

LAND'S END TO JOHN O'GROATS 2006 ~ WE DID IT!

Ref EE23

Cycling nearly 1000 miles from Lands End to John o' Groats isn't everybody's idea of a holiday.

For Peter and Glenys Knight, in their late(ish) 50's from Stevenage, it was a challenge of epic proportions. The furthest ride they had undertaken to date was 700 miles in 2 weeks on a CTC organized tour of the Danube cycle way in Germany in 2004 and being beside the river there were not too many hills.

The idea started when, in December 05 we scanned through the CTC cycling holidays and for the first time in a number of years we did not see a holiday that we really fancied. Having therefore a blank space in our calendar Peter hatched his cunning plan. Using LE Jo'G information from the web, the CTC and friends who had completed the ride, together with a 3 miles to the inch map book and highlighting pen, the plan eventually came to fruition.

The plan was this.

- 1) The start date would be in June so as to take advantage of warm weather and short nights.
- 2) We would use Bed and Breakfast accommodation. We read that youth hostels, despite being better than they were a few years ago, and cheap to stay in, were sometimes somewhat off route and could be very frantic in the mornings (queues for showers and breakfast cooking facilities)
- 3) We would book up these B&Bs on the day we wanted them, when we knew how far we could cycle on the day.
- 4).We would use main roads and good side roads for ease of navigation and hill climbing compared with minor roads.
- 5) We would carry all our requirements since we did not have a back up vehicle
- 6) We would try for 50 - 55 miles per day.

With all that agreed, a taxi was booked for May 30th to get us, our bikes and panniers to London Paddington station for the overnight sleeper service to Penzance which we also booked. There was no getting out of it now!

The end of May fast approached and we spent many hours packing and unpacking the panniers until everything fitted in.

During this time, you may recall, we had many consecutive days of rain immediately following a hosepipe ban which the newspapers called 'the wettest drought on record'. What were we letting ourselves in for?

Monday May 29th saw the weather change for the better - still cloudy but no rain. Tuesday stayed dry as John the Taxi came to pick us up in the evening. The train was boarded at 11.30 pm and we had a very pleasant night in our cabin, to be woken up by a man with 2 cups of tea in preparation for disembarkation at 08.30.

So it was that, after taking a couple of photos at Penzance station we set off for the 10 miles to Lands End.

Lands End was reached in less than an hour. After looking round and getting the CTC LE Jo'G Record Sheet stamped we started our adventure proper.

On Wed 31st May at 10.30 am, just 2 days after the rainy season had ended, Lands End was bathed in sunshine as we cycled in a NE direction along the A30 into a slight northerly wind. So it continued, getting slowly hotter by the day. Two things were particularly noticeable as we pedaled our way to Bodmin.

Firstly we seemed to be surrounded by oystercatchers. These medium sized birds, generally white of breast and black and white from above, have a large orange-red bill, emit a loud, piercing whistle and are particularly vocal. Secondly, as the weather had suddenly turned hot and sunny, literally hundreds of England flags had escaped from captivity as rear car windows had been opened and were lying at the side of the road. There must have been a business opportunity there - secondhand flag seller perhaps.

We survived the A30 through Cornwall, overnighing after day 1 in Bodmin. The original plan had been to leave the A30 at Bodmin and travel through Liskeard and Tavistock crossing over the centre of Dartmoor and on to Exeter. However we decided that the A30, although quite fast and busy, was wide enough to be safe and the hills were well graded. The clincher was the appearance on the map of several gradient arrows on the A390 around Tavistock.

The climb out of Bodmin and onto the moor was long, but once on top the view was worth the climb. A stop at the famous Jamaica Inn for coffee and a most excellent chocolate muffin was especially welcome. We skirted Dartmoor on the A30 looking across at the red soils of Devon and still listening to the oystercatchers except where they were drowned out by the traffic noise on the noisy concrete sections of the road. After the second day with 125 miles covered, we stayed with friends, Flic and Roger, at Newton St Cyres near Exeter where we were persuaded to partake of the liquid grape.

Leaving them the next morning at 9.00am, we made our way along no less busy, but slower and narrower roads including the A38, through Taunton and Bridgwater. In fact some of the smaller towns were so clogged with traffic, with lorries parked in the roads delivering goods, that on a number of occasions we were forced to stop for minutes at a time until the traffic cleared. At about 4.30 pm and after 61 miles we found accommodation in the lovely village of Axebridge, just west of Cheddar.

