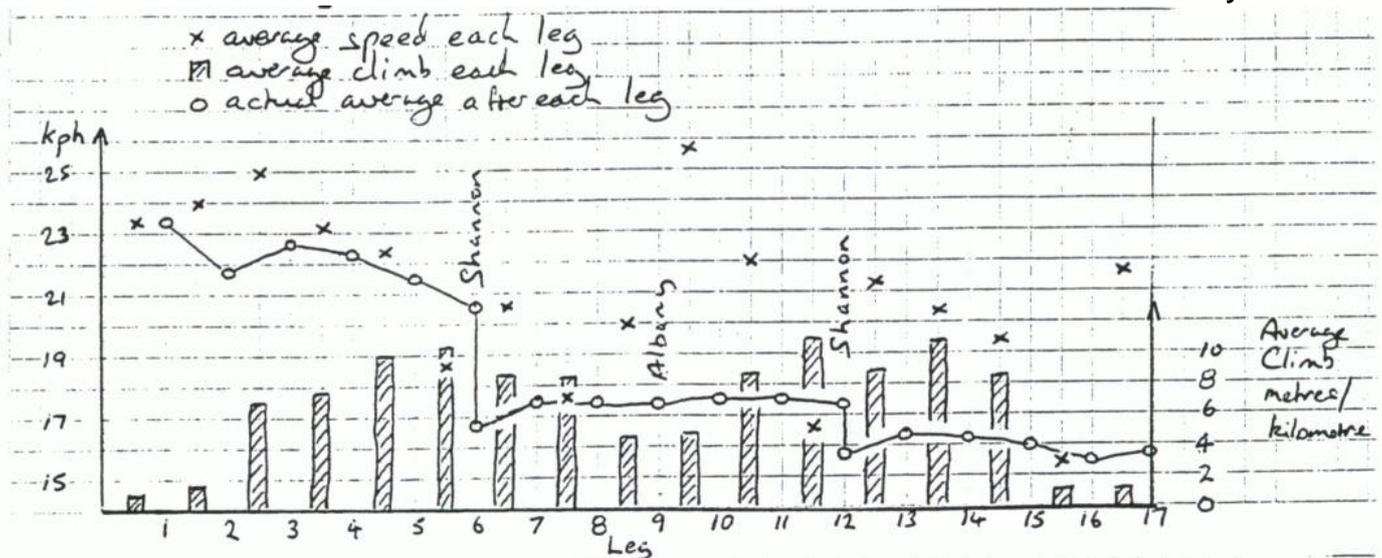


Perth-Albany-Perth

By Peter Moore



The alarm goes off at 3am. The Easterly still gusting over the Darling Ranges into Perth, and 420km South and East to go before I can sleep again. But I've come from the other side of the continent to do this ride, and at least when I roll out of bed it is not cold. For a Melbournian it is a pleasant change not to be shivering down the road before dawn. The Police are diverting traffic across the railway because of power line work, but it still only takes 10 minutes to get to the start at Kelmscott. Load the panniers into the support van, leave a small one on my rack with spares, clothes, shoes and food - not even a rain jacket the forecast is so good. I get my card stamped as the last two arrive - now one from the UK, one from Qld, one from SA, me from Victoria, and all the rest locals (although half are originally Poms).

A TV crew there to see us off, good for the sponsor BikeWest, and ABC Radio reports the progress of the ride. Beautiful night with the moon up as we get away at 4am, the Easterly across wind as we head south. As usual, I can't start as fast as the bunch, but work a bit harder a few km down the road and get on the back. Duncan surges away, but the other eleven stay together chatting and leisurely rotating along these flat sections, the occasional intersection breaking the tempo. A hand goes out ahead, not to indicate a pothole, but organizer Don lying on the road with a video camera. Put the first muesli bar of the trip in my mouth, and quickly realize I have bought "crunchy" not "chewy" - idiot. We cop the full headwind as we turn east to the Highway, and at 67km Pinjarra appears. I note a 24 hr Cafe for the return, and after a quick stop to remove longs and tops, we turn right off the Highway for more of the same, enlivened by a few stretches of water complete with birdlife. The bunch stops to be shown a mistake in the Route Sheet for the return - a "left" instead of "right" which would be disastrous after 1100km - and Brian kindly points out a place where water is always available if needed. More headwind for 5km

back onto the Highway again, then the first checkpoint at Yarloop. Brevet card stamped, have a cuppa and a bite, and write down the details from my Avocet Altimeter.

