

"Pain is our friend"

Highlights of London-Edinburgh-London 2013

Phil Hodgson

It was hard to imagine cycling 1440 kilometres, more or less non-stop, with a few hours' sleep here and there. Although Richard and myself had ridden a few 300km and 600km Audax events, the leap to 1000-plus kilometres was optimistic to say the least. Our friends referred to us as The Mad Badgers for even considering it. A Land's End-John O'Groats trip earlier in the year had covered a similar distance but over a much more leisurely 11 days. It was with some trepidation that we drove down to London on a sunny Saturday afternoon. Registration at Loughton, the event HQ, on the outskirts of London was quick and easy and, having opted for the additional 30 kilometre Prologue departing from Buckingham Palace at 6am on Sunday, we left the camper van in Epping and cycled into central London. The Travelodge in Bethnal Green was easy to find—once we'd found Bethnal Green. We eventually unravelled the urban maze, after an unplanned tour of the Olympic Park, and booked in. "I'll set the alarm for 04:45," I told Richard, "that'll give us plenty of time to get to Pall Mall."

"What time is it?" I groggily asked Richard when he shook me awake. "Quarter past five," he replied. "What happened to the alarm?" I checked my watch. "Oh bugger." I'd set it for 5:45 by mistake. We wolfed down some instant porridge, quickly packed our scant baggage and headed into the City with only a vague idea of the whereabouts of Pall Mall. Our plan was to find the river and follow it but spotting a river in a landscape obscured by soaring skyscrapers proved more difficult than anticipated. Everyone we asked was a tourist. "Pell Mill?" they'd reply blankly with a shake of the head. At last we spotted a London cabbie. I politely knocked on the window and asked directions. "Straight on mate," he told us, "you can't miss it."

It was after 6am and we thought we'd missed the start of the Prologue. Our planned leisurely introduction to the LEL saw us hammering through the streets of London avoiding the numerous drunks wandering in the road. "I can see Pall Mall," Richard shouted. Even better we could see the hordes of cyclists still penned up behind a big LEL banner. Fortunately for us

the planned road closure of Pall Mall hadn't happened and it had taken organiser, Daniel Webb, an extra 15 minutes to grab a London bobby and sort it. Phew! We posed for the mass photograph – 250 of the 1000 riders in the LEL had opted to do the Prologue; a tour of the sights of London by bicycle. Daniel shouted "Go", and the peleton cruised off down Pall Mall. It was the start of an epic four and a half day adventure to Edinburgh and back. The Mad Badgers, N46 and N47, were off!

We were set off in groups, the mini-peletons soon fragmenting as the surge of adrenalin kicked in and those in boy/girl race mode pedalled off as if on a 25 kilometre time trial. We soon hooked up with three other riders and stuck together for the next two days. We rode the relatively flat (compared to Yorkshire) route at a pace we'd rarely achieve on a short Thursday ride. As there were riders from 34 different countries we rehearsed "hello" in umpteen languages: "bonjour", "hola", "ciao", "guten morgen", "grüss Gott", "g'day mate", "namaste", "owdo"... and marvelled



Phil Hodgson and Richard Leonard ride the prologue

at the variety of bikes being ridden. Carbon racers, steel and titanium tourers, sportive bikes, recumbents, bullet bikes, tandems, Moultons, and ElliptiGOs (these are like running machines on wheels?). It was sunny and warm, we had a tailwind, good company and fresh legs, and we got fed and watered every 60–80km at the school based checkpoints. Marvellous. The miles flew by.

The weather was kind (we suffered only two hours of rain on the whole ride) and the landscape varied as we traversed the flat fens of East Anglia, the rolling Lincolnshire and Yorkshire Wolds, the

Teesdale and upper Cumbrian moorland, and the Southern uplands of Scotland... and then reversed it. We rode through some stunning scenery. I particularly remember the long ascents and never-ending downhill of the Devil's Breeftub and Yad Moss at dawn; the meandering lanes through Traquair and Eskdalemuir; the straight, panflat roads across the Holland fens battling a headwind on the way south; and the sun-gold wheatfields south of Cambridge stretching horizon to horizon. The route stuck mainly to quiet country lanes and small villages, rarely passing through the larger towns. Unfortunately many of the roads were potholed and pockmarked causing painful bruising to our palms as the days progressed. And as for the nether regions, one of the most enduring memories of the ride will be pain. Painful palms, painful quads, stiff shoulders and very painful backside. Shifting on the saddle every few minutes kept it at bay... just.

