

For those of you who have never met him, Paul Dytham is a Poole Wheeler with a difference.... He takes up the most unusual challenges, mostly self imposed and can be found touring, audaxing, or commuting around a variety of locations generally in the Northern Hemisphere.....

Its clear that this is a man with a love affair with his two wheels....

Here is his account of a trip to northern France in October 2008.... enjoy..... and Paul, thanks for Flying the Flag for Poole wheelers and making the effort and writing it up.

### **Paul Dytham St Malo to Le Havre**



During the last week in October my partner Kirsty had gone to New York. I wanted to do something rather than just another week at work whilst she was enjoying herself, so I went riding along the coast of Northern France From St Malo to Le Havre.

Usually when I'm over in France on the bike I'm chasing Tour de France stages. This time the plan (in the loosest sense of the word) was sightseeing. My MTB got fitted with some slick tyres and my rack so I could leave it locked up outside places without being distraught if it went walking. My only piece of luggage was my Ortlieb backpack lashed with toestraps onto the rack, this so I could put it on my back when I left the bike. Top tip: don't run a rear disc brake if you want to fit a rack unless you want grief!

Whilst I was there I had plenty of time during the long evenings to write a blog-style account of each day. Here's what happened.

Day 1 – Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> October – Blandford to St Malo

I left home at 6.45 am for a 27 mile ride down to the catamaran ferry from Weymouth to St Malo. Unfortunately not only was it raining fairly heavily, there was a hundred mile an hour south-westerly gale. I averaged 11mph and got a thorough soaking. I then sat shivering on the ferry not wanting to get a second set of my three sets of clothes for the week wet by changing.

Now, what does gale-force wind mean? Exciting ferry crossings. I work with ships, but I never go onboard them at sea as I'm such a bad sailor. Oh dear. I spent pretty much the whole first leg to Guernsey lying on the floor feeling awful.

I made it to St Malo without anymore trouble and behold, sunshine! Quite warm too. Things were looking up as I rode the 2 miles to the youth hostel, which was quite nice. Nothing lasts though, and it chucked it down again. I walked down the street for pizza at 6.30pm and they weren't open for another half hour, so I got soaked walking back.

The forecast in the local rag is for showers all week....

Day 2 – Monday 24<sup>th</sup> October - St Malo to Granville along the coast.

Not a bad day overall today, although it can be split into a great morning and a wet afternoon.

Pizza last night was good, but the local cidre and cassis sorbet with a shot of creme de cassis on it made the meal.

This morning I ate the classic french YH breakfast of museli followed by bread and jam. I love the expression on french peoples' faces when you put cereal in a bowl instead of coffee or hot chocolate - where do they think you put cereal?! I pocketed a few more jam rolls, and after a brief rain shower departed into sunshine at 8.45am.

Had the sun on and off for the rest of the morning - route was along the coast from st malo to Point du Grouin then south to Cancale before picking up the coast road east. This part was very flat, with fens-like scenery. Unlike the last time I was on the fens, this time I had a tailwind. Even on the MTB with a pannier I was cruising at about 19 mph.

I arrived at Mont St Michel at midday, having stopped off to eat my jam sandwich elevenses on the way. There was less here than I expected - I had allowed myself 2 hours as I wanted to make tonight's digs before dark. In the end 2 hours was more than adequate. An interesting place, but I would definitely recommend the audioguide for anyone going round the abbey - I declined the extra 4 euros, but there wasn't any written info at all. Hmmm.

It had been sunny the whole time at the Mont, so of course it started chucking it down as I was refitting my pannier outside. It also got noticeably colder. Still, no problem, more tailwind miles meant I flew along to Avranches. The flying ceased up the drag of a hill into town. I didn't stop here, straight down the other side of the hill and onto the D911 coast road, my companion for the next 2 hours. Had a pleasant pair of apple tarts in Genets to keep me going, after which, other than the local binmen trying their best to run me down, nothing much happened until Granville. Oh, of course there were the heavy rain showers every 30 minutes.

