

The "Pedal to Paris" sheet that landed on my mat in February nearly went in the waste paper bin along with all the other bumph that a club secretary receives.

But it got a second glance, and I was inspired. Here was something a bit different. This ride in September would focus my cycling for the season and when Janet gave it the seal of approval too, off went my entry. A Charity ride? Sponsorship? Good Grief, to what is an 'Ancien du Paris-Brest' descending?

The 'Pedal to Paris' is organised by the Royal British Legion and 1997 was to be the 2nd event. I think the first event had caught the RBL slightly by surprise with its success, raising £250,000. Spanning four days, starting from Greenwich Maritime Museum and ending at the Arc d'Triomphe, there was to be a limit of 300 riders. The entry fee was £250 which was not to come from sponsorship and each rider had to vouchsafe an additional minimum of £250 sponsorship. This seemed fair to me, the entry fee covered everything on the ride, ferry, meals, mechanics, sag-wagon, hotels and return fare on Eurostar and was an excellent value holiday package.

In the summer, some pot-boiling details came through and my first T-shirt. A few weeks before, all the reporting details came, and my second shirt. The weekend before, Princess Diana died in the car crash and that, in an unreal way, added its own flavour to the ride.

WEDNESDAY 3rd SEPTEMBER

Abilita gleaming, overhauled and fitted with my bar and saddlebag, it rests in the guards van on the trip to Waterloo with me sitting on the floor beside it. I'm not letting it out of my sight! The ticket collector adopted a quite respectful tone when he clipped the complimentary pass courtesy of South West Trains sponsorship.

A detour to Buckingham Palace to see the crowds and the flowers. Everyone was so polite, subdued and dreamlike and the ride away down the centre of the Mall, closed to traffic, seemed unearthly. On Sunday my ride will finish within a mile of that Paris underpass. But for now over to Greenwich for my B&B.

THURSDAY 4th

Check in is from 0630 and I don't want to be late. Anyway, I can't help but empathise with the organisers. Its nice to be all checked in and sit with a coffee and watch others arriving. What sort of people will take part? The usual charity ride crowd? A moment will dispell that thought of course, no one would consider a ride of this length without taking seriously the suggested preparations that the RBL issued. A scattering of lightweight racing machines with riders in club cycling gear, a handful of experienced tourists too, but overwhelmingly fat-tired mountain bikes - mostly riders in their late 20s and early 30s, probably 15% women, and all looking disgustingly fit!

Slowly, we trickle up the hill to General Wolfe's statue outside the old Royal Observatory and at 0800 assemble for various photocalls and speeches. There are a half-dozen Kent Police on motorbikes to marshal us and we are going to be set off in 6 groups according to our issued numbers.

We had been asked to give an estimate of our riding ability on the entry form and having determined from the outset to sit back and enjoy the scenery I'd ticked the 'snails' group. I am assigned WHITE 193 but I can't see any real logic, the Red, White & Blue groups looked just a convenient way to subdivide people - there seem to be all abilities in each colour. I think that the organisers are just going to allow us to select ourselves, and that certainly seems to be the case as we whizz through the outskirts of London. The Police riders are doing a good job too, holding the traffic where needed. My pace goes up! Well, I can't resist it. I just settle into my own style, it seems to be a free for all anyway. I am overtaking some low numbers now, and only being overtaken by a very few higher ones. They whip by me on the hills as I pace myself only to haul them back close to the summits with a quick final sprint. I am feeling good as we reach the RBL village at Aylesford for a break. (48km)

The route takes us straight down the A20 so there is no trouble with route finding or traffic (the M20 takes it all) its an ideal way to shift 300 cyclists. The second pit stop is at Sellinge (96km) and as I didn't hang around at Aylesford and left with an earlier group, I'm well up the field. No, of course its not a race, I just like to make

sure I'm well positioned! By arrangement, my brother and his family turn up at Sellinge as they live only a few miles away, and we have time for a chat before I leave. Their car overtakes us soon and shortly after I see it parked so that they can take photographs. My brother is kind-hearted and takes his pictures as I'm riding gently downhill rather than a bit further along on the climb up and over Capel le Ferne!

This hill had most people groveling and I didn't see anybody ride it but me! On the tremendous sweep down to the Dover Leisure Centre my maximum speed touched 45mph. We are all pre-booked on Sea France and I'm impressed to find that we have been allocated our own private lounge and bar and a meal is included too.

