

# John O'Groats to Lands End ~ 2002

## *Randonneur style*

*Following Dave Hudson's splendid 1000km event, I really had to ride the End to End at randonneur level, which had been on my mind for much of the year. It happened at the end of September, which was much too late, with only 13-14 hours of daylight, and cold nights and went like this.*

*Thursday;*

13 hour train trip at a cost £105 ouch, changing at Edinburgh, horrid, spend time cutting up road atlas to reduce weight. Expanding rack bag must weigh at least 7 kilos, dropped the bike down the steps at Edinburgh station, and a 80 min ride from Wick to JOG

*Friday:*

Don't think much of the Seaview hotel. The early early breakfast promised never happens, but the girl serving at 8am is gorgeous.

Photos + cards at JoG and on the road at 9.10am. There's a strong wind blowing from the West so I abandon any ideas of going West to Durness. Whenever the road veers right we slow down to about 10mph and pray for it to turn to the left. Berridale - was a double chainring a good idea?? Inverness at 125 miles comes up in 7hr 45 with a single stop to take off a jacket. Aiming for Fort William by 10pm but realise might be too late for food. Stop at Invergarry Hotel 8pm. Average running speed 16.5mph. Offered a seat by a cyclist going the other way who is staying the night, Three cokes and a curry! Stay much longer than intended and force myself to leave around 10.30pm, is this a good idea? I've been warned about road surface to Spean Bridge which is horrid, and it's cold.

*Saturday:*

Midnight, Fort William, bloody cold, far too long in the all night petrol station because I really don't want to spend the next six hours riding through the wilderness in the dark at this temperature. Shortly before Glencoe notice bright lights behind and then a Christmas tree, sorry, police car pulls alongside and says I look like a beacon (talk about calling the pot black) and asks where I'm going. When I tell him, he asks what's happened to my support car. I point to the expanding bag behind me, which appears to be taking on the proportions of a small tent. We briefly talk about the route - up Glencoe and along the A82, and he tells me there's very little up there and absolutely nothing open between here and Glasgow probably 80 miles away. We are in for a cold and lonely few hours. Spooky riding up Glen Coe in the middle of the night, and there was nowhere to stop till hotel with outside chairs at Ardlui on Loch Lomond, but it was getting light by then. An awful night.

The outskirts of Glasgow by 9am, I'm stamping in down the A82 but am disappointed with less than 300miles in the first 24hrs, Anyway I'm soon lost. Should have been heading for Kilmarnock but was tired and failed to turn left. Bum directions from Taxi driver - carry straight on - and I exit Glasgow heading towards Edinburgh. Stop. Sit down and re-plan route, and decide east through East Kilbride, Strathaven, then south down the B7078. The hoped-for truckers' breakfast at a tea shop in Strathaven is a flop.

The B7078/7076 is my ideal road, It's the old dual carriageway A74 complete with cycle lane, deserted, rolling countryside, avoiding the towns, and running alongside the A74M dual carriageway from the outskirts of Glasgow almost to Carlisle.

Unfortunately Seat post rack shears off, and this is a problem. Eventually ride with 7kg bag + broken rack balanced on the bar extensions and between my elbows for what seems like hours.

Handling dodgy, I can't get out of the saddle and I can't use the brake effectively either. I need either a good bike shop (unlikely) or a rucksack and its Saturday afternoon. Off route again in Ecclefechan, find myself in Annan and manage to buy £2.99 rucksack at a bargain store at 5.25pm, Phew that was close.

Its not much fun riding with a rucksack containing rackpak + the broken rack + everything else, but its better than balancing the bag on the bars. At least with this I can get out of the saddle on the climbs, but I'm spending much more time sitting down than usual.

Carlisle, and I can't find the truckstop! Meat pies at a late night store, its already dark, find the A6 and reach Shap by 9.30pm. About 150 miles since Glasgow, awful! There's four pubs here, and I choose the quietest, it's Saturday night and I'm feeling uncomfortable in lycra. 3 pints of coke, but free sandwiches and pork pies, they must have had a function on! At midnight I discover they have a bunkhouse in the garden. Great - 4 hours sleep, and I'm on the road at 4.30am.

### *Sunday*

Climb out of Shap and the horizon settles lower to reveal the lights of Kendal etc twinkling in the distance, but on the downhill swoops I watch the black horizon move up and blot out the view, then it's a long climb to bring it level again. The Schmidt powered switchable 2 x 3watt lumitecs are superb at anything over 20mph. Dawn, and I'm off course after Kendal. A65 east! Then it's via Kirkby Lonsdale to Lancaster. 2 spokes snap in the front wheel within half an hour of each other on this section. I only have spares for the rear. Whilst I get the wheel running reasonably true I'm concerned about heavy breaking on the fast descents, and certainly can't afford to lose anymore! Lost again in Wigan and then lose a rear spoke in Warrington, but I can deal with this.

