

# FLORIAN & BRIAN'S

## Bathampton to Flush House Cycle Challenge



July 2019

5 days; 268 miles; 10,676 feet gained; cycling over varied terrain on mixed surfaces with full pack - to raise funds for the mental-health charity 'Boys in Mind – Girls Mind Too'.

Sponsor at:

<https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/boysinmind>

# Day 1 - Bathampton to Stonehouse

**Dist. 52.18 miles Elev. 2,274 feet Max. 30 mph Ave. 11.4 mph Time: 4.35 hrs**

*Weather: Warm, muggy, stiff westerly breeze, brief shower.*



Using GPS technology for the first time, we headed west along the Bristol & Bath railway path. My brand new 'Garmin', however, kept trying to direct us back the way we had come. Since we knew the terrain, this was not a major issue but we realised it would need rectifying before venturing further afield.

During a break at the old station in Warmley, I restarted the navigation device. Or so I thought. Now, it appeared, we were on track. We settled into marvelling at how well the GPS helped us pick our way along quiet lanes, down

obscure tracks and onto unmarked bridleways.

As we began one particularly gruelling ascent, Florian recognised our surroundings. He also remarked on place names adorning road signs, saying 'Isn't that near Marshfield?'. Before that, we had also noticed a distinctive line of trees. These looked remarkably like what had been dubbed 'Africa' when seen from our previous home in Bathampton.

There was a reason all this looked familiar. We were actually around 6 miles north of Bath. We had cycled to the outskirts of Bristol, headed north and then the Garmin had taken the first opportunity to direct us back towards home.

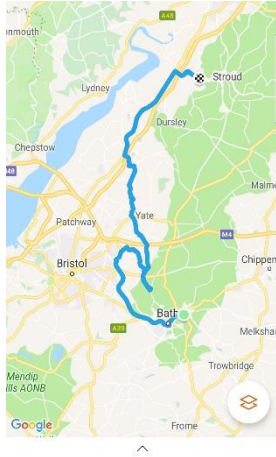
I later realised that, at the start of the ride, Garmie (as we will now call him) had asked whether we wished to navigate to the start of the course. The logical answer to this seemed to be 'yes'. However, since this was set by our postcode - and presumably deemed to be a few yards up the road, we never actually passed that point. So, he was trying to direct us back home the whole time.

Once our mistake was acknowledged and we had checked the map, it was decided the best thing would be to backtrack, then find another route north to re-join our intended trajectory. However, Garmie was set to follow 'mixed surfaces'. We therefore found ourselves on badly tended bridleways, complete with overgrown brambles, thorns, stinging nettles and – at one point – a narrow strip across a wheat field. We later met a horse rider who was checking on the local council's progress in keeping the ways clear. We showed her our scars and she promised to report back.

Soon, though, we were back on track and the landscape became friendlier. Travelling along quiet lanes and small roads, we eventually joined the A38 towards Gloucester. This turned out to be very cycle-friendly; wide and even, with long stretches of cycleway alongside.



## Florian & Brian's Bathampton to Flush House Cycle Challenge



Despite our 12-mile detour and the huge hill this delivered, we still had plenty of time. Our planned arrival at our friends' home near Stroud was not until 5pm. So, when a road-side pub appeared – complete with garden and all-day food – we stopped for some well-earned drinks and cheesy chips.

Pushing on to Stonehouse, the final approach was along picturesque canal-side paths. A warm welcome, warm shower and hot tea awaited us. This was followed by a hearty meal and a chance to catch up with my old pals from uni (well, Poly, actually). Due to an earlier miscommunication (mine), they were out for the remainder of the evening. So, Florian and I settled in for some serious vegetating in front of the TV.

