

## The CTC HoE Expeditionary Force Tour to France & Belgium, June 2012

### Day 1 - The start at Warwick Parkway Station

*From Rob Gullen (aka Captain Mainwaring)*

The CTC HoE Expeditionary Force (Touring Cycle Division) assembled at Warwick Parkway on Sunday 10 June 2012 to start the six day tour in France & Belgium.



The team (l - r) : Bob, Richard A, Jon P, Nigel, Jon T, Dennis, Rob, Richard FH

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### Day 1 - Sunday 10 June 2012 : Home - Calais

*From Rob Gullen - aka Captain Mainwaring*



A bright start saw the group assemble at Warwick Parkway ready for the Boys' Outing

After the obligatory team photograph (a few offenders without club jerseys) and a ticket - passport - clean underwear - handkerchief - do you want to use the loo? - check it was up to the platform for the 1008 Chiltern train to Marylebone.

Spreading along a couple of coaches there were no issues with the eight bikes, just a few glances from other passengers ... *"Who ARE those guys?"*

Next stop Marylebone and venturing onto the streets of London for a surprisingly easy ride along bus lanes all the way to St Pancras (I just needed to shout a warning not to ride down into the Euston underpass!)

If Mr Porteous was writing this he'd probably wax on about St Pancras Station being a masterpiece from architect George Gilbert Scott, construction started in 1863 and opened in 1868, built in Victorian Gothic style .... suffice to say it's a magnificent building, made even more impressive since 2007 when it became the London terminus for Eurostar. Several of the chaps wandered around and took some photographs.

Negotiating an escalator with a bike, another first for some of them, it was up to the platform and the HS1 train to Folkestone. *[Trainspotter note : This is the service that*

*runs the high-speed Javelin trains on the Eurostar line from London to Ashford]* - again no issue with bikes.

It's all been pretty uneventful so far, and that's how it continued - a short ride from Folkestone West Station to the pick-up point for the Eurotunnel Bike Service - load the bikes and people into a van and minibus (it's normally a trailer, see the final day and our return journey) - drive into the tunnel terminus - straight onto the *le Shuttle* train - next stop France.

After the usual plethora of mobile phone bleeps with messages *"Welcome to France, we're now going to shaft you on call costs"* it was out of the train and to the drop-off point ... it was now trying to rain .....

Hardy souls that we are we declined the offer of being dropped off at the hotel in Calais and rode the 1.8 miles (sorry that should be 2.88km, we're in the foreign now) to the Kyriad hotel.

Rooms allocated, showers and a beer before heading off to the only available eating establishment within walking distance - a Buffalo Grill (think Harvester with a slightly more exotic menu) ... but they did serve some interesting beer. Must make mention that we had the Human Good Beer Guide with us (Stratford Bob will doubtless be mentioned in ensuing day's reports!)

As the meal finished, the BROWN PURSE\* came into play to settle the bill ... which turned out to be the most expensive meal of the whole trip.



Back at the hotel the manager decided that his bar was closed! .... this was a man who had: a) turned down the opportunity to sell 8 meals (despite having the kitchen open to serve a coach-load of Germans) and, b) turned down the opportunity to sell copious quantities of beer. Must have been French!

That's day 1 ... much fun and laughter, mention of absent club chums ... one of whom was mentioned/or not, quite frequently during the tour. Sightseeing tomorrow, and the delights of a Formula 1 hotel to look forward to.

*\* a kitty system with the cash stored in the purse was operated to cover coffees, meals, some beer, museum entries etc - special note should be made of the extravagant Zeebass experience later in the week .....*

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## **Day 2 - Monday 11 June 2012 : Calais - Bailleul**

*From Jon Porteous - aka Sergeant Wilson*



I was a little concerned that there would be no breakfast this morning as a German tour bus had parked up at the hotel the night before and deposited some elderly German holiday makers. However, all was fine and we dutifully carbo-loaded.

We left the Calais outskirts bound for Guines, famous for being the site of the *Field of the Cloth of Gold* in 1520 where Charles I and Henry VIII sabre-rattled at one another.

We passed the monument and turned off the busy road into some quiet French countryside. One of the lanes we had planned to take was rather rough so we detoured slightly, the drizzle that had started became rain: even the kestrels gave up hovering.

I noticed a crop of bright green grass – later to be identified as early linseed oil shoots. Passing Louches, which we weren't, we rode in the now heavier rain to a small village for elevenses and a bit of a dry out. Back outside and on to Eperleques, this was the site of the WW2 German Watten Bunker for the construction and launching of V2 rockets. We were directed by a museum employee to park our bikes under a large gazebo – an excellent idea.



The museum provided us with umbrellas but nothing prepared us for the site of the bunker: it was of truly monstrous proportions and in remarkable condition, despite the best efforts of the weather and British aerial attack. It was constructed with the aid of 2,000 slave workers recruited from concentration and prisoner of war camps, as well as forcibly conscripted Frenchmen. The purpose of the construction works was very unclear to the Allies, indeed Winston Churchill's scientific adviser admitted that he had little idea what "these very large structures similar to gun emplacements" were but he believed that "if it is worth the enemy's while to go to all the trouble of building them it would seem worth ours to destroy them"

Some of the peloton had been bitten by some sort of insect so in my role as team-medic I dished out cream and anti-histamines.

