

PEDAL TO PARIS AND BACK 2005

PAUL HARDING'S RIDE REPORT

Thursday 8th September; London – Calais

Catching the 5.40 a.m. Metropolitan line train - and changing at Finchley Road - got me to North Greenwich in plenty of time to ride the mile or two to the start of The Royal British Legion's 'Pedal to Paris' 2005.

All was fine, the weather sunny and still. Meeting so many friends at such regular – OK, annual – intervals is always a blast. This year, there were 270 riders riding to Paris; I lost count how many I remembered from previous 'P2P's, but there seemed loads of them.

I had packed a 'bladder' hydration system this year, something that would prove invaluable. I had also filled my bidon (water bottle) with some isotonic solution, saving time at registration.

The start was delayed due to a few riders being stuck in the grid locked Greenwich traffic, but we were on our way soon enough.

At Aylesford – The Royal British Legion village – we stopped for our usual break and I for one was surprised how fast we had made it there.

I stopped again at The White Horse pub, just beyond Ashford, and downed a swift Irish pint with my mate Chris, who sensibly had a lemonade and lime. The side of the pub facing the road was in shade, and so it was we were able to yell encouragement to our fellow riders as they passed us by in the sunny heat. Sitting ducks for the ride camera team, looking (as ever) for the 'colour' that makes this ride what fun it is. The barmaid refilled our bidons with water, adding plenty of ice (bless her!) and then we were off once more.

There are some lonely stretches in Kent. This being my 9th P2P, I knew how best to get through them; find a rider that I could stay with, and draft behind him for as long as I could – alternating the lead when necessary. Richard (rider 113) proved to be better at leading than I, so he led for many more miles than I did him.

Leaving our next refreshment stop at Sellenge, I was keen to get over the 'Folkstone Hill' – which has a reputation of being the hardest and longest hill on the ride. Keen because, from the top of it, it is downhill all the way to Dover. My recumbent bike makes going up hills different to normal bikes; especially long hills. It is not possible to use one's body weight – all the effort must come from your legs – so I have worked out (OK, Lance Armstrong might have helped here) that it's best to 'spin' (i.e. pedal faster). This reduces the effort required by the legs, pushing more load onto the heart and lungs. So, as long as I could breathe without panting, I figured I'd be OK; and so I was. I even passed Richard (113) – who was walking up the hill when I passed him (I was too busy being focussed to chat).

I reached Dover at 2.25 and, what with the delayed start to 8.15, made that the best time ever for me. On the ferry to Calais, I bought a bottle of Southern Comfort (which I would later use for medicinal purposes).

Friday 9th September; Calais – Abbeville

Calais town centre was immaculate with blooming flowers, not a drop of litter; a clear blue sky and no wind. It was early morning and time for a wreath laying ceremony at the war memorial, to pay our respects. The Gendarmes even closed the road for us.

It is always an honour to carry a Legion Standard; especially so in a foreign land where they are respectful of the sacrifices made for their freedom. There were several French standard bearers

present and I presented a Legion 'V' badge to the chap that had stood beside me during the ceremony.

Afterwards, I removed my outer veneer of calm, dignified smartness to reveal the cool, calculating cyclist beneath - just in time to mount my trusty steed before we were sent on our way once more (myself in the 'social' – or 'slow' group) just as I remembered leaving my bidon behind in the hotel room. Thank heavens for that bladder thing!

At Devres, our lunch stop, I asked John (our logistics support – AKA Doccombe Freight Haulage) if he still had that little French flag that I had pestered him for (but not needed, in the end) last year. He had, and he gave it to me. With a zip tie gained from our mechanics and I had it fixed in no time to the top of my 10 foot high bamboo flag pole – the one with the 5 x 3 foot Union Flag attached to it. I am reliably informed that a flag of convenience is always appreciated whenever a ship of a foreign power enters a port.

6 km before Abbeville and the heavens opened. 'Wet' simply does not describe it, but we were all glad to get to our hotels and let that hot soapy water flow!