*Mishap of the day: Brian slamming his pedal into his shin as he prepared to negotiate the wheat field.*

## Day 2 – Stonehouse to Stourport

**Dist. 57.21 miles Elev. 1,725 feet Max. 28.4 mph Ave. 11.0 mph Time: 5.13 hrs**

*Weather: cloudy to start; brighter later; westerly breeze; warm.*



We were up at 7:30 but too late to catch our friends, who had already left for work, and too early for their daughter, who was still asleep. Setting off at 8:40, we only got 100 yards before my gear cable snapped. Fortunately, I had a spare and was able to quickly make repairs. Although a little delayed, we were then pleased to be on our way shortly after 9.

As we headed towards Gloucester, there was a beautiful canal-side stretch. The surface was fairly tricky in places, with ruts, pot-holes and loose gravel. However, the views were pretty, complete with families of swans and tall reeds, reminiscent of the Norfolk Broads.

Our route took us through the Gloucester docks, which still maintain an air of nautical history. We then followed a variety of roads: major and minor, some augmented, others diminished (for all you musos).

It's always hard to recall specifics when so much ground is covered in a day. We saw beautiful old hamlets, manor houses, country retreats and converted barns. There were churches aplenty, village greens and lots of beautiful horses. We even startled a small deer on a quiet lane. It stood, momentarily frozen, before disappearing into the trees.

We had lunch at a roadside pub just before Upton upon Severn. This seemed ideal but was apparently staffed solely by two rather dithery ladies. They were also looking after the adjoining campsite and seemed in no hurry whatsoever. Our pork roll and omelette took an age to arrive but were very welcome once they did.

The afternoon took us through Worcester, approaching along the riverside. This afforded us beautiful views of the cathedral and quaint, old-world centre. Now in our stride, however, we didn't stop to take this in.



An afternoon break was taken at a rather smart and pricey roadside pub. Seeing the slate-grey sign, we were forewarned of the pretensions of this establishment but the garden looked too good to refuse. Here, we were entertained by cute dogs, a singing hedge and a ludicrous menu. Then on we pedalled, through winding lanes, over rolling hills, to Stourport.

Once there, we quickly found our B&B. The owner showed us through to the garden to stow our bikes. Our room was cosy and had everything we could need. We took his recommendation of dinner at the Black Swan. This was

hearty to the point of being overwhelming. With puddings at a very affordable price, we couldn't resist – but for me it was really a crumble too far!

On our return, I was confounded by the electronic door lock to get back in. Florian then pointed out I was holding the key fob against the 'exit' button. He got us in in seconds.

*Mishap of the day: stopping to check the route at the entrance to a rather unwelcoming service yard, Florian balanced on one pedal. As he failed to remove his shoe from the cleat (the clip that holds your foot to the pedal), he did a classic slow-motion sideways fall. Some grazing ensued.*



## Day 3 – Stourport to Stoke

**Dist. 60.45 miles Elev. 1,708 feet Max. 22.5 mph Ave. 10.6 mph Time: 5.40 hrs**

*Weather: rain, becoming heavy, clearing early afternoon; then really heavy.*



The day began and ended with beautiful stretches of canal-side towpath. Unfortunately, both were accompanied by heavy downpours. These rendered our gears and brakes a grinding, claggy mess. This also made for very slow progress, which was not helped by my altercation with Garmie, first thing, when he refused to show us to the route.

And, just as it seemed things couldn't get any worse, Florian's gear cable snapped. His are the combined brake and gear levers for dropped handle bars. I took a look but couldn't see how to make the repair.

Fortunately, there was a cycle workshop not far from our route, a few miles ahead. We made our way there, with Florian stuck in the highest gear of the rear block. He was, therefore, only able to shift between large and small front cogs in order to gain any mechanical advantage.

The workshop was run by a peculiar little old bloke, who came out to view the damage. Seeing that the cable was splayed and stuck inside the housing, he said he wouldn't be able to do much about it. He explained he had taken one of these apart before and there were "hundreds of parts".

