

RAFA Ride Journal

Charity LeJog raising money for the Royal Air Force Association

A daily account of my 12 day LeJoG ride, starting on 3rd August, finishing on 14th August 2010.

Unsupported and riding alone (except for 3 days in the middle whilst I was joined by a friend from my local cycling club), my route would take me down to Lizard Point (the most southerly point on the British mainland, before following the north coast of Cornwall and Devon, crossing the Severn Bridge, tracing the Welsh border before cutting between Liverpool and Manchester. Passing through the Lake District, I was then going to ride through Glasgow, then heading west towards Oban, from there following the west coast of Scotland up to Durness, before the final leg when I would ride along the north coast of Scotland, including a short detour up to Dunnet's Head (the most northerly point on the British mainland), finishing in John O'Groats. My intention was to stay in Youth Hostels or camp. In hindsight, camping after riding 100 miles a day was not practical – I was so tired, so youth hostels were usually my preferred option. I should add that at every YHA and SYHA establishment I visited, the staff bent over backwards to help me out, and were super helpful and polite. Great locations too.

I didn't undertake any specific training for the ride as I commute 50 miles each day on my bicycle, and usually ride further at weekends... however I was not used to riding a bike weighed down with so much kit. This made the ride far more challenging than I envisaged!

My bike was a Surly Long Haul Trucker, and I was using front and rear panniers, with my tent (Gelert Solo) and roll mat (Thermarest) strapped to my rear rack. I was also using a bar bag. I took the train from Reading to Penzance the day before starting my ride, and after finishing took a couple of days to enjoy a scenic ride back to Inverness, where I caught a train to London.

Kit List

Towel
Sun Cream
Maps
Socks x 2 (cycling)
Trousers
Shorts
Underwear x 2
Fleece x 1
Altura Rainjacket
T-shirt x 2
Shaving kit
Shower Gel
Toothbrush
Toothpaste
Loo roll x 1
Flip flops
Hand wash
Camera
Chargers

Batteries
Insect repellent
First aid
Diary
Udderly Smooth
Cous cous
Tent
Sleeping bag
Head torch
Trangia
Mallet
Pegs
Meths
Triangia
Camping Cutlery
Swiss Army Knife
Tin opener
Baby Wipes

Cycling Kit

Arm Warmers
Leg Warmers
Full length gloves
Short finger gloves
Gilet
Rain jacket
Cycling kit x 2
Long sleeve jersey
Sun glasses
Lights
Hat
Cap
Spare tubes
Multi tool
Mini pump
Lock
Lube
Chain tool
Chain

3rd August

Land's End – Penzance – Lizard Point – Truro – Wadebridge – Tintagel
107miles

Started to a dreary sea mist at 0815 after a super YHA breakfast at Land's End YHA. The weather couldn't decide if my gilet and bar bag rain cover was necessary, and I ended up changing about 4

times in 2 hours, getting very sweaty climbing with the gilet on, but cold and wet when I removed it. I took a route that followed the south coast to Penzance from LE – stunning scenery just about appreciable through the mist. Added bonus (!) of some of the type of climbs I'd been warned about... never thought I'd be pleased to see a sign saying 10% gradient, but by the end of the day it was a welcome sight. Lovely encounter in Penzance when I stopped a local greengrocers shop to pick up some bananas – the store owner gave them to me free of charge when he asked me about the charity aspect of my ride, and the lady next to me in the queue sponsored me, and gave me the money there and then (that's confidence!). After Penzance I had to use A roads all the way to Lizard Point. This wasn't fun – the traffic and weather combined to make me pretty grumpy by the time I reached the end of the peninsular. After a couple of damp photos, I headed back northwards, finding some little lanes (very hilly) that took me to Truro, by which time the weather began to improve. I ended up getting thoroughly lost in Truro, so decided to take the A39 out of town, as I was by now some time behind my schedule for the day. On the climb out of Truro I passed 3 Scottish girls who were also doing an End to End – I next saw them in Inverness on my way home as they were entering the final leg of their trip. By the time I reached Wadebridge the clouds had almost completely lifted, and I was only caught in the occasional shower during the afternoon. I was also passed by Emma Pooley, the female British Road Race Champion during the afternoon – funnily enough was not able to hold her wheel! Once I'd got beyond Wadebridge I found myself back on some back lanes, following the north coast to the YHA at Tintagel, where I was booked in for the evening. A few more brutal climbs and I made my way down the track that led to the hostel, which is right by the coast a couple of miles from any other civilisation – I ridden for about 9 hours that day. Tough start.

