

THE PARIS – BREST – PARIS

A Contemporary Account of the 1979 PBP.

By John Burrows, Ray Haswell, Keith Matthews & Roy Wadey

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It is reproduced here with minor editing and layout changes for the sake of clarity.

I France & Frogs - Keith

No account of our sortie to France will be complete unless I tell of the journeying to and from the event. The tension before and the relief afterwards lent a vaguely unreal atmosphere to these two periods.



Night ferry from Southampton and then a long day's ride from Le Havre, starting at 7:00am along the Seine to Caudebec en Caux, where over, a fantastic suspension bridge and on to lunch. "Where are we?" asks Ray. "I don't know, can't pronounce it" I reply. The place is in fact called Bourgtheroulde, and we sit in the sun by the church and eat French bread and Brie, and guzzle milk. Then, shaking off lethargy, we ride on to Elbeuf and Evreux

under a baking sun across country which could never be England. Wide flat empty roads with wheat fields in every direction as far as the eye could see, giving us a curiously isolated feeling as if we were the only people in the World. We were eating the miles up but boring! Then we come into a small town and a road junction breaks the monotony, we have to change gear! Oh horrors, Roy finds that he cannot, the reason being that his uppermost jockey wheel is missing. We are a bit stunned, but look around carefully - in vain. The thing could be anywhere along the road for miles. Eventually we, rig the gear with the chain running around the fixing bolt which luckily is still hanging on,

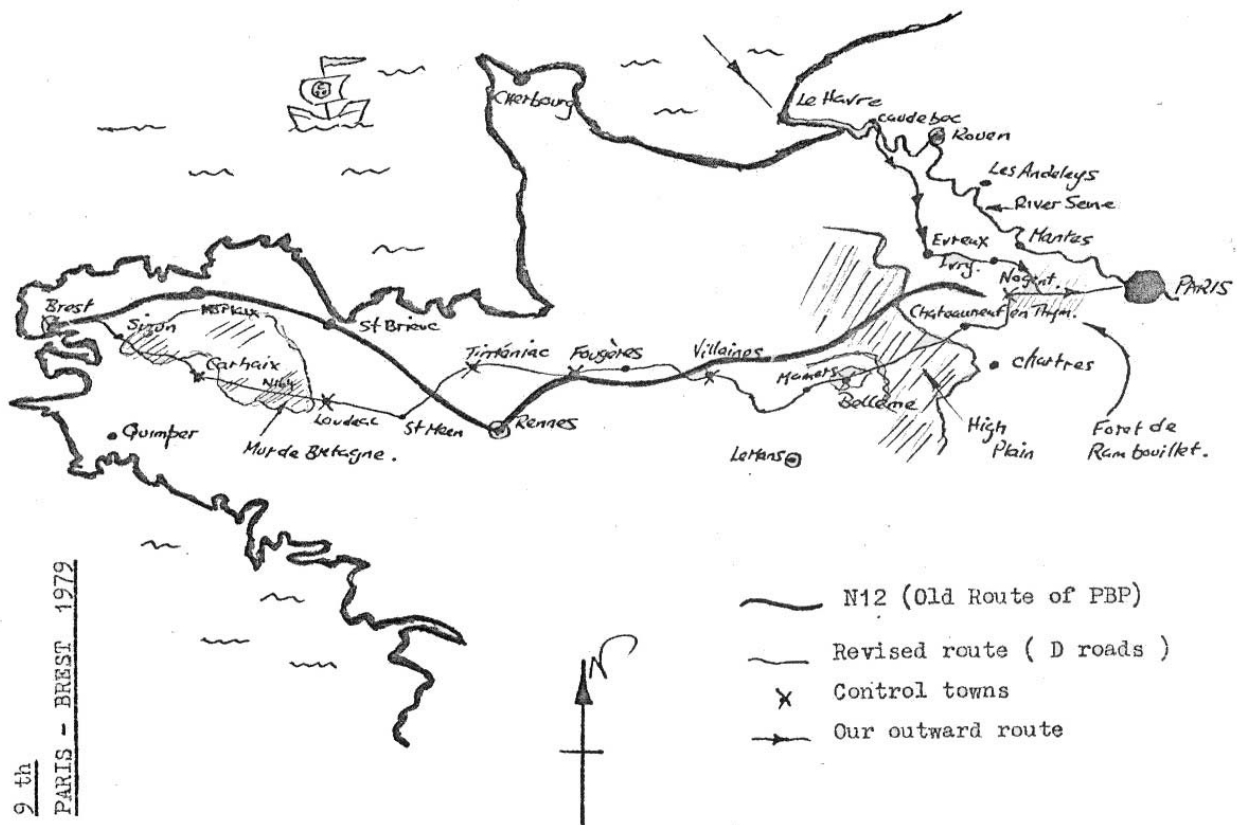
It's getting towards evening now as we reach St.Andre de l'Eure where we have decided to look for overnight lodgings. There is a good Marchand de Velo, so we try for a new jockey wheel. However, the chap is most unhelpful and with our limited French we understand that it is a problem with the threads that stops it being fixed, similarly, when we try to buy a new gear. We feel frustrated, because the problem must be simple, we could fudge something but the dealer doesn't want to help. Late now and a hotel is top priority, but we have found three already that have been closed for their annual holidays, which worries me because they don't usually close until mid-September. Can we be set for disaster already!

