



Cycling down a river



What do you get when you let six (oldish) men loose in Europe, each with a bicycle and a determination to make the most of it? The Tour de Farce. *James Clarke* talks about the fifth leg of this now infamous challenge ... one you may even take up yourself.

Top: Richard Steyn, Rex Gibson, James Clarke, Peter Sullivan, Harvey Tyson and Alan Calenborne – the intrepid cycling team that claims to achieve 30km to a litre of beer.

It was 2002 and we were old enough to have known better, I suppose. Well, all right, Richard was only 58 but the rest of us were certainly old enough.

Yet here we were, six men, average age 67, setting out on a nearly 1 000-kilometre two-week cycle ride down the River Danube from Germany to Hungary. Perhaps it was only 900km but these were genuine kilometres, the sort they have in France.

And none of us had seriously cycled since our first childhood.

To cut a long story short, we did it.

Somebody called it the Tour de Farce and the title stuck.

Since then our Tour de Farce expeditions have taken us across France (2003), through Italy (2004), around the northern seaboard of Ireland (2005) – and, this year, down England's famous River Thames from its source to the North Sea. The Thames is 338km long and, as somebody said, "every drop is liquid 'istory". There are prehistoric sites dating back to when the Thames was a tributary of the Rhine before the Channel formed.

Apart from Richard, who is very fit (he once captained Natal at rugby), the rest of us are in various stages of decrepitude, especially me. We have back problems, arthritis, heart complaints and permanent injuries from sport.

We favour dedicated cycle routes so that when we enter a hotel or inn in our garish form-fitting cycling togs the staff don't reach for the security button.

On these set-piece tours the bikes are supplied and one's luggage is delivered daily to the next hotel – all booked and paid for in South Africa. There are panniers over the back wheels for essentials such as rain gear, cameras, cake forks and pictures of our wives.

I should explain that our average age this year should have been well over 70, but in 2004 an older member was replaced by Peter Sullivan (group editor of Independent Newspapers) who was only 55. Thus our average age dropped several years, which enabled us, from then on, to do things that men in their 70s could probably never do. Our oldest members, both retired editors, are 77 and 75 and amazingly fit – probably

*Pictures by
Alan Calenborne*

because they play 18 holes of golf three times a week.

Before we mounted the expedition we sought advice from VisitBritain in Johannesburg (formerly the British Tourist Authority), explaining that as the British have been so busy exploring Africa's rivers it was time Africans explored Britain's river. After all, even Jerome K Jerome's famous 1889 Thames expedition recounted in his *Three Men in a Boat* didn't venture far into the West Country from where the Thames springs and where we intended to intrepidly go.

We established our first base in a southern Cotswolds village called Ewen, near Cirencester, where we spent the night in the very cosy, creaky, 500-year-old Wild Duck Inn.

From here it is only a short cycle ride to the footpath that leads over some fields to the eye of the Thames – a shallow, dried-out hollow (for there had been a serious drought) in a wooded dell. It was May so the hedgerows were bursting with life – shining yellow buttercups, daffodils, dandelions and

blood-red poppies. There was lilac blossom and the chestnut trees were in full bloom. We saw pheasants and lapwings. It was all so therapeutic we thought of claiming from medical aid.

Next day on a glorious spring morning we set out to cycle down the river but for the first 30km the quiet country lanes traversed water meadows patrolled by swans and flotillas of Canada geese. Then the vleis became channelled into an identifiable stream – the Thames.

After two or three hours cycling we saw a sign pointing off our course to "The Red Lion – First Pub on the Thames". Pulled by some mysterious force we found ourselves at the inn ordering six pints of beer. We usually achieve 30km a litre.

Beer, according to Peter's doctor, is the best beverage when cycling on a hot day. OK, the weather was not hot but it was certainly warmish and there's nothing to beat a beer when you feel you've earned it.

The bicycle, we decided, is a



Above: The team met their match at the Chiltern Hills.



Cycle along

There is a voluntary organisation in Britain known as Sustrans ("Sustainable Transport") that works with government and is dedicated to establishing routes where cyclists (and wheelchairs) have priority. It has so far set aside 16 000 kilometres for the National Cycle Network – 5 000km is traffic-free. The rest comprises designated "quiet roads" and, in towns and cities, "traffic-calmed" roads and cycle lanes. Few places in England are more than 3km from the network.

One of the most interesting routes is the almost 300km-long Garden of England Cycle Route from Dover (quickly reached by train from London) via Ramsgate, Canterbury, the "Crab and Winkle Way" to Whitstable and along the Thames to London. There's even a wine trail in Kent.

London itself is laced with demarcated cycle routes.



Cost

Our six-days, seven-nights ride down the Thames cost about R7 500 and included B&B, good-quality cycles, daily luggage transfer, detailed maps and information booklets. The accommodation was superb.

Best time to go

Spring (May/June), when tariffs are lower, or Autumn (September/October).



marvellous machine when one considers it can run on fuel such as bananas, ham sandwiches, beer, even duckling bigarade – the nice thing about it all is that the cyclist has to consume the fuel for he is the bike's engine and his stomach the fuel tank.

“Coarse cycling” – as Richard calls our particular type of cycling – has a casual pace allowing one to feel close to nature – so in tune with nature that one empathises with hedgehog road-kills.