4th August

Tintagel – Boscastle – Bude – Bideford – Barnstaple – Lynmouth – Porlock – Minehead
100 miles

A leg breaking day! Woke up to another drizzling sea mist, and, adding to my woes was getting lost in Tintagel (which only has 2 roads!). After rectifying my mistakes I was back on the rolling B road to Boscastle, when it began to rain very heavily. I put on my 100% rainproof jacket (the one I was saving for Scotland!), but quickly overheated, so resolved that I'd just have to get wet in my gilet. I was utterly soaked by the time I began the steep, twisty and slippery descent into Boscastle – very unnerving with a loaded touring bike. The climb out of the village was a good warm up for the day – 20% for some time, before easing off to 12% for a mile or so – thank goodness for granny gears! Originally I'd planned to avoid the A roads, but the weather conditions forced me to reconsider – it simply wouldn't have been safe to ride on little lanes with steep and slippery descents all day with the brakes so heavily affected by the rain. I decided to follow the A39 throughout the day, taking me as far as Minehead. The traffic was light until I got to Bideford, when it began to build up, and the terrain rolling except for the long climb out of Bude. I reached Bideford around 1130 in much need of breakfast, which thus far the A39 had failed to provide. I headed into the town looking for some desperately needed caffeine and food. I found a super little cafe and a local bakery (where I picked up my “on the bike” food for the rest of the day I was back on the A39. The traffic was horrible as far as Barnstaple, and the climb out of Bideford long, though on a positive note it had finally stopped raining! As I climbed out of Barnstaple (the hardest of the day thus far) the traffic eased off considerably, and the views opened out as I rode onto Exmoor. Several long and steep climbs began to take their toll on my legs – Devon and Cornwall were proving as hard as I'd been warned – and I enjoyed the rest as I descended down into Lynmouth. However, as any cyclist will tell you, “what goes down must go up”, and Lynmouth was no exception. 25% for ¼ mile then 12% for two miles. The hardest climb of the day hard me at 3½ mph and in bits at the top. On turning round to look across the Bristol Channel the view was beautiful, and nearly worth the pain of the climb! I ate my final banana and enjoyed the tailwind, rolling roads, and great scenery that took me as far as

Porlock. Running on empty, but happily, ahead of schedule I stopped in Porlock – I had made it into Somerset, and from what I'd been told the worst of the climbing was done. I celebrated this with a massive slab of fruitcake and a coffee... which nearly found their way back out of me on the climb out of Porlock that I had not been expecting! I reached the YHA in Minehead just after 5pm, another great hostel set in the woods behind the town. I celebrated once more with a traditional Somerset cider and a good supper, feeling very positive that what was supposed to be the most challenging part of the ride was now done.