We have a coffee and set off for a further 15 miles to Mantes (we have already done 110 miles and don't much feel like it) but as we pass through a village called Ivry la Bataille there is a bar which says 'Hotel'. It looks a bit rough and they don't seem to know if they have any rooms or not. I've met this before in France; will we be eating in the restaurant? So we say "Mais Oui!" and yes, they do have rooms! Gratefully we stow our bikes and go up to our suite of rooms. Two, separated by a tatty curtain and about six beds, including a couple of broken ones. No wallpaper, cracked plaster and a door that seemed to have been made for a different 'ole But the beds look clean and comfortable so who cares for 50 FF for B&B plus evening meal (demi-pension). We have an aperitif and get ready for the meal. I think- we were all hoping for a slap up meal and thinking that perhaps this place was not quite going to fit the bill, it didn't look much, but we must have stumbled on the centre for Haut Cuisine in the area. Soon the dining room was full of gourmets tucking and we were too. A basket of French bread quickly went the way of all flesh as we waited to be served, and with the soup so did another and this was replaced by a third. I had warned the others that sometimes on French menus there is an 'obstacle' course that must be overcome, and here it was. Escargots we knew and this was O.K. with me and Roy, but John and Ray didn't fancy it, so they

decided to investigate the alternative – Gren. . . or something. In vain John tries to find out the nature of this dish from the waitress, who cannot explain because she was suffering from a bad attack of the giggles. John asks; “Is it Moo? Is it Baaa?” But no, perhaps you have guessed the nature of this traditional delicacy? Well yes of course, it was the frogs’ legs! Feeling pleased with my choice of snails, floating in garlic butter, I thought how unappetising the frogs looked, just sitting on the plate all splayed out like that, but undaunted, Ray gets stuck in, and we do a bit of an exchange as well, so I can tell you that the frog leg was just like a chicken drumstick, and even tasted a bit like one.

On Sunday we set off to finish the remaining thirty mile to Paris, as we had to check in between three and seven o’clock and then find ourselves a flop for what there was of the night. (We start the ride at 4:00am) Our plan was to divert slightly so that we would actually follow the official route into Paris, in order that we would know the way (If we ever got that far) four days later. The hills seemed gigantic and never ending. If the whole route is like this! But the last few miles into Paris are downhill and with surprisingly little trouble we get to the starts at Montesson, which is a huge field, with a few buildings where we have to get our cards. But first for the bike check. A couple of Audax men we know point to the areas laid out like a cattle market and we are quickly shepherded into pens, where a fairly rigorous check on the equipment is made. My checker wanted to see my spare tubs, and I told him I didn’t have any. He seems horrified until I show him my spare inner tubes, and he realises that I’m using Elans (*forerunners of 700x25 made to English 27”x1” size*), so that’s OK. He issued us each a pass ticket which we hand in at the registration point and collect our number, brevet card and our “Surprise T.A.” a bidon inscribed with 9^{eme} P.B.P.

