

JOHN O'GROATS TO LANDS END

A Diary Of My Cycle Trip Done During October 2010

Overall distance cycled roughly 1200 miles

A bit of information about myself, I am male ,45 years of age, quite fit, and I'd been cycling at least 100 miles every week for many months before I set off on this trip.

My bike is not all that expensive, under £200.

Apart from train fares and bike repairs my daily outgoings were £5 or less.

Day 1:I had kept £74 aside for the John O'Groats trip, which was a good amount to have mainly for food for the first 7 days.

Before setting off I handed my bike into Halfords , as there were a few small issues that needed resolving, I felt any repair costs would be £20 or less as I only need pay for parts ,labour is free with the policy I have.

Unfortunately the bike was in worse shape than I thought, and the spare parts came to £60, Halfords were unable to contact me so continued with replacing parts.They were aware I was just about to do the End To End and made decisions about what to replace based on that.

So, shocked at first at the cost , I paid the money for parts and prepared for the journey, I was left with £14 to live on till I next get paid in 7 days time.I emptied my cupboards at home to give me some food to take with me, this added to the weight I was carrying of course.My bike at all times was too heavy to lift, especially so at the start of the trip.

I had bought a £4 Megatrain ticket in advance to take me from Southampton at 10 pm towards London,I could have stayed on and gone all the way up to London,but I decided in advance to get off at Woking ,33 miles from Kings cross ,and cycle into London ,I had 11 hours to go before the London to Edinburgh train was due to leave. Portsmouth to London is normally around £30 single which is why I chose to stay awake and do the journey this way, also even getting a morning train before off peak hours would still have left me rushing to get to Kings Cross.

I got off at Woking and cycled for hours in the rain, the rain never stopped till 6 am.

The plan today ,to get up to Edinburgh for the afternoon ,then catch a train to Inverness at 5pm ,then find a place to camp.My train tickets were booked in advance.

London to Edinburgh £14-70
Edinburgh to Inverness £10-30

Great value for a journey of that length. Price on the day would have been £150 to £200.

Distance cycled
18 miles from Gosport to Southampton train station
33 miles from Woking to Kings Cross

I arrived in Inverness just after 9pm and cycled out of town towards Dingwall, the front wheel made a lot of noise with each rotation [this was one of the faults I had told Halfords about]. I camped next to the road going to Dingwall.

Day 2: Woke up late in the day, after many hours asleep, I was worn out from not sleeping at all the previous day, and the lengthy train journey from London to Inverness. 9 hours spent on the train. The Inverness train had been a bit late.

Today the weather was dry with no wind, the bike had been playing up last night, I assumed the amount of weight I had in the front 2 panniers [around 25 lbs] was the source of the problem, so before I started cycling today I reduced the weight on both panniers and shifted the heavy items to my 2 rear panniers, this seemed to help, and the noise coming from the front wheel was less frequent, and gave me some hope that things would be okay.

I cycled to Dingwall and continued north to Tain on the A9, roughly 40 miles cycled today, the roads were fine, busy at times, but nothing severe or worrying, and drivers generally gave me plenty of space.

I'm going to continue tomorrow on the A9 and see how things go [I'd read on the web that the A9 was risky for cyclists, the people may have meant south of Inverness rather than heading further north].

I camped a mile from Tain in a small wooded area near a village or town.

I must say I began to get despondent when the bike originally started playing up, as with barely any money left, and repair shops scarce in the north it wasn't looking good, by the end of day 2 I was a bit more upbeat.

Day 3: Went from Tain across the large Dornoch bridge nearby, staying on the A9 and reaching Golspie, after Golspie for the 1st time I noticed the roads becoming more hilly, went through Brora and Helmsdale, found it difficult to find a camping spot in Helmsdale so cycled 5 miles further north to Ousdale and found one there.

Weather today was fine, very light rain for about an hour, otherwise dry, with a chill in the night air.

Camped on a side road off the A9 in Ousdale. Only 50 miles to go now to reach John O'Groats and the start of my main journey.

