

LONDON – EDINBURGH – LONDON **Saturday 23 July to Thursday 28 July 2005**

This is the Flagship event in the AUDAX UK calendar. It's a cycle ride of 1400 kms with two starting points, one at Lee Valley youth hostel, London and the other at Thorne Rugby club near Doncaster. The format of the event is an out-and-back course and the reason for two starting points is to make the number of entrants easier to manage. The route meanders through large swathes of England and Southern Scotland, incorporating picturesque villages, ex-mining communities and Pennine market towns. Also, along the way, you encounter numerous strenuous hill climbs, together with some of the most flat desolate and uninhabited parts of Lincolnshire and East Anglia. The contrast between LEL and PBP is chalk and cheese - French flair compared to the good old British stiff upper lip and improvisation, Haute cuisine against rugby club catering, route signs at every junction compared to 8 pages of closely typed directions. The most significant difference being 1200kms of a fairly flat, sunny meander through French country lanes, with all the locals cheering and spurring you on, against 1400kms of an out and return slog over the Pennines, six hard climbs through the Scottish Borders, often with head winds, jeers from lorry drivers and loud blasts on car horns to get out of the way from impatient motorists, with just a bleat from the odd sheep to encourage you on your way. Nevertheless, LEL was my goal for 2005.

The challenges for me in riding long distances are fourfold: physical endurance, mental stability, Cycle maintenance and the enjoyment on completion. My aim was not only to finish the ride but I also wanted to complete it in a good time.

I had been planning and training for this ride for 8 months and my schedule was similar to that of PBP two years previously. I cycled, on average, 250 to 300 miles a week prior to the event, together with Audax events of 100, 200, 300, 400 and 600 km. I elected to start from Thorne for the obvious reason of the vicinity but also to get the hilly Northern section over with while I was fresh. The time limit for the whole event is quite generous being 116 hours and 40 minutes. The overall average speed is as low as 12km/7.5m per hour with only the slowest being timed out.

Thorne to Hovingham (0 – 84 kms (84 Kms)) The start time was 08:00 with 40 riders departing at 15 minute intervals. I was in the second group along with 14 members of the VC167 Club. They had designs to be the club with the most finishers in the fastest time. Needless to say they set off at a fierce pace of about 23 miles per hour. I was soon on my own at the back of this group cycling through familiar territory. Howden, Stamford Bridge, Barton le Willows, Slingsby and Castle Howard where I came upon the first hills and began picking off riders that had started off too fast. The Hovingham control was very busy so I got my card stamped, refilled my bottle and went on my way. The weather was perfect, sunny, and not too hot, with a gentle side wind.

Hovingham to Eppleby (84 - 163 kms (80 kms)) I was still on my own and it was not long before the VC 167 train overtook me, still travelling

too fast for me to tag onto. I continued on through familiar territory of Yearsley, Coxwold where I had my photo taken, Sowerby, Yafforth, Middleton Tyas and on into Eppleby village hall.

Eppleby to Alston (163 - 232 kms (68 km)) Onwards and northwards up Teesdale through Barnard Castle the home of the impressive Bowes museum. On this section you have a choice of where you have your control card stamped, either Langdon Beck YH or Alston YH. I decided on Alston as this was after the 15 km climb over Yaddon Moss. I had descended this climb before on the 'Old 240' 400 km Audax from Halifax in 2003 so I knew what was coming. The scenery in the North Pennines really is superb. The Youth Hostel was well sign-posted so was not difficult to find. Although only a small Youth Hostel the helpers were doing a sterling job. I must say at this point that there were about 10 helpers (all unpaid volunteer cyclists) at all the 11 controls making your passage through as hassle free as possible. I had a meal here as it was not very busy and it did not take long before I was on my way again.

