

The Fridays' London-Paris-London Tour

June 2023

The Report

After the success of the Edinburgh to London Challenge Tour in 2022, we chose another iconic tour for 2023: London to Paris. And back again. A ride that would be a challenge and an achievement. But it had to be fun too.

The tour took the form of an overnight ride from London to Newhaven (in the best Fridays tradition) and then a ferry to Dieppe. From there we took a circular route around Northern France, including a tour of Paris, with rides of around 80 miles a day.

Almost 50 riders participated in the London to Newhaven leg, with 27 of those going on to France for the tour. Some were seasoned tourists, others had never done a multi-day tour before. All were up for it.

Days one and two - London to Dieppe [Ross Chestney]

The view from the back.

I'd done tours before, but always in a small group. So I was a little apprehensive when I rolled in to Fridays Central by the National Theatre for what would be my first large group tour. I had been assigned the role of Tail End Charlie / All-Upper for this first leg. I'd been TEC and all-upper on many rides, but not one where we had to get to our destination in time as the Saturday morning ferry would leave with or without us.



To give us plenty of time, ride leader Tim decided we should leave an hour earlier than usual, and around 50 cyclists assembled amongst the lively South Bank crowd ready for the start at 11pm. The theatres were kicking out, the bars were getting rowdy, and amongst all this was a group of cyclists about to embark on a fabulous adventure.

Our exit from London was 'interesting' and had us mixing with traffic on some busy roads. But this was good preparation for the day in Paris that was to come. And soon enough we were rolling along quieter lanes, heading ever southwards. We scrambled round the roadworks at Coulsden and climbed the wonderful Farthing Downs from where

we could see the blinking lights of London behind us in the far distance. We were truly on our way. Refreshments at half way were provided by the always accommodating Burtstow scouts, and we arrived there easily on schedule and with no mechanical delays - it really was an easy night at the back.

The excitement was building.

Had I packed my passport? What if I'd messed up my hotel bookings? These were the kind of doubts that crept in during the wee small hours. And others had doubts too. I spoke to a tourist about the hills - would they be too much? How about finding places to eat? Northern France can be quiet, with few places open unless you know where to look.

As often happens during the second half of a night ride, people were lost in their own thoughts and enjoying the peace and zen-like experience of overnight riding. Up and over Turner's Hill barely breaking a sweat; and down through the beautiful Sussex countryside, becoming aware the sky was brightening. And all of a sudden, the sun came over the horizon. A flaming orange ball heralding the end of our riding in the dark. This lifted our spirits and after re-group in Lindfield we were on the final dash through Lewes and onto Newhaven where our ship awaited.

Breakfast was provided by The Drove Brewers Fayre close to the docks. Full English for most (our last until we boarded the ferry from Calais the following weekend), but no beer - we'd have to wait until we boarded for that.



And then we were on our way. Most tourists tried to get some sleep on the ferry, but not many succeeded. A doze was the best any of us got.

We disembarked on time, rolled along to central Dieppe and on to our hotels. An early dinner on the bustling quayside was definitely on the cards. And not a late night as the adventure had truly begun and an early start meant some well-earned sleep was needed.



We were on our way.

64 miles so far.

Day three - Dieppe to Evreux [Ross Chestney]

The ride leader's view.

Although we'd ridden overnight from London, for many, today felt like the proper start to the tour. We were in France. We'd be riding on French roads. We were *properly* on our way.

There was an entertaining start to the day when we exchanged lively banter with some local revellers waiting for the first train home after a night in Dieppe's hot night spots. But before long we were pedalling and any thoughts of an easy day were dispelled as we made our way out of town up a long and testing climb. At the top of the hill we collected a handful of riders who had stayed out of town and hadn't fancied rolling down to meet us at the railway station. The first of several Di2 fettling breaks on the tour took place outside the local Decathlon. Over the coming days we were to make extensive use of that ubiquitous French sports store - and very handy they were too.



On we pedalled, starting to get to know each other, beginning new friendships, renewing those made on previous Fridays tours.

