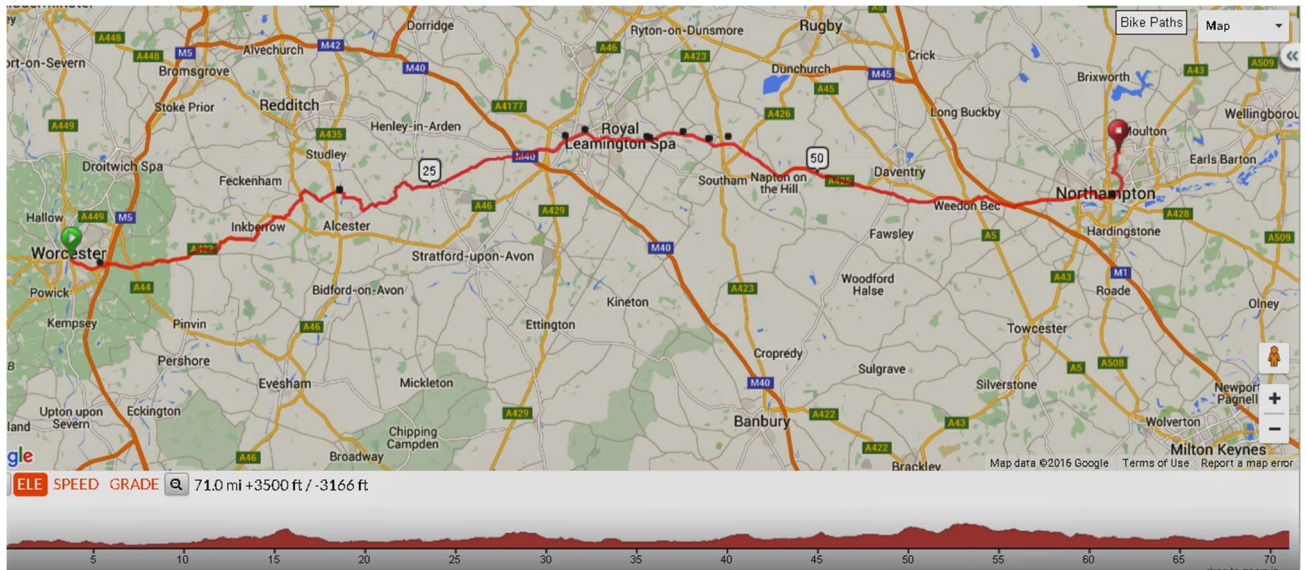


Day 15 Worcester – Warwick - Northampton



The Severn Hotel is rough and ready, in need of a lot of tlc and a complete refurb. However it is cheap and provided me with a perfectly adequate bed for the night. Hindi, the barman, ordered me a takeaway as they only cook at breakfast and lunchtime and I had a couple of pints of John Smith's keg to revive me. I then went and wrote the blog: however, disaster, when I came to save the document the computer went into awkward mode and refused to do anything. I had no option but to reset it and lost the whole darn piece. So it was by now about 11pm and I was tired and ready for bed, which is why there was no blog published last night.

I got up early, hoping to get downstairs as the breakfast room opened, to fix the gear cable on the bike and grab a bite to eat. I've changed gear cables before but I couldn't get it right, so gave up and rang Worcester Cycle Shop who said they could help. So I loaded everything up and, foregoing breakfast made for the shop. I thought I knew Worcester reasonably well but got hopelessly lost and it was raining hard enough to make using my phone for navigation very difficult. I went round in several circles until I finally found the shop. They immediately took the bike into the workshop while I went to the nearby Subway and had a breakfast butty and a mug of tea. As I was walking back to the shop Shaun rang to say the bike was ready so I was able to load up once again and leave at 1017. Thanks to everyone involved at Worcester Cycles for putting me back on the road so promptly.

My route out of the City took me past the County Council Offices before I



joined the A422 for the 8 miles to Inkberrow. There wasn't much traffic but it was still raining and spray was a problem. The road is quite wide and, although it was far from enjoyable, it could have been worse.

At Inkberrow, until recently the home of yet another cousin, I set off across



country while the main road went on to Alcester and Stratford-upon-Avon. After 15 miles the road dropped sharply towards Coughton, where the road

went through a deep ford which I was able to avoid by using the pedestrian bridge

The weather had now brightened with occasional glimpses of sun and I had a delightful ride for about 15 miles through a patchwork of small fields but not much evidence of livestock. The topography was kind and life was good.

A school bus passed me and stopped at the top of a short hill: as I reached the top the driver was opening the fuel cap, so I assume he'd run out. Just as well the bus was empty of passengers too.

After 33 miles of riding I entered Warwick where I had decided to stop for lunch. As I pulled under the awning of the Wetherspoon pub the heavens opened, so I avoided a soaking. I went in and ordered a pint of Ruddles. How is it that Wetherspoons can serve a pint of good real ale for £2.05? I asked if I could order food and was told that I would need to provide a table number. As there was an awning I thought I would go and sit outside with my bike so went outside to check the number. On returning I gave my order and went back outside. After a short while I realised with a sinking feeling that I did not have my phone or Garmin with me and had left them on the bar. Fortunately, they had been put away safely and were returned to me promptly. Thanks to the bar staff at The Thomas Lloyd in Warwick.

I was eating my veggie burger, and very nice it was too, whilst speaking to Rob about some farming matters when I saw, out of the corner of my eye, someone waving. It was Mike Rogers, an old College friend, and his wife Tricia who had said that they might catch up with me in Warwick, having been following the blog. It was lovely to see them and have a chat, considerably brightening up my lunch-stop.

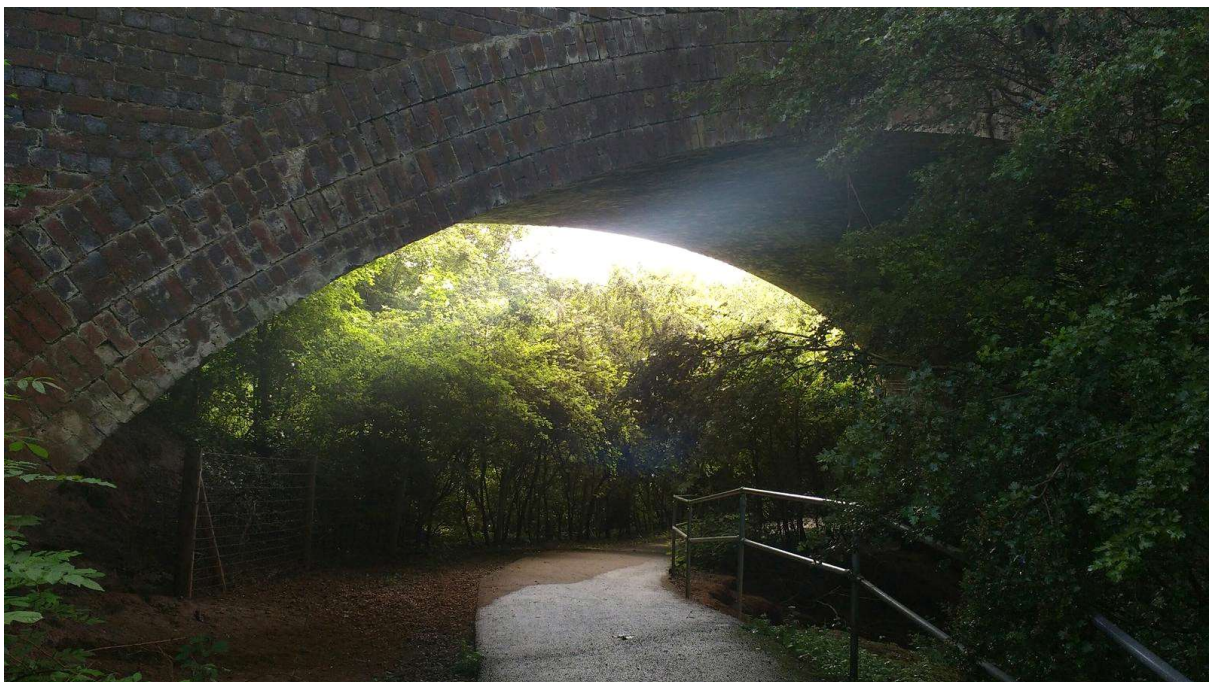


I left them and the Thomas Lloyd after Mike had taken the obligatory picture in front of the most unprepossessing County Council building I have yet seen

Within a mile Rita was calling on me to turn left but I couldn't see a turning. I stopped and checked and she was trying to get me on to the canal tow path. I had to stop and ask and a kind lady, on her way to get some cat food, showed me the way. The path was very variable and so the going was quite slow but there were plenty of beautifully painted boats



Eventually I left the canal and took to a short length of old railway line and took this picture as the path wound up under the railway viaduct



Back on the roads once more I took this shot of the Warwickshire countryside with a storm looming in the background



I took to another old railway line that soon petered out and joined a canal towpath, this one rather better than the one at Warwick and Leamington. A boat was entering the lock so I thought it worth a pic.



There were 2 pubs close to the canal at this point and a lot of boats moored up, so clearly this stretch is well used.

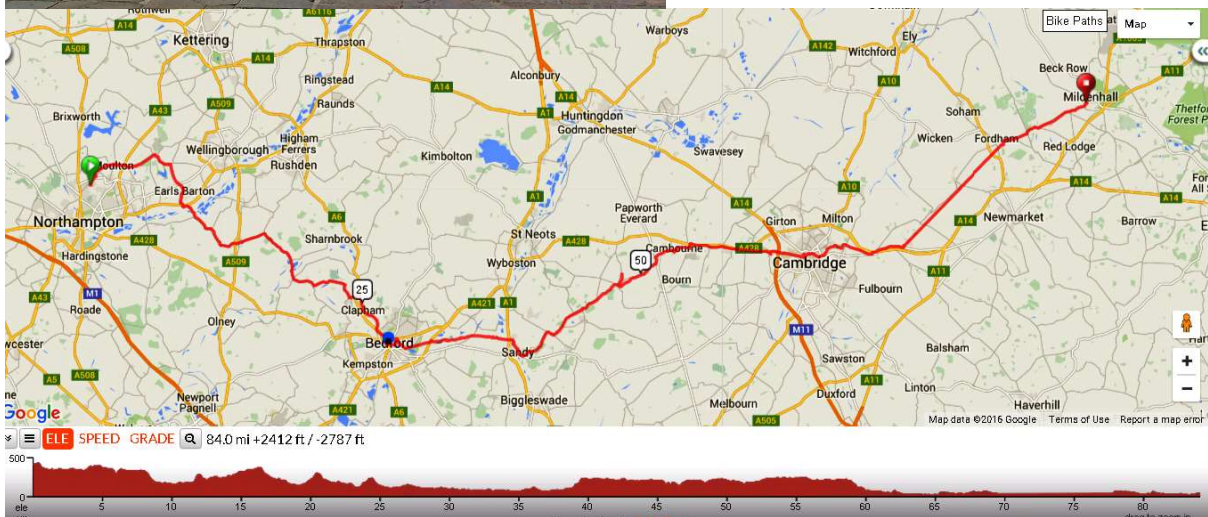
I headed away from the canal and as I reached the village of Stockton I could see a storm approaching. I cycled past the Working Men's Club and caught a glimpse of a smoker's shelter so, as the storm hit, turned around

and made for it. Sitting inside were the manager of the club and her friend, who kindly invited me to stay. The storm went on and we chatted about my journey, the village, Brexit and all manner of other things. The WMC has 500 members and appears to be thriving. 70 new homes are to be built in the village so the future of the Club looks good. As I was waiting 4 more people arrived and it was at least half an hour before I judged the conditions good enough to leave. They all wished me well and said they'd follow my progress on the blog and, hopefully, contribute a few pennies to Sport Relief.

I made the right decision as the rain cleared away and I stayed dry for the remaining 20 miles of my journey to Northampton. I found my way to the Guildhall, which is a very fine building with a tasteful modern extension, took the pic and headed the final 4 miles to my resting place at the Sunley Conference Centre, which I reached at about 730pm, much later than expected due to the rain.



Day 16
Northampton –
Bedford –
Cambridge –
Mildenhall



Yesterday saw me past the half way point in all respects, days taken, county towns visited (24) miles (1009) cycled so far and money raised for Sport Relief (£1015.). I'm still just about OK and feel able to finish the task. Thanks to everyone who has donated to Sport Relief so far but much more is needed so, if you haven't done so already please press the button to go to my Justgiving page.

The Sunley Centre is a Conference centre attached to the University about 4 miles north of Northampton Town Centre and is a bright modern facility. I stayed in the best hotel room so far with a comfortable double bed and excellent over the bath shower. There was even a heated towel rail to help dry my sodden clothes. I didn't get there until 7.30pm and my bike had not, apparently, been "booked in". However, the efficient receptionist found room for it in the back office. After cleaning myself up I was able to get a meal in the bar, very good artichoke soup and a vegetable based linguini washed down with a bottle of London Pride (a shame it was cold).

I lazed for a couple of hours having woken early and then got up and went for a continental breakfast. No hot food, but cold ham, cheese and eggs, which filled a hole and set me up for an 80 mile day.

Today was a day I was looking forward to, cycling with a very old friend from Bedford Rugby Club, Richard Chadwick (Chadders) who I played with in the 1970s plus Andy Whitehouse who joined Bedford at about the time I left in 1978 and Mike Grafton a friend of Chadders who does a lot of long distance cycling.

As I came out of my room lugging my kit, I was met by Chadders and Gareth Davies, President of Bedford Rugby, who had driven a van full of bikes and riders up to Northampton so that we could all set off together.

We left at 0905 and Mike led the way as he knows the area. I had planned a route but his was slightly different but went through some lovely countryside and villages. There was a bit of rain in the air and we stopped and donned rain jackets. My front brakes were making a horrible noise and when I looked closely they were worn to the shoes so we cycled to the centre of Bedford, about 25 miles from our starting point and went into the nearest bike shop who quickly sorted me out for the cost of the parts. Thanks very much. We then went on and stopped outside the Town Hall for the obligatory picture



Not brilliant, but you should see the other one with the white van in front of me! We carried on to Bedford Rugby ground at Goldington Road where I played for Bedford in the 1970s. There was a gathering of people to see us arrive and I was officially welcomed by Budge Rogers, for many years the most capped England International, who captained the Bedford side that I played in at Twickenham in 1975. A few of them joined us on a short ride to the Danish Camp about 8 miles out of Bedford. Many thanks to you all for the encouragement and support.



The four of us carried on through Sandy and up the only hill of the day after Bedford: nothing very serious and we were soon back on the flat and making very good time. At Great Gransden I was responsible for a wrong turn and we decided to retrace our steps so that we could avoid the A428 for as long as possible. At Cambourne my route went off road, across gritty tracks which quickly gummed up Mike's bike and Andy and I continued whilst Mike and Chadders went by a different route. We agreed to meet at the American war memorial, a couple of miles from Cambridge. This is a memorial to the US personnel who lost their lives in WWII and is on ground donated by Cambridge University. Chads and Mike got their first and, as it

was obvious that there was a storm on the way, we decided to make for a tea room to sit it out. Sure enough the storm hit and we avoided it.