If you want to know why I spent 3 days cycling from Inverness up to John O'Groats it was because the train fare was £16 and I could easily have afforded it on the day of arrival in Inverness had it not been for the Halfords bill.

Day 4: Helmsdale to John O'Groats. 46 miles cycling

There was a bit of rain at night and strong winds for many hours, I camped a few miles from John O'Groats, in a field. Found it difficult to find a camping spot in John O'Groats itself, I didn't arrive until midnight, I looked all the way from Wick 16 miles away and didn't see much in the way of trees or other good places to camp on the whole journey.





Day 5: John O'Groats back to Helmsdale, and back to the exact same camping spot used 2 nights ago. 46 miles cycling. I also cycled another 10 miles in the dark looking for the camping spot, I went past it once and cycled to Helmsdale then headed back. Weather fine today.

The money I had is just about lasting me, I have £4-50 to get through the next 2 days. And apart from yesterday, when all I had was a bowl of cornflakes to get through the day, things have been okay. I'm thinking that when I do have money I'll up the daily mileage, as just now I'm taking it easy, little money for food and nothing at all for bike repairs should anything happen.

Day 6: Helmsdale to near Tain, didn't cycle for long today, started off at 6pm, cycling in the dark, only covered about 25 miles, passed Brora and Golspie and have a few miles to go to reach Tain, camped in Skelbo forest. Should reach Inverness tomorrow night. Weather fine today, no wind.

Day 7: Skelbo forest [near the Dornoch Bridge] to Inverness, all the way travelling on the A9. This took me from 12 mid day till 6pm. Had a dinner break in Inverness city centre, lit up the cooking stove and had some banana rolls and coffee, as people with a wide range of international accents walked by, I had never thought of

Inverness as being a haven for tourists before. While cooking one guy even took photos of me.

After dinner I then cycled towards Fort William [I had the choice of continuing on the A9 heading south, which I felt could be busy, or go down the scenic less used route, the A82, with the banks of Loch Ness frequently in view]. Loch Ness it was to be.

Cycled for a few hours and reached Invermoriston where I camped in a forest. 73 miles cycled today.

Had £2-50 left for food and I get paid tomorrow so I've just managed to get through the week on the money I left Portsmouth with.

Day 8: Invermoriston to Fort William distance 38 miles

Didn't cycle as far today, left it till 4pm before making a start, got some cash, cycled mainly in the dark.

Need to buy some batteries as I now only have my wind up torch as a front light, wore out all of my AAA rechargeable batteries. And the high powered 60 lumens hand torch I bought especially for this trip had stopped working.

It's cold cycling at night, but the weather is mostly dry.

Felt a bit of pain in my left leg near my shin, so didn't want to risk cycling a huge distance, planning to head towards Glasgow tomorrow.

Day 9: Fort William to Bridge of Orchy distance 40 miles.

Time seemed to disappear today, I was up and away by 12, did some shopping in Fort William, by the time I did that it was 4pm, 2 more hours of light before dark. I've been cycling a lot in the dark lately.

Planned to do 50 miles today. Glasgow was a small bit over 100 miles away, Crianlarich was 50+, so it was Crianlarich I headed to.

By 10 pm I was looking for a camping spot, but as I couldn't see how far away Crianlarich was [no road signs stating miles travelled] I just kept cycling.

Camped in a forest. Weather fine this afternoon, light rain and cold after 6pm onwards.

Day 10: Bridge of Orchy to Balloch [loch lomond]. Distance 44 miles.

I'm 20 miles from Glasgow, camping in Balloch, I could easily have reached Glasgow as it was at 8pm I decided on Balloch, I still had time to reach Glasgow. I felt loch lomond would be safest for camping, so did that.

Weather today was dry, occasional sunshine.
Easy roads, downhill mostly.

Day 11: For some reason I couldn't sleep last night, so set off for Glasgow at 6 am, distance was 20 miles and it was a fairly easy cycle, ended up in Glasgow west end, took me a while to reach the east end of Glasgow, which is the usual route to take if you are heading South to Carlisle, I passed through some of the most run down parts of the city which are currently under going redevelopment.

