



25th Wedding Anniversary LEJOG Ride : 2011

Stuart & Sharon Woodsell

The daily journal of a 21 day trip, completed unsupported on a tandem to celebrate 25 years of marriage.

Day One: Land's End to Crows an Wra

Arrived at Land's End about 4:30pm and headed straight for the hotel to register for the journey. A large group of Joglers (John O'Groats to Land's End) arrived as we were off loading our Tandem, they had just finished in 13 days. They spun the usual tales about how they had battled through horrendous weather in Scotland and done their utmost to fill us with dread, however they wished us luck on our journey. We departed Land's End at around 6pm and headed towards the B&B at Crows an Wra (Witches Cross) stopping on route for dinner. We are both looking forward to tomorrow.

Day Two: Crows an Wra to Newquay

Had breakfast at 8am after a restless nights sleep which was caused by the presence of a fox around the farm. All night the dogs were barking and we were told the farmer was out at 3am trying to put the remaining chickens away. Thank heavens there was no gunfire in the night as we would have fled the B&B on our tandem in our nightwear, now that would have been a sight! Anyway judging by the number of foxtails proudly hanging around the farmhouse on wooden plaques I don't hold much hope for the fox's future. It is interesting to see how these creatures effect the lives of others and why they don't find them as cute as those whose day to day life is unaffected by them, in fact the farmer's wife was blaming the RSPCA for releasing foxes in their area as they had recently shot a three legged fox that had been amputated and stitched. We set off after a hearty breakfast and headed toward Penzance and onto St Michael's Mount which looked stunning on a clear and sunny day. Then there was a long climb over the hills towards Redruth where we stopped for lunch. We wandered around for a while whilst our lunch settled before heading off once more towards our destination for today, arriving at Newquay around 3pm.

Newquay seems to be full of people who are either in fancy dress or wearing far too little clothes to go out. Many of them seem to feel the necessity to display who's stag weekend they are attending and some fictitious nickname they have adopted for the weekend. I had to chuckle as Sharon could not work out why one chap had Drew Peacock on his shirt, her look of realisation when I pointed out the obvious was priceless.

After dinner we strolled along the cliff tops encountering the occasional flock of penguins, bunch of bananas, posse of cowboys and indians, keystone cops etc before deciding we had better retire to

the Sanctuary of our B&B before things get to lively. All in all a great day.

Day Three: Newquay to Launceston.

We set off around 9:30am on what on paper is the hilliest day of the entire journey and we were soon grinding our way up hill after hill. We chanced across a renovated Spitfire which was on proud display behind someone's garden wall so we stopped and took a few photos. We then dropped down to Bodmin in search of lunch. Launceston on a Sunday is about as lively as Chaffcombe is on Christmas day, the only place we could find open was the inevitable Wetherspoons which was already inhabited with the usual colourful selection of local regulars. So after a quick coffee and we headed off in search of a corner shop to grab a picnic lunch. We then commenced to climb what seemed to be the longest climb I have ever ridden, we seemed to be gaining altitude for miles. We eventually arrived at a small village called St Breward where we decided to stop and enjoy the picnic lunch we purchased in Bodmin. Then it was another long climb before finally reaching the disused airfield on the very top of Bodmin Moor. We then enjoyed around 5 miles of very welcome downhill towards our destination for the day. With about 8 miles still to cover we decided to stop in a remote pub called The Rising Sun, as we walked into the bar we bumped straight into David Badiel who was just leaving with his family. After a swift pint we finished our days journey arriving at the B&B at approx 4:15pm, today has been very tough and I fear we will be waking up with very stiff legs tomorrow.

Day Four: Launceston to Crediton

Firstly we must mention the Beechgrove B&B, this was truly the best place you could ever wish to find. You get an entire floor of the house including private bathroom, living room, and a second twin bedded room. All the finishing touches were perfect, highly recommended. After another hearty breakfast we headed out of town straight up a 600ft ascent 1:5 gradient! "morning legs" I heard Bea gasp between heavy breaths. Once over the top we immediately passed the Devon County border, we had made it through Cornwall without climbing off on a single hill. We soon turned off the "A" road and made our way through the quiet lanes which were very undulating to say the least. On one of these climbs in the distance we spotted another fully loaded touring cyclist pushing his bike up a steep gradient. As we spun our little gear with all our might we gradually caught up with him just as the gradient level eased enough for him to climb back on. We came along side and chatted for a couple of miles. "do you ever get off that thing on the hills" he asked, before I could say a word Bea proudly said "no, we have never got off on a hill yet". Alan was also doing LeJog and had left one day earlier than us. His journey is planned over four weeks so it is unlikely we will see him again. He was in his late sixties and enjoying life to the full, I sincerely hope that life is as kind to both Bea and I as we get to that age. At the foot of the next climb we wished each other luck and parted ways. We were soon in Okehampton having lunch under the shadow of Dartmoor. At this stage we are both feeling much better than we expected. It is very early days yet but with the notorious sections of Cornwall & Devon almost passed I cannot help feeling more and more confident of challenge ahead. The remainder of the day was very similar to the morning, we arrived at Crediton at around 3pm and sat and had coffee and cake in the square. After checking into our B&B we spent the evening sampling the local hospitality in the "Three Pigs"

Another great day.