Once the rain had passed we carried on to Cambridgeshire County Council buildings for the picture.



Cambridge is a city of cyclists, the traffic lights even have a special “go” signal for people on bikes. We made for the water meadows where we picked up National Cycle Route 51 which we followed for 3 miles along a beautifully surfaced track past the amazing College Boat Houses which line the north side of the River Cam.



We took to the roads again at Stow cum Quy, not sure how you pronounce it but what a great name . Shortly after I felt the ominous bump of a flat back tyre, the first of this trip of over 1000 miles. We stopped and extracted the thorn and put in a new tube in fairly short time. However when I went to cycle off something was not quite right. I stopped and unloaded the luggage once again but still could not find the cause. Eventually, after 3 tries, it became apparent the problem was in the front wheel. Chadders had kindly kept the bike upright by holding the front wheel between his legs, thereby putting grease all over his cycle shorts, and, in the process squeezed the front mudguard which was rubbing against the tyre. Once that was fixed all was fine and we took to a very straight road past Bottisham and Swaffham Bulbeck. As we approached Fordham there were some spots of rain that soon became heavy and we were suddenly in a torrential storm. We stopped under some trees for shelter but the rain came down in torrents, so hard that an enormous puddle formed beside the verge and every passing car soaked us further. After about 10 minutes we abandoned the bikes and made our way towards a gateway just behind us. As we went into the gateway someone got out of a car in the driveway, opened the garage door and beckoned us to join him. We accepted with alacrity and were immediately out of the storm which still raged around us, thunder and lightning and stair-rods of rain. Inter alia the garage contained an old butcher's bike and a Willys Jeep which the owner explained was a 1960s

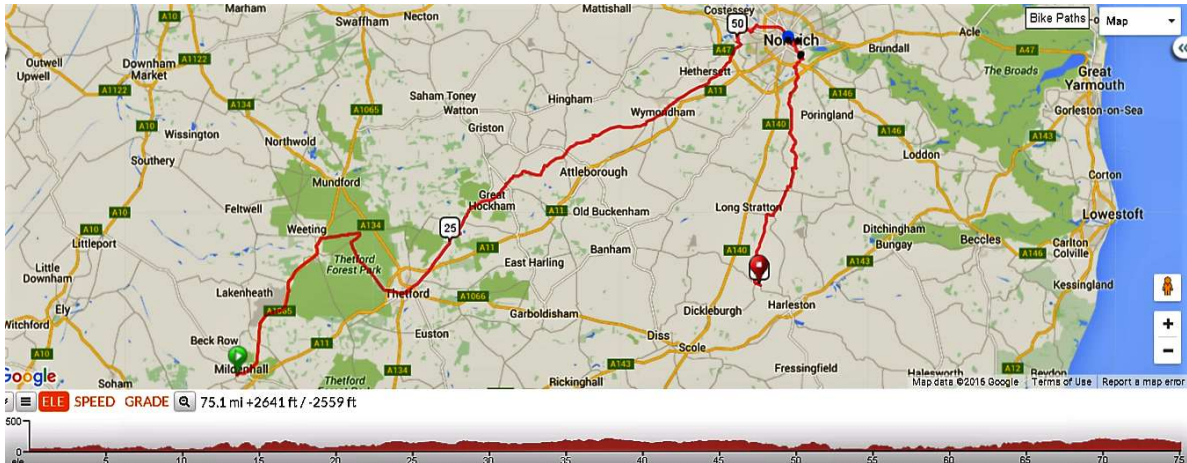
French replica that had been used in the film Saving Private Ryan. 10 minutes later the house door opened and his wife appeared, wondering why he had not come into the house. She very kindly offered us a cup of tea which was gratefully accepted, as we were all, by now, feeling very cold, and when I explained my Challenge, went back and gave me a handful of change for Sport Relief. What lovely generous people.

It was about 40 minutes before the storm abated enough to allow us to finish our journey and we arrived at The Bell in Mildenhall at about 720pm, about 3 hours behind schedule because of rain stops, where we were joined for dinner and the night by John Cooley who is Secretary of the Bedford Former Player's association, a very active Group who keep us all together and have done a lot of work to raise my profile for this ride. The irony of the situation was that if I had not had the puncture we would have been, literally, home and dry before the storm hit

The bikes were locked up safely and we found our rooms and cleaned ourselves up before going down for several pints and supper.

Pictures of the day are distinctly lacking because of the weather but more will be posted in due course

Day 17 Mildenhall – Norwich – Pulham St
Mary



We were fairly lucky with our choice of hotel. The Bell is an old coaching inn in need of refurbishment but it has large rooms and comfortable beds. We were not so lucky with the bathrooms. The shower had a mind of its own and we ended up running a bath and sharing the water. At least that warmed me up a bit from our drenching. The bikes had been locked in a shed overnight, watched by well-oiled onlookers celebrating England's 2-1 win over Wales and once were clean we assembled in the bar for some good ale.

Food was good, a plate of fritto misto and oriental tit-bits to share, followed by curry for some and steak pie for others. Everyone seemed happy and we washed it down with a couple of bottles of SA Pinotage which was good value at £13.95 a bottle. Dinner, bed and breakfast (including some drink) cost us £60 a head – not bad value.

We had agreed to set off at 0900. Cools was driving back and the other three cyclists were heading back to Bedford via Huntingdon



I was heading for Norwich, Norfolk's County Town and then back south to stay with another cousin, Linda's sister Jo who I had not met.

The forecast was for more heavy rain in the afternoon so I was anxious to get on with a view to being at my overnight stop by 4pm at the latest. I set off and immediately went wrong but once on the correct road I made good

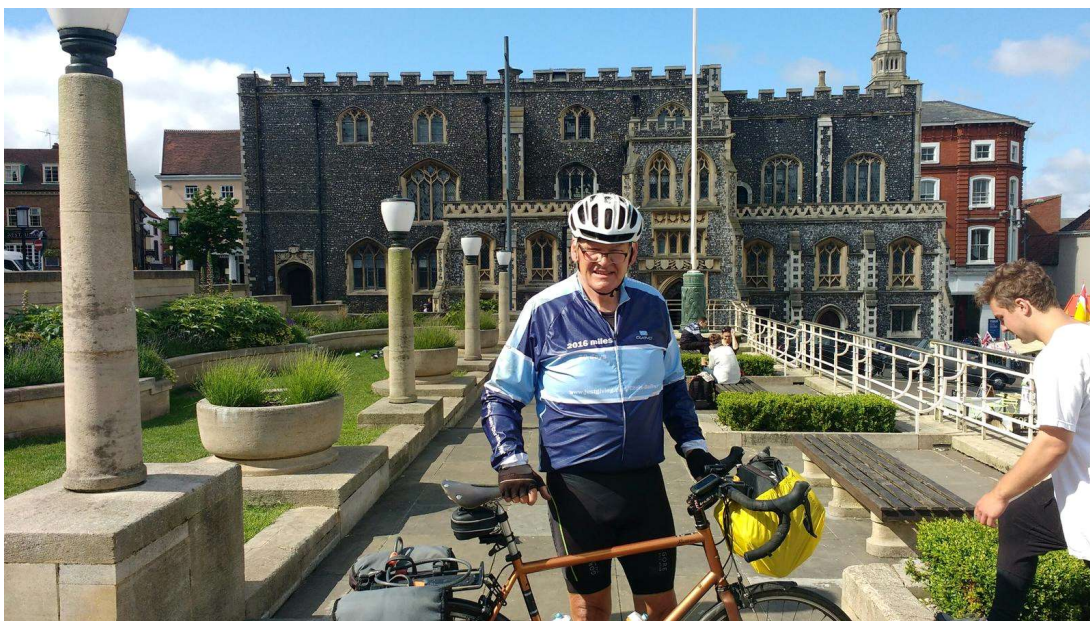
time past the vast RAF Lakenheath and up the straightest roads that I have been on so far. I was heading into Thetford Forest 19000 hectares of mainly coniferous woodland, planted and managed by the Forestry Commission. At Brandon I crossed the railway by level crossing and headed north east on a good road with a few lorries before Rita told me to turn right. That's where the trouble started. Before long the track deteriorated into a sand and gravel mess which clogged up the brakes. I hit a pothole and the back tyre went down once more. Ok, I thought, I've plenty of spare tubes and even a spare tyre, which I fitted to be sure that there were no hidden thorns in the old tyre. All done, I started pumping and got the tyre up to half pressure, when the pump seized up and wouldn't work. I now had a 3 or 4 mile run up this sand track before I hit a tarmac road. I pushed a lot of the way and when I reached the blacktop coasted down a hill until I reached the village of Santon Downham where a kind gentleman allowed me to use his compressor. Now I was heading for Thetford, which is what I should have done in the first place and thought I would look for a bike shop to buy some better tubes than the ones I had brought with me, a valve adaptor so that I can use a car pump and a replacement pump.

I asked three people in Thetford High Street if there was a bike shop. None of them spoke English! East Europeans all. Eventually another East European who spoke a little English guided me to Halfords. They fixed me up with a Continental tube and a valve adaptor but I clean forgot about the pump. They also kindly pumped up my tyres with a track pump so I thought that would be that. I set off north again trying to pick up on my original route but just after I crossed the A11 I, once again, had that sinking feeling and the tyre was flat. I was just passing a small industrial estate in the middle of the countryside so I pushed the bike into the Viridor compound to be told that the maintenance van had just left but try the farm round the corner. I went into another building and asked the only occupant if he had a compressor – another non-English speaker, so I continued into the next complex where I found a large shed labelled Engineering workshop. Inside I found Paul who suggested that I ask next door. Here I found Ivor and Neil, both English for a change, and eager to help. Neil is a keen cyclist so helped strip the wheel down, whilst Ivor watched on vaping and asking about my journey. He is the first person to ask my age and was keen to find out more detail so I pointed him at the blog. Once I had fitted the Continental tube Neil used the adaptor to blow the tyre up to 100psi and, after a few problems we had it all back together only to find that the wheel bearing was

loose. Once that was sorted I was ready to go, reloaded the panniers and set off once again.

Fortunately, that was the end of the tyre problems for the day and I was able to head north towards Great Hockham where I picked up my original route. I was now passing through some lovely countryside, quite small fields and hedgerows full of trees. I had always thought of Norfolk as a County of big fields and no hedges so It came as a pleasant surprise. I passed a field of asparagus, going to seed and a large area of strawberries. The barley was just starting to turn colour and acquire that distinctive slightly acrid smell of a ripening crop. The oilseed rape was smelling strongly of cabbages after the overnight rain and all the crops were looking good.

This was the pattern for the next 12 miles until I reached Wymondham where I stopped to buy myself a meal deal for £3 from Morrisons. The roads now became busier as I approached the outskirts of Norwich and I was taken on a big loop to the north of the City, past the university and along yet another old railway line which spat me out in front of the Cathedral, standing majestically high above the river meadows. I made my way into the centre where I persuaded someone, waiting for his daughter to collect him, to take the picture in front of the Guildhall which, he claimed, is the oldest Civic Building in England



I ventured further into the City, which has some delightful narrow lanes and found a cycle shop at which a very helpful young man sold me a couple more, good quality inner tubes and a mini track pump that fits neatly into my pannier, so I'm now prepared for the worst.

I left the City and cycled past Norfolk County Council building a brutalist modern block on the outskirts



Not a pretty sight.

My route soon took to back roads, similar to those I had followed before Wymondham and I had a pleasant ride, still fearing that I would get a good soaking but the wind kept blowing and I arrived at Jo's house at about 6.15 more than 2 hours late. However she was most understanding and gave me a cup of tea and I stuck my clothes in her washing machine. We had a lovely meal of salmon and new potatoes together with courgettes and broad beans from the garden, the first of the year for me and quite delicious.

Tim was about to leave for a weekend shooting at Bisley whilst Jo went out to a film show in the village leaving me to write the blog..

Day 18 Pulham St Mary - Ipswich – Great Baddow

Tim and Jo converted an old house and added to it to form a lovely bright home about three years ago. They have lived in the area for many more years and have slotted straight into life in Pulham St Mary. Tim has worked in high quality joinery most of his life and it shows in the house. He was off to Bisley where he is competing in a competition this weekend, but not before he got his maps out and told me the best way to get to Ipswich.



Pulham St Mary has a marvellous Community Centre, the Pennoyer which was formed from the old village school. The oldest part of the building is a 15th century Guild Chapel which was added to in Victorian times to provide a Free School for the Village. In the early 21st century the building featured on the BBC TV Restoration

programme, and, although it did not win the regional heat, generated enough interest to attract Lottery funding to further extend and refurbish it. The Pennoyer has a café open daily and can be hired for conferences or courses: however, it was to the film club, that happens monthly, that Jo was heading, to see Brooklyn. Thus I was left alone to compose the blog. Maybe I was long-winded or lacking in immediate inspiration but I was still at it when she returned.

I had an excellent shower and a good night's sleep in a comfortable bed and we breakfasted at 8 so that I could try to get away by 9. Home-made yoghurt and muesli were soon put away. Jo keeps hens and the scrambled eggs she rustled up were as excellent as the ones at The Bell were bad. Well filled, I packed everything up and was away at 9.15. It had been mizzling when I woke up but the rain had cleared, briefly, for my departure. Huge thanks to Jo and Tim for making me so welcome.

The air was chilly and remained so all day. The pattern of smallish fields and hedgerow trees continued as I made my way south and then turned sharp west to Dickleburgh where the store seemed to be doing good

business. I crossed over the A140, a road that Tim had warned me against, at a roundabout and then back again, shortly afterwards, by a bridge.

An hour after I started I was in Eye, an interesting looking market town with a population of about 2000 but I had a long way to go and did not stop. The mizzle started again and became heavy enough to fog my glasses.

I made a wrong turn at Stonham Aspel and found myself at a junction with the A140 so retraced my route, a detour of three miles. Continuing south the fields started opening up more, in places without roadside hedges. The crops all looked healthy and there was little sign, as yet, of storm damage.

Past Coddtenham the landscape changed completely as the narrow tree shaded road dropped steeply away into a valley. At Whitton the suburbs of Ipswich started but not before I came across a very curious bit of road that had clearly been the main road from Norwich, since by-passed by the new A14. The marks of bus and cycle lanes were still clear but the road was impassable for vehicular traffic and I had it to myself.

The first thing that you see when approaching from the north is the football stadium, indeed it is visible from almost anywhere in the city. I came down the Portman Road hill and turned right up Sir Alf Ramsey Way past the Bobby Robson stand



My route took me around the stadium and down to the river Orwell, tidal throughout the town. I followed this along and started to leave the town without seeing the Suffolk County Council buildings. I had gone almost a

mile from the town when I decided to return and see if I could find them. Ridiculously they, and the Ipswich Borough Council buildings are right next to the stadium but I had cycled past them



They are probably the best modern council buildings that I have seen, well designed and interesting to look at.