At our hotel, I'm roomed up with a chap called Will and later we are joined by Barry from Hull and so with them we 'down' a few in the bar. Will is about 30 and riding a top-flight ATB and we find ourselves riding together quite a bit. Not with Barry though, his machine would blow away if he let go of it and would pay off my mortgage if he sold it. Barry tells us that its only his spare bike, he wouldn't bring his best one on a ride like this. Will and I exchange amused looks. (120km)

FRIDAY 5th

In Calais the next morning we have a chance to reaffirm our preference for 'Snails, Tortoises & Hares'. There is a lead car for each group and we are asked to keep behind it. There are also about 20 motorcycle outriders obviously all out to enjoy themselves. The roads are all closed for us which makes us feel really special as we attend a wreath laying ceremony at the Town Hall.

Its the tortoise group for me I think, but it means hanging about for another half hour, but we are soon off and I'm clocking 22mph - what's happening! Actually, I think initially there is a bit of a cock-up as we all get stopped several times to regroup and then the pace settles down. Nevertheless after lunch, which is terrific and all set out for us on long tables, I realise that the 'snails' group is leaving. Well, I've finished my lunch, so I hop groups. Just like a randonnée - move out of the cafe while the others are idling! Actually, I find the 'snails' a much more happy-go-lucky bunch. Again, a bit like a randonnée, the first back are always a miserable lot, its the back-markers who are the cheerful ones. (120km)

SATURDAY 6th

Down to Abbeville centre. Again, the main street is closed off for us. Honestly, can you imagine this happening here in England? Yes, we can get them closed momentarily, but the police are always itchy to get going again. here there is no limit, nobody worries. The Mayor is a bit late, the main square is closed, c'est la vie. Speeches of welcome, in French & English, response from our organiser who is fluent in French. Last minute details are announced and we are off into a sunny, balmy morning.

This is the day of Diana's funeral and like clockwork, seamlessly, effortlessly, we all arrive together in a small village square at 11, noon in London, and total silence falls. The Fire Station siren wails to signify the end. Many of us, me included of course, have already raided the Patisserie. We cleaned it out I think! Life goes on and we are on the way to Beauvais (116km)

SUNDAY 7th

Today we enter Paris. There is quite an excitement running at the start of the stage and a frequent comment I hear is "I can't believe I've done it." Well, you haven't yet! Honestly though, that thought had never crossed my mind but that's the hard-bitten tourist talking. Its easy to be swept along with the enthusiasm.

I really do admire the RBL's organisation. They hit it right every time. On the outskirts of Paris, on a long flat straight road, we re-group. Water bottles are deployed all the way along the side of the road. "I was in the TA, I recognise a military transport order when I see it." one of a group I was riding with put it. But we are not in the Army, and the RBL allow for that too. Here we go into Paris! The pace goes up, its a free-for-all, the motorcycle outriders are in their element and all the junctions are closed for us. Through the cobbles of St Germaine-en-Laye, I started Paris-Brest from here 18 years ago! Up the Avenue de Grande Armee to the Arc de Triomphe, its a road race now and Will and I are up there with the leaders. (Well, I don't think we are, but it feels like it!) The Gendarmerie have closed the Place de la Concorde for us and there are bike parking pens set up under the trees.

We have been joined by about 100 cyclists from French clubs, all with T-shirts 'Les Bleuets de France', the Cornflowers of France which is the French equivalent to the RBL. I am invited by a group of them to exchange shirts with their club President, a venerable old chap of 80, who still rides 12,000km a year I'm told. Why me? "He obviously recognised another old git like himself," says Will.

The mood changes now, as 8 abreast, we walk slowly under the Arc de Triomphe. Will & I are within two metres of the eternal flame as the President of the RBL and his French equivalent lay wreaths of Poppies and Cornflowers, red & blue together.

There is a reception at les Invalides and it is here that most of the riders lose their bikes. Three Pickfords lorries are being loaded up with them. They will travel home tonight to be reunited with their owners in London. But not for me. The hotel bar is hopping with 300 elated cyclists and I join in with a personal word of thanks to the organiser. "You're cycling back? We had a few nuts like you last year." he laughs."
(94km - Total 450km)

I raised £650 with grateful thanks to sponsors:

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