

## **Cycling Land's End to John O'Groats**

Cycling the length of Britain was not my idea, but when my friend Ron North asked if I would be in it I jumped at the chance of the adventure. I had never been to the UK, and it seemed the perfect way to see the country in a way that few ever can. Ron had researched some options, and suggested we stay in Bed & Breakfasts along the way. By doing so we could minimise the weight in our pannier bags (rather than carrying camping gear) and make hill climbing easier. We chose to arrive in Spring, before the main tourist season, to make finding a B&B easier each day without booking ahead.

We arrived at Heathrow, cleared Customs and Immigration, unpacked and assembled the bikes, caught the train to Paddington. Deciding to have coffee and a snack at the station we left our bikes in full view while we ordered, and within minutes a Rail Security officer and a Policeman arrived. Unattended bicycles and luggage are a security threat, so we apologised to the officers and had our snack standing by our gear.

On the train to Penzance we chatted to a man whose parents were killed in a plane crash when he was only 14, he came into a substantial inheritance and left school, bought a narrow boat and has lived alone since, cruising the canals of England. Arriving in Penzance (which almost felt like being in a G&S production), we soon found our B&B, a cosy attic room, and after a satisfying meal and a pint in a pub with plenty of historic atmosphere had a good night's sleep.

Next day we designated as a rest day, getting over jet lag and organising cell phones and wet weather pants for the dirty weather forecast. We then rode 14 miles to St. Just, a little closer to Land's End, through lovely country lanes.

**Day 1.** (29/4/2010) We woke early, packed, and fortified with a full English breakfast, faced a very foggy morning, and rode through a drizzle to Land's End. Probably due to the weather this land mark looked pretty boring, and we photographed each other for the record, and rode on down lanes screened by hedgerows and back to Penzance, then along the sea front to Marazion. We had historic Mount St. Michael on our right, a booming port for the tin miners at the time of Christ. An apparition of Archangel Michael seen by fishermen in AD 495 led to the island becoming a religious centre, and after the Norman Conquest it became a Benedictine monastery and a church was built on the summit. The island was the scene of conflict during the Wars of the Roses, and in 1588 the first beacon lit to warn of the Spanish Armada.

We found that Cornwall is extremely undulating, and in the wet conditions scoured our brake pads, and cables needed adjustment. Navigation was difficult as the route notes

conflicted with the local signs, and asking locals for directions sent us miles out of our way. The hills just kept coming, and with the extra distance covered we were exhausted. Ron phoned an excellent B&B where the host met us in Truro with a vehicle equipped with a bike rack, and took us back to his comfortable home.

**Day 2.** An early start, with our host Patrick driving us back to Truro, allowed us to make our way to a bike path, where we met a lone walker loaded with a rucksack making his way from Lands End to John O’Groats. A sturdy outdoor type, he reckoned to be there in a couple of months. The path led onto a B road and we pressed on through the villages of Idless and St Allen, with continuing hilly terrain; took a wrong turn in St Newlyn and went 3 miles out of our way. Our route then entered the A39, with a reasonable road width for cyclists, but rain, wind and steep hills were testing my limits. As we approached the Atlantic coast I hoped for level sea shores, but the hills seemed to get steeper. The scenery around Tintagel was striking, and we stopped for a coffee break and phoned ahead to The Old Rectory at St. Juliot. It is set in 3 acres of beautiful garden and is noted as the place where Thomas Hardy met Emma, his first wife. It was an expensive B&B for an ordinary room, a premium for the Thomas Hardy bit.

**Day 3.** Did some bike cleaning before setting off, and made good time along a scenic coast into Bude, where we found a cycle repairer who replaced our worn brake pads. This was so overdue that we were reduced to dragging our feet along the road to stop on some slopes. We also received some advice on a better route than we planned. Energy was starting to flag by 3.30 pm when we arrived in Greater Torrington, which looked like an industrial ghost town, an unlikely accommodation prospect. However, we turned up the steep hill lined with dilapidated terraces, and at the top found an inviting town square, a clean comfortable room at the Black Horse as well as a pint and some pub grub. I’m feeling the effects of 3 days of hard riding over steep hills, but keep stretching the legs at every opportunity.