Day Five: Crediton to Street

Each day has started the usual way, wake up Bea at 7am, both shower and then pack the panniers before having breakfast at 8am. Half hour for breakfast, load the bike and be on the road by 9am each day. Today we had arranged to meet some family and good friends at the Cross Keys in Norton Fitzwarren and I had advised we would arrive between 1pm & 2pm. I based this on estimating it at 35 miles and one coffee stop. Breakfast today was a shambles, there were only five guests but you would have thought it was fifty. Our order which was carefully taken the night before was a total waste of time as Sharon who

had specifically asked for No sausages ended up with three and I only got two in my sandwich which was all I was having!

Asking for toast was a mistake as this added another 20 minutes to the breakfast duration. Hence we were already 15 minutes behind schedule by the time we were underway. Today's route started by turning off the main road and navigating alongside the river, in just 200 yards we saw a buzzard, heron and a kingfisher. The route was fairly undulating but as this was our first day without a headwind we were making good progress and were soon in Tiverton having a coffee. It was shortly after leaving Tiverton that we realised that it is actually 48 miles from Crediton to Taunton which meant all the contingency time I had built in was more than used and we were looking likely to be late. The Exe Valley is sublime, a lovely quiet road which is just so beautiful, we seemed to be going up for miles after turning towards Taunton and the help from the wind was limited despite appearing to be blowing the right way. We then suffered our first soaking of the trip, a heavy shower had us pulling over and pulling on our capes ASAP. It was now gone 1pm and we were still 12 miles from the rendezvous point. So heads down and finally with a good bit of assistance from the following wind we were able to cover the 12 miles in around 30 minutes. We were lifted by the sight of our good friends Mo & Dave who were waiting in a lay-by and jumped out to enthusiastically wave at us as we flew past shouting "see you at the pub"

We arrived at 1:35pm, which was almost bang in the middle of our ETA, very pleasing. We had a great lunch with my parents, my sister Ally and Mo & Dave. It was a real boost to see some familiar faces and get their encouragement. We set off again shortly after 2:30pm and continued to Street, our destination for the day. Today was our longest so far at 67 miles, this made it quite tough and we are both feeling the cumulative fatigue which is gradually increasing day by day and are now looking forward to our first rest day after tomorrow's 50 mile leg to Bristol.

Day Six: Street to Almondsbury

We left the B&B to the normal schedule and set off in shorts and cycle shirts. Within a mile, just as we turned towards Meare a huge band of rain appeared which was rapidly heading in our direction, so we quickly dived under cover of the trees and got out our ponchos. We set off again in full wet weather gear but within another two miles the sun was out and both the roads and us were steaming, so off came the ponchos and away we went again. You guessed it, within another couple miles another heavy shower had us once again diving into the panniers. This was the theme of the entire day, we got soaked a couple of times but also dried out very quickly in the sunshine and the strong winds.

After a short coffee stop in Wedmore we headed to Shute Shelve to pick up the Strawberry Line cycle path which runs from Cheddar to Yatton. Anyone who is familiar with cycle paths will know that Sustrans place gates at all the access points to prevent mopeds etc from using them. These gates are normally awkward for us on our tandem but the particular design of these gates is much worse than usual and made it almost impossible to get the long wheelbase around the posts, so at every gate we had to remove panniers and wrestle the bike over/around the obstacle. This was fine for the first one, but within two miles we had to do this four times so we decided to leave the cycle path and

return to the road. It is a real shame that these facilities have to be made so inaccessible, before we left the path we had been rather enjoying this section of traffic free cycling which had included going through a long tunnel that was lit by cats-eyes which I presumed were using solar power. We had lunch in the cafe at Yatton station, here we waited for Jon to arrive who was cycling down from Almondsbury and was to guide us over the Avon and through the edges of Bristol.

Our route took us through Clevedon and up through the Gordano Valley. I am really pleased we had Jon to guide us here as the route to the Avonmouth bridge would have been very difficult to find. Crossing over the bridge is a rather unnerving experience as you are cycling against the flow of the heavy traffic in a narrow fenced path which is shared with mopeds and walkers etc. Once over the bridge Jon lead us through the suburbs and up a last few climbs to get to Almondsbury, a very welcome sight for us both.

Today was tough, the fatigue has really set in and we both need our rest day. The plan is to clean the bike and carry out a little routine maintenance. We have now covered 260 miles since Saturday and have around 760 to go!

Day 8: Almondsbury to Great Malvern

During our rest day (Day 7) I cleaned and oiled the bike, changed a faulty inner tube on which the valve had broken when I pumped up the tyres before leaving Land's End and fitted a new flap to the front mud guard to try and keep the water spray off of our shoes when it is raining. We also bought Sharon a new waterproof jacket and myself a spare pair of mitts and five more pairs of socks, it was about 7pm yesterday when we realised that the five dirty pairs had evaded the washing machine when the rest of our kit had been washed and were all still in the wash bag filthy dirty and damp. All this was only possible due to the fantastic help and unreserved kindness of our hosts Shelley & Jon who ran us all over Bristol late into the evening as well as cooking us some fantastic food, for this we will be eternally grateful.

