

# Out-sundered Fietzers

*or, Ghost Riders in the Reiderwolderpolder*

September 2003

I went for a cycle  
With my brother Michael  
Four weeks on the go  
To Skanör Falsterbo



*Hips in a Wexford hedge*

## Monday 1st

I renewed my car tax and picked up my backlog of mail from the Academy, then got my wisdom tooth filled, cut my toenails, oiled my bike chain and got Jenny to give me a lift to Foxrock. Bobby made us a gorgeous lunch, Anne and Aoife sent us *Bon Voyage* texts, and Michael and I set off at 1.50pm.

We stopped for ten to fifteen minutes every ten miles, for a drink of water and a stretch. The weather was fine, no northerly following wind as promised by the weatherman; we averaged 10mph for the first thirty miles, then flagged slightly. We arrived in Gorey at 8.20 having cycled 54 miles, and turned towards Courtown Harbour looking out for a B&B. An enormous hotel, the Ashdown, caught our eye. They said they had a special price this week, and it sounded quite generous—to the hotel, not the guests. I said ‘That sounds special all right’ but we were tired so we booked in anyway, changed, phoned home and had a slap-up dinner (shank of lamb—outstanding) with a bottle of Bergerac. We phoned our dauntless Aunt Phyllis to wish her a happy 93<sup>rd</sup> birthday, and crashed out before eleven.



*Arriving in Rosslare*

## Tuesday 2nd

Breakfast at 7.30am and out by 8.30; cloudy but calm and dry. We ambled gently to Wexford for lunch at the Riverbank Hotel just before the bridge—excellent loin of pork with a pint of Guinness. We made Rosslare Harbour by 2.30 and were ushered straight onto the ferry before anyone else. We

lashed the bikes to the (padded!) railings and went to our cabin. Michael gave me 'How the Mind Works' by Steven Pinker to read and I gave him 'Turing and the Computer'. We read in the Samuel Beckett Reading Room at the aft port corner of Deck 7; after we moved off at 4.10pm I bought an Irish Times and did most of the crossword. The ship circled around in the sea a short way out; we found out later that they had spotted what looked like a raft, but it turned out to be a big bunch of balloons. Porpoises jumping all around—an exceptionally calm sea, a huge ferry. We had a pint and a half in the Molly Malone Bar, with a large dark Toblerone, then took a walk around the deck and turned in around 8pm. Michael proposed, and I agreed, that we would eat large lunches and no evening dinners on the trip.

### **Wednesday 3rd**

Michael woke me at 1.30am to say that the ventilation had just stopped working. He went up to the information desk and, finding no one about, rang the bridge on the phone provided. They said they'd send someone to check, and after a while we set out for a walk on the top deck and found a steward hanging around the stairs wondering what to do. We showed him the silent ventilator, he checked in the ventilation room and came back to say that a belt had broken and couldn't be replaced that night. He brought us to a rather better cabin one deck up and we bedded down there for the rest of the night after a pleasant turn on deck, very calm, signs of the south coast of England to the north, Mars glaring at us from the south.

We woke about 7.30am, showered and had a fine breakfast in 'Brasserie Boylans', then settled down once more in the Sam Beckett Room to read. Michael had bought a second copy of 'How the Mind Works' by mistake, meaning to get the new Pinker book, and he brought them both along so we could read in parallel and discuss it. By page 50 I was hooked: Pinker is even better than Dawkins at demolishing bad arguments in a few words, and he is terrific at guiding the topic and keeping your interest, not bogging you down in tortuous arguments.

Another turn on deck and it was 11.45am, time to disembark at Cherbourg. Having come on first we were up in the bows, and rode off quite early. We headed east and stopped a mile or so down the road to change our mirrors over to the left of our handlebars; then we looked at the map and decided to head for Quettehou. The road was busy as far as the airport, then less so; long straight hills, sunny and warm weather. At three or shortly after we tried to get a meal in a grill bar at a crossroads, but the open fire was out and nothing doing. The woman gave us bottles of lovely cool water from the tap, though, and we had more luck in the next town, Le Vast. Again they said there was nothing doing but we persisted—something cold? And yes, they could do a ham sandwich in lovely crusty bread with a half carafe of red wine. At Quettehou we headed down the coast and after a while we took a tiny road down along the beach. The road varied from sandy to metalled, and brought us to Ravenoville-Plage where we put up in a Chambre d'Hôte run by an English woman called Lesley Titherington who immediately made us a cup of tea.

She is from Hampshire, a kind of grey-haired Shirley Valentine figure; she moved to Cyprus when she got divorced ten years or more ago, then had to sell up and go back to secretarial work in England, and three years ago she sold up there and came here. Her plan is to install central heating so that she can give needlework classes over the winter. A sampler on her wall reads 'Born to Sew, Forced to Work'. We had a slightly disappointing dinner (but a nice bottle of Rhône) at the local restaurant—Irish prices and not French standards. Lesley made us coffee and we turned in around ten.



## Thursday 4th

### *Chalets at Utah Beach*

Breakfast at eight, and out by nine. We continued alongside Utah Beach and at Carenton it looked as though we were being forced onto a motorway, but the old road (N13) ran parallel to it and we took that. Our map was out of date and only showed the old road. Brilliant day but pleasantly warm rather than hot. We almost stopped for lunch at Osmanville, on seeing a string of parked lorries; but we hadn't quite done the thirty miles we had undertaken to cover before lunch (with twenty afterwards, to keep up an average of fifty miles per day) nor was it quite one o'clock, so we headed north towards Omaha Beach and found a lovely restaurant in Grandcamp-Maisy. We had smoked herrings and potatoes, steak-frites, and apple pie, which went down well with a local red and two small coffees (one doesn't say 'espresso' in France). There were various museums of World War II junk along the way and plenty of American flags, but we didn't go down to the beach, just pressed ahead. By five we were near Bayeux and called in to a little bar to sample some cider.



*A cup of cider*

A litre bottle was served up chilled, with two cups, and the bar-Madame asked us about our bikes and our trip. I noticed some sporting trophies behind the bar: she has six sons who all play football.

Michael said ‘Half a team’ which pleased her. We decided it was too late to look at the Bayeux Tapestry today and turned towards the first Chambre d’Hôte sign we saw. They were full, but they phoned ahead for us and we got separate rooms in Mme Roulland’s, on a little country road just north of the town. I cycled into town to buy pâté, bread, cider, asparagus, peaches and grapes in a gigantic Champion hypermarket. It was fun finding the way back, but I had memorised just enough about the street that gave onto the country lane. We ate outside, watching some cows and a heron (or possibly an egret).



*Supper outdoors chez Mme Roulland*

## Friday 5th

For breakfast Mme Roulland made a large pot of coffee for Michael, with a large jug of hot milk, and gave me a yellow teapot for six, filled with hot water, and a selection of tea bags to put in it—besides orange juice, croissants, fresh bread and jam. We noticed various Canadian references in the room and she said some of her children live in Québec, and that she had had unrelated visitors from there as well. We got going by 9am and skirted Bayeux by the Périphérique (the North Circular Road) having decided we didn’t need to see the Tapestry, each having seen it before. A cool morning; a few drops never quite materialised into rain. Cows in rough fields to start with, but very soon enormous cornfields and fields of what looked like manky spinach—probably beet. We steered a central path between the coast road and the main Caen road, and stumbled on a group of men rebuilding a neolithic tomb—the oldest in Normandy, c4000 BC according to the chap we spoke to. We worked on the principle that the guy smoking the cigarette was in charge. Long hills all the way, the flat top of one hill signposted as the site of the RAF aerodrome in 1944. In the corner of one field a giant man had been built from bales of straw, and he wore an apron reading ‘Laurence + Dany—Vive les mariés’. We finished our grapes and drank some of the cider-bar-woman’s water, from the plastic 1.5-litre bottles given to us on our first day, which would accompany us all the way to Sweden. Around noon we crossed the Pegasus Bridge, a bridge that opens by driving the axle of a quarter-wheel along an overhead track.



*Pegasus Bridge*



*WW2 Tank*



There were bits of WW2 guns still in place, mounted but rusting away, and a tank. We read a notice describing the landing of British troops there in June 1944 by gliders, to secure the two bridges which they called 'Ham and Jam' and begin the liberation of France.

A steep climb once we crossed the Orne brought us towards Merville where we had an excellent lunch—three courses with wine and coffee—in the first hotel we saw, which kept us smiling for quite a way. We were now into holiday resort Normandy coast and the towns started running into one another. One enormous hill separates Houlgate and Villiers; we thought from the map that the rest of the road, hugging the coast, would be flatter, but no. In Villiers I photographed a topiary dinosaur and a Barbapapa house—there is an endless string of houses between the road and the beach, three stories over basement but very narrow, with towers pinnacles fancy windows and fancy names—the fantasy châteaux of the nineteenth-century middle class.



*Topiary Dinosaur*



*Barbapapa house*

I couldn't remember which towns Proust had modelled Balbec and Combray on [they are apparently Cabourg, perhaps with input from the Grand Hotel in Trouville, and Illiers, now renamed Illiers-Combray] but Deauville looked like a possible model; we saw the Grand Hotel district from the distance as we crossed a bridge and started up the hill for Trouville. Just before Honfleur our fifty miles were up, and it was close to 6pm, so we pulled in to a gateway advertising chambres and paid in advance for a fairly crummy room, with a shower that didn't attach to its hook, in what seemed to be an institution where religious courses were run. Apart from us it seemed deserted, its minder had an off-hand manner, no breakfast was included, but our room had a grand elevated view across the estuary to Le Havre. Shortly after we arrived it started to rain.



*Breakfast Restaurant*

## Saturday 6th

A grey morning, but dry again. Having slept from 9.30pm to 6.45am, we got going by 7.30. We had an excellent breakfast—eggs & bacon, coffee, croissants, bread, jam, yoghurt and orange juice—in a café on the quay at Honfleur, where we got money from an ATM. Off again at nine; we thought we'd have to go along to the Tancarville bridge, since the Pont de Normandie is on the motorway, but some women we asked said that you can cycle across, so we sought and found the special access road for cyclists and pedestrians. Mighty impressive. I had to stop right at the top, halfway across, as my chain jammed. It had done that once before, overstepping the change to top gear, at Utah Beach, and we had turned the bike over and taken out the back wheel to release it. This time I spotted what was happening and didn't let it jam hard, so I could pull the chain free by hand without undoing the wheel. I moved into the pedestrian lane(!) to do this, as there were no pedestrians about. Very few cyclists either, though we did meet some coming the other way. Most cyclists we saw in France were of the shiny kind, both their bikes and their lycra, quite a few as venerable as ourselves but more sportingly turned out: I wore shorts and Jenny's floppy sun hat, Michael wore tracksuit bottoms, a road-mender's high-visibility reflective yellow top, and a baseball cap. Over the bridge we were directed away from the autoroute and given a choice between going west to the south docks of Le Havre or east to Tancarville Bridge, so we chose the latter. It was a side road for 'Convois Exceptionels' parallel to the motorway, separated from it by a metre-high grassy bank with trees and hedges on it. To our north there was an impressive limestone cliff face complete with caves. At Tancarville several roads came together, and we turned back, climbed the eminence, through forest where a rusty red squirrel skipped out in front of me, and then we went along the high plains to Bolbec (no Proustian connection) where we stopped at 12.30 for lunch. We found a Pizzeria off the walking-street with a €12.50 menu of *four* courses. I took so long washing the chain oil off my hands that they joked with Michael about me having fallen in; but presentable at last we tucked in to some charcuterie (M) and Terrine de Harengs (me) with a bottle of Gascon red. The terrine was amazing, not a pâté as I expected but large pieces of smoked herring swimming in oil with onions, carrots and spices, in a pot too big for me to finish half of it, and with potatoes on the side. Then we had steak-frites, cheese for Michael, mousse au chocolat and a small coffee. The Bolbec semi-marathon was just about to start when we left, celebrated with a parade, and I caught a few photos of a band playing this little tune:



on bagpipes, bombardes and drums. There were also historic cars on parade, a particular love of the French.



Then up the hill (all the towns here are in valleys; we would fly in and crawl out) and across more enormous fields—no hedges as far as the eye can see, but clumps of trees at different distances in all directions. A light shower cooled but did not wet us. A weasel ran nimbly across the road. We passed through Valmont and headed for Veulettes-sur-Mer, but as we approached it the road signs all pointed to places that weren't on the map, so we asked directions in a well-off looking little town. The directions were given graciously but confusingly and we found ourselves, with another exhilarating swoop, down a dead end at the sea in Les Petites Dalles, with a tall cliff road separating us from Les Grandes Dalles on the road to Veulettes



*Les Petites Dalles*

Asking more directions we picked up the hint that a B&B in St Martin, on the way but off the coast, might be less pricey; all posh seaside resorts here. But the only Chambre d'Hôte in St Martin turned out to be closed, though occupied, for the weekend. We wondered was it our looks or our smell. So Veulettes it was; we arrived at six, having done sixty miles, though less exhausted than yesterday. The last few kilometres were lovely going with both the sun and the breeze at our back and a long descent to the town. The first hotel we asked in had no rooms, and they wanted to direct us on ten kilometres further; when I expostulated they said there *is* a sort of hotel a few doors up the road, with the bathrooms on the staircase and other disparaging details... so there we stayed. We had a view of the sea across the road, our bikes were tucked in the corridor at the bottom of the stairs. We settled in; Michael went for a walk along the beach but I was overcome with snooziness and snoozed. After a while we went next door for a bottle of cider in an open-fronted café/bar, and retired about nine.

### **Sunday 7th**

We got up and left at 8am; a cool day, bright but overcast. We had breakfast in St Valéry en Caux, a curiously quiet town with a feeling of diffident reserve. Most places weren't serving yet, so we made the most of the Hotel des Bains which though moderately posh only served juice, coffee, croissants, bread and jam.



