

Bike rides helping leprosy sufferers

SHE doesn't like bikes much – but that hasn't stopped Miranda Hall from completing four gruelling cycling challenges.

Miranda, who goes to St Mary's Church, Warsash, has raised thousands of pounds for charity by cycling in Malawi and India.

And her final 300-mile ride was in memory of the person who first persuaded her to clamber aboard her bike for the leprosy charity LEPRO.

"I'm not a cyclist, and I still don't feel comfortable on bikes," she said. "You won't really see me cycling around Warsash because I do get nervous. But somehow I'm OK on the chaotic streets in India – I don't know why!"

Miranda and her husband Neville first came to Warsash in 1976. Neville was a Reader and Miranda has been a churchwarden twice, most recently over the interregnum before the current vicars Mike and Nicky-Sue Terry arrived. She has also been involved with Messy Church and the churchyard team.

Sadly, Neville contracted Motor Neurone Disease, a condition that affects nerves and stops messages getting to your muscles. This leads to a progressive loss of movement and mobility. Miranda stopped working in order to care for him.

The congregation was supportive, helping Neville with his exercises, reading to him, and doing practical jobs around the house. Some church friends bought them a vehicle that could carry Neville in a wheelchair. He died in 2006, and the congregation helped Miranda cope with the grief.

In late 2006, she visited her school friend Liz Kennedy, who had recently been treated for cancer. Liz had done cycle rides for LEPRO before and was still keen to do one. She asked Miranda to join her for a 450-mile cycle in Malawi in June 2007.

"I wasn't sure about it, but I thought that if she could contemplate it, it would give me something to focus on," she said. "I had decided not to return to work after Neville's death, so I



Miranda Hall got the chance to meet people in India during this year's sponsored bike ride; (right): cycling with the team in their LEPRO t-shirts

came into retirement with no real plan. The thought of cycling so far did scare me to death! I didn't have a bike as a child, but a friend, John Habberley, who was a keen cyclist, offered to take me cycling. I also joined a gym to train.

"It was an amazing experience, going 450 miles in two weeks with 20 others. One of the great things about these bike rides is that they are organised by LEPRO themselves.

"They take you to the villages where they are working and show you the projects they are supporting. It really appealed to me to be able to see how the money so generously given by my sponsors was used.

"There are a lot of different sorts of projects. Having leprosy still has a stigma in certain places, so it is easy for people to be excluded from their family and community. Part of their work is to educate people and show them that it can be cured, if people seek help early.

"They also have clinics that also help people with TB and HIV. Because illiteracy is high, there's even a travelling drama group that goes into tribal areas and put on plays showing what happens if



people seek help."

Two years later, Liz recruited Miranda for another cycle ride in the Andhra Pradesh region of India.

the second day, over the course of 45 miles.

"My aim was just not to fall off and not to get off and push," she said. "We cycle together, but

my faith

Miranda Hall doesn't like cycling that much. But that didn't stop her taking part in four charity rides, cycling hundreds of miles each time to raise funds for the leprosy charity LEPRO

Unlike Malawi, where there is little traffic and the streets are fairly rural, cycling in India involves finding a path between cars, lorries, tuk-tuks, animals and pedestrians all moving in different directions at the same time.

This trip involved climbing the equivalent height of Snowden on

of course some people tend to go at the front, whereas I'd usually be near the back! There is a support team from LEPRO, who would carry our luggage in their vehicles.

"We would tend to get up early, cycle for an hour and have breakfast by the side of the road. Then we'd cycle again and stop

for lunch for a couple of hours.

"The team from India would make fantastic hot meals for us at lunchtime and in the evening. And we would try to stay overnight in the villages where the projects were, rather than in hotels."

In 2012, she was back in India for another cycle ride across Madhya Pradesh in central India. But she decided this would be her last.

"I felt like I had got away with it three times, so I promised my family I wouldn't do any more," she said. "I wondered if I would be up to doing it again.

"But then my friend Liz died, quite suddenly. At Liz's memorial service last summer, there were some people who had done LEPRO bike rides, and we had a conversation about doing a memorial ride for her.

"The charity had actually stopped doing the bike rides in 2013, as it was quite people-intensive, but they said yes to this one. So in January 2016, we were off again to India. The average age of people in this group was late 60s. The LEPRO team included a doctor who diagnosed several cases of leprosy on the trip."

The 300-mile cycle ride in Madhya Pradesh took 10 days. This year's sponsorship money brought the total amount she has raised for LEPRO over the four cycle rides to about £15,000.

"People in church and elsewhere have been very good about sponsoring me, and in providing moral support and encouragement," she said.

"There is a real sense of making a difference to people's lives, as well as the personal achievement. Leprosy needs to be eradicated, and it's good to be able to do something to help."

LEPRO is an international charity that focuses on people who find themselves trapped by disease, poverty and prejudice and helps them to improve their health, lives and livelihoods. Driven by their focus on leprosy, they enable people affected by neglected diseases to transform their lives.

They work on the ground in India, Bangladesh and Mozambique, regardless of caste, religion or race. For details, see: www.lepra.org.uk.