5th August

*Minehead – Bridgwater – Weston-Super-Mare – Cheddar Gorge – Bristol – Severn Crossing –
Chepstow
95miles*

Overslept – awoke at 0720 after an excellent night's sleep to dry roads and sunshine. My spirits were up and I was really looking forward the day ahead. I made excellent progress – legs feeling really good, and met a chap on my way out of Bridgwater who was cycling around the coastline of England and Wales. Chapeau! I WSM I met my friend Stuart who was joining me as far as Carlisle. We were keen to ride up Cheddar Gorge, even though it was about 15 miles out of the way, but it was a pleasant climb and the views from the top of the Mendip Hills were worth the detour. We found our way back to Bristol, and made our way through the town in bearable fashion, following the Avon River out towards the Severn estuary. The ride across the Severn Bridge did not include the crosswinds I'd feared it might, and it was about 4pm when we came off the bridge... when it all began to go terribly pear shaped! My gears had been playing up throughout the day, and I had had a go at sorting them out, unsuccessfully. In hindsight I should have found a bike shop in Bristol, but being the numpty I am decided to carry on... and managed to snap my chain just as we entered Chepstow. We managed to find a bike shop in the town... arriving just after 5pm... at which time it had closed! I had a spare chain with me, and a chain tool, but was reluctant to put on the new chain only to break it a couple of miles down the road with the original problem unresolved. Stuart put up with my foul temper very well, and we booked ourselves into a hotel in the middle of town. I was now 20 miles behind schedule... but a few ales that evening helped perk my mood up!

6th August

*Chepstow – Forest of Dean – Goodrich Castle – Herefordshire – Tenbury Wells – Clee Hill – Bridgnorth – Shrewsbury – Hawkridge Hotel
112 miles*

What an immense day – massive ups and downs, and a lot of riding. Quite a leisurely get up – the bike shop wasn't open until 9.30am, so we had time to faff and sort ourselves out for food for the day. I was hoping to get on the road for 10am, and play catch up after the previous day's unscheduled early finish. The bike shop (559 Bikes) was opened by the owner a few minutes early after she'd seen us waiting outside. Whist she fixed the bike I bought some shorts (one of the pairs I'd brought with me had proved unsatisfactory on the 2nd day), and picked up a little cake for the bike shop owner to thank her for getting my bike sorted before all her other jobs. We headed out of Chepstow just after 10am, climbing quickly up to the Forest of Dean, wonderful views of Lydney Sands and the Wye Valley on either side. Great descent down at Symmonds Yat before a quick stop at Goodrich Castle for a photo call. Passing through Ross-on-Wye, we spent the next few hours on the tiny back roads running northwards east of Hereford. The countryside was worth the extra climbing involved by staying off the main roads, and even though this is traditionally one of the flat days of a LeJoG ride, we still managed 2000m of climbing during the day. However, only seeing a vehicle every 5-10 minutes was blissful. We arrived in Tenbury Wells around mid afternoon, stopping for a sandwich and caffeine break, which gave us a chance to evaluate the day's progress... oops –

only halfway to Shrewsbury... another 50 miles still to ride that day minimum, without doing any of the catch up I'd hoped to. I'd assumed that if we stuck to A and B roads from this point the terrain would be mainly flat... no such luck, as straight out of Tenbury we ascended up Clee Hill. Whilst the views across Herefordshire, the Cotswolds, and the Welsh Border country were stunning, we did need to crack on. We continued a rolling B road as far as Bridgnorth, by which time Stuart was beginning to show signs of tiredness. I was keen to get at least as far as Shrewsbury, and so we stayed on a very unpleasant and busy A road as I set a reasonable pace on the front for Stuart to hang on to. We reached Shrewsbury around 7.30pm, and as Stuart did not have a tent with him, started the search for a hotel. I'd identified this night as being a potentially difficult one to find accommodation, but hadn't wanted to tie myself down to somewhere to reach that night. We eventually managed to find a hotel, but it was a further 15 miles up the road. We decided to eat something at a pub, during which time we set ourselves up for a night ride (it was now dark – but at least the traffic would be lighter), before heading north towards Whitchurch. When we got to the hotel, around 9.30pm, we felt somewhat out of place – a wedding party was going on and we were wearing rather malodorous lycra! Whilst I was getting us booked in, some of the wedding guests approached Stuart and asked us what we were doing (for some reason we stood out among all the morning suits and glamorous dresses! When he told them about my ride, several of the guests, and hotel staff sponsored me further. Fantastic! Great end to the day. I finished the day on a high – we'd ended up, by virtue of the hotel being further down the road, catching up on the previous day's losses, and people's kindness and generosity (bike shop, hotel guests and staff – the hotel also gave us breakfast on the house!) sent me to sleep in a happy place. Utterly shattered though – over 9 hours riding!