I carried on out of the town and headed down the estuary under the majestic Orwell Bridge, amongst the longest pre-stressed concrete spans in the world. Beside the road were families of geese, Canada and Greylag, as

well as swans, oyster catchers and assorted waders. The road now climbed up away from the river, not a particularly steep hill but enough to make me puff. I passed the Royal Hospital School with its fine clock tower chiming an unrecognised tune to prove it was 1.30pm and thought about lunch



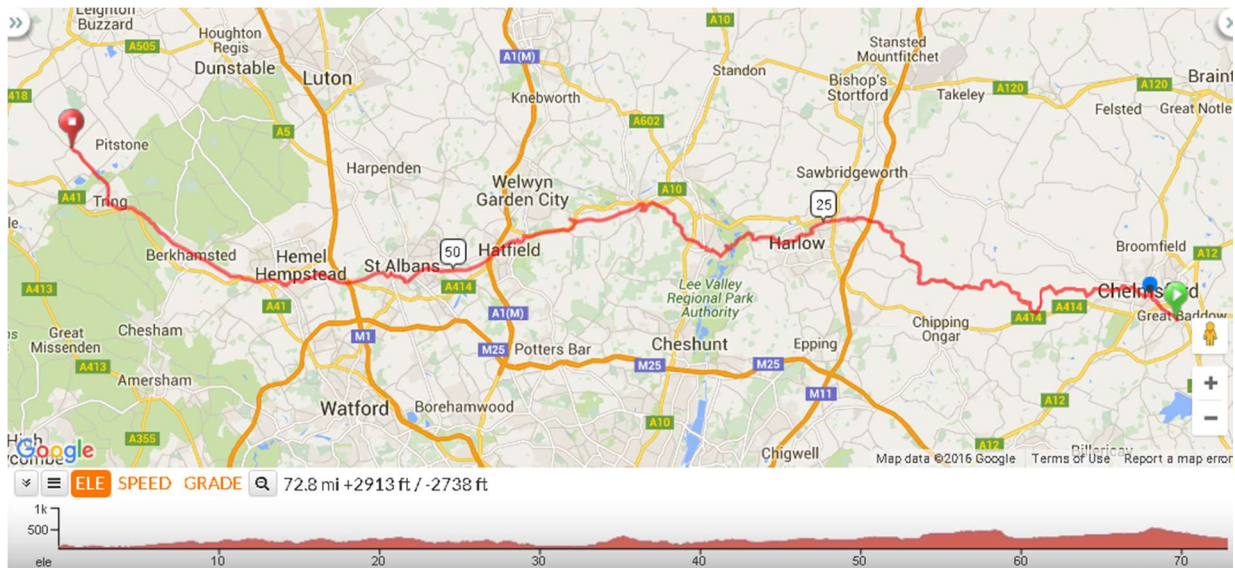
I passed three pubs, all closed (on a Saturday?) until I found the King's Arms at Stutton at 1.50 and ordered a pint of Adnams and macaroni cheese – a bit expensive but good fare.

The road was now going up and down as it crossed rivers and streams, not steeply but tiring enough. I was passing through John Constable country, seeing names like East Bergholt and Dedham but with 85 miles to travel could not deviate to Flatford Mill.

Through and out the other side of the garrison town of Colchester, now on a major road. Then back to the B road past Colchester Zoo and on to Tiptree famous for jams and preserves made by the Wilkin family. Then 76 miles in, down the hill to the harbour at Maldon, with a steep climb up to the High street that I could have done without.

The last 10 miles were hard, my energy reserves depleted and I was pleased when I finally reached my B&B in Great Baddow, close to Chelmsford.

Day 19 Great Baddow – Chelmsford – Hertford – Long Marston



Rothmans is a slightly eccentric B&B in Great Baddow which is about 3 miles from the centre of Chelmsford. I say the B&B is slightly eccentric but it is rather more the owner Peter. When you book he sends a long email instructing you what to do when you arrive. That is excellent but when you have been on the road for as long as me and have stayed in so many different places these things get forgotten. So when I arrived at 530pm I was faced with a door with 3 buzzers and a keypad. Fortunately, the man himself was behind the door and let me in, rather miffed that I had not followed his detailed joining instructions that told me exactly what to do.



The next problem was that the keypad was at handle height and difficult to read, especially in the poor light, so when the door slammed behind me as I transferred my luggage and bike into the house I could not work out what to do, so he had to help me out once again. Even then the problems were not over in that each bedroom has its own keypad with a different code and, once again, I had problems reading the letters and numbers and eventually resorted to sticking a bag in the doorway when I wanted to go in and out.

The room itself was fine, a reasonably comfortable single bed with a desk and a wardrobe but the shower and loo were shared, hence the need to hold the door open when I wanted a pee. Breakfast was very good with a huge choice of cereals, yoghurt and juice and a FEB which was well cooked and presented. Because it was Sunday I could not get breakfast until 0900 so it was 0940 before I left in bright sunshine for a change. For the first time in three days I had dry shoes and they remained so for the whole day.



The road into Chelmsford was good until I came to a large and very busy roundabout which tested my nerves, but I made it into the centre where I cycled round County Hall, a rather anonymous redstone building that has been much extended with a 70s box behind. The picture that I took with my bike leaning on the shelter rather summed up my feelings about Chelmsford..

My spirits were significantly raised when Rita told me to go into the park and follow National Cycle Route 1, which turned out to be a smooth tarmac path that took me through the park and past the Essex Cricket Ground and out into the countryside and through Writtle Agricultural College.



Once that finished I was still following NCR1 on back roads with little traffic. There were a lot of other bike riders out, some individuals but mostly in 2s or 3s but some quite large club groups. At Matching Tye I went under the M11 and started to pick up back lanes and paths that took me through Harlow to Roydon without having to cycle along roads. At Roydon I switched to NCR61 which followed the canal for a while before



setting off through industrial estates, past the Rye House Power Station and through Hoddesdon before I was forced onto some main roads across

Hertford Heath so that I could visit Hertfordshire County Hall, which I thought a rather fine building with a US Colonial feel about it.



I soon picked another old railway line with a generally good surface that I could have followed in a big loop up to Welwyn but, instead chose to cut the corner by taking to the main A414 which I followed to Hatfield. There wasn't all that much traffic, being a Sunday, but it was all moving very fast. I overshot my turn-off and had to retrace my steps gingerly along the narrow verge, coming out opposite Hatfield House which specialises in events and concerts.



I crossed the A1 (M) by the Galleria complex of fast food and entertainment that you see as you speed north just before you get to the tunnel. I was looking for food but could not face Macdonalds or Pizza Express so kept

going on yet more well surfaced cycle tracks until, I emerged onto a road behind a building that reminded me of the back of a supermarket which, indeed, it was. A quick right and left brought me to the front of Morrisons in St Albans where I was able to secure a meal deal for £3 to keep me going until the evening. More cycle routes through St Albans until I crossed the M1 which I could hear long before I could see it

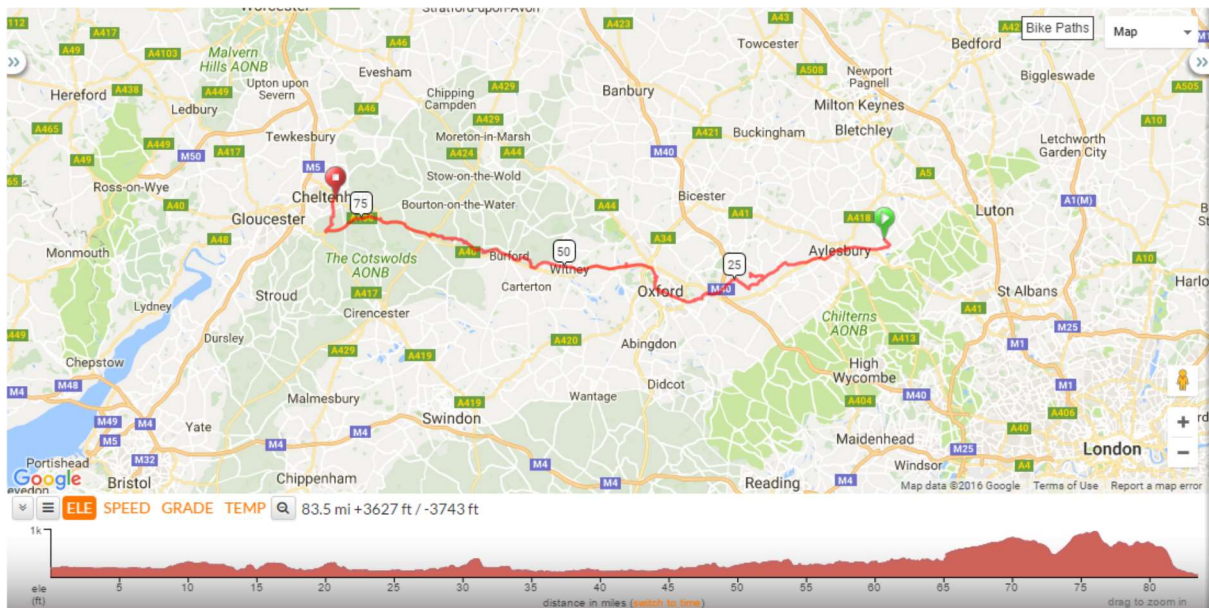


That brought me into the residential areas of Hemel Hempsted where Rita insisted I joined the Grand Union Canal – bad news as the surface was awful and I decide to ignore her and take to the old London Road that took me through Bourne End and

Berkhamsted before emerging into the countryside at the wonderfully named Cow Roast. A grind up the hill onto the edge of the Chilterns brought me to Tring and it was a short ride from there to my destination at Long Marston.

A very good day, with easy riding on good surfaces without traffic. An old friend Brian Gilmour joined me at The Queen's Head at Long Marston for the night before continuing the journey with me through Aylesbury and Oxford tomorrow. He will turn back from our lunch stop whilst I continue to Cheltenham.

Day 20 Long Marston – Aylesbury – Oxford – Cheltenham



It's been an interesting day but not one that I want to remember. Queen's Head Hotel in Long Marston is owned by Fullers who, as seems to be the wont of large pub landlords, charge extortionate rent and make it difficult for a tenant to make a profit. The previous tenant handed in the keys and the village was left with the possibility of losing their main community centre. They rallied round and persuaded Fullers to allow them to keep the pub open whilst a new tenant was sought. Villagers man the bar and keep the place ticking over and the night we were there Ruth was using some of her maternity leave to work the bar.

Brian and I shared a room with 2 single beds that were comfortable enough. The shower worked Ok and it was perfectly satisfactory. No food was being served so we jumped on our bikes and made for the Angler's Retreat in Marsworth, a couple of miles up the road, for fish and chips and a couple of pints.

We both awoke early to the sound of rain and having fuffed about packing up and then having a poor breakfast of cereals that was the only thing available, we set off at about 9am. Having studied the map there were three possible routes to Aylesbury, head south and pick up the A41 which was bound to be busy, head north and wiggle across to the A418, or take the most direct route along the towpath of the Grand Union Canal, which is what we chose.

The rain was teeming down as we made for the canal and it did not let up for the whole morning. We joined the canal towpath at Wilstone, and almost immediately regretted it. It was narrow and muddy and I cycled the entire 5 miles with one foot unclipped, frequently putting that foot to the ground and often getting off and pushing. Brian was suffering equally and we made very slow progress. It took us an hour to get into Aylesbury, 8 miles from our start, and still it rained. I took a poor picture of the monstrous County Hall whilst sheltering in the doorway of the Riverside Theatre, a much nicer building than the one I was photographing. In the disaster that has been today I have even managed to lose that picture!

We carried on, cycling over a rather fine bridge over the railway which linked to the so called Emerald and then Pearl cycle routes out of the town. 4 miles out of town we left the main road and headed into the countryside: it was still raining. There were few hills and progress improved until we reached Long Crendon, where my route planning suggested a pathway that would get us to Worminghall. It ran out in the middle of nowhere and we had to retrace our step and head south to Shabbington, another four miles of wasted effort.

At Worminghall I picked up my original route and we headed for Waterperry and then Wheatley where we crossed the busy A40. At this point Brian and I became separated and I had to retrace my route to find him.

Unfortunately, this became a regular event as he was unable to keep up with me. At least the rain departed and we started to see some sunshine

We were 38 miles into the journey when he took this rather distant shot of me in front of Oxford County Hall – it was 1.53pm, nearly 5 hours after we started, a dismal 7.5 mph.



I had arranged to visit cousin Annie for lunch in Cassington and expected to get there at about 1pm. In the event we reached her house at about 3pm where I quickly demolished a delicious lasagne and salad and washed it down with beer. Annie has been disappointed that I seem, recently, to have abandoned Jaffa Cakes as my main snack and supplied me with a double pack, one eaten with the meal and the other to put in my bag for later.

Brian, alas, was in a poor state and having started lunch went white as a sheet and asked to lie down for a while. This he did and he certainly looked a great deal better for it when I left at 4pm to start the remainder of my journey to Cheltenham where I was to spend the night.

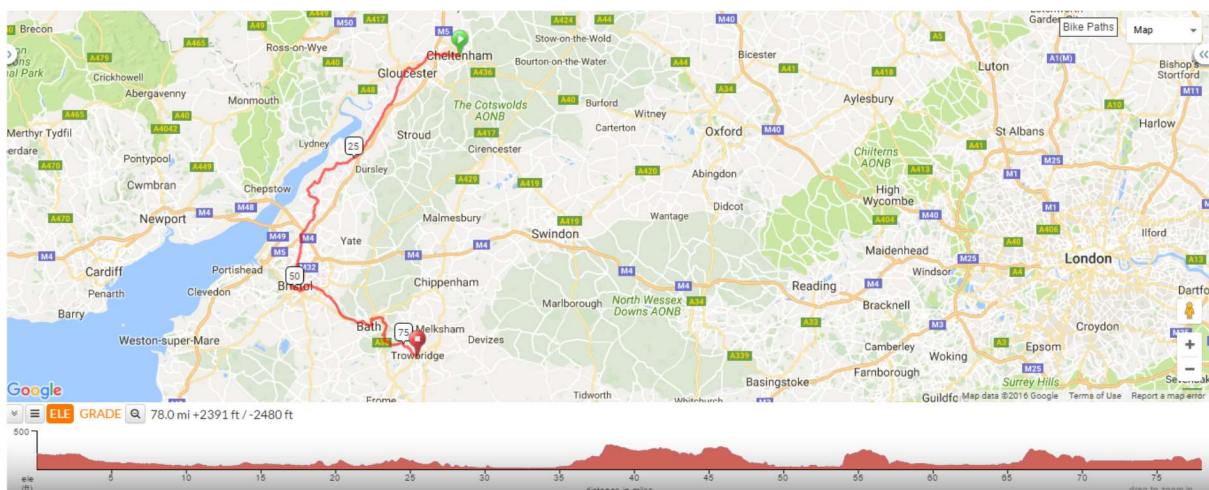
The early part of this journey was a trying 7 miles along a cycle lane that followed the busy A40 and I was very glad to leave it at Witney and start on a twisting route along the Windrush Valley. The road was quiet and followed the contours, so there was little steep climbing though I was making ground all the time as I climbed into the Cotswolds. Through Burford and Upton and the Barringtons, owned by yet more cousins, and the eponymous Windrush village. Pretty villages all, built of that mellow Cotswold stone, roofs covered in lichen and blending into the landscape.