Today was a 63 mile leg to Great Malvern. On paper it is a relatively easy day with comparatively little ascent to other days. Jon decided to join us for the first 22 miles to the Black Shed cafe on the Gloucester & Sharpness canal near Slimbridge. With a gentle tail wind we made reasonable time stopping only briefly to put on our waterproofs as the sky blackened and a few spots of thundery rain fell, this I am glad to say was as bad as the rain got the entire day. After a healthy breakfast of sausage and black pudding bap (healthy = no butter), we bid a final farewell to Jon and set off along the canal tow path. This was a real joy as we watched the many barges and canal boats heading up and down the canal with the occasional swing bridge opening and closing as we waited to watch the traffic pass through. We then left the canal and passed through the most picturesque village we have ever seen, Frampton on Severn. Sharon came up with the simplest way to express it, she said "if I had to draw the perfect English village this is what I would draw". From here we continued to head north stopping for another coffee stop in Gloucester, then bypassing around Tewkesbury in favour of a final stop in Upton on Severn. We had our coffee in The Bell cafe, a sad and tired looking place with dusty shelves, grubby china and stale cake, but the coffee was hot and tasted good. The final leg to the B&B was made a little harder as we turned into the southwesterly wind for the final 5 miles. We enjoyed a great Italian meal in the evening before catching a taxi back to the accommodation. We are both feeling pretty good at the moment, with the exception of some very tender behinds which is not helped by the pan flat terrain. Tomorrow we head to the Iron Bridge Gorge and hope for a few more hills!

Day 9: Great Malvern to the Iron Bridge Gorge

Last night's B&B was rather a strange experience. Whilst in general it was a comfortable room with all the usual trimmings there were two things that really let it down. Firstly the temperature, our host explained that the heating is kept on all year as they still feel the cold after living in East Asia for a number of years. This would have been fine, but he then went on to explain that the radiator valves are all faulty and you cannot stop them from belting out heat. Secondly the bath water was tepid at best, which meant when we had a bath we had to boil five kettles of water to add to the tub just to make it tolerable. Unfortunately the kettle was so slow the whole cycle of boil/pour/boil seemed only just sufficient to sustain the temperature. My feedback here will be to invest in a new boiler and radiators.

Once again we set off to schedule and after about seven miles we decided to grab a coffee in Worcester. We had a great chat to a chap who had already cycled 15 miles that morning to buy some resin to finish a canoe he was building which is due for sea trials next weekend in Devon, so keep an eye on the local news next week!

Our next stop was in Stourport on Severn which was a lovely little place really bustling with activity. It had a permanent funfair on the river bank that remind me a little of Weymouth years ago, the kind of paradise that a child never forgets but as adult it soon loses its appeal. It was from this point that our day started to go horribly wrong. Our planned route followed a national cycle path routed

alongside the Severn valley railway to Bridgnorth. Initially this seemed like a good choice as the traffic was non-existent and the road surface was good. After several miles of undulating terrain we arrived at the final river crossing and faced a choice, we either had another long climb up through a village to pick up a B-road as planned or we had the option of continuing along the cycle path which ran parallel to the river and was signposted Bridgnorth. A quick check on our road atlas confirmed this looked ok so we decided to take this option, with the benefit of hindsight this was a big mistake. Almost immediately the path deteriorated to a compact gravel track with horrendous undulations up to 30%, on one of these I made the fatal error of trying to force a gear change whilst Sharon was pushing hard on the pedals and snapped the gear cable. We then spent 30 minutes carrying out a repair whilst cursing the section of cycle path we had chosen. Once on our way again we had no choice but to continue along the fated route we had chosen thinking that it could not get any worse, but it did. To sum it up the path became so bad that we were unable to cycle, we had to battle our way through nettles and brambles, up and down steep slopes where the surface resembled a trekking route in the Lake District and when we finally hit a road it had taken us over an hour to cover little more than a mile and we were both completely demoralised. On a trip like this it is inevitable that you will have many high and low points, well this was the lowest we had been. We had a coffee in Bridgnorth before a final push to the Iron Bridge B&B where our spirits were immediately lifted by the sight of our dear friends Mo & Dave who were outside the accommodation enthusiastically waving and jumping up and down, all the day's troubles were immediately forgotten by such a simple act. After a quick shower and change we met up for an evening together. Mo & Dave gave us both a present, mine was a tin of cyclists mints and Sharon's was "LeJoG or Bust" T shirt which Dave had thoughtfully designed with a picture of a tandem and the planned mileage of our trip, wonderful gifts that really lifted our spirits once again. We had a lovely evening together where we enjoyed some good food and great conversation, we cannot thank them enough for making this much effort to share our adventure and helping to cheer us up on what could otherwise have been a truly forgettable day. Tomorrow we head to Northwich, apparently in the rain!!

Day 10: Ironbridge to Northwich

It was really nice to spend a little time with Dave and Mo and we shared breakfast together at the B&B before packing up ready to leave. The forecasted rain had already commenced and therefore it was full wet weather gear from the off. We left on schedule waving farewell to our friends and proceeded to exit the gorge by the flattest possible route. The weather here was pretty awful, the rain was relentless for the entire day so we had kept our heads down and had already covered 32 miles before we pulled into a very run down looking pub in Market Drayton. It looked so uninviting that we considered giving it a miss however we were so wet and cold that the thought of a coffee was irresistible. So I checked that they were actually open and we went in. "Not a nice day for cycling" the barmaid quipped, "please tell me you do coffee?" I asked, "of course, go and sit down and I will bring them over" she said. This was about 11:45am on a Sunday lunchtime, the place was empty except for three others sat in a huddle watching Sky Sports on the big screen. After a couple of minutes the barmaid came over with two large mugs of hot steaming coffee, we could not wait to get our hands on them. "Mum said you both look so cold and wet that these are on the house" she said, to say we were speechless is not really strong enough. This place looked like it needed every penny it could earn and much more but this spontaneous act of kindness was priceless to us, we had walked in as two total strangers dripping wet and leaving a trail of water behind us, sitting on their furniture wet through and they give us a free coffee, sometimes life just keeps surprising you. We thanked them sincerely before heading back out into the relentless rain. We decided to forego another coffee stop in favour of making headway into the 63 miles required to reach our destination for the day. We had a good tailwind and were soon at Winsford which was only about 7 miles from our destination. Then suddenly like an oasis out of the gloom appeared the golden arches of MacDonalds, we tried to resist but could not, never has a Chicken Legend and a Latte tasted so good!

