

'OVER THERE'

The Story of the Bike Ride to MULHEIM an der RUHR

DARLINGTON TOWN TWINNING ASSOCIATION and DARLINGTON ROTARY CLUB

20th April to 26th April 2012

Saturday April 21st

We all arrived in time at Sadberge, as did the van. Much discussion about the (very professional) logo on the side. Is he pointing 'over there' or are we about to sweep through the Low Countries? (And the helmet didn't help either).

Left from Sadberge promptly at 7.00a.m. waved off by supporters. Mike in the van, Tom, Steve, Nigel, Peter, Jez, Doug, Simon, Helen, Sandy, Sally and Martin on bikes, Dot and Oakey on the tandem.

Sandy knew the route and led the way. We joined the Sustrans no. 1 track at Thorpe Thewles and set off in pleasant weather on the old railway line, deep cuttings, embankments, traces of old platforms, bridges spanning, lots of misty wood anenomes and mist rising off the fields around Wynyard.

First stop at the new bridge - and new wind turbines - where Mike was waiting with tea and homemade biscuits. On again to South Hetton. Here we met Tom's aunt with welcome encouragement then through the village with its memorial to the coalmining past. From here the track was pretty rough and with plenty of puddles. On into the outskirts of Sunderland and a bit of rain. Tom, being native guide, led us through the bus and bike lanes of the city centre in a short cut and we pedalled over the famous bridge and found the track again.

We eventually reached Roker and Seaburn and enjoyed the ride by the sea. Lunch at Morrison's, trying hard to avoid saying 'When we came before . . . ' or 'last time . . . ' , obviously deeply irritating. The next stretch was past Marsden Rock and the approaches to the Tyne ferry, encouraged by Tom and Mike advising on ferry times. We got the 2.15 p.m. passenger ferry – picking out landmarks and seeing our DFDS ship moored up river. All was well until this point but as we got off the ferry the rain began.

We had to push and carry our bikes up a steep path and then in heavy rain cycle to the terminal. And then in a vast expanse of bare concrete, with no cover whatsoever all the luggage had to come out of the van to get all the bikes in. We ended up in a line under the sparse shelter of the hedge trying not to be irritable. The bike packing was ingenious but still ended in Oakey and Dot pedalling the tandem onto the ferry along with the motorcyclists, just missing another downpour.

Reunited in the bar, we all enjoyed the evening, especially the buffet, the herrings with genever

Image of the day 1: Sandy's muddy face when she stopped bothering about skirting the puddles.

Image of the day 2: Steve in a cycling cape.

Saying of the day: 'Will it go in the van, Mike?'

Miles covered: 47

Sunday April 22nd.

Docked at 9.30, not too early a start. Dot and Oakey descended to the car deck, back among the motor cyclists and saw Mike disembark down the ramp from the innards of the ship. Foot passengers reunited with bikes by the high port wall and we took to the famous Dutch bike lanes. The first roundabout when the motorists really did give way and didn't really need our salutes was a welcome start. Wobbled about through the suburbs but found the way eventually down the banks of the main IJmuiden to Amsterdam canal with the green commuter hydrofoils plying up and down, linking with the green buses and the green trams. Wind turbines, tanks farms on the other bank.

Met Mike and had a fantastic breakfast at a beautifully run café at a ferry landing (several of these linking the two banks) Watched the fast aerodynamic cigar shaped cycles flash by. Set off again into the wind. After mending Peter's puncture there was a merciful change of direction when the road turned and we lost the headwind. After a slight panic about the way, we found, thanks to Jez's instinct in these matters, a great off road cycle track taking us by the scenic route through the suburbs.

We stopped for photographs by an intriguing sculpture then made it into the centre of Amsterdam where we all got split up and generally confused. So we all roamed around in different groups, bumping into

each other in various cafes, shops and bars. The cheese sandwich shop was a revelation and the little bar where the ancient lady made a written record of every transaction was even more of an event. And it was sunny! The main attraction was probably the multi-storey bike park at Central Station

The idea was to meet at the Maritime Museum, near the ship, the Batavia, at 2 o' clock. Mike and Helen had gone ahead to suss out our hotel and guide us back to it (out in the suburbs beyond Amsterdam). There were two schools of thought about the meeting place and each group could see the other across the basin and were waving madly at each other – but only a little bit irritated. We did rendezvous about an hour late and set off again with Mike and Helen as guides.

City bike tracks are tricky, and Amsterdam riders give no quarter. Also there are separate traffic lights for pedestrians, cyclists and motor traffic which takes a bit of getting used to. Not helped by a drunk stepping into Tom's path, Jez running into him, both falling off and all of us coming to a stop. Derailleur damage., damage!

We then had a pleasant ride through a nature reserve before arriving at the Tulip Hotel.

Re-grouping at the suburban metro station, and spending about half an hour at the automatic ticket machine, involving half the local population we boarded the efficient shuttle service into central Amsterdam. This runs every ten minutes, even on a Sunday up until midnight, Dead easy.

