

CTC Heart of England

Cycle Tour : The Loire Valley & Paris

9 - 18 June 2013



The Players



Shirley Acreman



Richard Atkinson



Nigel Blakey



Mike Buckley



Jenni Ferguson



Richard Freer-Hewish



Rob Gullen



Jon Porteous



Paul Rose



Dennis Snape



Kelvin Staple



Keith Whitehead



Linda Whitehead



... and the brown purse

Route & Itinerary

CTC Heart of England (Le cœur d'Angleterre) Tour du Val de Loire 2013				Link	Notes
Day #	Date	Description	Overnight (shared rooms)	Scribe	
			6 x Twin, 1 x Single	RG	Prologue
1	Sun 09-Jun-13	SUA & Solihull c 0950 Train to Folkestone (via Marylebone, ride to St Pancras (approx 2 miles), 1312 train to Folkestone West - arr 1404)	Booked [6 SUA, 7 Solihull]	NB	£37.69 return (Groups - MUST travel together/ railcards) Meet at Marylebone (Folkestone - London return segment will not be used, but is "free" on the outward ticket)
	15:30	Eurotunnel Bike Service Ride to Calais, c 5 miles	Booked la Sole Meunier		£16 pp (incl bike) Euro 42 ppnn B&B
2	Mon 10-Jun-13	Bike-Liner : coach + covered in, fitted bike trailer [Load at Calais hotel to depart 0830] direct to Villandry	Confirmed	JP	£76 pp (There are 20 bike spaces, if less it can sell some seats to other cyclists to amortise cost)
			le Cheval Rouge, Villandry www.lecheval-rouge.com		Euro 55 ppnn D8&B
3	Tue 11-Jun-13	Day ride - Vouvray (RG)	Booked	KW	Euro 55 ppnn D8&B
	11:30	Visit to wine cave - perhaps gardens/chateau at Villandry on the way back			
4	Wed 12-Jun-13	Day ride - Usse/Chinon/Azay [MB]		SA	Euro 55 ppnn D8&B
5	Thu 13-Jun-13	Ride to Venue 2, c 53 miles	Hôtel Saint-Hubert, Cour-Cheverny www.hotel-sthubert.com	RA	Euro 59 ppnn D8&B
6	Fri 14-Jun-13	Day ride - ?? [JP]	Cour-Cheverny	KS	Euro 59 ppnn D8&B
7	Sat 15-Jun-13	Day ride - ?? [NB]	Cour-Cheverny	RA	Euro 59 ppnn D8&B
8	Sun 16-Jun-13	Ride to N of Orleans, c 65 miles	Relais St Georges, Pithiviers www.simplyhotelsfrance.com/en/relais-saint-georges-pithiviers_R_236_10_.php	DS	Euro 53 ppnn D8&B
9	Mon 17-Jun-13	Ride to edge of Paris centre, c 58 miles	Paris Kyriad, Porte d'Orleans www.hotelparisportorleans.com	JF	Euro 53 ppnn Rm only
10	Tue 18-Jun-13	Ride to Paris centre, c4 miles Eiffel Tower. Etoile. Warship at the altar of Decathlon, Ave de Wagram. Ride down Champs Elysees	Booked (bikes on 1513 & 1613 trains) Booked - ref Gullen SKNAQP	LW	£22 per bike £37 per person
	13:00	Check bikes in at station			
	16:13	Train from Paris to London, St Pancras			
	Arr 17:39	Ride to Marylebone - possibly with a diversion to kill time before trains home!!!			
		Train(s) home to SUA & Solihull	Outward ticket covers return (in groups)		After 1930, fare & bike restrictions on Chiltern trains
				PR	Chateaux highlights
				R F-H	Gourmand report
				MB	Reflections of a newbie
				RG	Epilogue

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The prologue : Rob

Here we are again - *la belle France* welcomes CTC Heart of England for its second successive cycle tour*

Whilst still sporting the silly cycling tan lines from 2012 my mind turned to thoughts of another jaunt - first choice had to be France . . . where else can you enjoy quiet roads, (usually) better weather and superb food? - a country only let down by the mostly pale and fizzy beer.

I have to own up to a rather selfish approach to the trip - I had been to the Loire cycling before, several times, and just **knew** it was good ... in fact good enough to propose a plan. Of the 2012 gang all but one signed up again for 2013 .. and we picked up five newbies - a last-minute change with Stratford Bob becoming Shirley and we were a thirteen person peloton.

A bit of www surfing and it all fell into place pretty easily with booking hotels, trains, coach and bike trailer - minor worries about getting bikes on trains were cast aside!

All this was happening in November for a June departure - the fine detail of the route maps was honed to perfection . . . ready to supply to gadget men Jon and Nigel.

So, let's get started with the players' daily missives



France - a bit of everything, for everyone

* OK we really went to Belgium in 2012 but it's only next door and they sort of speak the same language

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Sunday 9 June 2013 - Home - Calais : Nigel



The day dawned overcast but dry as I struggled out of bed at 0630. Taking care not to wake Liz, I donned my cycling kit and wobbled down to breakfast. Golden rule number one: never start a cycle ride without a full stomach. My friends will laugh and will add, "and top up plentifully during the day"

Washing up completed, teeth cleaned and bushy tail brushed I checked over the bike, testing the tyres for overnight softness and loading my Carradice bar bag and double-flap expedition saddle bag (do not forget the double flap). Liz emerged from her slumbers to wish

me *bon voyage* and I set off at 0855. on the 5½ miles to Solihull. Just before the station Richard A joined me and we rode in at 0915. to heave our bikes up the steps to the platforms. There was a welcome cup of coffee waiting for us in the newsagent's kiosk and one of the station staff engaged us in a knowledgeable discussion about cycling shoes. Dennis arrived shortly afterwards and got himself a coffee, closely followed by Kelvin apparently having packed the kitchen sink. Next up were Keith and Linda, he gallantly offering to carry her bike up the steps but she proudly managing it herself

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Sunday 9 June 2013 - *continued*

along with a rucksack of apples for the journey. We took photographs only to realise that we had forgotten all about Mike, who arrived bearing enough baggage for all of us together. Dennis thought that if we piled all our kit together and threw out all duplicates we could save ourselves half of it.

The train rolled in promptly at 0957 and appeared to be quite full so I walked right up to the front and the others spread themselves as evenly as possible down the train, one or two bikes per door. The train manager wasn't keen on allowing those in the rear carriages on at all, but Kelvin turned on his charm (where does he keep it?) and everyone scrambled aboard.

