



John was better prepared this time



## France

### TE Lawrence's wheel tracks

**Nick Lynch** packed his vintage camera and tripod and retraced Lawrence's tour of France

**INSPIRED BY A** 1908 cycling tour of France by a young TE Lawrence (later Lawrence of Arabia), I went to France last year to retrace some of it. It wasn't the first time I had followed his route, but retirement now meant I could cover more of his seven-week, 2,000-miles-plus journey in one go. I restored the 1989 Dawes Galaxy I had used for my previous trips.

Lawrence's letters and photographs from 1908 still survive, so I took a similar camera and tripod with me to retake his photographs. My camera and films went in one pannier and clothes went in the other. A bar bag, plus a tripod on the rear carrier, completed my luggage. Like Lawrence, I planned to stay in cheaper hotels.

I started from Le Havre in June and headed east to Compiègne, then south via Soissons, Provins and Vézelay to Le Puy. Lawrence's route then climbs to 1,200m before a long freewheel down to the Rhône at Valence. Avignon and Arles followed, and I reached the Mediterranean at Aigues-Mortes. It was nice to have a dip in the sea and feel, as Lawrence did, the sense of achievement.

The temperatures were getting up to 40°C now, so it was pleasant to follow the Canal du Midi's shady cycle path from Carcassonne to Toulouse. There I caught an overnight train to Paris and resumed Lawrence's route home from Chartres to St Malo.

I averaged 41 miles per day, a bit less than Lawrence. My only mechanical problems over 1,400 miles were two punctures. Lawrence reckoned to have had 34! I found that the old camera, with a bicycle, was a real conversation piece.

## England

### Return to Land's End

*In his youth, John Holmes traversed the south coast of England. Fifty years later he did it again*

In 1973 I set off from home near Brighton to cycle-camp down to Land's End with my friend Brian Watling. Last year we met up again, and it seemed like a good time for me to repeat the journey on the 50th anniversary of the ride.

In 1973 we knew nothing about cycle camping or the geography of southern England, but we had a book listing camp sites, a small map and a plan: head west. I now have an old Dawes Galaxy, plenty of maps and enough money to catch the train back from Penzance rather than cycle home.

The plan for 2023: head west again... but not along the main roads like we did in 1973. I needed no GPX files, mileage, speed or time measurements on this journey either. I took a smartphone with me, which I occasionally used to phone people in the evening. [No phone box required now.] Loaded up, my bike weighed about 50kg.

So what has changed in 50 years? Villages used to have useful shops and facilities but now some are devoid of community life. Only house names hint at

their past: the old post office, the old pub, the old police house, and so on. Towns like Fowey (Cornwall) are now full of drinking, eating and arty establishments. But if you want to buy a banana, there's one small convenience store left in town. I did get to speak to one local with a Cornish accent in the countryside miles away from Fowey. On the upside, camp sites generally have better facilities.

I got home at midnight after a ride from Brighton station. Will I do the ride again? Perhaps in another 50 years! It's hard work riding/walking the Isle of Wight and the coasts of Dorset, Devon and Cornwall.



In 1973 they also rode home again