We knew from experience that finding suitable stops for a group of nearly 30 cyclists in rural France could be challenging. And today was no exception, especially as we had to make major changes to the route just a day or two before we departed when we discovered that all ferry crossings were suspended downstream of Rouen, and most bridges closed too to allow for a tall ships festival. It left us no alternative but to negotiate the busy centre of town on sporadic cycling infrastructure.

The new route took us up the pretty valley of the Scie river, gently climbing as we went. We spotted buzzards soaring along the escarpment, almost as carefree as a Fridays cyclist on tour. A re-group in Val-de-Scie allowed those with a nose for coffee to track some down in a local tabac whilst we waiting for the tail end to catch up. The rain was beginning to threaten - a taster of what was to come - but wasn't yet troublesome. Re-caffienated we pedalled onwards using quiet roads and before long we found ourselves in the medieval village of Clères with its ancient market hall, and a convenient supermarket and boulangerie/pâtisserie. Cakes were bought and eagerly devoured. Some of us came to love boulangerie and pâtisserie on this tour.

A couple of testing climbs were tackled giving us all the opportunity to assess how hard we were going to have to work before we arrived back in London and answer the question “would I have the legs?” It was the ‘challenge’ tour after all!

McDonalds was a necessary evil in our negotiation of Rouen and before we knew it we were on the other side, speeding through a more industrial landscape and tackling another challenging climb. The peloton was quietening as we steadily ticked off the miles with the spectre of dark clouds ahead heralding the thunderstorms which we were expecting.

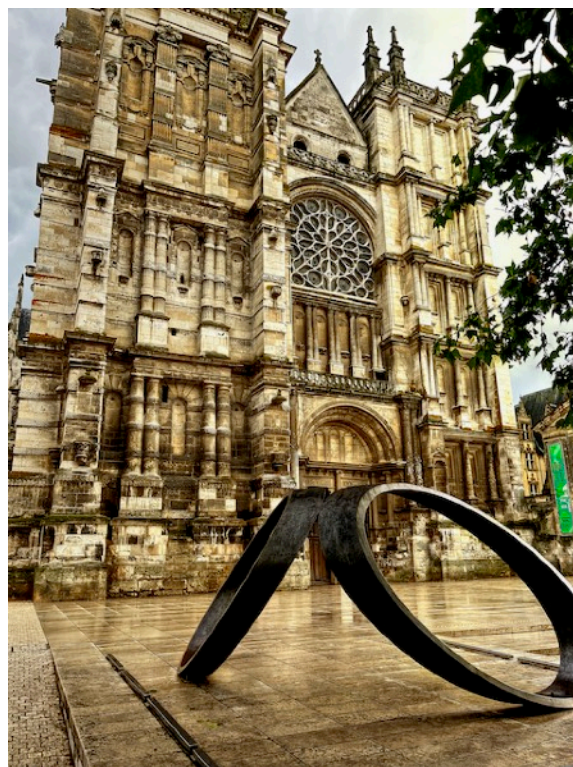


And then it hit us. Torrential rain, dark as night and, of course, no shelter. We splintered into small groups. Hi-viz donned, lights illuminated, we shifted up a gear and pushed as hard as we could. The front group found a couple of bus shelters, another group sheltered under the branches of a small wood. But spare a thought for the way markers - Titus in particular stoically put his hood up and stood on an exposed junction with no shelter. Thank you!

But as always, the storm passed. We were damp. Wet even. But our spirits were high and we were close to our final destination of Evreux where warm and dry hotels awaited and a

proper meal could be had. And beer.