We arrived at Marylebone about 20 minutes before the Stratford group and grabbed a sandwich and a cup of coffee. We hadn't finished by the time the Rob-mob arrived, and true to form Rob said, "Right, we all here?" and shot off closely followed by Dennis holding a half full beaker of coffee. The ride to St Pancras is a matter of taking your life in your hands and praying to St

Christopher. I'm not sure who St Pancras was but St Christopher is the patron saint of travellers. Miraculously, Dennis was still holding his coffee when we arrived at St Pancras.

Our next challenge was to get 13 bikes onto the high speed train to Folkestone. Initially the response from the man on the barrier was, "You're joking". However, the man on the barrier had not encountered Rob before, who must have been talking to Kelvin.

"We're all booked on the 1530 Eurotunnel service."

"Well, hang on and we'll see how full it is."

"I did check when I booked and was told that it was possible for us all to get on together."

"OK, bring your bikes through the barrier but don't get on until I've checked."

The automatic ticket barriers worked on the principle of pushing your ticket into the front of the machine inside which presumably some bit of magic was



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performed to check that the ticket was valid whereupon it popped out of the top so that you could retrieve it and the little gate would open to let you through. Linda managed to break the automatic ticket barrier by trying to push through the little gate before retrieving her ticket once it had popped up. Judging by the number of gate attendants rushing hither and thither this was a regular occurrence. "Design fault" comes to mind, or perhaps it was the bag of apples. We had to be ushered through manually by which time the train was deemed empty enough to allow 13 bicycles on board.

"Just spread yourselves down the train."

"Thanks very much."

"(Nice man.)"

"(Very nice man.)"



At Folkestone West we were met by the Eurotunnel Bike Service vehicles. It was cold, so they wrapped up our bicycles in blankets to keep them cosy (or maybe it was to stop

them getting too cosy with each other). Actually I could have done with a blanket myself as I waited to climb into the minibus that would take us through the tunnel. All was excitement as we drove down the ramp and onto the train with the second van behind with our cosy bikes. But not so fast ... there was a cat on the line and there would be a delay.

A cat? Chasing rats? They can see in the dark can't they?

At 1529, there was an "Attention ..." message and we set off. I wondered if they had found the cat.

Oh sorry, a power cut.

Note to myself, *"Must get used to the French accent"*

At 1714 French time we arrived in Calais.

Dennis, *"It's amazing that the English and French ends of the tunnel actually met"*

Kelvin, *"Yes, but you don't know how many*



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tunnels there are"

Jon, *"It's like spaghetti down here"*

Rob had sent us all an excellent route book for the tour that some of us had printed, and after his usual, *"We're all here then?"*, we chased after him ('twas ever thus) into the teeth of a gale. Past the Kyriad hotel where we stayed last year and the Buffalo Grill where we ate, the gap widened as the back of the peloton puffed along until with some consternation we arrived at Fort Risban on the edge of a yacht marina and found that Rob had disappeared. Fort Risban was besieged by the English in November 1346 when they chose to take possession of Calais after their victory at Crécy. I didn't feel the same sense of euphoria as I stood there in the wind wondering where everyone had gone. A shout from the other side of the marina bridge and we were reunited in the lobby of la Sole Meuniere.

Note to myself, *"Do try to keep up"*

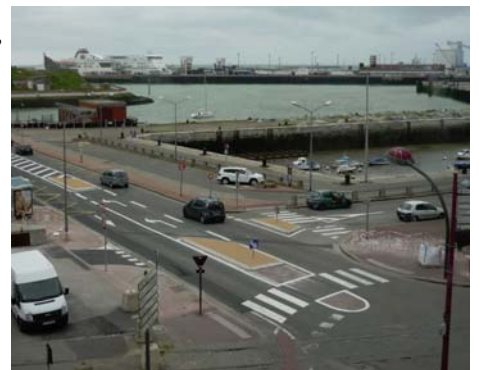
After showering myself and performing the first of my nightly kit-washing I joined the others in a speedy (Rob, *"We're all here then?"*) reconnoitre of local restaurants and enjoyed a splendid meal of prawns *mise en bouche*, mussel soup, turkey roulade, chocolate mousse and coffee.

Note to myself, café in France is small, black and strong, good for a caffeine boost but no good for replacing fluids after a hot ride.

Due to my tummy problem I only ate half of

my roulade and offered the remainder (untouched by human hand) to Richard A and Keith. They accepted it with glee (or gluttony) and as it passed down the table Richard F-H said, *"There's a brain here without an owner"*

Mike and Linda began to feel the heat and starting removing layers of clothing, and somehow or other that I now forget the conversation turned to the fact that quite a few of the male heads round the table were thinning. I never cease to wonder at Jon's thought associations, nor at his bottomless reservoir of bits of knowledge. Whereas I am awestruck at this phenomenon it sends Rob into paroxysms, and as Jon



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commented, “*Do you realise that the verb ‘balding’ only exists in the present-continuous form?*”

Rob rolled his eyes to the ceiling, started quivering in uncontrolled horror and slid gracefully beneath the table.

It had been a long day and I was in bed by 9:30 p.m. (French time).

Note to myself, “*I must try to keep up*”.



Monday 10 June 2013 - Calais - Villandry : *Jon*

The morning dawned somewhat more noisily than Kelvin, my room-mate, and I would have liked – with screeching gulls. It also dawned one hour later than we thought after a semi-sozzled discussion the previous night about what the real time was!

So we appeared rather later for breakfast than we thought but slightly more refreshed too. The meal consisted of the standard French hotel breakfast. (That’s using standard as a zeuma adjective to describe both the hotel and the breakfast)

After a quick pack of the panniers we all set off around the corner to the garage where our *Petites Reines* had been stored over night. We rode or pushed

them the short distance to the car park where Simon, his mini-coach and bike trailer were waiting for us. Loading



only took a few minutes then we were off.

This part of France is not particularly exciting so we settled down to read, chat or just getting used to seeing French life and road signs again.

The first stop was a service station where we stocked up on snacks and drinks and used the free Wi-Fi. Shirley had come well prepared and amused and tested us with a quiz on the Loire and indeed other subjects.



Monday 10 June 2013 - *continued*

From what I remember and scribbled down the Loire is 629 miles long and has more than 300 *Chateaux*. It also once made up the border between England and France.

