

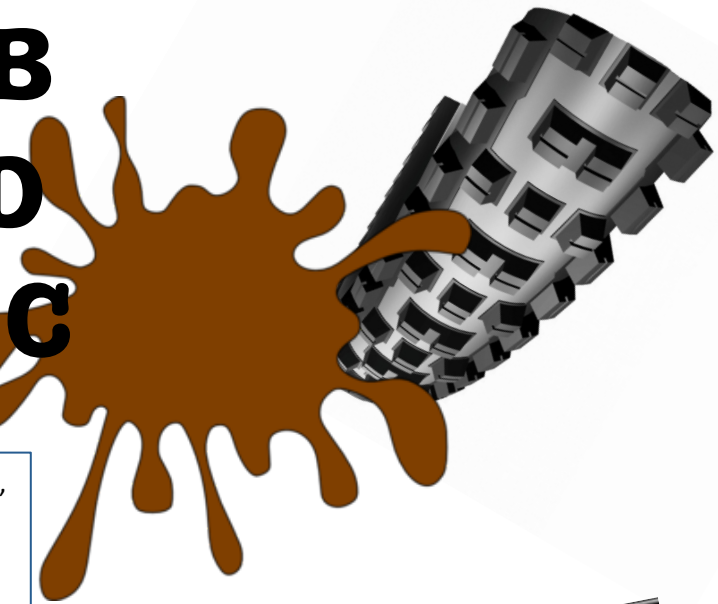
# AFAN MTB WEEKEND 3RD, 4TH DEC

By Richard Marriott - vice pres

Doug, Spasher (aka Justin Neville-Rolfe), Nick Coe, Hazel Davies, Andrew Rice and myself recently visited the Afan MTB trail centre in South Wales for the weekend. The write-ups that I'd read had been really enthusiastic so I was really keen to try it out. Afan is pretty much straight along the M4 and so is much more accessible than Coed Y Brenin in North Wales or the centres in Scotland. We arrived on Friday evening after driving through torrential rain (well it is Wales) and then went for a pint before dinner in the local pub. The locals we met were warm and welcoming so it all bode well.

The rain we feared on Saturday morning did not fall and the Sun was threatening to shine! It didn't, but we enjoyed ourselves nevertheless. We headed off to do W2 – a combination of The Wall and the fantastic White's Level.

W2 is 44 km long and starts off with a technical ascent along twisty, rocky and rooty single track through sections called 'Dastardly & Mutley' and 'Two Tombstones'. This was great fun but we soon stood at the top of the optional **Black Run**.



Hazel, Spasher, Nick, Me and Andy  
(Doug behind the camera)

**The Black Run.** The berms at the start catapult you out at near light-speed along this fast strip towards a gate with a skull and crossbones sign next to it. To give you plenty of time to read the warning you have to get off your bike but once through you head out along a boardwalk section that teases you into making mistakes before spitting you out down a 45-degree, zig-zag boulder-strewn section with highwire berms that just keep the fun coming.

See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47augdHt8Zc> for some Black Run footage although not shot by us.

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After the Black Run the slog up the fire road and long section along the top that links the White's level ascent to the Wall seemed a bit of a drag but soon the single-track descents of the Wall arrived like Graveyard and the final ZigZag descent. These were great fun but sometimes felt a little short and left us wanting more. After a tea and toastie stop we headed off for the second half of the route. It was getting late and the days are short at this time of year. So we cracked on and then split up with Hazel and Andy who would carry on at their own pace. The long slog back up to the top prepared us for the fantastic descent from the top of White's Level.

First up is the long and flowing **Windy Point** which takes its name from where it starts – next to the wind turbines. The gentle whosshing provides the soundtrack as you set off on your run but is soon left behind and forgotten in the concentration. Then comes **Energy** which takes you deep into the trees as you swoop along narrow single track with a bank to your right and drop to your left. You can use the little berms to catapult the bike out of the corner but your reactions had better be quick because the turns come thick and fast and the gaps between the trees make you fear for your shoulders. You emerge from the darkness of the wood into open marshy ground with a boardwalk section cross the wettest parts. The edges of the boardwalk are teasing you again and you know you mustn't get too close. By then concentration is waning and the arms are hurting and it is all too easy to slip off the edge into the bog.