We reached Lechlade where the Thames becomes navigable and where pleasure craft are moored and from where one has the choice of cycling along the Thames Path, which is often bumpy and in parts just a narrow rut across the meadows, or of cycling on smooth tarred country lanes, many of them labelled “Quiet Road”, which means motorists must give way. During the whole tour we were on the Thames Path three-quarters of the time.

One day we lunched at a half-timbered coaching inn called The George in the pretty town of Dorchester. We parked our bikes in a yard almost unchanged since the days when stage coaches parked there overnight and where the steaming horses were groomed.

Our printed route guide advised, “Don't miss Dorchester's Abbey Tea Room”. But we had to. We missed such

a lot. It made us realise the Thames ride deserves at least 10 days.

One passes so many historic sites and towns and villages – places noted for their elegant Georgian or Victorian street scenes – and we spotted the occasional thatched Tudor cottage with its abundance of flowers and shrubs and topiary.

At one stage we cycled through a magnificent country estate and to our astonishment saw in the paddocks, instead of sheep, long-necked alpacas. These South American animals of the lama and camel family are bred for their lightweight wool. Another surprise was to see opium fields – acres of cultivated poppies grown for medicine.

We cycled through Pangbourne where Kenneth Grahame was inspired to write *The Wind in the Willows* and where Jerome K Jerome stayed at The Swan with his two companions, not forgetting the dog.

There was Henley all ready for the world's most famous rowing regatta, Runnymede where the Magna Carta was sealed by King John, and, of course, Oxford with its famous colleges and Bodleian Library. Although we cycled through Oxford's streets, we had no time to really explore.

Ever since the Danube we have sought out routes that follow rivers downstream because, logically, the



route should be downhill all the way. Unless there's a gorge. The Thames valley is flat – until one reaches the Chiltern Hills where we came into abrupt collision with a hill so steep we practically had to push our bikes above our heads. Logically a long downhill should have followed – instead, in defiance of logic, we were almost immediately faced with a second steep ascent. But there is no shame in walking up.

The only other hills we encountered along the Thames were occasional molehills that erupt along the grassy sections of the Thames Path.

One night we slept in Eton's ancient Christopher Inn. Once again, time was against us and we saw far too little of this quaint old town. We would have liked to have visited Eton School (which we'd cycled past – it looks like a Victorian prison but is in fact 400 years old) and, on the other side of the bridge, the world's largest inhabited fortress – Windsor Castle.

Passing through Maidenhead I was panting up a hill past a large group of schoolchildren and one called out, "Keep it up, grandpa! You're doin' fine!" Alas, one is not allowed to take a swipe at children in England with a bicycle pump.

Before entering London we rode 30km along the Thames south bank until we reached Hammersmith, where we crossed to the north bank, where London suddenly becomes very serious.

We were in Kensington High Street and, because we were tired, we decided to ignore the guide book (which would have directed us through several parks) and,

instead, head straight for town ... past Kensington Gardens, through Marble Arch, down Constitution Hill past Buckingham Palace, up the Mall and around crowded Trafalgar Square.

Our hotel was behind the London Eye (the giant Ferris wheel), opposite the Houses of Parliament.

Again time was against us, for we would have liked to explore London's network of cycle trails that wend their way through many beautiful parks.

Our last day began with frequent showers as we cycled along the paved Thames Path. St Paul's Cathedral, on the other side of the river, towered above the modern office blocks. We passed under many famous bridges as well as past the Royal Festival Hall, the National Film Museum, the Royal National Theatre, the Tate Modern (gallery) and then under the spidery Millennium Bridge.

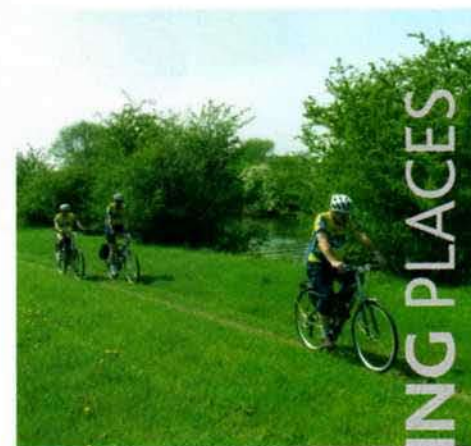
Every few minutes one passes a building, bridge or site worthy of attention – Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, London Bridge, Fishmonger's Hall, Billingsgate Market, HMS Belfast, Tower of London and Tower Bridge, the Design Museum, the Clink (the prison whose name passed into the English language), the Golden Hind in which Drake circumnavigated the world (1577-80) – and on to Greenwich, where we circled the magnificent clipper, *Cutty Sark*, now landlocked.

If you ever cycle the Thames Path, this is the ideal place to stop, for Greenwich is a fascinating place to spend a day.

We had specifically asked to cycle right to the end of the river and, occasionally getting lost (there were many deviations) and becoming mixed up with heavy traffic, that's what we did – to Gravesend and the grey North Sea.

Good sources

Our consultants were VisitBritain (formerly the British Tourist Authority) in Johannesburg and they provide free brochures and advice on cycling opportunities in the UK and can recommend agencies specialising in cycle trails. Telephone (011) 325-0343 or email Johannesburg@visitbritain.org.



Our route was designed by Capital Sport Gentle Cycling in the UK (www.capital-sport.co.uk). We travelled with British Airways with whom, if you go in a large group, you can negotiate a discount.