As we approached Rouen we could see the famous cathedral. This used to be the capital city of Normandy. Rouen became the capital city of English power in occupied France and when the Duke of Bedford, John of Lancaster bought Joan of Arc from his ally, the Duke of Burgundy who had been keeping her in jail since May 1430, she was logically sent to this city for Christmas 1430 and after a long trial by a church court, sentenced to be burned at the stake. The sentence was carried out on 30 May 1431 in this city, where most inhabitants supported the Duke of Burgundy, Joan of Arc's royal enemy.

In the city as we passed over a large bridge we saw on our right the association "L'Armada de la liberté" - "The Sails of Freedom" celebrating its 25th anniversary and its 6th edition of the Armada held from 6 to 16 June 2013. The finest and largest sailing ships, the most modern warships and many other outstanding ships, coming from all over the world, sailed up the 120 kilometres of the River Seine through the beautiful landscapes of Normandy to Rouen. They were huge and

from all sorts of places.

The journey continued with sightings of: kestrels, buzzards, forests, vineyards and *Le Loir* and *La Loire* rivers. Simon also managed to eclipse Richard A both in the frequency and in the volume of his sneezing!

An interesting start to the holiday and tour with much ice-breaking and the usual Mickey-taking thrown in too.



Tuesday 11 June 2013 - day ride to Vouvray : *Keith*

Help please Ed – I've never written one of these report-things before! What style do you want? (Ed: Whatever you like.) OK.

The sky dawned the colour of a week-old bruise as the phalanx of explorers grimly prepared their equipment for an assault on the first objective of the week – the wine caves of Vouvray.

(Ed: Too dramatic. Try again.) OK.

A CTC cyclist called Shirley was heading towards the Gates Pearly when her wheel touched a line and she fell – but was fine. Our Shirley is clearly no girlie.

(Ed: not really a poet either, are you?) I guess not. I'll try to stick to the facts.

0745 – no cold milk for the cereal!

0845 – we set off, establishing a departure time that survived just about unscathed for the whole of the holiday

0930 – Shirley falls – the only significant fall of the week, notwithstanding Nigel's encounter with a muddy puddle and mine with a concrete block (both near Paris).

1020 – Shirley has a puncture. Some murmured comments suggested that this looked a bit like attention-seeking. From this point we could see cliff top caves, which an information board revealed to be connected with a (now defunct) silkworm farm or, to use its proper name, a *magnanery*. You learn something every day.

1045 – coffee

1115 – a tour of the Vouvray wine cooperative, which has 6 miles of tunnels and 4 million bottles, a few of which we sampled afterwards.



Tuesday 11 June 2013 - *continued*

1300 – lunch by the river, spoiled somewhat by biting flies that I smugly said I would be unaffected by because of long leggings, only to discover later that this had been no barrier to them.

1400 – post-lunch navigation failed to find a forest path but we soon found a proper track. Back to Villandry via Tours, in which the traffic was chaotic. Ironically, this was partly due to road work to improve the cycle paths. Several bike “portages” were required to access river paths. Occasional showers which



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stopped as soon as we put waterproofs on.

1600 – Villandry chateau; a few of us toured the chateau itself while the rest enjoyed the gardens. Both were astonishing.

1800 – back to the hotel for an excellent dinner.

PS. Apparently I won the “Silly Hat of the Day” award for what I thought was a pretty cool new buff arranged as a beanie. There’s no accounting for taste...

(*Ed, True - with the evidence*)



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Wednesday 12 June 2013 - day ride to Chinon : *Shirley*

I usually keep a holiday journal, but as today I have the added pleasure of sharing my thoughts with you all, I will attempt to keep the language clean.

At 0715, I am again the first down to breakfast. Although the hard-drinking men are barely surfacing, in the women’s dorm we have already been awake for some time, mended the floppy shower head, and sorted ourselves out for the day. But no problem! Nobody else knows there are supposed to be peach slices in the fruit salad, and once again I sneakily help myself.

Before coming, as a newbie (and a diminutive one at that) I was worried about my ability to keep up. Although I am more likely to be bringing up the rear than leading from the front, so far so good, although managing to keep on the bike today would speed things up a bit.

On the road at 0845 (a pattern is set, same every day) we head down the beautiful avenue of trees opposite the hotel, and soon we are bowling along the levees of the Loire. Apart from a short section of pavé, they are largely well-surfaced and have very little traffic.

We pass a sign offering ‘*Location Velo Natur*’. Nude cycle hire? This lends a whole new meaning to the concept of ‘bums up nose down’

A spur off our route brings us to the little village of Usse, where for a large consideration (it mounts up when there are 13 of you) we look round the magnificent chateau, including a signed walk through the attic (*nb grenier=attic; grenouille=frog; =onesie*).

This picturesque chateau is where Charles Perrault wrote ‘Sleeping Beauty’, the story of a cyclist who jabbed his thumb on an Allen key, got pissed to numb the pain and slept for 3 days until his whiskery room-mate threatened to kiss him.

Coffee in the outdoor café opposite the chateau, then onwards to Chinon (accidentally taking in Avoine on the way).

Pretty Chinon sits on



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a rocky spur over the Loire, which has given it military significance for millennia, with associations with Henry II, Joan of Arc, Cardinal Richelieu and the Knights Templar. The shape of the fortress also gives its name to the 'French Bun' hairdo. (Odd that the 'Mont St Michel' never took off.)

After lunch, both the air temperature and the pace are cranked up, peaking at 25+ after our lazy morning. Passing through vineyards, and with several 'discussions' about direction, we bowl through the beautiful *Forêt de Chinon* with only a short amount of

off-road to get us back on route. In the lively little town of Azay-le-Rideau, we top up on caffeine and spare inner tubes, before an exhilarating ride back into Villandry.

As usual, we gather in the bar next to the hotel, where Jon (who has had a **THREE GEOCACHE DAY!!**) learns he is to be a grand-pere. More beer is obviously called for.

At 1900 we are just contemplating dinner when Richard and Paul roll in, having taken a short detour to Western Samoa.



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Thursday 13 June 2013 - Villandry - Cour Cheverny : Richard A

Thursday dawned dry but with the promise of rain. A quick consultation with Accu-weather on Dennis's smart phone indicated no rain. Good – oh. A brief visit outside revealed Jenni and Shirley wandering about. Up to no good I'll bet !

We were due for an early (0830) departure after breakfast from the excellent Hotel Cheval Rouge.

Unfortunately Shirley found that her expensive new tube was leaking at the valve, but with no time to return it for another.