Accommodation is arranged at a strange place called ‘Crepa’ and we have obscure directions in French and start to follow them. Difficult, but we have faith and soon start seeing arrows in weird places (They are the PBP route arrows) with CREPA written on them, and with a little help from the French Army (who cautiously let me inside the gatehouse of their barracks to see a street plan) we find C.R.E.P.A. a Y.H.A. cum study centre, and we are allowed to use the canteen and then sleep on hard mats in the Gymnasium. More arrive until it’s quite a merry throng, so with a few drinks in a nearby bar with others of the English contingent, we turn in until 3am when we must set off to the start.



II First, Fast and Furious – Keith & John

It's quiet in the Gym as I stir. 3:00am and all Paris is asleep? Don't you believe it! Already the Belgians on the next mats along are stirring. Stirring quietly that is because not all of us in the Gym are taking the 4:00am start. We pack up quickly and slide out of the Hostel. I'm riding with a saddlebag for night gear and a Karrimor Bardet full of maps and Kendal mint cake, and a half dozen Kellogs 'Rise & Shine' - highly thought of! Roll off down the hill on empty roads to the start, and John takes up the tale:

The 4:00am start is still a haze to me, as it was that chilly morning, just a mass of bikes and cyclists swarming and chattering like bees in a hive. Several hundred gleaming machines and fit, active riders waiting in anticipation by the light of enormous floodlights that seemed to be continually shining in my face. Noise was everywhere with P.A. Systems and calling voices of team mates lost in the crowd and friends all waiting; waiting for the off! Only five minutes . . . four . . . the tension mounted (and so did I) and the mass surged toward the gate, the exit for the off! 750 miles to come . . . the police motorcyclist revved up his engine, blue flashing lights went on and suddenly the bottle burst; we were on the road . . . The streetlight roads were lined with people and team coaches shouted as the clubs moved off. Slowly at first - think of the pile up if someone fell off - then up a climb onto cobbles, down, down, and right, faster. . . help! Where are the others? We seem to be doing evens now, and as the road twists there are glimpses of red tail lights as far as I can see 5 or 6 abreast, it's incredible. By some sort of miracle we rode as a foursome within a group for about 20 miles, content to follow through the-tricky first stage in - the Fôret de Rambouillet. As dawn broke and warmth started coming through we started to move up through the field slowly, keeping contact by calling to each other in English. But this marked us out as "Les Anglais" of course.

As dawn really broke we arrived in Nogent, which was only a control on the return leg, but a very nicely timed breakfast stop. At this time I think we must have been fairly well up the field, really fast men having gone way ahead and not stopped, so the cafe we chose was not too full. A lot of Roubaix men were there, all in matching strip "Dans la Rue avec V.C.Roubaix" and we learnt our first lesson for getting service in these situations; SHOUT! Surprise, here's Bill Brown of Cardiff Ajax and he shows us how "ere you Boyo, Grand Crem" elbowing out two hulking great Roubaix men who look as if they could mince him up. After Nogent we climbed and were soon on a plain of wheat fields, riding in a largish group halfway back and into a fairly tough head-wind. The atmosphere was strange and it dawned on us all slowly that these French were aware of our presence and a bit uneasy about it. But for one reason of another the front riders slowly dropped back (I'm sure it wasn't planned group riding) and I welcomed the opportunity to take the lead with Ray to show that we were not just joy-riding. But they were! We pulled a train of 40 or more into the stiff wind until we said enough and dropped out for some more coffee.