Alston to Canonbie (232 - 291 kms (60 km)) The hills towards Brampton were not a problem and there now came another option of whether to follow the hilly route or the heavily trafficked A6071 and A7 into Canonbie. As I was still on my own I decided on the latter as I had no maps with me, I was relying only on the route sheets and did not fancy getting lost. The food at Canonbie was all you could eat for £5 with no other option. As I had only eaten 3 hours previously I declined and ate some of the supplies from my panniers. I did the necessaries and as there was no one ready to leave, or looked as if there would be for some time, I set out on my own.

Canonbie to Ettrick (291 – 344 kms (53 km)) Before leaving I put on some extra clothes and set out with my lights on along a very dark and narrow road. The reason there were few riders in front and none willing to follow me was because they had elected to stay overnight in Canonbie. I wondered whether I should have done the same!!! Was I going to expire before I got to Edinburgh, I knew there was no sleeping facilities at Ettrick. It was too late now and I was still feeling pretty good so decided to stop worrying and continue enjoying the ride. This part of Scotland is fairly remote and apart from seeing the magnificent Tibetan temple at Eskdalemuir which was all lit up, showing its true splendour, there was very little traffic and very few people around. I caught two riders up who had gone off course and we arrived at the school hall in Ettrick at 23:40.

Ettrick to Edinburgh (344 – 410 kms (66 km)) The temperature according to the controller was predicted to fall to 3 degrees Celsius. It felt like it so I put on all the clothing I had with me together with reflective bib and went to find my bike in the pitch darkness. I was glad now that I had found two companions and decided to stick with them. As we had arrived together after 344 kms we must be travelling at about the same speed. Although it was not freezing it certainly felt like it. This section over the hills cycling in the moonlight soon passed as we chatted about strategies. After all there was still going to be another 1010 kms of cycling after Edinburgh. There was

one problem after Innerleithen with a road closure and a detour. I always believe that you can carry your bike around an obstacle and elected to carry on, the other two agreed, something about safety in numbers. When I am cycling in total darkness with only my lights lighting up a small section of road, I cannot judge the road climbing the hillsides. I have no idea of the forthcoming gradient or the length of the climb, often being in the wrong gear and not knowing what gear I am cycling in, maybe this will come with more experience. So it was slow going climbing and very, very cold and risky descending. After a while we encountered riders on their way back travelling south, confirming that the road was passable. We arrived at Dalkeith Rugby club Control at 03:15. There was a mattress free in a sleeping room so I bagged this and booked an early call.

Day 1 Thorne - Edinburgh 410 km in 19 Hours.

Edinburgh to Ettrick (410 – 476 kms (66 km)) I was duly woken at 06:30, I have read somewhere that you sleep in 3 hour cycles !!! There was a bag-drop here, but as I had not contributed to this facility I had a strip wash and did the necessaries. Next came food which was all you could eat for £3. Whilst I was breakfasting along with the VC167 group and many others including my two overnight companions, I realised that many were still sleeping having arrived after me and was told that others had already left. I finally got started again and was in a large group, I knew there were some big hills to come but they were going to be climbed in daylight. The scenery was superb, the views spectacular and the descents very fast – I was feeling good and looking forward to the day's cycling. The VC167 group soon pulled away and I was glad that my two companions did not put up a chase. They realized I was doing the event on my own and accepted my presence. Being Sunday morning we saw many club riders out and I thought what a superb area to have on your doorstep – very different to Holderness and a ride to Withernsea.

Ettrick to Canonbie (476 – 529 kms (53 km)) Just a quick stop to get card stamped, refill water bottle and take off some clothing as it was warming up. As was done at all of the controls I thanked the helpers profusely and carried on my way. We now saw many Thorne riders still heading north. This gave me a good feeling, knowing I had time in the bag. There was still not a great deal of traffic. We passed the Tibetan temple again at Eskdalemuir arriving without incident at the Cannonbie Community Centre. I got £5 out to have my fill of all I could eat and was asked if I was going north or south. I replied "South", was told it was only £4. Obviously I don't understand Scottish logic but did not complain.