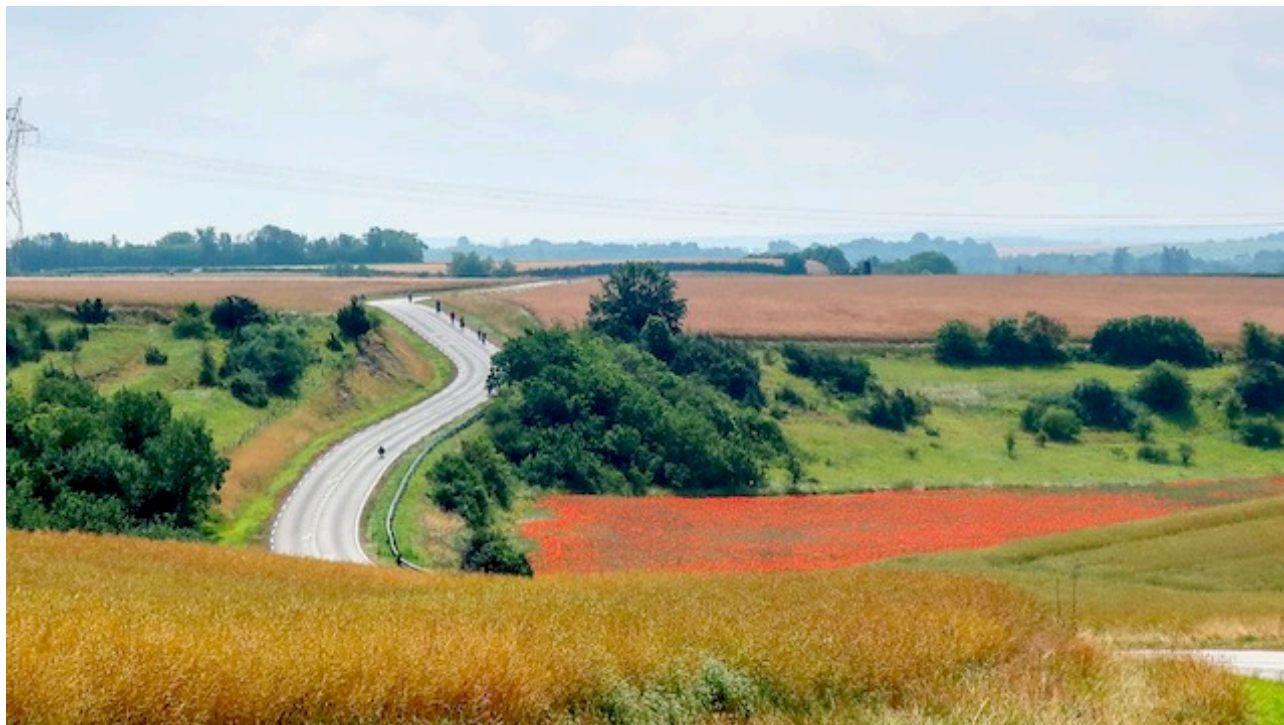
And then we were there. Rolling up to the cathedral, still a little damp, but knowing that one of the tough days had been conquered and we were already half way to Paris.



142 miles so far.

Day four - Evreux to Versailles [Rosemary Scott]

The view from the grupetto.



Many things may have happened on the road ahead of me, but most had been resolved before I got there. We started the day by being banned from carrying off spare baguettes from breakfast at the hotel.

After yesterday's tempest the weather was kinder - warm and dry with light winds. There were also fewer huge hills. Leaving from the cathedral we wove out of town and up onto a higher plateau sown with wheat and barley, (and poppies!). A rolling road of 20 miles took us by a quick descent down to Ivry la Bataille, where the hyper-market fulfilled our needs for elevenes and rehydration. At Oulins my device expired so after 22 miles all distances are approximate. Lunch was at Houdan (Houdini's little brother?), a cute little old town centre with refuelling places for all tastes - bistro, café, boulangerie, park benches. There was some grateful shade at 'Ferme duChamps', a walled garden, where we rested before departure.



The road went through lush forests up and down and up hills, with notices to avoid deer leaping out of the woods. There was an unscheduled stop at Montfort-l'Amaury, a puncture that required mending by committee. The town square was a pleasant spot, but when it rained a little the smooth limestone cobbles became lethal. We stumbled down steep alleys pushing our bikes until we rediscovered tarmac. This was the only shower of the day.

I note that the best place name today was Cheval Mort (dead horse), a straight road from Amaury. There was a brief stretch of horrible main road, lined by pretty poplars but too narrow for bikes and lorries to share. A sharp sprint took us back into the lanes, until the last stretch of woodland into the outskirts of the Paris sprawl. Tim was heard to remark that this stretch was somewhere

on PBP, a ride 10 times the length of ours. St Quentin les Yvelines got a notice several miles before the actual suburb was reached, through a maze of rush hour traffic and sketchy bike-lanes. We rolled to a halt, via an inconvenient barrier, at the town museum which was in a shopping mall. The Paris velodrome was nearby, which many of the team visited while others went to look for hotels, beer and dinner.

