

MR FOX RIDES TO PARIS



THE STORY OF TWO CYCLISTS RIDING FROM LONDON TO PARIS TO
RAISE FUNDS FOR THE BRITISH LEGION

SEPTEMBER 1ST TO THE 4TH 2011

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Having done the ride once before in 2004, it is a memory that stays with you and each September I have always thought about the riders doing the Pedal to Paris. Work commitments have meant that I was unable to do the ride again but last September was different, I had retired. I was free to ride whenever I wanted, so when the entry form dropped through the letterbox, how could I resist. I duly sent my cheque and whilst it would be good to do the ride with someone else I kept thinking how can you be lonely with 300 other cyclists for company. Even Billy no mates could find someone to talk to on the ride so there was hope for me yet.

Early in 2011 John Spencer asked me about the ride during a club outing and we discussed it some more during the cafe stop, he seemed very interested. Two weeks later and he had entered, the Garstang 1 had become the Garstang 2! Now it was time to start the training which is where I became a little bit nervous. Having cycled with John on numerous occasions I knew he was faster than me and whilst he was nervous about the ride and doing just under 300 miles in 4 days, I was worried about keeping up. Friday was chosen as our training day as it was John's day off and it would allow me Monday to Thursday to try and get up to speed without John knowing. After the first ride it became apparent that whilst John was faster on the flat I had a slight advantage on the hills although as John remarked he was a champion plummeter. I would have to choose training routes that included hills. When we first started training September seemed a long way off and before then we had holidays, club rides, training rides more than enough time to prepare. Time went by and we both seemed to be getting fitter although on some rides this didn't always seem to be the case as was evident by the collapsed state when I returned home. John went on his annual holiday and on return found it hard to get back to the level of fitness he had prior to his two week break, it gave me a small window of opportunity to feel good. It was a small window though because before long John was back up to full speed and all I could do some days was hang on for grim death. Sponsorship had started to roll in and we were both taken by surprise at people's generosity but then the Royal British Legion is a charity that is close to many hearts.

Now it was my turn for a break, off to South Africa but luckily I had discovered a web-site called cycle the Cape, what a good idea I thought, give me a bit of training whilst I was away. Cycling the Cape was a great experience and after approximately 80 miles and some hard hill climbing confidence was on the increase. At least it was until I got home as for some strange reason I started to worry about completing the ride and enjoying it. Luckily I had a good training partner who soon put me back on the right road so to speak. A couple of hard training rides and especially the one that took us round Pendle and up a hill that had my heart rate reaching a maximum I had never seen before meant the legs were getting better but the jury was out on the heart rate, perhaps John was only bluffing about hills. Just to make matters more interesting John then informed me that the Saturday before our big ride he was leading the club on the 100 mile challenge. What are friends for I thought, what excuse could I come up with, should I cry off, no chance, if John was doing it so was I. Knowing 100 miles is a long way on just a scone and a cup of tea I decided that at the cafe stop I would order something else, it would after all be good training for France as man

cannot live on a scone alone or even the odd baguette. Friendship however was stretched when my order of beans on toast had not arrived and everyone else was now ready to depart. Words of encouragement from John such as talk less and eat faster did nothing for my digestion and whilst the others in the group had had time to digest and enjoy what they had it was time to saddle up and hit the road whilst the last baked bean was being swallowed. During the ride John in our many discussions informed me that he was partial to a bed time story and would appreciate hearing the tales of Mr Fox if I could oblige, sometimes you can take friendship that little bit too far. Back home after 102 miles I felt confident about the forthcoming ride but I wasn't sure I was up to bedtime stories, John would just have to learn that in life there are sometimes disappointments.

Bike cleaned and oiled on the Monday it was now time to pack my things ready for the train journey to London on the Wednesday. How to get from Euston to Greenwich with bike had elicited a number of responses via the Legion website on facebook, however the overwhelming majority suggested going by taxi. John and Margaret had kindly taken my bag and we had agreed to meet on Wednesday night and share a meal so it was now just a case of wait, sit back and relax.