Canonbie to Alston (529 – 589 kms (60 km)) During this stage one of my companions was dropping off the back. Was he going through a bad patch, did he want time on his own? We waited whilst taking a comfort break and when he caught us up it transpired he was suffering from an upset stomach. As they were riding together they told me to go on, I was on my own again but after some hard riding soon caught up two riders who had been

dropped by the VC167 group. It was not long before we saw the first of the London starters travelling north just before we arrived at Alston Youth Hostel.

Alston to Eppleby via Langdon Beck (589 – 657 kms (68 km))

My companions were staying for a longer break, so I left on my own and encountered the cobbled and very steep climb out of Alston, the highest town in England. A different view of Yaddon Moss and a great descent into Langdon Beck Youth Hostel where I decided to have a warm drink. Here I had a very short stop as there were a couple of riders just leaving. We were now going into a very strong head wind which was slowing us down. Not so for the London Starters which we encountered, many travelling very fast with the tail wind. It was very hard going and strength sapping through Teesdale, Middleton, Mickleton, Romaldkirk, Cotherstone, Lartington and Barnard Castle where we all took turns on the front. That was a tough section and I was glad to arrive at Eppleby village Hall. Here I finished off most of my supplies, just leaving enough in my panniers as emergency rations.

Eppleby to Hovingham (657 – 737kms (80 km))

There was still a strong, warm southerly head wind but with the worst of the climbs behind us we made good progress through Melsonby, Middleton, Moulton, Scorton and Yafforth. It was here that my two new companions needed to take a break. It was 01:00 (Monday morning) and very dark. I decided to stay with them and we took a power nap of about 30 minutes. We came across the last of the London starters. I asked him if he had had a problem as he had only covered about 400km. He replied "I was going well until I came to the hills at Castle Howard". I dreaded to think what he was going to do when he got to Scotland. It was not long before I was on familiar territory again and riding through Sowerby, Coxwold and Yearsley, arriving at Hovingham Village Hall at 03:30 to find all the sleeping places taken. I had hoped to get to Thorne but this was not to be the case. I found a quiet dark part of the hall and lay down and went to sleep.

Day two Edinburgh to Hovingham 327 km in 19 hours 30 Minutes.

Hovingham to Thorne (737 – 821 kms (84 km))

I woke up to the smell of bacon frying at 06:30. I knew I would not get back to sleep again so got up and had breakfast. Last night's strong winds had died down. It had also rained which I luckily missed. I have travelled this next section many times before, through Slingsby, Barton Le Willows, Bossall, Sand Hutton and Stamford Bridge, where I pointed out the toilets and showed a companion where he could get some money from an ATP machine. This was the worst section of the ride for inconsiderate car drivers along with the state of the roads and the vast amounts of detritus (rubbish). Next came Wilberfoss and Sutton on Derwent, it was here that we were overtaken by a rider who had started from London, a member of Oxford CC road club, we were not hanging about but he started 300 kms behind us !!! Just think; 1417 km on your own, and they say "*it's not a race*". Next came Howden, Boothferry Bridge and eventually arriving back at Thorne at 10:45. My car was still there so I first took a shower, applied ointments to my nether regions and had a complete change of kit and took an early lunch. I sorted out my panniers and

replenished my stock of food for the ride to London and return while waiting for a leaving group to tag onto.

Thorne to Lincoln (821 – 898 kms (77 km)) A few riders had dropped out at Thorne including a couple from the VC167 group along with Martin Sladin my PBP companion from 2003. As with the previous two days the VC167 group pulled away and I was left in a group of six. I was still feeling good no real aches or pains and only a few hours behind my pre-planned schedule. I was not very familiar with this section but knew from looking at the map that it was not going to be very inspiring, so I was mentally prepared for the tedium. Sandtoft, Misterton Walkeringham, Beckingham, Saundby, Sturton, Dunham, Thorney, Wigsley and Harby all came and went while I was chatting to an ex Liverpoolian who had gone to the USA to work 25 years ago. Well, I say work, he was a professor who lectured at Harvard University on 'The effects that global warming was having on crops'. I told him I used to be in the RAF, then worked for the Council and was now at Larards. It must have been the way I said it because he sounded impressed, he clearly did not understand. The Youth Hostel in Lincoln is in the Middle of the City. It was mid afternoon and the traffic was heavy and unforgiving. We arrived at 15:50 when we were greeted by the controller Chris Crossland of the West Yorkshire CTC DA from Sowerby Bridge. I have previously been on a few AUDAX events that he organises.