**Day 4.** Left the Black Horse early and found our way through the town square and on to more hilly roads under a damp grey sky. I was walking up the worst of the hills, watching Ron powering away into the distance, when I thought I was listening to birds in the hedgerows until I realised the persistent squeak was my front brake touching the wheel. We fixed that problem, but I was still having problems with the hills. Nothing was too steep for Ron, who could patiently conquer every hill. We stopped briefly for a bite of lunch at a convenience store where the shop keeper wanted to bet Ron he could not ride all the way up the next hill. Ron did not accept, but would have won. He had a heavier bike,

more weight in his pannier bags and 21 gears compared to my 27, but he is just such a strong fit man there is no stopping him. He had one advantage in a 34 tooth mountain gear, and I noticed that his cadence was much higher than mine when we were both in our lowest gear. Cadence relates to the number of pedal revolutions per minute, and needs to be about 70-80 per minute just as car engine revs at an optimum rate.

We crossed the border into Somerset, and soon found that our route ran along a river valley that offered an easier ride into Bishops Lydeard, a good B&B and a hearty pub meal at the Bird in Hand. There was a stag party on in the bar, all very good humoured and well behaved; the bridegroom in drag and his friends dressed as pipe smoking country squires

**Day 5.** Today a Bank holiday, and the cold weather making my sinuses run. I was walking the bike up too many hills and my shoulders were aching from my handlebars being too low. We rode through Cheddar, a tourist town busy with holiday makers visiting the caves and the cheese shops, others climbing the cliffs. This was one time Ron decided to walk, as the road was so narrow for buses, and there was no footpath. We eventually made it to Saltford, found a B&B, and a meal at another Bird in Hand. After discussing the problems I had with the bike, our host Steve said there was a good bike shop in Bath, so we decided to detour there.

**Day 6.** In Bath we found John's Bike Shop, asked for a mountain gear to be fitted and the handlebars to be raised, and this was carried out while we toured Bath in an open top double decker bus, a fine way to see this beautiful city brimming with history. The beauty and dignity of Bath Abbey and the Royal Crescent, all the buildings fashioned from superb limestone. The modifications to the bike worked well, and I left Bath feeling confident and comfortable. We made good time through lovely countryside to comfortable digs in Alveston.

**Day 7.** Left early and soon approached the suspension bridge over the Severn into Wales. Tricky navigating the cycle path into Chepstow, where we missed a turn and went on a wild goose chase. But the terrain was easy and we made good time to Tintern Abbey, where we stopped to refresh our schoolboy memories. The ruins are still magnificent, in spite of bearing the brunt of Henry VIII's anger with the Vatican. Wordsworth's poem has little to do with the Abbey itself, more about his love of nature and the Wye River. Continuing up the valley we passed castle ruins and fields of canola with pheasants disturbed by our movement. More tricky navigation was aided by a Transport Regulation crew, and later by a charming couple who drove ahead of us and got us back on course.

We pushed on to Leominster, which is decidedly not a tourist town and, finding no B&Bs, took a room in a run down pub.

**Day 8.** (Election Day) No electricity at the pub due to a power failure, so our ablutions in half light and toilet pump not working. (Too much information?) Muesli like saw dust, but our hostess managed a full English brekky despite the power outage. Rode out to Ludlow, a pretty town, but tried to photograph the Castle and a bloke on the gate wanted four quid for the privilege (it is privately owned). Unwilling to be ripped off, we found a vantage point further on for the photo. More navigation problems, and more hills, so we were glad to get to Much Wenlock, find a room at The Fox, where we also managed dinner and a beer. This is a prosperous and genteel village; we strolled around the town and peered at old grave stones. Election Day aroused more apathy than enthusiasm, many people felt that voting only encourages the b\*st\*rds, especially after all their expense rorts.

**Day 9.** We rode out to IronBridge and saw the 18thC cast iron bridge, impressive. It is a stiff climb out to Little Wenlock, and then a level run through little villages. Lunch at Market Drayton, then Nantwich and finally Middlewich, where we found a spacious, well appointed room at a drab looking pub, The Boars Head. We had covered 409 miles of the route, (more if you count the diversions) and felt pretty good about it. Had a drink with a family friend of Ron's, Ian who lives close by and rode LeJoG last year as a fund raiser. He reckoned we should divert to include the Lakes District in our ride, and that sounded good to me. (I was feeling better after a soak in a hot bath.)

