

# “Come to Brighton for the Day”, I said.....

*or how one team managed to train for, get to, enter and get back from the*

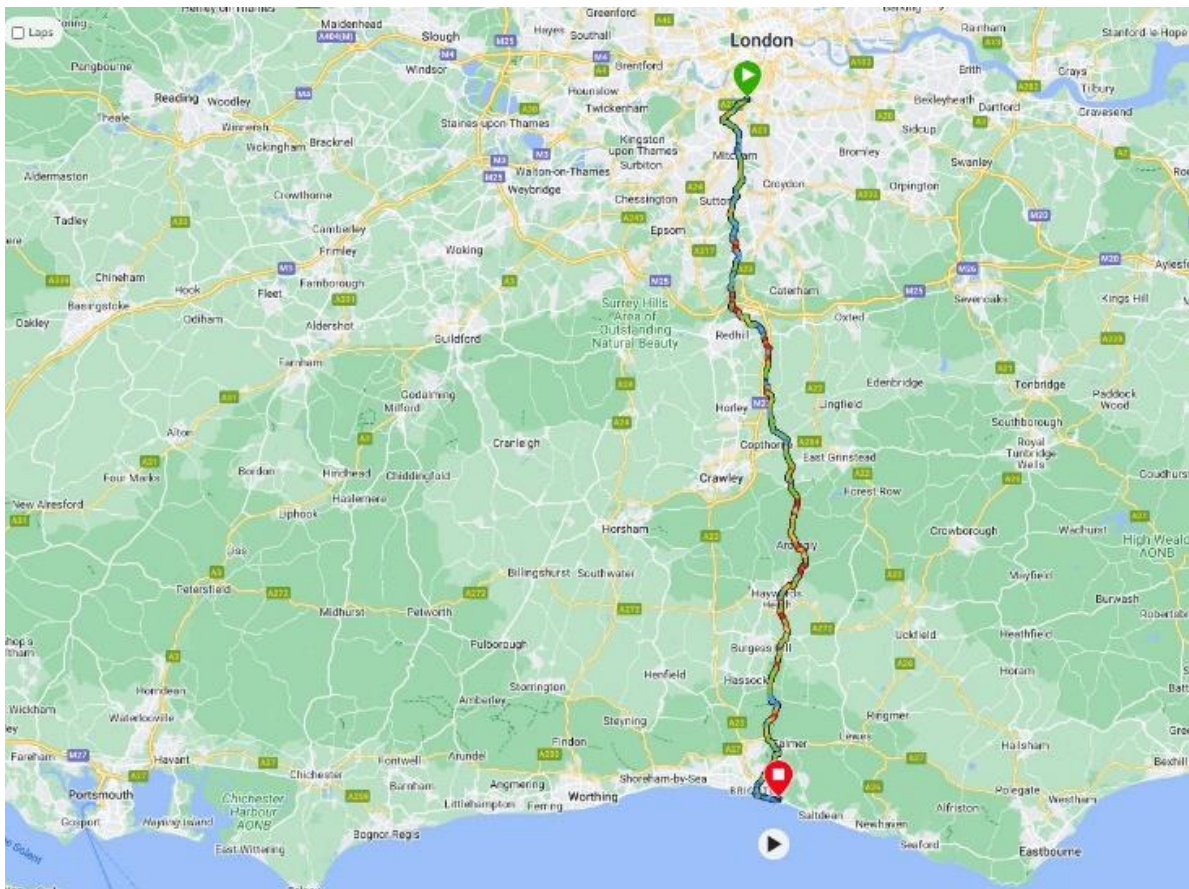
## **BHF's London to Brighton Cycle Ride 2023**

So, after riding and finishing the 2022 British Heart Foundation London to Brighton bike ride on my modest low-step commuter-style, second-hand e-bike, and buoyed up by adrenalin and euphoria I hurriedly pitched for an entry into the 2023 entry ballot for the same event. I was committed!! – *no endorsing comments from the floor, please!* Due to Covid the BHF had had to delay the 2020 L2B until 2022 and by then I'd raised £1435 for the BHF in my late brother's memory, before riding that year.

In 2023, as a retired fire officer, I wanted to raise monies for the Firefighters' Charity, and the BHF were fine about that when I asked.