DAY -1

What previously had seemed a long way off was now upon us, the day before the ride, all the training, planning, money raising and here we were almost ready for the off. The day before the ride was just a day to get to London. The train ticket had been kindly supplied by Virgin trains, my seat had been booked, and I had the label for the bike so it was just a case of let the train take the strain. Alice, Anna and Emily waved good-bye at the station which left me sat on a the train knowing I would miss them even if it was only for a short time, but time spent alone thinking is sometimes not the best way to spend a day. Arriving at Euston I now faced the problem getting to Greenwich. Looking at the traffic cycling was not an option and with my sense of direction in London I could have spent hours trying to find my way. Catching the train overland was out as I had arrived after 4 and bikes were not allowed during peak time so it was back to my only plan, catch a taxi. Cab hailed, bike loaded I was on my way but as I watched the meter whizz round faster than the taxi's wheels I started to regret my decision, the snag was I didn't have a plan B, never mind I thought if things get too desperate I will just ask him to stop and I'll walk. Thankfully we were now in Greenwich and whilst the damages were severe I didn't have to resort to walking even though we did have to go round the one way system just to bump up the charges.

I arrived at the Hotel at 5.45 and the bike was stored along with others in a secure storage area behind reception, at least I hoped it was secure. A quick phone call to the Spencers who were just boarding a train for Greenwich so I decided to walk to the station and meet them. If I had thought about it I would have arranged to meet them at the Hotel, that way I wouldn't have had to carry my own bag but hey that's just the sort of thoughtful person I am. Bag safely locked away in the room we decided to walk the short distance to Greenwich Park to see where it would all start tomorrow. Pizza Express was the chosen place to eat and despite all the advice you read about loading up on pasta we choose the sensible option and went for pizza. Talk over dinner was all about tomorrows ride and how back in the spring September had seemed such a date in the distance and now here we were less than 12 hours to the start. Walking back to the hotel I realised I had not brought any reading material, imagine my surprise when my training partner who it would appear tries to cater for everyone's needs, his own included had very kindly sneaked a copy of Mr Fox into my bag, now I was worried. Kit sorted for tomorrow, alarm set for 6.00am for what was going to be a series of early starts for the next 4 days. A cyclist's life is not an easy one.

DAY 1

The alarm rang at 6 o'clock, dressed in my new pedal to Paris cycling top it was down to reception to see a number of others dressed in exactly the same way, perhaps they were heading in my direction. The secure storage had proved to be exactly that as my bike was still there, so bike plus bag it was now just a short walk to Greenwich Park. Whilst it was a short walk to the park it was a hard slog up to General Wolfe's statue. He may have the best view of London from high ground but pushing a bike whilst carrying a bag and walking up hill is not ideal training prior to a ride to Dover. Finally I was at the start area along with a few hundred others. Registration was swift as they had split the desks by initials and thankfully there weren't many with initials R – Z. Having registered and delivered my bag to the back of the wagon it was now just a case of waiting for John to arrive and soak up the atmosphere. John and Margaret arrived and like me John had realised it was a long walk from the park gate to good old General Wolfe, next time go for a statue nearer the gates! Whilst making final preparations, pinning on numbers, filling water bottles and feeling a little nervous John's son David arrived. Margaret in the mean time had been talking to a young lady who was doing the ride for the first time and on her own, it transpired that she was Laura Wright formerly of All Angels and now on a solo career with her current album at No1 in the classical charts.

With a little time to spare we could all enjoy the views over London on what was a fabulous morning weather wise, sun and perfect visibility. Pictures taken it was now time to line up for the final words of greeting and messages of good luck. Outriders in place, the clock striking 8 it was time for the off which is precisely what happened to a man not far from us, climbed on his bike and promptly fell off, a feat he managed to repeat a little further into the ride. Must make a mental note not to ride alongside him just in case he goes for a hat-trick.

