



WHERE The Netherlands, Belgium, & northern France
START & FINISH Harwich to Boulogne, then home
DISTANCE 250 miles **WORDS** Joff Sommerfield
PICTURES Joff Sommerfield



Photos: Joff Sommerfield

OUT OF THE ORDINARY

Each May, vintage bike enthusiasts visit the Boulogne Bicycle Rally in northern France. **Joff Sommerfield** cycled there from Holland on a penny-farthing he built himself

Most people think that penny-farthings, also known as ordinaries to distinguish them from the late 19th century's upstart safety bicycles with equal-sized wheels, are only used in parades. Yet you can tour on them. Early CTC members did so, and Thomas Stevens circled the globe on his between 1884 and 1887, becoming the first round-the-world cyclist. In 2008, I returned from my own round-the-world trip by penny-farthing. I hadn't been on tour since, so I relished the chance to ride down to the Boulogne Bicycle Rally.

My penny-farthing is one I built nine years ago. It has a 49-inch fixed wheel with two gears: forward and reverse. If I'm using reverse, I'm having an accident. To tour on this wonderful machine is a little different from a modern bicycle. The first challenge is to carry your equipment. I use two front panniers tied to the backbone behind the seat. Bigger bags would make it impossible to get onto the bike.

Talking of which, how do you get on? Just above the small rear wheel there is a step: on this you place your left foot, scoot along, then hop aboard. Hill starts are tricky. You have to roll downhill, hop on, and do a U-turn.



DO IT YOURSELF
 > **CTC Information Sheet inf13, Taking a Cycle by Ferry, gives advice on sea crossings. Get it at tinyurl.com/87dhkky – you'll need your CTC membership number.**
 > **The Boulogne Bicycle Rally has a Facebook page. Search for 'Boulogne Bicycle Rally' on Facebook**

Comfort on a penny-farthing isn't the best. Sitting right on top of the big wheel, all the shocks come straight up through the saddle. The tyres are solid rubber, which means no punctures. But the advantages end there.

NEAR HEADER AT HARWICH

My tour started in Harwich with the ferry to the Hook of Holland. It nearly ended there as well. Riding on board, I caught the tyre between the large metal plates of the loading ramp. The penny stopped dead. An inelegant dismount just saved the day and my pride.

Disembarking in Holland, I got onto one of those lovely cyclepaths that crisscross the Netherlands. I crissed when I should have crossed and found myself temporarily lost in the town. My plan was to follow the LF1a North Sea cycle route south before heading into France. I was looking forward to a flat and easy ride.

Making for the town of Brielle, I saw a map board by the side of the cycle path so stopped to check my direction. Suddenly I was aware of another cyclist. 'I can't believe it!' he was saying in amazed tones. I looked up and was stunned: before me stood Lars, whom I last



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met in Tibet in 2007. He had just returned from riding in Africa for nine months. Who says it's not a small world?

NORTH SEA WHEELING

Later, at a junction in the road, I stopped and had a chat with Ruth and Siegfried, cycle tourists from Cologne in Germany. They went into great detail describing the wonderful tailwinds they had been having for the past week. Unfortunately, they were heading in the opposite direction from me...

The beautiful and barren landscape of the North Sea coast was now before me. Here the LF1a goes up on top of a dyke, which took me into the full force of the gale. My speed fell to 5mph. It was a slog. My way continued through the dunes, overlooking lovely wide beaches. I had to dip my toes in the water. The sea was freezing, but it's just one of those things you have to do.

The southerly gale blew up again. I really felt it when I crossed the exposed dykes that join the islands of Western Holland. For some odd reason, the signposted LF1a route on the ground bore no relation to the one on my map, and always managed to go the longest way. At Middleburg, I began to follow the LF1a plotted on my map instead. This was better.

Outside Groede I spotted a large collection of old bunkers from the war. They had been converted into a visitor's site but once again there was not a soul about. With the sun coming down, I pitched my tent between the buildings. The cold, howling wind and eerie structures blew tunes from their past into my ears, but I knew I'd be safe there. To keep the costs down, I always

“My penny-farthing has a 49-inch fixed wheel with two gears: forward and reverse. If I'm using reverse, I'm having an accident”

free camp. I figure that as long as I leave it how I found it and don't cross a fence, nobody is likely to mind.

WHEN THE WIND BLOWS

In Sluis I found a tree-lined canal to follow. It went through lovely countryside and was a joy to ride. The wind had dropped a little so I had an easier time.

Arriving in Bruges, the only place I could find to stay was a run-down bar. I had to put the penny in the bar's back storeroom, which had an open door next to the pool tables. Drunken people have this innate need to ride a penny-farthing. While it's down to them if they want to hurt themselves, I wouldn't want them damaging my bike. Thankfully, I was able to cover the machine – and remove the storeroom's light bulb for the night.

My day in Bruges passed quickly. Much to my surprise, I was not all that taken by the city. Perhaps being back on the road and enjoying the scenery and riding had turned me off a little from even the most historic architecture.

Leaving Bruges, I soon found myself on the Ostend canal. After a good stretch of pushing into the wind, I swapped over onto the Kanaal Van Passendale Mar Nieuwpoort. How envious I was of all the bicyclists heading the other way, barely having to turn their cranks!

IN THE PHOTOS

- 1) Approaching Bruges
- 2) Cyclepaths you want to ride on! Dutch, of course
- 3) King Henry II of France watches on Boulogne's walls
- 4) Small church in rural France



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JOFF'S PENNY-FARTHING

› The bike weighs about 34lb and has a 49-inch diameter wheel. I use long cranks for a penny-farthing as this is the only way I can improve my hill climbing ability. With all the bags on, I can ride up about a 6% grade as long as the tarmac is good and I'm at sea level. When on tour, I find that I can ride 40 miles a day. This gives me plenty of time to stop and talk to people, take pictures and have an enjoyable time.