Given that we still had a good 50 miles to cover, after battling through rain and goo, we weren't settling for that. We persuaded him to have a go at extracting the broken cable end (I suspect he would have done anyway but was enjoying the drama). Eventually, he was successful. He quickly installed a new cable and indexed the gears.

As I was paying for this work, our rescuer asked where we were heading. When we said Stoke, he tried to recall whether he had played there. It turns out he had been a drummer. "Me too", I said and explained that Florian plays as well. He then opened a drawer and produced a pair of drumsticks. "These were Johnny Bonham's", he said. It turns out he and John Bonham were mates.

I took the opportunity to stock up on food whilst the repair was in progress. We then set about eating-up some miles, now - thankfully - on roads. Loath cars as I do, there is something to be said for tarmacadam. No sooner had we found our way back onto the designated route than Florian's chain jammed in his front derailleur. Fortunately, I was - this time - able to affect a quick repair. And off we sped.

A short spell of disused railway then brought us to a café at an old station waiting room. Prohibited from eating our own, we bought sarnies and wolfed these down, together with a quick drink. And then we were really off.





Now on roads for a goodly stretch – and in the dry – we made up for lost time. With warm limbs and steeled resolve, we risked pushing the tempo a little and the miles fell away. At Stafford, we re-joined the canal, which then led us on to the rather pretty town of Stone. With a few on-road short-cuts (courtesy of MapMyRide), this led us to our destination of Stoke.

Today, we saw a large number of herons, many swans (mostly with young), a lot of dogs and the occasional squirrel (like an occasional table, only faster). Otherwise, the fauna comprised mostly insects. These were not content with merely colliding with us. Rather, they found their way into our eyes, ears, nostrils and helmets (oh, do behave).

Another curious feature of the day was a plethora of very low bridges along the canal. At some were signs, warning cyclists to dismount. At others, we were left to judge for ourselves. The heavy rain also meant there were a lot of nettles bent over at leg-, arm- and face-level. One slapped Florian in the eye, after I had managed to brush it aside. Fortunately, though, this didn't cause any serious harm.

In all, it was a really tough day but we seemed to have become hardened to the exertions of long hours in the saddle. This felt like an important test for the 'big one' to come, tomorrow. Having weathered the various difficulties... and the weather, we felt ready to take on the climbs in store.

We arrived at the Holiday Inn (look, we tried camping before and didn't enjoy it, OK?), in full rain-wear and with bikes covered in mud. At the desk, the receptionist said we could stow our cycles in the back office. I suggested we should first hose them down. She instead provided jugs of water and – after three refills – we managed to get the worst of the grime off.



Wheeling our bikes in, we then made full use of the facilities – including the hair-dryer, to get some of the moisture from my sodden shoes. Dinner was taken at the Harvester next door. And yes, it was Florian's first time, thank you for asking. Three courses were duly despatched.

*Mishap of the day: take your pick!*



## Day 4 – Stoke to Flush House

**Dist. 52.33 miles Elev. 3,709 feet Max. 32.4 mph Ave. 10.2 mph Time: 5.06 hrs**

*Weather: cloudy to start; then heavy rain; brighter later; westerly gusting wind; warm.*

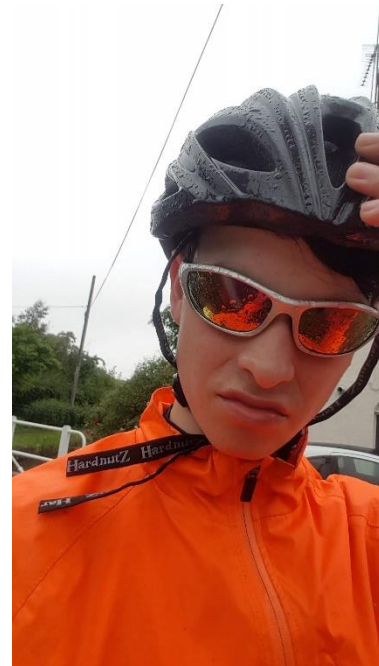
The stay at the Holiday Inn was surprisingly comfortable and the staff very accommodating. We couldn't fathom, though, why so many people wanted to take their families to what was essentially an industrial park next to the football stadium. Breakfast was a buffet with everything we could wish for. This was, however, clearly mass-produced, with quality not a priority. We had our fill, settled up and were away shortly after 8:30.