Back out into the rain the Captain had cleverly found a hill allowing us to warm up a little. Hunger pangs were beginning so the pace was upped on a long flat stretch beside a canal and we arrived in the square at St Omer. The Captain had been here before and led us unerringly to a restaurant with its own brewery i.e. a Brasserie. He had also spied out the menu and after ordering moules proceeded to use his silver mussel-eating device! It was here that Stratford Bob came into his own with his vast knowledge of beers and all week he seemed to pick the best ones, often above 8% though!



On our way again but still in St Omer we visited the Jacques Anquetil Velodrome, it was outside, made of concrete and not as banked as indoor velodromes - sadly there was mud on the banking otherwise we would have been tempted to have a go. In fine touring tradition we then rode to Arques to visit the museum and workshop at the canal boat lift. The manager even put on the English language DVD for us.

The Fontinettes Boat Lift was built in 1888 on the Canal de Neufosse and connected the River Aa and the Neufossé Canal. It was capable of lifting vessels of 300 tonnes displacement and designed to avoid the need to use five locks which took some 90

minutes to change height by 13 meters. It was inspired by the similar Anderton Boat Lift built in 1875 in Cheshire, England.

Happily the rain eased and Nigel put the hammer truly down on the front, Jon T and myself hung on for dear life with the speed on the flat going up to over 28mph (with a little help from the wind). The pace eased though to 25mph at which point we went past. The poursuivants eventually caught up and together we rolled into Bailleul and my first experience of a Formula 1 hotel – no en suites and a tight fit for the Mercian and me to cuddle up together (we were in single rooms!) It did have an efficient heater though and so with my washing-line rigged up and my kit washed and attached (with green pegs of course) I was a happy and clean bunny.

A bit of a walk was needed to find dinner but there was an excellent bistro with a wide meal choice and a beer menu too!

¡No se mencioné a Señora Davies!

*Total miles: 59.32, Average speed: 13.9mph, Maximum speed: 28.1mph*

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### **Day 3 - Tuesday 12 June 2012 : Bailleul - Ieper (Ypres)**

*From Dennis Snape*

I awoke with a start, a Horse's head on the pillow next to me!

Well, not actually a horse (as Captain Mainwaring likes to call it) but the front end of my Thorn Sherpa bike. You see we were staying in an F1 Hotel and our hostess had said we had better put our bikes in our rooms. Now, if you have ever stayed in an F1 Hotel you will know that the rooms are, well, how can I put it..... small!! Crammed in are an undersized double bed with a further drop down (wall-mounted) single bed above it, a TV and washbasin. Showers and Toilets are shared (not at the same time) and located down the corridor. Cheap and ideal for a stop whilst travelling but you wouldn't want to spend a two week holiday in one.



We had agreed the night before that we would be ready for the off at 08.45. Having had our F1 breakfast of coffee, cereals and toast with preserves we were all ready to go by 08.30. Well not quite all, Richard FH (*aka The Sea Bass*) was not there. 15 minutes later, which was still on time I might add, he appeared, '*It takes a while to get all of the air out of a blow up sheep*' declared Jon P.

Our journey today was going to follow the route a WWI cycling soldier may have followed. In the late 19th and early 20th century military leaders saw the humble cycle as invaluable for reconnaissance and communications work, being lighter, quieter, and logistically much easier to support than horses. On the eve of the First World War, the territorial force included fourteen cyclist battalions. It is true however that only a few saw active service abroad, most were kept in the UK to provide coastal defences. On the occasions that cyclists were employed in combat, they were generally found to be



ineffective; the terrain on the Western Front was unsuitable for them, causing the bicycles to be discarded early on and the unit proceeding as normal infantry. *Note: Regular club members will know of the War Memorial for Cyclists at Meriden.*

*Photograph : Cyclists of the 36th (Ulster) Division in France, 1918*



We left the F1 at Bailleul and set off at a brisk pace along a straight road (the D933) complete with roadside cycle path that had just been resurfaced. The occasional mound of loose gravel causing the only obstructions as we headed south-eastwards, skirting the France/Belgium border towards Armentieres (*left*) and then on to coffee at Quesnoy-sur-Deule. I must mention here my observation of French lifestyle, we saw many Frenchmen at 11s, however, not many were drinking coffee; most preferred brandy or strong beer! We managed to resist the temptation to join them and pressed on. It was during this part of the ride that Richard A announced '*we must be in Belgium*'. He had noticed the subtle change in car registration format and indeed as we approached the town of Menen I noticed the road names ended in *straat*. After a quick photo stop it was onwards along the very straight N8

road that runs parallel to the A19 Motorway. Again a roadside cycle path meant we could make good headway, although this didn't stop Captain Mainwaring complaining about the headwind. I however, and any of the other six cycling directly behind him, didn't know what he was talking about!

The N8 road although very straight had a few lumps to climb, it was just over the brow of one of these we spotted somewhere for lunch, a place called Hooze Crater. In the summer of 1915 the Germans controlled the hill and had a clear view of the British positions. The Crater was made when on 19th July 1915 the British tunnelled into the hill and detonated 1700 kg of explosives. The lunchtime deal was a drink, sandwich and entrance to their museum all for 10 Euros, a bargain we could not resist. The museum was very interesting; however I did question the need to have at the exit a counter selling WWI memorabilia, buckles, belts, bullets etc.