The first control at Belleme (99 miles) arrived in somewhat under the 8 hours, but of the control and what happened there John says that he cannot really remember. I can a little; card stamping very efficient and so is the meal service, although I can only remember the green beans. A bit of a joke that in the AUK contingent later, bloody green beans at every control! After lunch we push on to the next control, a shorter hop of 44 miles to Villaines. Short but tough, the main road between Belleme and Mamers has 6 gradient arrows on my Michelin - like a switchback. Villaines is superb! Top of the list for organisation. A tremendous building has been turned into a cafeteria for the exclusive use of us lot. The food is really good and the servers the most friendly that we find on the trip. No peace for the wicked though and we have to press on along strange winding roads and take a very tough climb in as we trek onwards to Fougères. We meet a couple of Englishmen (We meet them continually from now on.) and a group from RCP Camus of Boulogne. The ride is changing its character now during the early hours of the evening, frenzied haste and bustle has been replaced with a calmer, more relaxed mood, which persists for the rest of the trip - with a few notable exceptions.

There are a lot of people at Fougères, the control is at the Youth Hostel. Lining the road up to the control we can see all the team cars parked, all with their tables and chairs set out with food for their riders. We can't help feeling that some of these guys are really taking things easy, nearly all the French have only a

small bar bag and sparetub, they have only to reach a control and food is placed before them! We fight our way through the self-service feeding station and have to take what's going. Going? Yes, a lot are ... come on lads, the next stage looks tricky, a few miles of N12 and Juggernauts, a turn off onto a minor road that could easily be missed, and then minor roads in the dark all the way to Tinteniac... I'd like to be in that bunch!

Its 10pm now and we are much as we planned to be. We should make Tinteniac soon for a few hours kip, not far now, shortest stage in the ride in fact. I can't describe adequately that bit of road, we are tired but not at first are we sleepy. Even the French don't seem to be sure of the way, and the road goes on and on. Ray starts an intellectual conversation with me (at midnight!) but I know that he is just trying to keep awake. Here are two mad Englishmen in a pack of French yabbering away like demented idiots about George Orwell, T.S.Eliot, Compton Mackenzie and goodness knows what else, until we roll into the control at 1:30am. "Pardon", we buttonhole a poor auxiliary controller, "but where can we sleep?" We get the typical reaction of a Frenchman towards those who murder his language, he tries to back away! But we are four to one and with few inhibitions left! So he was nice and takes us in his car to a nearby school where . . . you've guessed it! There are no more beds! This seems inevitable to us now, we are told that all the beds are pre-booked. So we look helpless (a good trick and not too difficult!) and eventually we are found a small room to crash out in. Its 2am and we plan to get 4 hours sleep. We are 5 hours up on the maximum time now so that will leave us an hour in hand. It is not immediately obvious, but although we have checked in at Tinteniac control, we have to check out if we are there more than a half-hour, and we must have left it before it closes even though check in says 1:30! I observe some of the French moving off as I get up. They really are taking it easy. One gets out of bed, packs away his pyjamas, alarm clock and a host of other stuff into a huge suitcase which he delivers to his team vehicle - waiting with his breakfast - and pedals away.

Here we go again then at six in the morning, up out of the town, following a string of red lights. Hello, what's this up the road? It seems as if the string of lights suddenly stands on end and goes up vertically. Ah! It's only a TV tower on top of the hill thank goodness. I thought we were due for a 1-in-3 or something. The morning is cold alright but halfway up we strip down to shorts, we are overheating. After the spectacular TV tower we are ready for the long swoop down the other side, but confusion ahead and a lot of red lights weaving about, and oh ho, it is our first secret control. The crafty devils, only a few km out of Tinteniac it will catch anyone who overslept and didn't bother to check out on leaving! But we are O.K. as we shoot off into the dawn towards Loudeac, the next control, Ray takes up the story ...

