

# Not Really a Biker

*by Gerry Gee*

## **Holland**

In May 2001 I met with Bill Russell, who casually dropped his bombshell 'Let's go somewhere flat for a change!' This from the mouth of a conqueror of all things even faintly off the horizontal set me wondering about the state of his grey matter. However, it soon became clear that he was talking of a cycling trip to Holland. Well, thought I, I'm not really a biker, but what could be easier and it would be something different.

So, off we set on 7th June, with a sound plan. We would drive to Bill's sister near South Shields, have a leisurely lunch there and then a relaxed spin on the bikes to the ferry. On arriving at Bill's sister's house we thought it best to unpack the bikes and get them assembled before lunch. Out came my front wheels, then the rest of my bike, then Bill's bike minus front wheel; then we were confronted with complete emptiness. Bill's disbelieving eyes ravished the boot to no avail. Then he remembered his neighbours, seen vigorously waving him off in his rear-view mirror as he drove away. How kind, he had thought at the time. Now, it was either nine days unicycling for Bill, or panic stations. We decided on panic stations. Off to the local town, scouring the bike shops, back to Bill's sister's, a speedy lunch and rapid pedal to the ferry.

Arriving at IJmuiden the next day, we hot-footed to the tourist office to buy some appropriate maps. There weren't any, and we soon found that the only map we had with us was low on detail. Thus our route to Leiden via the coast tracks certainly proved Einstein's theorem that the space/time continuum is highly curved, not to say circular. Or, to put it another way, when one leaves one's water bottle behind on a picnic table, and later comes across the self-same water bottle on the self-same picnic table, one has definitively not been travelling in a straight line. We pushed the bikes up a steep sandy slope and over onto the beach for a kilometre, in deep sand all the way, finally gaining the coastal track.

Having left for Holland just after the UK Whitsun break and thinking that accommodation would not be a problem, it was a shock to find that the Dutch were having their break the weekend after. This led to some long cycling days. On an extensive northwards loop to Sneek Youth Hostel, we discovered why Holland has so many windmills, as we were buffeted and soaked all day. On arrival at the hostel we must have looked a pathetic sight. 'Welcome to Holland' remarked a fellow hosteller.

On the last day my personal undercarriage was so raw that sitting on the saddle had to be an occasional and momentary experience. Next time I vowed I would get some cycling hours in before going on a 250km trip.

### **Denmark**

Next time proved to be late May 2002 – cycling in Denmark. After Harwich-Esbjerg and trains to Sønderborg we commenced a delightful holiday with excellent sunny and breezy weather as we island-hopped our way to Copenhagen, following well-marked trails on minor roads and tracks. The highlight was a visit to the Danish version of the white cliffs of Dover, namely Mons Klint. Around 480km in six cycling days.

### **Normandy**

Another enjoyable trip with Bill, this time to Normandy, started in late May 2003. We were impressed by the Normandy landing beaches, the Bayeux Tapestry, the hot air balloon museum at Ballery and the war cemeteries. Our accommodation varied from a modern bungalow to five-hundred-year-old farmhouses. Around 500km cycled in eight main cycling days.

### **Germany, Siegtal**

Having to spend more and more time with his wife, who was very ill, Bill wasn't free for further trips. However, my eldest son Stefan, who lives permanently in Germany, invited me over to sample the cycling there in 2008. Germany proved to be even better than Holland and Denmark for cyclists, with masses of signposted routes on dedicated tracks and minor roads, travelling through very pleasant countryside and interesting towns. In addition, booklets (Radtourenbücher) are available giving route maps, accommodation information, cycle repair shops, etc. Concerned not to over-stress his then 76-year-old dad, Stefan asked the German equivalent of Cycling for Softies to arrange a suitable trip. They were also impressed by my age and the result was the easiest tour imaginable. The route started from Windeck and largely followed the River Sieg to where it joined the River Rhine near Bonn. We travelled about 30km per day, over three days, through good river scenery.

### **Germany, Ruhrtal**

Hence in 2009 Stefan felt he could be more ambitious so we followed the River Ruhr from its source, a spring near Winterburg, to its confluence with the River Rhine at Duisburg. This was a somewhat tougher trip, made more so because of my kidney problems, resulting in me carrying 3 stones extra!

This excellent route had good river and countryside scenery for most of the trip, finishing with interesting industrial and dockside views. It was 341km long and lasted 3½ days.

### **Outer Hebrides**

In May 2010, I decided it was time to fulfil a long-awaited plan to go to the Outer Hebrides. Luckily, this idea also appealed to John Payne and so off we set on 23rd May to Craigallan, leaving the car there. The next day we cycled to Oban, enjoying the cycle track which covers about one third of the way. We caught the ferry to Castlebay, Isle of Barra and then cycled

6km to our B&B. The pull up from Castlebay was a killer – on the steepest bit my pedals wouldn't move and I fell over, luckily into the long grass. The next day after a look at the unique airport, which functions only when the tide is out, we caught the ferry to Eriskay.