After the museum visit we noticed our first WWI Cemetery opposite - taking the time to walk around and for the first time in my life I began to understand the enormity of the WWI human sacrifice. Hundreds, if not thousands of graves, row upon row, all kept immaculately by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Out of the several dozen or so that I looked at, only a few were over the age of 25, the vast majority were just boys, some headstones had no name, just a message that read *A Soldier of The Great War, Known Unto God*.

We cycled the 5Km or so on to Ypres. Our next stop was the *Menen Gate Memorial to the Missing*. It's an archway stone memorial dedicated to the British and Commonwealth soldiers who were killed in the Ypres Salient of WWI and whose graves are unknown. I wish I could say it has but a few names inscribed upon it. But it doesn't. It does in fact have the names of 54,896 missing fathers, sons, brothers,



uncles and nephews. And if this is not too great a number to comprehend we were later to discover there was an arbitrary cut-off point of 15 August 1917. The names of a further 34,984 UK missing after this date were inscribed on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing instead.

Our next stop was the In Flanders Fields Museum located in the famous Cloth Hall in the centre of Ypres. A huge multi-level, modern interactive museum\* dedicated to the many WWI battles around and for the control of, Ypres. It doesn't pull any punches; you get the full horror of this awful period of human history.

Following our final stop of the day we assembled in the town square outside the museum. A large square shaped, sand filled platform had been built to host the next round of the Belgium Ladies Beach Volley Ball competition. Unfortunately for us eight red blooded Englishmen (well, seven plus The Sea Bass) it would happen the day after we were to leave Ypres.

Our B&B for this and the following two nights was to be the Hortensia, a really nice, clean, well run establishment located just off the centre of Ypres. Our Hostess, Veronique, and Michael (her brother, some hoped) made us very welcome and allowed us to park our bikes next to theirs in the garage.

After a quick shower, change of clothes and a beer in the pub (next door but two) we set off on a walk along the city walls back towards the Menen Gate. Following the Menen Gate Memorial opening in 1927, the citizens of Ypres wanted to express their gratitude towards those who had given their lives for Belgium's freedom. As such, every evening at 20:00 buglers from the local fire brigade close the road which passes under the Memorial and sound the Last Post. As we walked along the path on the top of the city wall, buildings on one side and a river on the other, I wondered how many people would be there. I guessed it would be us eight and perhaps a couple more, maybe a dozen in total?



We approached the memorial via one of its side arches, not the main ones that let traffic through and found ourselves on a set of steps inside the memorial, a rope barrier preventing any further progress. It didn't matter because we were right next to the dignitaries who were about to lay wreaths in front of a huge crowd that had assembled. Many pictures were taken of the dignitaries and of course us eight intrepid Heart of Englanders in the background! The ceremony took around ten minutes; a few words, wreaths, then buglers, it was I have to say, a very fitting tribute.

Our Landlady (and not her brother) had suggested and booked up for us, a table at a pizza restaurant just off the main square. We all picked a mid price range meal from the menu (*even The Sea Bass*) and following our meal it was back to the main square for a drink in a pub next to the museum.

All in all a brilliant day, with great company, many sights and hundreds of thought provoking moments.

*\* The museum had only reopened the previous day after an 8 month closure for refurbishment, and new development to "celebrate" the centenary of the start of WWI in 2014.*

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## Day 4 - Wednesday 13 June 2012 : at Iepr

*From Richard Freer-Hewish*



Having had a great introduction to the WWI warzone in Flanders Field Museum the day before it was now our first of two touring days from the base in Iepr. No panniers, thank heavens!

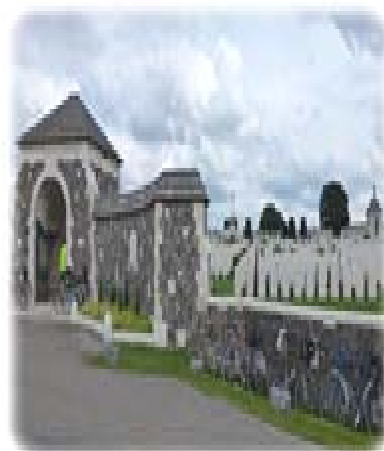
Again the weather forecast was for inclement weather and so the full range of gear was needed but in the event we did not get any rain.

We were now well into our mainstream activity : historical TV trivia, and many of us were wondering if we would last the pace but we could see weaknesses in the leaders' 'make up' as they got nearer to black and white TV programmes.

True to previous days our breakfast was pleasantly sufficient and varied. Our Captain had now taken to the French cured bacon at the expense of Richard A.

With little remorse from the Captain, Richard A was beginning to think it was not his day when Jon T, with excellent practice of checking all bike conditions, informed him of a soft tyre. A change of tubes was efficiently undertaken by Richard A before setting off. However he and I had a perfectly good tube hanging in our room for the remainder of the stay. Sabotage, treachery was in the air or was it self healing. Anyway the benefits of a hanging rubber in our room had its merits.

We set off along the pretty cobbled streets of picture postcard Iepr on a loop to the south-east area visiting many cemeteries including major sites of Bedford House, Hill 60, Hill 62, Sanctuary Wood and Butte - as well as Tyne Cot\* the largest Commonwealth Graves Commission site in the world. We only travelled 30 miles in the day but there were many stops and I was taken aback at the number of small cemeteries as well as the main centre-pieces. The consistency of presentation, the perfection of upkeep and the sheer number of graves at these cemeteries were hard to appreciate.



Each cemetery appeared to have representations from numerous battalions/regiments and we wondered whether many soldiers were joined as much by luck as by judgement such must have been the turmoil over those years. The extent of the Commonwealth/colonies representation was impressive 60 battalions from Australia and nearly as many from Canada.