Next day we took the A38 skirting Bristol to cross the Clifton Suspension bridge, the first of many bridges we either saw or crossed and took some photos of. After a few more miles we crossed over the old Severn bridge and dropped down a very steep hill into Chepstow where we parked our bikes *inside* a pub while we had lunch. It is interesting to note that although it is not very far north, Chepstow is about a quarter of the way to John o' Groats. Whilst in Chepstow we bought a sports bag where about 3 kilograms of Glenys' load was transferred to Peter (what a gentleman!). To avoid cycling back up the hill we took the B4228 to our 4th overnight stop at Monmouth.

Having reached Monmouth, with 245 miles on the clock, it was apparent that, with the loads we were carrying, totaling about half a hundredweight between us, steep hills were not a good idea, and that main, not too steep roads were favourite. Also by this time the body regions which contact the saddle were feeling bruised and sore for both of us. Remembering a tip from no less a personage than Edwina Currie in the CTC magazine we both started wearing 2 pairs of padded shorts which eased the pain a little. Thanks Edwina!

Sunday found us cycling due north close to the English / Welsh border on the A49. We passed, amongst others, Hereford and Ludlow before finding a B&B at Church Stretton. So far on the trip the weather had been getting hotter and more humid but we managed to dodge a thunder storm whilst we were enjoying a pub lunch. The wind, when there was some, was from the north, not what we wanted,

but not hard enough to cause us any trouble.

Monday 5th June found us back on the A49 through Shrewsbury, Whitchurch, Nantwich, and Middlewich before dropping into the Tourist Information Centre at Knutsford who found us Birtles Farm accommodation just north of Tatton Park. As this was nowhere near a shop or pub we bought some sandwiches and fruit to tide us over until the 'Full English Breakfast' appeared next morning.

An 8.30 start soon got us threading our way between Liverpool and Manchester against the normal east - west flow of the traffic crossing many motorways en route. A factor that was rather tiring, other than the heat, was the stop / start negotiation of the towns Leigh, Bolton, where we took the A666, and Blackburn. However we emerged out the other end to stay with our friends Nick & Veronica near Clitheroe, Lancs which was just short of the half way mark. At this point we were one day earlier than our 8 day target having covered 431 miles.

Following a convivial evening, the morning saw us take on our hardest day of the whole tour, with its very steep uphill and 'hard on the brakes' downhill via Slaidburn - the reputed half way mark - and Kirkby Lonsdale. The days were getting progressively hotter which also sapped our energy. The A683 to Sedbergh was a lot flatter but after another 10 miles of hilly stuff we decided to call it a day. Our legs gave up at Tebay close to the M6 where we found a very accommodating pub, the Cross Keys Inn, to stay at.

Only 45 miles were covered that day with an average speed of 9.4mph compared with the trip average of 11.4. I still wonder how much further we could have gone had we reached Shap summit with the downhill that followed (read on!)

However as we walked around Tebay that evening in an effort to digest a wonderful pub meal, a shrill whistling met our ears. The oystercatchers were back and kept us company for the rest of our journey.

Our ninth day (Thursday) in the saddle saw us, after 7 miles, reach the famous Shap summit at over 1000 feet. After that it was all downhill on the old A6 through Penrith and Carlisle. Moving onto the A7 we soon crossed the Scottish border at 535 miles into the trip. Stopping briefly for a photo with the 'Welcome to Scotland' sign we cycled another 10 miles before bedding down in a farmhouse at Ewes, 5 miles north of Langholm. This 62.4 mile day at nearly 12 mph average raised our spirits again and gave us a fighting chance to reach Edinburgh the next day.

After we had enjoyed our first "full Scottish breakfast" we took advantage of a following wind (No! that's not what I mean) and we set off at brisk pace on the A7 through Hawick and Peebles and finally into Edinburgh 71 miles later. Once again the day had been a hot one but as we approached Edinburgh we rode into sea mist which dropped the temperature from 25 degrees C to 12 C within the space of 1 mile.

It was with difficulty that we booked 2 nights accommodation. Arriving on Friday we did not realise that the Edinburgh Marathon was on Sunday and accommodation was at a premium.

During our 'Saturday off' we relaxed by riding the open topped tour bus, walking all round Edinburgh and seeing the sights. We decided to risk life and limb in the Scottish Parliament building and were shown round by a guide who spoke with a very strong accent. He told us his name was Pedro and he came from Chile!

Off again on Sunday, we competed for road space with the Edinburgh marathon, left the city, found the Forth road bridge, and, heading north found Perth and the A9.

Just as parallel to the M6 north of the aforementioned Shap you find the old and quiet A6, similarly north of Perth you get a cycle way which is the old A9, some of which we took.