Initially the weather was fine but the rain soon arrived. So much for Accu-weather ! As 11s approached we neared Montlouis as a bedraggled collection of cyclists.



We descended, en masse, on a bar all dripping profusely. A hot, strong coffee lightened the mood a little. Things could have been worse because as soon as

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Thursday 13 June 2013 - *continued*

we were ensconced in the bar the heavens opened and a downpour of truly biblical proportions ensued. Weren't we lucky.

Once normal weather service (i.e. standard rain) had been resumed we continued towards Cour-Cheverny.

We arrived in pouring rain with young Mr Blakey bringing up the rear at some considerable distance. I fear the 18 mph that we had been achieving was not to his taste. His Lincoln Green outfit made him even more difficult to spot against the forested background. Upon arrival we found but a miniscule covered bike shed with no other provision for overnight protection for the bikes. Many of us were wet through and some (me included) had only soggy cycling shoes to wear for the evening. In these circumstances I have found a dry pair of socks works wonders. When the damp gets to your feet it is at least somewhat warmer.

By now it was a fine late afternoon/early evening and our leader had left instructions to a bar that he was going to frequent. Some of us failed dismally in following the instructions but still managed to find an acceptable watering hole. After a few beers there were scenes of near farce as we attempted to pay the bill with a mountain of coins.

Our first evening meal in the St Hubert was excellent with a wide ranging cheeseboard. After the meal the Hotel relented and allowed us to use their function suite as a bike park. The only condition was they had to be removed by 1000 the next day. Never has my bike resided overnight in such a grand location.



Ed, What today's scribe omitted to mention was that another rain-enforced stop at Amboise saw us in a bar (above) from 1145 - 1430. An early lunch was taken

Friday 14 June 2013 - day ride to Beaugency : *Kelvin*

Breakfast was taken at the usual time (although a little tricky for me to report, as my eyes would still have been asleep at that unearthly time of day). After yesterday's wet journey, a posse of riders preened, cleaned and maintained their machines after wheeling them out from their lodgings, which doubled as Hotel Saint Hubert's function room. The bikes appeared to have enjoyed a rather sumptuous meal served on crisp white linen table cloths. Mine had certainly put on weight.

The day dawned cool and cloudy, but thankfully dry after the continuous deluge of yesterday. We rode to Chambord as the day warmed up and the sun came out. The Chateau de Chambord was a hugely impressive pile, with forests of turrets and spires in contrasting white limestone and dark grey slate. Yet, it had been barely ever been inhabited, surrounded as it had been, by mosquito infested marshes.

My newly learnt art of geocaching had taken my



Friday 14 June 2013 - *continued*

mentor and our day ride captain, off on a personal steeplechase around the estate. Jumping one of the ditches on his trusty green steed had found him a geo cache but lost a mobile. Fortunately, a second lap reunited the two.

The chateau had beautifully carved features, reminding us not unkindly of our tour manager, Capt. Mainwaring. Every time we spotted and tried to photograph one, there was a discrete 'cough' from the other side of the courtyard, to announce his impending presence.

After re-grouping for coffee and a disappointing doughnut, we rode on through forests and by La Loire to Bracieux and Beaugency. Were cyclists to report on road surface conditions in that part of France we would hear that metalled roads would generally score 1 on the Beaufort scale for smoothness, but that forest tracks were 5, veering 6 on the Richter scale.

Beaugency offered a delightful multiple arched bridge over the now warm and sunny Loire and an even more delightful patisserie, which was pretty well emptied of warm and sunny goods by our massed ranks of cyclists. Anything containing raspberries or showing any significant signs of goo-iness was immediately

purchased, particularly by the luncheon-loving cyclists with us.



The ride continued alongside the river on tracks and smooth level tarmac at a smart pace. It became necessary at one point for the peloton to form an arch for Richard A to cycle through, much to the confusion of a following car driver. The confused nature of the local populace continued, as a small group of Frenchmen, on seeing the peloton approaching, clapped and cheered and wished us *bonne route*.

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Friday 14 June 2013 - *continued*

Blois was another impressive town on the Loire where we stopped for 3s to enjoy the scenery, parading before us. A comely wench served glasses of beer, whilst we discussed the merits of simple entertainments such as hop scotch, skipping and other playground games; and the teacher's weaponry that was school chalk.

Over the bridge to follow some busy roads and yet more forest tracks, we came to one with a junction containing no less than seven ways, which brought us bumpily back to the hotel.

Pre dinner drinks were taken by a small sub-group, in the local *Café de Sport*. Here, our equally bumpy French language skills were meanly tested by 'le patron' with some of his customers, who seemingly had



imbibed most of the day. They were adept at mixing vernacular language and an almost Black Country accent with a slurring of alcohol.

Dinner was again a multi course extravaganza, often involving goat's cheese and washed down by *pichets* of a rather indifferent red. Perhaps in order to empty his cellar of spare stock the Maitre D' kindly offered the wine served intravenously. To the best of my understanding this was not taken up by any of the group.

Lively conversation, often ignoring the ride of the day



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Friday 14 June 2013 - *continued*

covered many topics, including sport. A certain lady of the party who may be described as having antipodean connections informed us that her son was a hooker. Further questioning revealed a connection with rugby and elicited responses about decking which, with the southern hemisphere accent altering the 'e' to an 'i' created much hilarity and the threat of some objects to be thrown.



Other members meanwhile discussed the concept of a 'tarte nature' – a succinct description of some of the

more hirsute female members of the French population, whilst Shirley entertained us with her veterinary skills, her colourful limbs and her own rendition of the Ministry of Silly Walks. Sea bass was doing his utmost to charm the cheese from the waitress, whilst others talked of methods of carrying towels. Our location in a separate dining room away from most other guests was well considered, and we were aware only of conviviality, and no complaints.

The randomer and his wife, who had joined us (and been warmly welcomed) for dinner the previous night, was seen again, this time waving through the dining room window, to us. The confusion was later cleared up when it was explained to me that, rather than a recently met stray cyclist/caravanner, it was in fact one of Rob's brothers*

** Ed, Roger and wife Mary were en route to the S of France with their caravan and paused at Cheverny (they were known to both Jon and Jenni, hence the welcome) They have a habit of being in France when I'm cycling there ... at Calais when I rode with Jon, and at Annecy (twice) - be sure to look out for them in 2014*

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Saturday 20 June 2013 - day ride to Chemery : *Richard A*

Today's ride was one of a circular nature as we were remaining at the St Hubert for a further night.

