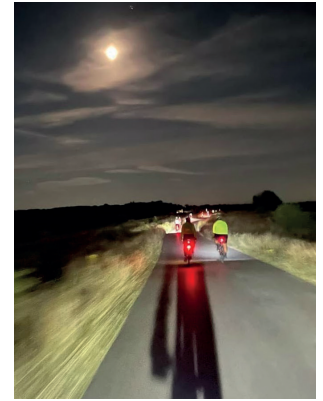




Left to right: Summer nights are best for big rides, being shorter and warmer. King's Lynn – the halfway point for the Fen Bridges. Good lights are essential on any night ride



running shoes and jeans. I didn't do the Dynamo that year; I did discover the Fridays.

On a rented town bike, I joined 40 or so others cycling from London to Whitstable on the Kent coast. It felt like an adventure. We stopped in Strood and paid a few pounds for rolls and handmade cakes served by volunteers, with the money going to a charity for disabled children. Later, as someone fixed their flat tyre, ride leader Tim pointed out Soviet submarine the Black Widow, looming in the dark River Medway.

After serving as a wayfinder and stopping to direct stragglers at a junction, I raced to catch up with the rest of the group ahead. For a few, glorious moments I was alone on a dark road. It was scary and liberating. Then I turned a corner – and there they all were, warm bike lights glowing. For the last seven miles of our ride, once dawn had broken, those of us keen to sprint broke free for a last, glorious descent into Whitstable and the breakfast café on the seafront.

The next year I joined another ride, borrowing my first ever road bike with toe-clips from a fellow Fridays member. We rode to Shoreham-by-Sea. Soon after, I signed up for the 300km Vätternrundan sportive in Sweden, renting a road bike and learning to ride with cleats. There followed more night rides and, finally, the Dynamo. When I arrived in Ely in 2021 for the King's Lynn ride, I had my own road bike, cycling shoes and fingerless gloves. I had, thanks to the Fridays, become a fully fledged night cyclist.

CYCLING INTO THE SUNRISE

After our petrol station stop in the Fens, we continued to King's Lynn and a brief tour of the riverside before beginning our ride back. Cycling in the Fens at night, it turned out, was almost like being at sea. You felt yourself surrounded by a low, flat nothingness. No hills. No trees. A distant, almost indiscernible horizon. Houses and patches of street lightning emerged from the dark, then receded. I was glad of the others' company.

Claire shared her knowledge about the

“Cycling in the Fens at night was like being at sea. You felt yourself surrounded by a low, flat nothingness. No hills. No trees”

landscape – how attempts to drain the marshlands had been ongoing since Roman times, and how the Dutch installed a much-opposed, costly drainage system that resulted in the dry peat bogs disintegrating and the land sinking even lower than before. At one point, the already flat road made a small dip. “Now we are cycling below sea level,” Claire announced.

When you cycle through the night, the same thing always seems to happen with your mood. You start out energetic and excited but towards three or four o'clock in the morning, your enthusiasm fades. It's dark. It's cold. There's no one else around. But the sunrise is not far away.

Slowly you become aware of a shift in the quality of the darkness. You can see the landscape around you. The dawn chorus starts up. A car drives by. The people inside are not on their way home after a long night, you realise; they are awake to go to work because it is a new day. An early morning pensioner walks a dog. The occasional other cyclist passes on their way to work. Now there's life inside the houses by the road. You are back in the land of the living. And you're still riding.

After passing Denver Sluice, the heart of a system protecting the Fens from the invading North Sea, we started on a long path following the River Ouse. Here my energy levels flagged. But when I struck up conversation with one of my fellow riders, a little bit of vigour returned.

FRIDAYS ON MY MIND

The Fridays Cycling Club was started in 2005 by Simon Legg. “One night he got a few friends

Fact file Fen Bridges night ride

Distance: 80 miles. Fridays routes range from 55-75 miles.

Route: From Ely in Cambridgeshire to King's Lynn in Norfolk, and back via a different route.

Conditions: It was cold for late April, with a chilling wind blowing in from the Wash. Roads were mainly narrow tarmac lanes and canal paths.

Bike used: My beloved Cannondale road bike obtained through the Cycle to Work scheme and continuously upgraded ever since.

Maps/guides: The beauty of Fridays' rides is that you don't need a map or even a general sense of direction – the ride is carefully guided for you throughout.

I'm glad I had... My gloves. Riding through the night can be cold, even in late April.

Next time I would... Engage others in conversation as soon as I felt my energy levels drop. It seems counterintuitive but it can really help.

More info: fnrttc.org.uk