Another steep exit, then on we went to Dieppe. We came across a sign on the road for a cycle-route to Dieppe and followed it; it kept us near the coast and off the main road, though on public roads rather than a cycle path. Most towns we passed were sleepy, but in one town a crowd had gathered, presumably to see a parade of veteran and curious cars (a seasonable event round here by the look of



things), and they all gave a great cheer to the veteran and curious cyclists. Wherever the cliffs dip to sea level there is a town; the climb out of the last town before Dieppe was massive, culminating in a wonderful view back over the cliffs we had conquered, before a change of scenery. Still on the cycle-route, we were guided through the centre of Dieppe where another vintage-to-unusual-car rally was under way. All sorts of cars, sixties Chevrolets, a dozen Minis, two flat-windscreen Beetles, a Triumph Herald, and of course several Tintin Citroëns. We had lunch at a café I chose for its name—Le Skipper, down by the quays, most tasty. Afterwards Michael bought stamps for our postcards and I went to look at the cathedral of St Jacques. There I learnt from a plaque on the wall how the apostle James was martyred in Jerusalem in AD44 and his body was put in a skiff which made its way unguided, that is to say divinely guided, to the Galician coast. They knew it was James that had arrived because a miraculous enlightenment told them so in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, revealing his remains in the Field of the Star, Campus Stellae. The Dieppe cathedral was built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and welcomed pilgrims coming from Brighton on their way through Rouen, Chartres, Le Mans and on to Compostella. There has always been a large English colony in Dieppe—the name even comes from the English word ‘deep’, applied to the river. I photographed some carvings including a bizarre string instrument and a very ancient-Roman style statue of St Expédit stamping on the reptile Procrastination.



The climb out of Dieppe was long, straight and (yes) steep, through Victorian-looking red brick buildings looking grimy and smelling of something I haven’t smelt for a long time—coal smoke. Soon we found the continuation of the cycle route and got back onto quiet roads through quiet towns. Still cattle in the fields, some places hedged and others not, plenty of beet and corn growing, some corn with one ear per stalk, some with two. From Le Tréport we crossed a bridge straight into Mers-les-Bains where we suffered a mild culture shock from the unexpected teeming crowds. The blob on the map had not prepared us for a town of such size and sleaze. Some streets we passed through on our way out had once-colourful carved balconies and gables, but with faded and peeling paint. Graffiti near the railway station reminded us that we had been in graffiti-free country since Cherbourg. We fancied a stop and a bottle of cider, but we didn’t fancy stopping there, so we pushed up another mile-long climb and turned off for Ault, which proved a total contrast. Ault is just over the border into the Somme département of Picardie, and on the coast but off the main road. Thundering down the hill we found it ominously sleepy; the Hôtel de Paris was all shuttered up; but a woman in a bar told us of another, the Victor Hugo, and that was just the place for us. A room with a bathroom! And a TV! And a garage for our bikes. The proprietor was delighted to find we were Irish, ‘That is my name—Patrick!’ He was playing Scrabble with the rest of his staff (his wife) when we went down for a bottle of cider, which we followed with very welcome hot baths and another early night, catching up on a little more Steven Pinker.

## Monday 8th

Our breakfast was laid on at eight, we were on the road at 8.45, and the sun shone; we even had a following wind for a while. After (guess what) a long climb out of Ault the landscape flattened out and we made good speed; in fact we completed our target fifty miles by five o'clock, even with an hour and a quarter for lunch. Our last long descent brought us in mid-morning to St Valéry, a medieval town with Joan of Arc associations. We contemplated coffee but didn't find the right place; but we admired the boats and photographed the Picardy brick-edged gables, and a little tourist steam-train.



We crossed the Somme by a tiny lifting bridge and found an off-road cycle track which allowed us at last to cycle abreast and chat. We passed marshes with horses and birds—plenty of swans, grey geese, coots with their white foreheads, and an egret; and also plenty of rough fields with cows or bullocks, and fields of maize. With the breeze astern we made 14mph and more, effortlessly. We lunched in Quend, a tiny village where the bar offered a table d'hôte; they didn't seem to expect customers on a Monday but Madame proposed a salad composée, salmon tart with ragout, and apple pie, which we enjoyed greatly, with a bottle of Buzet Tradition 2000. The men in the bar made approving jokes about Ireland being the place where they throw bombs at the English; perhaps that liberation of sixty years ago still rankles here. Our hostess was delighted that we enjoyed the meal so much and the gave us souvenir pens.

Pretty soon we left the Somme region for the Pas de Calais and the coast road became a long conurbation, one town melting into the next. Sometimes there was a separate cycle track, sometimes not. Shortly after five we turned off the main road at a Logis de France sign near Ste Cécile. The hotel was full but we got a room in a Gîtes de France chambres-d'hôte, where the woman said at first that she only had single rooms, then remembered as she was showing it to us that one of the rooms had a second bed in it. We went off for a couple of quarter-litres of beer sitting outdoors at a bar on a crossroads watching the local lads doing both clever and sloppy riding on bikes and mopeds. We had an exceptionally early night—Michael was asleep at about 7.30.



## Tuesday 9th

We breakfasted with another couple staying in the house, a retired man and his working wife from the Loire valley. Off at 9.15 or so, into Boulogne with a rise and descent, down a long street mightily dominated by the cathedral on top of the hill, then an incredibly steep street up to the old city gate; all the medieval gates seem to be intact.



We walked in to enter a more peaceful world of quiet cafés and charming shops; up close the cathedral looked quite docile, even uninteresting. On the way out we tried a shop for a map for the next part of our journey, but they had nothing beyond the French border. We took the D940 around Cap Gris Nez and after a while going through sand dunes we found the going getting hilly again. Shortly after one we reached Wissant and had lunch in Hotel Normandy, which we chose because it looked well patronised by the French—most of the cars on the road at this stage were northern: English, Belgian, Dutch or German. We had smoked ham & melon to start with, then I had salmon with tagliatelle aux fruits de mer, Michael had gigot d'agneau, and we had an excellent Côtes de Ventoux 2001. Greatly fortified we pushed on around three o'clock to find a gigantic hill up to Cap Blanc Nez. I got to the top first and continued on up to the obelisk.



Several trippers were there, including a bus or two, and my lovely PDQ attracted admiration. A few more hills brought us to a town with a traffic jam. I treat jams as slalom ski-slopes but Michael decided to walk, and on his way through he found a shop with a Benelux map. While waiting for him to come through I sat in the sun and sent text messages home.

Then on to Calais where we contemplated buying a dictaphone machine to keep a log, but found no suitable-looking electrical shop. The Hôtel de Ville is an extraordinary nineteenth-century phantasm in red brick with a German-looking tower over a Disney-looking clock. The problem then was to find

the non-autoroute way to Gravelines; we tried a promising road towards the hovercraft quay, but finding ourselves at a dead-end-or-motorway we thought we'd have to retrace several kilometres: a galling prospect on bikes, if the scenery does nothing to compensate the effort, and this was Industrial Estate. However asking at a factory entrance we were told that we were quite close to a bridge over the motorway, leading to the Gravelines road. After 6pm, having clocked up fifty miles, we arrived in Gravelines by a fairly quiet pastoral road. There were no Chambre d'Hôte signs so we looked at the Tourist Information office; it was shut but had a list of hotels and chambres stuck on the shutter, so we chose a Logis de France hotel and asked a passer-by for directions. It turned out to be several kilometres away, down on the beach in Port St Phillippe, right beside a black-and-white striped lighthouse. We garaged the bikes, watched an early Simpsons episode, bought a couple of beers from the plump, fair-haired, and (Michael thought) Belgianish-looking girl in the hotel bar, and walked on the beach, past fifty-three bathing huts (we didn't count them; they were numbered). The sand was soft and flat, and the beach fairly deserted. We retired early.

### Wednesday 10th

We woke at 6.45 and showered; breakfast was already on offer for half an hour before we went down at 7.45: a basic but pleasant coffee, bread and jam affair. I religiously applied my Factor 20 sun-block but it was grey and drizzling when we set off; gradually that turned to rain and the hands became cold and stiff. We took a long time—it seemed like an hour—getting through Dunkerque; there was a cycle track but it suddenly led us somewhere that wasn't on Michael's list for the day, which may have been the right way to go but we couldn't tell, as there was no long-distance signpost, only signs for local areas of Dunkerque. We tried guessing our way but found ourselves consulting a map on a bus shelter and asking people who seemed to know little more than we did. We eventually found Malo Les Bains on the coast just east of the city centre, where we cycled along a sea front which looked flat and grey in the drizzle, and decidedly off-season (why did I think of 'Scunthorpe is *so* bracing'?). The coast road petered out so we had to head inland and look for a road to Bray-Dunes; fortunately there was a cycle track along the N1 most of the way to the Belgian border. We crossed the border at 11.35am, a week to the minute, almost, since we landed in Cherbourg. The crossing was celebrated by a roadside sign, the circle of stars on blue, and then a Welcome-to-Belgium sign. Almost immediately began a series of tobacco shops, also selling chocolates and booze. It was raining heavily by now and we pushed on doggedly until we had to stop to pee and de-numb the feet. We sheltered under a wall from a particularly heavy squall from the east, along with another intrepid cyclist. But overall we made good time, and we arrived in Veurnes at 12.30 with thirty miles covered and ready for lunch. We selected a reasonable-looking restaurant (in fact it was the only one we could find) and wondered how they would receive us, dripping on their floor. Michael took off his rain gear in the hallway, but I had not brought rain trousers and my shorts (and t-shirt despite jacket) were sodden. The manageress didn't blanch, she showed us to a table, and I went to the loo with all my bags and towelled down and changed everything. Thanks to Aoife's advice—to pack things in plastic bags inside my panniers—I could put on my best shirt, jumper and trousers, and pants, socks and sandals, all bone dry. Feeling a lot more comfortable I enjoyed the meal well beyond its modest pretensions; the quantity was admirable and the litre of anonymous wine very drinkable. Michael being a sailor was apparently untroubled by soggy socks and shoes. Vegetable soup, a giant kebab (hanging on a gallows over the plate—the ultimate vertical food) and plentiful frites; Michael had an excellent steak Béarnaise. Fortified and settled with coffees we set off again around 2.15pm in a promisingly lighter sky, though it did rain more later. We had to follow a fairly main road, but it had a cycle track that was nearly always separated from the traffic.

We hoped to bypass most of Oostende and get to De Haan, but didn't find the road we were looking for; there are so many roads, and the map only showed a few of them. As in Dunkerque we thought we had got more or less through the city and found a cycle track, but it petered out and we were directed by some chaps in an old-folks' club back towards the city. Fairly disoriented, we decided,



having done our fifty miles by 5.45, to head towards a church spire we could see over the buildings: it turned out to be St Peter and Paul's, right beside Oostende railway station and the quays. Knowing at least where we were, we booked into the Strand Hotel, a bit more expensive than our standard: but a good room with bath, twenty-seven-channel TV and breakfast served from 5am. There was no garage, but the receptionist said we could chain our bikes to a rail in front of the window, and that there would be a doorman keeping watch all night. We hung up our wet gear, watched some more Simpsons, sent messages home (Michael phoned) and headed out for some beer and a wander round, since the rain had now stopped. A trawler in dry dock is built into the quays, and open (though not at this hour) as an exhibit. We asked in the station whether there's a road to Zeebrugge off the motorway, but the exhausted woman in the information office only knew about railways. The hotel reception was more helpful, and gave us a list of places to head for. Back in our room we had hot baths and watched England play Liechtenstein. Some heavy machinery at the dock, perhaps unloading a ship, made shrieks and creaks like the torments of the damned, so we closed the hotel windows, which were double-glazed and very effective. I slept quite well but Michael got up in the middle of the night and with the help of the doorman (who appeared to be the manager) carried the bikes, still locked together because he didn't want to bother me for my key, into the hotel foyer for security.

### Thursday 11th

We woke not too early, around 8am; after breakfast the Dutch girl at reception showed us how to get on the road to De Haan—in fact, she said, you can follow the tramlines from these docks all the way to the Dutch border. The sky was clear with a few small clouds and we set off, retracing the way we had come last night. I sent Aoife a text:

Sunny day, blowing the clouds away  
Clothes are dry and there's a lively breeze  
Can you tell me how to get, how to get to Zeebrugge please?

We really were at the edge of town, and we followed the main road (with the tram tracks on our left) in an off-road cycle track for a few miles. Michael had worked out a cross-country route to avoid Zeebrugge, and we turned right at De Haan towards Klemkerke. Unfortunately once we left the main road the road signs were scarce, pointed to places not on our map, and didn't tell us the road numbers; so we did an extra four miles or so, but found the way we wanted in the end. There were cycle tracks on most big roads, so much so that when we went on a big road that had no cycle track and used the hard shoulder, we felt perhaps we shouldn't be there—though drivers (particularly lorry drivers) always stopped and made way for us in any dubious manoeuvres such as crossing roads or going on roundabouts. At 12.30 we had an enormous lunch in a roadside restaurant, slightly posh with nice linen and three or four waistcoated waiters. We took the mid-priced set menu: tomato soup in a tureen (three helpings each), prawn croquettes, wiener schnitzels with frites, chocolate mousse. With that we had a bottle of the house red which the wine waiter parked in a pouring basket, tipped up as though to minimise the sediment, on a neighbouring table. When he came back to top us up we'd just done so, and when he came back to top us up again we'd finished the bottle. We didn't wait for coffee, having had large doses at breakfast, and at 2pm we moved on to find that the restaurant was exactly on the border. I kept my jacket on as the breeze was chilly (I carried it into restaurants as it contained all my valuables) and we began to enjoy the even more bike-friendly lanes of Holland. The first shop we passed was a bike shop. We headed for Sluis and then for the ferry at Breskens.