There are several little climbs on the London to Brighton route.....the first after 14 km (about 9 miles) is Carshalton Road, Carshalton peaking at a mild 7.2% or 1 in 14. At 20 km (12.5 miles) Rectory Lane, Chipstead peaks at 11.2% or 1 in 9. Then just after 31km (19 miles) comes Church Hill, Nutfield, 1 in 7. After 48 km (30 miles) comes Turners Hill starting at 42 km (26 miles) with a gentle climb for 6 km (4 miles) ramping up steeply for 0.6km (1/2 mile) at 10.5% or 1 in 9. They are all do-able by determined occasional cyclists as well as the more able ones, and for those that can't manage to get all the way – well, they just get off and walk up!



The 2023 London to Brighton recorded track (Garmin Edge 830)

But they're just practice slopes for the big y'un which you approach after riding some 72 km (45 miles) ....first, some gentle slopes, let's call them foothills, leading up to ..... Ditchling Beacon. This was the climb that was included in the British leg of the 1994 Tour de France route. It's hard – no, for us average mortals, it's a b\*!@&y hard climb, as it lasts for quite some time and gets progressively steeper as you go. 3 km (1.9 miles) of constant climbing with a peak gradient of just over 1 in 6, ascending 181 metres (just under 600 feet). It peaks at 248 metres (818 feet) above sea level and is the highest point in East Sussex on the South Downs.



Altitude (left scale) v Distance (lower scale)

Despite my having ridden up every hill on the 87 km (54 mile) route from Clapham Common to Brighton seafront in 2022 a few weeks after my adrenaline-fuelled signing up again, I began to rethink the wisdom of this rather hasty decision.

To myself - 'Frank, you're over 70 for goodness sakes! You're the weight of a small elephant despite your constant diet attempts and regular bike riding; you've a severe case of high blood pressure; you're just not built for an action-man kind of life, least of all the monster 1 day challenge that ends with the mini-mountain called Ditchling Beacon!'

Hmmm. Motivation sliding down the scale a bit. I thought to myself, 'I know! I'll enlist some support from the old HFRS fraternity. There'll be loads of 'em willing to join in, especially as it's to raise funds for worthwhile charities.' So many adventurous sorts about, cyclists, sailors, rock-climbers, Harley-lovin' motor-cyclists, campervan-addicts, marathon runners, triathlon entrants,..... I could go on. You know who you are!

So I put a message out and was overwhelmed with the response..... just one! My ol' mate Mike Stead, also in his 70's, and to be honest, I think if he'd really known what he was about to get into, he might've been a bit more reticent about volunteering!! Still, they never did teach 'em much in the Navy about never volunteering for anything – or so I've been told.

But you see, the trouble with us ol', can-do, give-it-a-go and hope-for-the-best fireys, is we're still thinkin', and trying our best to behave like, 35 year olds. We've still not accepted our declining abilities.....gracefully at any rate, and so we convince ourselves to do these 'mad' things, especially if the gauntlet is chucked down by another ol' mate like me, who has no sense whatever.

I grabbed Mike's offer of help, quicker than a ferret can run up your leg, and that was him locked in – heh, heh. Quick as a flash, I hear that his daughter and son are going to join in; then grand-daughter and partner; then another and another..... 'This was goin' to be brilliant', thinks I.

