

The Great South West Tour - A Victorian's Perspective

by Bob Bednarz

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This unsupported randonnée of 1,000/1,200/1,500km, organised by the WA Region and advertised in the September issue of *Checkpoint*, offered special incentives to interstate riders such as airport pickup and pre ride accommodation. But wait, there's more!



The last leg back to Kelmscott: Ian, Bob & Colin

As sole interstate rider, I would be given V.I.P. status, with a grand (motorised) tour of the Perth - Fremantle locale, followed by dinner in a revolving restaurant overlooking Perth, the Swan River and surrounding country side. Again, after the ride and the evening before my return flight, I would enjoy a barbecue with Audax members and families organised by my hosts, Don and Ronice Briggs, who made me feel a most welcome guest.

The tour was to extend over five days; with the 1,500km riders starting early Saturday morning from Karragullen, at the top of a hill on the outskirts of the Perth metropolitan region. The other participants would start a day later from the ride base, Wickepin - a small town with a population of 245 persons about 190km south east of Perth. We would ride a 1,011km segment consisting of three loops radiating from Wickepin. A further 189km ride back to the Perth suburb of Kelmscott would complete the 1,200 and 1,500km distances.

The road between Perth and Wickepin passes over the Darling Ranges and is quite hilly. Otherwise the route consisted of rolling and reasonably flat terrain, with distances between controls, towns and shops averaging 60km. We'd encounter only an occasional motor vehicle (during peak traffic hours) while riding in the relatively unpopulated region.

However, all roads other than the main highway are unmarked. This means that night riding with no moonlight becomes a challenge because these unmarked roads feature a narrow single lane sealed in the same colour as the wide gravel shoulders. Without moonlight, special care is required not to drift onto the gravel and risk a spill.

The four early Saturday morning 1,500km starters, Don Briggs, Ian Duckham, Colin Farmer and Malcolm Clark, endured a strong headwind as they headed east to Corrigin, and then to Kulin and Wickepin; covering 306km in a circuitous route.

Meanwhile Brian Hughes and I motored leisurely to Wickepin to set up camp in the Wickepin community centre. After a quick tour of the town (ie: a ride up and down the main street) it became apparent there was little in the way of tourist attractions to distract us from our mission. We were later joined by Barbara Farmer and Brett Rutherford. All four of us planned on doing (at least) the 1,000km option.

The Wickepin community centre offered relatively palatial accommodations; including a commercial size kitchen, a cool room to store drinks and fruit, more than ample shower facilities, and floor space for cots or mattresses as well as bikes and baggage.

I fell asleep shortly after the 1,500km cyclists arrived at the community centre, enjoying a last good night's rest before the 5:00am start. These late arrivals seemed remarkably lively after battling head winds for over 200kms of their route.

Leaving promptly at 5:00am Sunday morning, all eight randonneurs found the previous day's easterly wind had changed to a south-westerly, providing a considerable tailwind to Kulin. The three male 1,000km riders, starting fresh and bursting with energy, averaged 27km/h for 70 kilometres to arrive at the first control, Kulin, before shops or service stations had opened. After resting briefly, a short tour of the town revealed an early morning worker cutting the lawn of the local bowls club who could endorse our brevets.

Leaving Kulin, we experienced periods of strong head winds as we rode south towards Lake Grace. I was having difficulty keeping up with Brett and Brian on his new Allsop Beam; with a familiar cramp developing in my left calf muscle. Recalling advice offered in the PBP '95 Mail Out to ride at your own speed, I dropped back to a less demanding pace. I briefly caught up to Brett and Brian at the Lake Grace control before they headed off towards Dumbleyung. I assured them that I preferred riding at my own speed and would be fine.

Strong head and cross winds dominated the 80km to Dumbleyung and then 39km to Wagin. The effects of the wind moderated as we turned north-west towards Narrogin for a further 50km, and then assisted for the remaining 38km back to Wickepin.

Upon my return I found that Malcolm and Don had withdrawn from the 1,500 because of equipment failure. The front wheel of Malcolm's Moulton bike had lost six spokes, while an excessively worn shoe cleat was causing problems for Don. Brian also was withdrawing from the 1,000 due to blistering of strategic anatomical parts. This was attributed to having more than a single layer of material between bike and rider!

Five riders again set out for Kulin early Monday morning on the second loop from Wickepin. Arriving at Kulin before 8:30, we were disappointed to learn that tea would not be served before 9:00am. After a short rest we departed northward, hoping to find a more service-oriented attendant at Kondinin.

Meanwhile Brett's hard ride on the previous day had aggravated a previous leg injury. He therefore decided to withdraw from the ride and return to Wickepin, where he remained throughout the event; providing on-site support to weary riders returning for food and rest.