Breakfast provided us with a beautiful cameo performance. Rob was early in the breakfast room and came across an Aussie fellow who was also staying there. Rob arranged for said fellow to welcome Jenni into the breakfast room in the broadest strine as a long lost and well regarded friend. To her credit Jenni looked at him in amazement and immediately without a nano-second's hesitation strode purposefully to Jon's side and soundly cuffed him about the ears. It wasn't a playful cuff either. Rob smiled, but did own up to being the instigator. The room descended into fits of laughter with Jenni still looking a little fierce. It just goes to show that you have to get up early in the morning to put one over on her.

Two of our number, Sea Bass and Paul, opted out of the wheeled sport for the opportunity to knock little balls into holes in the ground. Apparently they had three balls each but Sea Bass managed to lose two of his within the first few shots. Honesty compels me to record that Paul ended the day on top. Our run stopped for coffee at the Club Des Sports near the Chateau de Fougères.

Lunch was taken in Chemery overlooking a lake. A very attractive location. Somewhat strangely our repas was interrupted by the local air raid siren being tested. Nothing like being prepared for WW3 !

About 15 km from home Dennis took it upon himself to have a strop about the vagaries of "euro fizz". This is the disparaging term used by real beer drinkers to describe the pale lager beer sold in France.

Our day out terminated at the Hotel Les Trois Marchands where we consumed a considerable amount of fine Leffe beer, not euro-fizz this.



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Sunday 16 June 2013 - Cour Cheverny - Pithiviers : *Dennis*

Today would be the start of the homeward journey. After our three-night stay in Cour Cheverny we rode north eastwards to Pithiviers. Breakfast consumed, bags packed we were off at 0845. The weather was good, sunny with a few wispy clouds in the sky. We had been travelling for just a while when we noticed the first sign to Paris, just 195km to go!



A classic car passed us, then another and another. A stream of immaculate vintage cars, some made just down the road from where I live, at the now demolished Rover Longbridge plant. All overtaking us with a cheery toot of the horn and a wave as they went by. It

would appear they were on their way to some sort of gathering. And indeed they were.

We were halted in Dhuizon as a lot of these 'old timers' had blocked the road while locals took pictures. Each car had a plate announcing *Rallye de Sologne*. On the back of many were picnic baskets; no doubt lunch with champagne was planned. I was, I admit, a little bit jealous.

Early 11s were taken at Ligt-le-Ribault, with a third of the planned mileage having been completed. We pressed on and made it to Orleans well in time for lunch. The peloton opting to sit on the banks of the Loire for the last time and eat our pre purchased food.



Sunday 16 June 2013 - *continued*

Tourist and locals walked by, some boarding boats for trips along the river, others just enjoying a Sunday afternoon stroll in the sunshine.



The increased temperature forced Captain Rob in to an afternoon stop at Chilleurs-aux-Bois for coffee, well a cool beer actually. We were making good time but it was decided to take a more direct route than planned. It being Sunday the main roads were quiet, the D2541 provided an almost straight road to our destination arriving at the Hotel Relais St George at 1600.

The hotel restaurant was closed on Sunday so we were forced to walk in to the town in search of sustenance following our 66 mile ride. Now on foot the peloton arrived in the town square, with stomachs rumbling, all were eager to examine menus outside establishments and quickly chose the lucky one that would take our money and feed our hunger. Alas our efforts were in vain; it was Sunday and that means ALL the restaurants in Pithiviers are SHUT! Some sank to their knees, some sobbed uncontrollably, we could all starve, right here in the middle of a sleepy French town. Even Jon P asking a local in his best French (*with strong Redditch accent*) could not provide the answer. We wandered around and around, many now in a trance like state and about to give up all hope. 'PIZZA' someone shouted and yes, finally we had found something. It was open and it served food, a Pizza bar that would not have been out of place in Selly Oak, complete with Formica tables and very little else, but it would do. After all, a hungry cyclist will eat almost anything and I did, a large soggy slab of pizza bread topped with some sickly cheese, rock hard pepperoni and watery curry sauce drizzled over that.....hmmmmm....de..licious!

Monday 17 June 2013 - Pithiviers - Paris : *Jenni*

Spent the night at Pithiviers at the Hotel Relais St George.

Looked out at the day from our room and all looked fine so down to breakfast. Suddenly, outside the trees started dancing and leaves and bits of rubbish flew about. It all happened in minutes and was over in minutes leaving an eerie calm. Going outside to pack our bikes we could see that the sky to the west was totally black and could see the turbulence at the edges of this mass rolling in on itself incredibly fast! It was heading in the direction we were heading. At 0845 we set off expecting to get wet!

The town now behind us, we moved out into the flat farmland all under crops; sugar beet, wheat, barley with a small quantity of oats. The roads were now wet as we were following the storm. As the group spread out a little, I noticed white lumps the size of eggs in the grass at the side of the road and realising it was hail pointing it out to the others. We stopped and picked a few up and took the obligatory photos, then caught up with the others. Rob had seen them but thought it was fertilizer! The destruction the hail had wreaked on the sugar beet was amazing. All that was left were stems sticking up, all the soft leaf was on the ground under the plants or



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washed into lumps where it was taken with the water as it streamed off the fields.

On entering the small village of Blandy we were confronted with mounds of hail up against the buildings in alcoves and against the

steps to the houses where the water had eddied. There were a few villagers standing about looking at the devastation. It was obvious from the water marks on the houses that the main street had been under at least a foot of water not long before. Looking at the geography of the roads and fields it seemed inevitable that the village would flood repeatedly.

At the next village of Mespuits the storm again had ripped the leaves and branches from the trees, but we saw no real flooding until we were leaving the village. The last house in the village had an underground garage basement and this was being pumped out by the fire brigade. As fast as they pumped, it was being filled up again as the water was running straight in off the fields.

We rode on by.

Next stop was for coffee at a Bar in Bouray-sur Juine where we brought olives and nuts from a vending machine!

Moving on we entered a village that was a pure delight as we turned into the square we were greeted by knitted creations decorating the trees, walls and the little bridge. Best of all, from my point of view, was the knitting that adorned the two old bikes that leant against the railings. There was no one to ask why it was so, but it was just magical.

On to Arpajon, lunch was purchased in the local shops then consumed in the centre of the town under the roof of the market square built in 1470.

At this point the baton of Captaincy was passed to Nigel.