At mile 68 – disaster! I had been aware that my gears were not as they should be but was delaying doing anything until I reach home, for the night, tomorrow. When I changed into bottom gear there was a sound of something hitting against the spokes, so I had managed to avoid doing so all day,

managing to make all the climbs without shifting right down. However there was a steepish and long hill out of Sherborne and I shifted to the biggest cog on the back. Bang! I lost all drive and the chain fell off the front. When I looked, the rear derailleur had disintegrated and I was left with a useless bike. I stripped everything off that might get in the way and tried to remove the chain but could not get the quick release to work, so I hooked it up over the rear rack which meant that I could push it freely. Not knowing exactly where I was, but knowing that there is a steep hill down into Cheltenham I thought that I would push the bike and freewheel where I could. After a couple of miles of painfully slow progress, I found myself on the A40 close to Northleach with at least 12 miles to Cheltenham, and realised that I wasn't going to make it on my own. I phoned Rob in Somerset and he made contact with a cab company in Cheltenham who came and collected me and brought me to the Crossways B&B, my stop for the night. So, dear reader, I have failed to make the whole journey by pedal power alone. In addition, I have lost most of the photos that I took today.

Tomorrow I shall get the bike fixed as early as possible and continue, with a view to being at Trowbridge by the evening.

Day 21 Cheltenham – Gloucester - Bristol - Trowbridge



I finally left Crossways, my B&B in Cheltenham at 1230pm, hoping to get to Trowbridge sometime this evening. Crossways was the best accommodation

I have stayed in on this trip. Lyndsay and Mark, both, formerly, librarians, decided to go into the B&B business a couple of years ago as a lot of library work has now been made redundant by the internet. They travelled the country staying in B&Bs to find out what they liked and disliked and carefully considered the best place to set up such a business before deciding upon Cheltenham. They love Devon and Cornwall at one end and Northumberland at the other but realised that the trade in both was too seasonal to support their ideal business. Cheltenham, however, has lots happening year round and gives them better potential. They have really thought about what they provide and I doubt there is any request that would stump them: I was most impressed by their professional approach and they are also both very nice people. If you need accommodation in Cheltenham go to Crossways.

At 8.10am I went downstairs for breakfast which was excellent, a huge choice of cereals, juices, compotes and yoghurts followed by a very good FEB. Mark had already researched bike shops in Cheltenham who might rebuild my rear mech and provided me with names and addresses of two. The first and nearest said he was not a Genesis agent and if the rear hanger was too bent he didn't have the correct tool to straighten it but he said Williams cycles dealt with Genesis and would surely help when they opened at 0900. I pushed the bike across town to Albion Street, the address I had been given, but found a shop called Leisure Lakes Bikes which I assumed was a re-branded Williams Cycles. On enquiry they said they were Genesis agents, would make space to do the work and would let me know by text when it was completed. They would not be drawn on time but promised it would be done asap. I went back to Crossways to do my packing and chatted to Mark and Lyndsay for a while until, at 1130, I thought I would go back and try to chivvy them along. The text finally came at 1217 and it was



not until I was paying the bill that I found out that Williams Cycles were a completely different shop just up the road! I was back at Crossways to load up the panniers and depart at 1230. There are good cycle paths

through Cheltenham and I did not hit a main road until I joined the A38 north east of Gloucester wiggling my way through back streets until I emerged opposite Kingsholm, Gloucester Rugby's stadium. I turned left and followed the road into the Centre of the City and was soon outside the Shire Hall, where an obliging passer-by took my picture.



I had planned to leave Gloucester on the Sharpness canal but, as I was short of time I decided to take the A38. This was an amazing experience because there are cycle lanes in both directions almost all the way from Gloucester to Bristol, so no feeling of danger. However it is noisy and polluted so I turned off at Berkeley and wound through some delightful Vale land before emerging at Thornbury and climbing the bottom gear hill up to re-join the A38. I stayed on this all the way to the centre of the City and was outside the Council House by 5pm



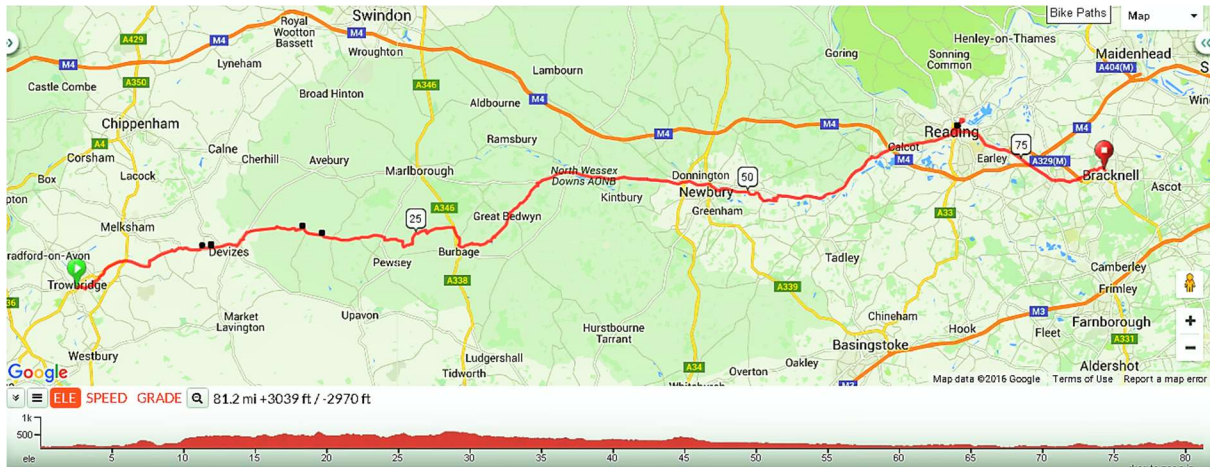
I rang Rob and said that I would be at Trowbridge County Hall at about 730pm and he agreed to be there to pick me up and bring me home for the night so that I can do some washing and sort a few things out before the last leg of my journey across southern England.

I followed the river out of Bristol, along cycle paths until I had to climb a very steep hill up to Hanham where I joined the main road which was quite busy but has a cycle lane for much of its length. I was heading for the Avon Valley Railway at Willsbridge. This old railway line runs about 5 miles, well surfaced and very busy with cyclists and walkers until it joins with cycle lanes along the river in Bath. To make best time I decided to take the main Warminster road out of Bath and joined the canal at Monkton Combe for 5 miles past Bradford-on-Avon and then on the main road to Trowbridge I



didn't get there until about 745pm and was met by Rob who took the picture before driving me back. I am writing this in my office at Home Farm and will return to Trowbridge in the morning.

Day 22 Trowbridge – Reading – Bracknell



It was nice to go home for the night, though difficult to leave this morning. I washed all my clothes and Rob kindly washed my bike which was filthy. I'm starting to feel quite tired by the end of the day, but seem to recover Ok by the next morning.

We left Horsington at about 0845, and were in a grey and mizzly Trowbridge for me to leave at 1002. There wasn't enough wet to make me don a jacket and the early part of the journey was through a park before I hit the main road to Devizes. There was enough traffic to make it uncomfortable but I made good time on the road which was fairly lumpy.



Just short of Devizes is the world-famous Caen lock system that raises the Kennet and Avon Canal by an extraordinary 237 feet in a space of 2 miles. There were several boats passing through and I chatted to a lady who said they had taken 4 hours 40 minutes to get up a couple of days previously and were now just starting back down. It normally takes about 5 hours to cover all 29 locks and you have to be careful not to trap the swans if, as was happening on my watch, you have two boats side by side, filling the whole lock



It was fun to spend a few moments watching, and interesting that the ladies were doing all the work opening and closing the lock gates whilst their partners drove the boats. The towpath is not steep and well surfaced so it was an easy climb and I stayed on it all the way through Devizes.



At Kingsmanor Wharf I took to the A361 which goes to Swindon past the magical stones at Avebury, but I forked off around Bishops Canning and rode across the open country beneath the Marlborough Downs. The sun tried to get through but generally lost the battle and, for the most part it was grey but quite warm. Any land that can be ploughed is growing crops, wheat, barley and OSR predominantly but I saw a field of beans.

I looked across at the Pewsey White Horse, distinctly grey and, from where I took my picture, it looked more like a llama



It was an enjoyable ride, few steep climbs but invigorating until I was drawn back to the canal at Wootton Rivers. This was not a pleasant experience, a track that almost disappeared in the undergrowth, wet and slippery from the recent rain. I passed some German cyclists heading in the opposite direction. At the next possible opportunity, I left the towpath, crossing the railway line and heading uphill to Burbage where I thought I might stop for lunch. The Three Horseshoes looked nice but the landlady had broken her hand and there was no food. The other pub in the village does not open for lunch, so I carried on along Wolfhall road. A farm stands on the site of the Seymour family Manor house, long since demolished.

I passed through Great Bedwyn, The Cross Keys also serving only drinks, and, shortly afterwards heard a ticking sound from my back wheel that told me I had a broken spoke. My wheels have 36 spokes so one less shouldn't matter too much but it makes it more likely that other spokes will also break. I wrapped the broken spoke around its neighbour so that the nipple did not drop back into the wheel and carried on. At Froxfield I joined the A4, the Bath Road from London. This is a wide road, built to take a lot of traffic that has now forsaken it for the M4, so it is comfortable cycling. At Hungerford, where I had

originally thought I would lunch, there were temporary traffic lights and I managed to queue jump the stationary cars and kept going. As there was so little traffic I stayed on the A4 as it by-passed Newbury, stopping at Tesco for a meal deal, which is the same price but less good than Morrisons.

I should have stayed on the A4 but the navigators took me down through housing estates, just as the schools were coming out, and towards the railway line which I crossed on the level before, once again hitting the canal towpath and, once again, leaving it as soon as possible and ending up back on the Bath Road. The navigators told me otherwise but I determined to stay on the A4 until I got to Reading where I took a picture of the Old Town Hall, now a Gallery and museum. Berkshire County Council no longer exists so this seemed to be the best building that Reading could offer

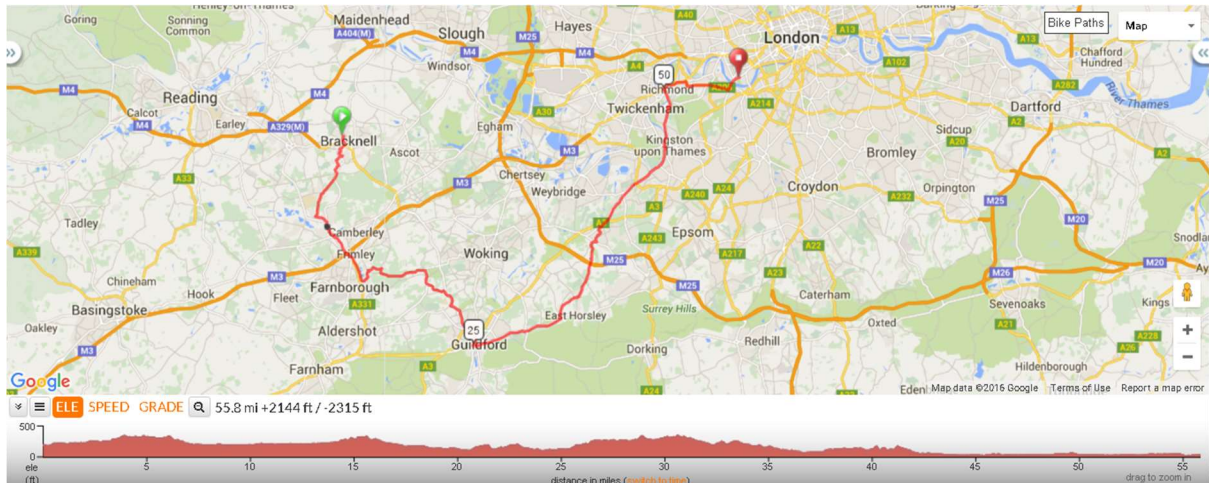


You can just see my bike parked against the stand at bottom right.

As I knew that Evans Cycles had a store in Reading, I thought I would get hold of a replacement spoke and see if they had a cheap wheel that they could sell me to see me through the rest of the trip, and post the damaged one back to Home Farm. In the event they could only supply the spoke so I will have to hope for the best.

Time was marching on and I still had 11 miles to go through Wokingham to Bracknell where I am staying at the Admiral Cunningham Hotel. The roads were straight and with good cycle lanes so I was soon at my destination.

Day 22 Bracknell – Guildford – London



The Admiral Cunningham wasn't as good as it should have been. It sits in a quiet leafy part of Bracknell and has the potential to be a nice place to go for a drink and something to eat. I turned up yesterday and was booked in by an efficient manager and told I could leave the bike wherever I liked. My room was huge with two small beds and, not that I tend to watch it, the smallest TV I have seen for a while. I carried the bike up to my room and unpacked and put everything on charge. The shower was erratic: I couldn't get the temperature right and either scalded or froze but managed to wash off the grime of the day and eventually went down for something to eat at about 830pm. The barmaid was raised on the Soviet style of service – couldn't really care and more interested in chatting to someone else. Doombar was off but they had an IPA which I chose – it was undrinkable, tasted of chemicals, and I sent it back. The second pint was no better so I gave up and had John Smiths keg. Food was grilled chicken smothered in Chilli sauce which was OK and the chips were really quite good. Italy v ROI was showing on no less than 5 screens in the bar so I went and sat outside to eat. A very small amount of attention to detail could make it into a good pub.

The bed was quite hard and I spent an uncomfortable night, made shorter by the thunderstorm that woke me at about 430am. I lay there listening to the rain teeming down and hoped that that would make for a dry day today.

Breakfast was good but entailed leaving the hotel by one door and walking round to another. A well cooked and cheerily served (not last night's barmaid) FEB arrived quickly and I had a full stomach when I left at 0930.

My plan was to cycle down to Guildford, the ceremonial county town of Surrey and then through Cobham to Kingston which is the administrative centre of the county, before making for the City of London to take a picture outside the Guildhall before returning to Fulham where I was to stay with an old friend Chris Ralston.

After the torrential storm overnight, the day started well, overcast but no rain, and my initial route took me along cycle paths through parks and by streams. I made the odd wrong turn and, at one point, had to divert to avoid a flooded underpass. Berkshire and Surrey are leafy counties. The South East of England, despite its large population, has more woodland than any other part of England and my ride took me through lots of it.

I was now in Army country, skirting Sandhurst before taking to a poor path across flooded water meadows, ending up with wet feet



I emerged onto a large roundabout and lost the route, ending up on the busy A331, an unpleasant experience for a couple of miles before I turned off at Frimley, passing the notorious Deepcut. The drizzle had started and now turned into rain but by the time I reached Worplesdon it had blown away.