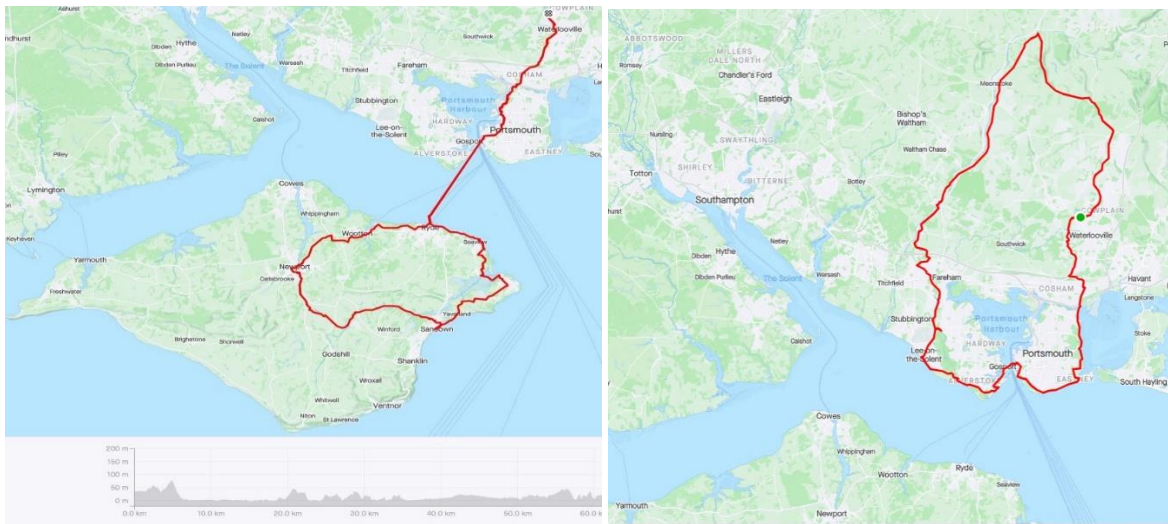
'You'll need to enter as a team', says I. 'As it's you entering the team Mike, you'll have to think up the name for it, so we can all make sure we end up starting at the same time=, and I'll let them know I'm part of the team, as I've already entered.'

Back came the response from Mike. "Right we've all entered, and we've called ourselves 'Over the Hills.'" How apt.....and in so many senses of the words.

I'd love to say we had loads of team meetings, even those internetty things so many folk seem to have these days, what are they called – Zoom? But no, Lisa, Mike's daughter formed a secret WhatsApp group called L2B bike ride 2023 to which we were all invited. (For those elder retirees reading this, you may need to ask an under-18 grandchild to explain what Zoom is, and an App, and where to find one).

Numerous 'secret' WhatsApp messages flashed to the group members through the ether as the weeks and months went on, as to the who, where, what and when. Old style banter manifested itself rapidly (ah, such a relief), and thankfully as Mike and his lad Steve were both Royal Navy men, their families 'got' the banter and just joined in. We Merchant Navy types had a much more refined level of banter, much more colourful, as were our ships of course.

Anyway, we all went about our methods of gruelling training for the event. Mine consisted of sailing about the Hampshire & IOW countryside, preferably when it was warm, sunny and windless, but as we all know when a good plan comes together, generally when it was none of those things! Mike was more of a rough, tough surface kind of rider – remember, he is ex-Royal Navy – but we never seemed able to co-ordinate our rides for some reason.



Training ride to eastern IOW and return

Training ride Old Winchester Hill, Meon Valley trail, Lee, Gosport & Southsea seafronts

Finally, on 15 April, we – Lisa, Glyn, Lucy and Tom, Steve, Mike and myself and managed to assemble at various locations, to ride a somewhat modified 'Three Harbours loop' which was about 40 miles in total. Takes in Chichester, Langstone and Portsmouth harbour views, with a route around Portsea Island, Gosport and Southsea, Gosport and Lee-on-Solent seafronts climbing up Portsdown Hill as part of the route. I am happy to report all were in very good spirits and felt confident.....but they hadn't faced.....Ditchling Beacon! Oh, and perhaps I may have forgotten to mention the several other 'practice slopes' that were also part of the L2B route!



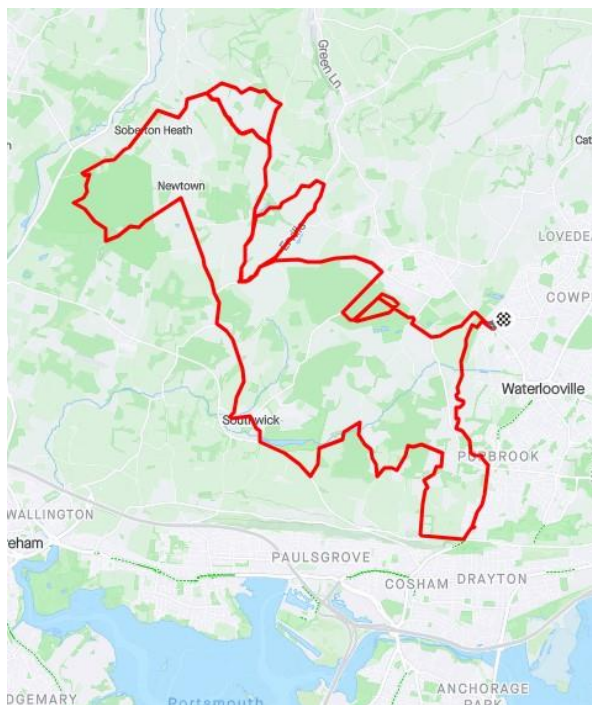
Team training ride aboard the Hayling Ferry – Lucy, Mike, Steve, Lisa, Tom, Glyn & the writer, Ian (Frank)