Leaving town we made our way along the valley of the river L'Orge and once again we had to negotiate a flooded road. Just at the end of the

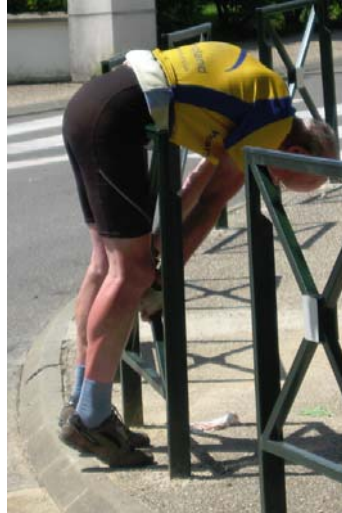


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flood we turned off the main road and into the first of a series of parks that were to take us into Paris. Nigel at this point decided that the puddle ahead looked far too inviting to pass by, and what he desperately needed was a bath - or it may have been a clipless moment? While enjoying his bath we realised that we were missing Shirley, Richard F-H, Linda and Keith. While we re-made contact and sorted it all out, Nigel entertained us! Having gathered together again we set off. Jon then



realised he had left his helmet behind, had Nigel's show really got him that flustered? Helmet and Jon and the rest of us all back together again, we were on our way. There was a bit of a vote for a pub stop as it was so hot but time was limited so we cycled on, with just one stop for a puncture repair, sadly not outside a pub, but again we were well entertained by Nigel hanging himself out to dry.

The rest of the journey into Paris was mostly in parks built on top of the TGV railway track, or in actual parks: a fantastic journey. At one point Keith decided he liked the route so much that he wanted to take a bollard home with him, but it decided to stay put and have a little of him instead.

We arrived at our Hotel Kyriad Porte d'Orleans just on dusk as it started to rain.

Cleaned up and went out for drinks, red beers! Then to dinner and on again to another bar for the last night celebrations.



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Tuesday 18 June 2013 - Paris - Home : *Linda*

Last day, but we made the most of it. The hotel boasted breakfast was available from 0500 but, creatures of habit, we all turned up around 0730 and were ready to leave at 0845 – but we were locked inside a tiny courtyard behind the hotel! Eventually the man with the key was located and we pedalled off towards central Paris.

Shortly after crossing the Peripherique, a cry to stop went up – Sea Bass had put his panniers on the wrong way round (after 10 days of taking them on and off!),



and he needed to swap them over.

There was a lane marked for buses and cycles much of the way, although often blocked by buses stationary at bus stops, or parked vehicles, and with the traffic heavy, it was a challenge to stay together. Rob led us northwards, slowly and carefully, with a bit of judicious walking a couple of times for safety, and we arrived at the Champ de Mars.

This was a great photo opportunity for most of us, and an obliging Frenchman kindly took a group photo with the Eiffel Tower as backdrop. Those of us wearing CTC Heart of England jerseys claimed centre front spots of course (and then I could take mine off as it was rather warm and sunny by now – and yes, I did have another layer underneath!)

We then proceeded past the Eiffel Tower, crossed a bridge over the Seine, passing the Trocadero en route to the Arc du Triomphe. Cobbled roads are not the best for cycling! After another photo stop, we set off again, then stopped and found Rob and Keith missing. Then we saw Rob waving wildly at us from some way behind – we had overshot the Decathlon shop. We returned and Shirley kindly volunteered to bike-sit as the rest of us browsed and made purchases – nothing bulky mind.

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Tuesday 18 June 2013 - *continued*

The toilets were also a most welcome facility. Whilst inside, a pigeon favoured Mike's panniers with a large 'deposit'. We were also rather bemused as to why a passing Japanese man took a close up photo of the rear of Dennis's panniers!

We cycled down the Champs-Elysees next, past all the designer shops, but stopped for Jon to pay homage to the Tour de France and do his Mark Cavendish impression, arms aloft, with Kelvin taking the video.



Onwards we rode, through the Place de la Concorde and along Rue Lafayette, with taxi drivers giving us the odd moment of concern! We arrived at the Gare du Nord in good time so had a coffee/beer stop nearby, then checked our bikes in at 1300. They were to travel on two different Eurostar trains (only space for 8 per train), so were hung by one wheel on racks on two trolleys, and we were left with our panniers, feeling



rather bereft – would we ever see our trusty steeds again?

We were to travel on the 1613 Eurostar, so had plenty of time for lunch, and broke into small groups. Obviously Kelvin did not want to walk far due to the size and weight of his triple-bag panniers (also known for their complex and time consuming bike attachment arrangements), so his group chose the Hippopotamus Restaurant. Rob, Jon (with Jenni) headed for their mysterious 'favourite' eatery, whilst Keith and I, together with Shirley, Nigel and Mike fancied the Italian at the bottom of the road.

Tuesday 18 June 2013 - *continued*

We were greeted very enthusiastically by the maitre d', who actually moved another group of diners to accommodate us! We probably have Nigel to thank for that, as he was addressed as 'sexy', and subjected to hugs and eye winks which discomfited him more than a little! Mind you, the same maitre d' was later observed being very familiar with a couple of ladies! But then this was Paris! The food was excellent, and reasonably priced.



We met up again in the station at 1515, and all had had a good lunch with some boasting of making the most of the last opportunity to indulge in French wine.

We checked in, passing through passport check and security scan without a hitch, and boarded at 1550. The journey on Eurostar was very smooth and lots of reading/sleeping/ dozing passed the time till we arrived at St Pancras at

1750. We were greatly relieved to see our bikes emerge, one-by-one, and unscathed, from the inner depths of the station. Panniers re-attached, we rode to Marylebone, quickly re-adjusting to riding on the left again, but also noticing the lack of cycle symbols on the roads, compared to Paris.



We piled the bikes up against a wall and killed time as we could not take bikes on trains until after 1930. I was in a very long queue in M&S when the Stratford and Solihull groups parted to catch separate trains within 10 minutes of each other. I emerged to find Jon holding my bike and I rushed to catch up and board the train. It was packed, but I got a seat and Keith kindly stood for most of the journey to manoeuvre the bikes as necessary to enable people to move past or get on and off. All seven of us found inconvenient spots spread out all along the train. Trains are not cycle friendly (and nor

Tuesday 18 June 2013 - *continued*

are some of the passengers!)

We arrived at Solihull station and waved minimal goodbyes as we were now all anxious to get home in the waning light. Keith and I had only a couple of miles to cycle, arriving home just before 2200.