I was on the outskirts of Guildford at 11.35am but it took me a while, and a



couple of wrong turns, to find the centre. The iconic building in the High Street is, appropriately the Guildhall. Unfortunately, the High Street is being dug up to replace the granite setts, so everything is shrouded. I was due to meet an old friend Tony Robin for lunch at the Fairmile near Cobham at 1pm but, as I thought it would now be nearer to 1.30, I gave him a ring and we agreed to meet at that time. The road from Guildford was relatively easy. I had been expecting a bit more climbing on the A25 but I bowled along very well and turned off at West Horsley and did a bit of cross country before making my way through

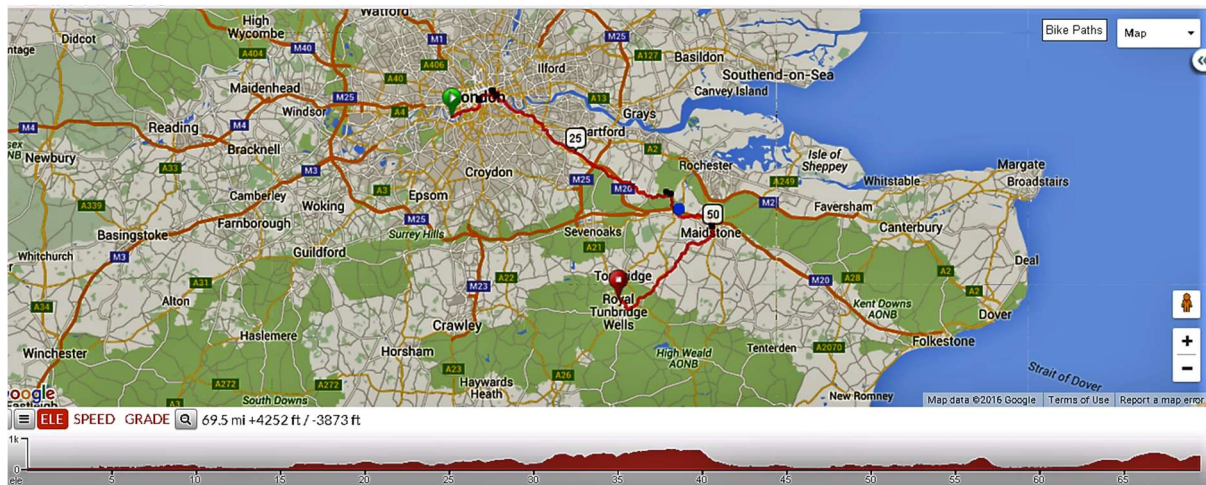
pleasant housing estates and wooded roads to Cobham. After a few twists and turns I ended up in Icklingham road, clearly millionaires row. The road surface was immaculate and I wondered if the residents had paid extra for its upkeep, because it was significantly better than the surroundings. That brought me out onto the Portsmouth Road and my lunchtime stop which I reached at 1.09pm, not far behind my original ETA. Tony arrived, as arranged, at 1.30pm and we had a very pleasant lunch in this Chef and Brewer pub/restaurant. Greene King IPA slipped down well and my steak and kidney pudding was excellent. Tony kindly treated me to lunch and I was able to help with a 25% discount on the food courtesy of an Email I received from Chef and Brewer this morning!

I was on my way again at about 2.30pm and went on the main road to Kingston. How people put up with driving in the South East is beyond me. I was able to overtake hundreds of cars on the inside as they sat in long jams, probably not helped by the local flooding caused by the overnight storms. I raced past Sandown Park and picked up the Thames at Surbiton. I noticed a bike shop just short of Kingston and called in on the off-chance that they might replace my spoke but they were too busy and I kept going. I stopped in Kingston to take a pic of the Guildhall, now the centre of administration for Surrey.



On to Richmond where the skies darkened and threatened more rain. By the time I reached the South Circular it was raining properly and it got heavier as I approached Putney. I reassessed my options and decided not to go to the City and make for Parsons Green which was only a mile away. I arrived at Chris's door, dripping wet and he made me welcome. I shall have to go into the City tomorrow, slightly lengthening my journey.

Day 23 Parsons Green – The City – County Hall – Maidstone – Tunbridge Wells



Chris is the main reason I got back to cycling after a long lay-off. We met for lunch, usually on a Friday, somewhere close to Sherborne where he lived. He said that he had recently got himself a bike and was doing 5-10 mile rides: would I like to join him? So Sunday mornings we would go off for a short cycle around the area, and end up at the Digby Tap for a couple of pints to undo all the good. After a while I became keener at the same time that Chris was unable to do much because of joint problems that eventually resulted in replacements. So 10 miles became 20 and then 30 and 50 until, one day I managed 107 miles, to the New Forest and back. After that there was little stopping me and when I turned 65 I did the end to end, Land End to John O'Groats in 14 days.

I pitched up at his pad in Parsons Green, quite literally dripping wet. Having unloaded everything, he showed me my room and I stripped off and had a blissful shower. The bike remained the hall downstairs and my clothes went into the washing machine. I made my excuses and sat down

and wrote up the blog for a couple of hours. At about 7 we went out to a local bar and had a bottle of South African red and a good chat. We moved on to an Italian restaurant, where Chris is well known, run by a Moroccan and had a nice meal: we both had pate and then Chris had a risotto while I went for calves liver and mash. Both very nice, and lubricated with an Italian red. An extra couple of glasses of red and some grappa on the house saw us off to bed. Good value for London at about £30 a head including drinks.

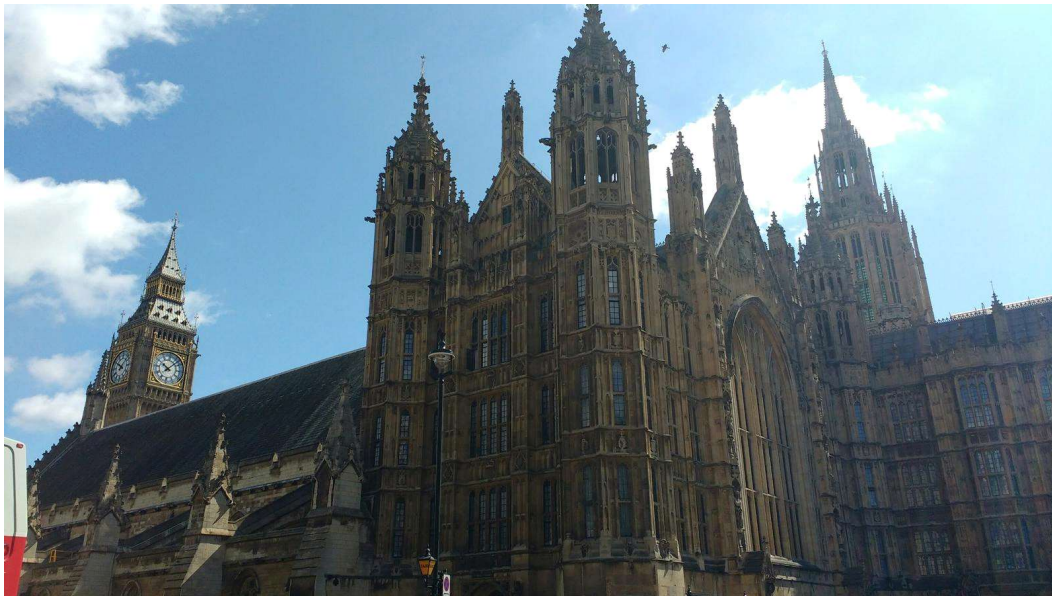
This morning SUNSHINE! I'd almost forgotten what it looked like but the day dawned bright and I was awake at 0630 having had a very good rest and sleep in an exceptionally comfortable bed. Unfortunately for Chris the storm the previous day and resulted in a flood through his roof terrace into the kitchen below and all over the carpets on stairs and landing. He'd managed to get hold of a roofer to repair the problem, who pitched up at 0800 and he joined me in a short ride to get some money from Fulham Broadway when I left at about 0930 after a cereal and cup of tea breakfast.

I cycled up New Kings Road and turned left down Lots Road to join the cycle path along the embankment. There were plenty of cyclists around and it was a bit stop start with pedestrians blocking the cycle way. Up Millbank, past Tate Britain, looking across the Thames to the "River House" MI6 building on the site of the 18th c Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens.

As I approached Westminster the traffic slowed and stopped and I entered a world of TV cameras and interviews. College Green was covered with scaffolding and awnings as people tried to make sense of Brexit. Lots of tourists joined the throng and I pushed my way through, having to wheel my bike because of the dense crowds.



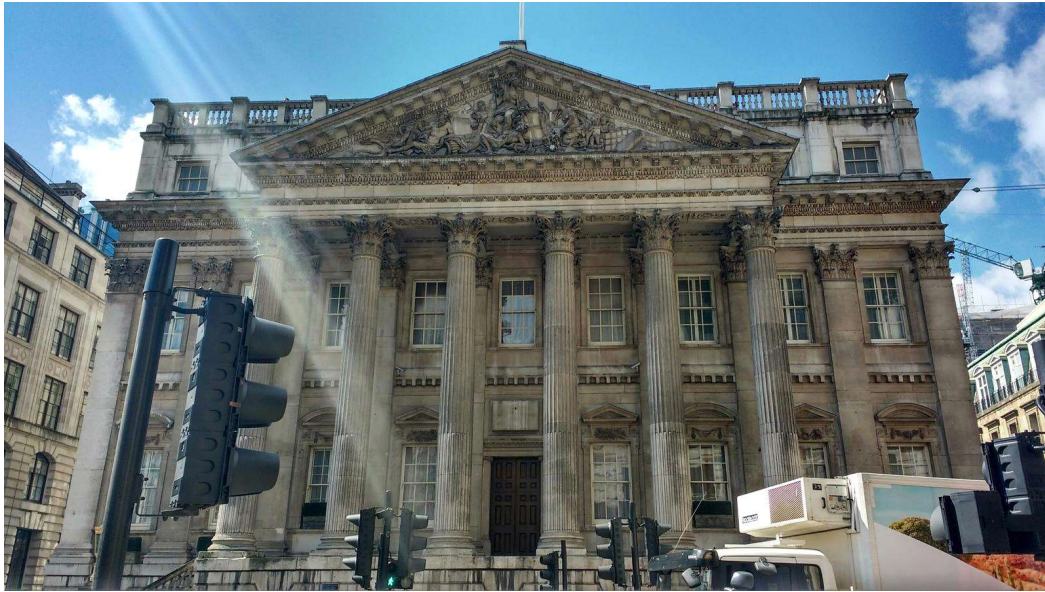
I crossed over the road and made my way towards the Embankment to continue my journey into the City



I'm not sure who claims the credit but the cycle lanes along the

embankment and towards the City are excellent, though I missed a crucial turn and was berated by angry white van men as we passed Waterloo Bridge.

Then I lost the navigators and ended up making an unnecessary loop to the east before finding my way back to The Royal Exchange, where I worked for a couple of years in the 70s. and taking a picture of the Mansion House, with a dramatic shaft of light from my left



A move around the corner got me this shot of Rolls Royce, registration number LM 0, waiting outside the side entrance



Now I was back on route, passing the Monument to the Great Fire of London before crossing London Bridge and making a short circuit against the one way traffic to join the Thames Path. It was slow going with pedestrians not paying attention but I made it to City Hall where an Australian visitor took the picture after a lot of faffing about

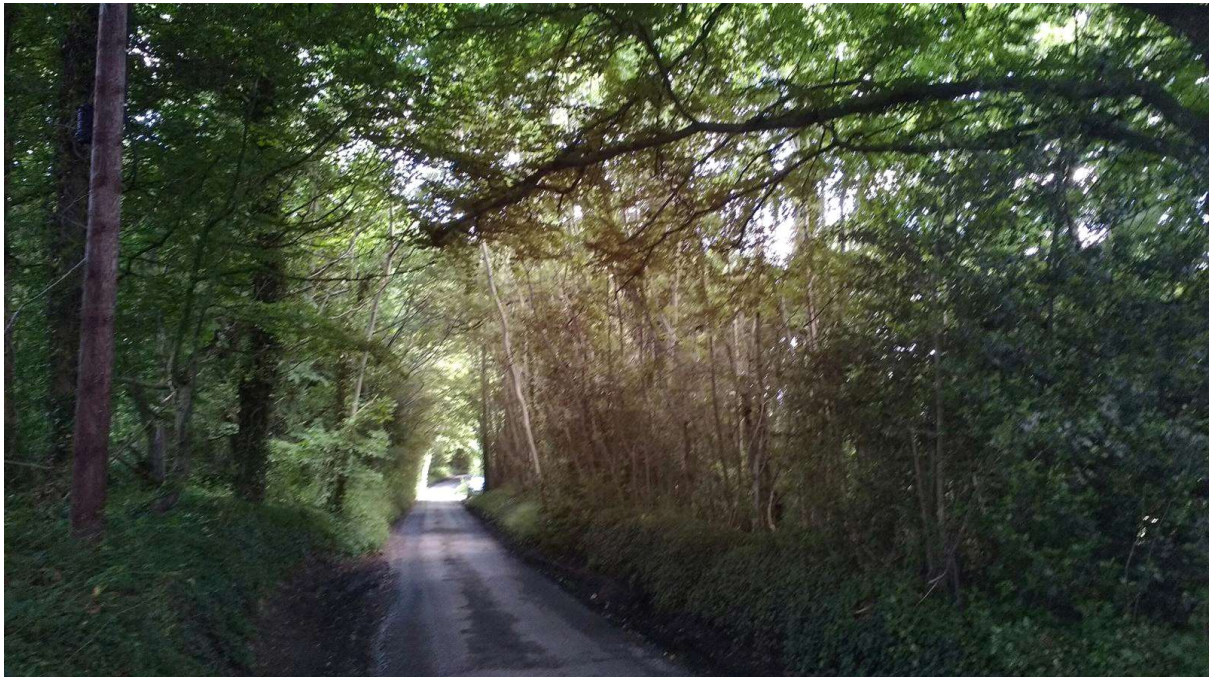


I continued down the embankment and took a shot across the river of the Tower and its eponymous bridge.



I was now running about an hour behind schedule and wanted to make progress so I pushed on along the A200 to Greenwich where I enjoyed a pull up the hill through the Park to get the muscles going. Across Blackheath and Eltham on a mixture of cycle lanes and off-road paved tracks and down the Footscray road to Sidcup and finally, after 25 miles, out into the countryside at Swanley. A Bracing climb through woods and narrow lanes Circuit, the sound of high performance engines echoing across the valley.

More testing climbing up some long hills, not unlike the Alpine ascents at 5-7% but over a mile or more, saw me past Vigo village on top of the North Downs and through typical Kentish sweet chestnut coppice woods



At Birling Hill the road drops steeply off the edge of the Downs, down a narrow road with hedges, through which I could catch glimpses of a glorious view across the plain to Maidstone but, maddeningly could not get the photo op.

On the steepest bit of hill there was an explosion like a rifle crack and my front wheel was completely flat. I thought to myself “tedious but I’ve got everything I need to mend a puncture” so pulled up and wheeled the bike back up the hill to a gateway to assess the damage. What I saw was horrible. The rim of the wheel had shattered and bits were hanging off it. There was no way that I could repair anything so I continued down the hill on foot. About half a mile on I came across lawn-mower man cutting the verge who stopped, looked at the wheel and said “that’s bugged then”. I asked him how far it was to Maidstone and he reckoned it was about 10 miles but that there was a bike shop in the village of Larkfield which was only about two and a half miles.

My spirits raised considerably and I continued with my push along the narrow roads until I crossed over the M20 and entered Leybourne at school finishing time. Another mile and I was at a small precinct of shops including Larkfield Cycles. I wouldn’t say they were welcoming but they fixed me up with a Raleigh touring wheel for just under £50 . I put on the tyre that I had

changed in Thetford Forest and one of the Specialized tubes and they blew it up for me. Job done. Just round the corner I found Morrisons and went in for a meal deal, as I had not eaten since breakfast.