The journey out of London was slow being escorted all the way to the roundabout for the M25, whilst it was slow it was a good feeling seeing all the traffic pulled over at the other side of the road, reminds you of the tortoise and the hare. By now the sun was shining and the temperature was rising, good job I had brought sun tan cream, just a shame it was in my bag on a wagon heading for Calais. Twenty three miles into the ride and the first casualty, a rider had been knocked off his bike by a car's wing mirror. We found out later that he had broken his collar bone so sadly that was the end of his ride. First stop of the day at Aylesford for a welcome cup of tea and bite to eat having not had breakfast in the hotel. Refreshed after the short break it was back on the road for the ride to Sellindge where we were scheduled to have lunch. It was on this stretch of road that the unthinkable had happened, poor Mr Fox was there at the side of the road, a victim of road kill. John and I almost in unison said poor Mr Fox, he is no more. This brought some looks of bewilderment from adjacent riders who were obviously not fans of Mr Fox and other stories.

The lunch stop at Sellindge allowed us to soak up the sun whilst eating a ham and cheese baguette, cup of tea and the first of many bakewell tarts supplied by none other than Mr Kipling, not sure how exceedingly good they were but I needed the bit of sugar from the icing. All the talk at the lunch stop was about the forthcoming hill at Capel le Ferne just

outside Folkestone. Tactics being discussed included how soon to get off and walk, how many stops to make on the way up etc, some people are beaten before they have even started. Now back on the road and just before we approached the hill we passed 4 people who were absolute dead ringers for illegal immigrants walking along the side of the road, middle of nowhere and unsuitably dressed. Although I do not work for immigration and may not have been on the training course I would have picked them out at a line up for arrivals via the back of some unsuspecting wagon. Round the roundabout, up the road and the climb started, quite steep not too long but enough to make you know you had been climbing i.e. short of breath and a heart rate of 180. I was waiting at the top for John (not for long I hasten to add) as we had agreed to meet others at the pub but as he swiftly rode past I thought he had changed his mind, he hadn't, he just didn't realise that was the pub people meant. From the top it was downhill all the way to Dover but a headwind meant that you had to keep pedalling to maintain a good speed.

Arriving in Dover we were shepherded into an area reserved for the British Legion and with time to spare we decided to go for a coffee. Whilst queuing for tea and coffee we met Ted and Russell and caused panic to the lone server who innocently asked if there were any more cyclists. Just another 300 was the casual reply which seemed to tip him over the edge and test his knowledge of the English language. A pleasant chat with Ted and Russell was interrupted as it was time to return to our bikes ready to board the ferry. It was at this point that you realise the world has gone mad when a 100 plus cyclists were selected and asked to put all their belongings in a tray (not that you can carry much on a bike) to be scanned and then asked to walk through the metal detector which promptly buzzed due to the metal cleats on the cycling shoes. Once through the metal detector the farcical situation continued as the tight fitting lycra wearing cyclists were then patted down for hidden items, as if! The only thing trying to be hidden was possibly the spare tyre round the waist and you can only breathe in for a certain length of time. A short ride to the boat and we were sailing as Rod Stewart would have said, time to sit back and relax and watch the White Cliffs of Dover disappear into the background. The arrival in Calais was similar to last time in that a number of cyclists fell foul of the railway lines but thankfully the only injuries were a few bruises. A long line of cyclists arrived at Calais Town hall and with bikes safely stored in the municipal depot it was time to board the coaches for the various hotels. Forward planning meant that check in had already been completed so there was just time for a quick shower and change before heading for the Hotel Meurice for a very welcome meal. By now the time was approaching 11 o'clock and as we were due to be up and about in just under 8 hours it was back to the hotel to prepare for the next day's ride.

Reflections on the day: sunshine all the way, good company and some new acquaintances made, all in all a good day. The most telling comment came from one of the "crew" who said, well done on the day and whilst you may have a few aches, pains, bumps and bruises think of why you are riding, for people who are in a far worse state than that. Enough said.