Team training ride aboard the Gosport Ferry – towards the end of the modified 3 Harbours ride in April

So, apart from Tom (Lucy's beau, who had gracefully [probably sensibly] opted out after our Three Harbours training ride in April), we continued to train, all in our separate ways. Lucy whizzing about Brighton where she lives – sometimes even on her bike; Tom ditto; Adam (more of which a little later) – well Adam didn't seem to do any training at all really; Glyn and Lisa both riding to/from work in Portsmouth from Stubbington using the Gosport Ferry each day; Mike and I continuing our own brand of ol' codger riding within the busy social diary fixtures that our respective domestic CEO's insisted on organising.

Finally, just 6 days before the event, Mike and I finally organised a ride out together on one of his routes. This involved various loops around small country roads and trails in the Worlds End and Forest of Bere/Hundred Acres areas on and off-road, with a pensioner-friendly climb up the north face of Portsdown Hill that Mike had nicknamed 'Heart Attack Hill', at the end of this 33 mile route. Just so's you know, 'Heart Attack Hill' is actually named Widley Walk on maps and peaks at a gradient of 14.6% or for the non-metricated amongst us, 1 in 7, and climbs for 1.2 km (3/4 mile).



There came some anxious moments for us all, waiting for non-arriving race packs that include your rider number – essential for the professional photographers to identify you from the other 10,000+ entrants and thus capturing the all important, action-packed images of your athletic frame cresting hills, with that 'oh-I'm-so-relaxed' expression on your face, etc.

Now, Mike and his family members had all made arrangements to hook up in Brighton at Lucy's gaff on the Saturday night, booking places for Sunday morning on the coach transport and trucked bike transport from Brighton to the start of the London to Brighton event at Clapham Common.

Everyone arrived safely, apart from poor Steve who sustained another injury to his knee that prevented him taking part.....enter substitute Adam, Lisa's nephew, who also lived in Brighton. Judging from the on-coach photos, I think the barbeque on the Saturday night may possibly have involved some liquid libation to fortify confidence for the next day's adventure.



5 of the 6 'Over the Hills' team – L to R, Lisa, Mike, Adam, Lucy & Glyn – looking a bit jaded.



Excitement mounts as the coach travels closer to the Clapham Common start line.

My own arrangements were to drive up with the missus and a.n.other, in my own car with bike on rack, dropping myself off at Clapham Common for the start. The missus and a.n.other would then drive down to Brighton to meet us and record our glorious finish on Medina Drive seafront in Brighton in the early afternoon summer sunshine. A.n.other went through several iterations due to a whole host of changing circumstances (excuses!) on the lead-up to the event and eventually became my older sister, Wendy. OMG! Two women let loose alone in Brighton for the day! My bank balance was going to suffer horribly.

In the end, I collected my rider numbers and Lucy's from the BHF tent near the starting gate on Clapham Common on the Sunday morning of the start – the 18 June 2023, Father's Day. Now we all had official numbers, so we could all be found, if we got lost – apparently!



Waiting for the rest of the team to arrive at Clapham Common before the scheduled start at 8.30 a.m.



Mike with daughter, Lisa (right) and grand-daughter Lucy (left) at Clapham Common..

Lucy's steed was a fairly standard and reasonably well looked after mountain bike; Adam's was a basket-case of a mountain bike that hadn't seen a spanner or the contents of an oil can for years, but was painted gold, so clearly deserving of a place in the event; Glyn had a very well maintained and equipped mountain bike; Lisa a beautiful sit-up commuter bike with 3 speed Sturmey Archer hub

gear and of course, the obligatory wicker basket hanging off the handlebar – oh, and thanks to Glyn, working brakes; Mike's steed was a handy looking Specialised Turbo Levo e-mountain bike and I was riding my new steed, a Trek Powerfly 4 e-MTB equipped for trails and touring.