199 miles so far.



Day five - Around and about in Paris [Bob Colover]

The view from a recumbent.

After one hardish night and two full days riding we got to Versailles for a well earned two day respite. Washing was done and we had a relaxed evening meal, knowing that we had a civilised 9am start for our 'if this is Tuesday it must be Paris' tour. Twenty of the tourists had a day's sightseeing in the French capital. And did we pack it in! Although 'only' around 40 miles with 2,400 ft of climbing, the climb back up from the city centre in the late afternoon was one of the hardest. We had good sunny weather just a degree or two less than uncomfortably hot.



We gathered near the town and headed into the grounds of Versailles, and kept a respectable distance from the palace itself. The vistas we had were reminiscent of views across Windsor Great Park. A short climb up to the front entrance, glimpsed through railings and hoardings and surrounded by many eager tourists. We wound our way through the outer suburbs to an amazing view point near St Cloud, where we had the obligatory coffee stop and had the whole of Paris spread out before us as we looked to the east. Unlike London or New York, skyscrapers are absent from the skyline, which is completely and uniquely dominated by the Eiffel Tower. We made our way down a steep hairpin bend descent and then over the Seine to the Bois de Boulogne. There we were rewarded by being given the first of the short explanations that Tim requested, carefully researched by 'volunteered' participants, so that we would be both educated and entertained at our various stops on the way.



Past Longchamps racecourse and on to the Arc de Triomphe, sensibly avoiding actually riding around it. Then down the Champs Elysee amongst heavy traffic, and across the Place de la Concorde safely. Parallel to the Tuileries to see the Louvre and then approaching Notre Dame, still being restored after the fire of 2019. Along the Rive Gauche to the Eiffel Tower and up to the Palais de Chaillot/ Fountain of Warsaw for the obligatory backdrop shots in brilliant sunshine. Some even elevating their bikes overhead in the time honoured manner of those victorious in bike achievement. Tim took a few group shots and attracted the sympathy and technical expertise of a passing professional photographer who took pity on him as he struggled with advanced self-timer technology.



A tale of two halves from then on. The sightseeing over, we sought out refreshment, some with more success than others. All fed and watered, some trained it home and others tackled the very steep slope back up the ridge we had descended from in the morning.

A whistle stop tour of the famous sights, with interesting Wikipedia based snippets to complement the exercise. All major sightseeing boxes ticked and time to get back and prepare for the next three longest days of the challenge, in miles and weather!

Many thanks to our intrepid leader and all our educators for a great day out.

237 miles so far.

Day six - Versailles to Compiègne [Gordon Parker]

The view from our most senior tourist.

A beautiful blue sky welcomed us back to the journey. Everyone met promptly at 8 o'clock and the group from the Velodrome met the St Cyr l'Ecole people at a lovely supermarket with a boulangerie round the corner.... The peloton was fizzing with excitement at the prospect of being back on the road after the city break!



Provisioned, we headed into the suburban Parisian rush hour: some twisty descents and a cycle path alongside a busy road, then through the Parc de Versailles, over a lump on narrow back streets. More cycle paths by commuter traffic led us after eight miles to the first of several crossings of the Seine, which we followed – mostly off-road – for 7 miles, dodging gravelly potholes, dog walkers, joggers and pedestrians.

Another Seine bridge and into a forest: a feature of the day was the extremely wide range of off-road paths that we encountered. From cycle lanes next to busy roads, separated or not, to smooth tarmac and some sketchy tracks, narrow rough gravel, all were

navigated but they tested us in the heat and humidity.

Between the first two bridges a serious mechanical (loss of front brake!!) led to Titus leading Harsh, Ash and Eddie to a bike shop which sorted it out rapidly. They rejoined the peloton when it stopped for refreshments at the Conflans-Sainte-Honorine McDonalds: Ash was delighted with the service he had received and he and Harsh glowed from the chase in a small group. But 23 taxing miles had taken 3 1/2 hours, it was gone noon and we had to move on.....