Along the way (a bike lane not just off the road but separated from it by a swathe of grass) we caught up with a recumbent trike—a little like the PDQ trike, two wheels in front. A young chap was riding it, in no hurry, but we didn't stop and chat. At Breskens we climbed up on the dyke to see a ferry heading in to the harbour on our left, so we made for that, bought a ticket from a man who came out of his booth to try out my bike, though not to the extent of pedalling it, and then we walked onto the ferry which left immediately. We were among twenty to thirty bikers getting on; at this part of the year no cars are taken even though it's a big ferry with two car decks. It took twenty-five minutes or so to get

across to Walcheren, and that seemed to be a holiday country, everybody wandering about taking the air, many of them cycling. We set out to go anticlockwise round the coast, and found dedicated cycle-paths: fietspads, a counter-intuitive name to an English speaker. A bicycle is a fiets, and a cyclist is a fietser. The fietspads here run quite separate from the car roads, all the way, through woods and behind the dunes that act as dykes. By 6.15pm we had reached Westkapelle and done fifty-five miles, so we found a hotel with a bright quiet airy room. We felt well-considered, since the manager invited me to view the room before deciding to take it. I locked the bikes in a little dungeon they gave us a key to. I changed my clothes, then we phoned home and went downstairs to sample the Dutch beer.

### Friday 12th

I woke up lateish from a bothery supermarket dream. Breakfast had already started at 8.30 before we came down. It was a little drizzly but not enough to wet you. We climbed quite soon onto the height of the dyke and followed the Nordsee path, sometimes beside a road, sometimes not. We crossed an enormous barrage dam with gates that are pushed down into the sea by hydraulic pistons. Wind socks showed us that we were going directly into the north-north-west wind; we made about seven miles per hour despite smooth cycleways entirely unencumbered by traffic. We stopped for lunch, a little short of our thirty miles, in Burgh/Haamstede, at a sort of village centre roundabout built around a redbrick church. We parked our bikes at good Sheffield staples already well populated with bikes, mostly locked with the flimsy circular locks so popular here; the one I shared a staple with had a long covered-cable lock like mine—but with the key left in.

We had a good clear soup with lots of bits of veg and chicken in it, then I had prawns on skewers with spicy sauce and chips, Michael had a steak. He was not offered a choice of how it would be cooked, but it was presentably medium. Service was good-humoured but leisurely, so we didn't stay for pud or coffee; indeed we had stopped for coffee earlier, in the rainiest part of the morning, partly because I needed a loo. Afterwards the weather gradually picked up until it was really clear and sunny towards evening.

After lunch we continued north (into the wind) and crossed another barrage dam. There were boardsailors and kiteboarders on the water—the first we saw was a kiteboard in the sea, then a man on shore practising with the half-moon kite, making tracks in the sand with his heels as he was dragged along. Around the corner there was a swarm of them: I counted nineteen kites, excluding kites that were just being flown on shore, and an equal number of sailboards with transparent sails pissing up and down a stretch of bay, with just a few tacking out offshore into the wind, most of them staying in the inshore shallows. I rode down the sloping dyke to take some pictures.



We also passed a lot of windmills turning energetically—about one rev per second. We went close by the foot of one and it wasn't in the least noisy: a sound of wind, but nothing compared to traffic noise.





Gradually the land was becoming more tidy, but still rushes and rough grasses were allowed to grow by the side of the road and drainage canals. At one place there were almost, but not quite, gorse bushes. [Re-reading that later I can't think how there could almost be a bush, but that's what I wrote at the time.] Beets or turnips were growing in huge fields, then Brussels sprouts, occasional collections of cattle and sheep (including a lot of spectacularly black ones) and a lot of very beautiful horses. Early in the day we saw a lot of people walking dogs, all on leads, and later on the odd cat would appear by the road. There were bike tracks everywhere, off-road more than on. At one point we didn't want to go anywhere marked on the bike signposts so we took a road that was marked not-for-bikes (once we were on it it dawned on us, that's what that sign with a red circle round a bike must mean). There was no hard shoulder outside the edge-of-carriageway line, but most drivers made room for us without comment. Others whizzed past in Irish fashion, inches from our elbows, and three or four beeped at us.

We got off that road as soon as we could. It was odd that we noticed the difference, since for us that was a reversion to normal; we were obviously getting spoilt. Dutch drivers go like the hammers of hell on the motorways but on small roads that they share with cyclists they are entirely tame; they have all the time in the world for you to make up your mind whether to cross their path or not, and that includes lorry drivers, smiling cheerfully all the while.

We decided to press on to Brielle despite our late start, coffee break and contrary wind; so we crossed another barrage dam with a different style of sea-gate: I photographed the cycle track across it, a good five metres wide and separated from the motorway by a two-sided crash barrier. We had it all to ourselves. Before that we had to wait while a bridge was lifted to let two boats through, very neatly done. Michael took a picture of me sitting at a bus stop drinking the end of my daily litre of water.



At that moment we saw our recumbent number four: a flat-out model with a curious rowing action involving pushing alternatively with handlebars (sit up) and feet (lie down), no revolving pedals. Very fast, and massive exercise, but I don't fancy it around town.

Finally around 7pm we sidled into Brielle by a back road not exclusively for bikes. We were clearly in an upmarket town, with many of the doors and windows painted fresh Amsterdam dark green (a nineteenth-century invention, we were told later; in the seventeenth they would all have been white). We came upon the Atlas Hotel on the first street as we entered the old part, and took a room—very pleasant too, under the roof with old and new timbers exposed. I phoned Susanne Braumann, a viol-playing and teaching colleague, to say we might be in Amsterdam by Sunday, and she invited us to visit her, though she has no place to put the bikes, and good bikes always get stolen in Amsterdam. Then we wandered out thinking of a pint of Guinness across the street; but I wanted to roam about a bit, so we went round a corner and found a put-up stage with a jazz band tuning up! We bought pints of Dommelsch there, sat at a table in the square, and had a fine evening's entertainment of all the trad classics. It was a big band, five saxes in front of four trombones and four trumpets, with an electric piano, bass and drums. Pretty good too, though only a few (the soloists) had real commitment and edge. They have the appearance of people who do it for the crack, businessmen perhaps; and a few women, including the best sax soloist. Best of all we agreed was the drummer who kept the rhythm alive and drove it along very tastily. A Dutch couple asked me what I'm writing here; they are also cyclists and grandparents, though they camp rather than hotel. They said I looked as though I was doing my homework, which was true enough.

### **Saturday 13th**

We packed up before having breakfast around 8.30; breakfast was quite busy, the clients were all businessmen by the look of them, quite a few English. It was the usual Dutch buffet with cold meat and cheese as well as cereal and fruit, but we kept finding extra things like currant buns and fried eggs, beans and frankfurters. I dashed out around the corner while Michael finished breakfast because I couldn't find my beloved Czech pen that I bought for less than a euro in Jindřichův Hradec in July—a stainless steel pen with no logo or maker's name to be found on it—and I thought I might have left it behind at the table in the square. It wasn't to be found, not surprisingly as I had rolled it up in my cream shirt pocket inside my stripy French jumper and packed it away before going to bed (the shirt and jumper together made up my 'instant good' clothes). We loaded the bikes and started off down the road, to find that I had a puncture; so we got a tub of water from the hotel kitchen and did a repair on a side street. While waiting for the rubber solution to dry I examined the outer tyre and found two possible culprits, sharp pieces of glass stuck in the centre of the tread. Meanwhile Michael tuned his gears and brakes and I tightened my back brake, which used up quite a lot of rubber over the white cliffs of Deauville.

It was 10.15am when we finally cycled through the charming town of Brielle where they never sleep. We got back on the cycle track signposted towards Rozenburg, where roses welcome you in the centre of the roundabout. The grass was dewy, the sky clear with nothing but jet trails at first, then high mackerel clouds later on. A definite feeling of opulence flowed from the very green and well-kept grass, tasteful houses, neat sheep and goats and beautiful horses; even the cows looked groomed. We crossed a huge blue iron bridge with a hedge of enormous concrete structures on the south bank, with no apparent function: a kind of concrete-henge. By then the cycle-path signs were saying 'Rozenburg' with a picture of a boat, and in the same direction 'Den Haag', so we followed those. The ferry at Rozenburg brought us across swift and busy water—one outlet of the Rhine—to Maasluis. Waiting to board, a man saw my 'Dublin Cycling Campaign' t-shirt and told us of his travels to Ireland three years ago: Dublin, Cork, Galway, Giant's Causeway. A man on the ferry (€1 each) swapped coins for some small-denomination Irish ones. I only had a 2c and two fives but he was happy to give me 15c for those. At Maasluis the bike track guided us straight away and out of the town; I photographed an old windmill with black sails turning in a very light breeze. We could see the way the trellis that supports the sails scoops them into a curve like a propeller to make the best use of the wind. We headed for Delft; on the way our attention was caught by a clip-clop sound and we saw a two-horse open carriage bringing an old couple along a road by a canal.



Rather than go into Delft we diverted towards the centre of Den Haag; our intention was to find a place to stay two nights, see the Gemeente Museum and make a train trip to Amsterdam, and wash our clothes. Well into the built-up section marked on the map we were still in leafy suburbs with an enormously wide road, that is to say, wide footpath, wide cycle path, one half carriageway, wide grassy median with tramlines down the middle, then the same again in reverse order on the other side.



As we came nearer the centre a child called out ‘Sint Klaas’ at Michael. One o’clock was approaching so we chose a restaurant in the Turkish quarter (which seemed from the shops to be also the Jewish and Arabic quarter) where we could watch our bikes from a window table.



The restaurant was empty and had the look of a very clean hamburger joint, but the menu was loaded with good things, so we had a mixed grill with a side salad, rice and chips: kebabs plus Doner kebab, chicken, liver and a chop, with a bottle of spicy Turkish red wine. We hadn’t much language in common with the waiter and waitress, but we got on most cheerfully, and the meal was excellent and possibly the best value on the whole trip.

Cycle tracks with a few interruptions for building works and road works got us through the centre of Den Haag, past the railway station and back out through more leafy suburbs towards Leiden. We stopped short at Verschoten because it is on the railway line, though the station turned out to be a distance from the town. At first glance the prospect of finding a hotel at all looked slight, rather like looking for a hotel in Foxrock; our eyes focussed eagerly on a ‘hotel’ sign but alas the building was under reconstruction.



A neighbouring shop sent us five minutes down the road to the Golden Lion Motel which was rather country-clubbish and teeming with smart cars; but they had a



room for us for two nights, and a garage for the bikes, and it was actually cheaper than the Atlas in Brielle. I asked for information on the Gemeente Museum in Den Haag and the receptionist said he'd get on the net and phone me in my room. Cycling until 5.15pm had only brought us thirty-five miles, with our delayed start; but our average was ahead of the daily fifty and we had a day to spare.



We unpacked all our gear and washed our clothes in the bathroom basin, then went down to sample the local beer. The barman brought us two bottles of Palm (no draft, the tap was producing froth) which is nice and tasty, but for seconds we had some Bavaria on tap, lovely and smooth. A sudden burst of live brass music with plenty of drums caught our ears so I slipped along the corridor to take a look: it was a band of three trumpets, a Wagner tuba, a Sousaphone and various percussion, entertaining a party—

perhaps a wedding, perhaps just the diners on a Saturday night. The Sousaphone player was of the 'hoot away on C and G' school and when the chords became too interesting to fathom he just played the same notes, but a little quieter.

### Sunday 14th

Our clothes had dried pretty well overnight so we tidied them away and went down for a comprehensive breakfast in the Golden Lion. The place was full, with a big surge around 9.15—all ages, several families with children, old folks, young couples... The reception desk man gave me a printout of the Gemeente Museum web pages so we consulted that and got on a bus to Den Haag to be in good time for its opening at 11am. A half-hour on the number 45 brought us to Den Haag Central Station where we immediately caught a number 4 and the driver said he'd tell us where to get off. We were delayed for a few minutes in the middle of town by a procession of horse guards, swords gleaming, and a royal coach drawn by four fine black horses.

We'd passed the police horses out practising yesterday, and wondered what they meant to do with their swords—smite the populace? After they had all passed our bus driver put his boot down and Schumachered us to the Museum by 10.30. We sat down in the warm sun with our hats and sunglasses on, on a cool stone bench near a fountain in a lily pond, to wait for the doors to open. I rang Susanne and she told me to ring when we reached Amsterdam, she'd meet us at station and we would have lunch close by.



We got in to the museum and were helpfully directed to the musical instrument collection but alas no gambas of any sort were to be seen. Plenty of horns, trumpets, flutes, clarinets (even walking-stick ones), harps, pianos, harpsichords, Jakobs violins, Chanot violins, far Eastern and African string and wind instruments, music boxes and thumb pianos, even chittarones and mandolones but no gambas at all. This was a disappointment as my main reason to come to the museum was to see the gamba that I had measured there and made a copy of for Anne, ten years ago or so. The online catalogue in the hall

made no mention of any instruments other than those on show. We went upstairs to see a large Mondriaan retrospective, some Picassos and a room full of the Fugare group including three paintings by Jurjen de Haan jr, dating from 1962 and 63. To our surprise we found that he was born in 1936, making him older than Michael though he was Peter's Boy-Scouting pal.



We got a number 4 back to the Central Station and bought tickets for Amsterdam with returns to Voorschotten, and got on an upstairs/downstairs fast train. I rang Susanne with our arrival time, while Michael designed a pedal boat on the back of an envelope. Susanne met us at Dam Square and brought us to a nice quiet restaurant where we dined elegantly—steak and fish pie, with two bottles of Pays d'Oc. We went back to Susanne's tiny L-shaped flat on the top floor of an old house, for coffee and a play of some of her viols and the lirone—a weird experience with its up-a-fifth down-a-fourth tuning, for sweeping chords like Edward Lear's Young Lady of Tyre. Susanne showed us some of her old tiles with viol pictures, and gave me a plaster cast from a viol-player baker's mould; she collects such things. Then we went out on a canal boat tour around the Herengracht and out into the bay (het IJ).

After the trip we had a beer in a little corner pub and got a tram back to the station where we caught a fast train to Leiden and immediately a slow one to Voorschotten. We asked directions from some

people on the platform who said the Golden Lion was fifteen minutes' walk, which it was, exactly. It was quite dark by the time we arrived.