DAY 2

An early start meant being down for breakfast before 7 o'clock as the coach was due to collect us at 7.45 but it was after eight before it arrived which meant there was just time to collect our bikes before making our way to the memorial gardens for a poignant ceremony. As we were not due to start riding until ten o'clock there was ample time to admire Calais Town Hall which was undergoing restoration work and then watch the other two groups depart. Once again the sun was shining and it had all the makings of a pleasant days ride. The whistle blew at 9.55 so it was on your bikes and 5 minutes later we were off. The start was like a champagne cork out of a bottle, we were meant to be the medium group but as we rode alongside the canal speeds were in excess of 20 mph or they were until we hit the climb. It is a nice steady climb and you can see what you are aiming for as they have very kindly located a radio mast at the top of the hill. The good thing is what goes up usually goes down and this proved to be the case as we were now into a downhill section and a welcome regrouping at about 11 miles, time to enjoy the sunshine and the French countryside. A blast on the whistle and we were off again heading for the lunch stop at Desvres. It was at this point we noticed a lady from the Calais cycling club, a number of members had joined the ride and would stay with us all the way to Paris, what I would call a club run. The lady in question was small, slightly built, of a reasonable age but could she turn those pedals, always in a big gear and always up at the front of the pack. John and I would have had her down in the C group had she joined us on a normal Saturday morning but it just proves appearances can be deceptive, we nicknamed her the pocket rocket.

We seemed to reach the lunch stop in no time at all, bikes parked it was into the hall where the priority was to take on fluid as the temperature was rising. A very tasty ham, cheese and salad bun was followed by an apple tart and the inevitable Mr Kipling bakewell slice. These had followed us from Aylesford but fingers crossed by the time we get to Paris they may have all gone. It was at this point that fingers began pointing to a gentleman whose head was firmly on the table and we all assumed asleep. After 10 minutes or so we began to wonder, could we see him breathing, what started off as being a funny sight was now becoming worrying. Thankfully one of the crew managed to wake him much to our relief but by his own admission he said he was not feeling too good, possibly a mixture of the heat and cycling.

Just after 2 and we were off again, a very pleasant ride as the pace following the morning's regrouping had become more sensible and the doubts about keeping up had disappeared. Having identified the pocket rocket we now spotted the yo-yo man, other names were used but if youngsters are reading this yo-yo man is more polite. His characteristics are: he just has to pass the group regardless of the pace always on the flat or downhill section, he has to be on the wrong side of the road so all can see him but as soon as hill appears he slips right to the back and then guess what, soon as it is flat or downhill there he goes again. It turns out he is part of the Kent Police cycling club and as he was to explain to John later in the ride "It's not that I am bored with your conversation, I just get a sudden rush of energy", pity it didn't extend to brain activity. After a short break for

refreshments it was time to re-group for a mass ride into Abbeville, 300 cyclists plus outriders and support vehicles was an impressive site and the villages along the way turned out to show their support. The children lining the pavement took great delight in trying to give high fives to as many riders as possible.

The ride to Abbeville gave me chance to talk to other riders one of whom was doing it with her partner a marine, she worked for the ministry of defence and was responsible for making arrangements for injured troops returning from Afghanistan. She was saying that for each fatality there are 10 troops returning who will need long term care due to the severity of their injuries. She said that Camp Bastion has progressed medically so much in the last 5 years that the survival rate has increased dramatically but this means the care needed is much greater which is where the British Legion are so good in many different ways. The conversation would have continued but a small group flying down the outside were brought to a sudden halt when one of the would be escapees took a tumble, no wonder the motorways get in such a mess. The centre of Abbeville was brought to a halt as we arrived and after depositing bikes we were all on coaches to Cap Hornu where once again we enjoyed an excellent evening meal.

