

## **LE JOG 2005**

During May 2005 I cycled from Lands End to John O'Groats (LE JOG as I called it). Having completed the ride I decided to write a 'few' notes about my experiences on the trip before some of the memories fade.

### **Why are you doing it?**

The starter to most conversations before, during, and after the ride was "Why?" This was often prefaced by "Are you doing it for charity?" The answer was usually "No, I'm just doing it to show the kids I'm not as old as they think I am!"

The real answer though is a combination of things. I like a challenge and this is a good one – particularly as I'm not a regular cyclist! I like journeys, moving from place to place each day. I like the idea of seeing my own country at a pace at which it can be appreciated. I've fancied travelling through the Scottish Highlands by bike since seeing cyclists near Cape Wrath some years ago. And finally - "Because it's there"!

### **Who with?**

So, decision made, what next? Well first of all who do I go with? For a while Steve Salt was going to accompany me but as planning got underway he decided to go and live in New Zealand! A bit of an extreme way of getting out of it I thought!

As no one else showed any interest when I mentioned it the decision was made for me – it's on your own or not at all.

### **The route**

The main part of the planning was working out a route. My final route was a combination of a number of sources – Simon Brown's guide book; the CTC B&B Route guide; Sustrans National cycle routes; and my own choices.

My intention was to keep away from large towns and main roads as much as possible. This meant that my final route was around 300 miles further than the direct route using the A-roads. But it was much more pleasant. I also wanted to see a bit more of the Eastern side of the Scottish Highlands as I was less familiar with it than the West.

### **The bike**

The biggest concern for me with this ride was "what happens if the bike breaks down?" My bike is a 24 year old Dawes Galaxy tourer. It's been a good bike, but I am not a very good mechanic so it had a full service at Bruce's bike shop before setting off.

As it's an old bike the tyres are imperial measure ones (ie 27 inches) whereas most tyres are now made in metric sizes. So Bruce had trouble getting me new tyres. They arrived a couple of days before I set off. I put them on but found that the rear wheel wouldn't go back in. Major panic – off to Bruce's and he couldn't get it back either, until he applied some force to bending the frame – an old mechanic's trick I was told!

Later that day I tried adjusting the brake cables – and finished up asking Dave Robinson to give me a hand (or both hands as it turned out because it took 4 hands to sort it!).

So confidence was now completely shattered, but too late to do anything about it. The next day was D-day.

### **Day 0 (Wed 9<sup>th</sup>) - Kendal to Penzance**

Stuart Hinton picked me up from home to take me to Preston station. On arrival there I put the fully-loaded bags on the bike for the first time. I could barely lift the bike! I weighed them when I got home (didn't want to know before I went!) – they were 38lbs in total.

Stuart waves goodbye and suddenly I feel very alone! When the train arrives I'm directed to the bike compartment. I have to take all the bags off and hang it vertically from the front wheel. Fortunately I'd brought some bungee cords which prevents it swaying around and potentially buckling the wheel.

After finishing this exercise the guard arrives. He tells me I've put it in the wrong bit of the train.

Apparently this part gets disconnected at Plymouth, so I'll need to move it. So at Crewe I take it off, run down the platform with it and my luggage, and get on the front part of the train.

As we leave Bristol the new guard tells me I'm in the wrong part of the train so at the next stop I have to repeat the exercise!

But eventually at 8pm we arrive in Penzance and I go looking for my pre-booked B&B as recommended by the CTC. An interesting place. The owners are well into their 80's. The lady brings me a cup of tea. She looks exactly like Mrs Overall from Acorn Antiques!

### **Day 1 (Thu 10<sup>th</sup>) - Penzance to Lands End, then Truro**

*Distance = 55.77 miles*

*Riding time = 6hrs 47mins*

*Average speed = 8.2mph*

The first day starts in the wrong direction – I have to do 9miles from Penzance to Lands End first! On arrival I pay the official photographer to take my photo in front of the signpost. It arrives home well before I do. After the first coffee of the day I turn around and pedal back to Penzance.

I immediately spot a problem – the wind is in my face! Instead of the normal prevailing westerlies I am riding into a strong easterly. This is to prove a real problem in the next few days.

I see 7 cyclists pulled in at a lay-by. Just as I get there a van pulls in and they all gather around getting cups of tea and cake. It's full of their luggage and they are carrying nothing on their bikes. Envious? Yes!