**Day 10.** Another full English breakfast (have to fill the fuel tank) and made good time on a crisp Saturday morning with minimal traffic. Went through Leigh, an industrial town, then off to Chorley where our good run slowed due to dodgy directions and a cold north wind. Stopped briefly at Wheelton and admired the narrow boats on the canal, then we lost time looking for Goosefoot lane and completed a full circle. Our frustration with dodgy sign posts was eased when we found a pub at a cross roads with a clean room, secure bike storage and a good meal. Chatted to a Scot from Ayrshire who had a poor opinion of the Scottish Parliament, which has little power.

**Day 11.** I was stiff this morning, but a session of stretching helped. My chain jammed as I missed a gear change trying to get through a roundabout, but we fixed that. We looked at the old Abbey in Whalley, where there was a wedding in progress. The north wind made progress hard as we rode through Great Mitton and Bashall Eaves, neither of which had food or drink. The hedges were often a good wind break, but made it hard to see or photograph the landscape. Around lunch time we lobbed into Slaidburn where the pub

served hearty soup and homemade bread. The lass serving us remarked on my CBA Mastercard, and said she came from Brisbane and had married a local. Riding on through the Yorkshire dales, steep climbs, the tall hedgerows were replaced by stone fences which allowed viewing and photography. There was a few sheep on the road which were lucky not to have been run down by a speeding truck. Ron's house swap friend, Arthur rode out to meet us and escorted us to Kirkby Lonsdale, where we found a cheap comfortable room. Had dinner at the Highwayman with Arthur, and his friends from Tasmania Stephen and Bec Mitchell, in UK for B14 yacht races off the Isle of Man. As I knew something of the B14 class from my Gosford sailing days, had a good chat about that, and made a note to check the results of his boat, Bondi Tram.

**Day 12.** Forecast weather was showers, snow on peaks as we set off to Kendall. In Windemere had a quick coffee and sandwich, then off to see the Lakes. It was a long hard slog up the road (known as The Struggle for some reason) to Kirkby Pass (1500 ft). I was drenched in perspiration, so the fast ride down the other side turned my damp clothes icy. But the views were spectacular, and the RAF swooped through the valley as we watched. Working our way out of Penrith we took an opportunity to get to the middle of a roundabout, walked across and were then unable to leave the traffic island to our exit until first one and then all three lanes of cars halted to let us cut across. It felt amazing to be treated with such understanding and courtesy, and I wondered if there are any other parts of the world this could happen. On to The Drover at Great Salkeld, a lovely pub with a cosy fire, good food and beer, transforming us from weary travellers to happy campers.

**Day 13.** A fine cold morning as we rode off to Brampton, then Longtown, and lunch in Langholm where advice from Tourist information was of very few B&Bs elsewhere headed us to Eskdalemuir. An option was a Buddhist Monastery, where we were given to understand the beds were Spartan and meals usually consisted of lentils and such. Resourceful Ron knocked on a cottage door, and the lady directed us to some self catering apartments, and there the charming landlady, Marilyn, not only produced some food for the evening meal and breakfast, but also washed and dried our garments.

**Day 14.** Rode out past the Monastery, which we were told had a very peaceful and calming effect on the Esk valley, historically the scene of much bloodshed. It was a lonely valley, some Roman ruins, lots of pine plantations, a few sheep. Stopped briefly at a corner deserted pub at Ettrick with a placard noting that Walter Scott and James Hogg met and parted here for the last time. There we met a youngish cycling group, also headed for Peebles; I felt superior as they walked their bikes up the hill (no panniers, while we cycled

past. Made it into Peebles for a late lunch, a cold north wind and 10 degrees C, found a friendly cycle store where I had some minor adjustments made, while Ron found a B&B/Bookstore, an elegant old place founded by Douglas Whities grandfather. We tried to use the internet services at the local library for emails, but our amateurish efforts failed. We met an Australian couple on a walking holiday, Sharon and Terry from Coolamon, and joined them for a convivial pub meal later.

