

The 15th Paris – Brest – Paris from 18 to 22 August 2003

Part One

A chance remark from a companion Sunday DA member about a challenge for 2003, led me through the winter of 2002 to gain as much information about the most prestigious of all the long-distance cycling events. Namely the 1200 km ride (race) from Paris to Brest and back to Paris again. This event is only organised every four years and is affectionately referred to as PBP.

First of all you have to qualify! This means completing a ride of 200kms by April 6 at the latest, 300kms by April 27, 400kms by June 1 and 600kms by June 22. These must all be categorised BRM (i.e. registered with the PBP Paris organisers) and be in the AUDAX calendar of rides. You can substitute a longer ride in place of a shorter ride, but the ride must be completed within the window of events. The Qualifying events that I completed were:

200 km from Alfreton Saturday 22 March	In 9 hours
200 km from Wiggington Sunday 30 March	In 9 hours 30 mins
300 km from Wiggington Saturday 19 April	In 14 hours 17 mins
400 km from Mytholmroyd Saturday 10 May	In 22 hours 8 mins
600 km from Mytholmroyd Saturday 7 June	In 35 hours 55 mins
600 km from Alfreton Saturday 14 June	In 36 hours 37 mins

Why did I do two 200's and two 600's? Well, I submitted my applications for all the events in January. When it came to March I thought that if I did not complete the 200 from Wiggington for whatever reason, and they're being no other qualifying events before the cut-of date, I would have failed at the first hurdle. So I Entered On The Line a week before for a 200 in Alfreton. The two 600s was a similar situation except, why do another 600 when you have already qualified, well firstly I had paid my money, but more importantly, I thought that if I was expecting to do two consecutive 600s in four consecutive days, it would be a good guide to my level of fitness and stamina if I entered the second one with a 5 day break.

Once you have qualified you are then entitled to send in an entry form (in French), which must arrive in Paris by July 14. Fortunately the entry form is despatched to a UK French speaking organiser who checks all applications for omissions and inaccuracies. The cost of entry this year was 91 Euros.

There are of course other conditions of entry which I will outline the most important ones. All types of cycle may be used (Bicycle, tandem, triplet of which there was one this year, tricycle, all-terrain and special) basically as long as it is propelled by human muscle power only, it is legal. One Norwegian completed the event on a scooter. It had a 27-inch front wheel, 12-inch rear wheel with conventional straight handlebars and a platform that was only large enough for one foot. I had the good fortune to ride alongside him for a couple of miles, his English was very good, he must have got fed up though by the end of the event, having to explain why he was doing it on a scooter, his technique, was he in any pain, did he also ride a conventional cycle, etc. etc, bearing in mind that there were 4433 starters.

You must supply a medical certificate, which is less than three months old stating that you are medically fit and physically apt to cover the 1200kms distance without any risk to your health, I suppose that must also include your sanity as well. In addition proof of individual insurance, which must include a repatriation option. It was at this stage I was wondering as to whether this challenge was such a good idea.

The cycle must possess a primary and secondary lighting system, both at the front and rear. Lights must be permanently attached to the cycle even during the daytime. A rear red blinking diode was forbidden. Three replacement bulbs were required and mine were checked. A reflective vest or cross belt (Sam Brown) must be worn when riding at night. All this equipment was presented on the day of the cycle check. Tri-bars or extensions to the handlebars of any description were also forbidden. Cycle helmets were only recommended this year, but rumour has it that for 2007 they will be compulsory. Accompanying vehicles were allowed but they were forbidden on the official cyclist route. There were penalties of mainly one hour for non-compliance of any of the rules.