Several of the party were searching for the graves of relations and it was a poignant day that was only broken with some lighter banter at lunch and dinner.

Captain Mainwaring saved face after the bacon incident by finding a very respectable lunch at a modern cheese factory. Fronting an M&S type cafeteria was a young friendly native lady who clearly ate a lot of cheese. This had not missed the attention of the Captain and who knows who started the play but intercourse took place on payment for the meal where one party said he was the groups banker and the other

confirmed that she was 'Welgian' Presumably 'on your bike' or its Belgian equivalent restored our leader to 'head off' the afternoon expedition.

The lunch clearly had agreed with Richard A who buoyed with his 'harder' tyre claimed to have seen antelope and wildebeest in compounds near to the cemeteries.



At 1700 we routinely opened the evening in liquid fashion and at 1702 late payers to the brown purse kitty, Bob and Nigel, were surcharged.

Our second evening meal in Ieper at an Italian restaurant opposite the beautiful cathedral proved to be a step up from the previous night and all had sumptuous meals with a slow service encouraging the TV trivia to extreme boundaries. My evening of misery ended with my one contribution when they reached the black and white era – a time when I used to watch TV. Lady Isobel Barnet (who bless her was had up for shop-lifting during her menopause) rolled off my tongue unintentionally and I relaxed back into my crème brûlée with a quiet sense of déjà vous!

During the meal we were treated to a state-of-the-art communication demo by Stratford Bob that left us bewildered and awestruck. Apparently it involved smoke from the Vatican prior to obtaining reception on his hand held black box before he could talk to Auntie Millie in Barford.

As we headed down the road for bed after yet another super day and evening I for one was grateful that I had chosen my room partner well. At the end of the evening once Richard A hit the bed he was out for count and silent! It took me 2 nights before I realised I had been talking to myself for 10 minutes!

The 'rookie' had survived another day.

*\* It was at **Tyne Cot** that **Stratford Bob**, with some assistance interpreting the numbering system for the graves, found one of his relatives - he has penned these words :*

### ***Wednesday's Trip to Tyne Cot***

One of the highlights of the trip for me was seeing, for the first time, the grave of one of my distant relatives. His name was Samuel Macvie and he was a private in 13th Battalion of the Royal Scots. He was 20 years old when he was killed at the Third Battle of Ypres on 1 August 1917.

His name is included on the war memorial at Boroughmuir High School where he was a former pupil and at Cramond Kirk, on the west side of Edinburgh. It was particularly poignant because I have a nephew of the same name who lives at Astwood Bank. Every grave, of course, tells its own story but when you know there lies one of your own kith and kin who suffered the horrors of that war and fell so young, it does feel particularly moving.



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## Day 5 - Thursday 14 June 2012 : at Ieper

*From Nigel Blakey*

We had a really good breakfast at 08:00, including scrambled eggs with bacon. Some even went so far as a small dish of cold rice pudding – interesting.

We were away by 09:11 and rode North from our B&B Hortensia on Rijselsestraat, just inside the Lille Gate, known also as the Rijselpoort, Rijsel being the Flemish name for Lille. To the East of the Lille Gate is the Ramparts Cemetery, laid out along the ramparts overlooking the wide moat that extends round the South-West and North-East parts of the city, almost enclosing it along with the Ieper-Ijzer-Comines canals that thread their way round the North-West corner.



Riding North through the Grote Markt with its Cloth Hall (Lakenhalle) we took the N313 North East towards St Juliaen. On the way we passed the White House Cemetery close to the side of the road and the Wieltje Farm Cemetery set back beyond houses lining the road. On the right of our concrete cycle path was a turning to the Oxford Road Cemetery, and a mile or so further on we came to the Seaforth Cemetery on the left of the road. We didn't stop at any of these and at St Juliaan we turned right, off the main road, along St Juliaanstraat, no longer on a cycle path. We crossed the road to Zonnebeek, where we had visited the Passchendaele Memorial Museum on Wednesday, onto a narrow farm road and then turned right onto Keerzelaarstraat between flat cultivated fields without boundaries.

We rode past well kept farms with their neatly pointed brickwork and red tiled roofs. At the crossroads where we turned left onto 's Graventafelstraat there is a memorial column to New Zealand forces, but no cemetery. Shortly beyond that we passed the Passchendaele Cheese "museum" (without stopping, we'd had lunch there the day before) and took a left turn onto Rowestraat, another narrow lane twisting between fields. The lane climbed gently past extensive glasshouses. Asparagus fields had been newly ploughed in their characteristic box-shaped furrows. We joined Stroombeekstraat and crossed a small stream onto Waterstraat, cycling due South. At the Junction with Onze-Lieve-Vrouwstraat there was a large windmill.



We crossed back over Zonnebeekstraat and the N313 and then turned along Cayennestraat heading for Langemarck and the Deutsche Soldatenfriedhöfe (German Cemetery). This was in stark contrast to the white lines of standing headstones of the Commonwealth cemeteries, all in black granite square tablets laid flat, and a bronze cast plaque surrounded by a wreath. At the back of the cemetery there was a sombre group of four bronze figures, bare headed with closed eyes, and one holding a helmet to his chest.