75 miles for the day and I finished the day in Granville in an internet bar (none of this internet cafe rubbish) drinking Grimbergen.

Day 3 – Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> October - Granville to Cherbourg

Not much sightseeing today, well, any at all really. I was a bit worried about excess mileage, so from the start the plan was a coast route to the north then see what time I had in Cherbourg upon arrivee.

The ride itself was one that at the time I wouldn't have said was much fun, but looking back it wasn't all that bad. Better than a day at work definitely.

I left Granville at 9am to blue skies, sunshine and high hopes. The start was a 3 mile drag up out of the town, then some main-ish road to Brehal. Through the local market and I got onto the D20 coast road, which turned out to be a bit more main than I'd hoped. 30 minutes later and I was sheltering putting my waterproof on.

The heavy showers continued until about 12.30, although there was genuine sunshine in between. The D20 became the D650, also a bit too main road, and the countryside became more rolling. I had a few detours off the D650, but the lanes were particularly filthy, meaning after passing one farm I was also covered. This prompted me back to the main road.

I decided to get lunch whilst the sun was out in Portbail. I managed to catch the end of the market and procured 2 sausages in baguettes that were eaten on the seafront in a remarkable likeness of what a holiday should be like.

I left Portbail on the D50 to Briquebec having decided to bin the extra coast miles in favour of getting to Cherbourg and out of the rain. This was a good plan for two reasons: it prompted the rain to stay away for a couple of hours and also the road inland was much nicer.

Graunching noises told me that my transmission was devoid of any lubrication now the precipitation had stopped, so I tested out my French at a Renault garage – fail! He thought I wanted to inflate a tyre. A customer translated for me and I got a large blast of GT85. Glorious silence.

The weather still had one trick left; stinging hail on the descent down to Cherbourg. I had plenty of time in hand now though, so spent 15 minutes under trees.

At the YH I should have read my notes better, as it didn't open until 6pm. No matter, I had a full tour of the town, before spending a cold half hour reading my book\* outside.

Finally, I've been out and blown all my savings on a 15 euro menu plus a massively overpriced pint of Heineken.

\*I have, without thinking, brought Pies & Prejudice by Stuart McConie, which means I'm sitting in Cherbourg reading about Warrington.

Day 4 – Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> October - Cherbourg to Reviers, near Bayeux

Brilliant day today, the day that makes it all worthwhile. There wasn't a drop of rain (although apparently I was a bit luckier than those starting the day near Bayeux), some genuine sunshine and blue skies and a pleasant tailwind whilst heading south for 30 miles.

I knew I had a long day ahead (I thought around 95 miles) so started early at 8am. The stiff breeze turned out to be north-westerly, which meant the first 45 minutes out of

Cherbourg along the D116 coast road were quite tough. I got turfed off there by roadworks and forced inland on the detour to Cherbourg airport, but this kept the breeze off and I made good progress to Barfleur. In the grey skies Barfleur looked nice, but the seafront - no doubt lovely in summer - was at best bracing today.

The wind became my friend whilst going south on the D1 to St Vaast - I hardly needed to pedal to do 18mph. I had had matron standing over me at breakfast so hadn't swiped any supplies; 3 pain au chocolades at Reville, eaten on the seafront at St Vaast solved this problem.

I continued south, now in sunshine, along the coast to Utah beach. Spent some time here reading monuments piecing together events. Next was some lanes around the estuary and some trouble staying off the motorway. In the end I went to Carentan which was out of my way but did provide that classic french experience of the cheap 'workers' menu lunch. 8 euros bought me liver and chips, praline mousse and 1/4 litre of local cidre.

I finally found my way to Isigny-s-mer and back on the coast road, this time the D514 and I spent some time at Omaha beach.

Finally it was 20 miles into the approaching dusk to a lovely B&B at Reviere. 110 miles for the day, and the lady at the digs immediately suggested I ride a further 3 miles to the next town for dinner. Errr, that's ok, I'll get some takeaway pizza from the van in the square, ta! Couldn't stay awake past 8.30pm...