When you submit your entry form there is a choice of start times. I had to decide on how many hours I was going to try and complete the event within, i.e. 80, 84 or 90 hours, which cannot be changed at a later date. This number of hours determines your starting time. If you go for the 'Under 80 hours' that's entering into the race proper, the starting time is 20:00 hours for all types of machines. The 'Under 90 hours' solos starting time was at 22:00 hours with the specials leaving 15 minutes earlier at 21:45, all on Monday. The 'Under 84 hours' Specials started at 04:45 and solos at 05:00 on Tuesday. I tried to find out how the start times were derived at, but as with everything else I try to find the answer to with regard to cycling. The reply always seems to be 'Its Tradition'. I suppose they all have their merits for and against and it is all down to personal preference. Having said that, if you have elected for the 20:00 hours start time but for whatever reason you don't complete the event within the stipulated 80 hours, but complete it within 84 or 90 hours, you have deemed to have failed. Being a first timer I decided to go for the full 90 hours, get my monies worth of pain.

Next I had to think about Travel and Accommodation. Graham Baxter Tours do a package for you and your cycle, which includes travel to and return from Paris, with accommodation and some meals. One of their buses is also available as a bag drop at one of the Controls on the ride. The draw back for me was that your bike had to be in a box or a bag and everything comes at a price. In 1999 there was a group of 20+ who travelled on the Portsmouth – Caen overnight ferry on the Thursday night, with an overnight stop in Evreux on Friday night. Arriving at the official AUDAX UK hotel 'Pavillon Bleu' on Saturday. This year there was over thirty who elected for this method of travel. I did consider this but I think it was for the more experienced minimalist traveller than myself. Many entrants from the UK travelled independently by train, car, and plane. One person I spoke to got a return ticket from his travel agent from Kendal to Paris on Virgin trains and EuroStar for £80. If you compare that with £55 for the Portsmouth – Caen overnight ferry and having to get to Portsmouth in the first place, it pays you to shop around. I elected to travel independently by car and found someone who was willing to share the costs; we stayed in the Campanile Hotel half a mile from the start arriving on Thursday evening.

Friday was supposed to have been spent (on advice from a previous entrant) doing a ride that covered the last section into the finish. I was told that you should try to remember the last bit and not have to rely on the route of other riders. They may be more tired than yourself and you do not want to be lost in the suburbs in the early hours of the morning. The trouble was that the signs had not yet been put up. This idea was abandoned and instead we went to the local Camp Site. My companion from the North East knew that some fellow cyclists from the VC 167 Club in Newcastle were going to be there with their caravan. We found them and the kettle was soon put on to boil. I spent the rest of the day listening to what they had been up to in France and Switzerland during the past two months, whilst drinking copious amounts of tea.

On Saturday we had a ride to Rambouillet a round trip of about 70 km. The evening was spent at the camp site getting advice from the VC 167 riders, 4 of whom had done the event previously. Listening to their advice and exploits was invaluable and to stand me in good stead in a couple of days time.

The cycle check was on Sunday between 09:00 and 18:00 of which you were given a specific time margin for when you had to be there. As my cycle check was not until 15:00 I spent the morning checking and re-checking my cycle. I then had a ride to Versailles, it was Sunday after all and I did wonder whether I would get a point or not. After your cycle and equipment was checked for roadworthiness and compliance you had to go and officially sign on. There you were given an official PBP water bottle, your route book which was to record the times and confirmation of visits to all the controls and an electronic swipe card. This card, which is very similar to a credit card was used to update the computer with your arrival time at a Control. This was most useful for those with an Internet connection back home. They were then able to follow the progress of all entrants through each control to see how they were progressing, or for the 924 unfortunates where they had to abandon or had their cards confiscated because they had run out of time. I cannot begin to image what it must have felt like, to have got to Brest (or anywhere else come to that) after having cycled 600 km or more, to be told you are out of time.

Monday morning had arrived at last and I was suffering from 'pre combat tension', or as Del Boy used to say 'the two bob bits', but there was a prologue of some 30km between 09:00 and 12:00 around the local roads to promote the event which settled down my nerves. I saw a few familiar faces I recognised from qualifying events and I had a chat to a couple of people I knew. The afternoon was spent resting out at the campsite, we had to vacate our hotel room or pay for 4 extra nights. At 17:00 it was time for the big pasta feast in the local university dining rooms prior to the big off.



In Part Two: On the ride, Controls, Sleep, Food, Hills, Extra Equipment etc,

David Wilkie