Anyway it's a nice sunny day and I plough on through the Cornish countryside to arrive at Truro where I start searching for somewhere to stay. All I see are No Vacancy signs. I knock on a door, look pleadingly, and say "I know it says No Vacancies but do you know anywhere else?" "No" says the lady and shuts the door! I try another one – virtually same reaction! On the third attempt, with my most shattered and pleading expression, the lady eventually rings a few people and finds me somewhere..... 3 miles away on the other side of a very hilly Truro! The end to a perfect day



Lands End

### **Day 2 (Wed 11<sup>th</sup>) -Truro to Callington**

*Distance = 44.53 miles*

*Riding Time = 5hrs 22mins*

*Average Speed = 8.2mph*

This was a hard day. Although the sun was out, the wind continued to blow strongly from the East. I had also begun to find out that Cornwall does not have any flat land! The day is a never-ending succession of long, slow climbs followed by descents down to rivers, immediately followed by another long slow climb away from the river. All of the hills are at an angle where it is just possible to keep pedalling without getting off and pushing (which I'm proud to say I only did twice on the whole trip!).

I also had my first encounter with a stretch of dual carriageway as I went around St Austell. Quite unnerving as the draft from the lorries make you feel a bit unstable with all the luggage on. But once used to it you can exploit the draft to move along a fair bit quicker.

Following my experiences in Truro I decided to drop in to the St Austell Tourist Information and try to book ahead for some accommodation. They were very helpful, but also very limited as I was to learn in coming days. The TI's can now only tell you about places that they have vetted, even though they may

know there's lots of other places around. They also vary enormously in their knowledge of their own area. But this one found me somewhere in Callington which proved to be OK.



A welcome break from the climbs

### **Day 3 (Thu 12<sup>th</sup>) Callington to Bovey Tracey**

*Distance = 34.25 miles*

*Riding Time = 5 hrs 18 mins*

*Average Speed = 6.4mph*

This was probably the hardest day of the whole trip even though it was also the shortest. It started with a big descent to the Tamar river and an endless (over 30 minutes) climb out again. Another couple of smaller climbs followed before I arrived at Tavistock. The sun had now gone in and the wind was strengthening as I faced the climb onto the top of Dartmoor. This was another big one, made a little more enjoyable when I pedalled past two cyclists pushing their bikes even though they had much smaller loads than me!

I pulled into a lay-by at the top and asked a motorist to take my photo then pressed on. There followed a succession of ups and downs and the wind was so strong that I was having to pedal down the hills to keep moving! By this time I was getting pretty cold so pulled in to the only place for miles around – the Two Bridges Hotel. It looked posh but there were tourists around so I went in and asked if they did teas. “Sorry not until 3pm. We’re doing lunches now and we’re pretty busy”. My pleading cyclist face failed again!

After a few more climbs I eventually came to the last 7 miles of the days trip, which had been recommended to me by my hosts for tonight, Phil and Hannika Page. It was a good finish, sheltered by hedges and avoiding most of the climbs, and ended at their home on the National Nature site at Yarner Wood near Bovey Tracey.

Phil went out for a ride that evening with his mates from the Bovey cycling group. I declined to accompany him! Apparently I was the hero of the Group for having survived Dartmoor in those conditions! Instead I tucked in to the casserole followed by the rhubarb crumble.



The top of the big climb onto Dartmoor

#### **Day 4 (Fri 13<sup>th</sup>) - Bovey Tracey to Sampford Peverell**

*Distance = 42.21 miles*

*Riding Time = 5 hrs 19mins*

*Average Speed = 7.9mph*

A change of route plan today. After discussing the conditions with Phil he suggests I try the Sustrans National Cycle Route 3 (NCR3), rather than the more exposed route I was going to do. I decide this is worth a try so he lends me the map.

It proves to be a good choice. Although it's longer it does offer some shelter from the wind, particularly along the canal sections which are a real pleasure. It's still a hard day though as the Devon hills continue to try and emulate those of Cornwall.

By the time I reach Tiverton I have decided that my original plan to reach Bristol by the Saturday was not feasible. Indeed I am beginning to question the whole thing. I have been battling my way into the wind for 4 days and in that time have only been heading eastwards – I have made absolutely no progress northwards at all !! I know how long it takes to drive from Bristol to Kendal and I haven't even started on that yet – and Kendal is not even halfway!

I decide to cut the day short and go to the Tiverton TI to look for somewhere to stay. They suggest a pub on the canal side about 10 miles away and directly on the route. I didn't need much persuading!