Unlike many of the other riders we suffered no punctures or mechanicals (other than a broken bottle cage). The mechanics at each checkpoint were kept busy, mainly repairing wheels. Our main malfunctions related to GPS. Mine frustratingly switched itself off every time I hit a bump and I heard Richard on several occasions threatening to throw his GPS in the gutter "if it didn't stop f'ing bleeping" (water in the connection). The team of volunteers at each stop were unfailingly cheerful and helpful and the food was great; usually a choice of three or four main courses, a pudding, drinks and a variety of snack foods. As we ate at least a three course meal every four to six hours Richard actually put weight on! Most checkpoints provided an air mattress and blanket if you needed a sleep. The downside was the 'bedroom' was usually a sports hall full of sleeping riders—a snoring and farting fest. Imagine the sounds from a pig farm after they've had a good feed and the sun's gone down... and treble it. On four occasions, after eating and showering, we grabbed three or four hours fitful kip, with the occasional half an hour power nap thrown in. Life was seen through reddened, sleep-deprived eyes. Despite the farmyard noise it often took several minutes to rouse Richard from his dreams of padded seats



and perpetual downhills.

As the days progressed and the novelty waned, sore quads kicked in, and our backsides became even more bruised and tender, life became a wheeled treadmill. The LEL mantra: Ride, Ride, Ride-Eat, Sleep, Eat-Ride, Ride, Ride. Our focus was on reaching the next checkpoint. Our mental arithmetic, calculating how many hours it would take for the next 70 or so kilometres to food and a brief rest, was invariably optimistic. After four hours or so I'd be thinking, "we must be nearly there", but uncannily, when consulted, Richard's GPS would always show 15–25 kilometres to go. These were hard won miles (we're of the age where we always convert to the old fashioned measure). Perseverance was the name of the game; just dig in, head down and keep pedalling, even more so north of the Humber when

Richard Leonard in the wheat-fields south of Cambridge



the hills gradually got bigger and longer. Interestingly, the "hills" south of the Humber seemed much bigger and longer heading south, particularly in the dark! The often monotonous tempo required Dextrosol and Kendal Mint Cake sugar hits to stop us nodding off on the bike. We nearly did at times. The hundreds of baby frogs on the wet road near Hull after a sudden downpour were real enough but I remember hallucinating a sign showing a steep downhill ahead after we seemed to have been climbing in the dark for miles. Needless to say I'd dreamed it, and the road continued relentlessly upwards.



Yad Moss on LEL photo by Ivo Miesen

"Another painful mile and a half in stockinged-feet saw me reunited with my shoes."

Disaster nearly struck at St Ives with only 120 kilometres left. Someone took my shoes! Easily done, as everyone was just kicking them off at the entrances to the schools. What to do? There didn't seem to be a

matching pair left by anyone else. "There's a bike shop in town," one of the volunteers informed me. I rang them and confirmed that they had shoes in my size and cleats to match my peals. Having to cycle the mile and a half in my red spotted King of the Mountain socks was a little embarrassing and attracted not a few comments. Arriving at the shop I walked through the door to be told, "they've just rung up, someone's handed your shoes back." Bugger! Another painful mile and a half in stockinged feet saw me reunited with my shoes.

The temperature on the last day was 34 degrees. Black cycling shoes seemed to amplify the heat and our toes were on fire. At one point we were desperate to see someone watering their lawn. "Can you point that at our feet?" we were going to say. No such luck. We had to buy bottled water and pour it over our feet. We were glad to see the sun setting before we reached the last checkpoint. Forty-five kilometres to go. It's amazing how you can feel stronger at the end of an epic endurance event than half way through it. The mind is a powerful ally. From being deadbeat as we'd battled the gratuitous hills of the penultimate leg, we set off for the finish like we were chasing a PB in a road race. We beasted the hills and swooped down dark lanes, heart rates boosted by the adrenalin rush of completing the most awesome ride of our lives. We reached event HQ just after midnight, exhilarated and exhausted; the Mad Badgers had done it. We were LELers.

So, was the pain worth it? Course it was. Will we do it again? Definitely. I remember agreeing with Richard, "Pain is our friend". We can't wait for more—bring on Paris-Brest-Paris in 2015. Bring on the pain. ●



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