III Tinteniac to the Turn – Ray

After the secret control, the confused riding of earlier had subsided and a large group formed which sped along swallowing up lone riders until about 8am when there were about 60. This was just what we wanted having started the day only 20 minutes up on time. At St.Meen we joined the main N164, a totally uninteresting stretch made worse by the undulating terrain. The orderly bunch also changed as they took the hills at walking pace and then hammered down the other side. At this time Roy & I lost touch with the other two, one minute they were there and then they were gone. We couldn't see them in the bunch but then saw two specks disappearing over the next hill, and with relief we set off in pursuit leaving the bunch without difficulty, and catching up on the outskirts of Loudeac.

We checked in at 9:15 but moved straight on as the cafés were all packed. Keith said he knew a place at St.Caradec from the club's Brittany tour of last year and so we sat down to breakfast in an otherwise empty cafe with 54 miles behind us, feeling much happier to be a further 1½ hours up on the "base-line". Not long after we caught another large group for the long climb up into the "Mur de Bretagne"; the "Wall of Brittany". In this group was Harry Kimberley from West Pennine RC, taking photos from all angles. The riders seemed to settle down to a tidy bunch which as always seemed to get bigger every time we looked round. All orderliness was shattered when we reached Rostrenen. Again John & Keith were near the front, Roy & I near the back when someone in the middle must have suggested coffee, for half the bunch just stopped! We were stranded while they sorted themselves out and again we set off in pursuit. This took a couple of miles.

No sooner had we caught them than it became noticeable that the people at the front were changing very quickly and right in the middle of it were two WESSEX jerseys! It seemed that wherever there was activity there was a blue shirt, for the speed was increasing and people were queuing up to get to the front. Gone were the thoughts of the next 400 miles - national pride was at stake! The French again showed their weakness on hills, when on the first climb, they changed down - and we changed up. Daylight appeared between us and the English were one up. The activity died down as suddenly as it started and left a string a couple of miles long, the remains of what had once been a bunch. We recovered in a cafe a few miles on at Carhaix-Plougier, the next control, with a couple of beers and reflected on how this had relieved the boredom of steady mile-bagging, also noting that we had picked up a further two hours on the section.

We then went round to the official cafe restaurant and were given our second unpleasant lesson on the differences between French & English attitudes. There was a single price of 25FF which we paid at the door. Then we sat quietly watching the waitresses flitting about tending to the slightest whim of some people. Still we sat, trying to attract attention while people came in after us and were served. After a long while, recognition from the servers was only in so much as to fob us off with a "Won't be a moment". Further delay and nothing arrived so we collected some water and bread and waited even longer and chewed angrily. Keith had tried explaining to the woman on the door how long we had been waiting and that we were in a hurry - she affected not to understand his French, so he shouted at her in English, and then disappeared into the kitchen with us following and came out with a plate of roast beef and mash from under the eyes of the astonished chef, then returned for seconds! Not long after that we got served! We felt totally within our rights to three meals each as we had waited so long, we had spent 1½ hours over lunch and lost almost all of our gain in the previous section. The weather in the morning had been warm, but over lunch the heat started to rise. This didn't detract from the next section on the winding road to Huelgoat. After this though, there was a long and monotonous climb, a lot of it deceptive road which the French call "faux plat" or false flat. This climb to the Roc Trevezel (1200 feet) seemed like an advert for lager - dusty, hot & very thirsty work. It was a strange feeling having climbed for 4 miles effectively on your own to find that we were cheered on at the top by spectators and waved across the dual carriageway by a Gendarme, and someone had written "Courage" in the road. On the ensuing descent we caught up with two French women and John went past. One of the girls showed a great liking for the descent and she, Keith & I enjoyed a very fast three-up to Sizun, 9 miles away. I think we surprised the groups we passed who saw this girl being chased by two lecherous Englishmen at twenty-fives.