#### **Day 5 (Sat 14<sup>th</sup>) - Sampford Peverell to Cheddar**

*Distance = 55.90 miles*

*Riding Time = 6 hrs 44mins*

*Average Speed = 8.2mph*

I feel a bit more positive today. The decision to stop early yesterday meant I felt a bit fresher, and the route has begun to turn northwards. I used the NCR3 up through Taunton and Bridgewater. It was delightful, along canal towpaths and quiet roads.

The final 20 miles of the day are across the Somerset Levels. This should be flat and fast but the wind has now decided to swing around to the North and so yet again I'm pedalling into the wind!

I am also back onto the 4miles-to-the-inch map and navigation starts becoming 'challenging'. This is made even more interesting because of the number of missing signs from the signposts. Amazingly each time I reach a T-junction with three 'fingers' on the sign the one that's missing is almost always the one that points in the way I think I should be going. I thought they only did this to confuse the Germans during the War!

The Bridgewater TI also do me well again. I ask them for a B&B near the centre of Cheddar. They arrange one. When I arrive I discover it's 1.5 miles outside Cheddar and I'm forced to walk there and back to get my evening meal!

### **Day 6 (Sun 15<sup>th</sup>) – Cheddar to Bristol**

*Distance = 38.25miles*

*Riding Time = 4 hrs 12mins*

*Average Speed = 9.0mph*

It's a glorious sunny day as I set off to cycle up Cheddar Gorge before all the tourist traffic arrives. For once I really enjoyed the climb and arrived at the top in good spirits. I settled down in the sun to write some postcards before setting off towards Chew Valley Lake where I am going to meet my Aussie friends Daryl and Anna Hergt.

Anna had brought Daryl in the car and it took minimum persuasion for me to remove the bags and put them in the back of the car before setting off to cycle into Bristol with Daryl.

Most of the trip in was on NCR3 and NCR4 along a disused railway track. It was amazingly busy with cyclists, joggers, and walkers enjoying the sunshine and provided a delightful 17 miles to Daryl's house in Bristol. Another nice short day meant I could spend the afternoon relaxing, chatting, reading the Sunday papers, and watching Doctor Who.



Daryl Hergt

### **Day 7 (Mon 16<sup>th</sup>) – Bristol to Cheltenham**

*Distance = 53.77miles*

*Riding Time = 5hrs 39mins*

*Average Speed = 9.4mph*

An interesting start navigating my way out of Bristol and back on to quiet roads. Managed to limit it to 1 mile on dual carriageway. I was impressed.

Back to hilly riding again as I pass through the Cotswolds. I had been stopping at cafes whenever I saw one, although I didn't see that many and it was noticeable throughout England how quite the villages on the backroads are, presumably because of the impact of 'commuter living'. Pucklechurch however provided one of the better cafes en-route.

From Stroud to Gloucester I had the choice of the relatively level A37 or the hilly backroads. As the A37 out of Stroud was blocked off by a policeman saying there had been an accident, the decision was made for me – back to the hills.

I found the B&B I'd booked in Cheltenham and later met up with Jane Medcalfe for a very nice meal in a local Italian followed by a guided tour of Cheltenham and the Ladies College (from the outside!).



Sustrans mile marker on cycle track leaving Bristol

### **Day 8 (Tue 17<sup>th</sup>) – Cheltenham to Bewdley**

*Distance = 50.17miles*

*Riding Time 5hrs 00mins*

*Average Speed = 9.9mph*

A good day. I feel like I'm beginning to make progress northwards, although the wind continues to persist in blowing from the wrong direction!

Nonetheless it's a much easier day as I follow the Severn Valley through Pershore. I have planned a route which bypasses Worcester and Droitwich, and this works out well, with only a limited amount of time spent on busy roads.

Today's problem however is yet again 'where to stay'. I call in at the Bewdley TI and ask for a B&B in Bewdley. She seems surprised and gets out the brochure. She suggests the pub over the road. I ask how much. The answer - £75 per night! No thanks, anywhere else? She gives me the brochure and suggests I look! There is only one possible – another pub but they're not answering the phone. I go and find it. They're full. They send me to a B&B around the corner. They're full. They suggest a friend. It's a Farmhouse B&B 2 miles out of town. I book it. It turns out to be really nice and the farmer gives me a lift back to town to get a meal. They tell me that they've stopped advertising with the TI because they think they're not much use. I have to agree!

