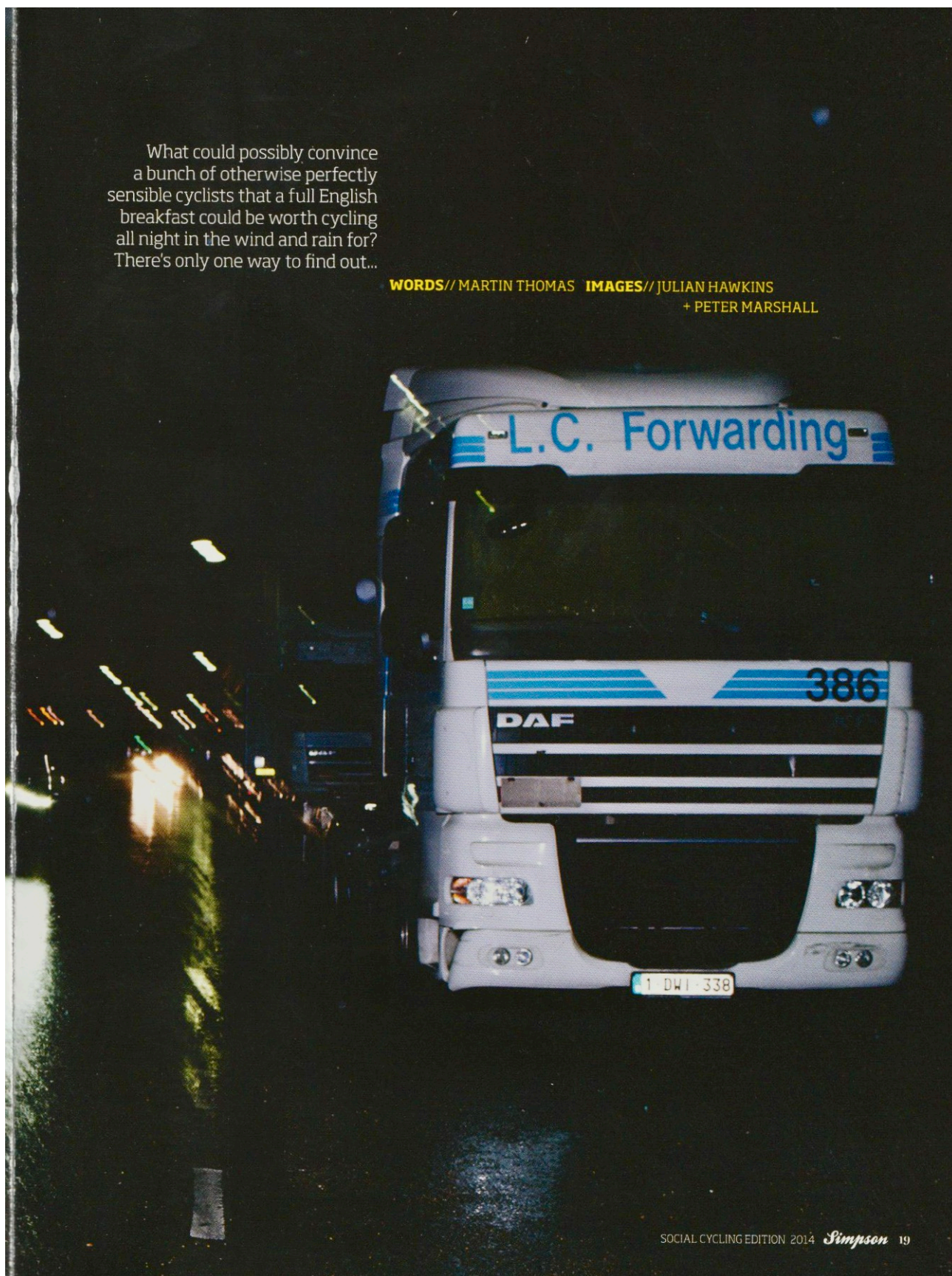


# NIGHT SHIFTERS



What could possibly convince a bunch of otherwise perfectly sensible cyclists that a full English breakfast could be worth cycling all night in the wind and rain for? There's only one way to find out...