I lived more than 25 years in Glasgow and still don't know my way around the City, on the other hand I lived 7 years in London and know where most places are there.

I first went to Parkhead, then south to Hamilton, followed by Lanark. The road surfaces are terrible in Glasgow, pot holes and patched up roads everywhere, as I headed south there were loads of small hills to climb. The climb into Lanark was very steep, it felt like much more than the 14% ascent stated on the sign post, I never knew Lanark was so high up. I did a lot of walking and pushing today.

For some reason I had assumed that I could take the A74 from Glasgow straight down to Carlisle, this idea wasn't possible, so I had a long look at the map to figure out what routes would be possible, and where I would need to reach in the south before I could find a reliable route towards Carlisle.

A bit further on from Lanark is the B7076, which is a very quiet road, and was the route I took all the way to Gretna Green.

I finished off cycling at 6pm after 12 hours on the road and camped in a wood somewhere south of Lanark, I'll try and sleep tonight, Carlisle is 70 miles away.

Day 12: Had a good sleep and woke up at 7am, set off at 10am cycling towards Abington, met some members of a cycling club at Abington service station who commented on the huge amount of stuff I was carrying.

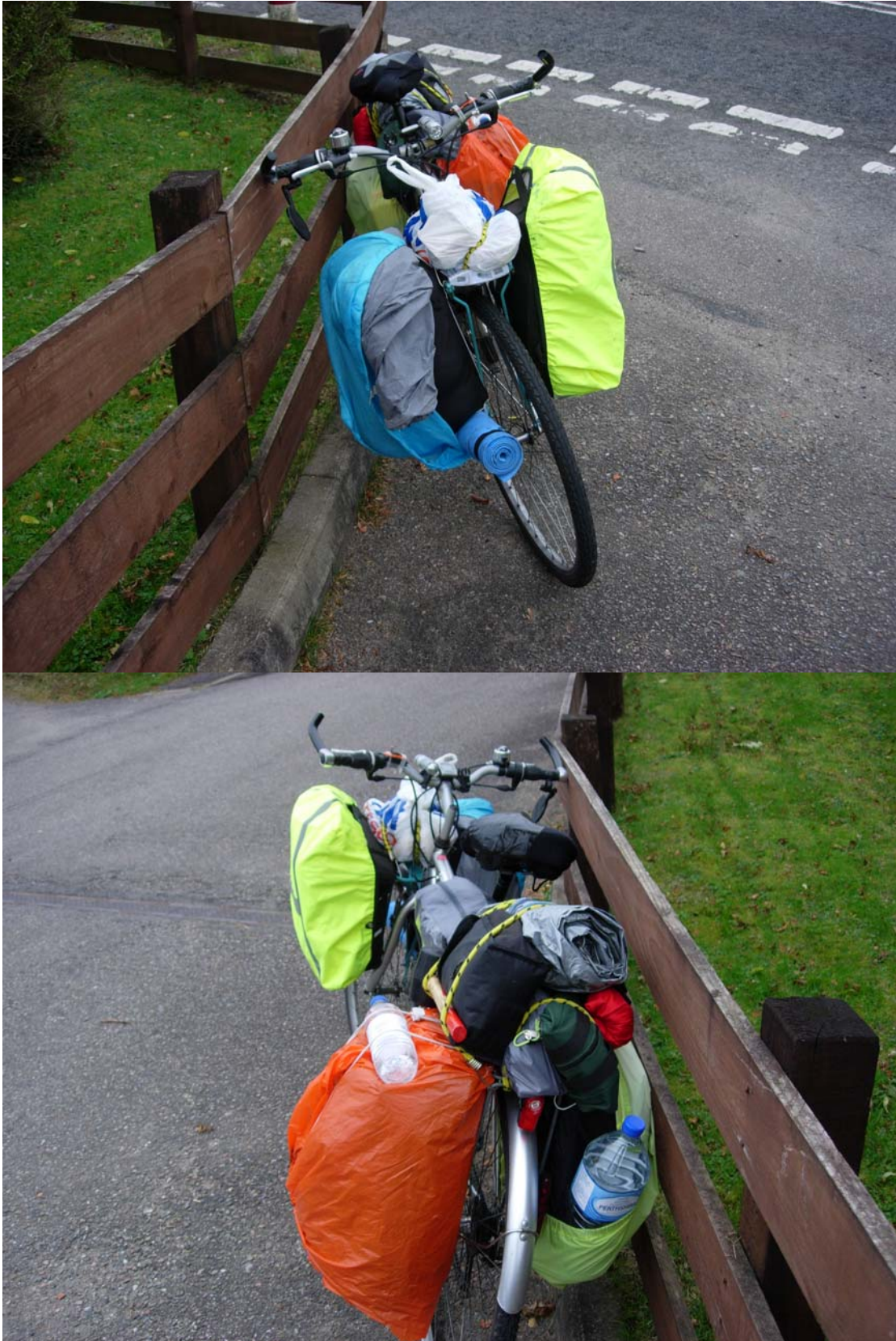
The photos below show my bike, and what I carried each day.