### **Day 9 (Wed 18<sup>th</sup>) – Bewdley to Market Drayton**

*Distance = 48.95 miles*

*Riding Time = 5hrs 2mins*

*Average Speed = 9.7mph*

A hilly start to the day but the sun was out and it was quite pleasant. Made good progress to Ironbridge where I stopped to admire Telford's masterpiece and have a coffee and cake.

Another good piece of navigation around Telford was spoiled when a whining scooter shot past and the job on the back decided to clip me round the head as he went by. I suddenly felt quite vulnerable on my own on a very quiet road near a major town.

I coasted along the rest of the day with a couple of coffee stops before arriving at the CTC recommended B&B. A pot of tea and biscuits was provided on arrival, in my own lounge, and then the lady insisted that I give her all my washing. She likes to look after her cyclists. Best place I stayed all trip, and only cost £17-50!

She also told me about 'her ladies'. They were four women of mature years ( probably between 65 and 70), who had decided to do LE JOG at a leisurely pace (30 miles or so a day) and had stayed with her a few days earlier. They'd been on the road for a month already, so my 9 days suddenly seemed remarkably quick!

#### **Day 10 (Thu 19<sup>th</sup>) - Market Drayton to Westhoughton**

*Distance = 62.25 miles*

*Riding Time = 5hrs 16 mins*

*Average Speed = 11.8mph*

A nice easy day - flat country and no wind. The back lanes of Cheshire provide an insight into the wealth that exists in Cheshire. Every house in every village seemed to have been 'done up'.

At one point, in the Tatton Park area, I went down a back-road of about 3 miles in length. Along the whole length was a succession of houses / mansions, all behind fancy electric gates, with the really exclusive ones backing onto a lake. How the other half live!

The villages are completely dead during the day. In 62 miles of riding the only café I found was in a Garden Centre – a very posh garden centre at that!

I also passed another pleasant hour in a Tourist Information office, this time in Nantwich. On this occasion most of the time was spent with them talking to the Blackburn and Bolton TI's asking them which one covered the area in which I wanted to stay. In the end both said it wasn't them and anyway there wasn't anywhere 'official' to stay! I ended up helping the Nantwich TI do an internet search for B&B's / motels then using their phone to book it (more than their job's worth for them to do an 'unofficial' booking!).

In the end I stayed at the Mercury Motel by the side of the M61. It was poor and expensive, but at least they had secure accommodation for the bike. I chained it up in the disabled toilets!

#### **Day 11 (Fri 20<sup>th</sup>) - Westhoughton to Slaidburn**

*Distance = 43.93 miles*

*Riding Time = 5hrs 6mins*

*Average Speed = 8.5mph*

A rainy start to the day, so I cruised the 10 miles into Chorley Town Centre and found a café for breakfast. An interesting place that would figure high on the list of towns recently said to be clones (ie containing banks and chain stores but no local shops).

I crossed the M6 and the M61 today (near the Reebok stadium) and then followed a route through the hills to avoid Blackburn and head into the remote Bowland Fells. This gave me a hard, hilly, afternoon. But at least the rain stopped and the views were excellent.

I stayed the night at Slaidburn Youth Hostel where I encountered the 'old ladies' for the first time. They looked real professionals – quality bikes and panniers, and club cycling shirts and shorts. An hour later, changed into their twinsets and pearls and sat in the pub restaurant, they looked like your favourite grannies on a night out! They were good fun though and had been having a whale of a time on the trip.

#### **Day 12 (Sat 21<sup>st</sup>) – Slaidburn to Newbiggin-on-Lune**

*Distance = 41.10miles*

*Riding Time = 4 hrs 24 mins*

*Average Speed = 9.3mph*

A really good day in glorious countryside. It started with a hard climb in the sunshine from Slaidburn over the Bowland Fells to Bentham. From the top of the climb the views were brilliant, particularly over towards the Three Peaks.

At the top I rang Steve Vickers and we arranged to meet at Devils Bridge near Kirkby Lonsdale. I got there early and enjoyed a coffee and cake whilst chatting to the motorcyclists who were suitably impressed with the answer to their question "Have you cycled far?"

Steve and I then rode on to Sedburgh, arriving to find the streets closed whilst the carnival procession came through. Another coffee and cake seemed in order! Steve then made his way back to Kendal, whilst I turned the trusty steed away from home and headed for the hills. Or rather I went around them to get to my night's accommodation kindly provided by Dave and Helen Neild (who had sensibly gone away for the weekend to avoid the temptation to cycle with me!). Then followed the highlight of the trip. Watching Man Utd lose the FA Cup Final – even more satisfying when they were the better team and lost on penalties. Ferguson seemed so happy at winning nothing again!