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+ PETER MARSHALL





*The Fridays meet at midnight at Hyde Park corner in London before cycling to the coast.*

**I STOOD ALONE ON THE VERGE OF A** roundabout somewhere not far from Basildon just as the first glimmer of dawn appeared on the horizon. A huge truck swung into view at speed and for one heart-stopping moment my tired brain told me he was coming straight for me but he kept turning and thundered past a few feet to my right.

Alone again, I relaxed into the silence and asked myself for the umpteenth time what it could be about cyclists that makes us want to give up the comfort of our beds for an all-night ride through heavy rain and hail storms along busy roads towards nothing more rewarding than a full English breakfast. I'd heard people talk about how much fun it was to ride the Dunwich Dynamo – an annual 120-mile overnighter from London to the Suffolk coast – but the concept had never really appealed to me before.

I'd been posted at the Basildon roundabout to point out the way to the stragglers in a 70-strong group of cyclists, all members of a club called the Fridays. They meet at Hyde Park Corner in London at the stroke of midnight on Fridays every month or so between spring and autumn and then embark on one of their Friday Night Rides to the Coast (FNRtC), more often than not to various destinations in Kent, Sussex, Essex and Suffolk. They pedal through the night, slowly and sociably so everyone can keep up, stopping every few miles to regroup. At around 7am they arrive at their destination – in this case,

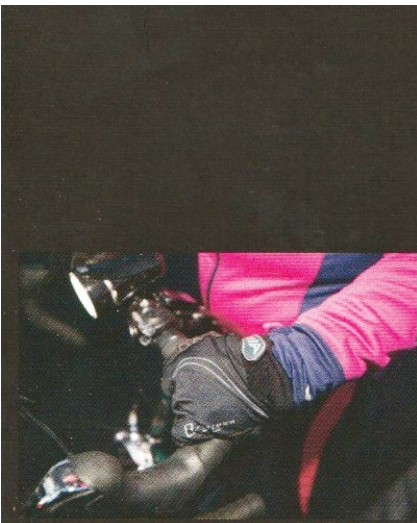
Burnham-on-Crouch in Essex – tuck into a hearty breakfast, and then head home again, most by train, some by bike.

I waited at the roundabout for perhaps ten minutes, until I could hear the Tail End Charlies shouting 'all up!' to signify that there was no one else to follow, then I climbed back onto my bike and started pedalling furiously to catch up with the front runners again – but also to work some warmth into my cold, tired limbs.

We'd had rain almost from the start. Cold, hard rain that ➔

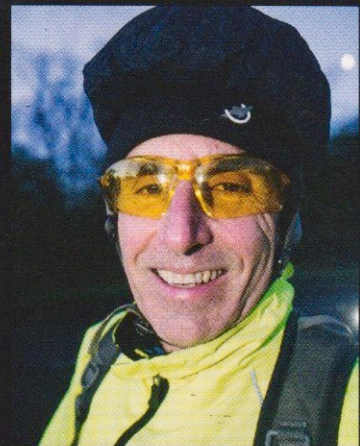
**A huge truck swung into view at speed... my tired brain told me he was coming straight for me.**

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*If you have any mechanical issues during a FNRttC ride, you will not suffer alone. Fellow riders always stop to offer light and assistance.*



*We swapped stories about the drunken Essex boy who'd run into the road to hurl incoherent insults at the passing peloton.*



you knew would chill you to the bone once it got through your defences. We'd cycled en masse along the Embankment, over London Bridge and then along Jamaica Road to the Rotherhithe Tunnel before the rain really started. It was thrilling to ride in such a big group through these familiar city streets. Heads turned as we whirred by; cars waited for us to pass. We swooped down into the depths of the tunnel, some people whistling and hooting to enjoy the echoes, before working our way back up on the north side of the Thames, the effort of the slope warming us up a little at last.