Saturday 10th September; Abbeville – Beavais

A similar ceremony here as Calais, but with both the British and the French national anthems played and sung. More French standard bearers, too - and then a brief speech from the Mayor. As time was pressing, it was decided that the slow group would miss the ceremony, leaving directly from the bike store. The fast and medium groups were to leave about 100 metres apart – the fast group take a longer route, with more hills, than the rest of us mere mortals. Thus I had no time to effect my usual swift change of costume. Arranging for John to take my bike, I asked Natasha to give me a lift and was thus soon once more changes and under way again – only following my bike in an Espace!

Natasha soon caught up with the queue of traffic being held up by a certain cycling event. A swift call to John, and a ride on the back of one of our motorcycle escort's bike, brought me and my bike together once more. But, by the time I was pedalling, the group had moved on and there was a gap growing ever bigger between us! I called over another passing motorcycle escort and, grabbing his bike's pillion grab rail, we sped off (with the utmost care, of course) after them. Merci, monsieur! Saturday's lunch stop was at the sports hall at Poix de Picarde. A splendid feast put on by the towns' people with wine, baguettes, fruit, ham, cheese and much, much more. They really do a splendid spread, and is much appreciated.

A light rain began in the afternoon, clearing up by our arrival at Auchy La Montagne, where there were more refreshments laid on, and where – as usually at these rest stops - our physiotherapists were once more hard at work enjoying themselves.

A little later on, the Mayor presented me with a splendid trophy. I little realised what it was all about – 'why me?' I thought; 'what have I done to deserve this?' and 'they'll be wanting this back'. So, after the national anthems (some of us had been practising) I asked who I had to thank for this. It appears the trophy is awarded every year by the people of the village to the rider voted by the Legion staff on the ride as being the most worthy. And that was me, this year. I was suitably humbled, and still have the trophy.

Arriving at Beauvais war memorial, I reversed the ceremonial costume change and carried the standard again as previously at Calais and Abbeville – only this time, in the evening. Our bike store in Beauvais is always the fire station, which is the other side of the city. So I stayed as I was until

there, where I removed my suit etc. One of the French standard bearers, seeing me changing, gave me his 'UNC' (Union National de Combatants) arm band, and I gave him a Legion 'V' badge. At dinner, Nick (fast group) said he would expect to pay £800 for a cycling holiday as good as they were having, developing good 'peleton' (paceline) skills but would not expect the physiotherapy, mechanical nor motorcycle escort support that we enjoyed. The benefit of the motorcycle escorts is only too clear when you see them stopping the traffic ahead of you, so that there are no stops for traffic lights, cross roads, junctions, etc! The entry cost for each rider for the Pedal to Paris was £450 – and an extra £149 for the return ride. Good value indeed!

Sunday 11th September; Beauvais – Paris

A foggy, still morning; but with the rising sun burning off the fog by lunch time, the ride was swift and without major mishap. Before leaving the fire station, Fiona – a young Australian – asked how best she might mount a large Australian flag (but not as large as my Union Flag!) on her bike. I showed her how I would, with a bamboo pole (if one could be got). At the lunch stop at Courdemanche, she took me up on my offer to tie it beneath the Union Flag on my bike, the rest of the way into Paris. Unfortunately, the additional drag this created when zooming down the hill into Chanteloup les Vigues caused my flag pole to fail. Skidding to a halt, I ripped off the broken piece and stuffed the now shortened flag pole back where it came from – a tube of about 350 mm long, fixed to the rear of my bike so that the flag can be removed swiftly and replaced.

Also at lunch, the tour director told us that it was important to arrive at the Arc de Triomphe at 3.20; if we had a problem we would have to go into the van. As it turned out, because the square where we would have stopped for regrouping and a rest was occupied by a fair ground, we pressed on and arrived at the Arc at 3.05.