Then comes **Goodwood**. In the middle of this there is the longest section of boardwalk but this time it's up and down with drops and cambered corners and it narrows and widens arbitrarily. It's easy to make a mistake and you really need to keep your wits about you. There is a track alternative but it was deeply disappointing. After the boardwalk Goodwood takes you back into the trees with a long, flowing section cutting across the face of the hill. For a bit of fun, the designers have left in a few tree stumps for you to avoid at high speed! But as with all good entertainment, the best must come last. Windy Point, Energy and Goodwood are just the supporting acts to the main attraction: Darkside.

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**Darkside** starts innocuous enough but it is soon swooping down across the face of the hill with big rocks to jump off if you have the nerve but thankfully there are ways around them if you haven't. As you work your way down you catch glimpses of the valley road where, alas, all good things come to an end. While dodging the rocks and the trees and swooping along the fast flowing lines it is easy to be sad that all too soon you will be at the finishing gate. It would be great fun to session the sections of Darkside and get each one perfect before stringing them all together for the made-in-heaven run. On Darkside you could easily clock up enough flying time for a pilots licence but be warned: the landings are hard and sharp. On the upside, the nearest A&E is not too far away and the site does have designated helicopter rescue points (do they take the bike with you I wonder?) The owner of the cottage warned us "that all the accidents happen in the last 20 minutes" (which includes all the descents) and it is true. By then you've riding and concentrating so hard for so long that it is difficult not to make a mistake. And true to form, I took a few tumbles on my way down Darkside for the first time.

On the Sunday Splasher and me repeated White's level (twice in fact) whilst Doug, Nick, Hazel and Andy did the mega-long **Skyline**, although not altogether. Doug came back raving about final descent called **Jetlag**. This is now definitely on my list for next time but he recommended skipping the long, boring southern loop of Skyline.



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I thought I would try out a full-suspension bike to compare to my hardtail. After a very informative telephone call with Howard at Bromley Cycles ([www.bromleybike.co.uk](http://www.bromleybike.co.uk)), he reserved me a Santa Cruz Blur LTc (Long-Travel-carbon) to try for the weekend. The LTc made easy work of the long, gnarly ascent with the suspension design making the most of the limited traction on the damp roots and rocks. The bike's long wheelbase makes it stable on the descents and the 140mm of suspension front and back soaked up the rocks with a minimum of fuss. This really showed on the black run. It was also fast and grippy through the berms. The stiff frame rewarded being pushed a little and coming out of the berms you were projected like an exocet missile – but your guidance systems needed to be up to the job of keeping you on target. Occasionally mine weren't but no damage was done to bike or rider. Howard promised a "magic carpet ride" and the smoothness certainly meant that my body felt less tired at the end of the day. But on reflection I wondered whether the LTc wasn't a bit too smooth: more Roger Moore than Daniel Craig. And, I couldn't help missing the immediacy of my hardtail.



It was a great weekend and we all got along very well. The locals were warm and friendly and the powers that be certainly seem to recognise the potential the area has to rival the Scottish trail centres given the relative ease of access. The guesthouse ([www.brynteghouse.com](http://www.brynteghouse.com)) was well situated in the village Cymmer, only a few minutes walk from the pub and a few minutes ride to the trail. Rock up, park the car and forget about it while you ride your bike.

The LTc is not a cheap bike. The frame alone is £2500 but it is strong and beautifully made: cleaning the bike on Monday morning before returning it to the shop really made me appreciate this. The rear suspension triangle is a one-piece carbon design and the front triangle is so beautifully shaped it could almost be a sculpture. The LTc has a threaded bottom bracket design, the pivots are all serviceable and the main pivot has grease ports. It certainly felt like a bike designed by riders for riders rather than a creation of the marketing department. Overall, the LTc is a great fun to ride and if it had been mine, it would certainly have allowed me to test the outer limits of my abilities last weekend. But, I haven't got any comparators yet and I will certainly be trying some other bikes before I part with my hard-earned.