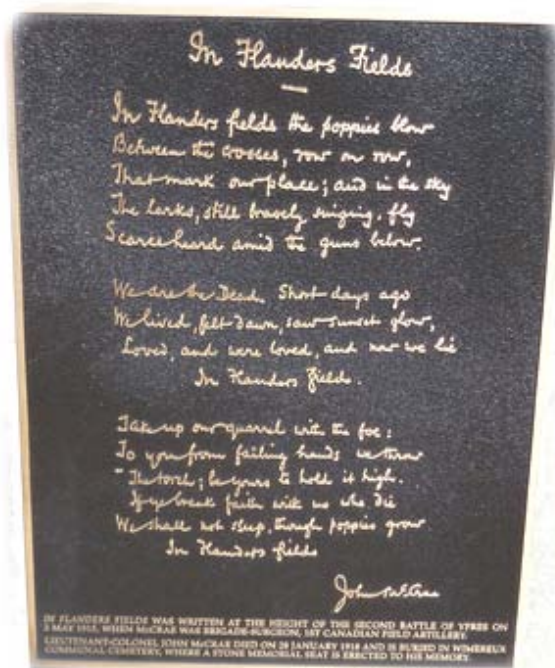
We cycled back into Langemarck along cobbled streets and found a café run by a Canadian couple who had been there for years. After a welcome coffee we rode down

a narrow cycle track directly towards the Artillery Wood Cemetery. Along the way we passed a memorial to Francis Ledwidge, the Irish poet, where an Irish tricolour was flying. His *Lament for Thomas McDonagh* was engraved on a plaque. Ledwidge was killed at Boezinge, near the Artillery Wood cemetery, and is buried at Passendale. Strangely the poem on his memorial is in memory of an Irish nationalist executed following the 1916 Easter Rising, and does not refer to the Great War.



We rode on, alongside the Ieperlee Kanal and turned into an industrial estate and stopped at the Yorkshire Trench and Dug-Out, on Bangiestraat. This is a preserved section of trench showing how it zigzags to prevent the blast of a direct hit surging along its length. It was the only example of an actual trench that we saw, and brought home the claustrophobic conditions.

We returned a little way to cross back over the canal and then rode south on a dedicated cycle track, past the Bard Cottage Cemetery and stopped at the Essex Farm Cemetery and Dressing Station. We stayed there for some time looking at the preserved dug-outs used for battlefield surgery and reading the plaque commemorating John McCrae, the Canadian surgeon who wrote *In Flanders Field*, focusing on the poppy as a symbol of self-sacrifice. We crossed the Ieperlee Kanal and rode a short distance up the other side to a café for lunch that didn't meet with approval (it didn't serve food!), and so retraced our steps to a sandwich bar in Ieper and returned to the Grote Markt where we sat on a warm stone bench in the sun looking across a beach volleyball pitch that had been installed opposite the Cloth Hall.



After our sandwiches we took an anti-clockwise route South of Ieper down the N336 from the Lille Gate and shortly turned left on the N331 until we crossed a small stream and followed a bicycle track along its West bank before turning right onto a lane between fields towards Voormezele. There we headed due South on a narrow lane, Voormezelestraat, passing the Croonaert Chapel Cemetery off to our right. We came to a 'T' junction with a map of the panorama where we paused to admire the view.

At Wijtschate we turned East on Houthemstraat and at the bottom of a hill turned back, having missed a right turn. We passed Derry House Cemetery and then Cabin Hill Cemetery, before turning East along Wambekestraat and then North along the splendidly named Pastor Blanckestraat. We climbed steadily and easily towards an impressive building that turned out to be an old school now converted into holiday accommodation, Oud Schooltje De Lind.

We now turned North on small lanes and enjoyed wonderful gentle undulating riding between borderless cultivated fields and occasional spick and span farms. We came to Palingbeek Golf Club, where we rode between fairways and tried to cross a stream at the bottom of a steep hill but decided it was not possible. We turned left beside

manicured hedges and signs warning of golfers, and passed the Oak Dump Cemetery although we didn't stop. We turned off the lane to wiggle along a footpath to the Spoilbank Cemetery and the Essex Farm Cemetery next to each other. We didn't stop at these either but rode along a cycle path before turning North along the N336 to the Bedford House Cemetery, passing concrete blockhouses behind heavily pollarded trees looking eerily stark set in front of modern farm buildings. We spent some time there walking round and quietly taking it all in.

It was a short distance back to Ieper, through the Lille Gate and our B&B Hortensia.

I washed and changed and set off for a walk along the ramparts, visiting the Ramparts Cemetery and returning to the Menen Gate before joining the others at De Walk, a bar run on Wednesdays and Thursdays by Willy, a characterful retired teacher. I had bought some chocolates to hand round the group along with an especially large chocolate pencil, which by general consent was awarded to the cyclist who was most likely to achieve the romantic aspirations of the group . . . the recipient will be revealed in the next daily report instalment.

We all then went to a restaurant for our final meal in Ieper.

*38.6 miles (62.2 Km) in 3 hours 36 minutes riding time, over the course of 6 hours 41 minutes. It had been a good day, with an average temperature of 71.4°F (21.9°C)*

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## **Day 6 - Friday 15 June 2012 : Ieper - Gravelines**

*From Bob Macvie - aka Stratford Bob, The Good Beer Guide*

Today we enjoyed our last breakfasts at Hortensia B&B – absolute quality! Once again the scrambled eggs and thin slivers of bacon were immensely popular, followed, in my case, by one last piece of ham and cheese in a roll. Well fuelled, we sadly bade our farewells to Jon T who was deserting us to return home\* for a wedding. His absence would be felt as he had been a cheerful companion all week.