I had chosen to travel south to north because of the prevailing wind direction. However, John pointed out that the Icelandic volcano ash was still arriving. We duly had the wind against us for the rest of our time in the Outer Hebrides, not to mention dusty tears in our eyes, but that could have been the result of the price of wine from the post office and stores in Clachan. However, it wasn't too far to our accommodation that day, at the Gatcliff Trust Hostel (South Uist), near Snishival and Howmore. This proved an excellent place to stay, with ancient religious ruins nearby and splendid views around the local shores. There were some entertaining guys and gals there. One guy was trying to photograph a corncrake which, with its needle-scratching call, could be heard but not seen. This photographer was camping, and the corncrake's revenge was to keep up his excruciating sound all night, leaving him shattered by the morning.

The next day we set off for Berneray. The wind was quite cool and strongly against us and I soon dropped well behind John – well, he had got a new bike! I was gasping for sustenance; saw a sign – a cafe? No, a



*Gatcliff Trust Hostel – Berneray.*

*Photo John Payne*

campsite, but there was JP signalling wildly. It transpired he had conjured the camp owner's son into making us tea. So JP's gift of the gab comes in handy at least some of the time. Refreshed, we went on our way, calling in on the Clachan Stores for supplies. Soon we were over the causeway to Berneray and a cafe stop. As such places and loos are few in number it's best to patronise them all.

The Gatcliff trust hostel on the island is charming and is in a superb situation, close to the beach with the Sound of Harris and Harris itself in view. Definitely one of the ten places to go to before you die, and with cooking facilities and hot showers, what more do you need?

The next day, we caught the ferry to Leverburgh and then took the west coast road, with its incredible views of turquoise seas, to overnight in Tarbert.

We had time to explore Lewis, but instead took the ferry to Uig and then cycled to Glenbrittle to join the Club meet there. This is not as green as it sounds, as we had arranged for camping gear to be taken there in the Musketts' campervan. This was quite a tough day with plenty of wind, hills, our only rain and a fair distance to contend with. A rest day was in order, with short coastal walks the only exertion. The next day gave us improving weather and an excellent run to Broadford. Here the local restaurant had its own salmon-smoking unit, a product we duly sampled, helped down with a cheap but appropriate Champers to celebrate our journey so far. Oh – the suffering and hardship of cycle touring....

Cycling the next day to Armadale in lovely weather seemed strangely easy – then I realised we had the wind behind us for the first time. This gave the most wonderful downhill run to Armadale with clear views over the sea to Knoydart. My bike just got me to the harbour before declaring a puncture. Over on the ferry to Malaig, where time considerations meant that we just had to take the enjoyable and scenic train to Fort William. My puncture blew again on the ride from Fort William to Craigallan. JP simply put an orange flashing light and an AA badge on his hat, rode on to Craigallan and returned to rescue me with the car, but this deflationary



*Looking East from Skye towards Knoydart.*

*Photo John Payne*



Stefan phoned again – pressures of work etc. meant that the trip was off. With my 79-year-old lungs, I breathed a sigh of relief. An hour later, another call – ‘train booked to Verona; mustn’t miss the opportunity’. I gulped, got my ancient bike out of its moorings in the garden shed and commenced training. The bike regularly broke down under the strain of the hills of the Dark Peak, but was ruthlessly repaired and put back on the job. 1,100km later, on 19th May, I arrived in Duisburg, to be told that we were raising money for a German Children’s charity and had sponsorship for around 2,500 euros, providing we both finished – so, no pressure then!

After interviews and photos for publication in the Rheinische Post and Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung, we caught the train on 21st May for Verona, arriving at 2:35am on 22nd May. Unfortunately the fast German ICE trains don’t take bikes. After cycling a few kilometres we arrived at the (completely full) hotel to find they had booked us in for the evening of 22nd. After an hour and a half of negotiation by Stefan (a master of this dark art) we were in bed.

The next day was spent pottering around the sights, smells and culinary delights of Old Verona, the first day of a five-day heatwave. On 23rd we set off on the trip northwards, in brilliant weather, through Old Verona and then following the River Adige upstream for a while. This river was to be our occasional companion almost all the way to the Reschen pass. Delightful scenery as we rode smoothly along new-laid tracks. Soon we were by a high canal with excellent views across the valley.

A stiff climb of around 250m led us away from the canal, then through vine country, with limestone cliffs in the background. We arrived at Rovereto for our overnight stay, having covered 84km. The next day we were soon on the outskirts of Trento, where our route and the branch starting from near Venice came together. Stefan had considered starting from the latter, but thanks heaven we didn’t, as it looks much more difficult with numerous steep sections as it passes through the fringes of the Dolomites.