Liz joined me for the evening, bringing an excellent M&S microwave meal for tea. She does look after me!



At the top of the climb from Slaidburn

### **Day 13 (Sun 22<sup>nd</sup>) - Newbiggin-on-Lune to Gretna**

*Distance = 59.40miles*

*Riding Time = 6hrs 6mins*

*Average Speed = 9.7mph*

Another good start to the day, this time over Aseby Fell in the sunshine to Appleby. Didn't see a car or another person for the first 10 miles.

Tourist Info served me well again – they were closed! It's Sunday, when the tourists are most likely to be about, so why is it closed???

Pushed on to Brampton, using the National Cycle routes again, on a lovely stretch with the highest point of the Pennines (Cross Fell) on one side and the Lakeland hills on the right, and no traffic. It was going so well I decided I'd push on to Gretna and cross the Scottish Border.

Having made the decision the rain started, but thankfully it stopped before Gretna and having got there I tried my first Scottish Tourist Information. It was open and even got me somewhere to stay which turned out to be OK, so a promising start for the Scots.





Scotland at last!

#### **Day 14 (Mon 23<sup>rd</sup>) – Gretna to Sanquhar**

*Distance = 53.00 miles*

*Riding Time = 5hrs 5mins*

*Average Speed = 10.3mph*

It's Scotland so the weather must be bad. And true to form it was. The wind had got up again and the rain started so I had a hard morning following the Solway Firth coast to Dumfries.

It was shaping up to be a wet and miserable day and the only sizeable place en-route was Sanquhar so it was important the Dumfries TI delivered somewhere to stay! They did, the last room in a Guest House, so "strike 2 for Scotland's TIs"

The rain poured down all afternoon, and it was 'proper rain'. So I gave up on the back roads, put my head down, and went with the traffic up the A76. Good training as it turned out for subsequent experiences around Glasgow.

#### **Day 15 (Tue 24<sup>th</sup>) – Sanquhar to Kilwinning**

*Distance = 47.22miles*

*Riding Time = 4hrs 41mins*

*Average Speed = 10.0mph*

Only showery, but still windy, today as I headed northwards towards the outskirts of Glasgow.

Accommodation may again be a problem so I divert to Cumnock looking for the TI. Apparently it was closed two years ago. So I divert to Kilmarnock only to find that they too have closed down. Scottish TI now going down in my ratings.

I pass a Country House Hotel on the outskirts of Kilwinning and decide to cut the day short rather than risk sleeping rough on the streets of Glasgow!

#### **Day 16 (Wed 25<sup>th</sup>) – Kilwinning to Balloch**

*Distance = 44.52miles*

*Riding Time = 4hrs 44mins*

*Average Speed = 9.3mph*

A day I had not been looking forward to – crossing Glasgow. To make matters worse it was pouring down ('proper rain' again) with a strong wind.

I was now using the National Cycle Route and this follows old railway tracks and quiet roads into the centre of Glasgow, then having crossed the Clyde it comes out again on a track alongside the river. The previous night I had looked at the maps and decided that if the weather was bad I could save 7 miles of cycling by turning off the route onto the A737 and use this to get to the Erskine Bridge (which has a cycle track alongside the road) to cross the Clyde there.

The weather was suitably appalling so I turned up the slip road on to the A-road to be confronted with a 6 lane highway! Lorries flew past me as I hung on to the bike for grim death and headed into a wall of

spray. I then spot an overhead road sign which suggests I'm on the M8! I panic until I notice that the M8 is in brackets so this road only leads to it. Then I realise that the lane I'm on is the one that is the slipway to the M8. I plough on and hope, dodging all the rubbish in the verge as I do so. Fortunately there's another slip road before the M8 turning so I gratefully pile off down there and find myself on a nice easy dual carriageway! I go 4 horrendous miles on this to reach the Erskine Bridge where I stop and breath a sigh of relief. Problems over.

Oh no they're not! One half of the Bridge (including the bit with the cycletrack on) is closed. I only realise this after the cheerful man in the toll both waves me through! So I'm faced with a lane of heavy traffic, separated from the on-coming vehicles by cones, and with my way over being to ride up against the metal crash barrier in the middle and with cars leaving virtually no space as they shoot past. To cap it all a couple of people chose to wind they're windows down and shout abuse at me for being there!

Once on the other side I got on to the Cycle Route as soon as I could (climbing down an embankment to do so!) and stopped to calm down.