DAY 3

On the coach at 6.50 for the journey back to Abbeville where after collecting our bikes it was a very short ride to the Cenotaph which looked resplendent decorated with the Union Jack and the French tri-colour. A band plus a number of war veterans added to the solemnity of the occasion and the singing of both National Anthems was very moving. The words of the French national anthem were printed on large banners held aloft by the Crew and everyone gave it their all. Remembrance service completed it was time to retire to the Cafe whilst we awaited the 10 o'clock whistle which would have us back on the road. The only slight snag with the cafe was the lack of toilet facilities, just one toilet between 100 plus cyclists is not a good ratio and desperation was seen on the faces of many as the start time approached, sometimes forward planning does not cover all eventualities. Riders left surrounded by a guard of honour, as the veterans from the earlier service held their flags aloft for the riders to go through. On yesterdays ride John and I had identified two domestiques, riders who are willing to ride in front all day taking the wind off the riders behind, hand out drinks bottles and then move aside near the finish. Whilst John and I did not expect them to undertake the latter two duties shielding us from the wind and maintaining a steady pace was one thing we were glad of. These two were easy to spot in Royal Navy cycling tops and whilst they may not have realised they were acting as domestiques we sort them out at every opportunity. Pity that on the last day all riders were wearing the same top.

Once again the sun was shining and as the day progressed the temperature rose so by the time of the lunch stop at Poix de Picardie the thermometer had reached 31deg, the shade of the Village Hall was very welcome. The Mayor and a number of civic dignitaries welcomed us to their town and after an exchange of gifts we were all invited to partake in a friendship glass of wine. Experience has shown that riding a bike and drinking wine do not go together so we made do with a tuna baguette, apple tart and if you wanted, yes you've guessed a Mr Kipling cake. Entry to the outside temperature was delayed as long as possible and water bottles that now contained warm water were emptied to be re-filled with slightly cooler water. After the poor summer we have had you would have thought a bit of very warm weather would have been appreciated, cyclists, always wanting different weather! Back on the road we were now heading for Auchy le Montagne across the area of the Somme. It seemed unreal that in the area we were now cycling and not so long ago thousands had lost their lives and the odd poppy which was visible at the side of the road meant that the sacrifice would not be forgotten. From about 5kms out of Auchy the villagers had been busy erecting signs at the side of the road with messages of support and welcome to our friends from the British Legion, like us they also remember the sacrifices made by so many. Once we arrived at the school in Auchy we were greeted like heroes and it seemed that the whole village of 550 had turned out to greet us. Drinks and cakes were supplied by the local village committee, a guard of honour by war veterans and again an exchange of gifts followed by renditions of the two National Anthems. During the speech we were all told that any time we wish to visit we would be made most welcome and as I remarked to John, I am sure we would. The village holds a special place in their hearts for the British Legion. It seemed no time at all before we back on the bikes and leaving Auchy after once again a very

special welcome and it seemed harsh not to spend more time there when they had gone to so much trouble, ah well there is always another year.

We were now one big group heading for Beauvais with a scheduled arrival time of 6 o'clock and despite the inconvenience we were causing to motorists who had had to pull to the side of the road they were still cheering us on our way. The scenery during the day was mostly wide open fields and not as varied as the day before, however I still felt extremely lucky to be doing something I enjoy and with a whole bunch of good people. Entry into Beauvais was going well until the man in front took a tumble and John managed to avoid the prone cyclist but only just. Like all things associated with this ride timings are done with military precision so it was no surprise that we arrived at the memorial gardens in Beauvais at 6 o'clock. The service was again attended by war veterans and civic dignitaries from Beauvais all taking place in front of a statue that overlooks the war memorial known as the Angel and the Fallen, a very fitting tribute. Medals were presented to all the veterans and the look of pride on one man's face was a joy to behold. After the service it was just a short ride to the Fire Station where there were cakes and drinks on offer courtesy of the Fire Brigade another thoughtful gesture and then it was on the coach for a short ride to the Hotel. By now the sky had turned black and was looking very threatening and sure enough thunder, lightning and torrential rain arrived. Whilst a good storm may look good from inside, it doesn't look that good when you realise that the dining room is a short walk, run or dash across the car park. It looks even worse when in panic mode because you are getting so wet you cannot locate the door, never mind it is all part of life's rich tapestry thought I after I had dried out. The evening meal was spent with a father and son from Cornwall, the father worked for the Legion in Cornwall and was responsible for spending some of the money we were in the process of raising. He went on to explain what a difference the money can make in so many different ways to so many people.