### **Monday 15th**

Fewer people down for breakfast at 8.15am; we got on the road at nine, another beautiful day but cool enough for a coat in the morning. We went through Leiden which looked beautiful, and made for the coast at Noordwijk aan Zee. From there on we abandoned the road map and found cycleways through the dunes; almost deserted, apart from frequent cyclists of all kinds and ages. Hard to credit that we were just between Amsterdam and the sea, in the most densely populated country in the world. At Zandvoort we were misled by the 'Noordseeweg' cycle-route signs and had to go back on our tracks a while; then we set out through a national park, all cycleways, little ups and downs. We had lunch in a roadside café at Bloemendaal aan Zee—half-chicken with chips and salad, a bottle of Cabernet Merlot (once again from the Pays d'Oc) and coffee.

After more dunes we found ourselves on the bank of the Amsterdam canal, spotted a ferry to our left and went for it—no delay and nothing to pay. A man on the ferry told us how the whole canal had been dug 'by hand' about a hundred years ago. On the other side we were invited to continue the Noordseeweg, so we gave it another chance and it brought us out to the coast where we had more quiet cycleways with no sight or sound of a car. We met and were passed by many other cyclists, among them quite a few couples you would describe as 'well preserved'. At Wijk aan Zee the signposts abandoned us again and we asked advice: we were told to buy tickets at the local Spar for permission to cycle through the national park, so we did (€1 each). Then more dunes, forests and empty fields with wayside cycle-signs like milestones at every junction showing us the way to Egmond aan Zee. Arriving there we rang at the first house showing a 'Kammer vrij/Zimmer frei' sign and a man took



payment in advance for a room at the top near a loo and shower. We changed and strolled into town for a beer. A cloud of school kids on bikes floated by tinkling melodious bells. Hundreds. After two glasses of beer at the Lighthouse Bar we stumbled back to the Pension and resumed the study of Pinker, and I had a few games of backgammon on my palm-pooter while Michael crashed out.



*Leiden*

## Tuesday 16th

Packed before breakfast at 8am and got on the road early—another beautiful day, but I had to keep my jacket on for the first two hours. I recognised the folly of taking no rain trousers, which means I can't wear long trousers if it gets cold and rainy; so I bought a pair in Groote Keeten for €12.50. I made the purchase in what Michael tells me is characteristic male fashion: men spot approximately what they are after and nail it immediately, whereas women check out all the bushes before going back and selecting the best fruit. A theory he read somewhere.

Our route was partly on the road, partly through the forest on cycle paths, passing through some nice small towns (too desirable a collection of residences to call them villages) where we did useful things like raid the ATMs and buy ten more postcards and a map of Schleswig-Holstein. I photographed a nice small white



church, and a cat who watched me doing it, and also a house being thatched. Sometimes we were out in wide open plains bounded on the north-west by the dyke or dunes. The cycle paths are wide and straight, sometimes we climbed part of the dyke, but mainly we bowled along with a

very slight following wind—just enough to turn an aeolian (though one we passed was turned off, fins to the wind). Michael told me the story of Jake looking on his map of Germany for a place he saw signposted everywhere, called 'Ausfahrt'; but he got similarly caught out by a sign for 'Hunden aan de Lijn' (dogs on leads). At Den Helder we

caught a ferry to Texel, the first of the string of islands off the north of Holland. We got to the ticket office near the beach, and when I asked the ticket-seller 'When does it sail?' she said 'In one minute.' In about a quarter of an hour we were there, and disembarked among many other bikes and quite a few cars. By now it was 1pm and we'd done our thirty miles, so we went to the nearest town—Den Hoorn—for lunch. The town was so sleepy and the first few restaurants were so closed that we began to wonder was Tuesday their day off; but we found a nice inside-and-outside restaurant (with about sixty bikes parked beside it) and had a wonderful nosh of tomato soup followed by Lamstoffspot—a good lamb stew with rice (full of seeds) on the side, cauliflower and broccoli—a fruity salad, pieces of watermelon, and chips with *two kinds of mayonnaise*. The house red wine was Spanish—Navarro—and very nice too. The coffee wasn't exactly espresso but there you go; the service was pleasant and the sun was shining. Over lunch we wrote and stamped our cards, a particularly artistic set of photographs.



We then cycled the length of Texel, which is lovely but quite similar to the mainland, and got a ferry to Vlieland. The ticket office was near the beach where the small ferry (too small for cars) docked at a pier made from an old metal barge. A ferry was moored, so we asked when it left, and the ticket woman said 'Five minutes—one person go down now and tell them there's another coming'. We



pushed our bikes across the beach and over the rough wooden gangway, and the crew of two lifted them over the rail onto the boat. We all sat on deck for the 20-minute crossing. A crewman offered round small shots of Genever, but we being obviously not Dutch were spared this ritual. We saw the island of Vlieland ahead, but it just looked like a long sandbank with something square and something triangular on it. We wondered was the square thing the hulk of a wrecked ship, but it was a lorry—



moving towards us! As it approached it looked like a Star Wars transport; and it was full of people who got off it and came along a rickety gangway and down a steep slope onto another pier-berge, where we waited to cross into the transport. Some were quite elderly and took a while coming down the slope, though it had good handrails. I counted them as they embarked, eighty-three in all; a sign on the ferry said it was able to take eighty safely. Michael had a job pushing his bike up the slope, as he had to push by the handlebars only, straddling the frame; I couldn't help as I was holding my bike in readiness to follow him, and there was no leaning place handy, but a girl ran up and helped out. My bike was easier to push as I could shove from behind. There were only eleven in our group, with eleven bikes and one trailer. The transport driver closed a chain across the back, then got into the cab and careered over the sand for several miles, stopping at chosen points to let us photograph seals, or birds, or (apparently) seaweed. Finally we reached some dunes and took off up a severe slope in some low gear, but still at a lick. We were all survivors together after that, and when we got off the bus we chatted together cycling along—Michael and I just went where the rest went, as they seemed to know the way. After some miles a few headed for a campsite, and we continued towards the town (a bus stop showed that we were near civilization). Desiring to get maximum miles under our wheels we looked out for a ferry to the next island, Terschelling, and indeed we found one in town, leaving in a quarter of an hour, at 7pm. Michael headed into the forest to find a piece of oak or something hard to mend his mirror with; it had been repaired before but had snapped off again in the heap of bikes on the transport. I found the ticket office and bought the tickets for a longer but more comfortable ferry trip on a fast catamaran with soft seats and a TV screen showing the Queen of the Netherlands riding in her golden carriage to open the parliament (that's what they had been practising for with their swords and horses) and giving her speech in an unlikely-looking hat. We passed several antique sailing boats, some rigged like Galway Hookers but bigger. Since it was a catamaran there was no going out on deck but we sat by a window and saw pretty well. When we arrived at Terschelling there were dozens of old sailing boats—perhaps sixty—fishing barges and the like, the round-fronted type we had seen photos of in a shop window in Egmond. They were moored four deep, all rigged and masted, looking entirely seaworthy. They were also (at least the front ones) crawling with people. We set out first to find the times of the ferries back to the mainland, then to find a room. A man on a bicycle passed us, dressed in a vaguely naval-looking uniform, and asked did we need an address for the night; he may have been the catamaran's captain. He recommended the Stayokay hostel, so we went there; it was just at the end of the town sea-front. The hostel gave us a spotless room with bunks and an en-suite loo and shower, for €51.60; it would have been less if we were members of the hostelling association. I showered to remove the oil I had collected on my leg bringing my bike across the barge-pier onto the Vlieland ferry. Then we had a few pints of Heineken





in the hostel bar, and while I wrote this diary up Michael examined the maps and calculated that it might take us ten more days to get to Copenhagen. I sent a text to Jenny.

### Wednesday 17th

The day began misty and we cycled along Terschelling to the town of Hoorn (not to be confused with Den Hoorn on Texel) to buy a rear-view mirror, deciding that Michael's old one was beyond redemption. It was of limited usefulness anyway, as it stuck straight out at the end of the handlebar, giving panoramic views of the left elbow but not of enough roadway to be trustworthy in manoeuvres. The bike shops in West Terschelling are mostly in the bike-hire business, and we were sent to Hoorn where there is a motorbike shop. It was nine kilometres through the mist and we saw nothing much beyond the immediate road, but when we got there we found the perfect mirror, big and round and on a tall stalk, and we fitted it on. Michael said he had never had so good a rear view on any bike. By this time, 11am, the sun had dispelled the mist and we saw the beautiful Terschelling scenery at last. It is just like the mainland, but with some nice forests. The nicest part I would guess is the town where the ferry arrived, West Terschelling itself, with its fleet of sailing barges, its maze of little streets which we



cycled round (all of them) looking for the supermarket, and its impressive tower, no doubt once topped with a light, now with a twirling radar dish. We found the Spar eventually and bought five slices of ham, seven rolls, a cake, a bag of dates, a bottle of mango and orange juice, a bottle of Shiraz Cabernet, and a bottle of the local speciality, Terschelling Cranberry Wine. The barman at Stayokay had said when pressed that the outstanding feature of Terschelling is that cranberries grow there. So we

had to. We then had a coffee at Hotel Nap and made our way down to the the slow ferry at 12.30. This would take one hour and twenty minutes, and we boarded straight away at noon, extracted our lunch (but sadly not our cameras) from our bags and went upstairs. We found a quiet seat outside on the port side, and laid in quickly, finishing everything, except the cranberry wine which we saved for later, and a few dates. All around us the sea was dotted with sailing boats and the occasional motorboat, barge or tug. Some of the sailing boats were modern but most were old sailing barges, gaff rigged, round fronted, with double rudders and leeboards, all expertly handled. The ferry kept strictly within channels laid out with buoys, sometimes apparently swerving to avoid a sailing boat. The big sailing boats were teeming with day-trippers, the small ones were manned by a skipper and crew of one. Benevolent sunlight played on the peaceful bay. We arrived early in Haarlingen and turned as left as possible as many times as possible until we were running along the inside of the dyke. A thirteen mile-per-hour breeze blew us along, so that we cycled in what was for us still air. We met few cyclists and fewer cars, so we went abreast and chatted.



After a while we came to a gate with a no-entry sign we were to see a lot of, subtitled *Fietzers Uitgezondert*. No admittance to any vehicles, *cyclists excepted*. At least that's what we took it to mean, but to be sure we asked a woman who came down the steps from the top of the dyke with her

dog, and found our first non-English-speaker in Holland. But we understood each other's double Dutch perfectly, and we had extra confirmation from a cyclist coming out of the gate. These roads, punctuated by cattle grids and spring-shut gates (no springs, just a fiendish use of gravity by using non-vertical gateposts) are surrounded by grass cropped by sheep; so you go through a stretch of road covered in sheep shit, then two or three quite clean stretches, as they circulate the herds round the sections. All the time the sun shone and my knees and arms gained extra swarthy so that I took fright and applied some Factor 20. At one gate we met the German girl who had helped push Michael's bike up the ramp on Vlieland, and she gave us advice on where to cross the German border—there is a special crossing for bikes. She invited us to stay in her flat if we went to Aschwarden, but we wanted to head further north. She



gave us her phone number anyway and said she wouldn't be there but her friend Peter would be sure to welcome two cyclists from Ireland—apparently they have cycled there together. She was finishing a four-month tour of the North Sea, and was going the long way round visiting friends and relations before returning home. I gave her my card and she said her name was Gisela. Later on we came on a sign by the road detailing the famous Noordsee-Route in German, Dutch and English, and we concluded that that must be the route Gisela followed—it goes for six thousand kilometres, along the eastern Scottish and English coast, then over to the western coast of Holland, Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Norway, with a boat connection from Bergen to the Shetlands. We took note of the website—[www.northsea-cycle.com](http://www.northsea-cycle.com)—for future reference. We also figured out why it had misled us at Zandvoort and other places: a map showed us various alternatives branching out along the way. We forgave it and took one of its directions again, but with the diffidence of the once-bitten.

With the aid of a following wind we had completed our fifty miles plus a few when we decided to go for Wierum, marked on the map as having a notable view. When we got there our spirits sank a little: it's a small town (maybe eighty houses) and there is a church and a café but not much in the way of shops and no sign of a hotel. The view from the top of the dyke was of a wide blue horizon with some mud in the foreground. We resigned ourselves to cycling on further, but then Michael found some folks in their front garden who told him that there is a big Pension just round the corner, left, right and left again, and so there was! A most immaculately clean and welcoming room with shower and loo en suite, a minibar fridge downstairs where we can cool our cranberry wine, a garage for the bikes and a mesh over the window to keep out the flies which, the first time in our Dutch experience, abound here. So do birds—looking away from the famous view from the dyke towards the town, the sky was crowded with sea birds. Sea birds had followed the ferry too, all the way from Terschelling, doing thrilling aerobatics.

This is Friesland, so good they name all the towns twice, once in Dutch and once in the local dialect. Another new thing is that two or three dogs have barked and run after us as we passed their gateways, one also snarling and baring his fangs most convincingly all at the same time. When we approached the Pension first it looked all closed up, but we went round the side and found a door with a bell, and a very helpful woman took us in and told us all the options, opened the garage for our bikes and got us to sign in the book. I added a picture of us so that she would remember who we are. We sent messages home, had some cranberry wine and a Heineken, and wrote up the day's story, while she had her drama group round for a play-reading. Michael told me about a night club he'd visited once in the Caribbean, with Anne, where he had been too unpushy to introduce himself to the owner, who had



been, according to Dad, our uncle Kenny's best friend in the RAF during the war. They had enjoyed the evening, the host was very involved in the entertainment, and did things like making everyone join in 'Ghost Riders in the Sky' by drumming on the tables, which Michael did with enthusiasm. We turned in at 8.45pm.