We were very tired, but happy.

This was mine and Keith's first foray into any kind of touring, either at home or abroad, and we had a fabulous time.

Great itinerary with good hotels, the wonderful company of such lovely people, good food, wine and beer – I could go on. But I know I speak for us all when I say that Captain Mainwaring's superb organisation and meticulous planning was the cornerstone on which it all depended, so thank you again Rob, and here's to next year.



Reflections of a Newbie : *Mike*

I had considered asking to be included in the tour of Northern France and Belgium during June 2012 but on reflection had decided on physical grounds and tinged with other feelings of apprehension that even as a newbie I was not yet sufficiently developed to undertake the experience. It had become clear to me that additional grueling rides and (more to the point)

humbling lunchtime experiences in the form of Wednesday rides would be necessary for both rider and machine before adequately qualifying for such an expedition

After much deliberation and soul searching, I decided to apply to join the Val de Loire Tour team. I put in my application and

permission was duly granted by the Tour Captain during September 2012. On receiving approval my planning process began immediately involving numerous communications with Messrs Wiggle & Co. (among others) and transpiring in a number of interceptions involving Mr Postman and myself to help avoid an ever increasing number of embarrassing disclosures to Mrs B.

All purchases proved to be well chosen and up to the job - altogether necessary for the well being of the rider during his overseas travels. Scotts cycles were employed on a number of occasions to prepare two possible machines for the mission allowing for a last minute choice. Which would it be - the Thorn 'Land Rover' or the black Audax? Unfortunately, as revealed during the course of the tour, one additional visit to Scotts may have been beneficial !

The tour proved to be most satisfactory in terms of routing, accommodation and gastronomy. However as a newbie there were a small number errors in preparation worth keeping in mind for the future.

- In future take an additional base layer or two (especially if revisiting Calais)
- Leave the 25 year old Carradice panniers at home and



Reflections of a Newbie - *continued*

use newer ones (alas, risking more possible interceptions with the postman)

- Cut down on inner tube repair materials - 3 spare tubes and 15 patches were, on reflection, excessive

What to avoid on a future trip:

- Don't choose routes travelling via forest tracks.
- Do not include extended sections of pavé along your chosen route
- Consider very carefully before selecting a room



partner who nicks the shower gel to launder his clothes without considering the consequences

- Do not openly ridicule fellow cyclists who prematurely dismount in 12 inches of muddy water
- Consider your actions very carefully before being rude to Sea Bass - he always finds a witty response

- Avoid employing terminology from the BBC's 'Allo 'Allo every time an attractive waitress or barmaid appears.
- Avoid Pithiviers on a Sunday night - especially if you're planning a modest birthday celebration

Conclusion

An excellent trip, superbly managed and with a great collection of cycling companions. Certainly to be repeated should a future opportunity arise.

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Gastronomy - French culinary delights: *Richard F-H (Sea bass)*

Well fed and 'watered' sums it up, as I put on 7lb, in old currency, on this cycling tour.

Our typical modern French breakfasts always included a hard-boiled egg (and I am not referring to one of the team), fatty meats, fatty cheese, fatty croissant, and a selection of cereal (cornflakes and cornflakes and cornflakes). Has anyone ever seen Shredded Wheat in a hotel anywhere?

Lunches were generally purchased from the local boulangerie/pâtisserie and then picnicked on the banks of the Loire. The croques, rolls, Panini and cakes were heavenly however some of us also enjoyed the delights of a pavement café lunch served by delicious young very French staff. (*I assume Sea Bass means females here! Ed*). At one such lunch at Chinon we thought that Mike's eyeballs were part of the Plat du Jour!



Our longest lunch was in Amboise and whilst not an epic feed what started out as morning coffee at 1100 finished at 1430 after a lunch whilst waiting for a relentless



downpour to pass by. I now appreciate the benefits of a 'dry run'. I apologise to the bar staff for nicking their newspaper as it seemed such a good opportunity to dry my riding gear. I did wring it out and put it back!

For dinner on our coach travelling days we dined out and our first stop at Calais was a good starter with a little taster course thrown in. Jon and Jenni were off the mark early with the banter, which I put down to the Letterine Ardenaise! At the time I did not know that there was a selection of Welsh dishes in an adjacent pub!

Our dinners were inclusive with our accommodation

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Gastronomy - *continued*

at our two pleasant cycle centres, Villandry and Cour Cheverny and they consisted of three courses plus. The content was different each night and the whitebait, veal, quail on skewers, Chantilly cream avec strawberries etc were particularly worthy. It was civilised and in true French style to have our sweet course at the end on a few occasions. We, someone, drank litres of mostly red wine of varying but generally acceptable quality and funded from the brown purse. Some say we also had some rosé but I think it was a white with a splash of red added!

I believe I was the exception in finding our evening meals anything other than excellent and good value. There were valid reasons for this minority view as shown below:

Monday - sea bass had been available but had been let off the hook for good behaviour.

Tuesday - sea bass substituted with pike and they might have got away with it if our Capt. Mainwaring had not blurted out ‘don’t tell him it’s pike.’

Wednesday – sea bass sold out

Thursday – I thought I had ordered ‘sea bass’ but maybe there was a slight error in

interpretation as I got 'sheep's arse' (*Wellingtons? Ed.*)

Friday - sea bass would have been sold out but they didn't have any in the first place

Saturday – sea bass wouldn't go with the claret.

Sunday – (on the move to Paris at Pithiviers) - All the restaurants were closed but I had lost the will to eat by now anyway. However, the unusual arrangement on their ceiling of just about every conceivable type of light bulb, ignoring any theme of rationality, made our motley offering at the grotty local pizza house an enlightening event.

What a range of experiences, textures, flavours and smells.

Bon appetit!



Chateaux highlights : *Paul*

The 10th century saw the building of castle fortifications as tribes sought to protect their land. During the Hundred Years War (1337 – 1453) the Loire Valley was the location for many battles between the French and English, causing the older castles to be extended or rebuilt. Despite these battles the Loire was seen as a safer place than Paris by the Royal Court, and it spent long periods in Tours building many of the Chateaux we see today. To ensure they stayed close to the seat of power, the Nobility followed the King and also built impressive chateaux.

In the 16th Century King Francois moved the centre of power from the Loire to Paris. This was firmly

established by the building of the Palace of Versailles. In the meantime the Nobility continued to build or renovate chateaux, many having lavish Royal Apartments for the King should he decide to visit.