More coffee, and Roy turned up not long after. Over coffee, Roy said "John?, he's just gone past, didn't you see him?" so we followed, but we didn't see John before the turn. I suffered a great temptation in Guipavas as a chap in a cafe offered me a drink. The draw of Brest was greater and I turned it down, but I still don't believe it! We descended through the rush hour traffic to be waved across two lanes by a Gendarme. A Tannoy was blaring at the turn, some sort of commentary with advertising. After a free drink the four of us linked up and decided to move out of the busy control and eat later. There was a sense of anti-climax at Brest as we had set this as our target, and we left with the awesome thought of doing the same distance again!

IV Back from Brest – Ray

A short stop at Guipavas for provisions, just six miles out, lengthened as first a chemists shop and then a café were found. The lady pharmacist kindly opened shop just for us and was tolerant of our lack of French as we purchased Vaseline & talcum powder. Being true gentlemen we did not explain what these were for. We met a few English and then picked up a tailwind when we made good time back to Sizun where a coffee stop seemed a good idea before re-tackling the Roc Trevezel. At the top it was now dark and the temperature started to drop, but we were going well. As we started the descent we could see the lights of Quimper far off to the right. Soon we joined a group, one of whom was sporting a light on his leg, something the French are keen on. This was going up and down, mesmerising me as I rode behind him. After two full days this was an unfair burden on anybody! At around this time, and nobody seems to know when, Roy disappeared with a few other riders, not to be seen again by me until the finish. The only

surprise was that it hadn't happened earlier. The three of us reached Carhaix just after 1am, there had been some talk of moving on to the next control, but this slowly lost favour in the last hour. This had been a long day; 200 miles in 19 hours, we had gone from a mere 20 minutes up to 5½ hours up, and all we wanted to do was get our heads down for a while. Instead there was confusion as to where the accommodation was. Then Mick Latimer appeared and in his quaint Geordie way he bellowed at the controller and intimidated him into telling us. Then of course there was no space, Keith found a mattress, John & I were led around a bit until the warden gave up. He seemed to get the message that anywhere would do when we lay down on the landing of the stairs! So he then took us back into the dormitory and gave us blankets and pillows. I didn't need second bidding and was asleep before my head hit the deck. It seemed funny therefore to be woken up ½ hour later to be told there was a bed free! Why are the French so perverse? Sleep until 5am, breakfast on bananas and fruit cake then back to the control to check out. Another day, and another chapter which I leave for Roy to tell. . .

V Carhaix Cruising – Roy

When I awoke at Carhaix it took me some moments to realise where I was! I could see no sign of the officials with whom I had arranged to be woken, but feeling surprisingly fresh I dressed and began to look over the rows of bodies to find the others. It was hopeless, there was nothing for it but to ride on alone. Presenting my card before leaving I noted that it was still only 3:45am, I had had just 3 hours sleep. There were very few participants on the road between Carhaix and Loudeac and it was extremely cold, even in my tracksuit I was shivering so I kept up a good pace to keep warm, passing ones and twos who were travelling very slowly. Mist and pale morning light gave everything a mystical appearance, not least the mass of flashing lights I could see in the distance, which I knew from the outward leg must be another "secret" control! I stopped here in a tiny cafe and was joined by one of the English riders, looking totally shattered. He seemed to recognise me but insisted in talking in French despite my constant reminders. Suddenly he walked out without buying anything and rode off - lack of sleep was getting to us all. After coffee and croissants at Loudeac I set off again and by now the sun was warming things up and my spirits were soaring. Although I had cycled many more kilometres and was on my own, I emulated our previous days ride by sprinting from one peloton to the next.

