



Shining Life Children's Trust Solent Challenge Bike Ride - 14th June 2008

As we arrived at our chalet accommodation rumours were rife that an extra six miles had been added to the already challenging 56 miles Solent Challenge cycle route I had been mentally (and physically) been preparing for. I took this all with a pinch of salt, assuming it was just an attempt to exploit my gullible side once again.

'It's true I'm afraid' said Juliet – chief organiser extraordinaire of the event, 'it's peak season and we couldn't get anywhere closer to the starting point of Lymington, you'll need to cycle an extra three miles each way to get to the official start and end point, at least you have six ferry crossings to recover on!'

This called for a glass of wine or two, while Juliet's sister, Roz, explained the route; what would happen if we missed a ferry and what would become of us if we had a puncture on the Isle of Wight where there would be no vehicle support. An amazing take-away curry followed (wine and curry – not your standard 'athletic' preparation for a 61 mile bike ride!).

A 6.30am start the next day, the 18 of us had to be on the road and cycling by 7.30 sharp or we would miss the first ferry! It didn't start well with the chain falling off Jo Brown's bike before we had even got out of the holiday park! Nothing was going to stop us from catching our first ferry though and we all enjoyed a very sedate journey across the sparkling Solent, well before most people were even stirring on their Saturday morning.

The Isle of Wight was at its best, the sun was shining and there was a gentle breeze to help us on our way. Between Yarmouth and Cowes we cycled through beautiful meadows, forests and along the coast.

Number two ferry was the chain ferry between West and East Cowes. Frustratingly this was the spot where my bike got a puncture within the inner tube. Assuming that bike shops on the Isle of Wight would be two-a-penny, I was amazed to hear from the local newsagent that there were only two on the whole island – one at either end. Luckily for us, one of these, Wight Mountain, was willing to drive to us to deliver a new inner tube – over an hour's round trip, which he would only take £5 for, 'well, it's for charity', he shrugged kindly. We were back on track.

The group had split up a bit by this point but the majority of us met again for the third ferry. How nice it was to be able to rest our bottoms on this long stretch back across the Solent to Portsmouth. Our fourth ferry took us from Portsmouth to Gosport. Another picturesque leg followed – passing dinghy racing and kitesurfing at Stokes Bay, cycling past beaches and through parkland.

The Pink Ferry from Warsash to Hamble really is as it sounds – very pink. Even the shelters at both ends are pink. There was a bit of a bottle-neck at this point because the ferry could only take four bikes at a time.

The sixth and final ferry of the day took us from Southampton to Hythe – we were on the home straight! Some took the opportunity to kick-back a bit and enjoy a couple of well-deserved beers.

The final stretch took us right through the middle of the New Forest. The ponies looked at us as if we were mad as we puffed our way through their territory.

At Lymington the end really was in sight – just those final three ‘extra’ miles to crack. We all crawled to the finish in drips and drabs between 8 and 9pm. Over 12 hours of cycling and we were famished, a bit sore round the edges but also rather proud of ourselves. Juliet and her superb support-team had prepared an excellent dinner of Coq au Vin, which we all enjoyed hugely while comparing notes on which hill we found the toughest and whose bruises were the biggest.