7th August

*Hawkridge Hotel – Whitchurch – Warrington – Wigan – Preston – Lancaster – Kendal – Windermere
125 miles*

After breakfast (for the first and last time on the trip brought to me) we got on the road for 7.15am – another long day was in store. We were also not anticipating scenery on a par with previous days – no offense intended, but Warrington, Wigan, and Preston, don't quite float my boat like Somerset, Wye Valley, and Herefordshire! We stopped off in Whitchurch at a local bakery to get provisions for the day, and proceeded to make excellent progress as far as Warrington, arriving around 10.20, well ahead of schedule. The next four hours passed very slowly – a seemingly endless drag of houses, LIDLs, and potholed cycle paths that threw you out onto the nearest busy motorway junction. Fortunately, we didn't get lost, and only took one wrong turn (for a hundred metres or so) down the A556 to Manchester. Just before Preston I spotted an opportunity on the map to get off the A roads, and find some quiet lanes. Stuart was riding alongside me, and somehow we collided on a bend, knocking me off my bike. Luckily, no major damage was done... except possibly to the eardrums of bystanders who came to see if I was alright, and heard my somewhat colourful language directed at Stuart! We made it past Preston around 2.30pm, and finally found a decent stop for a coffee and a sandwich. The route from now on simply involved following the A6 through Lancaster as far as Kendal, where I was hoping to stop for the night. The terrain was flat, and we made excellent progress as far as Lancaster – where I made a phone call to sort our accommodation for the evening. Kendal YHA didn't have space for both of us however, so we decided to head up to Windermere instead – a little further, and somewhat hillier, but worth it for the beautiful Lake District vistas. We arrived in Kendal just before 7pm at the end of a challenging day, and enjoyed a super meal provided by the YHA on the patio outside the hostel, with views looking across the Lakes. Stunning sunset included into the deal!

8th August

Windermere – Ambleside – Keswick – Carlisle – Longtown – Gretna – Lockerbie – Abington

110 miles

Slept like a log – this cycling lark is quite tiring! We had a good breakfast at the hostel, setting us up well for the day. We decided to ride through the Lakes, riding past Thirlmere and Grasmere before Keswick and farewell to the Lakes. The early morning meant for light traffic, and tranquil views across the Lakes and mountains. Once we got out of the Lakes, after a brief postcard stop in Keswick, the roads flattened out, and a strong tailwind pushed us merrily along towards Carlisle, where Stuart had left his car. We parted company just before lunchtime, and I decided to get through Calisle (mercifully simple) before looking for somewhere to get some food. I found a nice little bistro in Longtown, where I ate my last bit of English food for the trip. Soon after leaving Longtown, I crossed into Scotland, and followed the B road alongside the M74 from Gretna, through Lockerbie and up to Abington where I began my search for accommodation. A good road surface, a virtually traffic free route, and an unanticipated tailwind had put me in a good mood. However, the weather forecast for the evening and the following day meant that I was reluctant to camp unless I had no other options. I eventually found a reasonable hotel just before 7pm in Abington, and once again enjoyed a relatively early night.

