

From Audax novice to Paris-Brest-Paris in 7 months

This is the first part (of three) of club member Rupert Millican's account of his preparation and participation in last year's Paris-Brest-Paris Randonnee. Parts 2 and 3 will follow!

Part 1. The road to Paris

The classic Paris-Brest-Paris (PBP) 1200km Randonnee took place last summer (August 23rd to 27th), and I managed to successfully complete it in 90 hours 30 minutes having never ridden an Audax event before January last year. PBP occurs only once every 4 years, and you qualify for entry by riding a Super Randonneur Series (200, 300, 400 and 600km Audax rides) - these must be ridden within the same year as the event, explaining why I managed to attend only a handful of Cambridge CC club runs throughout 1999.

It was the September before last, after riding John O'Groats to Lands End in 13 days, that I decided 1999 would be an Audax year for me. I fancied doing long-distance riding on a more regular basis, and joining Audax UK (AUK) seemed the perfect way to achieve this as well as seeing different parts of the great British countryside. Also, the fast-touring Orbit Harrier bike I bought several months previously was perfectly suited to the task. So I sent off my application form, and quickly received the very informative AUK (Audax United Kingdom) handbook plus the latest edition of the club magazine, Arrivee.

My first Audax experience was not until January 1999 when a good friend and myself finally got our act together and entered the **Windrush Winter Warm-Up** 100km route starting from Cirencester, Wilts. Bill and I had done a lot of cycling together early in the summer of 1998, and he was largely responsible for convincing me to buy a fast-touring Audax-style bike. Thanks Bill - its all your fault!

A cold and misty car park greeted us; at least 15 riders already lovingly attending to their machines and making the obligatory pre-ride adjustments. Having found the start control, we picked up our brevet cards and hastily washed down a handful of Nice biscuits (because that was all there was left) with scorching tea decanted from a large, battered chrome earn. Due to a general lack of Audax experience and quite a lot of fiddling around with my map-holder bracket at the start, we set off 10 minutes late, but soon caught up with the back-markers.

The route followed country lanes and B-roads almost exclusively as we meandered our way across the gently undulating North Wiltshire countryside towards Swindon and the main control at the Whistle Stop Cafe. This is an old converted railway carriage by now teeming with cyclists tucking in to very hot apple pie and tea. Thankfully, the hills had not been too severe, and we soon felt able to depart on a very cold, windy and considerably more hilly return leg. As is customary, we lost our way but soon rejoined the route thanks to a couple of helpful locals. On finishing, we slinked off for a large slap up meal at a restaurant in Cirencester where my Mother often works.

Having completed my first Audax, it struck me how well organized the event was with an unambiguous, easy-to-follow route sheet and good food provision throughout the ride. The atmosphere was friendly, with experienced Audaxers very willing to tell me in detail about other events which might interest me, and, of course, to impress me with their own stories and personal pedalling triumphs.

My next Audax experience, **Mad Jack Fuller's** 120km Grimpeur, started from Hailsham, West Sussex. This is a hilly course zigzagging back and forth across the South Downs, deliberately double-backing on itself several times to take in all the toughest hills and clock up 2050 metres of ascent over 120km, making it worth 1 1/4 AAA (Audax Altitude Award) points. Only events which climb a minimum of 15m/km or more are designated Grimpeur, and anyone collecting 12 AAA points becomes eligible for the award.

I rode this with two fellow Cambridge CC members, Miles Wood and Craig MacAlpine. Craig, who had just returned from 6 months cycling around New Zealand, was already aiming for PBP, and enthusing about all the longer events he had already entered. I was just happy to survive the day without popping any kneecaps on the steep ascents. It was tough, with the other two dropping me on the hardest hills; 6 weeks of minimal cycling were paying their toll and my legs felt weak. At the Fairlight control, we were rewarded with top-nosh thanks to El Supremo!

Unbelievably, in the final 1km, Craig's frame failed and snapped clean at the point where the seat tube enters the lug at the bottom bracket end. Apparently he bought it on the cheap, plus it had just done 6 months hard cycling in New Zealand after all. At the final control, he was already making plans to order a new Sirius frameset in time for the next event; obviously nothing was going to stop this man getting to Paris!

It was around this time that I decided to go for PBP. I had been cycling between 100 and 150 miles per week since the beginning of the year, and this was the next obvious challenge to stretch me and complement my cycle-touring experience. I hastily entered the **South Coast 200**, my first PBP-qualifying ride, along with Craig and Miles. Up until now, I had ridden only Brevet Populaire (BP) Audax events; however, only Brevet de Randonneur (BR) or Brevet de Randonneur Mondiaux (BRM) events count towards PBP qualification. All events in the Audax calendar fall into one of these 3 categories, and the important differences between them are as follows:

Brevet Populaire (BP): Lesser distance and/or speed than BR/BRM events
Mudguards at the discretion of the organiser

Brevet de Randonneur (BR): Any distance over 200km (standard event distances are 200, 300, 400 and 600km)
Minimum speeds of between 14.3 and 15kph (8.89 and 9.32 mph) for events up to 699km - for events upwards of 700km, minimum speeds are reduced further
Full mudguards are compulsory
Brevet cards are validated by AUK