The saddle of my German bike was very different in shape from that of my bike at home. This resulted in some excruciating torture in unmentionable places and so we hived into Trento centre to buy another saddle. A steep ascent at the end of a day filled with views of higher peaks and cliffs, wild roses and clouds of butterflies. The approach to our hotel at Termeno went through a vineyard from where we had great views across the valley. Another 76km completed.

25th May dawned gloriously and off we went through delightful scenery – forests, Lake Caldaro, vines, apple orchards and a castle, still on excellent quality track. We dined en route on tomatoes shaped like Christmas-tree lights, spring onions, bananas, cheese and luncheon meat, with copious cups of tea made using our small gas stove. The first and only puncture of the trip occurred in Merano. Stefan soon repaired it and then we were on our way westwards, ending in a very stiff climb to Naturno. It was 6:00pm and still very hot, so we showered en route under an errant irrigation rotor. We had completed 231km by Naturno, but it looked like

being the final total as I awoke on 26th May feeling weak and wonky. My middle son Patrick texted me to point out that we Northerners are bred for wind, rain and cold, not glorious heat. Salvation arrived in the shape of an overnight storm.

After our enforced rest day we continued further west in much cooler conditions. Soon the heavens rewarded us with their copious bounty and we stream-cycled, soaked and nicely cold, to Glorenza, having completed another 50km. After a bite at 5pm I soon retired to the horizontal mode until 5:30am on 28th May, when we got up early to tackle the Reschen Pass. We started northerly at 6:30am to give ourselves (and me in particular) plenty of time to complete the ascent. I was still feeling very weak. The speedometer hardly flickered off the zero mark as we went very slowly up and up on a good track through lovely pastures and forests, with occasional glimpses of the River Adige. We crawled into a village which turned out to be Burgeis. To my surprise we had covered a significant distance. Much cheered we continued, almost reaching 5km/hr and then, as the angle eased, we could see through the trees in the sunlight where the River Adige exited from Heidersee – a wonderful moment. We continued to the second lake, a reservoir (Reschensee), with the church tower of a drowned village well above the water surface, and from there to Reschen village. In the aftermath of the storm it was quite chilly, but more scenic with the peaks on both sides of the pass covered in new snow. The highest point reached on our track was 1,515m.



*Stefan descending into Austria after Reschen Pass.*

*Photo Gerry Gee*

We rolled effortlessly down into Austria, our track passing through endless wild flower pastures. However, we had to take to the main road for a short and steep climb before descending the many hairpins on the north side of the Reschen pass. Other cyclists had been few in number but, as the River Inn appeared, so did a lone and slightly mad Scottish cyclist on a bike I wouldn't have swapped for my old wreck in Didsbury. Later we saw him again, with one thigh like raw steak, the consequence of a daydream tumble. We persuaded him to stay with us for the night in Landeck to fix himself and his bike. A good day with the Reschen Pass and another 89km behind us.

On 29th May we continued in leisurely fashion in warm sunshine, downhill through lovely meadows and woodlands. The last few kilometres on a busy main road were nasty but compensated for by our stay at the Schloss Fernsteinee hotel in Nassereith with its private and incredibly blue lake. This put us in pole position for tackling the last big obstacle on the route, the Fern pass (summit 1,215m). In the evening we explored possible tracks but found nothing suitable and so decided to go up the main road. I was now feeling OK and we were on the top in under an hour. Descending from the pass we were soon on tracks again, but these were very gravelly and slowed us down. However, we pressed on into Germany through pleasant scenery including Forggensee and the River Lech and reached Schongau in the early evening, after 85km.

On 31st May we again hit a lot of gravelly paths and a storm at 4pm, near Augsburg. We could smell the finish and pressed on through sodden tracks. By 9pm we decided it was time to book into a hotel, in the village of Asbach, with another 132km on the clock. The next day we just had another 13km to the finish – a great moment!

Our aids during the trip were: (i) Radtourenbüch und Karte 1:75,000, Via Claudia Augusta from Arvelle ([www.arvelle.de](http://www.arvelle.de)); (ii) Asus EEE PC Sub notebook with map of all Germany; (iii) Garmin GPS60 SCX with route downloaded from [www.gpsies.com](http://www.gpsies.com); (iv) Cycle milometer.

Our equipment indicated that the total distance cycled was 651km, with a total vertical height gain of 4,367 m, in eight full cycling days plus about one hour on the last day. Stefan kept his sponsors happy with nightly progress reports on Facebook and many were so amazed that we both finished that they gave double what they had promised, resulting in a total of 3,800 euros for the Friedensdorf children's charity. Early on during the trip Ray Grover promised a donation and this gave me the idea to raise some money in the UK for Christie Hospital's Youth Cancer Project. With gift aid a total of £750 was raised. Many thanks to Rucksack Club donors.