Kelmscott - Yarloop, 8:50am; distance 113km; amount of climb 112m; real average speed works out to 23.4km/h.

After 30 minutes we're back in the saddle, and soon off to the West of the Highway again. Then a surprise, a little bank down to a railway crossing, the first slope for 135km. A longer stint on the busy Highway, single file with the leader hitting 30km/h is stretching me although we are bending away from the wind a little.

Yarloop - Dardanup, 12:05pm; 179km; leg 66km, average 24.0km/h; climb that leg 104m; real average 21.9km/h.

After a cuppa, of course, I tell the group that I'll be riding a little slower; someone says what a pity it is to break up the bunch, but someone else wonders out loud that the same speed could suit eleven riders for 180km. Colin Farmer and I leave first, soon joined by Lindsay Green, Matthew Rawnsley and Brian Hughes. The next leg is mostly Highway to Busselton, tending more and more to the West and so wind assisted at last. Along the hills to the left are frequent long sandy scars, which Colin thinks is Ilmenite mining. I chat to Colin, he and his wife Barbara had an extended time cycling in Europe before and after Paris-Brest-Paris in 1995, as did Noreen and I. Matthew edges ahead as it gets hotter, but the bunch don't catch us till we are well through another flat leg, and we come into the checkpoint at the turn-off to the Vasse Highway together. The hamburgers from the Servo go down well with most, but I opt for the ubiquitous cuppa, and two pieces of cake - one too many my stomach tells me shortly down the road.

Dardanup - Busselton, 2:10pm; 232km; leg 53km, average 25.2; climb 44 m; real average 22.8km/h.

Twenty five minutes and we're off West, wind not too bad, and the first hill appears between two dense clouds of smoke, right on schedule at 246km. Colin, Matthew, Lindsay and I riding together, Duncan somewhere ahead, the others still together not far behind. Up the first rise and Lindsay sits and spins up the hill, perfect tempo and not an iota of movement of his torso. I plug along just behind, Colin losing ground up the hill, but charging back and past us over the top. And so it goes through the undulations to Nannup, Matthew occasionally drifting ahead, Lindsay always bringing us back to him with that metronomic cadence. Lindsay and Colin swap ages, 65 to 68, and weights, 55 to 58

At 4pm, 12 hours into the ride we have covered 264km, and we are now into the famous forests of the South West. A representative of the bunch catches us just into the hills, but sits up to wait for them and we're further ahead in Nannup, hot and sweaty and just in time to see Duncan leave. The checkpoint is in a green, shady park, the cool now appreciated.

Busselton - Nannup, 5:03pm; 290km; leg 58km, average 23.2; climb that leg 456m; real average 22.3km/h.

Threading between smoke columns, Colin urges us to go on, but what he loses as Lindsay and I ease up the hills he more than makes up down the other side. In the midst of what has been fairly scruffy forest, two swoops down green valleys and they are nearly a kilometre ahead of me in the dusk, I can only wait to pick them up on the next climb. Noticeably fewer wildflowers here, mainly just the yellow broom and some sort of purple flowering shrub. Too soon getting dark, so stop to put on reflective clothing, and switch on dynamos - the only three bikes with dynamos also sporting Brooks leather saddles. Both Colin and Lindsay have levers rigged up to turn their dynamos off while on the move, relying on batteries for going slowly uphill. Those hills don't relent, we can't see much of the famous forest, but it is a pleasant ride to the next checkpoint opposite Karri Valley Resort.

Nannup - Karri Valley, 8:01pm; 346km; leg 56km, average 22.4km/h; climb that leg 560m; real average 21.6km/h.