Brevet de Randonneur Mondiaux (BRM): Same regulations as for BR events, but:
Speeds and distances are set by Audax Club Paris (ACP)
Brevet cards are validated by AUK 'and' ratified by ACP

It was apparent by the numbers at the Worthing start that the South Coast 200 was a PBP qualifier. There appeared to be quite a few 'roadies' who, about 5 minutes into the ride, were

flagged down by the mudguard controller and told that they could continue, but without their rides being validated by AUK or contributing towards PBP qualification. Only a few minutes later along Worthing promenade, Craig managed a spectacular road-race style crash in the centre of the mass peloton; riders behind swerving all over the place trying to avoid running over him. Unfortunately, he was borrowing Miles's bike for the day (Sirius not yet ready), while Miles completed the 200k on his MTB (no mean feat). I was surprised how well Miles took it as his STI levers were severely scratched having taken the full force of the fall. Again, food provision was both scrumptious and plentiful thanks to EL Supremo.

At this point, Miles decided that to even consider any longer distances, one had to be on the brink of insanity. So Craig and I went on to ride the **Last Chance 200** (Bedford) and the **Rural South 300** (Reading). The former, so named as it was the last opportunity on the 1999 calendar to qualify for PBP at 200km, was pleasant and sunny on the outward leg with a great lunch stop at Rutland Water. The return soon became an ordeal with grey skies leading to showers and wind. It was great to see Terry out; he became particularly useful in the last 40k when a nagging headwind persisted to the finish.

It was on the Rural South 300 that I decided to sling the sidewall generator and opt for battery-powered lighting. Thanks to their brightness, dynamos are great for commanding respect from car drivers. They are a fit-and-forget solution, and these qualities make them ideal for the regular urban commuter. However, the sapping of 18% of your total power output is a bit sadistic for any event over 300km, and particularly for PBP! There are expensive dynamos (Schmitt hub generator) with very low rolling resistances, but my wallet didn't stretch that far.

My next real challenge was the **Shoestring Dragon 400** which I did on my own. This started from a car park in Cheadle Hulme, Manchester at 21.00 on a Friday night. I had worked from 06.00 to 14.00 on that day and was pretty tired having driven from Cambridge to Manchester in the afternoon. The ride seemed a daunting prospect as it was to be my first experience of cycling all the way through the night and on into the next day without stopping. Manchester United had just won the double, and Cheadle pubs were beginning to overspill with high-spirited fans, whose attentions we unwillingly attracted as we set off to a cacophony of jeering and wolf-whistles.

The route followed a rough triangle shape from Manchester to Gobowen, then across to Chesterfield via Uttoxeter and back through Matlock and Buxton to Cheadle. It really was a 'shoestring' event with petrol stations for controls and unsuspecting, bleary-eyed sales assistants ordered to stamp streams of brevet cards at unearthly hours. For me this is one of the most memorable experiences of long distance cycling; having spent vast tracts of time in the blackness of night, and to emerge blinking into the bright lights of another remote garage forecourt control.

Surprisingly, I felt very strong during the night and didn't begin to feel drowsy until around 04.00. I remember willing the sun to rise in the hope that it would rouse my sleepy head - and it did. After a transport cafe stop on the A5, and the tastiest plate of beans-on-toast I had ever eaten, I felt completely revitalised and made quick progress to Chesterfield. Hills were both frequent and steep on the return leg, particularly around Matlock. Despite this and a snapped chain link, I was the second rider to arrive back in Cheadle. This gave me much confidence, and I began to think for the first time that I would get to Paris.

The **Rural South 600** was very hilly, only just missing AAA classification by a whisker. It consisted of a 400km loop from Denmead Hants to Cirencester Wilts and back, followed by a

second 200km loop through West Sussex. The hills were relentless as we had to traverse the Western fringe of the South Downs, the Marlborough Downs and take in a fair chunk of the Cotswolds. Again, a very welcome El Supremo trailer greeted us at the top of Hackpen Hill on the way back from Cirencester to Denmead. At around 03.00 at the end of the first stage, Craig and I suffered hallucinations; I kept seeing columns of multi-coloured light radiating from the rear lights of passing cars. Craig complained of similar visual distortions.

We decided to get 2 hours kip back at Denmead before completing the final 200km, but ended up oversleeping by 1 hour. Luckily I had pitched my tent at the start and this afforded me better quality sleep than Craig who had to tolerate the very noisy and hard-floored village hall. For the first 2 hours of cycling after waking we felt rough and lacklustre, but hot, sunny weather kept our spirits up as we had to push the pace and make up for lost time sleeping. We returned with only 40 minutes left before final control closure; a very tough ride, but we had qualified for PBP and felt elated. My entry form was in the post within the following 24 hours.

A general Audax rule states that if you can complete a 600 in under 30 hours, you should be able to ride a 1200km Randonnee, such as PBP, without too much difficulty. Craig and I had our work cut out for the next 3 months! My training consisted of regular Sunday club runs, at least 50 miles training during the week and a handful of 100/200k Audaxes leading up to the event. I was averaging somewhere between 150 and 200 miles per week without fail for 3 months between qualification and the actual event. I felt pretty strong by the beginning of August; maybe even ready to take full PBP punishment!