

# What it was like to cycle the Western Front – knowing my uncles dug trenches there

Our writer talks to Countryfile presenter Tom Heap about his poignant ride along the Western Front on a 1920s push-bike

By [Sally Howard](#) 6 October 2022 • 10:08am



Tom Heap cycled 621-miles through France to retrace his family's footsteps. By the time they reached northern France, one of Tom Heap's fellow cyclists on the 621-mile Western Front Way was reduced to stuffing clumps of grass in his underpants. The unfortunate cyclist's modern touring-bike cycle seat was bruising his backside.

It was a moment of great glee for Heap, who was traversing this newly plotted route – which carves south to north across the breadth of France from the Swiss mountains to the Belgian coast at Nieuwpoort – on a 1920s cycle with rod gears, a steel frame and a metal-sprung leather seat.

Heap had feared that his novelty vehicle, which weighs 17kg compared to today's average of ten, would prove a bumpy ride, yet it rode like an "absolute joy". "They made those seats surprisingly comfortable," he laughs.

These privations were nothing to the experience of the men who inspired these twin commemorative hiking and biking routes, which will launch on November 7. Over the war's 51 month duration, nine million men perished from combat and disease on the Front: a 400-mile stretch of trench systems that formed the principal theatre of war.

Heap's two great uncles were amongst the Great War's fallen: a sporty young man called Thomas Cunningham Gillespie, killed in action near La Bassée in north-east France, and his intellectual older brother Alexander Douglas Gillespie, a pupil barrister who became an officer in 1915, his commission having been delayed for a year due to his short-sightedness.

Alexander Douglas Gillespie was a witty correspondent and wrote a series of letters from the Front to his family and former headmaster at Winchester school, including a flurry of missives, in the summer of 1915, that set down his dream that no man's land would become a pilgrimage route, a via sacra, at this brutal war's end.

"These fields are sacred in a sense..." Gillespie wrote to his former headmaster from the trenches at Loos. "I wish that when peace comes our government might combine with the French government to make one long avenue between the lines from the Vosges to the sea... a fine broad road in the 'No Man's Land' between the lines, with paths for pilgrims on foot and... trees for shade."

## The Western Front

In 2014, in the aftermath of the World War One centenary celebrations, historian Anthony Seldon, who had chanced upon Gillespie's correspondence when writing a book, and Heap, who is a trustee of the Western Front Way charity, set about the long process of realising Gillespie's 1915 dream.

Today the two Western Front Ways ([thewesternfrontway.com](http://thewesternfrontway.com)) – cycle and foot routes which at points overlap – have been plotted along their length with the help of local French and Belgian partners, and mapped out on an app, which includes images, audio recollections and snippets of social history (such as letters home from young men on the front) as well as recommendations of monuments to see and hotels en route where you can hang your muddied boots, or cycling helmets. The walk takes around 40 days to complete from mountains to coast, and the cycle route around 12 days.

Heap's journey along the cycle Western Front Way on his 1920s upright cycle, the charmingly named OK Perfection Roaster, was undertaken over 11 sunny days in September, in the company of members of Heap's family and friends and Western Front Way supporters.

Their journey began in Pfetterhouse, a Swiss border town with an alpine character where the air was fresh and the merry band of cyclists were brimming with excitement as Heap read from Gillespie's correspondence to the gathered cyclists.



Tom Heap and his cycling comrades tackle France's Western Front Way

The greatest cycling challenges come in the earliest stretches of the south-north route: there's a 1,680m climb on day two and in the Vosges, a range of low mountains near the German border in Eastern France, which the cyclists reached on day three, sinuous roads twist through steeply wooded hillsides and vantage points from the Grand-Ballon, the highest summit, overlook the swooping flight of eagles.

Sustenance was provided by Heap's sister Alice and wife Tammany, who followed the tour in a supply car and popped up at lunchtimes with crisp baguettes, livid red local saucisson, feathery mille feuille and high-calorie flapjacks that Tammany made from late-travel writer Jan Morris' recipe from her 1953 Everest expedition.

Today much of the north of France has been given over to the concrete expanses of 21st century infrastructure, but many southern stretches of the route are as they would have been in the Gillespies' day.

"The pattern of the settlements is the same, though some villages were flattened during the First World War and of course the fields have been endlessly ploughed over," he says. But at points where the Western Way Route route traverses woodlands – at Fontenelle, Ban de Sapt and Tranchee de la soif, near Verdun – "the trenches and cratered landscape of war is fully visible," Heap recalls.



War memorials can be spotted along the route CREDIT: Getty

The north of France is well known to the British for its war commemoration tourism – the Thiepval memory to the war dead at the Somme in Authuille; the World War II landing beaches in Normandy – but regions of the south such as Verdun, where the French suffered 377,231 casualties in a battle that ground on through 11 months of 1916, were, Heap says, unexpectedly moving.

“It’s beautiful countryside around Verdun, all rolling greens, and the battlefield still felt tense with the memory and brutalities of war,” he explains.

The cyclist band, nursing various bruises and scrapes by the route’s final days, also stopped to pay tribute at the plaques to Thomas and Alexander, who died on 25th September 1915 in the first Battle of Loos, killed while leading a charge against an enemy position. He was the only officer to get as far as German trenches that day, and died where he fell.

## Rebooting remembrance

The Western Front Way’s patrons hope that the new route will be a novel way of interacting with the past, a means of “rebooting remembrance” as living memory fades. Heap imagines that the Western Front Way will be a little like the Santiago de Compostela, the famous camino that some pilgrims walk to commune with religion, some for the physical challenge, and others for the sheer pleasure and camaraderie of the hike.



Tom Heap conquered the route on a 90-year-old push bike

“People don’t have to be morbid and walk about war monuments looking at their shoes,” is the way Heap sees it. “You can do it as an endurance route, for its geography, or as a wine tour – you will still be marinated in the history of this important war.”

Despite the fact he conquered the route on a 90-year-old push bike – suggested by Heap’s cycling enthusiast son Dugal – cycling the The Western Front Way was also, for Heap, a thoroughly 21st century project of commemoration, in an era in which grand-scale ‘completist’ land challenges, such as Scotland’s scenic North Coast 500, are all the rage.

“There’s something special about being in the landscape that witnessed war, and moving slowly across distance through this landscape,” Heap says. “It brings you a little bit closer to understanding those who lived through it. Were these the wild flowers and sedges my great uncles saw? Is this a trench they dug? It’s all quite spine-tingling.”