We had been given an 8.30 a.m start time, along with what seemed to be several thousand other hopefuls. I'd arrived at around 7 a.m so I had plenty of time to sort out the missing rider numbers and a few other small loose ends.

However, what was missing at 8.30. was the rest of the 'Over the Hills' team – they were still collecting their bikes from the truck after arriving late in the transit coach from Brighton. No matter, we got ourselves organised, had pre-start nervous pees, the obligatory pre-start photo, and then amid the clamour of hundreds of tinkling bicycle bells, and psyched up by the BHF's MC on his amplified mike, we eventually got going. Not so much a sudden surge as a steady flow through the start gate and onto the relatively quiet Sunday London roads.



The cast of thousands milling around just before their mass 30 minute start at Clapham Common.

The route is well signed and there were plenty of event stewards making sure we all understood where we needed to turn or stop etc. Just about every traffic signal in the inner city seemed to be at red as we approached. Hard work for cyclists as you just couldn't get into any kind of rhythm before you had to stop and get off again. I counted a 17 second interval between red lights at one set of signals!

But the atmosphere was simply brilliant. Everyone chatting to everyone else; by-standers and residents along the route

cheering us along; and plentiful characters riding in the event for all manner of different charitable causes, some in fancy dress (Mario and Luigi, Batman and Robin, several body-suited super-heroes, etc.), teams in tutus, tandems, chopper bikes, BMX bikes, Brompton folding bikes, a penny farthing(!) – even two mad blokes on roller blades.....and they finished!!!



Mario & Luigi, just two of the fancy-dressed characters to be seen en-route.

Our team naturally split into pairs – Lisa and Glyn, Lucy and Adam, Mike and myself and, after meeting up and regrouping at the first rest stop, we agreed we'd all meet up at pre-arranged rest points (5 and 8) or tops of climbs to make sure everyone was OK. As Mike and I were riding e-bikes, we were going to try to climb all the hills if we could find a way through all those who were having to walk up, but then wait for the others to catch up.

Adam couldn't change gears and was stuck in his highest gear all the time, so we advised him to consult with the professional mechanics at the rest stop area to see if they could help.....outcome, "It's a basket-case mate, but we'll try to get the gears to change some, despite the chain being stretched to within an inch of its life and the cables being a tad sticky!"

Despite this mechanical inconvenience, Adam, being a fairly lanky, lithe sort of racing-snake build kinda bloke, flew along on this gold-painted machine - even up many of the hills. Fair play mate!



Mike and Adam, with a cool, cool ale out on the course.



Mike and daughter Lisa, before the 'off'.

At the 5<sup>th</sup> rest stop where we had pre-arranged to meet up, there were literally thousands of cyclists milling about and we discovered that there had been an accident on the route up ahead, and Police had closed the road. We decided it was about lunch time, so we'd stop, have a quick drink and bite to eat and hopefully continue after the road was reopened. This was an hour or so later.

I can't remember exactly where, but Lisa's bike got a puncture and Glyn fortunately had carried a spare tube so was able to resolve the problem without further assistance.



Lisa, Glyn and Lucy, photo-bombing the shot, somewhere out on the course.

Back to the ride which continued in warm, sometimes sunny and SE'ly breezy conditions. The first serious climb at Turners Hill was a challenge for many, but everyone managed to get up and we agreed we'd stop at the 8<sup>th</sup> rest area, Ardingly Showground, a little further on. After half an hour's rest on a grassy bank, serenaded by a brass band no less, we continued the ride, now getting ourselves ready for the climb of the day at Ditchling.

Mike was suffering from his rear end a bit; mine wasn't much better. I did carry some anti-inflammatory gel and asked Mike if he'd like me to rub some in to his bruised and tender bum-bones, and then, as I'm a pensioner and have a gammy back, perhaps he'd be kind enough to rub some into my coccyx area? True to form and in the best traditions of the Royal Navy's Jack-tar vernacular, he declined my first offer by giving me a choice set of compelling reasons for not doing so!! I responded by saying "Well, I was in the Merchant Navy, not the RN grey lot you know", to which he responded quick as a flash – "Exactly!!" We never actually discussed the second request after that.

Not long after this, the forecast rain arrived. Now we had calculated before the event we'd likely reach Brighton before this started, but our delayed start and the enforced stoppage had put us so much behind our forecast that we were now in the inevitable wet stuff. Initially this was a bit of a relief, but after 20 minutes or so, we stopped and put our wet weather jackets on.