The rest of the day was a relaxing, but still very wet, ride to the shores of Loch Lomond and a night at the YHA.

### **Day 17 (Thu 26<sup>th</sup>) – Balloch to Killin**

*Distance = 53.45 miles*

*Riding Time = 5hrs 50mins*

*Average Speed = 9.1mph*

Glasgow behind me and into the hills again. This was a good day. Showery and cloudy but the tops of the hills were mainly clear.

I was using the NCR again and so was on very quiet roads. The early part of the route today was on Forestry tracks which unfortunately disappeared completely at one point because the Forestry Commission were chopping the trees down! I had to retrace my tracks back to a Forestry Commission Activity Centre. They told me the route was closed (thanks for putting a sign up!) and that I should go over the Dukes Pass. They took some satisfaction in telling me I'd need strong medication to get over it!

It turned out to be quite hard, but nowhere near as bad as Cornwall! By now I'm in pretty remote country and facing the Ogle Pass, the last pass of the day. I can see the cars hundreds of feet below me on the main road route to Killin but my route is much better – provided nothing goes wrong because there won't be many people past here today.

All goes well and I arrive at Killin YHA. It's here that I realise the weekend is approaching and it's a Bank Holiday. So I decide to book ahead to ensure I have somewhere to stay. I have trouble with Aviemore but the girl on the desk suggests Glenmore Lodge YHA, saying it's only a couple of miles outside Aviemore so I take it. This is to prove interesting!



On NCR7 above Loch Earn

### **Day 18 (Fri 27<sup>th</sup>) – Killin to Pitlochry**

*Distance = 44.54 miles*

*Riding Time = 4hrs 45mins*

*Average Speed = 9.3mph*

A classic Scottish day – low cloud, medium rain (not heavy enough to be ‘proper’ but wet enough), wind (as usual from the wrong direction) and fairly cool. But still preferable to Cheshire it has to be said!

It was a nice ride on very quiet roads and tracks alongside Loch Tay for much of the day. Eventually arrived at Pitlochry YHA. I made a cuppa when I arrived and walked into the dining room and heard my name called. Looking round I saw the ‘Old ladies’. How the hell had they got here in the same time as me? It turned out that they had headed straight up the A7 from Carlisle to Edinburgh, then up the A9 to Pitlochry, so saving 100 miles on the route I followed. I had to admire their confidence and bravery in taking on the traffic on these roads day after day.

### **Day 19 (Sat 28<sup>th</sup>) – Pitlochry to Glenmore Lodge**

*Distance = 62.36 miles*

*Riding Time = 5hrs 55mins*

*Average Speed = 10.5mph*

Big hills to come today and amazingly it’s raining again! I’ve not got into a breakfast routine when staying in Youth Hostels – I don’t have any! This is because hostels don’t seem to do meals anymore and I don’t want to carry packets of cereal and bottles of milk around in the panniers. So I have a little plastic tub of coffee and another with some powdered milk. A quick cup in the morning and I set off hoping to come to a café ASAP. Today it’s a short ride (6 miles) before I reach Blair Athol and find one. On other days it’s been as much as 25 miles and breakfast becomes the ‘emergency Mars bar’!

After that it’s a long grind to reach the highest point of the trip, the summit of Drumochter Pass at 1516 feet (462 metres) above sea level. It’s still drizzling and the two ‘easy’ Munros that I should be able to see are shrouded in thick mist. I had intended to go up one of these if it was a good enough day to do it in my trainers, but I would have needed waders today just to get to the start!

It was nice to coast down the other side but I was soon off on to wilderness trails again and had my first puncture whilst about 10 miles from the next village. And it was raining, and it was the back tyre! Had to take all the bags off and then take the wheel out. As I’m replacing the tube 6 lads pass by. The front one asks if I need any help. I’m a real cyclist now so reply “No thanks, just a puncture”. As they disappear into the distance I realise I’ve still got to get the back wheel in. The last time I tried this I had to take it to the bike shop! What have I done? To my relief it goes back OK.

I’ve been using the Sustrans map of the National Cycle Route to navigate today, but it only shows the area a couple of miles either side of the route. So as I approach Aviemore I stop to get the big map out and see where Glenmore Lodge YHA is. It turns out that it’s a bit more than 2 miles from Aviemore, it’s actually 6, and what’s worse it’s on the road to the ski lifts which means it’s uphill all the way. Not an easy end to the day.