Another amazing day with countless people expressing their gratitude for something which brings me a great deal of pleasure, just riding my bike. Something that is made all the easier by the fantastic support you get from the outriders, the local police, the crew of the British Legion and the French people who make this ride so special.

DAY 4

Hard to believe but we were now on the last day, the time has passed so quickly and whilst the days have been long they have been four days with memories to treasure. Thankfully the thunderstorm of last night had cleared but it was still raining as we boarded the coach for the short journey back to the Fire Station. Leaving the hotel we seemed to be taking a different route and the dual carriageway of yesterday had been replaced by a series of narrow streets. Turning down one more narrow street we were confronted by a road closure due to a street market so now we were on an alternative, alternative route. Faced with a no entry the driver tried to turn left but due to the number of parked cars this proved to be an impossible manoeuvre. Reverse gear selected we edged cautiously back onto the street but reversing approximately 300 yards was not really an option. After careful consideration and encouraged by a large group of cyclists the driver decided to ignore the no entry and go forward. All was going well until a parked car about 20 yards from the end of the street made it impossible for the coach to pass. Reversing was impossible so a number of testosterone fuelled cyclist persuaded the driver that they could lift the car onto the pavement. Muscles having been flexed the car was now parked differently to where the driver had left it but at least the coach was now on its way. From here on in, it should be plain sailing mais non as the French would say, the Fire Station was on the left we were heading to the right. Whether the driver was flushed with success I am not sure but she had decided to head for more narrow streets, if nothing she liked a challenge. A number of turns later and we were back where we had been 10 minutes ago. By now we were wondering if this would be the first 5 day pedal to Paris, others were imagining newspaper headlines "60 cyclists missing in France" "Cyclists kidnapped by crazed coach driver". Others were beginning to wonder if she actually was a coach driver or maybe a passing granny who had always harboured a desire to drive a coach. By now the shouts of encouragement were getting louder and it was surprising that she didn't throw the keys on the floor and shout "you drive". Now back on the dual carriageway the cry of "turn left, turn left" echoed through the coach as 60 voices were joined in unison. The cheer that followed was added to by helpful suggestions such as "aim for the gap between the posts", "mind the Fire engines and go for the empty shed". Finally we were off the coach amid much laughter and the driver thankfully seemed to take it all in good spirit, which she demonstrated by not driving off with our luggage. Meeting up with all the other riders the conversation was along the lines of guess where we've been, because we don't know.

The first two groups left in the rain but thankfully when we came to leave it had stopped raining and whilst I couldn't see any blue sky I knew it had to be there somewhere. The scenery was not as good today but still the French were out cheering us on our way and the sky was becoming a little brighter. The last climb of the ride came just outside Menucourt, a bit of a strength sapper and as John would say a hill that nearly outstays its welcome. Once at the top it was downhill all the way to Sennett, the lunch stop, but not before we passed the social group who had been pulled to the side of the road about 10kms from the lunch stop. Park Sennett was the place for lunch situated alongside the River Seine and we were wondering whether we could cycle along the banks of the river all the way to Paris. A short service was held at an imposing memorial during which the social group arrived. Alain the man in charge of all the support vehicles announced that we were due in

Paris at 3.20 and at 3.20 we would be there, if you cannot make it go in the van, we have never been late and we will not be late. Some aching bodies now rejuvenated after lunch were now on the final leg, the ride into Paris. The rain that had been threatening for a while arrived and made the roads a little slippery which a rider went on to demonstrate by taking a tumble at a sharp turn on the outskirts of Paris.