9th August

Abington – Glasgow – Dunbarton – Helensburgh – Loch Long – Inverary – Loch Awe
110 miles

My fourth century ride in 4 days. I'd decided to go through the middle of Glasgow on my way to the west coast of Scotland, the other options being going north of Glasgow and west towards the southern end of Loch Lomond, or getting a ferry across the Clyde. I managed to pick up the same B road that I'd been on the previous day as far as Hamilton, where I began to make my way through the suburbs of Glasgow. I was pleased that I survived Glasgow without getting too lost, but less impressive perhaps was my choice of the A814 as the road out of Glasgow towards Dunbarton. Not recommended... even more so in heavy rain and spray! A couple of hours after I reached Hamilton I finally reached the other side of Glasgow, still on the A814 but by now much less busy. The road follows the coast alongside Loch Gare, passing HMRNB Clyde and Faslane. After a short and steep climb out of Garelochhead, from the top of which a picnic spot offered great views back towards the Clyde, I soon dropped back down to another sea loch, Loch Long, following the side of the loch through a tree lined route to Arrochar at the northern end of the loch. Unfortunately the road surface was of such poor quality that it's not a route I'll be recommending to anyone, despite the scenery! I decided to get my provisions for the evening from the village store in Arrochar, before carrying on to Inverary, where I was hoping to stay in the youth hostel (once again the weather forecast was not encouraging me to peg out my tent!). Before I reached Inverary there was the small matter of the long climb up to the pass at "The rest and be thankful", about 30 minutes ascent before the descent down to Loch Fyne. Skirting around the edge of the Loch, I could see Inverary on the other side... even though it was still a good 40 minutes ride away. When I finally reached Inverary it took me a while to find the YHA, crucially, because by the time I got there the hostel was full for the evening. I decided to carry on my way, and that I'd keep my eye out for an appropriate camping spot for the night, eventually settling for a nice location on the shores of Loch Awe. Under some trees, which I hoped would offer a little protection from the forecast rain in the morning, I was out of earshot of the (practically traffic free) road, about 15 feet above the water beneath me. It felt like I had the whole world to myself – well coated in midge repellent, I enjoyed a reasonable supper, and a beautiful sunset before the rain finally arrived just before 9pm. Glad Glasgow was done, really looking forward to the final few legs of the trip – over 750miles done!

10th August

Loch Awe – Dalmally – Cromelly Bridge – Ballahusich – Fort William – Glen Nevis

70 miles

An easy day, but a needed one. I slept fantastically, waking only once to contemplate the complete pitch blackness, and supreme silence of the water lapping on the shores of the loch near my feet. I began to come to my sense around 6am, to the sound of heavy rain on the roof of the tent. Considering it totally pointless to decamp earlier than necessary in the rain, I allowed myself time to ponder life's various questions, listening to the therapeutic sound of raindrops varying intensity above me. Unfortunately, by 7.30am, life's questions still unanswered, the rain had not abated, but I did need to get on the road. It took me a while, and a game of solo twister in the tent, to try and change, pack, put in contacts etc keeping everything dry, before the miserable task of taking down a tent in the rain (somehow the knowledge that it'll be wet next time you put it up never leaves me with a good feeling – and being as I was in Scotland I wasn't confident of many opportunities to dry out the tent!). I headed into the small village of Dalmally, where I found the village shop, which provided a hot drink, and some breakfast. I proceeded west towards Oban for over an hour – riding in this direction felt somehow utterly wrong – I was taking myself further and further away for JoG with every pedal stroke. However, on a positive note I did find an excellent coffee and a bacon and egg roll in a cafe enroute (2nd breakfast!). By the time I reached Cromelly Bridge and the Falls of Lora, the sun had come out to play, and the views across the Sound of Mull were breathtaking – regular photograph stops were required! I got to Fort William around 3pm, having stopped for lunch just after Cromelly Bridge. I popped into the local bike shop for a couple of spares – I didn't anticipate seeing another bike shop for several hundred miles. I bought my supper and breakfast supplies before making way to the YHA at the foot of Ben Nevis in Glen Nevis, a couple of miles outside Fort William. The early arrival gave me loads of time to wash my kit, read, and generally just rest.