Today there are some 300 plus chateaux scattered along the Loire which have had varied histories since their heyday. Some have been destroyed; many have been taken over by local authorities. Others are still privately owned and lived in by their owners or used as hotels.

Chateau Villandry

On the edge of Villedary village. Whilst the architecture is wonderful, it is the gardens that make



Chateaux - *continued*

Villandry special. Covering an area in excess of 7 acres, the gardens are laid out in 3 terraces and are best viewed from the belvedere. The kitchen gardens themselves amount to 2.5 acres. A site not to be missed.

Chateau d'Usse

Otherwise known as Sleeping Beauty Castle, all round towers and pointed roofs that inspired Walt Disney in the creation of the many Disney castles. It is also believed that when writing Sleeping Beauty, Charles Perrault had d'Usse in mind. Highlight was walking through the attics admiring the masterful woodwork holding up the roofs.

In the afternoon the group split up. Some rode past the impressive Chateau D'Azay le Rideau surrounded by its moat, others went on to Saumur where the Chateau is set in a raised position overlooking the river and the city.

Chambord

The largest chateau in the Loire valley. Started in 1519 by Francois 1st and finally finished 30 years later. It was designed as a hunting lodge and was a monument to the French King's power. Some have suggested that Leonardo da Vinci was involved in its design. The scale is enormous, so much so that 60 feet above the ground

there is a huge stone terrace (essentially the roof of the chateau) that would be a fantastic venue for any BBQ. Despite its grand scale and many fine features the chateau was hardly lived in and at times was abandoned, being described as too cold in winter and mosquito infested in summer. Its owners seem to have spent most of their time finding someone else to live in it and maintain it. Finally in the 1930's it was bought by the French state and is now, quite rightly, a major tourist attraction.

Chateau de Cheverny

Just like Villandry, the Chateau was just round the corner from the hotel. Built in 1624 it is still family owned and was one of the first chateau to be opened to the public. The interior and grounds are magnificent. It is also known as the Tintin Chateau. Herge, the Belgian comic book creator, used Cheverny as the model for his fictional Marlinspike Hall in the Adventures of Tintin book.

We rode past many chateaux during the course of our adventure; those described are just the highlights. Without doubt the Loire Valley and its chateaux are a fantastic destination and fully deserve to be a World Heritage Site.

Epilogue : *Rob*

I'll start with the usual question I ask myself: "Was it fun?" "Yes." Actually, it's "Yes"

The foray to Ypres in 2012 was pretty good - excellent beer and some interesting, and moving, experiences with the trenches, cemeteries etc ...

As I said in the Prologue, the area was far from new to me as a visitor - both motoring and cycling - the Loire trip exceeded all of my expectations by some measure.

More people (13) than in 2012 (8) and a bit more organisation ... but hey, that's part of the fun!

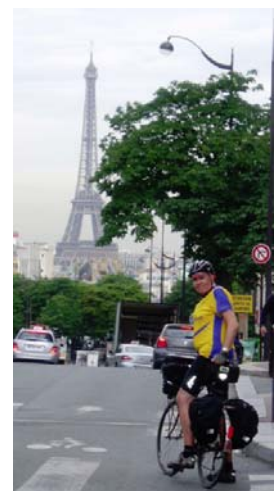
As well as the cycling some of the highlights for me were:

- Stumbling on Simon and his Yorkshire Bike Liner to get us and our bikes from Calais to Villandry pretty painlessly
- The hotel (rustic) and staff (informal) at Villandry
- Staying at Cour Cheverny (again, 3rd or 4th time)
- Riding into and around the centre of Paris
- Proving that taking bikes on Eurostar is possible
- Apart from the awful meal in Pithiviers, everything went pretty much to plan
- ***The company of 12 great cycling friends - and being able to offload some of Jon's "0950 trivia"***

Keith, obviously a glutton for punishment, e-mailed in about August and asked "*Where are we going next year?*" - Well, that's sorted with a re-run of *Wine-ding Down Through France*. Can't wait - the brown purse is ready.

Rob

.. and please, none of this "Captain Mainwaring" stuff - an informal "Mr Mainwaring" will be fine in future. Sgt. Wilson (Jon) did overstep the mark on one occasion and address me as "George"



Appendix : Maps & Photographs



The complete Route Book that travelled on Rob's handlebar bag has been compiled as a separate A5 landscape pdf



All of the photographs have been compiled as separate A4 landscape multi-page pdf files (4 pictures to view), 1 file per photographer

[The pictures are a mixture of portrait and landscape - those that are portrait are turned anti-clockwise 90 degrees to fit them on the page]

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... and finally

June 2014 sees another CTC HoE cycle tour - this time being an almost exact re-run of Rob & Jon's French ride in 2008 - *Wine-ding Down Through France* - a 900 mile ride from Calais to Montpellier.

Eight riders are on the team and as at November 2013 everything is booked - Eurotunnel Bike Service, European Bike Express for the return journey and all the hotels en route - with a day at the seaside to finish - the brown purse even has €3.28 left over from 2013!

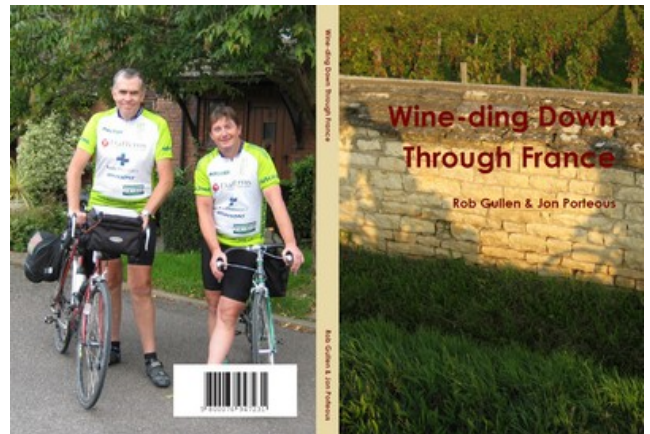


The book - *Wine-ding Down Through France* with a foreword by Edward Enfield - his book *Downhill All The Way* was the original inspiration for the 2008 trip - comes together with a complete route map.

Despite lengthy contract negotiations with a major studio the movie of the book has yet to start shooting ... the delay relates to the availability of Donald Sutherland and Brad Pitt who have been cast in the leading roles.



The Boys' Outing © 2013 Rob Gullen & the participants. Not for resale



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