It is mortifying looking across the road to the Resort's Restaurant, lights blazing and people with leisure to sit down and eat a meal, then nothing to do but go and lie in a soft warm bed afterwards. But from our little two burner camp stove Neil conjures baked beans on toast, and my world brightens immeasurably. Only half an hour and we're back in the saddle, the prospect of bed drawing nearer. Duncan waits for our company, but with Lindsay and Matthew soon leaves Colin and I behind on the long drag up to Pemberton. Heading East again the wind has strengthened, really howling on the exposed ridge where we turn away from the lights of Pemberton in the valley and drop south into the quietness of the forest. Three or

four of the rest come charging past while Colin and I plod on, then the moon rises directly in front, perfectly round and improbably huge, growing yellower and smaller as it ascends. The little hamlet of Northcliffe, and a few people straggling out of the pub, promises only 18km to go, East again on a ruler straight road. The hills are shorter and sharper or we're getting tired, but we reel in two taillights, Matthew and Lindsay dropped when the bunch surged past taking Duncan with it. Around midnight the 400km passes, 20 hours is an hour ahead of the best I had hoped. A relief to turn right on the Highway, 5km to Shannon and bed. Some up, more down, switch on the Cateye and slow down to turn gingerly onto the gravel road leading to the bunkhouse - a good time to take extra care.

Karri Valley - Shannon, 12:33am; 422km; leg 75km; average 18.7km/h; climb that leg 722m; real average 20.6km/h.

A short wait for a blessed shower, hot and strong from the wood fired heater in this remote place - no phone or electricity. Soup and bread go down a treat; I contemplate going on, but the lure of the sleeping bag is too strong - so are opportunities lost. After briefly considering 4am, Colin and I agree to leave at 5. The problem now is to find a comfortable position for restless legs, and I can only half doze while the others come in. I wake at 4:30, and crib a few more luxurious minutes in bed as Colin pads about his preparations. I have time to change my Brooks saddle for a more modern type - the Brooks will now definitely be pensioned off, too much riding in rain has seen it contort uncomfortably. Duncan is the only other rider stirring. (Leaving Shannon at 5am, real average - 422km in 25hr - has dropped to 16.9km/h! The price of a long stop. Until we get to Albany, the Audax rules say we have to better 15km/h.) Moon still up and the sky beginning to lighten, the gravel road now looks innocuous. Right into the Highway and immediately climbing, Colin telling me the now visible trees are Karri (the white ones) and Marri (the ones with the stringy bark). Down the road, gradually bending East and the wind begins to be felt again, but a great time to be out, spirits high and feeling virtuous at leaving earlier than planned.

We note for the return that the hills seem to ease to wider, swampy scrubby plains at about 25km, till 5km before Walpole the hardest climb of the trip so far. I get slightly ahead of Colin, and when he comes into Walpole he decides not to leave with me.

Shannon - Walpole, 8:06am; 486km; leg 64km, average 20.6; climb 552m; real average 17.3km/h.

Walpole's only claim to fame is its proximity to The Valley of the Giants, the turn off defended by a swooping magpie against invading cyclists. The road is new, but in a broad cleared swathe which allows the rising Easterly to vent its spleen. Finally some prospects of sea to the South, another climb and steep descent and Denmark appears.

Duncan is next in, followed closely by Colin, and the bunch before I leave. I'm still feeling pretty good, wander down the road and buy some fruit and muesli bars, then one of the best sausage rolls I've tasted - hope the Bakery is still open when I get back.

Walpole - Denmark, 11:50am; 552km; leg 66km, average 17.6km/h; climb 548m; real average 17.3km/h.

Turning right off the Highway towards the coast exposes the full force of the gale. Only 50km to Albany, but every centimetre has to be fought for, no chance to lift the head and look at the scenery. I don't need this, I thought I had paid my dues to the God of Wind on my training rides, even struggling against it to Melbourne Airport. A final blast trying to cycle along the causeway beside the Harbour, then away from the wind for the first time in hours, but steeply uphill to the checkpoint at the top of town. It is more in relief than in celebration of halfway that I subside off the bike. It's taken 36 hours to get here, 54 hours available for getting back.

Jane Neely has laid out a fantastic spread on the tray of the truck, highlights including homemade pizzas and strawberries (not together). I am in no mood to find and write postcards as I had intended, just want to sit in one place and not do anything for a very long time. The bunch arrive, Colin with them, only two others still trying to get to Albany.

Denmark - Walpole, 9:45pm; 730km; leg 66km, average 22.0km/h; climb 560m; real average 17.5km/h.

Now very weary, just desperate for Shannon only a tantalizing 70km up the road, don't eat enough or rest long enough, so in 15 minutes I am out of Walpole. Mindful of overheating on the big climb just down the road, I decide to wait till the top to put on my longs, and my dynamo.

