needs mountain bikes!” Peter Meyer

“It was fabulous to find some new roads and see some stunning new scenery on our back doorstep. Now I’m keen to do some more investigating of the dirt road options in our area.” Rebecca Morton
“Normally, we'd cross here, but instead, continued on the western side, across “the bridge to nowhere” along the dirt on the lesser travelled section towards St Albans.”
“From Wisemans we took the Laughtondale Gully loop.”
As one of the riders, Tom Carment described it “like doing a bush walk on the bike”
“We doubled back to Wisemans Ferry, stopping briefly at the lookout...”