### Thursday 18th

We were packed and down for breakfast early: the usual hard boiled egg, ham and cheese, selection of bread and some cake like the one we bought yesterday, coffee and jam. This time there was an apple and an orange as well, so we split those. We loaded up and paid and were on the road by 8.45am—another sunny day, hardly any mist. We followed the dykes with the flat reclaimed land, the polders, on our right, and hardly met anyone. With a following breeze we did around thirteen and a half miles per hour, and got our thirty miles in by noon. Occasional



peeps over the dyke revealed mud flats—the Wad—divided into squares by solid palings, with mud accumulating and rough grass growing, and a few horses or sheep here and there. No doubt in a couple of years another dyke will be built further out and more polder created. We read at one point a notice saying that these dykes were first built in 1811. They've been tidied up a lot since then, with a thirty-degree slope (or so) and a hard crust outside, the inland side all grass, cropped by the many sheep who entertained us as we passed, by (mostly) standing still, (a few) running away, (a couple) walking across our path, (several) lying down and chewing the cud and (one) rolling down the slope having apparently missed its footing. They seem to congregate on the road to pass the night, at least this was the only explanation we could come up with for the extraordinary concentration of sheep droppings on the roads through heavily populated sections<sup>1</sup>. The swing-gates gave way to a more modern form with a long U-shaped turning part that allows a person in with a normal-sized bike, at which point you can swing the U (the hinge is vertical, the U horizontal; no photo I'm afraid) to let you exit at the other side. My bike went through but Michael's being extra-long had to do a pirouette, raising the front wheel in the air in order to get the back wheel in far enough to swing the U. This slowed us down a little but rested our feet, which were getting numb from long pedalling, and added to the amusement. For a while the fietspad left the dyke and brought us through the woods. There was a lovely clean concrete path, crossing roadways of sand, where we had to dismount (the PDQ just comes to a dead stop in sand). This was just after skirting a lake. Suddenly we met a sign that directed us alongside, instead of on, the concrete path: the concrete was still wet, and soon we came upon the workmen laying the next section. From there on the path was a mixture of small pebbles and sea shells, giving out a pleasing scrunch.

Back on the dyke after this detour, we looked out for lunching opportunities and found a café at a lock connecting a channel with the outer sea. We had a beer and asked had they any food; but they were not enthusiastic about their fare: 'No bread' was the first response. What did they have, we wheedled? Soup, hamburger, fish...we had some tomato soup, micro-waved, and a burger (me) and fish (Michael). The 'fish' was prawns and the 'burger' a slice of a large sausage, on a piece of bread

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<sup>1</sup> Inspiring the hum 'We pedal all day and we piddle all night/Our beards in the wind and our tyres in the shite'



(despite their disclaimer) with crackly stuff like bacon crisps on the side and lots of mayonnaise. Another beer, a consultation of the map, and off we went promising ourselves a second lunch later. We pounded the dykes another while, and the sun grew so hot I put on a second layer of Factor 20. We rested in a forest of windmills—ninety-four of them according to a notice, producing fifty-four thousand kilowatt-hours per year, enough for eighteen thousand households. I photographed the notice to see if translation could yield more later. Then we pushed on for Delfzijl, hoping to find a ferry to one of the German towns. On the way we stopped in a town called Spijk and rested limbs so weary near a long trailer parked on a side road. In our idle curiosity we worked out that it was made to carry skips; we marvelled at its rough-welded simplicity and noted its powerful air-brake connection. Along came a lorry; Michael said ‘Here’s the thing that pulls it.’ The lorry stopped alongside, then parked just beyond the trailer and backed up in line with it, the driver peering back from his opened door to line himself up. Then he turned on his hydraulics and moved the full back of his lorry onto the sliders of the trailer. It slid on, dead in line, with no margin of error, for a few feet; then the lorry moved away, leaving the load suspended in between, until it clanked down an inch when its end was about to fall off the end of the lorry; then the lorry reversed, shoving the load back onto the trailer. Applause.

We got to Delfzijl around 4.30pm and spoke to some men on the quay, who, when they heard we were Irish, told us tunefully how they’d been a wild rover for many’s the year, and spent all their money on whiskey and beer. They said there was an occasional ferry from there to Germany, just across the estuary, but not an official one. It looked an unlikely bet, so we decided against further investigation; the men pointed out a later ferry crossing that could shorten our route through Germany, and we moved on to an eet-café for our second lunch: more beer, soup, and schnitzels with fries and apple sauce, and of course mayonnaise. It was a quiet bar with a carpet and rather ghastly décor, run by an oldish couple; a vaguely nautical-looking man sat at the bar chain-smoking rollups and chain-drinking Heinekens, which the patroness swapped unbidden as each bottle came down empty. When we left and mounted up again our knees said ‘Oi! What’s this?’ as we’d already done our fifty miles. Ignoring their pleas we cycled on—spotting on our way many sheep and also several hawks and eagles, and a large gaggle of Brent geese, and other birds, ducks, coots and the like—to Woldendorp, where we asked a man in his garden for a Pension or Kamers. He directed us to the Hotel Wilhelmina where we got a room just like last night’s but with a TV and phone. The hostess produced some powerful strong thread and needles for Michael to sew up his seat-webbing which had started to rip this morning.

## Friday 19th

Our last Dutch breakfast, in Woldendorp. Michael reattached the seat to his bike, we loaded up, paid and gave back the needles and thread, and set off by 8.45am, not before photographing the shop window of a new age emporium beside our garage. A cool misty morning; we guessed correctly the road to take for the German border; it was only signposted to a couple of polders. The landscape was very flat, broken by the occasional piggery; mostly ploughed fields with enormous stacks of beet. The



road was good concrete and very straight. I got Michael to photograph me in the middle of the wide open expanse of the Reiderwolderpolder. Good guesswork and a keen eye for signposts, both high on poles and low on the ground, brought us to the bike border-crossing at Nieuweschans. A sign saying ‘D’ told us we were in Germany,

and it was shortly followed by a list of speed limits. Our first town was Bunde where we couldn’t make up our minds whether we were being invited to cycle on the footpath; but seeing others doing so we carried on. Things don’t seem so orderly here, bikes go on the left or right of each other arbitrarily.

The fields look rougher and messier than in Holland, with more fences and hedges, but with similar good-looking horses and goats and sheep, and later Friesian cows. There is also the odd windmill, both of ancient and modern make. In the towns we saw down-and-outs and people with untreated varicose veins in their legs, and were reminded that we hadn't seen such sights for a while. Along the main road (with separate cycle path) to Weener, where we stopped for coffee and *Küchen*—I had a slightly underdone raisiny Danish, called a *Schnecke*<sup>2</sup>, and Michael had a slice of cake with a nice thick layer of plums on top. Unfortunately the bakery shop had no loo, which was a main reason for stopping; it hardly had seats, just tall things to lean against. I was delighted to find I could understand most of what the shop ladies said; several people came in, greeting all present, as they do in France, and one regular drove in very carefully in his battery-wheelchair. Michael was very taken with his steering mechanism—a joystick that worked the small back wheels by rods. Silent and agile despite a poor turning circle, it gave this old chap his independence. The shop girls were chatty and helpful to him; he bought a load of bread and cakes which they loaded onto his back luggage platform, and off he went.

We moved on to Leer and looked for the road (436) to Hesel; we found it but were forced to leave it when it became cars-only. We asked a passer-by, a young man who answered in English and directed us well; but rejoining the 436 at the other end of town we only had a hundred yards before it became cars-only again and the cycle-signs directed us into a suburban estate with no obvious way out and no more signs. A young mother out cycling with two small children went into painstaking detail to direct us expertly to the Ostfriesland Wanderweg, about a kilometre away, and this did bring us to Hesel, through the woods, with frequent sidesteps back onto the 436 wherever it had bike lanes. Then we had a choice: lunch or information. We'd done thirty-six miles and it was one o'clock so we chose lunch and began waiting for service at a not-very-busy burgers-and-fries joint. For five or ten minutes three ladies frying things in the kitchen did no more than lift an occasional baleful glance to me as if to say 'You don't *really* want to eat this stuff?' so we went for information instead. The Information Office was closed for lunch but the man came in the door with us and said 'That's all right, it's me' and opened up. He was very keen and helpful, doling out maps of varying degrees of detail, and speaking rather fast German, though we got the gist. I asked him 'Wo kann man hier *gut* essen?' and he directed us to a much more salubrious hotel close by, where we had something more like what we're used to—soup, pork steak with veggies and sauté potatoes and french fried onions, then a slightly coffeish mousse. We asked for *eine flasche Rotwein* and got a bottle of nice stuff from Baden, on the Rhine between Strasbourg and Basel (as a map on the label told us).

Michael was impressed by their ten-urinal loo, attached to a dining room that was not that enormous. One wall had a bar, with a stuffed fox over it, and there were greatly varied pictures on the wall including a small colour print of the Victory, an eighty-four-gun ship of the line flying the flag of the Admiral of the White Fleet; Michael knows the naval lore, to me the flag looked like a red cross on a white ground with a Union Jack in the corner. The only other couple dining, an artistic looking man with a sweep of grey hair, and a younger woman—the man in extraordinarily colourful striped trousers—came back in having left and spotted a bike with an IRL sticker, and he said 'Gentlemen, welcome to Germany. Enjoy your journey.' And then we had very decent coffee and re-mapped our itinerary. Michael's list of towns to pass through was much longer than previous days, as we are going cross-country with no direct road to Golzwarden where we will cross the river. Armed with a copy of the list each, we successfully negotiated Schwerinsdorf, Remels, Grosssander with its three esses, Hollreider, Westerstede (where we stopped so that I could buy a birthday card for Oscar, and some refills for my dear Czech pen), Linswege, Petersfeld and Spohle where we found a large and welcoming Gaststätte with an excellent room, and a bike-garage all to ourselves. A wedding party arrived as we did, but they were absorbed into the rambling building and we neither saw nor heard them again. When we sloped down for our evening beer, there may have been four other guys in the bar.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Snail', from its spiral shape.

Some of the names on our list turned out to be townlands rather than towns, a few houses and you're past. There was some greater rise and fall in the landscape, nothing like France but a change from Holland; though by evening we were back on dead flat land. We passed through some deciduous woods, with oak twigs and acorns on the ground, mostly on smooth cycle paths separated by a green strip from the road. In places it seemed quite an old path, cracked and repaired, some of the repairs being simply new smear-and-sprinkle. Towards the end there were some maize fields, some of them cut, and plenty of cattle—much more than we had seen in (Dutch) Fryslan. The Pension lady in Wierum had told us that Friesland was once bigger than Holland; it must then have included East Friesland, which is where we are now.

Man dear, I remember, when coming home the rain began  
I wrapped my Friese coat round her and ne'er the waistcoat had I on  
My shirt was rather fine drawn but oh, the false and cruel one  
For all that she's gone and left me here for to die

### **Saturday 20th (Oscar's third birthday)**

Breakfast at 7.45; no sign of other guests except for two other tables set for couples. We had the feeling that the man who served us at the bar, and also gave us our breakfast (the first soft-boiled eggs of the trip) and took our payment, was the proprietor. When I told him that we were from Ireland he said he'd noticed, from the form I'd signed checking in. He said that Ireland is his dream country—he's visited twice (Connemara and Ballyvaughan) and hopes to go again.

Another bright morning, hardly misty and soon warm. We pressed on through Jadeburg and Jade, then did some nifty sign-following to Ovelgönne and the Weser, which we crossed at Golzwarden, once more cycling onto the ferry just before it cast off. Unlike Holland where bikes are generally uitgezondert and ushered to the front, we were moved out of the way as quickly as possible down at the back. No matter. I got a photo of a passing galleon and then it was time to get off. Then Sandstedt, Hagen, Bramstedt—all through green fields on tree-lined cycle paths, the countryside gradually building up into little highs, little lows. We got



in good mileage, thirty-five before we stopped in Bokel for lunch at a restaurant that didn't quite live up to yesterday's: only nine urinals in the Gents. The place must be quite a community centre, it has a ballroom with a lovely floor, and a little stage with curtains, and plentiful dining space: but we were the only diners today. Still we did our best. There was no wine list but the patron proposed a local (Nieder Sachsen) wine which was very drinkable; we needed an extra glass at the end because we got through most of it waiting for the meal, which was plentiful and tasty—a rumpsteak (more like a fillet) for Michael and a pork schnitzel for me, with 'gebratene' potatoes (what I called sauté yesterday) with plenty of onions and mushrooms, salad and croquettes with the steak. There was no choice of 'how done' offered but it turned out tastefully medium. As we had our (weak) coffee a group of small children with a few adults came in and the waiter/barman/owner mixed up a big cocktail of soft drinks for them. As in last night's place,





the walls and mantel were covered with sporting trophies, in this case for table tennis. Michael confessed that he played ‘a bit’, not mentioning his own collection of trophies. We continued on along quiet roads with off-road cycle paths which allowed us to chat: before lunch we talked about our working lives and exam-sitting experiences, after lunch about whatever came up, the countryside (scrunching acorns under our wheels a lot of the way) and previous places on the trip. We both had the feeling that this journey would be remembered principally for the Dutch part, where we felt truly *uitgezonderd*. After Wollingst, in the middle of a wood, we stopped to celebrate a thousand miles on the clock since leaving Dublin. I phoned Oscar to wish him a happy birthday; he had the blues



because Miah hadn’t turned up to his party yet. Ah me. I sent a text to Jenny and took a picture of us drinking our celebration water, and we moved on.

We planned to stop in Lintig, but the Gasthof there was taking no bookings on account of a disco this evening which is to run to 6am. The man recommended Bad Bederkesa, a holiday centre on a lake only a few miles away, and not far off our path, though not on our list. There was nothing in any of the towns we were aiming towards, so we did the slight side-shuffle and came to our hotel around 6pm, with fifty-eight miles clocked up today,

making a total of one thousand and thirteen miles in twenty days. Congratulations! Thank you! Cheers! Another? Why not!

### Sunday 21st

Our hotel was in two buildings: the bar/restaurant on the street and the Gasthaus behind it. They hadn’t a two-bed room so they offered us two singles for the same price, €20 each including breakfast. The rooms were tiny but had loos and showers and TVs. The duvets and pillows were covered with colourful shiny stuff. The staff seemed to consist of a man and his Indian wife who was also looking after their two small children. He did the bar and she did the breakfast; maybe there was a chef as well. We put our bikes down in a cellar with a horizontal door like a trapdoor. After our beers we went for a walk through the town, looking for the lake, but didn’t find it and instead looked in shop windows (excellent value in stainless steel heavy-bottomed pots and pans) until it got dark.