> We got to our B&B at about 4pm, this is by far the poorest accommodation so far, just what we didn't need after 63 miles in the rain! We now have clothes hanging off of every possible ledge or hook in an attempt to get them dry, the proprietor has turned the heating on for us which is very kind

so hopefully we will get most of our clothes dry before tomorrow when we head to Preston, and we will keep our fingers crossed for better weather.

Day 11: Northwich to Preston

Northwich is a very run down area to which I have no desire to ever return. Last night we had no choice but to have a picnic tea in our room as there were no eating places within walking distance of the B&B and neither of us fancied trawling around Northwich in either a bus or taxi. The breakfast today was very poor, who ever heard of a B&B that doesn't do either fruit juice or toast. Our route today started off on quiet b-roads crossing over motorway after motorway, M6, M56, M62, M61 as well as countless dual carriageways and major trunk roads, this really was the theme of the day. We followed a small toll road which crossed over the Manchester Ship Canal near Warburton, whilst bicycles went for free we were both still highly amused by the toll for cars, single journey 12p, return 20p, hardly seemed worth it on a single lane crossing.

Shortly after we caught up with two lady cyclists called Sandra & Mary who were also fully loaded and heading to John O'Groats. We had a brief chat as we rode alongside discussing mainly the horrendous weather of the previous day and both our destinations for tonight. It is great when you occasion across some like minded individuals who are facing all the same challenges as you. We eventually wished them luck and bid them farewell and pushed on to our next coffee stop which was in a garden centre. This cafe received a "highly recommended" accolade from us both as they served milky coffee by the pint and the cheese scones were simply divine.

> After this we had a choice to make, 1250ft of ascent to pass to the right of Bolton, or the traffic on the A6 to pass to the left. After a brief evaluation of the A6 we both agreed that after yesterday's trial we would welcome an easy afternoon and the possibility of an early finish, so the A6 it was. This actually turned out to be a good choice as this section of the A6 turned out to be reasonably cycle friendly and also relatively quiet. We looked down on the Reebok Stadium as we passed by Bolton and we also noticed the weather was turning rough on top the hills where we had planned to cross over.

We stopped for lunch in small roadside cafe only 10 miles from Preston, we had a great chat to a local couple who also owned a tandem and they were amazed that we had travelled all the way from Cornwall in little over a week. The final 10 miles were slightly less enjoyable as we picked our way around main roads to find our way across Preston to our accommodation for the night, arriving at 14:30hrs. Today was a welcome relief after yesterday and just what we needed. The hotel here is fantastic and we had a great evening meal in the restaurant. Tomorrow our destination is Kendal, a shorter day is purposely planned at 48 miles because the following day we have to cross the infamous Shap at an altitude around 1500ft.

Day 12: Preston to Kendal

Our hotel in Preston was great. We had a lovely evening meal and we were both treated to a drink on the house. In the morning we followed our usual routine arriving for breakfast dressed head to toe in Lycra ready for the off. A guy who was just filling his cereal bowl enquired whether we had already been out for a ride and we explained our journey in detail. He also asked where we lived and was shocked when we said Chard, "you are joking, I live at Forde Abbey" he laughed. What a small world this is, it turned out his business is a freelance health and safety advisor for major sporting events and he informed us that there was a group of 400 cyclists on their way down from John O'Groats to Land's End. We had a good long chat about time trials and road races etcetera which I used to organise in days gone by and how the health and safety requirements have changed dramatically over recent years making these events ever harder to organise. We left at around 9:30am about half an hour later than usual as breakfast was slow and I had a small panic which meant unpacking all my panniers to find my wallet which I had mistakenly packed amongst my clothes. Today was a beautiful sunny day with little wind and a very flat route which meant it

seemed like we covered the 22 miles to Lancaster in no time at all and we were soon enjoying a COSTA Latte on a bench in the shopping precinct. I actually like sitting on benches in these kind of public places and watching all the local characters who seem to be very similar in every town. Our conversation over coffee was the incredible number of people in mobility scooters that were flying around the pedestrian precinct with great skill and dexterity, some of the manoeuvres they execute with ease are not to be under estimated, we watched with great interest one particular guy in his 4wd offroad model weaving in and out off the crowds as he went up and down the precinct. We were soon on our way again and made good progress passing through Bolton Le Sands and Carnforth before we decided to stop again. We have found the secret to this long distance cycling is to have lots of regular stops even if it is a short stretch of the legs in a lay-by or gateway, this relieves the pressure on your behind, stretches your muscles and gives you opportunity to encourage each other when things are getting tough. We arrived in Kendal at around 3pm and were greeted by a very friendly hostess in our B&B for the night, it makes such a difference when you are greeted this way rather than merely received by some grumpy individual which you have to wonder why they are in the B&B business at all. Our evening meal was interesting, the actual food was very good but the portion sizes were ridiculously small, Sharon's main meal which was described as braised beef with root vegetables and a horseradish mash was served on a plate no bigger than a saucer and my sautéed potato was about equal to 3 chips. We returned to our room for an early night after Sharon said she was very tired, this of course had nothing to do with Holby City. Tomorrow we tackle a real stiff challenge as we cross Shap Fell to Carlisle, we are both feeling pretty good and the legs are holding up well apart from we both have some minor niggling knee pain. After tomorrow we are due our second and final rest day.