I joined a grid-locked A20 for a while before making a loop to the north of the Medway through Aylesford and into Maidstone via the Royal Engineer's road. Signs to County Hall were good until I passed Her Majesty's Prison when they disappeared (had they been nicked?) Fortunately, I chose the right option and took the shot at about 5pm. The only by-stander was a traffic warden busy doing his job so I made do with my bike in the foreground



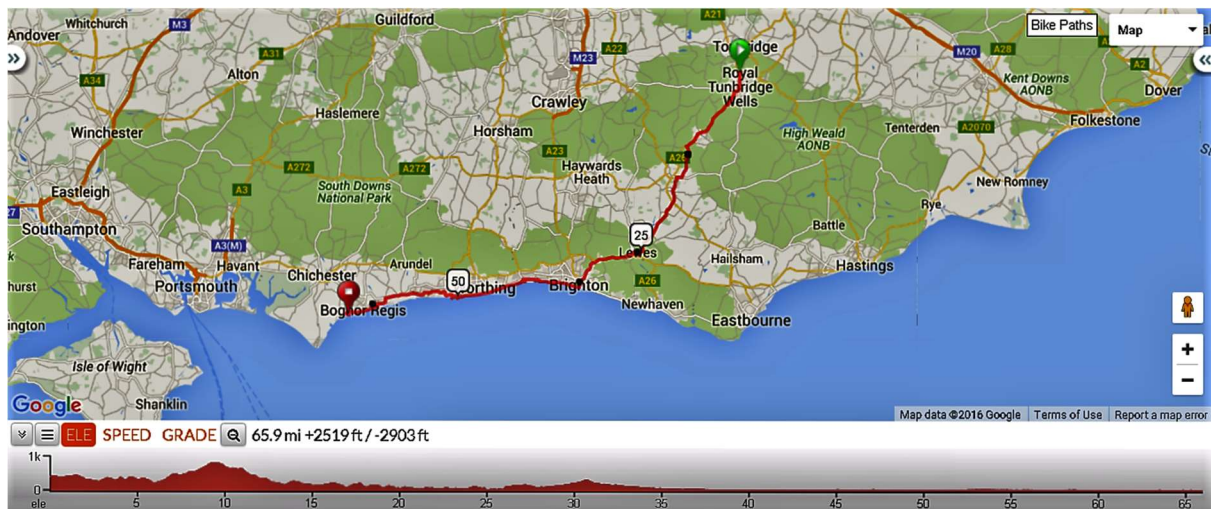
I made my way through the centre of the town and left by a very busy road that took me 5 minutes to cross. I'm not sure how it happened but Rita was on one route (the one I favoured anyway) and Gary was meandering along the Medway, so I had to ignore what he was showing and rely on the voice cues. Maddeningly the tyre on the new wheel was rubbing quite badly on the mudguard and I stopped several times to try to right the problem but I didn't quite succeed so I had to live with the noise for the rest of the journey.

The B2010 through West Farleigh and Yalding was narrow but quiet with lots of ups and downs, again often climbing for a mile or more but I eventually joined the A228 which is quite narrow. As it by-passes Paddock Wood it climbs at about 5-6% for a mile or more and I was aware that no cars were passing me due to the on-coming traffic. When I reached the top of the climb I pulled over and, to my amazement and horror waited for a full

five minutes for the queue, that had built up behind me, to clear. Shortly after that, the road widened and acquired a cycle lane and I made my way past Pembury up some more stiffish climbs before crossing an apparently dry valley with a railway line at the bottom for a final steep climb up to Southborough and Aspens, my B&B for the night.

So another day of incident but at least it was dry.

Day 24 Tunbridge Wells – Lewes – Bognor Regis

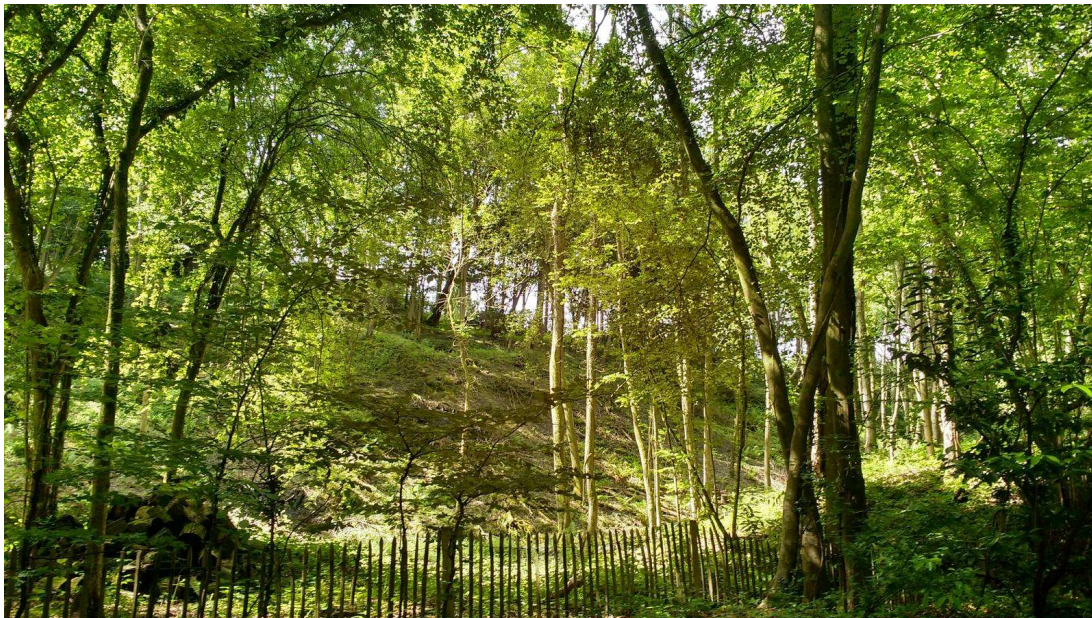


Last Monday, as I cycled through the rain and muck of Oxfordshire, I had nowhere to stay in Tunbridge Wells or the area, on Friday. Everywhere else my accommodation had been arranged months in advance, but I simply could not find suitable cheap lodgings. However, after a bit of internet delving I found Aspens, Southborough which is a couple of miles uphill from Royal Tunbridge Wells. I rang on Tuesday and spoke with Anne who said, yes she had a room available, so I booked. I pitched up after a significant climb at about 730pm after my wheel problems and Anne met me, put my bike in a shed and showed me to a lovely double room with spacious ensuite bathroom. The shower was excellent and the grime of the day was soon washed away. I put everything on charge and washed my kit and wandered out in search of food. Anne and Peter, who I met very briefly, recommended the Imperial, about 15 minutes away, and that is where I went, passing a number of other restaurants on the way. However, the Imperial now appears to be the only pub in the area. It is a Shepherd Neame pub, run by an Italian family and the food is mainly Italian. I was

hungry after my day on the road and started with delicious tomato bruschetta, so simple and yet so satisfying. Vegetarian lasagne was delicious and I finished with a Tiramisu which was covered in cocoa powder and less to my taste, though I finished it. Several pints of Spitfire slid down well and I walked back to my digs feeling good. The blog was completed shortly after midnight and I had a good night's sleep in a comfortable bed.

FEB was produced at about 0830 and was very good. A bonus was provided by the other guest Maria, originally from Cyprus, now Essex, but on a weekend course on fostering at Barnado's. We had an amusing conversation, touching on Brexit, her main job teaching Art and Design and my challenge. Anne joined the conversation and we had a diverting half an hour. A good B&B, to be recommended.

I left at about 0930, knowing that I had to meet an old rugby friend Dan at Shoreham at lunchtime. The weather was fair but the forecast was for rain at midday. My route took me down the main A26. I knew that there would be a lot of climbing between TW and Crowborough, not desperately steep but hard work. What I had not taken account of was the road surface which was dreadful and I stopped to see if there was any alternative. After 11 miles I found that I could go down minor roads without adding much to the journey, so diverted onto Chillies Lane which took me through woodlands



and high hedged roads, sometimes dropping steeply but without major climbs. I went through pretty villages and hamlets and passed a cheery horse-rider before I hit a main road just before Uckfield which was very busy with shoppers. It seems that every town I pass through is being dug up and Uckfield was no exception, causing long traffic queues that I enjoy passing.



I re-joined the A26 as the skies darkened and it started to rain, not hard enough to put on a jacket but wet all the same. It stopped briefly as I sped along the main road to Lewes but by the time I was in the County Town of East Sussex it was raining hard and I donned my jacket before taking brief shelter under the eaves of County Hall, another 70s monstrosity clad with scaffolding. Look hard and you can just see my bike.

I carried on towards Brighton in the rain. There is a long uphill trudge over the South Downs and I was glad to reach the crest and coast down into the town past the Royal Pavilion

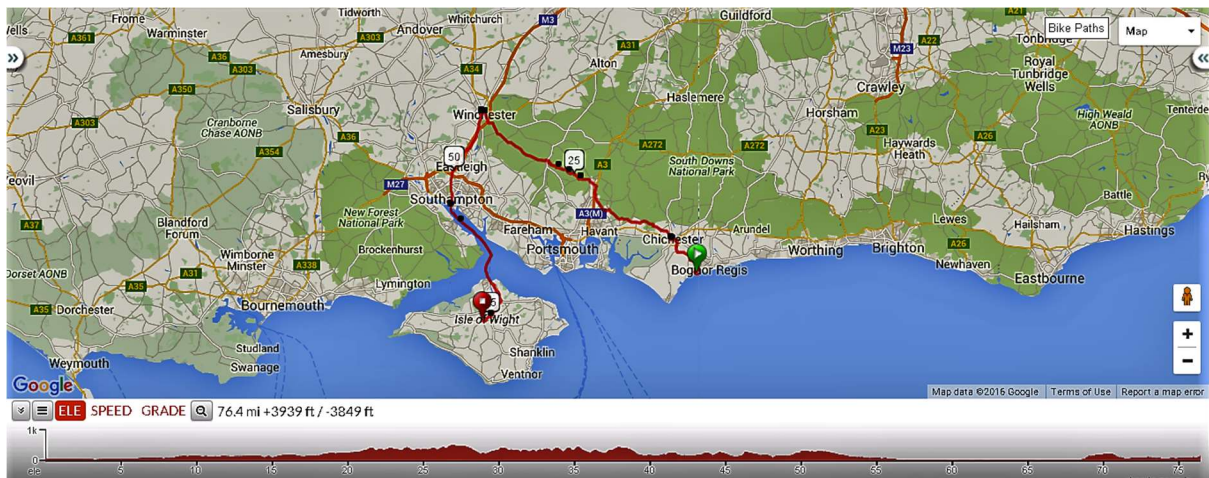


As I hit the sea-front the skies cleared and the sun came out just in time for me to feel a puncture in my back wheel. By this time, I was already late with a further 6 miles to our rendezvous in Shoreham but I threw off the luggage, fished out a new inner tube and checked the tyre. I couldn't find any problem so put it all back together and used my new pump. I stopped pumping when the gauge reached 60psi but it appeared to be deflating so I took it all apart again but I think it must have been the fact that I left the pump attached that was the problem. Trying again seemed to do the trick and I carried on down the sea-front, crossing the harbour by a footbridge and finally found a patient Dan at our meeting-place. We went into the nearby pub for a pint and I had a good veggie spaghetti while we chatted.

Beyond Worthing there is no path along the coast and we struck inland along some rough paths through the dunes before emerging onto some hard roads. We twisted and turned through housing estates before crossing the River Arun at Littlehampton. By this time the rain was getting harder and we had a fairly miserable ride for the rest of the journey before arriving at Dan's house at Craigweil, just beyond Bognor, to be greeted by his wife Barbara who gave us tea and cake to cheer us up.



Day 25. Bognor – Chichester – Winchester – Newport I.O.W



Arthur du Cros was a 19th British industrialist and politician who owned Craigweil House, Aldwick, a suburb of Bognor. In 1928 George V became ill and his doctors decided that he needed somewhere close to the sea to convalesce, and Craigweil House was put at his disposal for about 4 months. During his stay the Council petitioned that the town should be renamed Bognor Regis in his honour. When his private secretary passed this to the King he reputedly said “Bugger Bognor”: soe some unfathomable reason this was interpreted as assent and the town was renamed. The reason for this potted history is that Dan and Barbara, with whom I stayed, live in a house that was converted from the stables of Craigweil House, which has long been demolished to make way for salubrious housing.

Dan and I played rugby together many years ago at Bedford. At the time he was a schoolmaster but retired quite early and has built a portfolio of houses that he lets out. I bumped into him again last year at a lunch party in London and when I mentioned my trip he insisted that I stay with them. Having planned my route, Bognor fitted well so I took him up on his kind offer.

When we arrived at the door last night dripping wet I think Barbara must have wondered what she had let herself in for, but she made us tea and then washed my clothes and gave them back to me clean and dry this morning. Dan and I disappeared to the pub for a couple of pints of ale and returned to an excellent supper of beef casserole and veg, followed by cheese and crumble and a very good Rioja. We then watched highlights of the

second half of England v Australia before I disappeared to publish the blog. So a lovely evening spent with like-minded friends.



This morning Barbara volunteered to get on her bike to guide me the 6 miles to Chichester to get the picture in front of County Hall. She also took a picture of me in front of the more iconic Market Cross. I said goodbye to her and Dan and headed for Winchester.



It was quite chilly and overcast when I set off and the B2170 was quite busy, so not great cycling conditions. Just past Funtington I came across the only field of outdoor pigs that I can remember seeing on this trip, such is the poor state of the British pig industry. The road passed between high

hedges and mature woodland that protected me from the wind but the road surface left much to be desired and I was glad to turn towards Rowlands Castle on a lesser road for a short while. I'd forgotten my route and was



surprised to join the main A3 London-Portsmouth road at Horndean, 19 miles into the journey. The tower of the former Gale's brewery, now converted into residential accommodation since the brewery was acquired and then closed by Fullers, stands proud beside the highway.

I was soon climbing away from the A3 and past another icon, The memorial stone to the birth of cricket at the Hambledon club opposite the Bat and Ball pub. It was a stiff climb and I was glad of the breather when I took the picture. Now on top of the Downs I was getting glimpses of big panoramas through the roadside hedges. Fields of corn stretching to the horizon and, surprisingly, a

large herd of suckler cows and calves. There were sheep in the distance as I, once again, turned onto smaller roads and the road started roller coastering, up and down steeply for the remaining 10 miles to Winchester. It was hard work and I was relieved to cross over the M3 and make my way through Bar End to the centre of the City.



Winchester is full of history. The relatively modern statue of Alfred the Great greets you as you make your way into the High Street. On your left is the magnificent Guildhall, the biggest I have seen on my trip but, again, it only dates from 1871



There must have been some money in the area in the 19th century. For real history the Cathedral, the longest in Europe, and the Castle with its Great Hall housing King Arthur's Round Table, dating from the 15th century, are worthy of a long visit. Sadly I had no time but I will return.