I do have brakes, but only for moderating my speed when going downhill. If you use the front one as you would on a safety bike, the rear wheel just lifts and tips you off the front.

› Once I reached Nieuwpoort, I turned onto the Dunkirk Canal, hoping that the wind would drop. This open stretch of water gave me no respite, however. Every few minutes a gust stopped me dead in my tracks.

After what seemed like an endless ride, I reached the small town of Veurne. Here I bumped into Bill and June, a friendly retired English couple living on a converted canal boat. They invited me on board and told me how they sold up at home, bought the barge, and now lived a relaxed lifestyle on the canalways of Europe. June gave me a warming cup of coffee and Bill, with a wink, dropped in a shot of brandy 'to take the chill out my bones'. We had a delightful half hour chat before I pushed on; it was time to try to find a place to camp.

CAFÉ TO CAFÉ

The morning brought me to France. I was grateful to dive into a small bar, away from the cold rain. Unfortunately, being rural France, the coffee was served in a cup the size of a thimble, so it took a few shots to get me going.

In Wormhout I went into another café for more coffee. This time it was served in a reasonable-sized cup, which I cradled in frozen hands. I was pleased to realise that I'd done 25 miles and it was only 10 o'clock. My slow pace continued through the rain, but the route had at least been better marked since I'd crossed into France.

After Watten, I entered a heavily forested area where I found a place to camp behind a large pond. When I went to leave next morning, I discovered the path I had followed into the forest had gained a barbed wire

“The beautiful, barren landscape of the North Sea coast was before me... I pedalled through the dunes, above wide beaches”

gate. All the bags had to come off the penny for me to manhandle it over the top.

I had my first long stretch of walking on the trip when a long hill appeared before me. It made me think back to my past adventures, when it took me days to push the penny over high Himalayan passes. This was nothing!

In the town of Tournehem, I stopped in a café just off the square. The friendly lady owner reminded me of Molly Sugden, Mrs Slocombe from 'Are You Being Served?' Mrs Slocombe was diligent in her attentions and insisted that I sign a card for her. As I left, everyone inside plus a few local villagers lined up outside so Mrs Slocombe could take a picture.

Just outside Boulogne, I found a convenient place to stop. Some roadworks were taking place on a lane and they had closed the road. It was a perfect out-of-the-way place for me to pitch the tent. So I thought.

In fact, my hidden camp was nothing of the sort. I had walkers, runners, two motorcyclists, and a herd of cows stopping by to say hello. Twice during the night some thieves came to steal the concrete slabs that had been left out to repair the road. They made a lot of noise during their bungling theft, and I'm sure they must have damaged the back of their car dropping the blocks in. ›



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IN THE PHOTOS

5) Homage to the road racers of old is paid at French bars along the Boulogne Bicycle Rally's route

6) Discreet wild camping seldom causes problems



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› In the morning I had a quick and easy ride into Boulogne. I found the town centre and a warm café near the Basilica. Here I ordered a huge cup of hot coffee and two chocolate croissants. I love cafés on cold mornings. Looking through the fogged up window, Boulogne slowly came to life. The shutters began to open and bleary-eyed people wandered to the patisserie for their morning bread.

RALLYING ROUND

Slowly my fellow bicyclists started to appear from the ferry and the small local hotels. Greetings were made, breakfasts finished. Then we headed to the courtyard next to the Basilica for the start of the rally. A throng of 100 or so cyclists waited for the off. There was a shout and a whistle, and we were on our way.

The last time I went to the Boulogne Bicycle Rally was back in the mid-'80s on my old BSA Paratrooper's bike, which still sees good service to this day. The ride loosely follows the old race circuit that runs out of the town centre and over the hills and dales of the surrounding countryside. Nowadays there's nothing left to be seen of the circuit, but homage is paid to the racers of old with a toast in each bar that's passed by.

After a picnic lunch on the village green of Alincthun, we took to the road again and headed for the woodland of Forêt Domaniale de Boulogne. This was a harder section, with a rough surface and a couple of good hills to climb. But it was ridden with the jolly British spirit that so encapsulates this ride.

After 30 or so miles, we returned to Boulogne. The only thing left was to retire to a local bar. ☺



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IN THE PHOTOS

- 7) Heading to the ferry home from Calais
- 8) Joff printed off his own maps and discarded them en route
- 9) Plenty of cyclists take the ferry to the Hook of Holland



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FACT FILE TO BOULOGNE ON A HIGH WHEEL

Distance: 250 miles over 9 days. My longest day on this trip was 46 miles, the shortest 21.

printed them myself in small-scale. As the days went by, I could discard them.

Route: the trip started at the Hook of Holland where I got onto the LF1a North Sea Cycle Route. From here I headed south down towards France to end in Boulogne.

Next time I would...

For a short journey like this, an e-reader of some sort would be great – except that when it's dark, I don't want to make any light when I'm free camping, so perhaps an MP3 player with an audio book.

Conditions: I had a week of gales and rain blowing from the south, which made it hard going for a few days.

More information:

Read about Joff's penny-farthing world tour at pennyfarthingworldtour.com (follow the 'New Mk-5 Penny' link to see his penny-farthings for sale) and crazyguyonabike.com/doc/joff1

Accommodation: free camping

Maps: I downloaded some maps from the internet of the LF1a route,