**Day 15.** Breakfast was a swell affair, with a full English/Scottish version on the self service sideboard in chafing dishes: eggs, bacon, sausage, mushroom, tomato and haggis. I alone tried haggis, but would not recommend it. Lovely coffee too, and our charming hosts, Doug and Sheila pampered us. Left Peebles and had a good run to Edinburgh on a fine cold morn. We overshot the planned turn off, and had a difficult time navigating the central city streets - lots of directions asked and given. At last we found the A9 which lead towards the Firth of Forth Bridge. As the traffic became faster and more serious, we encountered a large notice warning that Cyclists and Pedestrians Must NOT Proceed. We decided to chance it and go on, but fortunately half a mile on there was an exit ramp to Dalmeny where we found the cycle path that leads to the bridge. Meanwhile a midge settled on the inside of my glasses, and in my efforts to get rid of it popped the lens out of the frame and on to the road. Luckily it was undamaged and I replaced it easily. We enjoyed the ride over the Firth of Forth Bridge, an impressive engineering feat, and weaved through roundabouts to Crossgate, where we found a greasy spoon café; had a cuppa and a snack. Pedalling on through light rain on minor roads, we found the village of Drum, which looked unpromising until we were directed to Blue Cedars, a very comfortable B&B owned by Morag. The pub was nearly a mile down the road, and as it was raining Morag drove us there and collected us after we were fed and watered. What I really liked about pubs in UK is their “personality”. Here, the Italian proprietor, Bruno decorated his place with a display of matchbox cars and his photos of racing cars from the days when Juan Fangio and Stirling Moss were kings. Over the bar, on a transparent false ceiling, an electric train glided silently around the room. Good beer, and Italian food too.

**Day 16.** Grey unpromising weather greeted us as we headed off towards Yetts a Muckhart, using the alternative route to save time and avoid the very strenuous Braemar Pass and Balmoral Castle; we stopped by and had a wee look at Gleneagles Golf course, (looked like golfing heaven). On through Kinkell Bridge, where I chatted briefly to a local, who said he was a gillie (a sort of gamekeeper and guide), then Methven, Coupar Angus and Forfar, a total of 67 miles today. But it was level terrain and we made good time into

the cold north wind. We discovered Forfar to be a dreary working class town with few B&Bs, but settled in at Athol House. Found a decent restaurant for dinner, and chatted to an octogenarian fellow who was walking in fund raisers for charity. After he left, the barman presented us each with a pint the old chap had shouted us, so we in turn left a donation for his charity.

**Day 17.** Headed off to Brechie, a cathedral town with narrow streets. I looked for a phone box and tried four, none worked, and there was no joy with the Orange mobile either. We stopped to snap the Aberlemno Stones, carved with symbols of the Pict culture. Proceeded up a very long steep pass on which I rode all but the couple of yards when my front wheel lifted. I got back on and made it to the summit (Cairn O'Mount 1493 ft), and chatted to a bunch of motor bikers who were enjoying the outdoors more comfortably. Again my sweat soaked underwear froze on the fast ride down the mountain, but we enjoyed the visibility of Bonnie Scotland without the constant hedgerows of England. We tried to reach Alford, but it was 10 miles too far, and as usual, Ron sussed out a welcoming B&B where we were able to get some washing done. I lay down on the bed and passed out for half an hour before regaining consciousness in time for tea.

**Day 18.** We started the day badly, riding off in the wrong direction for 6 miles because we did not read the sign post, but saw some countryside that we would not have otherwise. However we made good time through undulating country, suffering cold numb fingers for a while. We admired a castle on a hill – Austinduin I think - enjoyed a bowl of soup at an olde worlde Scottish Grouse restaurant, then rode on through whisky country – John Dewar, Glenfiddich, Glenlivet and The Macallan. Inspected the bridge over the River Spey, designed by Thomas Telford circa 1840, using cast iron lozenges. We achieved 48 miles progress, plus the 12 miles wasted made 60 for the day, ending in the village of Archietown, where a lovely Scots couple made us welcome at a bargain rate including a 3 course meal. We should not fade away at this rate, and I ordered porridge as well as the “fry-up” in the morning.