Wickepin, WA. Centre for the Great South West Tour, 1994

Arriving at Kondinin, we were pleased to find both a cake shop and roadhouse open, ready to serve tea. As we set out to Narembeen, I noted that the day's weather was providing ideal cycling conditions, with WA's springtime wildflowers and unique gum trees offering interesting scenery over the relatively flat terrain.

The day's journey to Narembeen, and then to Bruce Rock at the 534km mark passed relatively quickly with the congenial nature of my riding companions, Barbara, Col and Ian, offering opportunities for pleasant

conversation. At times it seemed like I was on a leisurely Great Victorian Bike Ride, rather than a strenuous Audax event! We were well into the 80km ride segment towards Corrigin when darkness fell. With no moonlight, we could see only the silhouette of surrounding trees against the

star-illuminated sky. Otherwise we were in complete pitch blackness, with no road markings to guide our path. My riding companions' battery powered lights provided only feeble illumination compared to my Dynapower generator set.

Fortunately, I had also heeded Alan Walker's earlier, and later Kate Green way's advice on the utility of a helmet lamp. Using the lamp on my helmet, I could easily illuminate the boundary of the road and its shoulder, while my bicycle lamp projected its beam forward. Never-the-less we made slow progress and didn't arrive at Corrigin until 9:30pm, after spending over five hours to travel 80km.

All shops were closed when we arrived at Corrigin after 614km. We obtained shelter and warmth in the local Australian Post Office's entrance, where we consumed our self-provided food and made note of the time so we could later endorse each other's brevet. I also noted that we would have covered 600km in just under 40 hours, just scraping in within the AUDAX time limit for that distance.

The 78km route from Corrigin back to Wickepin was similarly dark. My helmet light had stopped working, so that I had only a pen-light to occasionally check my cycle computer and map. Time passed slowly, with no road-signs or mileage markers to assure us we were on track. We had only a view of the road surface immediately in front of us and the unvarying silhouette of the forest against the night sky. I wondered, "Could the ride organiser be testing our celestial navigation skills?"

Finally we reached a junction and rail crossing which indicated we had arrived at Yealering. With no road marking or sign to guide us back to Wickepin, we paused in the darkness to locate the correct road. The temperature had fallen considerably, and as I shivered I resolved to carry my cycling jacket, in addition to Audax jumper and cycling jersey, for the remainder of the ride. It was after 3 when we returned to Wickepin. A hot shower, hot food and short sleep revived us for Tuesday's ride.

As we rode towards Harrismith on Tuesday morning, I started thinking about how there were three rides in progress, and that the four riders had three different times remaining to complete the ride. In my tired state I miscalculated that I had only some 24 hours remaining to cover 500km. In desperation I charged ahead and arrived alone at the Harrismith pub. It was about 10:30 and I enjoyed a cold drink while briefly watching the Melbourne Cup activities on TV.

I left the pub as the others arrived, but after proceeding a short distance and not finding the road to Dumbleyung, I returned for directions. Again, saying goodbyes, I set out for Dumbleyung, a mere 53km away.

Stopping twice along the roadside to eat, drink heavily and stretch, I made slow progress to the Dumbleyung Shell Roadhouse at 800km. At Dumbleyung, I had not finished my meal of potato cakes, sticky-bun and energy drink when the others arrived. Realising the futility of riding alone, I thankfully re-joined them.

My spirits picked up as we headed towards Katanning. Barbara, Col and Ian continued their earlier practice conversation in French. I recall this part of the ride as being a gradual but steady uphill climb. My handlebar had worked loose since adjusting it after my Perth flight. I retightened it while Ian got our brevets stamped at the Katanning Toyworld store.

Darkness fell as we rode towards Wagin. However, this highway was well marked and we made relatively good progress compared to unmarked roads, especially when stimulated by the distant lights of Wagin and the prospects of a hot meal at the 909km mark.

My brevet records a time of just over six hours between our Wagin arrival and the next control at Narrogin; a mere 64km distance. This compares with three hours on Sunday's ride between these towns. How can this be?

Well, we must have spent about an hour at the restaurant in Wagin before riding off towards Narrogin. Our speed was then somewhat moderated by Ian's strained achilles tendon. As well, we had a (planned) 15km extension of the route, leaving the main highway at Highbury, a town distinguished at night by a solitary street light.

Confusion reigned here, because we couldn't locate a road on the right, which on the map was opposite our turn-off. After due exploration and deliberation we embarked left into a minor unmarked road in pitch darkness. Seeking confirmation of our route, we travelled slowly trying to locate an intersecting car track. My helmet light would have been of great assistance here, had it been working. Relying on my penlight, we had to stop regularly to check our distance on the computer.