The High Street was closed for traffic by the Farmer's market, all sorts of



produce from the surrounding area. I had not eaten since breakfast and treated myself to a massive lardy cake to keep me going. Once through the stalls I re-mounted and

trudged up to the top of the hill before turning left and taking the picture. County Hall is shrouded by trees: not a great piece of architecture so, maybe, just as well



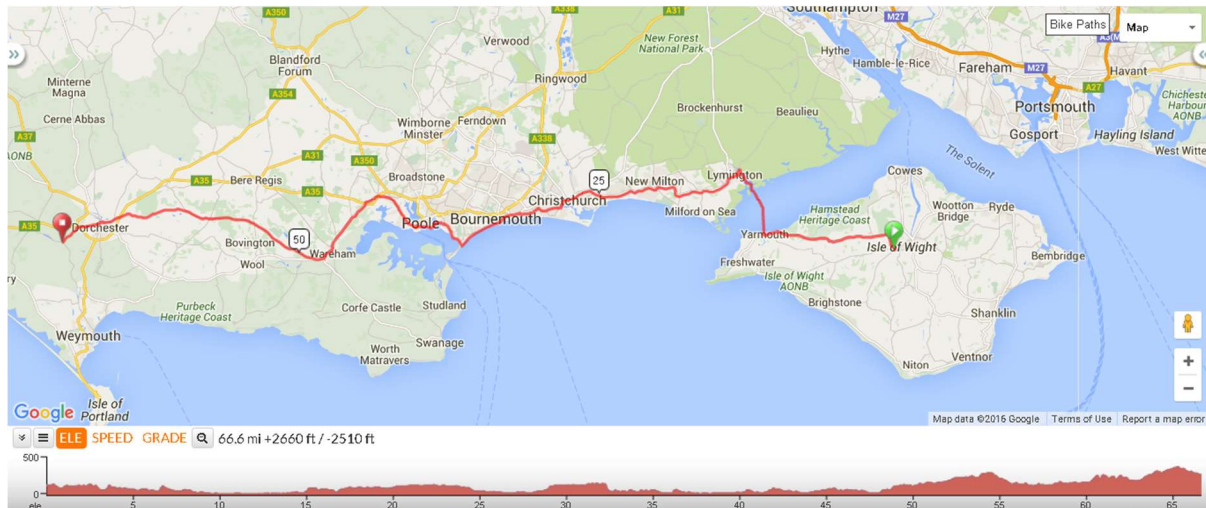
I had a ferry to catch so pressed on towards Southampton. Not a lot of climbing as the ground drops towards the sea but enough to make me puff at times. The cyclist is treated well with lanes or paths most of the way, here through a Park, there down a back lane. I lost the way when confronted by the West Park shopping centre and did a couple of circuits before Rita finally put me on the route and I found the Red Funnel terminus. Because of my great age I only had to pay £5.40, though the young lady on the booking desk couldn't believe that I was over 60, especially when I told her of my journey. "My Grandad's 61 and he can hardly walk". A nice fillip at the end of a hard day. I was first on the ferry at about 3.45pm and sat down to make some phone calls and start the blog. On the journey we

passed the ferry coming the other way and docked at East Cowes at about 5pm. I still had about 6 miles to Newport, county town of the IOW and got a little lost before taking the picture in front of the Guildhall, now a museum, and a considerably nicer building than County Hall



A couple of miles uphill to Carisbrooke, with its historic castle, prison of Charles 1 for 14 months before his execution, and the Waverley hotel, my lodging for the evening. I stayed largely dry all day, I suspect I shall not be so lucky later in the week.

Day 27 Newport – Dorchester – Martinstown



John's Club is an established Island charity, dedicated to providing social and leisure activities to vulnerable people aged 15+ with special needs, learning and physical disabilities. Tim, the landlord of The Waverley where I was staying invites them to use the pub for a social evening once a month and the night I was there was the night. So it was a noisy, high spirited environment when I came down having cleaned myself up and put everything on charge. They were enjoying themselves in the pool room and there was a deep conversation going on between a mentor and a 20+ girl on the next table. The menu was limited but I had an excellent chilli con carne and salad for a very reasonable £5.99. The beer, alas, although good, was £3.80 for a pint of Yachtsman brewed on the island.

John's Club disappeared at about 9.45pm and I was left in the bar to compose the blog. Half a dozen late drinkers arrived and put the world to rights: some very disparate views on Brexit, immigration and the profligacy of the Island Council, but they didn't come to blows. I went off to bed at about 11 and had a comfortable night. The room was old fashioned but had everything required though, had I had a cat, it would have been safe in the bathroom. The shower was adequate and breakfast this morning very good with a FEB and home-made marmalade for my toast.

My intention was to make the 11.05 ferry from Yarmouth to Lymington, but I managed to stir myself early enough to think that I could make the 10.05 if I was lucky. So, leaving at 0903, I time-trialled it along the main road. No big climbs and most of it in top gear, so I made it to the ferry terminal by 0945: perfect timing. The crossing is reckoned to be the most expensive per mile of journey of any ferry in the world but they give concessions. My fare was still £7.50 but it carved a lot off the journey I would have had to make if I returned to Southampton



I phoned my mother, with whom I am spending tonight, to give her an ETA., phoned Rob, who is bringing a replacement rear wheel for the last 3 days of the journey and settled down to enjoy the crossing which passed uneventfully and calmly. I was heading for Lymington High Street by 1045, only to have to wait at the level crossing for the train heading for the docks.

I decided to push on as quickly as possible so stayed on the main A337 to Highcliffe where I looked at my maps and noticed that I had planned a route that might take me across another ferry at Mundeford, which I wanted to avoid. Unfortunately, I couldn't get the maps to load properly so, rather than find myself in a bad place, I decided to push on to Christchurch on the main road. It wasn't too bad but I would rather have been on minor roads without the noise and fumes, so when I reached Christchurch I decided to make for Southbourne. As Rita was not playing ball with maps I was navigating with Gary who is not very clear, but I managed, without mistakes, to make it to Bournemouth and roads that I recognised.

Down the hill to the Promenade for the 3 mile ride to Sandbanks. The beach was busy for half a mile or so from the pier and walkers on the Prom were not keen to give way, so progress was slow at times. I noticed that cycling is

prohibited between 10am and 6pm in July and August. The Beach Huts that line the Prom were being well used in the sunshine, although it was quite cold in the westerly wind.



At Sandbanks I turned north towards Poole, up a bit of a hill before dropping down the other side and into the Parks that line Parkstone Bay. I had made very good time and was in the Lord Nelson pub at about 1pm. This is a Hall and Wodehouse pub so First was the beer of choice and I was thirsty enough for two of them. They have a pensioners menu, £5.99 for two courses, so I had garlic bread followed by fish and chips, both good

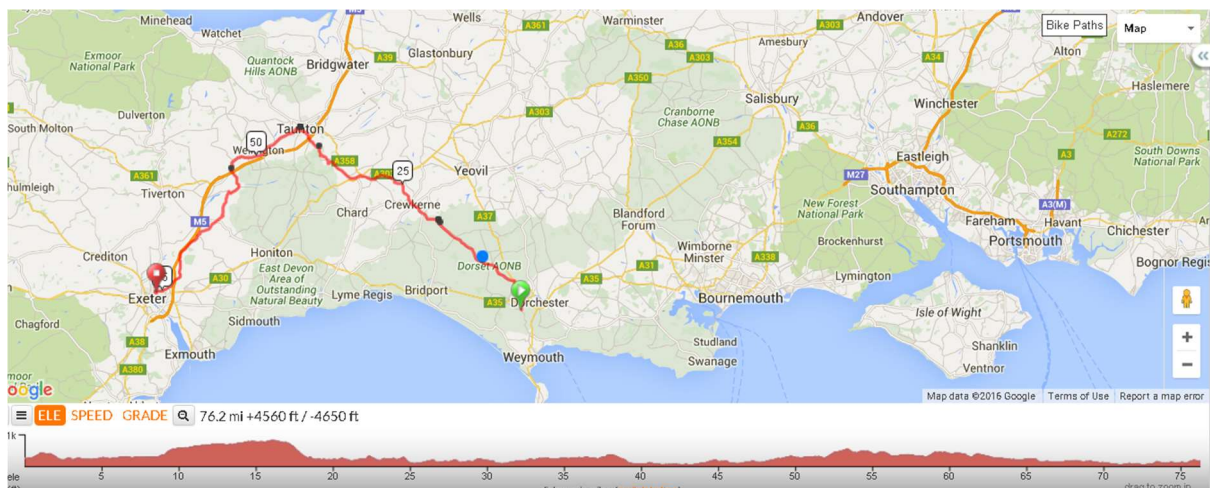
I was off again before 2, across the Town Bridge and up the Blandford Road, a route I had ridden quite recently. The road curves around Poole Harbour at Upton and heads south west towards Wareham. There is a cycle route for part of the way but it runs out at Sandford and for a couple of miles I felt threatened.

Again the route that I had planned made little sense so, as I know this area well, I decided to make for the side roads past Bovington Camp where the tanks were on exercise and through the small village of Tincleton and skirting the agricultural college at Kingston Maurward before crossing the river Frome water meadows by Grays Bridge and pushing up High East Street before turning right by the Arts Centre to take the picture in front of County Hall at just after 4pm, an hour earlier than I had anticipated



It was then only 15 minutes up the road through Poundbury, Prince Charles' pseudo village, that is effectively a suburb of Dorchester before I arrived at my Mother's house.

Day 28 Martinstown – Taunton – Exeter



My, 91 year old, mother still lives in the house that she and my late father bought when they down-sized from the family home 17 years ago. Her only real difficulty is that she is very shaky on her legs and this has led to a couple of serious falls over the last couple of years so she now has a companion, who lives in, to help her and drive her to choir practice, for she is an enthusiastic singer and member of two choirs, and any of her other

engagements. Today is lip-reading class, more of a social occasion for her than a learning process, but she is keen to get ready so I am off at 0900. She has already been up very early, and cooked me a FEB. Last night she cooked supper for all three of us and very good it was too. So she's still living a full life and keen to do as much as she can.

I left, after an excellent night's sleep, in hazy sunshine with a lot of cloud about. The forecast was for rain in the early afternoon so it was good to get on with the ride. My route took me over ground that I know quite well for the first 20 miles and then on to small roads and lanes around Crewkerne that are new to me



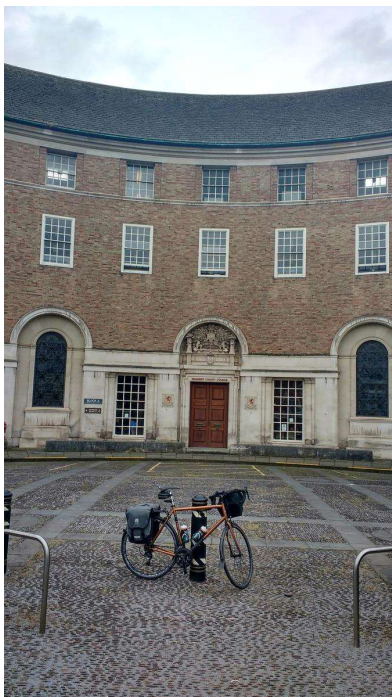
There is a long slow grind up to the top of the Dorset Downs: on a clear day the views are magnificent, today not brilliant but some nice cloud formations that make up for it. I struggle to get the picture because of the high hedges and curse as I fly by a suitable spot and miss the opportunity. Eventually I find a gap.



I hurtle down into the Vale land around Misterton and Mosterton and then on through the centre of Crewkerne, crowded with shoppers and queues of cars, before I emerge the other side into a steep climb up a narrow dark lane overhung with trees. The lanes twist and turn through lush meadows, many still to be mown, probably for hay if the weather ever improves.



Suddenly I join a familiar road that runs parallel to the A303 and on through Ilminster to Horton Cross where the A303 continues towards Exeter until it stops where it joins the A30. I leave the main road and head across more hills and vales towards Taunton, my next objective.



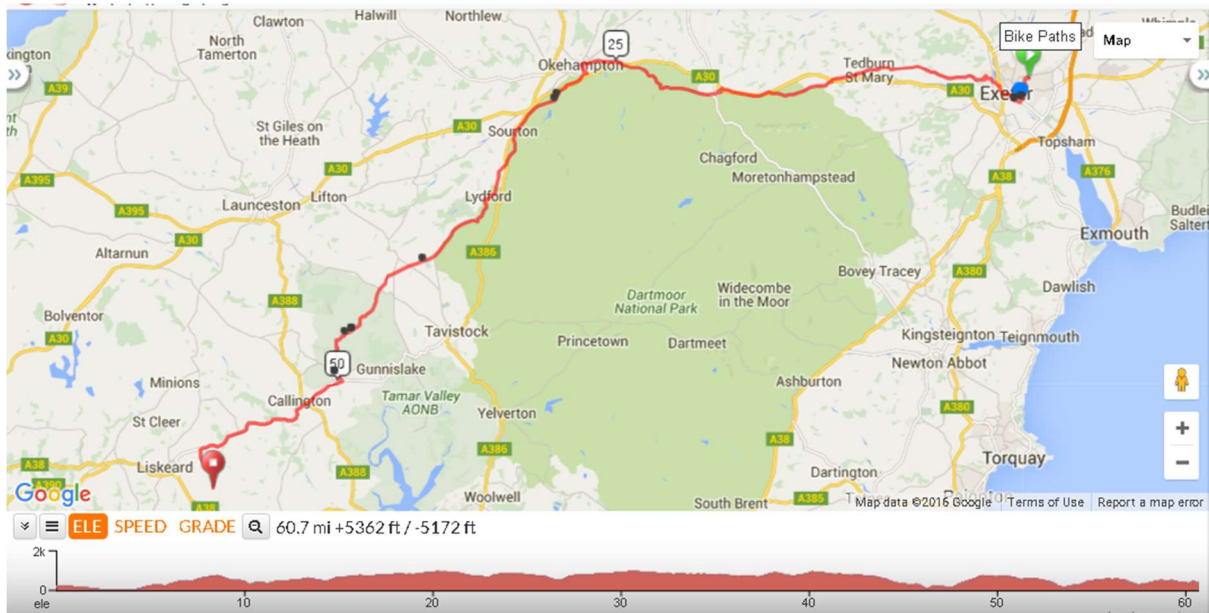
The Mendip Hills loom in the distance and the rain clouds gather but it stays dry, all the way into the centre of town where I take the picture outside Somerset County Hall. I follow cycle tracks through town and avoid the heavy traffic in the centre before making for the A38 which heads south west to Exeter, my penultimate County Town

As I head out through the housing estates, avoiding the main road it starts to spit with rain so I stop and put on a jacket. The navigators push me back onto the A38 and the rain worsens. It's lunchtime, so the Rumwell Inn proves a

suitable shelter and an opportunity for fuel. I find a smoker's shelter round the back for the bike and wander in. The television is tuned to Wimbledon, still sunny whilst the rain lashes down in Somerset and I watch as Serena Williams demolishes a plucky east European. Pasty and chips, washed down with a pint of Otter Ale and followed by a delicious raspberry cheesecake, hits the spot. Not only that, when I do venture outside after an hour, the rain stops. Not for long: it's soon belting down again and I get very wet despite putting on a second jacket. The A38 is busy enough to be uncomfortable, especially in the rain, and I seek an alternative but don't find anything for about 10 miles. Finally, I turn off, cross over the M5 and head through some leafy lanes around Culmstock and Kentisbeare. In good conditions it would have been delightful but I was feeling the strain. Gary turned himself off 3 times and didn't record half the route. Fortunately, Rita behaved, so I have a full record.