Before departing we had a final photo-shoot standing in front of the B&B on Rijselstraat, along with 'Madame', who I think would miss us – just as some of our party would miss leering at her in those oh so tight jeans!

With the sky grey and overcast, we cycled away from the cobbles of Ypres on the start of our journey home. It struck me quite poignantly as we passed the Ramparts Cemetery how fortunate we 'band of brothers' were to be heading back to our loved ones, leaving behind our fellow countrymen and ancestors who, nearly 100 years ago, had suffered so appallingly and lost their lives.

The peloton soon sprang into action and we maintained a brisk pace as we headed for Dunkirk. Mild concern was felt as we crossed railway lines at an angle of 45 degrees but fortunately there no mishaps. After a few miles we entered the town of Poperinghe where the ranks made it clear to Captain Rob that we wanted to stop and visit the lively market held in the town square. It was an opportunity for some of us

to buy small gifts for the folks back home. Just to add even more weight to my panniers I opted for some Camembert which Fiona, my wife, is partial to, while Dennis must have spent a fortune buying a necklace of charms for his dear lady!



Although the rain was keeping off, the crosswind and sometimes a headwind was not conducive for fast cycling as we headed through rather uninspiring countryside and it was with some relief that, having crossed the seemingly non-existent border into France, we stopped at a Tabac in the small village of Rexpoede for coffee. It was probably the worst cup of coffee of the week and not cheap either!

As we headed for the port (not the drink!) Jon P took more action shots of individuals battling against the wind while those of us in the rear decided that masses of poppies by the roadside were too good a photo opportunity to miss!

Into the busy streets of Dunkirk we rode with its maze of paths, lights, crossings and ugly buildings. It reminded me rather of downtown Smethwick! I really was quite amazed at how well our leaders were navigating their way through all of this when, in the process of waiting for lights to turn green, Sergeant Wilson (Jon P) inadvertently sent Capt. Mainwaring (Rob G.) sprawling, with the pair of them lying in an ignominious heap together. Fortunately neither was hurt – only pride slightly dented – and neither noticed the suppressed giggles from the ranks!

Lunch was taken on the seafront at L'Orée des Sables (Bar Brassiere) with the sun now shining strongly. I had an omelette and salad which may not sound particularly exciting but the French have a knack of making ordinary food taste especially good!

Suitably refreshed we left Dunkirk and headed for the more upmarket seaside town of Gravelines, a bit like leaving Blackpool for Lytham St. Annes! As Rob had said, the hotel L'Alexandria was literally on the beach, with just a promenade separating us from the sands. We were early – too early to get in, but it was very pleasant sitting on benches eating our various cakes trying to catch a glimpse of the sea! It must have been two miles away!

Eventually the owner turned up to let us in so we parked our bikes around the back and found our rooms. Ours had an uninterrupted view of the deserted beach and the English Channel. As usual Nigel headed straight for the shower while I made cups of Maxwell House coffee (I haven't had that for years). Washed and changed we soon found a bar just up the road. The drinks were waiting for us as Rob, Jon P and Dennis had got there first! Duvels no less.



Brewed in the province of Antwerp, this Belgian style Golden Beer is considered to be the World's finest Golden Ale. Duvel is extremely fragrant and has flavours reminiscent of orange zest, pear brandy and green apples. Duvel (the Flemish for 'devil'), was founded in 1871: a truly classic beer.

Unfortunately the French seem to pay lip service to the notion of not smoking in bars as several cigarettes were on the go. Having got used to smoke-free pubs we all objected to the noxious fumes around us so cut our visit short and returned to the hotel for our 'last supper'

I had an excellent Salade d'Ecosaise which was smoked salmon with a lot of lettuce. The Affligem beer was very drinkable as it is brewed in the Flemish village of Opwijk by the Benedictine monks. During the meal we somehow got onto the subject of discipline, or the lack of it, in schools today. Richard A had us all in stitches as he described the methods used by 'Slasher' Denton to keep his class in order in the 1950s! That got Rob reminiscing about radio programmes he listened to as a boy, including his love of The Glums. He could even remember certain episodes which is pretty amazing! I think he even knew Mr Marconi!

However, Dennis and I had our minds on something else! England were playing Sweden in a 'must win' match at the European Championships and we were keen to watch the action in a bar rather than in our bedrooms. So we made our way to the nearby Palm Beach Club. Talk about feeling like a fish out of water! The average age must have been 25 and loud thumping music was blasting the airways. The 'deux Duvels' Dennis ordered got lost in translation and turned out to be two glasses of red wine! Was it his Brummie accent the barmaid couldn't understand?

The match itself was a cracker with first England and then Sweden taking the lead. After a while we were joined by the rest of the gang, except for Rob who was having an early night! Within seconds of more drinks arriving, Nigel proceeded to knock over a glass of wine before it even touched someone's lips! The Palm Beach was buzzing but we were the only ones interested in watching the match on the big TV. With five minutes remaining Danny Welbeck scored an amazing goal to give England the vital win. We all left in high spirits and were even considerate enough to tiptoe upstairs so as not to disturb Capt. Rob.

It had been a memorable day and night for the 'Magnificent Seven'!