The incredulous cries I got from the French "Regardez l'Anglais Blond" only served further to boost my ego, and I arrived in Tinteniac in time for an early lunch in an almost deserted "Hotel des Voyageurs" which had been such a scramble on the outward leg. I was able to consume the obligatory steak and green beans in relative comfort! It was scorching as I set out on the next stage to Fougères and I began to regret the dash on the previous stage as my cadence dropped further and further until I was literally crawling along. By now the headwind of the outward journey had reversed so that it was once again a headwind. A small group of French passed all dressed in the same jerseys. I knew that my hanging on the back would not be appreciated, but at that time I couldn't care less. I soon got my rhythm back however, and after showing them how to climb a few hills, I got chatting with one of them who spoke quite good English. This respite was short-lived as an additional rattle from my missing jockey wheel caused me to stop and investigate. The chain bouncing on the bolt had loosened it, but although I soon corrected matters, the French team were nowhere to be seen and I continued my weary way to Fougères alone. At Fougères, I helped myself to all the moist food I could find and sat to eat it at a leisurely pace. A couple of beers later and a trip to the excellent washrooms at this control, I decided that I'd been there long enough, but as I was leaving, I saw a vaguely familiar face cramming itself with food. It was John. "Have you seen the others?" he asked, "I thought they were well up on me." But I assured him that it was unlikely that Keith or Ray could have passed me without my seeing them.

(We thought that we were ahead of John too! He must have passed us while we were in a cafe ... *Keith*)

John was going well at this stage and after my long rest we made good time to Villaines arriving at 10pm. We were now over seven hours up and decided to have a good rest. Enquiries about sleeping accommodation led us to a large shed where we stood blankly as huge boxes were broken up and spread on the floor on which we were told that we could sleep. A pile of blankets was brought which we utilised

and settled down with vague uneasiness about waking up on time. We only had about 230km to go now and it would be a disaster if we overslept now! It didn't prevent me from dozing off though. . .

VI The Home Straight – Keith

Ray and I also sampled the delights of the superb Villaines control. We were later and didn't arrive until 1am, and found that the sleeping accommodation was now in the main hall where we had eaten on the outward journey. Straw had been spread out over the floor of the huge barn-like building. Even in our sorry state, for I had been suffering from the heeby-jeebies on the run in to Villaines, it was easy to see the system. The scene was surrealistic to say the least:

1. Tear yourself off a bit of paper tablecloth.
2. Write desired time of awakening on it.
3. Find yourself a spare bit of floor. (Difficult)
4. Pin paper on chest
5. Sleep. (Easy)
6. Wake up when kicked in ribs.

Simple and effective isn't it? We rose at some ungodly hour and trooped off into the cold night with bunches of others, our last day on the road. As dawn breaks, no one is more pleased to see it than me; lack of sleep and dark roads is making me nod off. The sun is up by the time we pass through Mamers. John is in the cafe here, so we join up again for the awful main road with the switchback profile to the next control at Belleme. On the top of one of the peaks is a secret control, don't see the point of that one; it won't be catching anyone surely? Then off down the other side and I hit a big stone (The road is littered with them) and pick up the only puncture that any of us get on the whole journey. I curse, but it could have been worse with a brick that size! The cover is not broken and it hasn't buckled the wheel at all. I meet the others at Belleme, we go on without waiting after our cards are stamped. Ray and I stop for breakfast later but John goes on, so we are on our own again. Soon we are back up on the plain with the wheat, most of which has been harvested since the outward trip, everything looks different. We are drifting along not pressing ourselves at all as the day becomes hotter and hotter.

A beer first, and then press on to the penultimate control at Nogent le Roi. With 50 miles to go, it's about 1:30pm and I'm feeling the heat and have to stop in some shade. Ray gives me a disapproving look which startles me because Ray never gives disapproving looks, I must be in a bad way! I pull myself together, "Lets go to Paris!" I say, and weariness, aches, pains aside begin to force myself into a strong rhythm.