We all had a drink in a pub opposite the station, long table, blue and white tiles, friendly landlord, then Dot and Oakey and Sally set off to find an Indonesian restaurant and the others to find the red light district. Both groups were successful, but only the former group partook of the services on offer. Back on the late train, the red light group in a hilarious incident involving several drunk Moroccans.

Saying of the day No. 1: 'Gruelling, Tom, gruelling'.
Saying of the day No. 2: 'Steve, is my tyre flat?'

Image of the day. Man on a bike, carrying a bike.

Miles (on bikes) covered: 28

Monday April 23rd.

Rain threatened, but didn't happen and we left the Tulip Hotel for Hilversum (that of the radio dial), through lovely beech woods. We met in the centre for brunch at 11.30 a.m. Little sightseeing, cathedral closed, next stop Amersfoort.

This stretch was packed with incident. We stopped at an intriguing crescent shaped white palace with statues of Queen Juliana and Prince Bernard in the grounds waving democratically. We stopped again at a woodland park outside Amersfoort for a rest and photographs. Through Amersfoort (castle and a low arch over the canal). Then Steve had a problem with his brakes. Fortunately this was in the outskirts outside a garage with luxury cars, so while the bike mechanics conferred, the rest of us enjoyed peering at BMWs, Jaguars, Aston Martins and two very exotic looking machines which turned out to be electric cars.

On again to Achterveld where we stopped for a beer, and Tom and Mike found us. After a couple, Doug, Simon, Sandy, Dot and Oakey decided to push on to Ede. The bad company stayed on, bad move?

Simon set the pace and this group actually reached 16 mph! Found Luteran again of blessed memory (the ill starred stop the last time we came, four years ago). On the outskirts of Ede, where the road divided into three, Mike on his trusty Brompton found us and gave us great directions to Hotel Paasberg, then pressed on to find the others.

The hotel was great but the staircases were incredibly steep and the upstairs corridors impenetrable.

We ate in the town, most at a jolly Italian and another group at a terrific Chinese.

Saying of the day No 1: 'Two paracetamol and two lagers, please'.
Saying of the day No.2: 'Tom's bike's gone the fastest it's ever gone' (Peter riding it).

Image of the day. Young girl on the bike track pedalling a big Dutch bike which had a box on the front with six small children in it under a jolly canopy.

Miles covered: 46.

Tuesday April 24th

Left Ede very happily through wonderful woods again, beech, then pine giving way to the famous Ginkel Heath where we stopped for Mike to give us a talk on the Arnhem debacle. It was horribly obvious to see the trap, the blasted heath is encircled by pine woods, still there in the distance which hid the Panzer divisions and made our glider pilots and paratroops so vulnerable.

We rode on to the memorial which is a graceful and understated shape on a small obelisk, an eagle/arrow/heron shape stretching up into the sky.

At the Oosterbeek Cemetery we wandered around without speaking much. Tom found his namesake's grave again. We noted the Jewish headstones with a few pebbles left on top, the slightly different shape of the Polish ones and the hundreds of British ones. Some went to the Museum, now wonderfully interpreted with multimedia displays. Dot, Oakey and Jez pressed on into Arnhem, got comprehensively lost - and wet - and pedalled over the famous bridge too far and back again before finding Helen and Sandy in a café on the Rhine embankment..

We were now in two groups, six set off first, crossed the bridge again and were pedalling along the track to Huissen when there was the most explosive bang. We thought someone had been shot. It was Sandy's wheel, the whole rim had snapped and sheered into a twisted streamer. The bike wouldn't even wheel along. We rang Mike to ask him to bring the van to the nearby road, single carriageway but very busy and had to be crossed. Sandy carried the bike heroically to a layby. Another cyclist told us there was a bike shop in Huissen so the idea was to find it. And when we opened the back of the van - there was the buckled wheel of Steve's bike! Don't ask! Well, yes, do - apparently giving Mike a croggy prove too much for it. With two knackered bikes, Sandy, Tom and Mike went to look for the bike shop.

The rest of us continued on our way, all reunited now, reflecting on the British tradition of heroic failure. The route was along the Rijndijk, very obviously a dyke, through lovely country to a ferry which dodged the huge barges to take us over to the North side of the Rhine. After much discussion, we got to Tolkemer with cheery girls, beer, warm red blankets and ice cream sitting watching the famous barges from the bar on the riverbank. We could see the Emmerich suspension bridge shining in the sun about eight kilometres away, we were getting cold by this time and cycled as rapidly as the constant gates would let us along the dyke and into the town.

The hotel opposite the station was great and the proprietor very welcoming. This time we all ate together in a rather smart German restaurant on the embankment, still fascinated by the Rhine barges, constant traffic, one even in a string of three, with every sort of cargo. Great salads, wonderful breads, spargel and various schnitzels later there was a move to 'Billiard Garage' a sports bar, where smoking is still allowed, Martin delighted to find table football. The main draw was the Chelsea v. Barcelona match. The amazing Torres goal at full time! Too much beer.