This morning we left at 8.45am and it was so warm, though cloudy to begin with, that I wore my T-shirt without a jacket. Yesterday I had kept the jacket on until it got too hot around 5pm. The wind was quite lively, and from the west, which pushed us along nicely once we had finished going north for the first while. With the wind astern we made 14mph with fairly leisurely pedalling. Our roads were partly cycle-track near the main road, nice and smooth tar, or on the road without any cycle track, sometimes main and sometimes back roads with little traffic, too small to have a line down the middle. With a lot of zig-zagging, creative map-reading and guesswork we got to the Elbe crossing at Wischhafen at about half past noon and cycled straight onto our boat as it was just about to leave. It seems in fact that they are so frequent they’re *always* just about to leave: they keep four going back and forth the whole time. The Elbe is incredibly wide—like a lake with a powerful current running through it. There were windmills





(modern) to be seen in all directions, and we agreed that they don't in the least overpower the landscape; but then we *like* them. There were twenty or more cars on the ferry, a dozen motorbikes and four bikes, much less than the traffic going the other way. At one point a number of motorbikers laughed very loudly, it seems a roving seagull might have bombed one. The motorbikers on the road tend to be single or else in big groups—no luggage—and several on the ferry

were quite, ah, mature: baby-boomers like myself.

Over in Schleswig-Holstein things looked different. We had seen several thatched cottages, some quite small, in Nieder Sachsen, but there were much more here; and the town of Glückstadt where we landed had a very pleasant air and some old buildings they were obviously proud of. The farm buildings in Nieder Sachsen are hard to date, some may be old, but being of red brick and unchanging design it's hard to know, apart from signs like windows bricked up and re-designed. There was a festive air about the town square where we chose a restaurant we could sit outside (with a good view of the bikes). Their speciality was 'Matjes'—a form of pickled or salted herring, which I find called 'Maties' in the OED—so we tried those and they were truly excellent, very mild and moist. A litre of the house red—Vin du Pays d'Oc—and some Bratkartofeln and fruity salad helped them down, besides the three sauces: curry, pinkish, and white-with-bits which was the house special.



We got out of town heading north and so got into our chosen line of towns to bring us east, nicely blown along by the wind: Krempdorf, Krempe, Steinburg, Hohenfelde, Brande-Hörnerkirchen, Bokel (another) then north to Wrist where we hoped to stay the night. Plenty of trees, and cows—the brown-and-white (Holstein?) variety—and before lunch we had noticed that we were now tiddlywinking conkers more than acorns with our wheels. By 5pm the wind had died down, which meant we felt our own wind, and I put my jacket back on. There is a hotel in Wrist but it was closed so we went an extra seven kilometres to Bad Bramsted and a lovely quiet little hotel right on the street, run by the Freese family. The manager helped us garage our bikes, showed us a spacious room and the fridge downstairs which was the help-yourself bar. We texted home, I washed some socks and pants, and Michael had a shower.



Later we had a half-litre each of Erdinger Weissbier from the minibar, while we watched a CNN news programme about Iraq, Pakistani villages, solar-powered water schemes in Honduras and the inventor Stan Ovshinsky.

## Monday 22nd

Another soft-boiled egg for breakfast! This hotel has been run by the Freese family since 1919, first as a pub, later expanded. Across the road is a nice hardware shop where we bought oil, to quieten Michael's cogs (an unaesthetic anti-droop cog interrupts the pulling part of the chain) and a file to modify my pen refills. This was a day of backroads, forest paths, dirt tracks and yes, one field. We belted along to Bad Segeberg, in nice conditions that soon became sunny, along a main road with separate cycle-track, very smooth. At Bad Segeberg we missed a turn and found ourselves on the Lübeck road—the town layout doesn't resemble the map layout, don't you know. We wanted the road slightly to the north, and had to go a long way round to get to it—Weede, Schieren, road signs few and unhelpful; we found ourselves in Rohlstorf, then Warden, Krems II (honest!) and finally where we had been heading for, Blunk. We planned to have lunch there but the restaurant of Blunk had a sign up saying 'We are on holiday till the 1<sup>st</sup> of October' and there didn't appear to be any Blunk shop, or any Blunk people awake except for a woman on a bike who answered my pitiful plea with something I didn't catch as she sped on her way. Some workmen on lunch-break were dozing in their trucks and machines, and we forebore to disturb them; so we abandoned Blunk, having drawn a blank. We took an unmarked northerly road, then changed our minds and plunged down a forest track on the right-hand side, which happily returned us to the road we were wanting.

At Tensfeld there was no sign of any restaurant, only a shop that had closed at noon and would re-open at 7am on Tuesday. We left Tensfeld also by an unorthodox route: I turned on impulse down a cycle track that quickly deteriorated into a walking route. We dismounted in the middle of a wood and Michael pushed through some undergrowth; he returned after a few minutes to say we could reach a road but might have to carry the bikes.

Instead of that we took a grassy path along by a ploughed field, went through a meadow and emerged on a back road that led back to the main road. Fortunately we joined it near a signpost with three signs pointing to places marked on the map, so we could work out exactly where we were. We set out for Bosau, hoping to lunch on the way. After more blank villages with closed restaurants or none we came to Bosau itself at around 2.30pm, seriously ravenous, and asked in the Seehexe bar-restaurant could they give us something to eat. The proprietor said 'yes' and his



wife threw her eyes up to the ceiling, but she produced a heroic feed<sup>3</sup>, which indeed we did need, and we finished it with speed, with a nice bottle of Merlot from Kindsenheim (Pfalz) and a bottle of fizzy water to celebrate forty-five-and-a-half miles *since breakfast*. Bosau is a holiday centre on a lake (the Plöner See) and has plenty going on. All day we had hardly met any cyclists outside the towns, but within five miles of Bosau there were couples and groups out cycling. By now we were mainly on roads without cycle tracks, and the landscape was certainly rolling, with increasing ups and downs. Before we left we raided an ATM and got more euros—though of course they'll be no use in

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<sup>3</sup> Hexenschmause, which consists of 'three steaks' viz beef pork and chicken, on a bed of vegetables and Bratkartoffeln smothered in onions and with plenty of mayonnaise. Oh yes.



Denmark. In Malente we stopped to sit on a bench and look at the lake with a tourist boat setting out and a tiny boat house that had been there since 1912.



We crossed a hill and went along a cycle track through a forest along by the Kellersee—another beautiful blue lake, rippled by the southerly breeze that helped us along. The track became another dirt track with sandy episodes, but it was pleasantly quiet and dappled with sun and shade. That brought us to Sülbeck, then we climbed a hill to Nüchel; I took a picture of the rollingness of the countryside. We went down and up again to Kirknüchel, and then back on an offroad cycle track, and finally we arrived in Schönwalde where the Landes(something) Hotel took us in, garaged our bikes, and gave us a nice big

room with a sofa as well as all the more necessary furniture.



## Tuesday 23rd

On the road as usual by 8.45am, through the beautiful Naturpark to Lensahn, then north and gradually downhill to Oldenburg in Holstein where I got another puncture in my back tyre. It was easy to spot, something sharp had pushed through the tyre but hadn't stayed there. We pulled in to a side street or

cobbled alleyway between houses, and while I mended it Michael went off to buy string to do a job on his seat—his sewing hadn't prevented further tearing. He also got a map of Denmark, so he can continue to plan routes. While my solution was drying I did a bit of Czech-pen technology with the file: almost there. Oldenburg tried to do the same trick on us as Bad Segeberg, and directed us out west, but we turned round smartly and demanded the road to Altgalendorf which we (that is, Michael) successfully found; and we set off in a stiff westerly breeze which helped us along as we approached Heiligenhafen. We gave in and went on the big road onto Fehmarn Island—though it might have been possible to get there by a small road. We were on a very main road with long climbs and long drops, on a hard shoulder with loads of cars and lorries flashing by. There were no other bikes going either way, but cyclists were clearly expected, as there was an occasional cycle track at a slip road (it is not a motorway, but there are no crossings). Then just as we crossed the huge green bridge we saw a cyclist coming the opposite way—on a cycle path separated by barriers from the road! We couldn't get across and lift our bikes over the barrier—too much traffic—so we kept on our hard shoulder. On our other side, separated by a barrier, was the railway track. Once we arrived on the island we pulled in to a bus shelter for a rest and a drink of water. Suddenly it started raining quite hard, so we went round and sheltered behind the bus shelter, which faced straight into the by now strong west wind. We put on rain trousers and started out again, taking the first exit from the main road, heading for lunch in Burg. We were offered a 'quick' steak at the first restaurant, as it was 1.45pm and they were about to close at two. We said we couldn't eat quickly, and went instead to a downmarket restaurant further on, that also had a notice saying they were closing at two; but this was a family concern and they stayed very much open for us. Perhaps they stayed open as a café anyway; but in any case they did the business for us. Michael had a Lumberjack (Holzfällermann) steak which was enormous, but pork rather than beef. I had Berliner liver with bacon and onions and apple rings, and mash. We also got our best value yet in wine in Germany.

We were able to avoid the main road all the way to the Denmark ferry at Puttgarden, which we concluded must be frequent, from the volume of traffic—and indeed we only had to wait for half an hour, for a one-hour crossing. It would have been forty-five minutes but there was some delay on account of a power cut on the Danish islands. We wandered around the boat, changed €95 for DK650 in a machine, and looked back at Germany and ahead to Denmark. One strange result of the Danish power cut was that all the aeolians were immobilised! Didn't think they ran on electricity.

We landed and cycled off to find our way northwards. Within a few hundred yards of the port we were surprised to see a sign for a cycle path to Rødby and Maribo, pointing us along a dirt track! Pretty soon we were in a country lane, bordered by trees, between fields; and so it continued, quite straight, far from the roads except where it crossed under the motorway. Twice we were given directions, once by a guy driving out onto a road we were crossing. We were looking uncertain; the sign showed the cycle track leaving our laneway, which looked shut off by a gate where it resumed across the road, and taking to the road instead; but he approached us and offered his help, and said the lane was the right way to go. So we pushed open the gate and continued. We were later given directions by a jogger, who caught up with us! as the lane finally ended. In Maribo as the sun set, around 6.45pm, we asked at a restaurant and were directed to the Søpark Hotel, four-star, very upmarket but very welcoming. Our bikes were given an indoor berth, in the cloakroom. Michael made himself a strong seat of string, we had a beer from the mini-bar and watched some TV: plenty of English and American stations available.

### **Wednesday 24th**

An excellent breakfast, good and early; but we were delayed setting out by a puncture in Michael's front tyre. We brought the bikes out to the sun and got a container of water from the kitchen, and found that the strip of super-tough plastic inside the tyre had pinched and punctured the tube—as it had done once before, not on this trip. I tried cutting and filing the end of the strip to feather it off, but it is so tough I made little impact on it. When we got away we found an information office in Maribo town centre, so we waited the ten minutes for it to open at 10am. The lady sold us a cycle-path map of the



country most of the way to Copenhagen, and gave us some booklets including a more overall map. She also recommended a look at old Maribo, just behind her building, so we had a quick dekho. Colourful (mostly yellow) little houses, about the size of Smith's Cottages in Ranelagh. I tried taking a picture but my camera wouldn't open up—batteries must be gone. So at about half past ten we headed northeast for the bridge at Vordingborg.

In fact we hardly needed a map here; our cycle track ran along by highway 153 all the way. In one small town we bought a bag of a dozen apples for €3 and we munched them on our way. The stall was unmanned, but there was a notice saying it was 20Kkr for the various types of apples and pears, all bagged up, and underneath was a money box for the honest customer. The day was fine but very cold, and I was glad to have changed over to long trousers. The wind was from the north or northwest, and it got quite strong—a wind sock at the beginning of the bridge stood horizontally across our path. The bridge is incredibly long and quite old—the concrete and iron of the fencing are well deteriorated. Lorries are redirected to the newer motorway bridge further east, but trains still go over the old bridge, and two lorries came over as we crossed. The view was grand, sails on the sea, at one point a sea bird rose up vertically beside us, riding impassively on the wind. My hat blew off for the second time on the trip, the first being on a long hill down to Le Vast on our first day. This time I had the restraining bootlace under my chin and I was able to catch it, otherwise I suppose it would have been in the drink, or just as irretrievably on the road,

Coming down from the bridge towards the town of Vordingborg I felt my back wheel behaving squashy so I whistled and waved ahead to Michael. I found a piece of glass stuck in the tyre, and a matching hole in the tube, so it was quick to fix. Michael talked to a German cyclist from the Ruhr who was making a seventeen-day trip on a fairly speedy bike. By the time we got to Vordingborg it was 2pm and instead of searching for an open restaurant we bought bread, Danish pastries, mackerel in tomato sauce, Italian salad, and a bottle of Côtes du Rhône. We found a lovely spot under a grassy bank, sheltered from the wind, under a ruined castle, and facing a marina full of boats, for our picnic. An old gent on an auto-trundling machine came by and looked at us for several minutes, then



went along the path and came back again. We started wondering was it illegal to drink wine in parks, or disreputable or what, so we said 'Hello' and he made some comments, apparently about the bikes—he pointed to his walking stick as though to say 'My cycling days are over'. Having bought batteries as well I was able to photograph the spot, and the castle.

We moved on then, following cycle track number seven to the northwest. After a while we left the main road to follow a cycle way over some back roads, up and down small hills with beautiful views of mostly ploughed fields, some green again with winter wheat. I photographed a huge long stack of rectangular straw bales all wrapped in plastic. When we looked at the overall map of Denmark we realised that we shouldn't have been sticking with route 7 as it doesn't go all the way to Copenhagen. So we started heading northeast; but it was time to settle for the night, and finding nothing in Mogenstrup except for a room in an expensive hotel (the Mogenstrup Kro, pronounced Ho) we moved



on to Naestved and asked at the railway café. A helpful waitress discussed with an unfeasibly large customer who rang up two places for us, and we took a room in the Hotel Kristina, an old-fashioned house with double windows, with an old dilapidated book about ducks or something at the reception desk put there specially for people to scribble remarks in. (Did we participate? Never one to disappoint, I did, with a sketch of ourselves and a statement of our mission.)