Garmie took a while to wake up this morning but soon had us heading through the centre of Stoke. Given this was rush-hour, things weren't too hectic. After a steep climb through the town, we escaped via backroads and onto a disused railway path.

Going was good and we ate up the miles before a traditionally rainy stretch of canal tow-path was reached. The gravel here, thankfully, was more forgiving than the claggy potash around Stafford. Leaving this to join a welcome stretch of road, the heavens then really opened. At times, we could barely see but ploughed on regardless, now coming into more hilly terrain.

It was a long day and hard to remember what came where. However, one stretch of road took us through Macclesfield. This has to be a new contender for the 'shittiest drivers' award. The worst of these were van drivers, as well as those in Mercs, Audis and Range Rovers. So, no surprises there.

Another fine stretch of ex-railway – with decent gravel and tarmac surface – helped us on towards Stockport. From here, the climbing really began. One particularly long ascent took us to the outskirts of Glossop. At this point, the forbidding shadowy outlines of the Peaks came into view. The tops were obscured by cloud but we were pretty sure the clouds were lifting.



Sure enough, as we followed a frustratingly sandy stretch along another disused railway, the hills revealed their full majesty. We took a short break, overlooking the Woodhead reservoir, as a couple of dicks on motorbikes sped past along the cycleway. Soon after resuming, we joined the road to take us across the dam and onto the busy main road towards Barnsley.

Now came the climb up to Holme Moss. We had seen from the map that

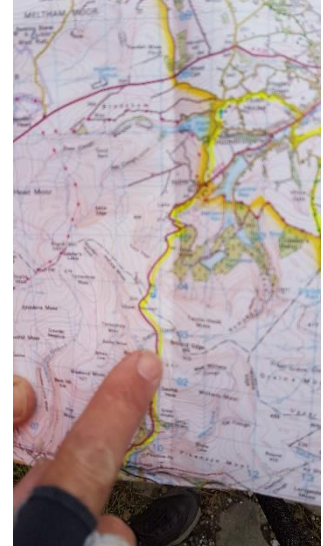


this would be steep. It was. And long. The helpful tailwind also had a nasty habit of veering to the side and threatening to push us into the path of the sometimes-less-than-cautious drivers and motorcyclists. Talking of which, every couple of hundred yards or so was a sign, bearing a picture of a motorcyclist and the legend "To die for?". Charming.

We took a couple of stops for me to get my breath on the way up. During the second, four cyclists on expensive road bikes (and minimal load) pushed past. Florian was then unleashed. He sped off, immediately passing the back two and overtaking the second as he neared the summit. I, meanwhile, trudged on in my ultra-low 'walk-up-walls' first gear.

It was an emotional moment as we reached the top. Of all the trips we have made, this one gave me the most trepidation. I wasn't in particularly good shape before we started and have also had a few minor niggles (Florian, on the other hand, is fighting fit).

The sense of achievement was, therefore, huge. To have cycled 50 miles and scaled Holme Moss - at 1719 feet – felt amazing. Yes, club cyclists ride over 100 miles regularly and the Tour-de-France (presumably lost?) saw riders race up here at ridiculous speeds. But we had done this at the end of a 4-day journey, with ordinary road bikes, over mixed terrain and carrying our own gear. And some of us aren't getting any younger.



My wonderful friend Rob – a keen cyclist himself – met us on the descent. He very sensibly suggested a celebratory pint at the Fleece in Holme, before the climb to his place in Flush House – our final destination.