Inside the blue bag at the front was 2 sleeping bags, the yellow bag on the opposite side contained food, cup, bowl, and cooking utensils.

The orange bag at the back [a 25 litre rucksack] contained a lot of clothes, and the other bag had more food and odds and ends.

A steel framed camp bed is on the rear rack, and I carried 2 tents and extra training shoes at the time of the photo, I ditched the 2nd

tent and shoes later on. The tent had only cost £10 and the trainers wore out.



The roads were still poor and I continued on, they improved further on as I headed south towards Gretna.

Rain came down at 7pm, so although I really wanted to reach Carlisle [for symbolic reasons I suppose, leaving Scotland behind, entering England] I thought I'd call it a day 3 miles short of reaching Gretna.

The last 2 days have been tougher than all the others, mainly due to the poor road surfaces and hills.



Day 13: Had a great camping spot last night, the kind you find where being discovered or disturbed is highly unlikely, woke at 8am, but kept going back to sleep, by the time I was ready to pack it was 1pm, then I broke a spoke and fixed it, by now it was 3pm. It rained most of today, cycling wasn't enjoyable.

Reached Carlisle before dark, and got 2 ½ miles from Penrith in Cumbria for 8pm, tried to find a camping spot on a small back road, couldn't find anything, asked a passing cyclist if he knew of anywhere to camp locally and he invited me to his house nearby, gave me a meal, made me very welcome, and I stayed in his summer house next to the garden, he too had cycled Lands End to John O'Groats.

I only cycled around 30 miles today, got annoyed with myself for not setting out earlier in the morning.

Stayed in Bowscar.

Day 14: Bowscar to [Carnforth 8 miles from Lancaster] total distance 46 miles.

Started out cycling at 12 o'clock, my destination was Kendal and then Lancaster.

Shap, which is 10 miles from Penrith, is 1350 feet above sea level , I pushed the bike all the way to the top of this summit. Ice cold rain/sleet came down while I was up there, but it eventually cleared.

Stopped cycling around 6pm as I saw a good camping spot. Hopefully get a morning start tomorrow and head down to Preston and further south.

Day 15: Carnforth to Newton Le Willows. Merseyside.

Got up and started cycling at 3am, reached Lancaster, then Preston, then Wigan, by this time it was 1pm. Had a short break in Wigan and looked for the pier that George Orwell wrote about "the road to Wigan pier" . Not much to see since Wigan is inland.

Cycled towards, and almost reached Warrington. Cheshire , finished cycling at 3pm.

On waking at 3am it was cold outside, cars I passed all had ice on the windows, in the tent I had been comfortable enough sleeping in just a t shirt, but I was frozen while cycling, had to put my jacket hood up over my woolly hat to keep my head warm.

When planning this trip I made sure I was prepared for below zero temperatures. I always had gloves, scarf, hat, and extra clothing , as well as 2 good quality sleeping bags and a camp bed, so there was never a night when I was cold in the tent.

Did quite a few miles today, around 70, and things are looking positive for a finish within the next 8 days.