I joined a B road that mirrors the M5; the rain stopped but the wind blew strongly in my face, so the last 7 miles from Beare were hard work on harsh road surfaces. Eventually I hit the outskirts of Exeter at Pinhoe and made my way towards the centre. My stop for the night was just off the Pinhoe Road and I arrived before 5, an hour before I had suggested I would, after 76 miles of hard cycling. More bad weather is forecast for tomorrow when I make my way across Dartmoor: fortunate that there is only 100 miles to go and I have 2 days to complete my journey.

Day 29 Exeter – Menheniot



Kate and Patrick are amongst my oldest friends and, although they no longer co-habit, they are still friends. I was staying the night with Kate because she lives in Exeter and I needed to get to County Hall easily this morning for the pic. The original plan had been for Patrick to cycle with me for the last two days but he had to attend a funeral so that put paid to that. He pitched up at Kate's house and we sank a bottle of Prosecco to celebrate the journey before going out to dinner at The Rendezvous, a pleasant restaurant in Exeter centre. Good food, drink and company made for an enjoyable evening. I managed to cobble the blog together before midnight and had a good and comfortable night's sleep.

This morning Kate cooked me bacon and eggs and I was well set up for what I knew would be a very hard day. I left just before nine and picked up a route that avoided main roads and traffic and brought me to County Hall. It may have been that I went all the way around it, which I hadn't done elsewhere, but County Hall seemed huge. Devon is the fourth largest English County by size and 12th by population so why it needs to accommodate so many civil servants is an interesting conundrum. (Answers on a £20 note to Sport Relief via my Justgiving page please.



My route from County Hall followed bike tracks across the river Exe. The waterfront has been tarted up over the years with warehouses converted into restaurants and some nice housing protected by flood defences



The day was pretty murky so photographs are likewise. There were cyclists and joggers making use of the excellent track beside the river, which is crossed by several pedestrian bridges.



I climbed away from the river through housing estates until I reached proper countryside. I passed horse riders but otherwise the roads were deserted. Four miles of climbing, some very steep, peaked out at 738 feet with good views. I could hear the A30 main road to my left as I sped down six mile hill into Tedburn St Mary. The weather was still mizzly and cold and I was finding it hard when I was, once again, into a climb, this time long and slow, crossing the A30 and passing through Cheriton Bishop. Back over the A30 and then on a road immediately alongside it – probably the old A30, I arrived at Whiddon Down services where I pulled in to buy a packet of expensive Jaffa Cakes (for later) and a bag of custard doughnuts (consumed immediately)

Suitably fortified and about 20 miles into a 60 mile journey I pressed on after a 20 minute stop. The road wound on through South Zeal and Sticklepath, home of Finch Foundry a water-powered forge owned by the National Trust – worth a visit if you're in the area. The road was up and down with some quite severe climbs so I was pleased, once again, to cross the A30 and descend sharply into Okehampton.

The town was busy with shoppers and traffic, even on a grey day and I knew that I had to make my way up the hill to the station. It was a steep climb and I thought to myself that I had missed a trick in going all the way down into the town to climb back up again, but looking at the map in hindsight, there is no option. A new cycle track alongside the railway is called for.



I needed to get to the station to join the Granite Way a nine mile tarmac path that skirts Dartmoor to the village of Lydford. It's an excellent track used by pedestrians, equestrians and cyclists but it has a 250m gap in the middle which deteriorates to a narrow muddy path. It appears that the landowner won't dedicate the path so the Council cannot maintain it. It's a bit of an inconvenience but no real problem. The Granite Way follows the railway for about a mile to Meldon Quarry which seems to be the home of old rolling stock. Quite what the Polar Express was doing there I can't think.



The track soon crosses the Meldon Viaduct, an amazing cast iron bridge. I couldn't get a picture of the intricate trusses myself but here is one taken by a third party.

Lydford was my designated lunch stop and I made it to the Castle Inn at about 1.15pm for excellent soup and ham, egg and chips. The comfortably shoed ladies that run the place were very friendly and wished me well with the rest of my journey.

Past Brentor church and through Sydenham Damerel I descended sharply to Horsebridge and crossed into Cornwall. The bridge itself dates from 1437 and, although repaired has never been swept away.



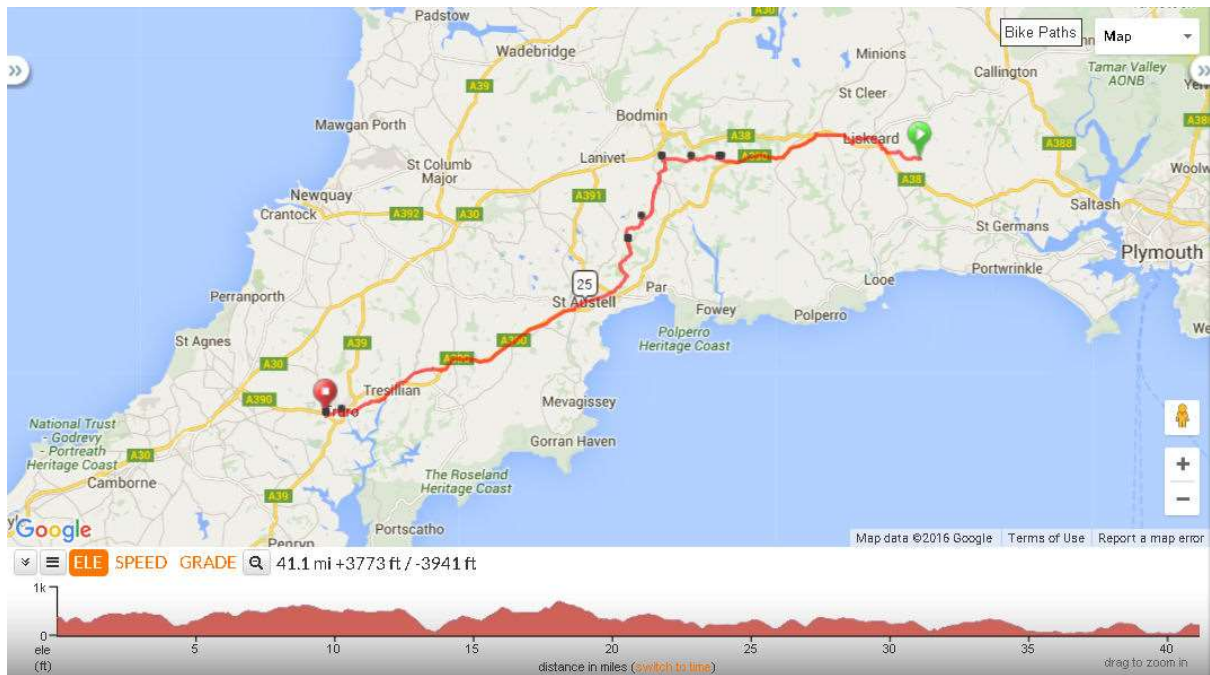
The Tamar looked placid as I crossed over and immediately faced a steep climb. A mile on, the road forked and the navigators were no help. I chose the wrong road. Down it swooped into the village of Luckett (my thoughts when I saw the 15%+ climb for a mile and a half rhymed). I had to stop twice to catch my breath but made it without GOAPing: without doubt the steepest hill I have cycled up on this trip though not as severe as Winatts in the Peak District which I failed to ride. The view from the top was spectacular.



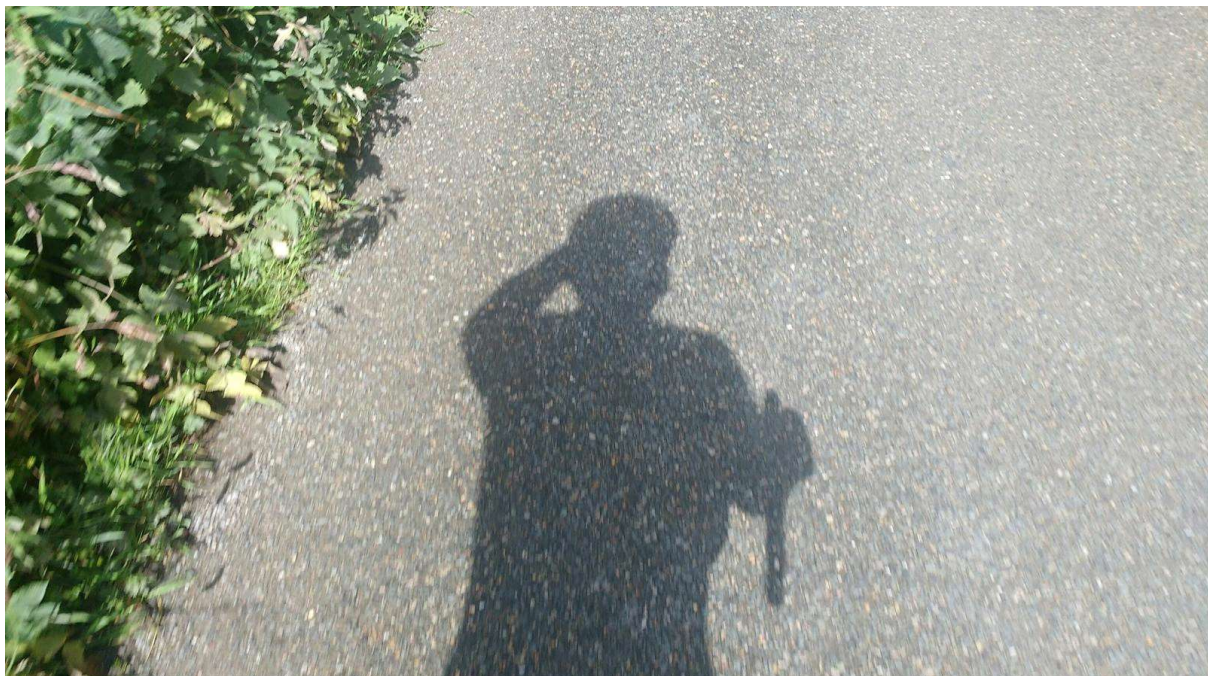
I soon joined the main road from Tavistock to Liskeard which proved to be quite a roller-coaster before arriving at my destination, the White Hart at Menheniot at about 5pm after about 6000 feet of climbing in, at times, cold and grey conditions, though at the end of the day I did see a bit of watery sunshine.

The worst is over: tomorrow I have about 40 miles to go to Truro along roads that I know. I'm hopeful that I shall make it by lunchtime.

Day 30 Menheniot – Truro



I had such a novel experience today that I needed to record it on camera. For the first time for what seemed like weeks I saw real Sunshine, enough to throw a shadow. It didn't last for long but it was nice to see.



I set off early from the White Hart. I'd been in the bar "early doors" the night before and had a couple of pints of Proper Job ale from St Austell Brewery. I

stayed on to eat a supper of roast pork and all the trimmings, which was very nice and then sloped off to my room to write the blog, which took longer than expected, so I never got back down for a late drink. It was ladies' darts night and I could hear a great deal of merriment as I was tapping away. I'd spoken with the landlord, Jonathan, who was a Cornishman who had done a lot of travelling and come home. He and his partner Susie were friendly and welcoming and the number of people in the bar suggested they were successful, though 9 letting rooms certainly help the cash-flow.

Jonathan cooked me an excellent FEB and I was away at 0836, much earlier than usual. I was anxious not to be too late getting to Truro as I had arranged for Rob to meet me at 1300 so that we could have a bite of lunch before he drove me home. I knew that there would be some hard climbing to do in the 41 miles that I had left and I was immediately into it as I had to get up 2 steep hills in the first 2 miles before I reached the main road to Liskeard.

Once in Liskeard I was able to cycle past a long queue of cars at some traffic lights, before heading out of town and down a hill to join a road that ran alongside the busy A38. For the next 7 miles it was up and down on a reasonably quiet A road before I turned off just as the sun came out and I was able to enjoy a spot of warmth.



I soon came to the gates of Lanhydrock House, a Victorian mansion owned by the National Trust. The gates were closed but I knew that going through the grounds would save me a mile or so of steep climbing, so I pushed my way through a side gate and started up the drive. It was a stiff climb for

about three quarters of a mile before I arrived at the house, by which time the sun had disappeared.

I followed the back drive which deteriorated into a rough gravel road which dived and then climbed steeply up to the road that brought me back on course. I kept climbing, some hills so steep that I could have walked faster but I got to the top and soon started the descent towards Luxulyan. In the



distance I could see Bugle and the edge of the china clay mines across the valley.



The road steepened and I plunged down into the thick broadleaved woods that line the Luxulyan valley and suddenly, there above me was the extraordinary Treffry Viaduct: constructed between 1835 and 1844, the 650 foot long and 100 foot high structure carried both a tramway and a canal to carry stone from inland quarries to the ports until the mines closed in 1928. It is now so lost in the trees that it is almost completely camouflaged from the south, but its grandeur is still apparent from the direction from which I approached. A bit of judicious tree cutting would be in order. It is possible to walk

across the viaduct but that would have meant a long stop that I could not afford to take, so I kept going.

I was soon climbing steeply up to the Bodelva Road, passing the entrance to the unseen biomes of the Eden Project, brainchild of entrepreneur and former rock promoter, Tim Smit (I love the palindrome) to mark the Millennium. It's well worth a visit at any time of the year, but I had no time on this occasion.

Down the hill into St Austell, a town I know well, built on steep ground with its own magnificent rail viaducts. Here I re-joined the A390 that I had turned off to reach Lanhydrock and had a roller coaster of a journey for 10 miles. The road is wide and has a tarmac verge so I was away from the traffic but it was still a tedious experience.

At Tresillian I saw the salt-water creek that extends up from the Carrick Roads that empty to the sea at Falmouth, 10 miles away. The road flattens out before a final lung-busting climb up a small road, passing Truro Rugby Club and then down the other side into the capital of Cornwall.

I went through the middle of town and stopped to take a picture of the Hall for Cornwall, now an Arts Centre but formerly the Town hall and court building





The road had one last steep climb up to the aptly named Highertown, home of Cornwall County Council where Rob, as promised, was there to meet me. He took a picture in front of the entrance to the building and another in front of the sign at 12.54pm. The building has little merit so I chose the latter picture to mark the end of my 2000 mile journey.

I've been on the road for 30 days, cycling every day for 29 and, by initial estimate, having deducted the 12 miles that I missed because of bike failure at Cheltenham, have cycled 2042 miles. I've shed a stone in weight, a tee shirt and a security cable for the bike.

I hope you've enjoyed following my journey. We're not quite up to the £2016 I had hoped to raise for Sport Relief but

there's still time for you to donate if you haven't already done so. Thank you so much to those of you who have already shown such generosity. It has helped keep me going even when things looked a bit grim. If you're in the area, come and join me for a drink and chat at the Half Moon Inn, Horsington tomorrow night Friday 1st July from about 7pm.