Steve's bike has a new wheel.

Sandy's is unmendable and no replacement could be found.

Sandy heard the expected news of the death of her father, peacefully, in his sleep.

Wednesday April 25th

Left Emmerich in bright sunlight but cold air. Missed the road to the suspension bridge, milled about a bit, turned back then enjoyed going over it. Turned onto the road for Kalcar and Xanten into a headwind. It was a lovely country road but hard going. We saw deer in an open field, then hares spotted too. We stopped at the van for a breather and advice about the scenic route to our next stop in Kalcar. Sandy is on Tom's bike, Martin is struggling with a painful shoulder.

The route was undeniably green but faintly circular. After meeting a pleasant couple – conversation about their High Wycombe and Irish connections – we arrived at Kalcar and lunched at the wonderful patisserie.

The next stretch to Vynen was marred by deteriorating weather and tempers. It was only about 12 kilometers but we had constant arguments about the way, and it began to rain. Much discussion at every junction, misleading advert etc. We finally arrived at Landhaus Hans Stickerman mid afternoon to find it closed and most of us in an annexe we couldn't find. Definite bad moment but after more milling, they opened up for us and gave us beer which improved our mood. Checked out the bowling alley, booked a meal and made a date to watch the Bayern Munich v. Real Madrid match later. Settled into the annexe.

Some intrepid ones set off in the rain and in the teeth of the wind to explore Xanten. Dot, Oakey and Sally toured the amazing Roman museum (very new and state of the art) and the bath house. Nigel and Peter went into Xanten and found the cathedral and the windmill. Much better coming back with the wind behind us.

Dinner was served in a private room for us all, just as well as we were very noisy though Nora the Bulgarian waitress sorted us out. Watched the match and because we were in Germany were pleased to see Bayern Munich win on penalty shootout.

- Jez and Martin made a joint video on smartphones.
- Found out there had been a murder in Ede, discovered just after we left and the whole place had been subject to a lockdown.

Image of the day: The group cycling over the Emmerich bridge.

Saying of the day: (when trying to find the way) 'For God's sake, Tom, I asked the bloody postman!'

Miles covered: 32

Thursday 26th April

Left Xanten at 9.30ish led by 6 members of the Mulheim cycle club who had come by train to meet us and escort us into Mulheim an der Ruhr. Got lost on the outskirts of Xanten going through a housing estate or two before regaining the road. Rather gratifying that the Germans can get lost too.

We reached the Rhine and pedalled along the banks for an eternity, passing a long many-arched railway bridge, now completely ruined, never mended since the war. We crossed the Rhine again by a great cable stay bridge next to a curious girder bridge which didn't meet in the middle.

Then on and on in a howling gale until we were heartily sick of dykes if not the Rhine.

Two power stations later we stopped for lunch, very relieved to find we were perhaps two thirds of the way. The restaurant was in a micro brewery, with wonderful copper vessels bubbling away. The food was great but the method of paying was challenging to say the least. The waiter went for his break at the crucial moment and was the only person who knew anything about anything and had to be applied to - to be allowed to settle up.

The next stretch was challenging, more headwind. We were very glad of our guides as the route was incredibly tortuous through the outskirts of Oberhausen and Duisburg until we arrived at the Ruhr. We'd never have found the way, grateful thanks to Manfred and his team.

We knew our eventual destination was Aquarius where the Rotary Club of Mulheim was to meet us. However we hadn't realised quite what Aquarius is. As we pedalled along the banks of the Ruhr through a waterside park, we came upon an impressive redbrick water tower. This was it, Aquarius! Looking up, we could see people waving to us from an observation floor, entirely made of glass at the top of the tower. This was our reception party. Sandy, who had arrived first, had already been politely invited to the wrong reception, (regardless of garb) and was very thankful to see us.

Locking up our bikes, we took the lift (in a secondary tower) which took us two thirds of the way up. We then had to cross to the main tower and a final lift journey to the top. This took ages, so some took the outside stairs. Finally, there was the very strange experience of being greeted by half of Darlington suddenly transported here, as well as the Mulheim hosts. Of course, they were all beautifully dressed when we were in our cycling gear, very windswept and absolutely exhausted after more than forty miles in a howling gale. It was the most marvellous reception and we were definitely made to feel heroic.

Back to reality and another mile or two through parks to our hotel led by another kind native guide on an electric bike. The hotel had a cavernous garage where we locked the bikes. We found our comfortable, high ceilinged rooms and after a very rapid shower and change we went to eat at the Wasserbahnhof restaurant with wonderful Town Twinning members who were so kind to us.

Arrival!

Image of the day: Sandy, overcoming her terror of heights, on hands and knees on the bridge from one tower to the other at Aquarius.

Saying of the day: Tom, to anyone borrowing his bike 'Don't take it out of second, hinny'.

Total miles 228

With sincere thanks to Tom for the Town Twinning Association and Steve for the Rotary Club for organising it all, to Mike for his support and to all for the unflinching camaraderie.

Dot Long 20/5/'12