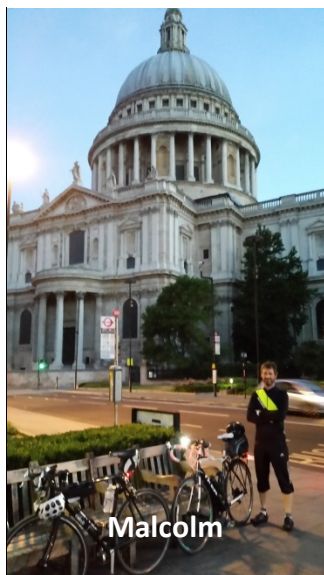


Ride from LONDON TO PARIS (via Calais) – “Dome to Dome”

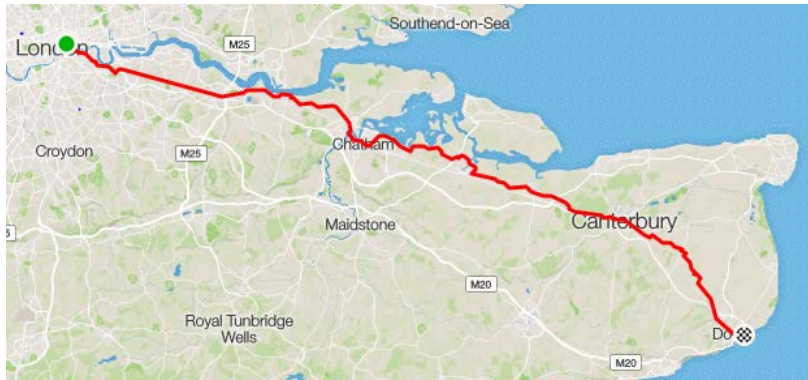
Three days, 325 miles, no punctures!

There are various options to cycle from London to Paris. The shortest route is about 200 miles and uses the Newhaven to Dieppe crossing. The ride via Calais is in the order of 300 miles, depending on the choice of route. The typical route from Calais heads more or less due south, with Amiens at around half way. Instead, this route takes a relatively easterly sweep, avoiding some of the hillier countryside and taking in beautiful dutch-style landscapes and then rolling countryside, through the Somme region, punctuated by some historic towns of sufficient size to provide plenty of interest and options for accommodation and food.



Having previously cycled unsupported from London to Paris “Tower to Tower” (Tower Bridge to the Eiffel Tower), Malcolm and Julian decided to make this journey “Dome to Dome”. Of a number of domes in London, St Paul’s Cathedral seemed like the obvious choice for the start. The idea of choosing Sacre Coeur as the destination landmark is that it is on a hill with great views, you can ride on a canal towpath to within 2km of it, and there is only 1km to get back to the Gare du Nord.



Day 1 (1 Sep 2016) – London (St Paul's Cathedral) to St Omer**DAY 1 STATS...**

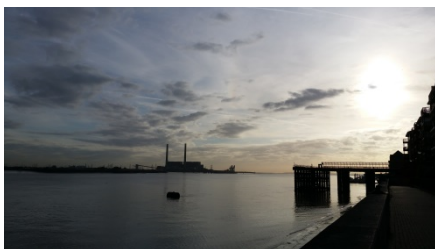
Distance: 181km / 113 miles
 Journey Time: 10h 36m (ex ferry)
 Riding Time: 8h 34m
 Moving Average: 21kph
 Climbing: 1273m

Set off from St Paul's at 5.50am. Crossed the Thames via London Bridge, enjoying dawn views of the city, then left down Tooley Street (wave to Evans Cycles where Milo would be arriving for work in a few hours!) and head towards Dover.

Through Greenwich Park (home of the observatory dome), where, by coincidence, 300 cyclists were preparing to set off on the Royal British Legion's 'Pedal to Paris'. With the benefit of rolling road closures, food stations, mechanics...and an extra day.

See <http://www.britishlegion.org.uk/get-involved/fundraise/bike-rides/pedal-to-paris/>

Maximum speed for the whole trip recorded descending Shooter's Hill into Welling (53.5kph / 33.4mph).



Gravesend looked at its best as we passed through at about 8am (spotting another dome at the Sikh temple). The presence of the school run traffic and children in uniform was a reminder that September had arrived. Thanks to Costa Coffee in Rochester High Street who let us take our bikes inside and lean them against their sofa during breakfast.