But the Cairngorm tops were all clear and seeing them from the Hostel was far preferable to the concrete jungle of Aviemore. I did however have a one mile walk in the rain to get my evening meal at the Glenmore Lodge National Outdoor Centre.



Cairngorms from Glenmore Lodge YHA

### **Day 20 (Sun 29<sup>th</sup>) - Glenmore Lodge to Culbokie**

*Distance = 58.80 miles*

*Riding Time = 6hrs 10mins*

*Average Speed = 9.5mph*

The day gets off to its usual Scottish start – raining! The café at Carrbridge however provides a good ‘coffee and cake’ breakfast by which time the rain has stopped and I can push on to the big climb of the day to Schlod Summit (1328 feet).

The miles roll by and I finally arrive at the capital of the Highlands, Inverness. The usual poor Tourist Information Office provides me with a B&B on the Black Isle. This also proves to be the biggest rip-off B&B I’ve yet encountered. It’s supposedly close to the village of Culbokie but is actually 2.5 mile away, so it’s a long walk for a meal and a pint (I could go on the bike but walking gets some of the stiffness from the legs).

What’s worse is that I’m told they’ve only got a twin room available and so will have to charge me that rate (£44!!). On arrival I find that they have 5 rooms and only two other guests!

It’s also at Inverness that I try to book my bike and myself onto the train/s home. The ticket office man sees me approach and starts the conversation with “Oh no, not another cyclist”. I need to book on trains from Wick to Inverness // Inverness to Edinburgh // Edinburgh to Oxenholme. Remember this is Sunday. He tells me the first bike slot on the Wick train is the following Saturday!

I look pleadingly and ask why. He tells me there’s only 2 bike spaces per train and only 3 trains per day, and they’re all fully booked. “Can’t I just turn up and see if there’s any space in the carriages?” He replies “No, the guards have been told to turn people away even if the train’s empty”. “Why?” says I. “Because people keep turning up without a booking!” says he. “Why don’t they put more bike spaces on?” I ask. I sense he’s now getting really fed up with me when he says “As I said there’s only two places on each train, you should have booked earlier!”.

I therefore make booking for the other two parts of the trip. I solve the problem by ringing John O’Groats Youth Hostel and asking them if there’s an alternative service such as a taxi. There is a local taxi man who does take cyclists. I ring him, to be told it will cost £100 (it’s a 5 hour round trip from JOG to Inverness). I accept, then continue my trip to Culbokie to be further ripped off by the B&B!

### **Day 21 (Mon 30<sup>th</sup>) – Culbokie to Helmsdale**

*Distance = 63.31miles*

*Riding Time = 6hrs 13mins*

*Average Speed = 10.1mph*

A day of sunshine and showers starts with a crossing of the Cromarty Firth and for the first time I see John O’Groats mentioned on the signposts – 109 miles to go!

I am brought back to reality by a hard climb away from the sea but this is followed by a beautiful descent to Bonnar Bridge.

The rest of the day is spent on the A9 – a much quieter A-road than any I encountered further South, and ends at the small Youth Hostel at Helmsdale.

The warden directs me to the La Mirage fish restaurant in the village which I'm assured is world famous. It proves to be so, mainly because of the larger than life owner, and the ostentatious nature of the décor. The walls are covered with photos of her with famous people such as Paul McCartney, Elton John, various members of Royalty (who I only know from the names written underneath), and Sally Webster from Corrie (who I know from her picture!).



About to start the 4 mile descent to Bonnar Bridge

### **Day 22 (Tue 31<sup>st</sup>) – Helmsdale to John O' Groats**

*Distance = 53.22 miles*

*Riding Time = 5hrs 33mins*

*Average Speed = 9.5mph*

The final day has arrived at last and starts in the usual fashion – in the rain for 10 miles of hills before reaching a café for breakfast!

But the miles roll by with great views all day as the road follows the coast. I arrive at Wick in the rain and shelter under a tree to eat the emergency Mars bar. I'm approached by another cyclist to ask if I know where the parcel office is. It turns out that he's tried to book on the afternoon train to Inverness only to enter the same conversation as I'd had days earlier. He's been told that his best option is to go to the parcel office and get them to package and post his bike home for him! We discuss Scot Rail in glowing terms. I mention my taxi arrangement and offer to share it, but he decides to try the parcels so I set off to finish the last 18 miles to JOG.