The day turned warmer. By the time we reached the next stop – taking on supplies at a gargantuan Carrefour supermarket at L'Isle Adam – it was a tired peloton, and the next 8 miles to a lovely picnic spot by the river Oise seemed interminable. But we made it! And three of our number (from the upper, middle and lower age range of the group) jumped in the river for a swim. We left there at 3.45pm with over 30 miles still to ride along the Oise valley – no hills but undulating with some busy roads and fast traffic, at least until the very last few miles alongside the river.

Before long and after a few more miles the decision was taken to send an advance party of faster riders to complete the ride and allow the others to enjoy a more leisurely ascent into Arras. The leading group formed a tight chain gang for the rest of the ride, stopping to enjoy France's finest

fresh strawberries from a farm gate vending machine before riding into Compiègne and finding a quiet back street bar to rehydrate.

A slow and steady group of five followed and eventually a third and fourth group reached Compiègne some time after 7pm, weary and glad to be there – some despite, others because there was a loud musical street festival but I think only a few had energy to really get into the swing of it!

316 miles so far.

Day seven - Compiègne to Arras [John Malamatenios]

The view from a regular Fridays rider

Today was a ride of two halves, in many ways. The morning presented us with heavy rain, which gave way to a dry and pleasant afternoon.

Our start point was the gothic 9th century Église St Jacques in Compiègne where the group sheltered from the rain under the cover of square trimmed trees. Shortly after 8 o'clock, news arrived of the day's first puncture and the sad decision by the rider to abort the day's ride and meet the team at the finish point.



At Vandelcourt, the first hill (450 ft, 2 miles) was despatched without difficulty, and we progressed a further 20 miles through the rain until we reached the town of Nesle where we took food and shelter at a supermarket. A beer might have been involved – no names! At this point, looking like we had been put through the car wash, some riders took the wise decision to continue the journey to Arras by train, changing at Amiens so that they could dry out, warm up and arrive at Arras and enjoy some much-needed rest and recreation.

The rest of us pressed on by bike and after a while the rain stopped and the temperature improved. At mile 47, we reached Péronne, where most of us gazed in awe at the splendour of the 9th century Chateau de Péronne and one of us fuffed with a tubeless puncture.

This was the end of the flattest section of the ride. From there we rolled on through a succession of small towns before we rolled into the grand squares of Arras where we were given a warm welcome and cold pint by those who had made it to the town by train earlier in the day. Much appreciated it was too!

In all, it was a challenging but wonderful day of 80 miles and 3,250 feet of climbing. It was Jim's first opportunity to lead a ride, which he did in great style. He only let us down by not cleaning our bikes, which looked like they had been sprayed with cement when we rolled into Arras.

395 miles so far.



Day eight - Arras to Calais [Ross Chestney]

The view from the peloton.

We could almost smell the sea when we assembled bright and early outside the town hall in Arras. For some this was going to be the last leg, but all of us we knew we'd met the challenge laid down by the tour. Today was going to be an easier day - just 77 miles and very little climbing. And what climbing there was would be early in the day, and far gentler than some of the hills we'd encountered so far.

We rolled out. Spirits were high on the back of excellent rehydration and sustenance in one of the magnificent main squares of central Arras the previous evening.

We were heading upwards to Vimy Ridge, and as we pedalled the gentle slopes that would take us to the top, the mood sobered and we each got a sense of the tragedy of war. We could make out the grassed-over shadows of WW1 trenches and bomb craters in amongst the beautiful trees. Trees that eventually opened out to reveal the magnificent and deeply moving Canadian War memorial situated in a commanding position overlooking the slag heaps of industrial northern France in the far distance. We paused and reflected. It was truly moving.



We rolled down the hill, skirting Lens, heading north west to Saint Omer where a boulangerie beckoned for our lunch stop. Not far to Calais from here. Our last boulangerie.