Day 13: Kendal to Carlisle

Today was a day that we will never forget, and for all the right reasons. We had a lovely breakfast as we sat discussing the miserable weather to which we had awoken and the legendary climb of Shap Fell which starts just a few miles into today's ride.

We both decided to depart wearing shower proof jackets and overshoes, but within half a mile we had stopped to add ponchos as the rain was now quite heavy. By the time we hit the foot slopes of Shap thankfully we were able to disregard the ponchos again as it was getting very warm and the rain had reduced to a misty drizzle. As we climbed into the clouds the visibility was very limited however in the distance we saw another cyclist who had already summited from the opposite direction and was descending towards us at full speed, as he passed by he yelled encouragement to us. We were just discussing how nice that was when another appeared from the mist all lit up by Hi-vis and he again shouted to us whilst punching the air like we had just won a stage of the Tour de France. From this point onwards we had about seven miles of climbing to reach the summit and we were cheered the whole way up by a continuous stream of cyclist, almost every single one shouting some kind of encouragement. The exception to this was one pleasant lady who just as we had hit a false summit, and had dropped a few hundred feet to a bridge crossing, shouted "the worst is yet to come, you don't want to look around the corner"

She was right of course, the gradient steepened and the climb seemed to disappear into the heavens with only the distant sight of a car headlights in the clouds to be seen. We were oblivious to the pain, the adrenalin rush of all these fellow travellers encouraging us along made our climb easier and we were pleasantly surprised when after 70 minutes of continuous climbing we passed the memorial stone which marks the summit and pays respect to all those who used this notoriously difficult route during the decades gone by before the M6 opened.

Today we had reaped the rewards of all our 2000+ miles of winter training and glided up over this infamous climb with relative ease. It was now our chance to return the favour encouraging group after group of struggling cyclist as we occasionally hit 50 mph down the other side. We passed another tandem, someone riding an elliptical cycle, and another chap heading up the climb riding a hand bike.

As we pulled into Shap village itself we had already descended around 600ft. In the village there was a temporary feed station for the hundreds of cyclist heading in the opposite direction to Land's End, and as we pulled in to have a chat we received a tremendous round of applause from the

organisers and the remaining few cyclists. As we were being congratulated on our journey so far we were treated to as much free food and drinks as we liked and encouraged to take as much as we could possibly carry. They worked hard as they hurriedly packed away their feed station to move it on further along the route. All in all this was a morning we will never forget for the rest of lives. Whilst we were in a cafe in Wedmore what seems like ages ago but, but was actually less than a week. A waitress we had chatted to had told us about an American couple staying in a local guest house that had flown over with their bikes to complete the LeJoG. As I sat by the wall munching my second pot of free rice pudding you can imagine my interest as I heard these two American accents discussing the fortuitous timing of their arrival in Shap and how on earth they were going to carry all this food. Well it turned out that this was the very same couple as they confirmed their stay in Wedmore. We had a good chat about our journeys so far and our planned routes for the rest of the ride before wishing each other luck and heading off towards Penrith and Carlisle. The remainder of the day was undulating and fairly quiet, we crossed over the M6 several times before arriving in Carlisle at about [2pm](#). We had completed today's 50 miles at a pretty good pace considering the 3000ft we had ascended during the course of the day. We sat in the shopping precinct and had a coffee before heading off to find our accommodation for the next two nights. Tomorrow we have a rest day which will be used to find a laundry and do some washing.

Thanks again to all those who have taken time to write us some words of encouragement, this is very much appreciated and helps immensely when the going gets tough. We both feel great at the moment and we are looking forward to moving on into the remoteness of Scotland.

Day 14: Carlisle to Moniaive

We had a great rest day in Carlisle, we spent the morning in the launderette washing and drying all our kit and in the afternoon we decided to ride the Settle-Carlisle line which has always been a desire of mine. It was quite late by the time we had finished the washing so we had to catch the 14:04 train from Carlisle. The journey was every bit as enjoyable as I had hoped and it was a welcome rest for our legs. At Settle we had two options, as we arrived at 16:43 there was a train back at either 16:45 (two minute connection) or 18:56 which would have meant having an early dinner in Settle, so we decided on the 16:45. As we arrived at Settle we prepared ourselves for the dash over the footbridge and as soon as the train came to a halt and the door release light was illuminated we were off. We hurtled across the platform and as we climbed the steps of the bridge we could see the 16:45 to Carlisle pulling into the station and we knew we had made it. The platform guard came over and said "you two certainly like to live dangerously, do you know how long it was to the next train?"

"Of course" we said, "you two should be bloody certified" was his reply as he wandered on down the platform chuckling to himself.