Continued through Chatham, Gillingham and out into the country, stopping to wonder about the "candle-snuffer" steeple of the church in Upchurch. Then through Kemsley and Sittingbourne as quickly as possible and again into the country past farms where the hop harvest was in progress. After Faversham there was a climb of about 100m up to Dunkirk, Kent. Then welcome downhill (mostly) into Canterbury.



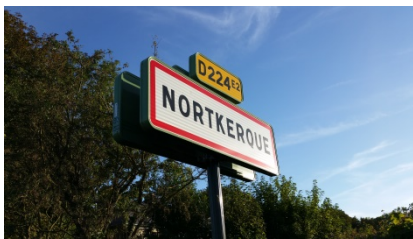
Disappointment in Canterbury, though, as it turns out you can't even get close to the exterior of the cathedral between 9 and 5.30 without parting with £12. Fortunately, spiritual consolation was on hand from a nearby monk, who turned out to be an actor shooting a road trip film about a pilgrimage from Bruges to Northern Ireland.

Left Canterbury, passing the former prison. Finished off the last of more than 1,000 metres climbing on the stretch to Dover. The day's only route-planning failure involved having to wheel the bikes across the A2 just above Dover, due to a footbridge I'd imagined would be there, but wasn't.



Julian made a very successful attack on the 10% ramp up to the ferry on his single speed bike, watched by an audience of truckers waiting to embark.

The drivers had the last laugh, though, as we had to wait until every other vehicle was off the ferry in Calais, as there is no cycle lane in the port. From Calais, (see <http://www.calaidipedia.co.uk/calais-kitchens>) an easy escape into the French low countries landscape - canals and red brick houses – and place names.



*Where's
Kaptinkerque?*



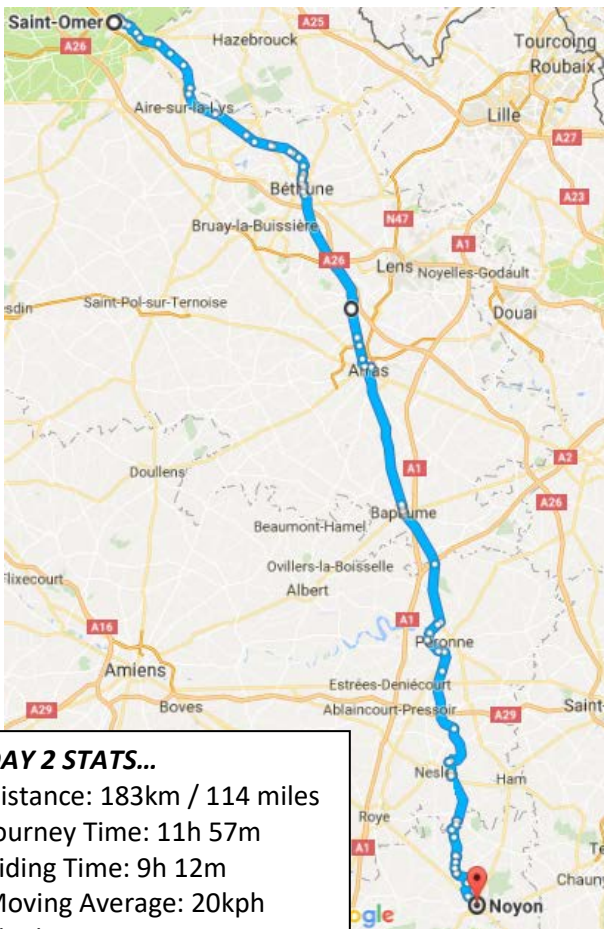
Arrived in St Omer at 8.30pm. The accommodation (Hotel Ibis) was fine, apart from the manager denying that they had agreed to let us keep the bikes in our rooms. They eventually let us store the bikes in the conference room. Strolled through lively streets for dinner at Brasserie La Terrasse. No fish and chips available, though.

Top Touring Tips – Luggage!

Julian's "just popped down to the shops" cycling look is echoed in his approach to luggage.



(Luggage not actual size, unless viewed on very large screen television).

Day 2 (2 Sep 2016) – St Omer to Noyon**DAY 2 STATS...**

Distance: 183km / 114 miles
 Journey Time: 11h 57m
 Riding Time: 9h 12m
 Moving Average: 20kph
 Climbing: 633m

Set off from St Omer at about quarter to eight. Once out of town, opted for the quieter route, away from the D943. (The map here is approximate, due to mobile data failure causing Strava drop outs on the day).