Lincoln to Thurlby (898 – 968 kms (70km)) I wanted to exit the city before the evening rush hour, so I only had a quick snack and, with the same group of six, we were on our way within the hour. The route after the city was quite rural, travelling through Normanton, Ancaster, Ropsley Bulby, Elsthorpe, Edenham, Toft and arriving at the Church Primary School Thurlby at 21:35. Here the VC167 group, along with others, were planning to stay the night. My American companion asked me what I was going to do. I explained that although it was 87km to the next control I had only done 230 km today and that my pre-planned schedule was to continue. He said he would do the same. I had two helpings of beans on toast, a double bacon banjo, mixed fruit and rice pudding, two mugs of tea and a can of coke for the road all for £2:15. I queried this and the lady said the drinks were free.

Thurlby to Gamlingay (968 – 1055 kms (87km)) There were 42 route instructions on this section of which 30 were less than 3 km. Had we taken on too much? We were riding through small hamlets and villages which were in total darkness. I had purchased a head torch from ALDI for £2.99 on which you could have 2, 4 or 8 LED's alight. What a superb and invaluable piece of kit this turned out to be for reading the route sheet. My companion had a handlebar mounted satellite navigation system. Well, being an American he would, wouldn't he? So we managed to navigate through West Deeping, Wansford, Elton, all the Giddings, St Neots, Eynesbury arriving at Gamlingay Community Centre at 02:45. Here we found out that we were the 15th and 16th cyclists to arrive. One of them was the London starter who had overtaken us earlier yesterday, he'd had his card stamped and did not stop. He was definitely going to finish in a record breaking time.

Day Three Hovingham to Gamlingay 312 km in 19 hours 45 minutes

Gamlingay to London (1055 – 1120 kms (65km)) As there were plenty of air beds and blankets, I decided to sleep and do all the necessities in the Morning. Woke at 06:30 refreshed with a few aches and pains, I had plenty to eat and drink refilled my bottles and with my new American companion, John, set out for London. It was not long before we were caught up in the rush hour traffic, Audi's, BMW's, Shoguns, Range Rovers and the like. This was a real stockbroker belt area where the many instructions took us through Potton, Guilden, Ashwell, Cromer, Walkern, Benington, Essenden, Brickendon, Hertford, White Stubbs, Holy Cross etc. etc. etc eventually arriving at Cheshunt and the new London Youth Hostel 'Lee Valley'. This is a very picturesque location but very close to a main line & Underground rail track. The number of trains was amazing and the length of time the barriers were down was equally so. I shall not complain again about the Cottingham Level crossing.

London to Gamlingay (1120 – 1185 kms (65 km)) I heard that many of the foreign cyclists had got lost in this section, we were either lucky or concentrated and stuck to the route instructions implicitly. It is also fairly hilly in this area and I noticed that John started dropping off the back. I eventually stopped for a comfort break to wait for him, he explained that I should not wait for him anymore, his knee had swollen up and he was in discomfort. I said I would stick with him to the next control. After 15 minutes of very slow cycling we came to Benington and he was now in pain and had to stop. I left him in good hands at a small village shop where they were putting frozen packets of peas on his knee to reduce the swelling. I bade him farewell and set off on my own again. My thoughts on injury, aches and pains stayed with me until I saw a large group of riders coming towards me. I knew it was the VC167 group, very distinctive in their club strip of maroon with a yellow diagonal stripe. Cheers and waves all round. I arrived at Gamlingay and explained to the Controller what had happened to John. In return he asked me to look out for 'Astrid' a German lady rider who had phoned in three times asking for help. She was lost.