On Friday we left the B&B slightly earlier than usual and got caught in the rush hour traffic for ten minutes. The cycle route to Gretna Green is somewhat difficult to find so I had researched it well beforehand, the last time I done the LeJoG in 1997 the route went up the A74 but since then the M6 has been extended beyond Gretna and the old route was reclassified as a motorway. The new route is a relief road that runs parallel to the M6 but is not signposted so that cars are not encouraged to use it to avoid the extra few miles required to travel the M6 route. We found the route without too much trouble and were soon taking the obligatory photos by the "Welcome to Scotland" sign before enjoying a coffee in the COSTA. While we were busy enjoying our coffee the weather gods had decided to conspire against us and what had started as a reasonable day suddenly turned horrid. We delayed the inevitable as long as possible however eventually we had no choice but to leave for Dumfries in full wet weather gear. The next 25 miles were pretty awful, we hardly said a word to each other as the rain just lashed down on us relentlessly and made us both quite miserable. As we sat in the cafe in Dumfries there was very little positive to chat about, yes we had made it to Scotland but the weather that greeted us had somewhat dampened our spirits and was making our day very hard to endure. We were both soaked through to the skin and the longer we sat there pondering whether to make a dash for it, the colder we were becoming, until eventually we had no choice but to

continue in the rain. As we gradually clicked away the remaining miles the rain eased a little and occasionally the sun would just make the token effort to try and brighten the day from behind a thin curtain of cloud. Needless to say we were both very relieved to reach Moniaive and get out of our wet clothes and have a nice hot shower. The hotel we booked us a little run down but the staff are incredibly helpful and even tumbled dried all our wet gear so that at least we can start again tomorrow with dry shirts and socks. The weather forecast is again horrid and there appears to be no let up in the forecast over the coming days, which makes tomorrow's prospect of another 62 rain soaked miles very uninspiring.

Day 15: Moniaive to Ardrossan

We woke to sound of rain dripping heavy on the window ledge so we immediately knew the prospects of a dry day were non-existent. The persistent rain is becoming quite tedious now and the problem is the more you try to weatherproof yourself the more you sweat and you just get soaking wet from the inside.

We had breakfast, packed our bags and departed by the usual 9am target. We immediately started climbing into the drizzle and it was not long before we had to stop and remove our base layers as we both became too hot. This first ascent was a steady climb that went on for about seven miles and climbed to 1100ft before dropping through a beautiful gorge to Loch Doon (I thought this sounded like a late night in a Scottish pub), before eventually reaching the small town of Cairnsphairn. Here we found a nice little cafe for a welcome coffee stop and I could not resist a bowl of hot steaming porridge which I covered in honey and tasted divine. Not long after leaving here the road started ascending again and it was several miles before we had regained another 700ft and went over the top of the second mountain pass of the day. All this time the weather was a mixture of drizzle and heavier showers so we were once again wet through and feeling pretty miserable. We always knew there was a real prospect of bad weather in Scotland, we had hoped that by choosing June to fulfil our ambition we would be lucky, we had dreamed of riding through the glens in our short sleeves drowning in sunshine, and not rain. As the day went on the weather worsened and the showers turned heavier and longer. We passed briefly through Ayr but decided not to stop as it was race day and everywhere seemed to be full of drunk Scots who were a little rowdy to say the least. We briefly pulled into a corner shop to grab a bite of lunch and as we departed we were treated to a rendition of "The Goodies" theme tune from yet another group of racegoers who found us amusing. The rest of the day seemed to take an eternity as we picked our way through numerous small run down towns which seemed to be distinctly cycle unfriendly. We were both very glad to finally see the sign for Ardrossan after another 63 rain soaked miles with a headwind and nearly 3500ft of ascent. We are fortunate again tonight that we have the use of a tumble drier and radiators in the B&B, so we spend our free time trying to get dry for tomorrow.

We did walk down to the town in the evening to get some dinner but the one and only restaurant which looked ok was fully booked, so we ended up in a fish and chip shop, not the best cycling food but it tasted great.

Tomorrow we ride across Arran to Kilmartin, this looks to be a hilly day's riding of around 55 miles and we're hoping for some relief from this relentless rain.

Day 16: Ardrossan to Kilmartin (via Arran)

The day started wet, so as usual we left in full wet weather gear and headed straight to the ferry port to catch the 09:45 boat to Arran. According to our host at the B&B in Ardrossan the ferry to Arran is more expensive to travel on per mile than the QE2, not sure about this but 20.50 was plenty dear enough for two foot passengers and a tandem. As we relaxed in the reclining chairs we were both warm and dry and the thought of heading out into the wind and rain again was not very appealing. As I gazed out into the mist I imagined we were sailing to Cherbourg and heading south to find the sunshine, just like we had every year when the children all lived at home. The Arran ferry was much larger than I expected and we both thoroughly enjoyed the one hour crossing which took