Finally we sighted the lights of a combine working the nearby wheat field in the night, then railway lines; confirming our route towards Narrogin. Our spirits rose as we sighted the street lights of Narrogin.

Naturally, all shops were closed at 2:30am. Again relying on provisions carried, we refreshed ourselves with food and drink, and endorsed each other's brevet before starting out on the remaining 38km back to Wickepin.

With all four riders very sleepy, we were making what seemed like painfully slow progress towards Wickepin. Finally Ian and I decided to try "power napping" on the side of the road, hoping to make better progress after dawn and with rest. However Barbara and Col preferred to continue riding, singing to stay awake.

Falling asleep immediately, I awoke briefly when Ian responded to a passing motorist who had stopped to offer assistance. Finally the morning chill wakened us. Greeted by daylight, we mounted our bikes for the remaining ride back to Wickepin. At this point I was a bit groggy and uncertain of where I was, trying to locate myself somewhere in Victoria!

It was almost 6:00am Wednesday when Ian and I arrived at Wickepin. As we approached the community centre, Brett Rutherford was just leaving in his car to find and awaken us.

Barbara and Col had arrived somewhat earlier, with Barbara completing her 1,000km target with more than a three hour margin on the 75 hour limit. By this time I was confident that, given a couple hours of rest, we both could ride a further 190km and complete the 1,200km distance. However Barbara, satisfied with her achievement, ignored our encouraging pleas to continue. Ian, Col and I decided to leave at 9:00am, giving me some 14 hours to travel the remaining 189km after a two hours rest. This last day was again sunny and warm, and as I recall, with moderate cross and headwinds.

The ride to Pingelly, and then to Brookton was uneventful, except for finding a snake on the road. Was it dead or just basking in the sun? We'll never know, as we rode cautiously around it. Brett and Barbara stopped on their drive back to Perth to take a quick snapshot of the three remaining riders.

Leaving Brookton after 3:00pm, I was a bit concerned with the 113km distance between the final two checkpoints. The route, passing over the Darling Ranges, could prove difficult should we run short of rations or water, for there was no store or source of drinking water over the route.

Sometime later, realising that Ian had dropped back with his aching achillies tendon, Colin rode back to re-join him. Meanwhile, feeling the time pressure, I continued on alone, noting the increasingly steep hills as we approached the Darling Ranges.

Late in the afternoon an approaching car gained my attention. It was Don Briggs, driving out from Perth to monitor our progress! After a brief word, he continued east toward Col and Ian. A short time later he stopped on his return trip to indicate that Ian and Col were fine and making good progress. Continuing on for perhaps another 20km, I was directed to pull off the road by Don who was now conducting a secret control point at approximately the half-way point of the final leg. Besides endorsing my brevet, Don provided welcomed food, hot coffee, water, and a chance to relax briefly on a comfortable deck chair. I also took the opportunity to remove my shoes and massage aching feet. Col and Ian arrived as I prepared for the concluding night ride and soon departed.

The ride through the Darling Ranges was strenuous but interesting. In the darkness I would occasionally catch glimpses of the bright Perth night sky. Time and again, hoping that I had finally reached the summit, I would reach another curve in the road only to face another uphill climb.

Finally, reaching the summit, I began the grand finale descent: a seven kilometre downhill run almost all the way to Kelmscott. Stopping at a service station for directions, I was guided left into a Kelmscott side street and approached the train station from the rear car park.

After crossing the rail line back towards the highway, I located Don and Barbara and startled them from behind as they watched for my arrival from the highway. I had completed the 1,200km ride with two and a half hours to spare!

About an hour later, Ian and Col were cheered by family and friends as they rode into the parking lot. They had completed their 1,500km ride some seven hours within their 120 hour time limit.

In conclusion, I feel that there are a number of factors that contributed to my success that are worth mentioning:

- A pre-ride bicycle maintenance check.
- Earlier advice from Keith Lowe on leg stretching exercises while on the saddle, and the use of various hand gripping positions to prevent finger numbness.
- Advice from PBP veteran and riding companion Col Farmer to ride as to conserve energy, and not power up hills or into the wind.
- A supply of carbohydrate energy sachets along with a packet of Jelly-babies, to complement my regular carbohydrate riding diet.

I thank the ride organiser, Brett Rutherford; Brian Hughes for transporting me to Wickepin; Ian Duckham, Col and Barbara Farmer who were great riding companions throughout this cycling adventure; and finally Don and Ronice Briggs for both their hospitality and ride support. My visit to WA and experience on The Great South West Tour exceeded all expectations.