We overnighed in a B&B at Birnam, midway between Perth and Pitlochry where Peter replaced a broken rear spoke. When we woke up the next morning the weather presented us with the first (and only) rain of the trip. For us this was not all bad as it was a lot cooler, and there was a tail wind for the steady 30 mile climb to the Drumochter summit 1530 feet above sea level. That negotiated, we had a 20 mile downhill, at the start of which the sun appeared again and with a fierce tailwind we cycled to the Tourist Information office in Aviemore. A helpful lady found us a B&B, 7 miles up the road in Carrbridge. Having covered 76 miles, our longest day, the cycle computer was now reading 755 miles.

This technique of stopping at a Tourist Information centre when we thought we had ridden far enough, then booking a B&B 5 to 7 miles ahead was a good system for adding a few extra miles to the day, in the knowledge we had somewhere to stay.

The next day (Tuesday) we set off, stopping at Inverness only long enough to book our return train tickets, then carried on up the east coast road, A9 crossing the Moray and Cromarty Firths.

At lunch soon after, Peter found another 2 broken spokes in his rear wheel, repaired one and set off to find a 'Spokes R us' shop which we did in Invergordon. We were directed to a shop in Munro Street that looked like a large garden shed with a similar workshop behind. Its owner Kenny Ross took me round his emporium where he showed me one of his treasured possessions, a wooden bicycle rim, and provided me with 4 spare spokes 2 of which he had to cut and rethread. There can't be many cycle shops and owners like that any more!

We then had a final trouble free 17 miles to our accommodation in the Eagle Hotel, Dornoch where Peter replaced the broken spoke. Wednesday morning found us pedaling northwards along the east coast road, up a couple of particularly steep hills, one out of Helmsdale (where the pub there does morning coffee and apple pie with cream for £4 for both of us) and on to Berriedale for lunch. The café at Berriedale is a cross between a cafe and an antique shop and does a very good lunch. Whilst there, we chatted to a road construction crew who had previously given us some encouragement to conquer one of the hills. From there we continued to Wick where we found B&B for 2 nights.

The next morning (Thursday) required a final 17 mile sprint to John o' Groats thankfully leaving our panniers in the B&B. When we were within 3 or so miles of our destination the islands of the Orkneys could be seen stretching into the horizon. On arrival we took the requisite pictures by the signpost, spoke to a couple of other end to end groups - one British, one Dutch (none of which were carrying their own luggage) and meandered back to Wick via Duncansby Head, where flocks of seabirds nest in the cliffs.

Back in Wick we had time to celebrate our achievement, although even now, almost 2 weeks after we finished, it still hasn't sunken in.

The figures tell us we totalled 901.5 miles, averaged 63 miles per day, 11.4 mph and took 78 hours 42 minutes over 14 days and 2 hours to complete the adventure.

On Friday 16th June we boarded a train to Inverness, our bikes traveling by van, and as we could not get the sleeper to Euston, overnighed in Inverness.

On Saturday another piece of good luck. Owing to engineering works, the train would, unusually, stop at Stevenage, avoiding the need to change at Peterborough.

We cycled the last 3 miles through Stevenage to home, put the kettle on and returned to the real world.

So what have we learned?

Firstly, it is difficult to keep the luggage weight down. As soon as you decide to take a mobile phone and digital camera, 2 battery chargers are required and they are not the lightest of things.

At the time of year we did the ride (Early June) B&B's are not difficult to find on the day. We took the CTC list of accommodations and either found them 'en route' or visited Tourist Information offices, which are marked on many maps.

Every B&B we stayed in had tea making facilities so we needn't have taken the water heater, mugs and tea bags.

The tool kit I took was very heavy. Although useful when changing spokes, I could have taken fewer tools and, as I have very common 26inch wheels, one spare inner tube would have sufficed.

Two shirts for evening wear was one too many for Peter.

Even with an off road bike, the spokes do not take kindly to dragging a heavy load up steep hills. The 3 spokes that broke were all rear wheel ones (not unusually) and all broke with a musical 'ping' when I was pushing hard on the pedals in bottom gear.

On the food front we found that 3 large meals a day was not the way to go. A full English / Welsh / Scottish breakfast is fine for the morning, together with just a medium sized lunch and dinner. To supplement this, we took morning and afternoon tea and cakes, with energy bars and drinks in between. That way we were never cycling or trying to sleep on a full stomach.

Was it all worth it?

A definite YES.

Despite being a hard and long ride, the sense of satisfaction and achievement will stay with us for a long time.

We also raised about £1000 for various charities to make the journey even more worthwhile.

To anyone who is thinking of doing LE Jo'G we would advise them to plan well and go for it.

Peter & Glenys Knight

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