

1989 LONDON - PARIS

THE PERILS OF THE LONG DISTANCE CYCLIST

This is a follow-up article to the article that appeared in RESUME Issue 3 about the charity ride in aid of the NSPCC [that's not Cruelty to Cyclists], which coincided with the 800th anniversary of the City of London and the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution. Those taking part were John Walker [SD81], Pat Sullivan, Clive Tomlinson, George Baugh, Gareth Thomas & Gerallt Richards [all from SD82], Dominic Scott [ex-SD83], Glyn Morgan & Rob Hopkins [SD85], Bob Laing [SD86], Tim Frenzel [SD83], John Clark, Chris Baugh [no relation] and Mark Sweeney [SD8 secondees].

This tale goes back to June of this year when a few demented souls who had forgotten the trials of the London to Paris charity cycle ride of last year started to get itchy saddles. The word soon got around and within a short space of time there were a dozen riders of varying skills and fitness who misguidedly wanted to participate. Clearly the wisest of these were the two support drivers who made up the total party of fourteen.

The event was scheduled to start from the Guildhall in London at 06.00hrs on Wednesday 23 August. The first day was a ride to Portsmouth. 80 miles we were told then across to Le Havre. The next day [Thursday] could either be a rest day or we could go on a 50 mile randonnee around the the surrounding district of Le Havre. Friday would see us riding to Rouen along the Seine valley, estimated 70 miles - all very pleasant. The final days ride (Saturday) would be Rouen to Paris with the assembly point at St.Germain-en-Laye for the ceremonial ride into the city, a distance of 80 miles. Total distance 280 miles in four days (an increase of 40 miles on the report in RESUME Issue 3).

The above outline of the trip did not deter our gallant band, as there was plenty of time to get into training and at least 12 hours in the day to complete each stage. Throughout June, July and into August we set about putting arrangements into place. At an early stage the "organisers" CTC and Whitbread [White Label] announced a slight change of plan - we were now to travel from Portsmouth to Caen, not Le Havre. This meant that riders could either travel by coach to Le Havre or they could join a randonnee from Caen to Le Havre, about 60 miles.

Because part of the team were at that time based in London separate arrangements were tackled for the BT support vehicles. Fortunately, we managed to gain the support of our Director, Dr John Spackman, to obtain passenger carriers from London City District and S Wales [Cardiff]. Our thanks to all concerned for their support and assistance. Arrangements were also made to obtain BT kit to enhance the teams image and project BT as a company working for charity. Of course, July and August are not the best of times when there is so much to do, with people starting to take their annual leave. We are all indebted to George Baugh for all the time he put in to make bookings for the team with the organisers and Bob Laing for the many strings that he pulled and all the others that did their bit.

Team training was mainly based on the charity Cyclethon organised by Heart Unit at the Heath [University] Hospital. 53 miles from Cardiff to Nelson, via Risca back to Caerphilly and over the mountain [cat 2 climb] returning to Heath. This was managed at some slight discomfort to be followed the next weekend by repeating the exercise, just to prove we could take it like men! Come August members of the team were returning from leave, John Walker having been in France, avec bicyclette, to train [500 miles] and ride up Mont Ventoux [1915m]. His wife said that it was the most restful holiday she has had for a long time!

Monday 21 August saw the collection at the Cardiff end of the Sherpa van in the evening with the time spent up till 8.30 trying to fit seven bikes onto it. Under the watchful eye of Nick Hawkins [see you on the trip next year, Nick?] we finally solved the problem - another management challenge completed. On Tuesday afternoon all the kit was packed, bikes were once more secured to the van roof and rear door and we were ready to make our way to London and join up with our London based colleagues at the Guildhall Reception. We did not make the start for 6.30am on the Wednesday morning, due to events the previous evening, but our thanks to Dr Spackman for waiting to send us off. We were the last away at 7.00am, much to the concern of the organisers and the police, who wanted to get rid of us before the London rush hour.

The first stage was probably the worst - getting out of London took ages. Tim Frenzel punctured (and furthered our knowledge of low German expletives) and there were problems in trying to keep together, resulting in John Walker arriving first of the BT party (10th overall) at 1pm and other riders arriving from 1.45pm onwards. The distance to Portsmouth turned out to be 95 miles, not the 80 miles we were expecting! After repairs to bodies and bikes we caught the 10pm ferry to Caen (Ouistreham), arriving at 7.15am to grey skies.

Thursday's cycling began for the BT party at 10.30am from the Pegasus bridge in Benouville, stopping for 'coffee' in Trouville and lunch in Honfleur, a beautiful town. After again getting strung out, we mustered at Pont de Tancarville to go into Le Havre together. The distance covered on the day was 74 miles, again in excess of the estimate.

Friday's journey to Rouen began at 9.15am in high winds and drizzle, with the traffic again helping to string out the group. Pat Sullivan, triathlete extraordinaire, was first into Rouen, with John Walker and George Baugh arriving with the leading bunch of four riders. However, Rob Hopkins suffered a rear tyre blow out and was stranded (in a bar!) waiting for the support vehicle.