Gamlingay to Thurlby (1185 – 1272 kms (87 km)) The control was very busy with many riders going south but well organised, so I had a quick second breakfast washed down with two mugs of tea. They had also made up a snack bag containing fruit bars, banana, chocolate bar, cheese roll and a bag of crisps to help us on our way. There was no one going north so I set out on my own again. After 10 km travelling down a one way street in St Neots, I saw a cyclist coming towards me on my side of the road. Was I tired, had I made a mistake? Neither, it was Astrid. I forgot to ask at the control which way she was going and started giving her instructions of how to get to Gamlingay. She had already been there and was trying to get to Thurlby. "It's your lucky day" I said and she duly turned round. After five mini-roundabouts and a few other instructions we were back in the lanes of Hertfordshire/Cambridgeshire. It turned out that Astrid was a very experienced rider, having done many Audax events but mainly on the Continent. We talked about PBP whilst cycling through Kimbolton, Catworth

Old Weston, the Giddings, Elton, Wansford, West Deeping and eventually arriving at the control in Thurlby.

Thurlby to Lincoln (1272 – 1343 kms (71km)) The control was not very busy, only the slower riders who had started from Thorne, but they were still within the time limit. Astrid and I left together after having had something to eat. We were now being greeted by London starters going south, a good camaraderie on the road. Through Edenham, Elsthorpe, Ingoldsby and Ancaster the going was not hard. It became dark. There was still 30 km of rural countryside to the outskirts of Lincoln. I was becoming tired, it was only the concentrating on speaking German that kept me going. Astrid had missed me making a turn, I had to go back. This was becoming dangerous. I was very grateful to arrive at the Lincoln YH at 23:50 and was amazed at the number of cyclists. Germans are not noted for their sense of humour but Astrid asked me if I was going on. “No way” said I. We were fortunate to get beds. I had a shower and was soon in bed fast asleep.

Lincoln to Thorne (1343 – 1417 kms (70 km)) I woke up at 02:45 and could not get back to sleep again because of the snoring. I got up. Astrid was still asleep in the bunk above me. I thought of giving her a shake but thought of the implications!!!! I left a message with Chris the controller and set out on the final leg. I followed the instructions through Eagle Moor, Harby, Wigsley, Thorney and crossed the river Trent at Dunham. Although I had ridden this section on Monday, I did not remember it apart from it being uninteresting, but who cares, soon be over, a shower some clean clothes and I will be in my own bed tonight. The roads here are long, flat and straight, no turns so no Instructions needed. It was 06:30 I could see cyclists in the distance coming towards me, in ones and twos and small groups, about 40 cyclists in all who had spent the night at Thorne. They all gave me a cheer as I went by. They had 300 kms to go to get to London, a long day’s cycling in front of them but they had 22 hours left in which to get there. I eventually arrived at Thorne as the last London bound rider was leaving at 07:10 on Wednesday Morning. The controller congratulated me as I handed over my Brevet Card. I said “I know it’s not a race, but, how many are there in front of me?” He said I was the 4th to arrive. I was very pleased with myself as I went to take a shower and change into some clean cloths, then waited to cheer in some of those behind me.

Day Four. Gamlingay to Thorne via London 362 km in 22 hours 50 minutes.

Total Time taken was 3 days 23 hours and 50 minutes. I recorded 1431 kms, so I must have gone off course in a couple of places.

The ride was about as I had expected it would be once the main hills were out of the way. The “Seven P’s” had worked for me “Prior Planning & Preparation Prevents P... Poor Performance”. In my opinion the organisation of the event was very good. I was lucky with the weather and not one drop of rain. I had no mechanical problems, not even a puncture. No illnesses and very little aches or pains. Will I do it again in 2009? Who knows? Next year

it is the turn of the Germans. From Saturday 19th August to Thursday 24th August 2006, 1500km / 940miles, starting from Hamburg to Berlin to Koln and back to Hamburg. In 2007 it's PBP again. Could I do Boston – Montreal – Boston in 2008 as my 65th Birthday treat?

David Wilkie