The rain hammered down as we emerged from the tunnel and it continued relentlessly until we reached Thurrock Services, 20 or-so miles later. For a few torturous miles it fell as hail, bouncing painfully off any exposed skin. As the rain worked its way into gloves and down tights inside overshoes, the only thing for it was to switch into survival mode and try not to think about how horrible it would be if the rain continued all night.

The toilets at Thurrock were quickly filled with shivering cyclists holding sopping gloves, socks and hats under howling hand-driers. Dripping bikes lined the walls as their riders stood patiently in the queue for the coffee machine, leaving small puddles as they inched forwards, faces set grim as they

endured the pain of warmth returning to dead, soggy fingers.

And yet spirits remained high. Any thoughts of abandonment were kept private as we laughed together at how ludicrous the whole thing was, swapped stories about the drunken Essex boy who'd run into the road to hurl incoherent insults at the passing peloton, munched our sandwiches and prepared to saddle up and ship out for a few more hours of the same.

Except there was no more – the rain held off for the rest of the night. ➔

*Soggy but happy: riders try to dry off and warm up at Thurrock services on the Friday Night Ride to the Coast ride to Burnham-on-Crouch.*

## THE GROWTH OF NIGHT RIDING

The first Dunwich Dynamo ride took place in 1992 with just a handful of riders – all London bicycle messengers – heading to the Suffolk coast on a whim. By 2012, the number of riders taking part had grown to nearly 2,000. A cursory internet search reveals a wealth of nocturnal riding, from mass-participation charity events to smaller groups like the Fridays, who have been pedalling happily through the night for eight years now.



*Just rewards after a night of cold, wet cycling; the bikes wait outside while the Fridays tuck into breakfast at Burnham-on-Crouch.*



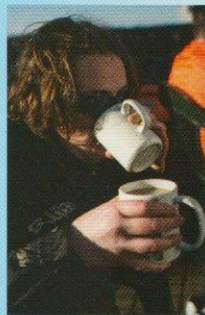
And as we snaked our way towards the coast, increasingly dry and decreasingly cold, the point of the thing became clearer and clearer. I fell into conversation with riders whose faces I couldn't see very well, chatting quietly about this and that as we passed beneath dark, curtained windows in smaller and smaller communities.

Often, the conversations stopped altogether as we wordlessly shared the magic of cycling together along country lanes, hearing only tyres on tarmac and seeing only a line of blinking rear lights snaking into the distance. These were sublime little moments that I will treasure for a long time, made all the more special by the darkness of the skies and the unfamiliarity of the roads.

The skies slowly grew lighter after the Basildon stop and, as we got closer and closer to that full English at Burnham-on-Crouch, I found myself more and more reluctant to stop. Suddenly the idea of an all-night 120-mile ride out to Dunwich made perfect sense. I think I might be hooked.

## FRIDAY NIGHT RIDES TO THE COAST: SOCIALISM IN ACTION?

Friday Night Ride to the Coast (FNRttC) founder Simon Legg on why his rides are a bit like the 1970s.



DID SOME WEIRD STUFF IN the 70s, but not as weird as the stuff Werner\* did. My Californian period went no further than substances, but Werner told stories that kept people awake for way too long, restricted their visits to the toilet, messed up their heads and took their cash. Lots of cash. Mind you, they loved him for it, because, as he put it: "To [those] thus enlightened it appears as a vivid and overwhelming certainty that the universe, precisely as it is at this moment, as a whole and in every one of its parts, is so completely right as to need no explanation or justification beyond what it simply is...the mind is so wonder-struck at the self-evident and self-sufficient fitness of things as they are, including what would ordinarily be thought the very worst, that it cannot find any word strong enough to express the perfection and beauty of the experience...The...insight that the immediate Now, whatever its nature, is the goal and fulfilment of all living."