As Duncan and Matthew cycle past I am engaged in a pantomime struggle with my longs, taking two attempts hopping round in socks on the gravel. A bit further and warm gloves, a little later cap under helmet. Two bikes and one motor bike from the support crew in the first 10km, and I don't see another living soul, or electric light, till Shannon. The stars are amazing, no problems with light pollution here, but difficult to twist my head enough to see them.

The 5km markers take forever to arrive, can't see the computer and feel that I am getting nowhere, just weary, and I lose the plot. I stop and lie on a soft rock by the road, have probably 15 minutes of sleep expecting to wake as the others come past. Eventually I force myself up and onto the bike still in solitude, and the next glance at the computer bucks me up, magically showing only 15km to go. Strangely the hills are not a problem, and by the time the gravel track arrives I have lost less than an hour to Duncan and Matthew. Saint Neil serves soup and bread,

a meal fit for a king, a shower and into the bunk, waking occasionally as people move around.

Denmark - Albany, 3:20pm; 610km; leg 58km, average 20.0km/h; climb 264m; real average 17.3km/h.

I still take only 40 minutes before heading off, a couple of km across the wind before turning west to be blown back to Denmark, sitting up doing 30km/h! Now quite warm without the wind in my face, and time to look around, although the countryside here is somewhat nondescript. I stop at the Take Away in Denmark for a bucket of chips, and walk up the hill to the checkpoint just as Duncan arrives.

Albany - Denmark, 6:05pm; 664km; leg 54km, average 25.7km/h; climb 256m; real average 17.5km/h.

A stretch fades from memory - I make a gesture to my legs and don't turn on the dynamo till I'm up the big hill out of Denmark, and I remember Matthew gliding past with a word. A blur on the road is a fox, mesmerised by my headlamp but fortunately just off to the side of my wheel. I get too hot and take off my longs, stopping makes it obvious that the wind has subsided some.

Walpole to Shannon, 2:02am; 798km; leg 67km, average 16.7km/h; climb 732m; real average 17.3km/h.

Two riders getting ready shame me out of the bunk, but in fact it is Brian Hughes and Paul, last to arrive as I am first off at 6:30am, fuelled with porridge prepared of course by Neil the magnificent. Real average is 15.8km/h when I leave. It's wonderful to be out, weather perfect, legs great and powering over the hills. The straight road to Northcliffe passes quickly, people in the village coming out to buy their milk and papers. I have to think a bit to work out that this is Monday morning, the start of the week for normal people. Down to the Warren River, then up to the turnoff above Pemberton, farmland here and time for kids to be out by the roadside to catch the school bus - wonder how often they see a cyclist? Then mainly down to Karri Valley, appreciating what a climb we did in the dark. Ross this time has set up next to the Resort, Duncan already there with his wife in support. The shop here doesn't have much, I am referred to the camping ground a few hundred metres further back. But the very thought of going back is anathema, so I make do with a hunk of plastic wrapped tasty cheese out of the fridge, some of my wilted sandwiches which still taste surprisingly good, and of course a cuppa from Ross. Sitting on the ground beside the bike, I notice one of the bidon screws is loose - the intermittent noise which has been bugging me since just before the ride!

Shannon to Karri Valley, 10:08am; 876km; leg 78km, average 21.3km/h; climb 708m; real average 16.2km/h.

There is burning off going on next to the road, the heat quite noticeable, silent figures in overalls in the charred

scrub surveying their handiwork. The sun is also hotter, a slight Easterly still sometimes apparent, and the climbs are now warm work. The forest here is scruffier, so the wildflowers underneath have more chance. Across the Donnelly River, and there is more climbing. Closer to Nannup heavier smoke actually reduces the power of the sun, but hot and sweaty I stop at the Blackwood Cafe, all 60's retro, for toasted tomato and cheese sandwiches, preceded by an ice cream cone. Down the street the indefatigable Ross is waiting with the indispensable cuppa, Duncan about to leave and Matthew in soon after me.

Karri Valley to Nannup, 1:45pm; 932km; leg 56km, average 20.4km/h; climb 596m; real average 16.1km/h.