We were now in the suburbs of Paris cycling along a tree lined avenue, a wave at a young lady from a number of riders failed to receive a response but as John went on to inform me a wave of a handful of Euros and not a water bottle may have received a more favourable reply. As we came past La Defense we were on to the cobbles and proceeded by all the outriders and support vehicles we were approaching the Arc de Triomphe and there was Alice and Margaret suitably positioned to get the best view of the riders on the approach. We had made it and it was time for celebrations in an area on one of the busiest roads in the world. No champagne but there was beer and wine on offer to all the riders and their partners who had made the trip to Paris. Medals were presented to all the riders and then following a blast of the whistle we were off to assemble on the Champs-Elysee prior to the service under the Arc. A large crowd had assembled to watch the proceedings and under the orders of an ex sergeant major we told to line up in rows of 6 ready to march up to the Arc accompanied by a military band. What a surprise when we arrived under the Arc, there was Alice and Margaret in the front row near to the eternal flame, how did they do it? A very moving and dignified service took place followed by a rendition of Danny Boy by Laura Wright, a very fitting end to the ride and I feel sure there were a few tears being shed.

Sadly it was now time for the final part of the ride a short distance to Les Invalides escorted by all the outriders much noise and the constant flashes of cameras as numerous tourists were keen to capture the action. There is no other way to ride in Paris, it was inspiring. Bikes loaded on the wagon it was now time to finally relax and board the coach for the hotel, fingers crossed that it was a different driver from the morning's mystery tour. A champagne reception had been arranged for 7.30 followed by a celebratory dinner and a chance to sit, swap stories, reflect on the ride and listen to some excellent speeches.

TIME TO REFLECT

Having done the ride once before I always thought there was a danger that the second time may not be as good. When I had entered I had thought I would be doing the ride on my own so to speak. Thankfully John decided to do the ride with me and despite the fact that he has pushed me along flat roads and I no doubt have dragged him up hills I am extremely grateful that we rode together. We even managed to ride into Paris together a feat which Alice was no doubt amazed at, as I had run off and left her near the end of a 26 mile walk when we were 13, a fact that she occasionally reminds me of. Was it as good the second time, definitely, the only difference was I knew what was coming but despite that you cannot help but be touched by the welcome you receive, the remembrance services where people are so grateful for what has happened in the past and the pride with which the veterans parade to welcome a bunch of cyclists. The social side was as good as the first time, nearly 300 cyclists united in one common aim and determined to raise thousands of pounds for what is sadly a very worthwhile cause. Was it as difficult as last time? Hard to say really, I had perhaps done more training for this ride just so I could enjoy it and despite a shaky spell a few weeks before the off and thanks to a good training partner it all came together. Sometimes thank you just doesn't seem enough which is why I had the idea of putting these words on paper as a way of saying thank you John and hope you enjoy this tale of Mr Fox. Would I do it again? I would hope so as it is not often you get to meet so many nice people all at once, enjoy for 4 days riding your bike with a full escort and be cheered along the way, could cycling be any better?

Did Mr Kipling make it to Paris? Well he certainly wasn't there at the Arc de Triomphe but perhaps he was like the rest of us, just there for an exceedingly good time.

Thanks must go to close family members and friends who have supported us all the way, numerous sponsors who have made the whole ride worthwhile and special thanks to Alice and Margaret who allowed us the time to go training, showed endless patience when we were talking about nothing else but the Pedal to Paris and who were there at the end in the front row and even managed to acquire the Bleu et de France for John and I to wear with pride alongside our Poppies in remembrance.

A FEW FACTS AND FIGURES

Total distance cycled, 286 miles

Total time riding, 20 hours 52 minutes

Average speed, 13.7 mph

Total Calories, 15758

Total climbing, 12,671 feet

Number of starters, 297

Number of finishers, 296

Amounts raised John and I £2500 plus

Estimated amount raised by all riders £600,000 plus.

Energy bars, Mr Kipling cakes consumed, too many to mention.

Friends made, lots.

Enjoyment factor, impossible to quantify.

