

Mildenhall Rally 300 km

August 29 1998

from Helen D. Vecht

Still imbued with the spirit of long distance cycling after an experience at the receiving end of my profession, I decided that the time to return to the gentle art of the randonné was long overdue.

My qualifications for a 300km ride were impeccable:

- 1) No ride exceeding 100km in the past 12 months.
- 2) No ride at >15kph for nearly 18 months (both the Brevets Populaires I completed in 1997 failed miserably to achieve such a racy pace)
- 3) A total mileage for 1998 which did not exceed 400 and might only have been half of that (or less!).
- 4) A record of extremely slow progress on previous successful randonnées.

This being said, I had recently renewed my AUK membership for another five years and felt I had to get some value for my money.

My entry for the Mildenhall 300km was duly sent, with the customary brown envelopes ensuring my route sheet was promptly returned in a 'plain cover'. I felt it was best to be discreet about my plans which included a getaway from the sleepy Suffolk town at 4am.

Approaching the campsite wearing a head torch, Sam Browne belt, fluo yellow Gamex jacket, reflective anklebands, and riding a bike with two lights to fore and two to aft, the security guard asked me if I was doing the '300' ride. Well, I don't suppose they see very many 40-year-old female burglars trying to look inconspicuous, do they?

A clock beeped and we set off.

Almost immediately, I managed to take a wrong turn following somebody, did a U-turn and was soon near the back of the crowd.

An uneventful run to Cambridge followed during which all but two riders passed me. At Trumpington, Derek Howard, the tireless organiser manned a secret control. Still 50km to the first control and 270km to go, but for some peculiar reason I was finding it tough going! Oh well, Reg Gates and Peter Land were still behind me and the day was yet very young.

I entered Bedfordshire, which the signs proclaimed as 'A Progressive County'. Given my pace, this was highly debatable but then, there was no real reason why the signs should know what sort of cyclist I was. (Or was there? Who knows what Big Brother might be thinking...)

Suffolk CTC staffed the roadside control at Cardington. I was plied with tea, bananas, cakes and chocolate and continued my non-progress through the Progressive County. Somewhere round Biggleswade, the Land of Gates passed me and they were to stay ahead of me for the rest of the day.

The day warmed up pleasantly but fortunately never became excessively hot. I crawled up to the Silver Ball caf, which was to be the only caf control open for snails. The next stretch was wonderfully familiar, having been covered or crossed in Jim Brown's rides, the Great Eastern, or previous incarnations of the same ride.

All in all, things were feeling easier and I reached the Stansted Info Control which represented the halfway mark. Essex felt much lumpier than on my last visit but at least the villages were pretty and there were few jobs about. Entering Suffolk, I realised there would be no more county signs to pass despite a long ride ahead.

Derek was waiting for me again at Acton, the caf having long since closed. It was overcast now; 210 km down, 97 to go. Still, apart from very minimal soreness, I really had little about which to grumble.

The Info Controls had changed since the last time that I had done this ride.

At Raydon, no longer was I to state that 'Stiff' was a common name on a War Memorial! Shortly after this memorable village, my rear tyre deflated. It took me about half an hour to sort this out but I arrived at the Copdock Control about 30 minutes before it closed.

Dusk descended and I realised how much brighter car headlights had become over the last few years. Along the A14, the oncoming dazzle made the cyclepath rather challenging, being on the right hand side of the road. Another closed caf welcomed me here at Haughley, coupled with the comforting green glow of a 24-hour BP garage. Here I had my card stamped and bought some choccy milkshake, one of my favourites late into these rides.

Once off the A14, I rode into pitch-black lanes for the last leg. After faffing around checking the route far too often, I eventually reached the A1101. Suffolk's good road maintenance people had treated this with the neglect that the saddle zone of the exhausted AUK truly welcomes. How else can we stay awake if life is pain-free?

I crawled into the final control at Mildenhall as it closed. Derek was there (AGAIN) to welcome me. It must have been a longer day for him and his helpers than it was for me. I'd like to thank them all.

I'm sure I would have got round a bit faster if I'd had a few more miles in my legs for 1998. There again, anyone who thinks or says that you have to be *fit* to do a flattish 300km ride might just be sadly mistaken!



Amnesiac Auk looks at Cyclists, dogs and bats

What is the fascination that dogs have with cyclists that makes them appear from nowhere to chase us? They can hear us coming from 100 yards and are waiting, fangs bared, at their gate as we pass.

Maybe this is the answer: A group of 'bat-ologists' were out one night recently studying bats' behaviour (randonneurs are obviously not the only looney group who spend the night on the road) when their electronic equipment picked up the approaching sound of a bat. Waiting in anticipation they observed a cyclist riding by but no bats to be seen. They concluded that a bicycle emits a sound similar to a bat, unheard by the human ear but high-pitched enough for a dog's sensitive hearing to think it's a dog whistle.

True dog tale - Did you hear about the 400k on which an angry householder, fed up with his dog barking throughout the night, remonstrated with some passing randonneurs: "Why do you keep riding past my house and making my dog bark?"