Hard to take my feet off the table, and leave the shade for the bike, but the next leg promises to be scenic, up the Blackwood River valley to Balingup. Unhappily the road builders have decided the road should go over every spur along the River - one pinch is so steep that I within an inch of getting off to walk. It would be a magnificent ride, in the cool of morning or evening and in isolation, but at this stage in a 1200 it comes close to being the last straw. Who designed this route? Paranoia reinforced by the Black Cockatoos, bombing me with gumnuts as I flush them screaming from trees overhead. Worse, as I have toiled my way almost to the top of a long climb and the computer says I should almost be there, I start worrying that I must have missed the only turn along the way. Stop and consult the map, rueing the prospect of losing all that I have just struggled for, but decide to have a look from the next corner up - where the valley widens out to disclose Balingup. The Bakery is just closing, but I take their last chicken pie, and the last cup of filter coffee. Matthew joins me and we sit outside, both feeling as bad as the other looks. Evidence of alternative life-stylers in this neck of the woods. One bloke talks to the baker about tonight's Save the Forest meeting, then asks us what we think of the area for cycling, before launching into a dissertation on how the Government should do more for cyclists. I have to observe that on the whole the problem here is not enough people cycling, not shortage of provision. He walks away.

The road climbs, but suddenly elated I breeze up, perhaps the real coffee making me celebrate far too early the end of the ride. Donnybrook is just over the hill, I'm feeling good, and there is only 200km of flat to go.

Nannup to Donnybrook, 6:44pm; 1005km; leg 73km, average 19.5km/h; climb 292m; real average 16.0km/h.

It is just dark as I roll into the Hostel at Donnybrook. Don is looking preoccupied, tells me Duncan left at 6pm. I am also determined to press on, so after a shower and can of creamed rice I leave the fleshpots and bright lights behind, little realizing that it will be 140km and over 8 hours

before I taste another hot drink. The first 25km to Dardanup are a breeze, flat roads and no traffic. Nothing open, so I press on, navigation becoming necessary for the first time in over 800km. My euphoria has vanished, now just a resolve to grind away at the remaining 170km, but the loneliness and the dark are insidiously undermining my mood.

It stays warm, keep feeling overdressed but reluctant to take anything off in case I get chilled. Even a spell on the Highway with some traffic doesn't help; finding nothing open in Brunswick Junction except a rowdy pub I lie down for ten minutes in the park where I have filled my water bottle. Off the Highway into a maze of depressingly dark, straight, featureless side roads, counting intersections and longing for Yarloop and a hot drink. Eventually I drag myself in, but nothing is open. Lie down in the forecourt of the petrol station, and drift in and out of a dejected doze for how long? I can't even be bothered looking at the computer or my watch.

When I get underway again things are no better, except that I can hold out like a carrot in front of myself a vivid memory of the 24 hour cafe in Pinjarra; after a tiresome age this oasis of humidity, mosquitos, bright lights and loud music appears, run by a bright girl who chats away, telling me that Duncan was there at 1am, but that his wife had missed him. I stoke myself with hot chips, egg-nogs and various other items no sane person would contemplate at 5am, and watch the dawn spread outside - no more dynamo, and only 67km to go. (The temperature did not drop below 21C all night.)

Donnybrook to Pinjarra, 4:50am; 1142km; leg 138km, average 15.5km/h; climb 168m; real average 15.6km/h.

Off the Highway with the Easterly for a few km, and I get out the mobile phone and call home - they thought I was delirious! More long straights and tacking back and forth through intersections, headwind more often than not. Bum so sore that I can't sit down, legs too tired to stand up. I keep popping barley sugar and thinking what I will do when I stop, but have to prop and rest for a minute or two at more frequent intervals, till finally the scent of the finish drags my speed up to 25km/h through Armadale, and down beside the Railway to Kelmscott. As I get off the bike, wanting desperately to blow my nose, Don keeps the video camera rolling, so I try to look as though it has all been a breeze really - ha! The day gets up over 30C but the wind drops, Lindsay and Colin finish just after noon, Matthew and the others with a tailwind after 6pm.

Pinjarra to Kelmscott, 8:50am; 1213km; leg 61km, average 21.8km/h; average 21.9km/h; climb 84m; real average 15.8km/h.

Overall 76hr 5min, average 15.8km/h, total climb 7188m.