Camped at Newton Le Willows, had to cross a stream via unsteady wooden logs a few times with my bags [my idea of being in a safe camping spot, not easy to access]. I managed it that afternoon, but got my feet wet twice the next day trying to cross back over the stream.

Day 16: Newton Le Willows to Crewe , then West towards Whitchurch [Aston or thereabouts] total distance 39 miles.

Decided I'd cycle for less time today, I wanted to go to a G.A meeting in Crewe. I woke around 8am, rain was falling so I stayed in the tent till 12, then started cycling, I headed for Crewe and reached there for 7pm, enjoyed the G.A meeting and cycled back towards Whitchurch. Weather good for much of the day.

Camped near Aston in a forest next to the main road to Whitchurch.

Day 17: Aston to Whitchurch to Shrewsbury then Leominster and eventually stopping 7 miles from Hereford.

Done just over 70 miles today, when I reached Whitchurch the road sign said Shrewsbury 20 miles, Leominster 60 miles, so I focussed on reaching Leominster for the whole day, it was in the area I needed to be anyway.

Got to Leominster around 9pm and cycled further on towards Hereford to find a forest to camp in, managed to find one.

It rained a lot after finding the camping spot, but the weather hadn't been too bad earlier in the day, and I'm glad to have done a lot of miles.

Day 18: 7 miles from Hereford to Monmouth, only cycled 25 miles today, my priority was to get to the launderette, which I did in the afternoon, by the time I'd done that and some shopping it was nearly dark.

I had a difficult time leaving the place I camped last night, went round in circles trying to find an exit and the place was covered in mud, the forest was very steep in parts, and I pushed the bike while trying to find an exit, fell over with the bike



and got mud all over a pair of jeans, I had quite a bit of washing to do anyway and wanted to freshen up.

Occasional rain throughout today.

Earlier in the week I had hoped to reach Bristol by Sunday, that should still be possible as Sunday is tomorrow.

Day 19: Monmouth to Bristol.

30 miles cycled today, had to fix 2 broken spokes on the back wheel before setting off today, I was going over really rough roads in the dark last night and knew there was something up.

Anyway, set off to Chepstow, close by is the old Severn Bridge which I used, it has a good sized cycle lane on it and was free to cross for cyclists.

I had been apprehensive beforehand about crossing this vast suspension bridge, which is about 2 miles long, but I had nothing to fear it was easy. Camped 2 miles from Bristol in a place called Easter Compton. Finished cycling today before it got dark. It gets dark about 6-30 pm at the moment.

I feel I've now got 4 or 5 days left before I reach Lands End if I do a decent amount of miles per day rather than 25-30.

Day 20: Easter Compton. Bristol to halfway to Exeter.

Got up really early at 1-30 am in order to get a few miles done.

The place I had camped seemed to have a lot of dead trees, I leaned the bike against one and the whole tree fell down, the bike fell too into a shallow hole, so on waking at 1-30 I checked the bike out, it was okay, but had yet another broken spoke, so I fixed that and got going by 4 am.

Cycled into Bristol, it took a long time to find the correct route for Taunton [my next destination]. I even spent 20 minutes cycling on the correct road, but heading north rather than south, so had to backtrack.

Arrived in Taunton by mid day, had a quick break and then cycled towards Exeter, by this point I had been cycling nearly 12 hours and had travelled 62 miles. So I finished off at 4pm and found a camping spot.

I camped near a place called Greenham in Somerset [Next to the A38]. At first I was considering paying for a night in a caravan park, but after taking a look around one I felt better just camping wild like I had been doing, the camp site had all sorts of restrictions, gates locked till 8 am for example.

Weather wise it was another very cold morning, like the one I experienced a few days ago, there was some fog and plenty of icy grass, car windows were also iced over.

Day 21:Greenham.Somerset to 6 miles from Oakhampton [Devon]
Made slow progress today, rain came down for the first 4 hours while I was cycling, it stopped for a while then continued.
I went to Tiverton, then Crediton rather than through Exeter and Dartmoor.I had hoped it would be less hilly than that route which I had cycled along back in March of this year.
There is a 15% climb near Crediton and plenty of ups and downs all through this direction so it wasn't much different than going through Dartmoor.It may well have been more hilly actually.
I pushed the bike and walked a lot today.
Apart from the first 5 miles out of Bristol, yesterday was easier, I expect I'll find more hills tomorrow.
Cycled for 8 hours and found a place to camp while it was still light.