us south west and further away from our ultimate destination. Once we had disembarked we immediately headed north along the Coastal route accompanied by many other cyclists who had also made the short crossing. After around 6 miles the route then turned west to cross over a mountain pass and we took the opportunity to take a few photos, the mountains looked fantastic as they briefly appeared and then disappeared in the low cloud. The climb was quite long and steep with the gradient passing 20% in places; we held our place amongst the stream of cyclist which had left the ferry with us and overtook many who had passed while we had our brief photo shoot. This was very pleasing and we were actually one of the first bikes to pass over the summit and start the fast descent to Lochranza where we were to catch the second ferry of the day to the Mull of Kintyre. Just as we hit the outskirts of the town we could see the ferry at the docks and we thought we had timed it perfectly; however in the final quarter of a mile, despite pedalling like mad, we watched the bow doors close and the ferry pull away from the quay. We now had an hour and a quarter to wait for the next scheduled crossing at 13:15hrs and we had only covered fifteen miles. Whilst we had a coffee and cake at the Sandwich Station cafe we had a great chat to a Scottish couple called John & Mary who were on the first day of a two week holiday travelling between many of the islands of the Outer Hebrides. We listened to their planned itinerary with genuine interest and then told them all about our adventure to date so the time seemed to fly past. Before we knew it the ferry was fast approaching the dock on its return voyage, so we bid John & Mary goodbye and got ready to embark. This was a much smaller ferry and carried only six cars, the crossing was about 30 minutes so by the time we got ashore in Claonaig on the Mull of Kintyre it was almost 2pm and we still had another 35 miles to reach the B&B in Kilmartin. The road from Claonaig was a single track lane with passing places that started ascending almost immediately after leaving the port. We again left amongst a group of about ten cyclist of which only a couple of were carrying full panniers like us. This climb was the toughest of the day and the gradient reached 25% on one hairpin bend before easing back again to a more manageable steepness. Before long we were over the top of the climb and descending through the Glen to Tarbert where we stopped for a coffee and refuelled on Jelly Babies, Butter tablet and a bag of peanuts and raisins. With around twenty miles still to cover we kept our rest short and set off along the banks of Loch Fyne. The final section of today's route was fairly flat so we made good progress arriving at our accommodation at 17:30pm, our latest arrival to date.

After a damp start, today had actually turned out to be quite a pleasant day that was mainly dry but with a noticeable northerly headwind. We head a fantastic meal in the village hotel followed by a short stroll around cemetery reading the headstones.

Tomorrow we head to Balachullish deep into the Highlands at the foot of Glencoe. The planned route is 60 miles which will take us past 800 miles to date.

Day 17: Kilmartin to Ballachulish

Today looked to be a tough challenge on paper, and this was exactly how it turned out.

The road out of Kilmartin climbed almost 800ft within the first couple of miles and with very tired legs the hills seemed extra difficult today so we stopped at the summit of almost every climb to recover a little before descending down just to start climbing all over again. We were treated to some fantastic views of the lochs and mountains which now surround us on all sides. Sometimes as you ride through the Glens it is impossible to see where the road could possibly go next, and then as you turn a corner you see a little gap appear between the rocks and you see the road disappearing to another hidden path and you again try to guess its next course. By the time we stopped for lunch at Oban we had already covered thirty miles and climbed over 2,200ft to cross five separate mountain passes of varying difficulty. We sat on the harbour wall and ate our panini and salad box followed by a rice crispy cake for me and a raspberry and white chocolate muffin for Sharon. Oban is an interesting little seaport with a bustling harbourside. The most unusual feature here is a replica roman coliseum which sits high on the hillside overlooking the town. I am told it was built as a folly to keep the stonemasons in work over the winter months and was never actually finished. We were very reluctant to leave Oban as the sun was shining and it was really very pleasant sitting on the harbour wall watching the ferries come and go carrying their mixed cargo of freight and holiday

makers. As we headed off we immediately resumed the theme of the morning with a stiff climb out of Oban followed by a fast descent back to sea level. We were then treated to a nice section of undulating road which ran along the shores of Loch Linhe. The Scottish tourist board are investing in a fantastic cycle path which will run the entire length of this stretch of the route. The surface is lovely smooth tarmac and the route in general runs parallel with the A816, we were able to use this on a couple of sections that were finished but the construction is ongoing and the route is not yet fully open.

Our final stop of the day was a lovely little cafe on the top of what turned out to be the last real climb of the day. It overlooked an old castle which was built on the shore at Portnacroish. From here we enjoyed the last twelve miles to Ballachulish although the B&B was further past the bridge across Loch Leven than I expected and we will have to backtrack a couple of miles tomorrow before we head north through Fort William.

Today was another 62 miles and we now have just over 200 miles to complete our journey.

We are both feeling the fatigue in our legs now and each day is getting harder. We have no more rest days to come so the only thing we can do is keep the bike in a low gear and spin our legs as much as possible. The forecast tomorrow is for more rain and a headwind so it will be another tough day.

Day 18: Ballachulish to Fort Augustas

Our B&B in Ballachulish is accredited by the Scottish tourist board as being cyclist and walker friendly mainly due to the provision of clothes drying facilities and secure bike storage. This is the first establishment at which we have stayed to partly operate on an honesty policy for snacks and drinks which are left in the dining room for you to help yourself. The breakfast however was accredited by Sharon as the best yet on our entire journey, as I have only had two fried breakfasts so far I am in no position to disagree. I am however on my nineteenth sausage sandwich of the trip and the out and out leader so far is Kendal.

We set off to schedule on a lovely morning with lots of blue sky and excellent visibility of the mountain tops and lochs. We stopped several times to admire the views and to take a few photos whilst the weather lasted. Fort William was about fifteen miles into today's planned route and we were very hopeful of getting a great view of Britain's highest peak. As we sped along the banks of Loch Linhe the weather was changing by the minute and the sky was rapidly filling with grey clouds which looked full of intent at making us very wet. We arrived into "Fort Bill" (as referred to by some annoying shop assistant) just after 10am and we decided to stroll through the town and grab a coffee. By the time we had enjoyed the caffeine boost it was a very different day than when we had started out. We decided that our lunch break would be in Invergarry which was about another twenty five miles. The route took us along the shore of Loch Lochy and through Spean Bridge where we briefly stopped to admire the panoramic views of both Ben Nevis and Aonach Mor which were both stubbornly holding on to pockets of snow, and to have a look at the memorial to the Royal Marine Commando's who used this area as their training ground in WWII.