Lunchtime. Text my brother from Whitchurch who offers to meet me further down the A49 with a selection of spokes and new rack; a 150mile round trip for him. Aren't mobiles and back-up wonderful! Rendezvous after Ludlow at about 6pm, by which time my shoulders are really aching from the rucksack. New front spokes, plastic Halfords rack and small bag to suit. A couple going the other way (LEnd-JoG) stop for a chat, her on a Trek and him on a fancy Colnago with crinkly tube set. The bikes alone are probably worth £7k between them, and they are travelling about 80 miles a day - civilised. I dump about 4kg of gear with my brother, and leave, travelling light at last. My Giant Cadex feels like a proper bike again, and I can tramp on at 20mph+ for an hour or so.

Find a couple of very nasty climbs around Hereford and shortly afterwards a sign advertising an alternative route to Monmouth AVOIDING steep hills. This has to be a joke, so I stick to the A466 and find myself on a familiar road retracing a lumpy part of the Brian Chapman, including Claire Ashton's favourite hill! Arrange stop at Bristol Central Travelodge, and hope to arrive about midnight. (The aim is to leave Bristol 4.00am Monday, ride the remaining 200 miles to arrive Lands end Monday afternoon / evening in about 80-84 hours.)

However, sudden right knee problems. No power, no push, and lots of pain. Quickly reduced to cycling one legged and stuck in the saddle. Very, very slow on the climbs, The all-night loo at Tintern is very tempting and wish I hadn't booked and paid for the Travelodge, still miles away. The climb at Chepstow takes forever on one leg, and no cars come past me over the miles of Severn Bridge. There's a small rise at Tockington and here I need a 10min break even before attempting it. Deserted roads, arrive Bristol and eventually find Central Travelodge at 3am.

### *Monday*

8.30am, and I'm dressed differently from everyone else in the Travelodge. Leave Bristol in the rush hour - what a transformation, traffic chaos everywhere. Lost again immediately. Round the ring road (???) and eventually pick up the A37/A39 which goes straight up and down the hills instead of following the contours. There must be an easier route. Still lots of problems with the knee and slow progress. Realise I haven't eaten properly since meeting my brother yesterday evening. Stop at cake shop in Wells, move opposite to cafe, and swallow a mega-size truckers breakfast (much larger than the standard). There's still a hole, so I order and polish off a second one washed down with lots of coffee. Easy, except an hour later I feel decidedly ill.

By lunchtime I'm going extremely slowly again with a very, very sore knee, and buy painkillers and gel at Boots in Taunton. By Cullompton mid-afternoon, I'm off the bike seriously depressed and ready to pack. Carry on after half an hour or so, but this is now survival. One hour on and 10min rest. In Exeter I'm lost again but I dare not stop the bike at traffic lights and junctions in case I can't get it going again. A30 dual carriageway, and reach Launceston about 9pm. It's starting to get quite cold and I just can't push hard enough to warm myself up. Fortunate to find a B&B open next to the all night petrol station/convenience store. They weren't expecting a damaged cyclist to turn up on the doorstep at 9.30pm!

### *Tuesday*

On the road at 8am. Pain killers say not more than 8 in 24 hours, so I shallow 6 and hope they last long enough. About 83 miles to go straight down the A30 and there's a brilliant tail wind. Sod the pain and consequences – let's go for it. Still stuck in the saddle and slow on the climbs, but the road surface is so smooth and I can freewheel downhill at over 45mph! Made Lands End by 1pm in 5 hours dead, with a stop for homemade ice cream in Jelbets at the crossroads in Newlyn - not to be missed. Told the girl I'd just cycled down from JoG for one of their ice creams, and we took photos outside!

Lands End, the place is packed. I jump (but not literally) the queue at the signpost for the obligatory photograph. The knee feels completely wrecked, and there's the usual "I've finished, what now" comedown feeling. It's taken me almost 100 hours from end to end, and a further half an hour just to cycle back the 2 miles to Sennen Cove.

Check train times on the phone. It's got to be the night train leaving Penzance at 10pm. After 6 hours rest I succeed in cycling up the 17% climb out of the cove but it was a bad move. Paddington eventually at 5.30 but still no sleep, Kerchunck Kerchunck Kerchunck Kerchunck all the way. Strange - everyone else seems to sleep through it. Very slowly I cycle home for 7am, with the early morning cycle couriers bombing past - I'd never usually let this happen. Cup of tea, breakfast, shower, change, and on the road up to Birmingham (driven by my wife) for a Funeral at 1pm.

Now I've got to sort my knee out!

*Mel Kirkland.*