

Have bikes, will travel

Raising Funds

Burford School is twinned with the Bishop Dustan School in the Sesse Islands in Uganda. Each year students from one school exchange with the other, bringing benefits for both communities and broadening the horizons of the children involved. The Burford Uganda school link is now a registered charity, raising funds to bring the Ugandan students to England, and to build and support their school library.

My eldest daughter Zoë applied to join the exchange and was delighted to be accepted. Zoë had warned me that to take part, the student's parents were expected to raise funds for the charity. Great... an opportunity to do a long, sponsored cycle ride, something I'd had in my 'to do' list for about 20 years. A friend had recently moved to France, to a small village about 35 miles from Mont St. Michel, so I decided to make this the focus of the charity ride. I calculated the distance on the bike would be about 410 miles, plus the ferry crossing. I could spare five days to complete the venture. Andy Muddle, with whom I often cycle, offered to come with me.

Off we go

Early on a September morning we cycled out of the Wychwoods. Murphy's Law had kicked in with the first rain for many weeks and a strong headwind. I was



Destination Mont St Michel

beginning to wonder if someone didn't want us to do this ride. We approached the Ridgeway, keeping wherever possible to quiet country roads, then on towards Lambourn and "The Valley of the Horse." Here we had a dodgy gear change, and the chain came off, startling some twitchy racehorses out for their morning exercise... sorry! The rain continued.

Bread and Butter Pudding

In Winchester we were wetter! We also discovered that road signs are geared for car drivers as it was not easy to find a quiet side road out of the city. However, a friendly butcher pointed us in the right direction. Our next break was at Bishops Waltham, where through the drizzle we searched for a cafe, but they were all closed. We were hanging around outside the last one for some time, when the proprietor (a Captain Birdseye look-alike) kindly opened up for us. His recommendation of onion soup and bread and butter pudding to follow was just what we needed. I took the opportunity to ring my socks out between courses.

It was dark when we arrived at the ferry terminal in Portsmouth; "This is a woman" remarked the girl in the kiosk as she looked at one of our passport photos. We had just cycled 109 miles, it was cold, dark and damp and I admired her

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cheery sense of humour, but she wasn't joking. One of us had the wrong passport! The appropriate wife was phoned and whilst awaiting her arrival we sat in a nearby pub and supplemented our nutritionally balanced sports diet with a few pints of beer!

Destination Mont St Michel

We managed about three hours sleep on the ferry, mercifully, it was a smooth crossing. It was still dark as we cycled through a very quiet Cherbourg. As dawn approached we found a cafe and in keeping with our strict nutritional regimen, loaded up with coffee and croissant. The patron shouted a cheery "au revoir" as we left for Valognes.

The miles soon ticked by despite a puncture. As we ate lunch in Coutance, the waitress came over and wedged the door open; the smell of two sweaty Englishmen didn't float her boat. The stretch from Coutances to Gavray proved very tiring. It was a long straight hilly section of about 20 miles which seemed to have short downhill runs and endlessly long and exhausting climbs uphill.

The final leg of the day took us to Fleury and to my friends Paul and Lisa. After three-hours sleep and 75 miles cycling, we arrived very tired at their picturesque farmhouse. We closed the day with a very enjoyable meal and wine with their friends.

The next day was another early start for our goal, Mont St. Michel. As the road twisted and turned we caught glimpses of the Mont, getting closer; looming up out of an infinite space of sand and tides. The abbey appeared suspended at the top; it was quite magical. Finally we had

arrived. We sent a post card, and did a photo call as proof, then off we went again on the return journey to Fleury.

Day 4: Home!

We rounded off the day by taking our hosts out for a meal. Andy complemented his sports nutritional diet with snails whilst I looked away. On Day 4, we covered the 75 miles back to Cherbourg. I had a sore bum, and was very grateful for the luxury of three pairs of cycling shorts... bliss! As evening approached we cycled to the terminal and boarded our ferry back to Portsmouth. It was dark as the ferry docked. We donned our gear, put our lights on and we were away; "Your mate's fallen off" shouted a passenger in a passing car, I turned back, Andy's rear wheel had fallen in a gap in the ferry ramp and he'd fallen. Fortunately only his pride was damaged.

We spent the night in Portsmouth, then made an early start. When we were about 9 miles south of Winchester a road side burger bar appeared in view. Reassuringly they were fresh out of cornflakes and muesli, so it was two fat, juicy, bacon burgers washed down with a hot mug of tea. We sped along the flat stretch from Faringdon to Alvescot and were soon home to a welcome banner, balloons and family greeting us, and treating us to a buffet. Before the trip I'd assured Andy we would lose about 1 lb for every hundred miles, we'd ridden 428 miles and I'd put on 1 lb, c'est la vie! It was an excellent experience and I'm looking forward to my next long ride.

Eric Corbett

Between us, our ride has raised eleven hundred pounds for the charity, but any donations would be gratefully received. Please ring Eric on 01993 830172