11th August

Fort William – Invergarry – Eilean Donan Castle – Strone Ferry – Lochcarron – Glen More Estate – Torridon
110 miles

Dubious breakfast plans involved eating the leftovers of my supper the previous evening – ham and cheese sandwiches + fruit. Not an idea to be repeated! I didn't manage to get on the road until 8.30am, which in hindsight was a bad idea – this turned out to be the toughest day of the trip. Drizzle again in the morning (this was becoming a routine), but the forecast suggested this would break into few and far between showers during the late morning and afternoon. The A82 out of Fort William was not as bad traffic wise as I'd been warned, and it wasn't long before I reached Invergarry, where I turned north-west towards Skye. After climbing out of Invergarry, and reaching the summit of the climb offering breathtaking views down Loch Garry, I descended once more onto the A87. It was here that I realised how strong the wind was – and my mood wasn't improved when I saw heavy black clouds moving towards me. I put on ALL my wet weather gear before the rain reached me, but it was so heavy that within 15 minutes I was soaked to the skin. Despite the road generally descending, the strength of the wind, which was chilling me to the bone, was preventing me from making speeds faster than 10mph. After 3 hours (during which time I covered just under 30 miles downhill), I passed Eilean Donan Castle, soon after which I had to turn inland, crossing the peninsular. Several steep, and strength sapping climbs in still horrendous weather and I dropped past Strone Ferry (no ferry!) to Lochcarron. I couldn't see across the loch, but I knew that only a ½ a mile or so away was my route back into the hills to cross another peninsular... but I had to ride another very hilly 10 miles around the loch first. Stopping briefly in Lochcarron to get my supper and breakfast sorted, I realised I was still at least 2 hours away from Torridon, and it was already nearly 5.30pm. The ride across the Glen More estate had me in tears. Chilled to the bone, tired, and soaking wet, I climbed and descended seemingly endless times, struggling to control the bike in the strong winds. I was so cold I was struggling to feel my fingers and brake, despite my long finger

gloves, and 4 layers. At this point I was quite ready to quit, and go home. Eventually, after quite possibly the hardest day I've ever had on bike (including thunderstorms in the Alps) I finally saw signs indicating Torridon was approaching. I have never been so pleased to get off my bike as I was at the end of that day, after 11 hours riding, covering just 110 miles. Mentally and physically shattered, I wasn't sure if I could do another day on the bike like that on the trip.

12 August

Torridon – Kinlochewe – Achnasheen – Loch Glascarnoch – Braemore – Ullapool
66 miles

It's amazing what a good night's sleep, a tailwind (for part of the day at least!), and a (mostly) dry day will do for one's morale! The met for the day had the same forecast as the day before had had – showers. I was hoping that this time it would be correct! However, whilst eating breakfast in the YHA, I was not hopeful – the raining was hammering against the windows, the cloud hung low in the glen outside. The trees and plants were bending and swirling in the wind. I postponed my departure by writing some postcards, and by the time I left the rain had eased to a drizzle, which it did as far as Kinlochewe. Here I had a choice – I could turn left up the coast, or right and head inland. Looking left the clouds looked heavy and ready to unload a bucketful of water on me, whereas looking inland I could see white clouds, and touches of blue sky. Decision made! Riding inland I had a tailwind all the way to the A835, where I turned northwards, following this road up a 10 miles climb up to Loch Glascarnoch at the foot of which is a large dam. As I crested the top of the climb, the wind, from which I'd been sheltered on the ascent, hit me hard. As strong as the day before, I was ground to a virtually halt on the flat, though at least this time it was dry – if somewhat cold! After several miles skirting the shores of the loch, riding on the drops to keep myself in a low profile out of the wind, I began the long descent to Ullapool. On arrival in Ullapool I found a super little tea shop on a road away from the touristy harbour, where I got some warm food and a mug of strong tea to help warm me up. Whilst killing some time in a cafe and taking some photos of the harbour I enjoyed a pleasant conversation with one of the many people who were coming to take a look at my bike (it was either the stunningly handsome rider, the 4 panniers, or the 3 water bottles that was attracting all the attention!). Once again, when hearing about the charity I was riding for, he generously gave me a little money to put towards the cause. Fantastic. I got into the YHA just after 5pm, cheered by seeing that the forecast for the next 4 or 5 days was excellent!