### Thursday 25th

An early start after an excellent breakfast. The hotel was fairly full: once again, of nearly all men—it looked like a business convention crowd. We found the road to Fensmark, then by back roads to Skuderløse, and into Haslev. The sky was grey and there was a light west wind at our backs. At Haslev we decided to give up interesting back roads as they give rise to too many interesting pondering moments at dubious junctions, and we made for the east coast road. People were most willing to help even if they had no words of English, so we thanked them profusely and tried to work out what they had told us. In Freerslev we saw an Indian-looking woman and thought ‘She looks intelligent, let’s ask her.’ (She was.) We crossed under the motorway and got onto the 151 to take us all the way to København via Køge. The road was straight and thankfully not too busy, the parallel



motorway drawing off all the big traffic. At Køge we reached the coast and looked at the harbour and the marina but found that there was no minor road closer to the coast than the 151, so back we went to that. At Jersie Strand we bought bread and Danish pastry, pickled fish in a jar, salad and raisins and a bottle of Australian Shiraz Cabernet, all of which we demolished stylishly on the beach. We nipped between holiday houses to the sea and sat on a sloping bench near a Hoby catamaran pulled up above high water mark. It wasn’t as

sheltered from the wind as yesterday’s picnic spot, but it was more private—only a few young ones out walking their dogs by the sea. I washed my hands in the Baltic, choosing a clear patch between the thousands of small jellyfish which were all, believe it or not, pink and fluffy. Back on the road we belted, with a stronger wind to help us on, for the city. As we approached we kept to the right-hand options in order to get on to Amager island where the Malmö bridge begins. We found a bicycle track signposted to Tårby which is in the middle of the island, so we followed that; it took us across some waste ground, petering out at one stage, but we were encouraged, by an old chap we met coming the other way, to go on and round some roadworks (all without a word of English) and having taken a wrong turn down a walking track we surveyed the situation from a height and doubled round, under the motorway again, and found that there was a cycle track over the bridge to Amager, alongside the motorway. The motorway is incredibly noisy, with lanes full of cars and lorries belting into and out of Sweden all the time. We watched planes taking off from the airport on the island as we rode along: as one was obscured by the cloud, another would follow from the ground. We never got to Tårby, because we came close to a railway station apparently in the middle of nowhere, though accompanied by a skyscraper. We asked two young ladies walking out of the station did trains from this station go to Malmö? and they answered in perfect English, with a slight Neighbours intonation, that they didn’t

but from the next station they did, and that we could buy our tickets from a big red machine. We cycled along to Ørsted station and found that a Malmö train was due to go in fifteen minutes—but the red machine only sold tickets for Denmark. On the advice of a very helpful young man I ran along the platform and up the escalator to another machine, which would have sold me tickets had I remembered my Visa pin. Another helpful young man translated the sequence for me; he said I could buy the tickets from the controller on the train so I went back to Michael at the top of the stairs at the other end of the platform, and we carried the bikes down onto Platform 1—where we found another Visa machine. Michael tried out his card but having no helpful person to translate the steps beyond where I had got to, we decided to buy the tickets on the train. There is a bike area in every carriage of Danish trains, so we got on where we saw a bike and added ours on top, and off we went. First Tårby, then the airport station, then into the tunnel, and then we were on the bridge, with views of ships in the sea between bridge girders flashing by, and then we were in Sweden. No controller ever came so we never did get a ticket. I sent a text message ‘Greetings from Sweden’ to Jenny and Anne. Getting out at Malmö-Syd (Svågertorp station) I changed some Danish crowns at equal value for Swedish ones at a hot-dog stall, so that I could use the 5Kr toilet. The door was open, so you could just go in and use it, but to get the light to go on and the door to lock you had to put in 5Kr. Then we decided, rather than stay in Malmö, to head south to the next sizeable town, Vellinge, which was sure to have a hotel.

The evening was fine and calm, the farmsteads immaculate (some were a unique mixture of tatty and immaculate) and the farm machinery driving down the roads, gigantic. When we got to Vellinge we quickly located the hotel but it was closed. A helpful old geezer on a bike told us (without a word of English) that there was another hotel nearby; if we followed him he would show us. We followed him through the back ways and out into the country where he pointed to a road and motioned a left turn while saying ‘links’, so we went on and he went back. A roadside sign said <picture of a bed> so we took the left turn as directed and at the end of a string of houses we found one marked ‘Hotel’. Unfortunately it was closed. But a note on the door said (we surmised) ‘Try our other hotel’ and gave a phone number. In Vellinge. I rang the number and got a recorded message giving another phone number. It may have been for the one we were at, or it may have been another, but I couldn’t take down the number because of course it was in Swedish.

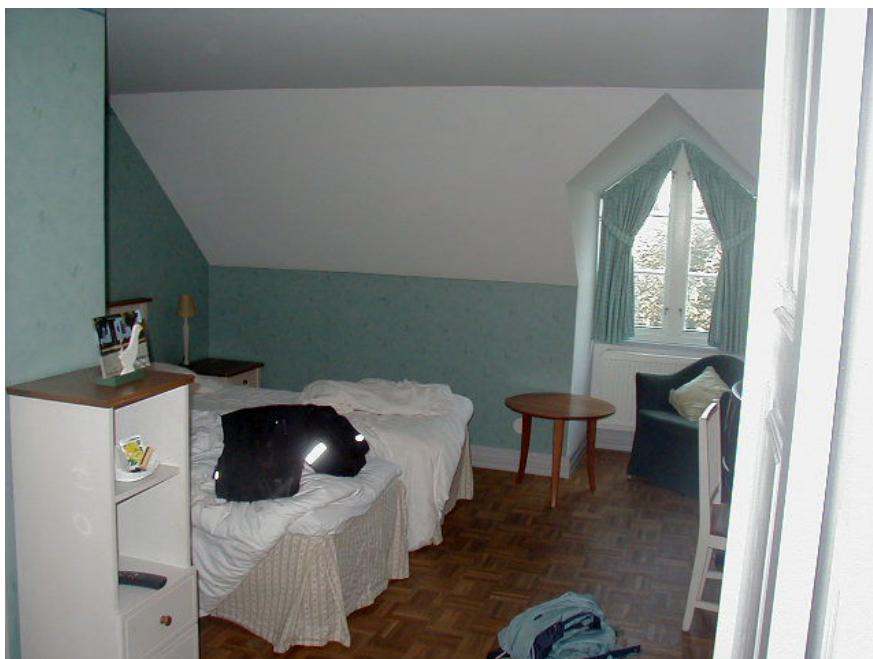
At this point things started looking serious; it would soon be dark, and to add to our entertainment we were being bitten by mosquitoes. They don’t bother me much but Michael tends to swell up when stung. So we headed down the road to the next big town, Trelleborg; but a few hundred yards on we saw a Hotel sign. We turned in; it looked posh, flags at the gate, a long driveway and so on; but the first building, though it was lit up, was only a shop, unfortunately closed. Apparently we were in a big visitors’ centre with a garden, a picnic area and what not as well as the hotel. After consulting the map on a big noticeboard I hared off around the perimeter, and finding no way in to the hotel in the centre of the mazy garden, hared back and cycled into the labyrinth. I found the restaurant, and its courtyard was dotted with flaming torches, so I knocked, then pushed the door and entered. There was nobody about, but the tables were set and a bar behind the reception desk was well stocked with all the famous drinks of the world including Baileys and Bushmills. I called out and wandered round, and after a minute a teenaged girl came out and I asked for the hotel reception. She said ‘Yes,’ so I asked for a room. She thought the hotel was full, and confirmed this by ringing someone. I asked where else could we stay that was close by; she recommended the Skanörs Gästgäfvaregård. I asked could I phone them, and she generously offered to call them for me. At this stage Michael joined us; he had found a different way in and had looked around until he found my bike. The girl made a booking for us at the Gästgäfvaregård and we asked her how to get there. She gave us a leaflet with a map and an ad for the hotel on it, which she marked with an x; it was only ‘a few minutes’ down the road. So off we went again; by this time the sun was setting and the sky was suitably dramatic. The map unfortunately showed a T junction as a Y junction, or a T junction lying the wrong way, and we went astray and had to go the long way round to Skanör. As the darkness descended I found my steering going queer, a feeling I recognised as a sign of a soft front tyre. We pushed on until my steering was unbearably unpredictable, then stopped for a quick pump-up. We were on a fairly big road with fast traffic;

Michael had a strong front light, but his back light batteries were gone, and so were his spares, or else his light had given up. It had behaved all right when he tested it before leaving Dublin. He cycled in front to show the way and I came behind to ward off friendly fire with my bright back light; though I'm sure the brightest things the following drivers saw were our red reflectors and the white and yellow reflective stripes on our bags. Some locals were still out cycling, with no lights at all, but they kept to cycle paths or grassy verges, not the main road. A few zigzags brought us to a signpost (at last) naming Skanör. We followed that sign, and a subsequent cycle-track sign for Skanör, which brought us along a gravel path that ran for a while behind some back gardens and then through a forest.

By now it was completely dark; we could see the Plough on our right so we knew we were heading west, and there was no other place we could reach by going west than Skanör. The path divided once, but fortunately the sign saying 'turn right for Skanör' was under a light. It also gave us a distance: 6.5 kilometres. We pushed on through the forest on a wide and straight path, not bumpy but bordered by a treacherous fall to each side. Michael's front light lit up the way sufficiently while mine blinked ineffectual greenness. When my steering deserted me again we stopped for another pump-up, and so we continued until we reached a road again. Straight ahead we soon found a sign saying we were entering Skanör; but it was suburbia, all quiet and sleepy at 9pm, and no sign of a town centre. Eventually we found some signs of commerce: a lighted sign saying 'Kock'. I thought we were entering a factory compound, but no, there were shops, so we pressed on, and soon saw shop signs that were lit up, though there was still nobody about. At last I saw a man standing in the street and showed him the leaflet; he was wearing security-man uniform and had a torch. He read the hotel ad and said 'Turn right and continue three hundred metres'. We did that, and were encouraged to see after a few hundred metres a street sign pointing ahead with the name Gästgifvaregård on it, so we did another few hundred metres. We passed a small hotel, which we noted for future reference, but we pressed on to honour our booking. The street contained houses but no businesses, nothing open or even particularly inhabited-looking. I was starting to emit groans when we came to a house with an open door and lights on inside; we stopped to ask for help, and lo it was the very Gästgifvaregård itself, unadvertised except for a dark carved wooden sign over the door and a noticeboard outside. A civil chap with an English public school voice and manners to suit welcomed us, gave us key cards for Room 2, and showed us the alley where we could leave our bikes. It was 9.30pm and we had done eighty-three miles since breakfast. We brought the bikes round, let ourselves in the back door with a card, and brought our stuff up to Room 2. Changing into our good shirts we went down to celebrate our journey's end with a couple of pints of Krone, the extra-mild Swedish beer guaranteed to do you no harm (about three per cent alcohol) which suited us just fine. I wrote up this screed which has just about depleted the original refill of my heroic Czech pen, and sent our bearings back to Jenny and Anne, and we retired about 11pm. The public school chap had let us know he was treating our second pint as last orders, at 10.30 for God's sake. As I finish writing this it's 11.50 and my ink is finally run out. Night night.







## Friday 26th

Breakfast at 7.30am, and the best one of the trip for tastiness and fresh bread—hot—and fruit and nice things to put on muesli and lecker meaty slices and tiny soft croissants ... I fixed the puncture in my front tyre while Michael paid. We hadn't asked the price but it wasn't astronomical, just ... Irish. The place is decidedly odd; it has no illuminated 'hotel' signs, just the name painted on the corner of the house and carved in wood over the front door. Neither sign has any lights shining on it. And yet at the same

time it has its trademark goose sign on an official-looking signpost across the street in the form of a 'Goose Crossing' warning, and goose footprints painted on the roadway. It also seems to be the office of 'Horse Show AG', and a meeting was already under way in a boardroom beyond the breakfast room at 8am.

We got away at 8.30 and began by retracing our ride to where the security man told us it was three hundred metres up the road; establishing that it really was more like five hundred. Then we turned west to see the little harbour with its old lifeboat on its launching wagon, a lot of trim yachts and a splendid view of



The Bridge in the distance. I took a timer-photo Michael and myself at Journey's End and we celebrated with a slug of hotel water. We rode back through Skanör and back along the forest track to Vellinge; at Gessie we turned west again to get near the sea, and after a few false starts we got down to the shore and took photographs of The Bridge with a train crossing under the roadway full of cars and lorries. Then we looked for a shop, found a petrol station shop and bought a similar lunch to yesterday's: sild and mackerel in tins, bread and tomatoes. We asked for wine, but the shop man said 'Oh no, you're in Sweden now!' Wine can only be bought in government-approved premises. But he did have beer, special Swedish strength (3.5%) that he mentioned in a humbly dismissive way. We bought two cans of Prille Blå and went to wards the sea to have lunch. We found a sign to

Bunkeflostrand and it led to waste ground with a steep gravelly slope, like a sand dune only not sandy. I ran up to the top but it looked like a long walk before we would have a view, so we sat in the weeds and rough grass, sheltered and sunny, and ate our lunch, this time completely undisturbed. Had we walked across the top of the gravelly dunes I reckon we would have found ourselves at the foot of The



Bridge, and might have found our way to the station quicker; as it was we went a bit north, a good bit east, and back south into quite a strong wind, and got back to Svågerthorp station by a very roundabout way about 2.30pm. We bought tickets by Visa, as the machines there didn't ask for pins, and caught the 14.53 to Copenhagen Central Station where Michael went to buy train and ferry tickets home. The first train was 12.30 the next day; so we had the idea to visit Jenny's brother-in-law David in Vedback. I phoned him but got no answer, which didn't surprise me since it was then 5pm; so we set off northwards in the direction of Helsingør, phoning every five

minutes or so. At six I rang Steph in Dublin, and she said unfortunately David is in Estonia; so we asked a taxi driver about hotels in the area and he directed us to the Ermitage Scandic Hotel in Lyngby. We got there, again by a roundabout course, taking in a bounce off the coast, and then cycled right past it—the hotel is in the middle of a shopping complex. A passer-by directed us to the complex, a bike shop directed us to the 'candy store' and the candy store directed us to the lift which brings you up to the hotel, in the five top stories of the shopping centre. Having made a booking we got the bikes into the lift (with great heaving and wheelying) and brought them down to the underground car park, where we locked them up and reascended to our rooms on the fifth floor. We went down after a shower to take a walk around the block; nothing much doing, not even an Irish bar, so we went back into the hotel lobby for a beer. Set up with soft armchairs and TVs showing sports and American chat shows, it was a place weirdly devoid of atmosphere.