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*Jon T was required to be home to attend a wedding on Saturday 16 June and took his leave of the group on the Friday morning*

## **Day 6 (part 2) - Friday 15 June 2 012 : Iepr - Home - the escapee**

*From Jon Tuckey*



The alarm went off at 0700 but breakfast was not ready for another hour. This gave me time to pack, check all our tyres and attach the Carradice Camper Long Flap saddle bag to my Mercian Vincetore in readiness for an 09:00 lift off. Veronique our attractive hostess provided yet another excellent breakfast. (Far superior to the Formula 1 offering on Tuesday)

Over breakfast Mr Porteous decided to share his Team Training and Development observations for each of the Tour Riders (except the Captain of course) I was expecting to be told that my chain had too many links in it, but no, my training involved taking greater care of chocolate creations! *[The aforementioned chocolate pencil]* The most notable comment was for Richard FH to back off the expensive Sea

Bass! It was noted that the Northern Guests on Table 2 managed to avoid paying their EUR100 kitty contribution previously called for by our Captain.

I needed to settle my account with Veronique EUR105 (good value I thought) but my card would not work in her machine (stop it!). This necessitated arranging a quick interest free Snape Loan, which was fully repaid on Wednesday 20 June in sterling at the prevailing exchange rate. Thanks Dennis. Goodbyes and handshakes followed and it was time to hit the road.

I had left plenty of time to get to Dunkerque for my 14:00 ferry crossing to Dover, despite having a rear wheel puncture just after I crossed the Belgian border near Rexpoede (15 minutes lost). I followed the text book route provided by our Captain along cycle paths and through quiet country lanes moving from one village to the next. As I approached a railway crossing just past Craywick I saw flashing lights and heard ringing bells as the half barriers were lowered. A few moments later a goods train appeared hauling over 20 flatbed waggons each carrying a huge piece of metal. I waved to the driver and he waved back (good for Anglo-French relations) and was soon on my way again.



I got a bit lost around Dunkerque but the GPS app in my phone saved the day and I quickly found my way to the ferry port. I was first on the Ferry, but only because I cycled to the front of the queue, and locked my bike to one of the Sheffield cycle stands provided. The 2 hour crossing was calm and uneventful. I was first off the ferry at Dover and only had to wait 10 minutes at Dover Priory Railway Station for the next train to London which arrived at St Pancras at 1650.



I had a couple of hours to kill before my train from Marylebone was due (falling foul of both the bicycle restrictions and my ultra-cheap ticket), so I went in search of a decent pint of beer and something to eat. I caught the 1915 train which arrived at Warwick Parkway at 2050 and cycled the last few miles home arriving at 2140.

*Total cycled miles home to home 256.6 Total cycled miles from Ypres to Solihull 67.7*

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## **Day 7 - Saturday 16 June 2012 : Gravelines - Home**

*From Richard Atkinson - aka Tommy Atkinson*



When we arrived at Gravelines on the Friday evening the sea was barely visible on the horizon, surprisingly it appeared just the same when we appeared for breakfast on Saturday morning.

I am reliably informed that it came in and went out again during the night! The morning weather was pretty grey with clouds scudding across the sun in a regular pattern.

There was plenty of shipping to be seen in the Channel. After breakfast our first challenge awaited us. I say us, but in reality it was mainly for Richard FH who couldn't undo his bike lock. After a few swear-words and an extra fiddle by our

Captain the lock succumbed and we were free to depart. We were making good progress into a strong headwind until Nigel decided to stop for a photography session. A few of us waited with him and it proved a tough pedal to regain the leading group who had barely slackened their pace.

A group visit to the Decathlon store in Calais proved to be a source of amazement to those who had not witnessed their breadth of products before. All of this resulted in a mass purchase of red gilets. If you see one on a club run it will probably have come from Decathlon, Calais. Prior to arriving at the tunnel we stopped at a boulangerie to buy lunch and came away with frangipans and croissants galore. Nigel and Stratford Bob making a bulk purchase between them.

We made timely contact with Eurotunnel's Cycle Service run by the friendly and helpful Norman. When we arrived at Coquelles we were directed to the Coach building for Immigration checks where we almost had an Officer apiece. After the crossing Norman was a gem, taking us all the way to Folkestone West station rather than the nominated point. Hats off to Eurotunnel's cycle service.



While waiting on the platform I strayed over the yellow lined and went close to the edge. Jon P said I was in danger of being sucked off which caused much mirth although I don't understand why. We all piled into the carriage immediately behind the driver only to be told off by the Guard for obstructing the driver's exit route in an emergency.



There was a final pecuniary transaction to clear our debts with the "brown purse"

Upon arrival at St Pancras we started on the journey to Marylebone through the busy traffic and on much worse road surfaces than we had been used to. At Marylebone the group split depending on whether you wanted to end up in Stratford or Warwick/Solihull. I formed a triumvirate with Nigel and Dennis. We left London in fine weather but

a phone call home soon let us know that it was chucking it down in Birmingham. This presented us with a dilemma: did we get off at Warwick Parkway or continue to Solihull for a shorter ride in the rain? We showed little spine and opted for Solihull. Would there be anyone there to spot our Warwick Parkway tickets? No, you have to be lucky sometimes. We split again at Solihull with Nigel and I taking a different route from Dennis.

This was my first cycle tour and it turned out to be an excellent trip thanks in no small measure to Rob's meticulous preparation and excellent leadership. The camaraderie was superb as was the mickey taking. I am now, almost, a beer drinker!!

Thanks one and all for a week's fun on a bike.