Some nice riding early on, criss-crossing the Canal du Nord.

In Busnes, about two thirds of the way between St Omer and Bethune, there is an old-style cycling café, which serves as the headquarters of the local cycling club. Au-stopped there for an espresso and admired the trophy cabinet.



During the day, we saw a number of war cemeteries, reminding us of a very different period for this part of northern France.

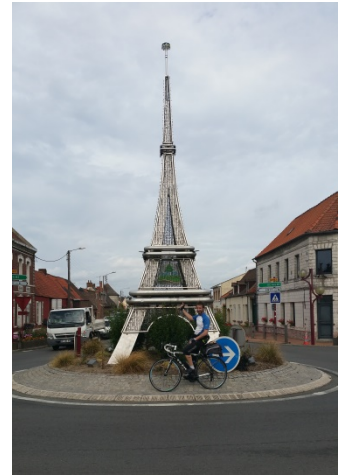
Coming in to Bethune from the north west you pass the Maison d'Arret de Bethune – the prison - conveniently located near the fantastic Art Deco style Palais de Justice which is in Place Lamartine.





We had got a bit lost just before Bethune and behind schedule by about half an hour. But still managed to stop for coffee and snacks in the main square with its typical belfry.

A surprise on the D937 just after Bethune, when we see the Eiffel Tower looming in the distance. It turns out to be a scale model in the middle of a roundabout in Sains-en-Gohelle. Even the wisdom of the internet does not tell us why it is there!



A highlight of the day was the Canadian War Memorial at Vimy. On the short alpine-style climb to the ridge we were passed by two WW2 jeeps, loaded with American tourists in army clothes. The atmosphere at the memorial was very peaceful, contrasting with the echos of trenches and shell craters around the memorial, left untouched and defenceless against advancing nature.

On to Arras for pizza in the square (overlooked by the inevitable belfry), where the mood was lightened by a fun fair.



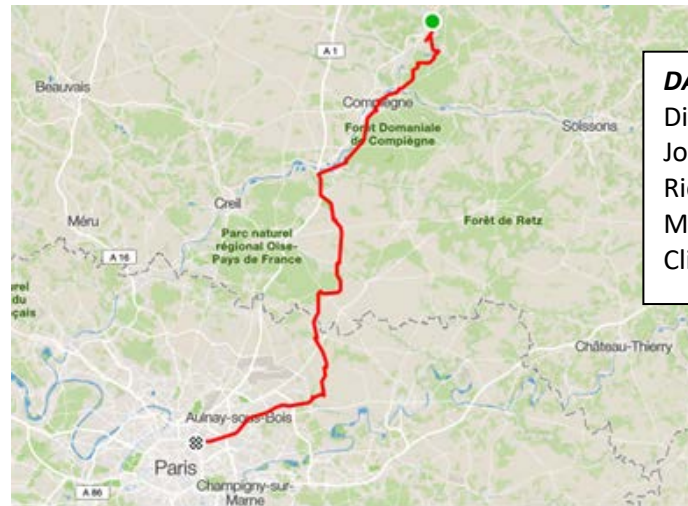
A surprise during the afternoon's ride, as the landscape of big fields and even bigger skies was broken by the spire of the church of Our Lady of Rocquigny. This must be a recent addition as it doesn't appear on Google Street. It made a stunningly modern contrast to the traditional architecture of the other churches we had been passing.

We rejoined roads running alongside the Canal du Nord for the last section into Peronne, culminating in a steep hill up then a refreshing swoop down through suburbs to the centre. As we were still behind schedule, we chose a nice bench in a car park for our short break, with a view of the chateau housing the Museum de la Grande Guerre.

Leaving Peronne, the route crosses lots of waterways connected to the Somme river. To catch up some time, we stayed on the D1017 rather than risk the towpath surface.

The final section to Noyon included some good fast riding on undulating roads from Bussy through Genvry. Noyon is the birthplace in 1509 of Jean Calvin, protestant reformer. It is also in possession of an imposing cathedral, which looks out of proportion to the buildings crammed in around it. Friday night in Noyon was rather quiet, with only about three options for restaurants near our hotel (Le Cedre, next to the cathedral).

Day 3 (3 Sep 2016) – Noyon to Paris (Sacre Coeur)



DAY 3 STATS...