*Mishap of the day: not stopping for a second pint at the Fleece.*

## Day 5 –Flush House to Bathampton

**Dist. 46.00 miles Elev. 1,260 feet Max. 31.8 mph Ave. 12.75 mph Time: 3.41 hrs**

*Weather: cloudy to start; a few spots of rain; brighter later; warm.*



During our stay at Flush House, we recuperated by going on a series of hill walks. Daft as that may sound, it made a good change to use some different muscles and not be saddle-bound for a few days. Florian, however, couldn't resist the challenge of another go at Holme Moss, this time from the Holme side. Accompanied by Rob, he darted up and down in no time - but did afterwards realise that perhaps a rest would be a good idea.

Then, after a violent night of high winds and lightning storms, we set off on our way home. We would be taking a train from Sheffield to Bristol but this still left a good stretch of cycling at either end. In the morning, things were a little more settled as we descended the familiar lanes to Holmbridge. Then began the long ascent to Dunford Bridge. From here, we took the Trans-Pennine Trail, following another disused railway. The climbs were stiff but manageable, with moments of respite as we followed the hill tops, during which we could take in some fine views.

Once on the railway path, we got into a good, steady rhythm. This allowed for comfortable conversation, which helped us pedal the miles away. The sun broke through the now-dispersing clouds but we were shaded by neighbouring trees and the temperature remained pleasant.

Eschewing the trail for a brief section of road, the carriageway here was pitted but with a pleasing degree of climb and curve. Sadly, though, we encountered the very worst of driving on this stretch. One driver all but forced Florian from the road, then blasted his horn as he passed, inches from my shoulder.

Soon enough, we were safely back on the railway path, which was - at this point - paved and dry. This made for a pleasant trundle into Sheffield. Once within the city limits, we joined a busy dual carriageway, thankfully flanked by cycleway, that led us right into the centre. Due to roadworks, it was a bit of a challenge to find our way to the station. The last stretch, though, followed the elevated tramway, making for an easy final approach.



In spite of having our bikes pre-booked on the train, we braced ourselves for the familiar tussle over spaces. However, ours were the only non-folding cycles onboard for the full duration. Manoeuvring the bikes into the vertical spaces provided took a little application. We both bore the chain-marks of our ineptitude afterwards. But... full marks to Cross Country for providing these – and proper tickets for the bikes.

Our booked seats were in the same carriage but – with the train overfull – it took us until Chesterfield to locate them. Then, it was a case of sitting back, enjoying the view and listening to some sounds on our respective devices (Florian... state-of-the-art smartphone; me... Nokia thingummy). Having tea brought to us at our seats was a bonus. We also ate lunches at either end of this ride but were burning plenty of calories, so that's OK.



At Bristol, the continued regeneration of the city centre has meant it is now easier to navigate from Temple Meads station to the Bristol & Bath railway path. This loops around to the North, before heading eastwards towards Bath. Whilst a trailing wind would normally be expected, today it was blowing from the east. However, we agreed we would happily trade this for the helpful tailwinds encountered earlier, on our journey North.

The way was uniformly busy. Populated by a mixture of stern-faced 'cyclists', pottering pensioners, meandering children and watchful dog-walkers. We managed to negotiate these with

minimum fuss and barely a break. This was a measure of our enhanced condition, coupled with the knowledge we would soon be safely home.

On reaching home, we then showered and bathed respectively, followed by a sumptuous meal and some well-earned R & R. Now, thoughts turn to where our next cycle excursion might take us. First, though, we will take some time to process all we have seen and experienced. It's also time to – ahem – remind friends and family of our fundraising. So, if you are able to dig into your pockets for a little post-challenge sponsorship, that would be greatly appreciated. Thanks, one and all.