## Saturday 27th

Strange to wake up with a view over rooftops of city buildings; though there were also some trees and an old church tower with stepped gables. Another beautiful morning. We've been steeped altogether, only one serious soaking, and otherwise glorious weather, and the wind nearly always at our back. D'éirigh an bóthar linn.

The Scandic breakfast is not to be overlooked—lots of choice, fresh bread and fruit, very nice leaf green tea (and three other varieties besides many bags) and hot things, though not *very* hot. We marvelled at the curious architecture of the hotel; it has a front door on the street after all, right beside the bike shop that sent us to the sweet shop, but it seems to have no signs up. Perhaps the whole complex is still being redesigned. We paid with cash to use up our Danish money, keeping 200Kr to buy lunch, and got our bikes from the underground carpark which appeared to be entirely public and entirely free—no tickets, no barriers. We asked a passerby who had the look of a cyclist which way to go for the centre of Copenhagen, and wangled our way onto the cycle path beside the road beside the



motorway. This brought us so smoothly to the centre that we were there by 10am, so we began to take



things easy and take photographs of buildings, water features, interesting bikes and a personalised car. Before going to the station we stopped at several shops to pick up smoked trout, litres of juice, bread, pastries, pâté, gherkins, bananas, and suchlike, not forgetting a bottle of French Syrah; and we sat outside a café in the weak sunlight and drank coffee with a splendid view of ... our bikes doing a lean in a piece of street barricaded off for refurbishing. At 11.30am, one hour early, we arrived at the station and marvelled at the thousands of

bikes parked outside, some on two-storey racks. There are many varieties of bike to be seen in Copenhagen, long ones with a platform for large containers between rider and front wheel, three-wheelers with containers in the front for children (the three-wheelers are mostly two-wheels-in-front, steered by either front or back. There are also stylish lightweight city bikes, amazingly without gears, and some with only one brake (though the hub back-peddalling brake is also to be seen). At noon we took the lift down to track six and got to the right part of the platform for our train, which loses its back end in Odensee. Our carriage arrived right in front of us, and our seats were facing forward with a splendid view of—yes, our bikes. They had two opposite spaces booked for them, against folding-up seats which are free for unbooked passengers if there happen to be no bikes prams or wheelchairs claiming them.

They fitted, just, but unlike the Malmö train there were no hooks on straps to hold them down, so we tied them on with string. We gave up one side to a couple who asked could we put the bikes together, so that they could sit down with their newly-painted piece of art mounted on brackets; with the result that *both* bikes were now directly in our line of vision as we sat. (Paranoid? Us??)



We unpacked our lunch, which looked exceedingly

large; the gherkins, kippers and pastries we put aside for later, and we set to. The train stopped at four stations near Copenhagen, and then made longer runs for maybe six more. Our bike space was well used by prams, and a Moses basket on a stand was balanced on top of Michael's bike for most of the way; the man selling snacks from a trolley had to get the people to move things each time he passed—all done quietly and agreeably, though the incumbents upheld their right to stay there. The



comfortable seats like ours are normally booked out, and a light-emitting display along the edge of the luggage rack shows the stations between which the seat is booked, so that outside those stations the seat is free for all comers. A large LED at the end of the carriage shows the current time and the proposed time of arrival at the next station—each one loomed up on time within a few seconds. We had a leisurely lunch looking at the fields, forests, towns and windmills, and we appreciated each bridge as we crossed it, all the way to the island of Fyn (pronounced fun) and eventually at 2.30pm to Jutland. The beet was still in some fields; we had watched the machinery shovelling up, snagging and spewing out the beet into an accompanying tractor-trailer in Sweden, and a similar operation building up a gigantic mound of potatoes.

We arrived in Esbjerg (which rhymes with Lesbia) and the ticket collector helped us down from the train with our bikes. We cycled down to the docks and noted the turning to England, then continued along the coast to see if we could find a nice place to sit. Unfortunately the docks at Esbjerg are never-ending. Fortunately though one large part of them is given over to storing Aeolian blades, so we stopped and admired them. Michael stepped out the length of one: 74 feet, and that was a short one, without its end-section. They all seemed to be made in England.

We then came back via the town centre, suddenly thinking of presents we might bring home, but alas on a Saturday afternoon everything was very shut. Even MacDonald's was shut. We stopped at a roadside and Michael made a copy of all our booking details, in case they took away the page at the check-in. Meanwhile I wiped some of the oily gunge off my chain. Down at the docks we were directed to the front of the queue of cars, which made us feel once again properly *uitgezondert*. We marvelled at an 1800cc Honda motorbike with a Norwegian registration and a tow-bar. After a while the owner strolled up and we chatted with him; he was coming to Norfolk to pick up a trailer for the bike and ride/haul it back, catching the same boat for the return journey, when he will ride back up to Frederikshavn and catch the ferry back to Norway. He works as a computer salesman and servicer, building custom PCs; he also does some teaching of programs like Word. He's setting up a website to sell motorbike trailers in Norway, largely in order to buy one for himself and one for his brother at agent's rate; but he hopes to sell ten or so in the year. We noticed he had a phone cable to his helmet; he uses it to receive phone calls, and also to listen to CDs and the radio. If he has a pillion passenger they can communicate by cable.

At about 6pm we were ushered aboard, after all the truck containers had been loaded very speedily by men in truck tractors with extra-long connectors for tight cornering, and driving-seat/control units that swivelled round so they could drive the trailers on by pushing them from behind. They sure packed them tight, as we saw when we went on deck later in the evening.

We fixed our bikes in place using the special webbing straps provided, with tightening grips in the middle and hooks at the ends for grappling to points on the wall (or is that bulkhead?) and floor (I mean deck). Taking all our bags up to Deck 8 we were directed to our cabin which was spacious and elegant with wooden tables and two lower bunks, their upper ones folded away. Roomy loo and shower en suite. Before we sailed we finished what was left over at lunch—stupendous mini-kipper in oil, bread and gherkins, and the two pastries, with some of the peach juice. We went along to the lounge just before she sailed at 7pm on the dot, and watched her stately progress out of the harbour, as a few slow aeolians waved us goodbye. We looked through all the photographs on my camera, had a pint of Carlsberg, changed some euros to sterling and had a walk on deck before turning in.

## **Sunday 28th**

We woke around 7am; I had a shower first and went to find out about breakfast, which didn't start till 8. I left a note for Michael and went out on deck; the sun hadn't come up yet and it had been raining in the night. I counted twenty-nine lorry trailers on the open deck, besides the two deckfuls of lorries below the car deck. I walked up the steps to Decks 9 and 10 which are reserved for Commodore Class and Commodore De Luxe Class. Access wasn't barred or restricted in any way—it couldn't, as it was the only way to the lifeboats. A notice on the door of the Commodore De Luxe lounge said

‘Commodore De Luxe only’ but the door was open and I could have walked in and read all the papers and done all the crosswords, ho ho, but I refrained.

Back down on Deck 8 I got chatting to an English chap who had been over in Sweden preparing his yacht for the winter. He was an odd-job painter and decorator called Brian who had a longstanding passion for Agnetha in Abba; he had been writing poems and stories and sending them to her for fifteen years, and never keeping a copy. She never replied, but he was sure she read them because of cryptic clues she dropped into her interviews and biographical programmes. So he’s waiting for her new album to come out in December, to see if she uses his lyrics. He recited one of his poems to me about ‘when you talk to the tallest trees your words fall to dust’. He had told her in a letter that he’d tie up his boat at her island, and this time he had sailed really close but ‘bottled out’ at the last minute when he saw her walking down from her house. Michael came out on deck as we were talking and they chatted about sailing matters; Brian had done a lot of delivering boats, but mostly crewing, not skippering. He said he was a hopeless navigator, even managed to get lost in the Baltic, despite having satellite navigation. At 8am we went in and had a pleasant Scandinavian breakfast. Michael and Brian talked about storms in the Aegean—bloodcurdling tales that made my flesh creep. Brian told a strange tale of a trimaran he had made out of a Fireball dinghy by adding outriggers, and a keel, and an albatross figurehead, and how he had gone out with a retired clown and got becalmed in the Norfolk mud flats; and then found that an enormous air-sea rescue had been instigated by the clown’s sister who didn’t know where they had gone (he may not have told her; she may have forgotten). He was an engaging, quiet-spoken chap who suffered from ideas he just had to act on, the kind that seemed to make some sense though he couldn’t explain quite why. He had had an incident three years ago when he had to walk and walk and couldn’t stop all day until someone said ‘you look confused’ and sat him down and called the police; he had been put in a mental home then for three weeks, and put on medication which he probably won’t ever come off. He’s 58; they never told him the name of his condition. Attack of the poetic muse perhaps.

Michael and I said our goodbyes and left him in the lounge to go and buy presents of Danish chocs for the folks at home. We docked at noon, Danish time, which was 11am English time, and were sped through passport control and directed to the train ticket office in Harwich International, which is the port: Harwich town is two stations on. ‘Pay no attention to the sign saying “No Cycling On The Platform”—I always cycle up there’ said the affable official. The girl at the ticket office consulted her screen and sold us tickets to Holyhead via London. She said that some companies charge a few pounds for bikes but our first train takes them free. So we caught the 11.50 to Manningtree where we got on the 12.10 to Liverpool Street. On the second train there was no guard’s van but a Danish-type arrangement of folding-up seats where bikes could go in the carriage. Michael’s fitted only by leaning its front wheel over between seat-backs like a horse looking over a fence. Another cyclist with a nice dark-green machine told us of a trip he had made recently from Durness in Scotland to Dungeness in Kent: 1100 miles. He said it was really beautiful coming down the west coast of Scotland. The normal route, John o’Groats to Land’s End, was apparently dull by comparison; he had done the other diagonal of Britain.

At Liverpool Street we carried the laden bikes up the stairs—some feat, sirs—and set off with an hour and a half to get to Euston. Bishopsgate became a gridlock and we walked past the traffic; after that it was quite navigable, after all it was Sunday morning, and we turned right at St Paul’s and found ourselves heading straight for Euston, aided by a passing motorist and pedestrian. A jolly taxi-driver called out to ask were we brothers, but I hadn’t the presence of mind to shout ‘Hear that, grandad?’ to Michael. Next time. Both of us realised we had never gone into Euston by the door, always from the Tube, and we were surprised how it tried (unsuccessfully) to hide itself from our searchlight eyes. There was a very large crowd scrutinising the departures board; some earlier trains in our direction had been delayed, and they were all going to be put on our one, the 14.35. I left Michael minding the bikes in the middle of the crowd and went to buy a picnic lunch—two ham salad rolls, slices of cake, apples, bottles of water and a bottle of Crozes Hermitage (a snip). Stowing these in the bike bags I went off to pee and came back to a stampede—our train had just been announced at Platform 3. We moved down

in the rear of the crowd and got the bikes into the guard's van. This was a Virgin train and the Train Manager let us know that we *should* have bought bike tickets, not offering to sell us any, but in such a manner as to let us know that we were in his debt. By now I was afraid all the seats would be gone, so I ushered Michael into a first-class carriage, where we had no trouble finding two seats together. The loudspeaker announcing Platform 3 had said that there would be no first class on this train, all seats would be standard class.

It was delayed starting, and Muhammad the Train Manager made several courteous announcements saying that this was due to engineering works, and then that we would start within fifteen minutes. This was bettered as we started within five, twenty minutes late altogether. He then announced that there would be a charge of £15 for upgrading to first class. I was inclined to challenge this but



*Swedish insult*

Michael was inclined to comply, so we treated it as bike fares—you'd pay more in Ireland. Muhammad's courtesy had saved him a minor scene. We had an excellent lunch, naturally, but the train slowed and stopped several times before getting onto clear track, and it was running fifty minutes late by the time we reached Crewe. We missed our connection there, and reached Holyhead shortly after the 8.15pm boat had sailed; so we bought tickets for the 2.50am. We sent text messages to Anne and Jenny, and went to the nearest pub for a couple of pints of Tetley's—mmm—and a couple of Mars bars *faute de mieux*, with a moderately good view of the bikes through the window and a large family group with a mixed Irish and English accent for general entertainment inside. Nice stuff Tetley's, but it beats me why they call it 'bitter'. Another of life's mysteries.

We returned to the waiting area to pass the hours till 2.50 chatting, and I read some Pinker aloud, which was easier than reading silently as it kept me focussed. Around 2am we began the long process of getting on the boat, which involved a passport check, a ridiculous baggage check (all our bags had to go through an airport-style x-ray, *with the exception of* the bag attached to my bike, which contained the plastic bag *that I eventually carried on board*) a wait in another hall, a bus ride, at which point—oh the indignity—we were separated from our bikes for the first time, without personally locking them somewhere, as they went into a van with all the luggage. Finally we had an extraordinarily long walk through a covered way. The van at least would not be unloaded, but would travel on the boat with us. On board the ship we lay down on bench seats and slept until we docked in Dublin at 6am. No curiosity to look round the ship; at this stage we just wanted to get home.

### **Monday 29th**

The bikes came unscathed out of the van and we cycled a mile out of the docks, crossed the tollbridge where the dawn could be seen starting a little red line over the bay, and parted at Cambridge Road. Michael headed for Foxrock and I went home to Donnybrook by way of Ringsend.