Distance: 131km / 82 miles
Journey Time: 8h 45m
Riding Time: 7h 15m
Moving Average: 19kph
Climbing: 496m

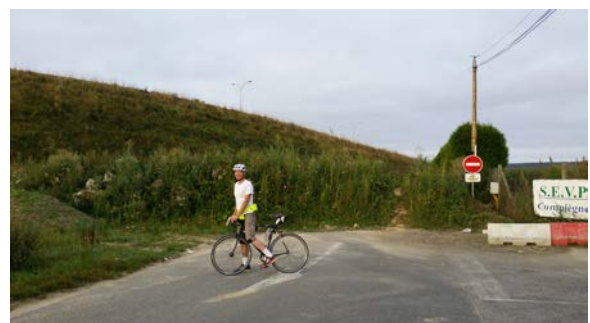
Departure from the hotel was nearly delayed by Malcolm sliding down some tiled steps on his cleats, on the way to retrieve the bikes from the basement. The route out of Noyon was lovely and made a relaxed start to the day. However, plans went awry about an hour in, when the planned route turned out to be blocked by a recently constructed bypass!

In Theory –

*Route de Ribecourt,
on Google Street
(image dated May
2013, still online in
August 2016)*



In Practice – The same spot on 3 September, 2016!



The silver lining to this blockage was that when we retraced our steps we found signs to the Oise Piste Cyclable 3, which was also not shown on Google Street. This is a fantastic route through forests to Choisy-au-Bac and on to Compeigne for our breakfast stop. The town of Compeigne boasts a fine Hotel de Ville, where a small brass band (comprising men dressed in hunting clothes) played us on our way as we set off for Paris.



The figure of Christ on the Cross was a frequent companion on the ride, at various junctions in towns and villages. This one was just outside the village of Raray and the juxtaposition with the road signs echoes depictions of the original configuration of crosses on the hill outside Jerusalem.

Another frequent landmark was the "Chateau d'Eau" – this one on the high ground before we start the descent to the canal and the run in to Paris. We could tell the city was near as our route started to track the planes on their approach to Charles de Gaulle airport.



We messed up our lunch stop on this day – reaching Ermonenville (with its landscaped Parc Jean-Jacques Rousseau) too early to eat and then making the mistake of assuming there would be plenty of opportunities later on. There weren't.

Gressy was the last village before the canal towpath ride into Paris. The only option was the four star Le Manoir de Gressy, where the receptionist dealt very professionally with two English cyclists in need of refreshment. However the refreshment options for a quick stop were distinctly limited and we ended up having a liquid lunch of expensive lager!

Shortly after Gressy, we picked up the Canal de l'Ourcq cycle path for a 20km ride from the rural fringes to the urban heart of Paris. (See http://next.paris.fr/english/heritage-and-sights/canals/leisure-on-the-canals/rub_8274_stand_34665_port_19138.)



After leaving the canal at Basin de la Villette, near Stalingrad Metro, the final 2km along the Boulevard de la Chappelle provides a complete contrast and culture shock to our three days of riding the quiet country lanes. After turning right just after Metro Barbes Rouchechouart the climb to Montmartre starts. A fantastic hilltop finish up cobbled streets, brought our destination within sight...



The area to the front of the church was heaving with tourists in 32 degree heat. After the obligatory photo opportunities we retraced our steps down to Rue Lamark where we got every cent's worth from our beers at 7.5 euros each and then moved to the restaurant next door for a slightly better value pizza.

The Dome to Dome distance (including about 12km accrued due to route problems and other unplanned detours) clocked up as 309 miles / 495 kilometres.

With a train to catch, we then headed round the back of the Sacre Coeur to complete a loop back to the Boulevard de la Chappelle and then to the Gare du Nord. Giving thanks to the LCC and others who campaigned to make Eurostar keep this service open, we checked in our un-deconstructed bikes and then ourselves. The train departed at 20:13, just over four hours after we had arrived at Sacre Coeur! By 10pm we were collecting the bikes from Eurodespatch at the back of St Pancras and by 11pm we were home.



On arriving home, the total distance on the bike computer was 511km. With the 9km lead-in ride from home to St Pauls, that makes a total of 520km / 325miles. With no mechanicals and no rain affecting the ride, it feels like this Dome to Dome journey was truly blessed by the cycling god(s?)!

Malcolm Wills, January 2017