Day 5 – Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> October - Reviere to, err, Reviere

Rest day today. That is, rest my legs. A bit of a good/bad day today meant I still burnt plenty of calories worrying.

Had a gentle start rolling into Bayeux, about 14 miles it turns out. Reports of snow turned out to be false. Went to see the tapestry, which was well worth the trip. The narration really moves you through it quickly though, maybe to assist with the carnage that must be the high tourist season. Careful use of the pause button and I got about 45 minutes out of my 7 euros. Spent the rest of the morning roaming around the town centre until the inevitable French long-lunch close-down.

Back at the bike the rear tyre was completely flat. Bugger. I had noticed it was a bit soft last night, but it was still up this morning so forgot about it. I decided to give it some more air and see how far I got - it was only 6 miles to Arranches, my next stop.

All went well for the first mile, and then I noticed a bumping from the rear. 30 minutes of faffing trying to sort out why the tyre wouldn't seat properly got me nowhere so it was

back into town in search of a bike shop (and fretting a little). Three enquiries and about 3 miles later, I found the bike shop, across the road from where I'd started of course.

'Super Sport' was some kind of French Halfords, but the guy at the cycle dept desk looked like he knew what he was doing. He replaced the tube, then the tyre, then scratched his head a bit, then the wheel went in the jig and it turned out my indestructible rear wheel had some issues. All credit though, he trued it out and I even got him to put my original tyre (now deemed to not have a problem) back on - watching him break a tyre lever getting the new Michelin on didn't fill me with hope so I was glad not to keep it. 9 euros plus the price of a new tube and I was back on the road. Nerves frayed and 2 hours lost.

I rode up to Arromanches and took in Gold Beach and the British temporary harbour, then battled the easterly along the coast to Courseulles before calling it a day. The wheel problems had cost me a trip further on to Juno and Sword beaches.

Day 6 – Friday 30<sup>th</sup> October - Reviere to Le Havre and home

A final day away, and a good one overall.

I demolished a whole jar of homemade apple jam at breakfast and left at 8.30am so I could dawdle along. First stop was a British D-Day cemetery at Hermanville which was thought-provoking, especially the substantial percentage of gravestones reading 'A soldier of the war' 'Known unto God'. Depressing that they were never identified.

Next, on to Pegasus Bridge and the first house to be liberated, which is of course now a tat shop.

After crossing the Orne river and successfully avoiding Ouistreham I headed onto the D514 to follow the coast again. A bit of an easterly breeze today meant progress was unhurried but no matter. The views were lovely in the sunshine and around 11am I dropped into Cabourg for pain au chocolades in the beautiful square.

Onto the D513 and along the beach through Houlgate to Villers. Whilst taking a photo on the front a distinctly English voice started behind me having spotted 'Poole' on my kit. It turned out to be Chris Davies of Portsmouth CTC who I'd previously met in Pontivy earlier this year, and we stood chatting for about 20 minutes about our exploits during the week. I particularly liked his comment that they come over every year for a 'last tour before winter' but this year had turned out to be more like the 'first tour of winter'.

My stomach was rumbling so I made swift progress through Deauville and Trouville and onto the rolling route to Honfleur. A friend who'd been many times had recommended me a stop here and I wasn't disappointed - a lovely place at which I had a lovely lunch including a hot apple tart to die for.

The climb over the Pont de Normandie was a good finishing highlight - I love engineering stuff like this. I drove about 300 miles out of my way in the summer to see/cross the Millau bridge, and the Normandie was nearly as good. Finally, I battled trucks into the massive dockard that is Le Havre for my ferry.

The ferry was late leaving, then was slow due to a headwind (I can sympathise). This meant I had an exciting messenger-style 9 minute sprint from port to train station at Portsmouth. I made it with 20 seconds to spare having ridden straight through the station itself. I can't even relax when I think the trip's finished