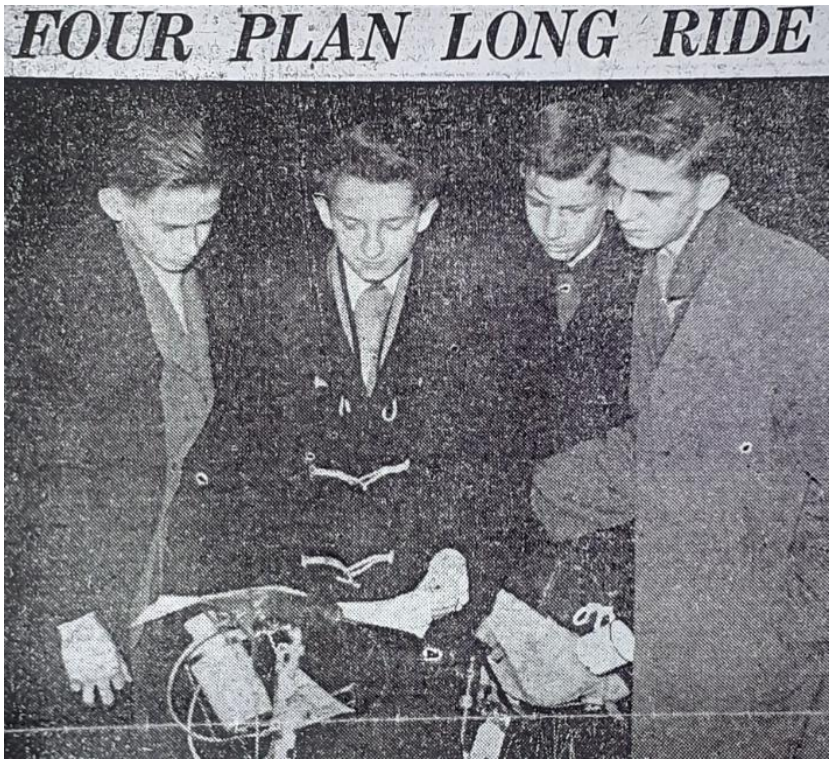
Bicycle Journey to Lourdes

This photograph was taken in 1957 at St Peter's, the De La Salle School in Southbourne in Dorset. It's of the group of boys and their teachers who were due to travel to Lourdes that coming Easter. That's me circled on the right hand side at the back. I was seventeen years old at the time and studying for my A level examinations, which I was due to take that summer. Our head teacher, Brother Augustine was not happy about the decision for me and my classmates to be away as it was so close to the exams, because he felt we should be concentrating on revising for them.



Whilst the group would be travelling by coach, four of us decided that we would do the 1,200 mile journey to Lourdes and back by bicycle. Identified by the large circle in the group photograph are the other three (from left to right, Gordon Heald, Anthony Dabinett and Martin Tatnall). When the Bournemouth Daily Echo heard about our intention to Cycle to Lourdes the newspaper wrote an article in their publication about our venture. The newspaper photograph shows the four of us with one of the bicycles we used. That's me on the right, with the full head of hair I once had! The other three are, from left to right, Martin, Gordon and Anthony.

We anticipated it would take two weeks to make the journey to Lourdes and planned our route via the De la Salle schools in France. We wrote to them to ask if they would accommodate us for a one night stay prior to us continuing with our journey. During previous holiday times I aimed to earn enough money to see me through the journey by working on Bournemouth Corporation Buses as a conductor. I managed to save over £10.

We set off several days ahead of the main group and cycled to Southampton where we boarded the ferry for the overnight crossing to Le Havre. For this leg of the journey we booked an overnight couchette and the following morning set off from Le Havre. The lengths between stops was determined by the distances between the De la Salle schools we had planned to stop at. All the

schools fed and gave us overnight accommodation free of charge. About a quarter of the way into our journey we reached the village of Mauléon where the residents appeared to be having a festa. When we asked what the festa was about we were told, to our great surprise, that it was to welcome our arrival. Tables were laid with food and wine, of which Anthony was encouraged to drink copious amounts. All we really wanted was a cup of tea, but it was difficult to refuse the hospitality of our hosts! We were all affected by the wine, having cycled ninety miles that day. Afterwards Anthony felt so bad he ended up sitting on the kerbside and we had stop him giving away his money.

At another stop we checked into the school and then decided to explore the town. When we returned late that evening the entrance to the school was locked shut and we had to gain access via a fire escape stairway.

The last leg of our journey was also ninety miles, which took us all day and we eventually arrived at Lourdes where we met up with the school group. Whilst there we joined the procession of hundreds of people from the underground grotto to the basilica where we attended Mass. For me this was a wonderful and unforgettable experience.

We stayed in Lourdes for two days before setting off on the cycle journey back, which was the reverse of our outward journey. The whole trip took us four weeks in total.

Back at school and on speech day the four of us were awarded and presented with a trophy in recognition of our achievement.

Sadly, Gordon has now passed away. Anthony and Martin now live in Cumbria and I occasionally speak to Anthony on the telephone.

Patrick Lewis

Brother of Croydon Circle