# Thoughts & Observations

**Total Dist. 268.17 miles   Total Elev. 10,676 feet   Max. 32.40 mph   Ave. 11.19 mph   Time: 23.35 hrs**

It struck me, during this latest cycle challenge, that under-tyre surface is a key consideration. My first long-distance bike trip was 600 miles from St Albans to Aberdeen, which I did over 10 days when I was in my early 20s. I then guesstimated that 60 miles (100 km) per day would be a good average. We also used this as the standard when my wife and I cycled 1,800 miles to her family home in Bavaria and back, in 1996.

On both these journeys, we stuck to fairly major routes on well-made roads. Covering 60 miles on mixed surfaces is a far tougher challenge. I would say that 45-50 miles per day is a more sensible target for gravel tracks and cycleways. Plus, when you are in your mid-50s, you need to lower your expectations a little.

Whereas we packed minimally for this trip, I still couldn't resist throwing in a spare fleece and extra t-shirt. Wrong. Weight is the enemy. For this reason, Florian and I can be extra proud of our ascent up Holme Moss.

As noted on previous trips, it's really important to keep snacking, even when you don't feel hungry. We found that a 'proper' lunch break also gave us a welcome boost. A few extra calories for the second half and a bit of a longer rest seemed to offset the mild torpor that protein can induce. Florian was more sensible than me with his food choices when it came to breakfast. Never able to resist a full-English, I can report that a belly-full of fatty proteins is not the best way to prepare for a long day's cycling.

What has been pleasing, though, is to feel my overall condition improve over the course of the ride. Beginning with a couple of niggles, which cast doubt in my mind, I was a little cautious on earlier climbs. However, as things progressed, I felt more confident of attacking the hills and pushing harder on the flat.

Whilst I know I won't be cycling 50 miles a day over the long term, the phrase 'use it or lose it' does spring to mind. I'm determined to stay active and hope that a generally good level of strength and fitness will alleviate the aches and pains that come with increasing age.

On the subject of navigation, the combination of the Garmin GPS Sat-Nav, together with a physical map worked well. The various hiccups with the former were down - mostly - to my inexperience. Whilst occasionally confused by complicated junctions or obscure tracks, the Garmin was actually remarkably accurate. In 'Battery-Saving Mode', it would spring to life in time to warn of up-coming turns. Showing road names and detailing the type of route (cycleway, road, dirt-track, etc.), made for few pauses to double-check the map. Having prepared the paper map with highlighter along our chosen route meant it was easy to keep track of our progress between Garmin prompts.

I also would thoroughly recommend 'Map My Ride'. With this app, I was able to simply input the start and end points for each day's ride, request the use of cycleways by preference and a very effective route was plotted. This could then be exported to the Garmin (via Garmin Connect'). The unit also stores ride data, including distances, times, average speed, height gained, etc. This can then be shared with Garmin Connect and viewed with helpful graphics. You can also see a map of the route taken.

As for tools and spares; always carry: a multi-tool, with Allen-keys, posi-drive, tyre-levers, etc.; spare brake and gear cables (with the ends ready-trimmed); spare inner tubes and a pump. A small first aid kit is also a good idea.

Thanks for reading. Happy cycling!

# Thanks & Acknowledgements

As always, there are people without whom this ride would not have been possible. We are extremely grateful and would like to extend our sincerest thanks to the following:

Barbara & Mari Madigan – for keeping track of our progress and making sure we were OK

Matt, Clare & Ellie Banks and Reagan – for putting us up, feeding and entertaining us in Stonehouse

Dave at Baldwin House, Stourport – for your excellent hospitality

Hayes Cycles, Wall Heath, Kingswinford – for saving the day when all seemed lost

The staff at Holiday Inn Express, Stoke – for your warm welcome and help with the bikes

Rob, Katrina, Molly & Jasmin Whale – for being the best hosts and most loyal friends we could wish for

Please remember that we are fundraising for Boys in Mind – Girls Mind Too. Any donation, however small, would be hugely appreciated and will be going to a really worthy cause:

[Please Donate Here](#)

Thank you for your support.