Day 22: Today was a good one, I put plenty of effort in, started cycling around 3 to 4 am, rain filled the early morning but stopped by 7 am and the day weather wise was very good from then on, sunny, warm and dry.
As I was still 6 miles from Oakhampton I began with reaching Oakhampton, then Tavistock was next, Liskeard was my next destination followed by St Austell I then started cycling towards Truro, but only got as far as a town called Sticker. There are some very odd town names in this area.
By 11am I had done 40 miles, by 5pm it was 60+ miles.Cornwall is endless uphill downhill whichever way you go, this really hits into your daily mileage.
So it looks like I will end the trip in Lands End tomorrow, I put enough time and effort in today for it to be achievable.
I was worn out after 15 hours walking and cycling, I felt it best to camp for the night.Earlier in the day I had been dreaming of doing the whole lot in 1 day [the lot being straight to Lands end without sleep, another 60 to 70 miles on top of what I had already just done].

Day 23:Sticker to 6 miles from reaching Lands End.
Cycled from around 11 am to 11 pm.
Done 60+ miles.
Weather fine throughout the day.Non stop hills all the way.In Cornwall any time you go down a hill you know that a long climb is only minutes away.

Cycled to Truro ,got lost a bit going to RedRuth, eventually went the right way, went to Camborne and then Penzance, finally cycling towards Lands End.

Got my 1st puncture today, a large thorn straight through the back tyre.

Booked my train ticket towards home, I got Penzance-Plymouth-Westbury for £37.

Westbury is inbetween Salisbury and Bath, 75 miles from where I live in Gosport.

I thought I would delay reaching Lands End, get some sleep and see it in daylight rather than ending the trip in the dark.Camped in a wood.

Day 24: Reached Lands End in the morning, Lands End was incredibly windy.I signed the book at the hotel to say I had completed the journey John O'Groats to Lands End , many cyclists do this.

After that I went back to Penzance to wait for the train.

The train would take me to Plymouth, then I'd change train to go to Westbury.A 4 hour journey all in.It was nearer 5 hours as the train was delayed on route.

I priced the various routes I could take from Westbury back to Portsmouth and to me they were all more than I wanted to pay.£10 for a 25 mile journey for example.

I'd already paid £37 and another £26 was required to take me to Portsmouth.So I cycled it, distance was 75 miles.

I began just after 8pm and arrived home at 4am.I had done this same journey from Westbury to Gosport back in March, my last visit to Cornwall, and I knew it was a quick and easy road with no major uphill stretches.

Westbury-Gosport 75 miles

Lands End and then back to Penzance was 16 miles.

So I did 91 miles cycling today.In 10 hours.

It's amazing what a lack of hills can do,I was still carrying all the panniers on the bike, apart from carrying very little food ,nothing had changed.

I also broke another spoke on the back wheel during the trip from Westbury, giving me a total of 5 broken spokes and 1 puncture for the whole trip.

I camped wild every night, usually in woods and forests, so accommodation was free.

I generally just spent money on food and water every day.

The tent I used was £7-50 from Asda. It didn't do too well when the rain was coming down very heavily, there was some water ingress when that happened, but it was fine with light rain and strong winds.



The route I went is shown above, I used very few B roads, I stuck mainly to the most commonly used A roads.

The A9 for example, then the A6 at Carlisle. From Warrington in Cheshire all the way to Monmouth near South Wales I used the A49 as often as I could, I only avoided A roads when they were used like motorways and the traffic was just too fast.

John O'groats to Lands end is 900 miles.

I had done nearly 200 miles cycling before I arrived at John O'Groats [Inverness to John O'groats was 140 miles as I went the long way] Gosport-Southampton-Woking-London also. And I did almost another 100 miles on the last day of my trip.