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## The Epilogue : Post-tour thoughts

*From Rob Gullen - pictured here in the green sprinter's jersey leading out the CTC HoE "train"*



Well, hopefully readers have enjoyed each daily instalment that we've published here in the *Electronic Link* over the past few weeks [*The daily articles were first published in the CTC HoE online Electronic Link magazine in July/August 2012*] ... and what an amazing few weeks that has been for cycling, albeit perhaps not of the kind we're all used to.

. . . the other cycle tour that they have in France every July - in the word (in fact I think it's the *only* word in his vocabulary) of Mark Cavendish : INCREDIBLE! A British 1 - 2 with Bradley Wiggins and Chris Froome, plus the win on the Avenue des Champs-Élysées for Cavendish . . and Team Sky only missed the team prize by less than 6 minutes.

The Olympics provided many highs and a few lows for cycling - disappointment in the men's road race, BMX and mountain biking . . a wonderful silver for Lizzie Armitstead in the women's road race . . Bradley Wiggins and his amazing time-trial performance for gold, and not forgetting Froome's bronze . . the unfortunate Pendleton/Varnish incident . . Sir Chris and his pals with a gold . . Ed, G and the other chaps with the men's pursuit gold . . Vicky's Keirin gold . . Ed with his sprint gold and omnium bronze . . Laura with her omnium gold .. Vicky with a silver ... and what can one say about SIR CHRIS HOY . . INCREDIBLE!

Back to the France/Belgium Tour . . .

As you probably noticed from the daily missives we had a great trip, with many memories that were both poignant in the case of the WWI sites and amusing with the radio and television trivia . . . and great fun - mainly at the expense of the other members of the group ... Richard FH with the Lord Charles monocle ... and his *Sea Bass* incident will be long-remembered.

What the photograph above doesn't show is that we were slip-streaming another rider - I got the whole team on the wheel and after some super-human effort we just managed to reel her in before she got to the boulangerie!



Brief mention was made (by Jon T) of Jon P's "notes for improvement" announced at breakfast on our last day at Iepr, here they are in detail:

**Jon P** - Research 1950s' radio programmes more thoroughly.

**Jon T** - Ascertain how to keep a chocolate ~~dille~~ pencil from going soft.

**Stratford Bob** - Needs to do more research to discover beers with an ABV of 100%.

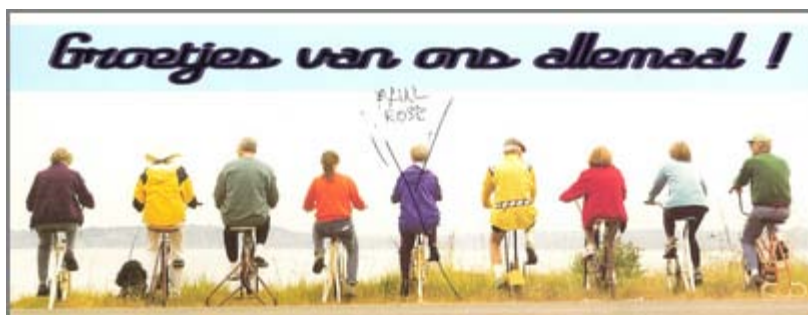
**Dennis** - Invest in a map\* with a scale less than 1:1,000,000.

**Nigel** - Invest in a magnifying glass or borrow Richard's monocle.

**Richard FH** - Our antipodean Welshman likes upside-down sheep, would recommend buying another monocle to make a spectacle of himself and to learn more trivia.

**Richard A** - Must try not to use his middle chainring at all and not mention she-who-must-not-be-named.

I, as Captain, was clearly beyond criticism but was given a very apt signed card as a token of appreciation for the planning, ticket and accommodation booking etc - and administration of the BROWN PURSE.



*Stratford Bob found the card - we have no idea what the caption means.*

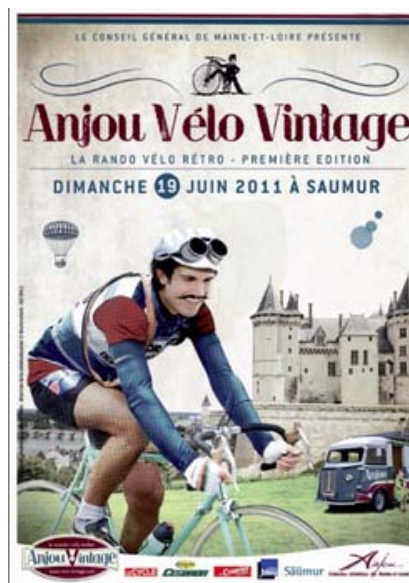
*Note : there are 9 riders, including (Stratford) Paul who had to drop out for health reasons.*

It wasn't long after our return that I was to utter that well-worn phrase made famous by Michael Caine "Hang on lads, I've got a great idea . . . " - and to float a plan for another French tour for 2013

Current thinking centres around getting by train to, and then riding from St Nazaire or Nantes at the Atlantic end of the Loire as far as about Orleans and then riding into the centre of Paris\* All very doable with excellent cycling on quiet roads, some interesting sights to see, and great food ... not sure about the beer, we'll have to consult Stratford Bob on that.

Enough of this rambling, I need to get on the bike and get some more miles in for the year.

Thank you for reading it all!



\* If the idea of a 7 or 10 day trip interests you, let me know - provisional dates are to start on 9 or 10 June 2013 (train time to be confirmed!)