Mike and I passed through Ditchling and started on the foothills. We agreed that we'd both attack this as individuals trying to get right up without stopping and meet in the rest area at the top. I arrived first, Mike a minute or two later. In my case, I gave it full beans on the electric power and dropped down to 5<sup>th</sup> gear; I think Mike was similar.

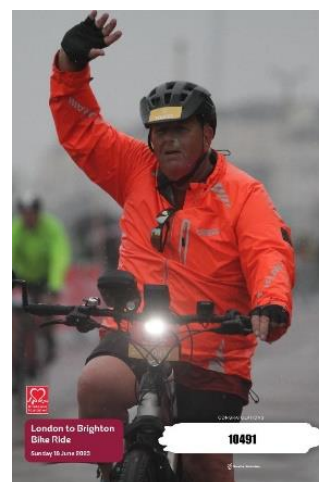


The writer cresting Ditchling Beacon, and sounding like Stevenson's first steam locomotive, the Rocket!

We treated ourselves to a congratulatory ice-cream in the pouring rain, refilled our water bottles from the water tankers provided, and waited for the remainder of the team to arrive. They had all given it their best shot, but had had to walk up Ditchling, and I'm not surprised in the least. It is a bit of a monster climb, and but for the electric motor, which only produces power assistance if you're pedalling yourself, by the way, I am certain neither Mike or I would have ever got anywhere near the summit.

From the summit it's a downhill 8 mile breeze into Brighton where you are greeted by a mass of dense traffic, seemingly resenting having to concede any road space to a continuous stream of very tired, dripping wet cyclists. None-the-less, we all made it through the traffic melee and regrouped at the start of the barriered Medina Drive finish straight to finish as a team in the pouring summer rain.

And here, at the finish line, I was reunited by my long-suffering missus, Caroline and my sister Wendy, both sporting new Brighton-bought brollies and a tidal mark up their trousers from having to walk miles from Roedean Fire Station where, as retired fire officers, we were kindly allowed to leave our vehicles, and waiting for hours in the rain at the finish for us to arrive. To add insult, we couldn't get them a taxi to get back to the station, as they were all busy ferrying other wet-through people around Brighton. I didn't even manage to cycle to the fire station and get the car turned out quickly enough to fetch them as they'd already walked 90% of the way by then, poor rain-bedraggled things.



The writer, approaching the finish on Median Drive, Brighton

Bit of a shock then to drive back into the station yard with missus and sister close behind to learn that Mike had just finished shucking off all his wet gear in the back of his son-in-law's van and was cavorting round in the altogether for a few moments while his dry kit was produced! Not sure the world, or indeed my missus and sister were quite ready for that sight!! Timing is everything, right?



I must say a big thanks to East Sussex Fire & Rescue for allowing Mike and I to park our vehicles at Roedean Fire station for the whole day. It may have been a bit of a walk to/from the finish line, but it saved us a heap of difficulty in finding vacant parking that was reasonably close to the event finish.

Thanks to all of my very generous supporters too. They and I collectively raised £650 for the Firefighters' Charity (with BHF's blessing), and Mike and his family will have raised similar sums for their own charities of choice too. A really worthwhile venture this, which is why, in all the finishing euphoria, I've put in a bid for a place in the 2024 event!! Here we go again.

Come to Brighton for the Day.....well, maybe it was a little misleading, but it were still a grand day out!



The 'Over the Hills' team, wet, tired and elated at crossing the finish line on Brighton's seafront.

Recorded riding time 5h 10m 09s

Av. Moving Speed = 16.0kph/10.5 mph

*Footnote: Tragically the road closure, close to Gatwick Airport, was due to a fatal accident involving one of the ride entrants, Dave Cooper, a 61 year old who was doing the ride for the 24<sup>th</sup> time and raising money for the British Heart Foundation on every ride. When the rest of the field learnt all of this from the British Heart Foundation a day or so after the event had ended, many of us contributed to his JustGiving fund raising page as a tribute to him and his efforts. At the time of writing this was 1271% of his fundraising target, and there's now talk of organising a Dave Cooper memorial ride. People really can be thoughtful and caring, can't they?*

Frank (aka Ian) Bowen