

AUDAXITY

Paris-Brest-Paris 2019

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We rode to the start early on a mid-August Friday morning; a group of around 60 UK riders spilling out of the overnight Newhaven-Dieppe ferry before dawn into rolling countryside and gradually strengthening headwinds.

Just a hundred miles or so to ride to the historic town of Rambouillet, on the Western fringes of Paris, but the journey to reach that point had taken me about a year. A 600km pre-qualifier in 2018, routine 200km outings at least once a month over the winter, and then my qualifying *Super Randonneur* series of 200, 300, 400 and 600km brevets, culminating in the legendary Bryan Chapman Memorial, a Welsh End-to-End traversing a



figure-of-eight loop between Chepstow and Anglesey via some familiar mid-Wales hills and the mountains of Snowdonia.

Two more 600km rides for good measure, an overnight 300km, and a few hilly rides in Croatia a couple of weeks before. And two or three long evenings in the pub,

swapping stories and advice with more experienced Cambridge riders including the two Nicks – Jackson (of CCC), a many-times PBP *ancien*, and Wilkinson – a local Audax organiser famous for having completed the last edition, 4 years earlier, on a Brompton.



I'd splurged on a hotel in the centre of Rambouillet – close to the start and buzzing with randonneurs of all nationalities – so the following morning I was up early to beat the queues for the bike check. It was starting to rain – it would pour down for the next 24 hours – but after resolving a minor hiccup involving temperamental dynamo lights all was deemed well with my bike, a steel Condor Fratello, heavy but comfortable. I picked up my documents and frame badge from a huge barn in the National Sheepfold and the rest of Saturday was spent lounging and re-packing, followed by an evening meal with Audaxing buddies at the creperie.

An enormous breakfast on Sunday morning – the hotel staff had clearly never seen anything like it – and as much rest as possible. I'd secured a late



checkout and dozed in my room. The rain began to clear -it stayed pretty much dry for the rest of the event - and at around 3pm I rode the kilometre or two up to the start area for a pre-departure meal and a look around.

I was pleased to bump into Claire from London, with whom I'd shared the last half of a hilly 400km, took a selfie with Nick Jackson and chatted to John Jukes, another CCC rider who would be setting off early the next morning in the 84 hour group. At 5pm I was in the departure area, joining the second wave of 90 hour riders. The elite vedettes, riding to a limit of 80 hours, had set off ahead of us, Nick Jackson among them; followed by the velos speciales - tandems, recumbents, velomobiles and the like, alongside some beautiful vintage bikes.

I spotted some friends from other rides and joined them in the queue, immediately behind Fiona Kolbinger, *(below right)* recent



winner of the TCR, who had ridden down from Brest to join the start of this

ride (a cool-down, perhaps?). And before we knew it, our brevets were stamped and at 5.30pm we were off through the first control gate and turning sharp left into the forest of Rambouillet.

The intermediate control times for PBP start quite tight, so it is necessary for the vast majority of participants on the 90 hour

start to ride through the first night and day. I decided to hang back and not get involved in the more exuberant and sometimes undisciplined riding at the front, but made good progress to the first control at Villaines (217km), reaching it at 3.30 am in



10 hours. After this my pace began to slow through the night.

The next day felt like a bit of a slog through interminable rollers and riding mostly solo into a headwind, before reaching the sharp, pretty and enjoyable lanes west of Loudeac. The streets of the Breton towns and villages were lined by enthusiastic supporters offering encouragement and sometimes free crepes or coffee, and often enjoying a bit of a party for which we riders provided the moving wallpaper.

At the "secret control" in St Nicolas-du-Pelem, reached at 9.45pm with 490km completed, I was ready to pay a few euros for a camp bed in the school hall, and had a good three hours sleep despite the rather noisy environment. I was up at 1am for the hilly stage to the high point of the route at the Roc'h Trevezel, the dawn descent of which was much harder than the climb, painfully slow and impeded by freezing cold conditions, stomach cramps and the fear of falling asleep.

My spirits restored by a breakfast galette at Sizun, a short roadside nap, and the warmth of the morning sun, I reached the half way point at Brest, just over 600km and 40 hours in, with a little over an hour

in hand. The lunchtime climb back up the Roc'h, fuelled by another galette, felt much more comfortable than I'd been expecting; but I still had to make up time so I pushed on right through the following night, teaming up with my Cambridge friend Alex between Loudeac and Fougères to get back on track and on to the endlessly rolling terrain heading east towards Paris.

A photo stop to capture an incredible dawn,



and a brief morning nap in a bus stop followed by an enormous mid-morning bowl of pasta in Fougères, and my energy levels improved to the extent that I even enjoyed a bit of gentle competition with some Seattle randonneurs on the hills approaching the party town of Villaines-la-Juhel, descending the high street to cheers and shouts of “Bon courage!”. A quick bite to eat in a cavernous village hall before the climb back up to Mortagne-au-Perche, which I reached with Ricki, another UK randonneur, just before midnight.

Unfortunately a ride as long as Paris-Brest-Paris is unlikely to be completed without at least one crisis and mine waited until that final night. It was 3am and I woke up with a start. The floor of the control at Mortagne was rock hard under my improvised sleeping mat (an insulated shopping bag, cut to size). Everything ached. A stranger, six inches away, was snoring loudly into my face. I'd overslept by two hours. Furious with myself that I might have blown it less than 140km from the finish, I forced myself up, doing the mental calculation. I could still hit the control in Dreux by my deadline of 7.46am. Normally, 77km in four and a half hours would be easy. But I had 1100km in my legs, less than seven hours' sleep in the last three days, and I didn't really know what the profile of this next stage was going to look like.

By 3.15am I was on the move, accelerating into the mist down the hill, through stone villages. A minor route change briefly confounded me and I doubled back, looking for a missed direction sign. Then onto some rolling terrain, a fast rider overtaking me – I tried to hang on to his wheel for a kilometre or two before concluding that he was too fast. A bit further on another rider and I teamed up wordlessly, taking equal turns at the front, overtaking hundreds of zombie cyclists labouring up the hills. By the time we parted company,



an hour later, thanking each other, I knew I'd broken the back of the stage. Soon after, a tight, fast peloton came by. I jumped on, and we sped into the dawn, two moto riders with whistles ensuring the junctions were safe. As the group – inevitably – began to fragment, I dropped back; the riding was becoming undisciplined and scary. Not much later I passed a rider walking, pushing a damaged bike. But the terrain was now East-Anglia flat and I rolled into Dreux, the penultimate control, at 7am, 45 minutes ahead of my control time and knowing that, bar unforeseen disasters, I was going to finish within my time limit.

The adrenaline released by my panic about oversleeping had probably done me a favour. A leisurely breakfast, and an enjoyable last stage was spent chatting with fellow riders and taking in the scenery before riding into Rambouillet for a final lap around a cobbled courtyard to complete the ride – 1223km - in a little over 89 hours.



If this has given you a taste for monumental mileages, sleep deprivation and bone-wearying physical exhaustion, Terry Dickerson, Cambridge CC Audax secretary, is organizing a 200km Audax for the 10th May, details of which can be found here:

<http://www.aukweb.net/events/detail/20-130/>

whilst Cambridge Audax are also running a 200km event in March.

Details here:

<http://www.aukweb.net/events/detail/20-276/>