**Day 19.** This was still pine plantation country, and we had to cope with a few timber trucks, eventually coming to an A road with no bike lane or even much apron, and we continued with great care for some miles. Finally we diverted to a quiet road, and found ourselves in Cawdor for lunch. Decided to look at Cawdor Castle, said to have been an inspiration for Shakespeare's Macbeth. Inside there were lots of sitting rooms and bedrooms in various colours, tapestries, paintings of all the chinless ancestors, and a real dungeon into which those out of favour were disposed. The castle kitchen was at the other

end of the castle to the dining room, a deliberate arrangement so that the soup would not be too hot for the diners! Shakespeare productions are held here periodically in the grounds, which were impressive. We rode on to Culloden, where we spent an hour looking over the terrain, absorbing audio visual presentations giving the English and Scottish perspectives of the drama leading to the battle. There was a room with audio visuals on each wall, putting one in the midst of the fray. It gave us an understanding and pity for the poor brave highlanders who fought and died for the badly prepared Prince Charlie. Moved on to Inverness, where we found a comfortable B&B close to a pub called The Fluke.

**Day 20.** With good directions from our host John, we found our way to the Kessock Bridge, and turned left to ride along a lovely bike path on the north shore of the loch on a warm morning. Inverness must be a very cold place much of the time, but today it was a little bit of heaven, with the quaint houses looking over the Loch, perhaps watching for “Nessie”. We rode on through Muir of Ord to the A862, which had a wide apron for cyclists, taking us through Dingwall and on to Evanton where we had morning tea at a Christian café. Ron tried to make train bookings for the trip south, which we had delayed until we were sure of getting to JOG on schedule. We were dismayed that the tickets had to be collected from a manned station, which ruled out Thurso or Wick. Dingwall was the only real option, and seeing our disgust at having to retrace our journey, one of the nice ladies offered to drive Ron back to Dingwall. Meanwhile I phoned ahead to arrange a B&B at Lairg. We thanked the ladies with a hug and a donation to their charities, and rode on towards Bonar Bridge, but found a road block of witches’ hats across the road, diverting cars on a 7 mile detour. Not wanting to add that distance to our trip, we rode through the barrier, and hoped for the best. Luckily the cause of the road block was fixed by the time we reached it, and we got through. Had a cuppa at Bonar Bridge and continued, taking the route by The Falls of Shin. Without warning, a big junkyard dog charged out of a driveway at Ron, and he took off in response to my screams. Two things saved him from a mauling, one that he was going downhill and could accelerate, the other that the back wheel panniers prevented the brute from attacking from behind. This went on for 100 yards, by which time the dog was so stuffed that I rode by easily. We found our B&B in Lairg without further incident.

**Day 21.** A pleasant start to the day, riding past lakes (or lochs?) on a lonely road surrounded by vast hillsides covered in green grass and brown heather. We arrived at the northern coast at Bettyhill, where we lunched on soup and sandwiches, and the barman informed us that we faced a long downhill stretch, a long uphill, then flat. Like most

people who travel by car he had little idea of terrain or distances. We had quite a few hard uphill pushes before we ended our 59 mile day at Melvich Hotel, an upmarket place where we dined on venison with new potatoes accompanied by a bottle of Californian Merlot.

**Day 22.** (20/5/2010) Pleasantly refreshed, we rode out in warm sunshine with the coastline in sight on the way to Thurso. The Orkney Islands loomed mysteriously on our right as we pedalled to John O'Groats. It was a thrill to arrive at the famous sign post and be photographed. There was a large group of cyclists around, all smiling with the buzz of achievement; we shook hands to give and receive congratulations. Many of the others had made the trip on light bikes, shielded from traffic by support vehicles, often fund raising for charities. Among them was a pair of 30- something fellows from London we met in the last few days who had made the ride a bit of a pub crawl, but still made good time. Ah, youth! They were good fun, but we avoided drinking with them. We had covered more than 1100 miles, meandering on minor roads, carrying much more luggage. Rode out for more sight seeing around the light house, the rugged cliffs being a haven for birds. We photographed the "Stacks at Duncansby", 2 mighty columns off the coast reminiscent of those off our Great Ocean Road. Ron discovered that the railways had mucked up our tickets, dating Thurso to Inverness as 21/5/10 and the following leg Inverness to Edinburgh as 20/5/10. When phoned, the railways operator said "Sorry, you will have to sort it out at Inverness", and fortunately we did. Ron and I went our separate ways from Edinburgh and on to the next stages of our UK adventures.