13 August

Ullapool – Ledmore – Unapool – Scourie – Laxford Bridge – Durness
67 miles

Another short day, but one that I had been looking forward to more than any other during the entire trip. Despite a terrible night's sleep (the chap in the bunk above me was some sort of sleep dancer, and the bloke across from me was the Spanish National Snoring Champion), I got up around 7.30 really looking forward to the day. Breakfasting on Ambrosia Devon Creamed Rice (breakfast of king's!) I set off from Ullapool around 8.30. Population 1400, this was the largest settlement I'd be going through for a few days. The sky was overcast, and the air was damp, and although it was cold (I was wearing 2 layers, plus my gilet, and arm and leg warmers), I soon warmed up as I climb away from the sea. After about an hour's riding, as I approached Cul Moor, the skies looked very foreboding, and I was certain that I was in for another soaking. Happily however, it wasn't long before I climbed away from the clouds, somehow dodging the heavy rain in the glen. The day's ride essentially involved climbing away from sea level for long and sometimes steep climbs, before descending again... tough riding, but great views to take my mind off my legs. One climb in particular between Quinag and Glas Bheinn stuck in my mind, from where I could see for miles and miles across mountains, islands, and out to sea. Breathtaking. I stopped in Scourie for lunch – whilst the

climbs had me sweating heavily, my extremities were feeling the chill on descents. After a bowl of hot soup, a sandwich, and a somewhat disappointing cup of coffee I was back on the road, immediately tackling a climb that was marked with double arrows on the map, indicating that it was steep, for a long time. Nothing on Lynmouth is all I'll say!! With about 20 miles to go before Durness I came across more tremendous panorama. The moorland about 12 miles south-east of Cape Wrath was utterly deserted, the only indication of human civilisation being the thin single track road running through it. Complete silence and stillness. Beautiful. After the long descent away from the moors, I began to ride past the golden sands of the beaches which this part of the world is famous for. Whilst it was cold, a photograph could have made it look like the Bahamas... except for the people wearing jumpers and hats!

14th August

Durness – Tongue – Thurso – Dunnet's Head – Duncansby Head – John O'Groats
103 miles

I left Durness just before 8am, in the knowledge that the first half of the day was set to be hilly. I wasn't sure what to expect during the second half of the day, but the map led me to believe that it would be flatter as the day went on. The early start was worth it – I only saw 5 other vehicles in the first 90 minutes riding, and the skies were a striking blue, whilst the beaches stunning golden colour looked most appealing. I was treated to stunning views of Ben Hope (927m) as its summit cleared of cloud whilst I rode past, and the vistas of the mountains inland was simply awesome. A fast descent down to the Kyle of Tongue and the causeway across it was great fun, and after the long and steep climb away from Tongue, the constant climbing and descending began to ease off in regularity and in gradient. By the time I reached Dounreay Power Station the terrain had become almost pan flat, and I felt super good. Only 40 miles to go, tailwind, sun etc. The Orkney Islands began to come into view as I followed the coast road into Thurso where I stopped for a sandwich and coffee. I made the short detour up to Dunnet's Head, which gave me more great views back to the Highlands in the far distance to the south-west, and the Orkney's, just across the sea to the north-east. After Dunnet's Head I'd decided to ride past John O'Groats, and go to Duncansby Head, where the light house indicates the most north-westerly point on the British mainland, from where I made the final short leg into a frankly disappointing John O'Groats. After a few traditional photos, I headed back to the YHA 2 miles back down the road. My journey had taken me 12 days, and I'd ridden exactly 1200 miles.