And in mid-afternoon, in glorious sunshine I reach the end. There's a group of lads wearing kilts stood at the famous signpost with their bikes, having their photos taken. One of them wanders over and asks if I've just finished. When I say yes he gets one of their bottles of champagne and pours me a cup. I also get my photo done and then see the 'cyclist from Wick' approach. He introduces me to my taxi driver who he's just spoken to and arranged to share my lift the following day. So the cost is now £50.

Another supported party finish and I'm recognised by one of them. He was one of the group that passed me when I had a puncture and tells me they'd first seen me at Pitlochry YHA and were impressed by the fact that I was doing it solo and without support. I felt like a proper cyclist after these comments!

The night was spent at John O' Groats Youth Hostel.



**There at last**

**Day 23 (Wed 1st<sup>st</sup>) – John O' Groats to Home**

Stats for the trip.....

*Total distance = 1110.9 miles*

*Total Riding Time = 119hrs 22mins*

*Average Speed = 9.3mph*

*Fastest Speed = 34.9mph*

I was discussing the train situation with one of the wardens at JOG Youth Hostel and she said that the Tourist Board were in the middle of a major row with Scotrail on this problem. On an average day during the peak 'End-to-End' season there were 60 cyclists on average finishing at JOG apparently. Many of these people were being turned away from the trains (even though they're rarely more than half full) and the resultant publicity was reflecting badly on the area. Scotrail were apparently hiding behind the view that 2 cycle spaces take up 6 passenger seats. I have written to Scotrail to add my voice to the complaints!

Anyway my return went OK. The taxi driver (using a mini bus) took the two of us to Inverness in time for my 12:45 train to Edinburgh, providing a running commentary on the area as he did so. On arriving there my 'partner' went off to the ticket office to book on a train to Edinburgh, then one to Wales. He returned to say that he couldn't get his bike on an Edinburgh train until 8pm, so would have to stay overnight there and finish his journey next day! Amazingly when I got on the 12:45 I found I was the only bike on it and there were 3 free spaces! What a shambles!

**Thoughts after event.....**

**“Did you enjoy it?”**

Yes, although I could easily have packed up at any point during the first four days as I battled with the weather and the hills in Cornwall.

**“Did you find it harder on your own?”**

No, it worked out OK. Whilst it's good to travel with a friend or friends there are compensations in not doing so. I could decide to do whatever I wanted - whether to stop early if I was tired; to take a hillier route; to stay at a YHA rather than a B&B; where to eat and when; etc. I also got to meet more people because I was fairly obviously on my own and people seemed to take pity on me and chat! The drawbacks were the lack of conversation at times; sharing the load over planning and route finding; and the camaraderie that goes with shared experiences.

**“What was the hardest part”**

Crossing Dartmoor into the teeth of a gale.

**“What was the best part?”**

Watching Man Utd lose the FA Cup Final to Arsenal on penalties after being the best team throughout!!

Apart from that the other highlight was the stretch from Loch Lomond, onwards through the Highlands. Although the weather was ‘average’ for Scotland (plenty of showers and grey skies) the cycling was on wonderfully quiet roads and I felt I was in the wilderness much of the time.

**“Most frightening moment?”**

Going through Glasgow on a 6 lane highway (which at one point I thought was the M8 motorway) in pouring rain, and hanging on for grim death as the lorries flew past and the spray hammered into me. The most frightening 3 miles I’ve ever ridden on a bike!

**“Best decision?”**

To use the National Cycle Routes as much as possible. For anyone who doesn’t know what these are I recommend looking up Sustrans on the Internet. They were wonderfully quiet routes and kept me away from traffic for days on end. Highly recommended

**“How did the bike hold up?”**

Very well. Only one puncture and no major problems. They don’t make them like that any more

**“Was it as hard as you expected?”**

Yes, and no. I knew it would be a tough trip but once out of Cornwall I started to enjoy it. I also began to get fitter as I went along so that by the time I got to Scotland I was able to do 60-mile days, with some big hills, without much problem.

**“How’s your bum?”**

The most frequently asked question, to which the answer is – fine after the first few days, although at the end of some of the long days I knew I hadn’t been sat on a cushion!

**“Would you do it again?”**

No, although I would like to do some other long cycle trips.

**“What next?”**

Well there’s the immediate challenges of acting as ‘mountain guide’ for AXA Three Peaks Challenge; then two weeks walking in the Alps in July.

Looking to August I fancy cycling the W2W National Cycle Route from Barrow to Sunderland, returning on the C2C route from Sunderland to Whitehaven. Anyone interested or is to be a solo?

*Bryan Hardaker*

*June 2005*