Soon we are on roads that we know, because we traced them last Sunday when we were going to the start, although it seems like centuries ago now. This is a great morale booster and our pace goes up with a "bit and bit" routine and we begin to pass large groups of clubs who look really weary. Only one knarled old randonneur attempts to follow us and sits in for a while as Ray eats a Mars in preparation for the last 20 miles, but as Ray finishes we are both feeling great and in no mood to be philanthropic. Sorry old chap, but you're not staying with us now, and we power up one of the hills that seemed so gigantic on the reconnaissance run. Ray has to pedal like crazy on the descent the other side, his freewheel has gone fixed! We squirt it with oil, as we are in no mood for sophistication at this juncture.

Through a small town on the outskirts of Paris, a "lady" seems to wish us to stop as she throws open a car door in my path, cracking me on a finger joint. Ray thinks this a miraculous escape as he is only about 1" off my back wheel at the time. The French air is split with very Anglo-Saxon four-letter words as I realise that I'm still here and moving, it is too late though, we are gone and the "lady" would barely have heard them. The pace is "evens" and suddenly we are swooping down into Paris, across a traffic scheme without a thought, just like the French do, and then the indignity of a final cobbled street, and here we are at the last control.

Crowds everywhere as we push in to get our cards taken away from us, those friendly little booklets that have marked our progress over the last four days, will we ever see them again? They have built up a set of control stamps that make a sentence:

1904; 1979; LXXV eme; AUDAX; CLUB; PARISIEN; PARIS; BREST.

Bliss; sitting in the sun, viewing the scene in relaxed mood now with Phil Benstead of Catford CC and some other AUKs. John dozes off on the grass and we nudge him “Wake up, wake up, the next control closes in a half-hour!” Cruel, but irresistible.

VII Havre and Home – Keith

This journey I promised to tell about splits into isolated fragments as we wander back along the Seine valley, a marvellous route which I would recommend to anyone as part of a tour. The road hugs the river on one side and has a cliff all the way along the other. After a long sleep at the C.R.E.P.A., we posted a few letters home before setting off, and passed the talcum powder round again, you know what for! I pull the waistband of my shorts and squeeze a soothing puff of cool talc where it is needed . . . and the top comes of the pack! The others are highly amused as I seem to emit puffs of smoke every time I move.

A strange chapel is set into the cliffs near Roche Guyon and we stop to look. It is quite deserted and turns out to be a run-down cemetery too. There are stones engraved to French soldiers of the 1914-18 war, with small enamelled portraits of the fallen heroes inset in the stone, so fresh they look as if they were placed yesterday. The atmosphere of the place suits my mood exactly, I feel drained. Some French cyclos go by us and we give chase and get talking, telling them we plan to go to Andeleys for the night. We understand that accommodation may be difficult, but cannot understand why, but in the meanwhile going up a short rise, John moves up front with me saying “I think I’ve got a puncture.” No sooner has he spoken than there is a strangled cry from behind and we all look back to see Ray sitting in the road. I’ll never forget the bemused expression on his face! A lady motorist, anxious to get by us, has given him a friendly push from behind to help him up the hill. I’ve never seen a back wheel so completely destroyed, but luckily there is no damage to the frame and only a small scratch to Ray.

Ray gets a lift to Andeleys and our French friends take us to a super bike shop and have already got the dealer bringing out his most expensive wheels! We saw our lady friend part with 350FF and slip Ray another 50FF with a “lets hear no more about it look.” In the meantime, I have found a hotel with no trouble, but there is something odd about the town, we can’t see what. There is a small fair in the square, some people are erecting wooden frameworks, but at 6pm everything is dead and closed. Next morning though, noises off at 7am tell us that everything is awake, and we look out to see the biggest flea-market ever. It looks as if everyone from miles around has turned up with all the old junk from their attic, and dumped it on the pavement. This is exactly right. Ray and I have an enjoyable rummage, me for stamps and Ray for coins, while the other two look bored, but then, they are not old like Ray. Eventually we proceed, falling down into Rouen on a most spectacular hill and then to Caudebec and the last boring miles into Le Havre ferry terminal, where we suffocate in a stifling cabin as we sail for Albion.

Mission Accompli!