Thus I had plenty of time to welcome Suzanne (my wife) and Jean (her mother) who had come out to Paris to see me. Also time enough to change into smart gear for carrying the standard, joining standard bearers from the Paris Legion Branch and many more French ones. We formed up on the Champs Elysee pavement, and marched onto the Arc de Triomphe to lay wreaths.

Thus ended the 'Pedal to Paris 2005' and here begins the 'Pedal to Paris 2005 – and back!'

Monday 12th September; free day in Paris

The girls (Suzanne and Jean) and I took a boat trip up and down the Seine, and then shopped in Galleries Lafayette. The evening entertainment was at the Moulin Rouge. Spectacular!

Tuesday 13th September; Paris – Amiens

We were coached out to Cordemanche very early (7.15 am), the 20 or so bikes being taken by our sweeper, logistics and mechanics vans. This was for safety reasons – the Parisian rush hour was not the time to be trying to move a posse of bikes through Paris!

Soon after we started, the route was barred by road works, and our 'deviation' took a while longer than we thought.

Lunch was in a tiny hotel after 62 miles amid rolling countryside, with few clouds and little wind. Some Gendarmes met up with us - as pre-arranged – just outside Amiens to escort us to our hotel. Some more road works meant we had to go down the wrong side of a dual carriageway, past queues of traffic! I guess that would not have been possible without the Gendarmes.

Wednesday 14th September; Amiens – Calais

Not a good day.

Although it began well enough with the morning weather warm and not too much wind – and we thoroughly enjoyed eating our steak and frites outside at the lunch stop. Later on, a soft drizzle began to fall, making the wet weather gear imperative and the sunglasses useless. Later still, and it began to fall heavier and heavier until, after 83 miles, my front tire lost traction cornering on a slippery, adverse camber and I gained some tarmac tan – about 50 metres away from the next rest stop!

While everyone else tucked into something warming and filling, I had some first aid. No damage done to the bike though, so I was soon back on the bike cursing my stupidity, the weather, slippery roads etc.

I also noticed that my cycle computer had stopped registering, so I then had no idea how fast I was going, how far I had come - only the time seemed OK. After about half an hour of this (still in drizzly rain) what should I hear but a loud 'pop – hisssss' and I knew that I had a blow out - a bad one. Dismounting the bike and checking the rear tire proved my assumption correct (the tire wall had been split after being ridden whilst flat, making it unusable). I waved to John and Tiggy (John's fiancé) in the logistics van, and as we had only 5 or 6 km to go before our hotel in Calais, I decided to take a rest in the back.

I brought what was left of that bottle of Southern Comfort to dinner with me, determined to leave the empty bottle there. With a little help from some friends, so it was.

Fortunately our mechanics were able to replace my rear tire and inner tube that evening, but still not a good day.

Thursday 15th September; Calais – London

Another early start – this time, to catch the 8.30 ferry – and not only my tire fixed, but all our bikes were cleaned overnight by Nigel and Graham (the mechanics) and my cycle computer worked! Weather was warm and sunny on the Gallic side of the channel, but a steady light rain greeted us on the English.

We left the port at 10.00, and the rain stopped at 3.00. We refreshed at Sellinge and then Aylesford, just as we had on the way out (only wetter this time).

Diverting onto the A20 at Swanley, we turned off for Sidcup, to take a cup of tea or coffee at Nigel's cycle shop (Sidcup Cycles). Leaving there in bright sunshine (at last!) we made steady progress through the London suburbs, passing over Westminster Bridge at 5.30 (by the clock at Big Ben) – then, turning right past Horse Guards Parade we arrived at the top of the Mall with Buckingham Palace before us; our hearts lifted to see it there, and soon we had barrelled past and into Wellington Barracks where we were welcomed, congratulated, hugged, kissed and generally thought a lot of by the assembled crowd of Legion staff and spectators.

Someone said I must feel exhausted; I replied that, unlike marathon running, cycling gives you a seat all the way.