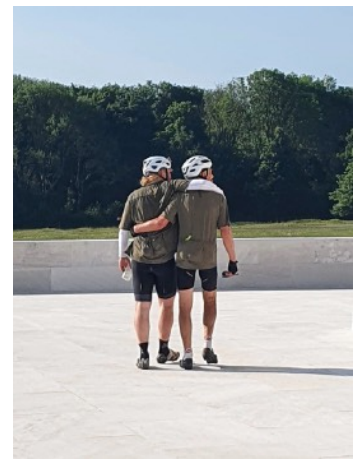


We rolled on over the gentle hills and wide open fields, passing giant wind turbines, and through tiny villages with barely a soul around. And finally we were on the canal paths. Mile after mile of traffic and hill free tracks taking us to Calais and our ferry back to Blighty. Some of the canal path surfaces were less than perfect, and mile after mile of bland scenery can bring its own challenges, but tired legs appreciated the easy riding.

Then we saw it - you couldn't miss it really. The Calais light house. Our final destination for the day.

After a wash and brush up, it was time to celebrate. We headed to Restaurant La Buissonnière on the edge of town clad in the best non-cycling gear we could muster. Alcohol was taken, excellent food was consumed and the atmosphere was the kind that can only be inspired amongst a group who had bonded on a proper challenge. We'd all had our difficult moments on the tour, we'd all had doubts, but we were each and every one bolstered by the new friendships we'd made and memories that would stay with us forever. And we'd come through it. Together.

There were speeches, prizes, jokes and much laughter. Then it was done. We were sobered by the thought of a ridiculously early start the next morning - even those that stopped at a local bar on their way back to the hotel decided that a 'late one' would not be a good idea.



477 miles so far.

Day nine - Calais to London [Ross Chestney]

The view from the front.

London-Paris-London. By bicycle. The final day, and the hilliest of the tour so far. I was designated the leader for this ride. Probably because much of the route was on Kent lanes I'm familiar with and indeed the final few miles was my old cycle commute route in The City. I knew every pothole. The downside was that the route went just a mile from my front door and I thought I might be tempted with 12 miles to go to head home. I needn't have worried - I was enjoying the ride so much that those doubts drifted away and I knew I'd be doing the full 'there and back again'.

A super early start and we were soon shivering in the queue for the ferry in Calais. On the ferry most napped, some quaffed a Full English, but generally the mood was subdued as we prepared for the end of our adventure. A few had already decided to jump on a train in Dover, others were playing it by ear and probably heading for Ashford and the fast trains to London. I'd been there myself - on previous tours, getting off the ferry very much felt like the end of the journey.

Then those that were riding to London were off and pedalling with renewed vigour and the camaraderie came flooding back. A couple of brutal climbs out of Dover were followed by the rolling Kent lanes and some stunning views.

Half a dozen or so of our number decided to divert to Ashford just before the peloton's quick pit stop for ice cream in Wye, alongside quite a few other cyclists - some with proper bikes, some with dirty mountain bikes. Refreshed, we rolled on in ever increasing temperatures.



Although I was leading I felt the strength of the peloton behind me increasing. That's what eight days of cycling does - you get stronger, climbing faster than you thought possible just a week previously, and more confident riding efficiently in a group.

Lunch in the pub in West Malling gave us some respite (and rehydration) before we tackled the main event - Wrotham Hill. It was now scorchingly hot, but nobody complained as we spun and ground our way to the top.

Our reward was the fabulous run along the ridge and the fast descent past Brands Hatch motor racing circuit. Personal speed records were broken by some.

From there, the end was in sight - London's skyline came into view almost exactly a week after we'd left it. I felt a bristle of pride in having ridden to Paris, and then back again. We still had to wrestle with the drivers of urban South East London, but we were cheerful as we stopped in Greenwich Park to admire the view and we knew that from here, one of the new cycle superhighways would take us directly to our final destination.

And then late afternoon we rolled into the shadow of Tower Bridge and it was all over. A dozen hot, tired and happy cyclists had completed the toughest day of the tour.



560 miles in total.

It was epic.

Thanks to all those who contributed words and pictures to this report. And thanks to all the tour riders for your good humour and company on the road. Here's to 2024!