Saturday's ride was to culminate in the procession into Paris, so the riders were to be gathered at St Germain to ride in together. The BT team was again last away in the morning, and had to progress through the field in driving rain. There were various accidents - some riders falling onto gravel, others falling off at an adverse camber and Dominic Scott pirouetting on the wet road; all gamely carried on. The police provided a motorcycle escort into Paris and the entire 400 cyclists participating paraded in to cries of "Allez" from the bystanders - we had all finally made it! Not quite the Tour de France, but so what! The last day was 103 miles and the trip totalled 330 miles, slightly over the organiser's estimates.

Would we do it again? I think the answer is yes but the organisers must get their act together. For us it did not matter too much as we were self sufficient but for those who had to rely on luggage deliveries etc, there must have been some worrying times. Having said that we have some lessons to learn about our own planning which should make the next time just as rewarding but we may be limited by the number of support vehicles we can get allocated and even then it does not come cheap. In the meantime it is our intention to keep the BH Cycling Group active and Sunday 17 September saw us out on the Abergavenny RNIB charity ride. We are also aiming to have a few day trips - watch this space and let us know of your interest. We would like to have you along!

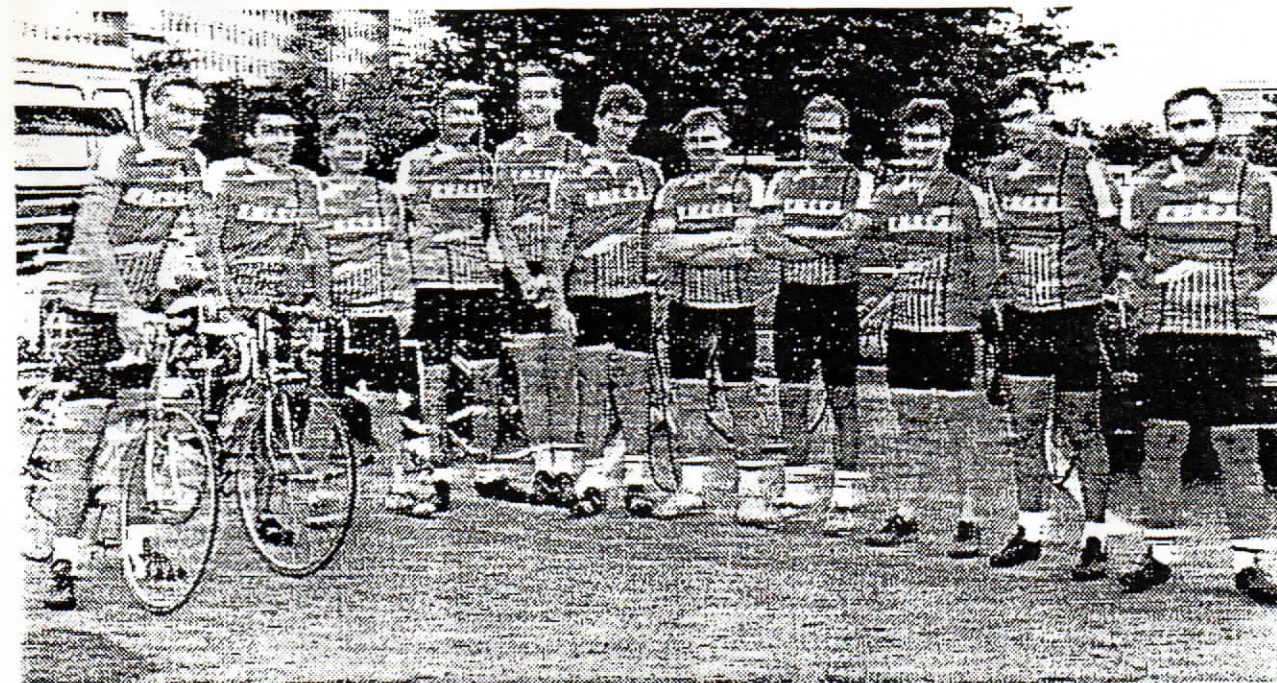
• POSTSCRIPT

It can now be reliably reported that the "peril" [ref.BMJ 1989;298:1072-3] did not take its toll on any of the riders. After everything else that would have been the ultimate sacrifice!

After enjoying a drink at a Parisien bar Rob Hopkins decided to practice his French and ordered the bill. "L'addition garcon, s'il vous plait" The waiter duly returned with a plate of gherkins!

The competition for the most battled scarred and scabby rider must go to John Clark. Two separate accidents left him symmetrically scarred on both sides of his body.

Bob Laing, Rob Hopkins and Glyn Morgan had settled nicely into the French cafe routine for the first two days, however, due to a time restriction they had to cycle over 100 miles on the last day without their "normal" lunch. They are slowly recovering.



(A full version of this article is available from John Walker on request.)