All of which is one heck of a basis for a bike ride. Give 'em the moonlight, give 'em some pals, keep 'em up all night and watch the contentment with the Now spread itself around like honey on hot toast. Throw in a bit of mystery, the spurious mystery that attends the most ordinary suburbs when the residents are fast asleep and darkness hides the world beyond the nearest hedgerow, take them down roads, lanes and paths seemingly disconnected one from another (and apparently chosen at random), take out the decisions, set up a system that is both seamless and co-operative, and you've got yourself a rolling

party of a ride that might just pass for Socialism in Action but which, then again, might just be Hypnocracy. Who can tell?

I've not sorted the lots of cash bit - do 16 rides in a year and they'll set you back the grand sum of twelve and a half pence each. Then again, 'society is at the mercy of the criminal without a motive', which pretty much sums up how I've got away with this schtick for so long.

But...I've got the Now thing down. Werner's little trick works a treat. Nobody sleeps. Toilet opportunities are few and far between. The silver moon, a skein of little red lights reaching up the hillside, the first smear of dawn, waves breaking on a beach... each prey on the mind's capacity to magic up the kind of meaning you can't quite put into words.

The clever bit is to make every ride tell a tale. London to Southend is the East London Night Out, York to Hull an Ode to Horizons, and London to Southwold, the FNRttC magnum opus, does History and Geography (and a landing craft on a deserted beach at 5.30 in the morning), but all with the same basic mix of overture, gentle development, bright intervals and quiet resolution.

It's the slow shifting through a story sprinkled with smiles and small kindnesses that takes FNRttCers out of the everyday and in to the realms of fast-held friendships, identity and myth.

Forget the before and after, share time with people you'd never meet any other way and just pedal through the Now. Kind of like the seventies. But no substances. Thank you, Werner.

\*Erhard

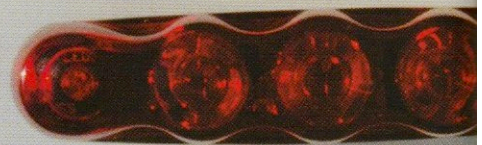






## NIGHT RIDING ESSENTIALS

- **Bike:** It's much harder to fix things in the dark and the wet and the cold so make sure you give your bike a proper safety check before you set off.
- **Lights:** I used an Exposure Strada front light and an Exposure Tracer rear. Both were more than adequate for the mix of urban and rural roads, but the Strada only just held enough charge. If you're riding all night, take a back-up or spare batteries.
- **Layers:** It gets very cold very quickly, especially if it's raining and you're making frequent stops. I wore two base layers, a long-sleeved jersey, a windproof softshell and a lightweight rain jacket, plus a merino beany under my helmet. Take more than you think you need.
- **Spares:** Take fresh gloves and fresh socks in waterproof bags if it's going to be raining. Remember to double up on spare tubes too - you'll puncture more than usual.
- **Cash:** That massive mug of steaming coffee at Thurrock services was a lifesaver and the full English at the end was not to be missed. You'll want the option of catching a train home too, however strong your intentions of riding back.
- **Phone:** Your fancy smartphone might not hold its charge for the whole ride, especially if you use it to take photos and/or navigate. Consider taking a cheap spare pay-as-you-go back up.
- **Embrace the saddlebag:** All this stuff won't fit into a jersey pocket so you'll need a bag of some sort. After years of resisting the mysterious lure of the Carradice saddlebag, I finally relented and I'm very glad I did. I went the whole hog and bought a Camper Longflap, complete with Bagman Support fixing system. It kept my stuff safe and dry despite the downpours and I didn't really notice it was there.



*It will be dark; you will get cold and maybe wet; there will be punctures. The key to a happy overnight ride is being prepared for all of these factors.*