By the time we reached Invergarry the rain had once again started and we were in our first level of wet weather gear which is waterproof jackets and neoprene overshoes. We had lunch in the bar of a hotel and chatted to a guy who was on a motorcycle touring holiday and was heading to Skye. When we departed we only had a further eight miles left to get to our hotel for the night but we had to wear our full wet weather gear now as the rain was coming down hard. We had a strong headwind for the last section but arrived at the Lovat Hotel in Fort Augustas at about 14:30hrs. The hotel is the most expensive of our trip and was selected to give us a night of luxury to celebrate our 25th Wedding Anniversary which is today. We enjoyed a relaxing afternoon followed by a three course evening meal in the Brasserie. The owner of the hotel is doing LeJoG in July and was very interested to hear about our journey so far. As it was our anniversary he offered us to eat in the "fine dine" restaurant for half price but we cordially declined his offer as we only have one set of evening wear, and it is not suitable for dining in a £50 a head restaurant when it is clean and ironed let alone when it has been worn for a week since it was last washed. I did however have a clothes parcel waiting for me in the hotel room when we arrived. Mo and Dave had a t-shirt printed for me the

same as they had made for Sharon and they posted it here for us to collect on arrival. Thank you very much to them for this kind gift which will help remind us of this journey in the future. We have now only three more days to complete the last 160 miles of our journey and reach John O'Groats. We are both longing for the comfort of our own home and the opportunity to eat some home cooked food.

Day 19: Fort Augustas to Fortrose

Breakfast at the Lovat Hotel was a bit of a shambles and I had to reorder my honey porridge which delayed the cooked element of our breakfast by about fifteen minutes and when it arrived it had obviously been kept warm under a heat lamp as half was nearly cold and the scrambled egg had gone dry. When we went to check out there was another mix up over payment. I had noted in my itinerary that I had paid in full for both the room and a three course evening meal but although they agreed that this should have been the case, they had no record of the payment actually being taken. I was in no position to provide any evidence of payment so we had a long drawn out discussion about what might or might not have gone wrong. The bottom line was I was not prepared to pay again until I was certain that no payment had already been taken so we left with the issue still to be resolved when we return home.

We were by now half an hour late leaving and we were facing another miserable morning with a stiff headwind. After a brief visit to the shop we set off along the shores of Loch Ness keeping a keen eye on the waters in case the legendary monster decided today was the day he would make a rare appearance. The waterfalls which channel the water from the mountain tops into the loch were in full flow after the night's heavy rain and were really quite spectacular. The route up the A82 is busier than we would normally travel on but the alternative routes are few and far between and are usually much longer. Our first coffee stop of the day was just after eighteen miles in Drumnadrochit. By the time we had finished our break the rain had got a little heavier so we once again changed to our more waterproof jackets. Loch Ness is over twenty six miles in length and is joined at each end by the Caledonian Canal which opened in 1822. The canal has twenty six locks and runs between Inverness and Carpoich near Fort William and was built to provide a shortcut for small shipping allowing them to avoid sailing all around the North coast via Cape Wrath and the Penrith Firth. We had a panini lunch in Inverness where we found the Costa coffee shop and dragged out our lunch as long as possible. This is a problem when you are staying in B&B while on a cycle tour, if the weather is poor as it has been for the whole of Scotland you don't want to wander around in the cold and wet. So you either sit in a cafe for a few hours or risk getting to your B&B and hope you can get into your room early. Leaving Inverness we crossed the Moray Firth Bridge on the cycle path and then found the underpass to cross the dual carriageway. The last ten miles were a long drag of a climb followed by a fast descent to a road on the water-sedge. This B&B is just fantastic and so far the room and bath are the best yet which is very welcome as we near the end of our journey. Tomorrow is the penultimate day and we have 56 miles planned to reach Helmsdale on the north-east coast.

Day 20: Fortrose to Helmsdale

The quality of accommodation just gets better and better. Watersedge at Helmsdale was a top quality B&B in every department and takes the lead in the "Best Overall" award category. We left in the usual manner, wet weather gear and uphill. The first climb was quite a shock to the tired legs as it ascended around 700ft in about a mile before levelling off. We then crossed over the "Black Isle" passing oil rigs and refineries which hold a strange attractiveness of their own. There was a very short ferry journey to cross to Nigg point from Cromarty and on this occasion we timed it to perfection. As we were about two miles from the slipway we saw the ferry heading to our side of the narrow strip of water so we hastened our pace and sped down the hill at full pace. We banked it round the corners in the high street and flew through the port entrance just in time to see the one and only car drive off the ferry. The deck hand then waved us immediately aboard, shutting the bow doors behind us and the skipper pulled away from the slipway. All this happened in a matter of seconds and we were the only passengers. As the crossing lasted about five minutes from slipway

to slipway I am now in a position to tell the B&B owner in Ardrossan that he should stop moaning about the price of their ferry as this one was £9.50 for a bicycle to travel about 200 yards.

From here we had a nice flat section before we joined the A9 which will be our route north for the majority of what remains of our journey. We had a coffee stop in Tain which was poorly timed as we got wet for the last mile before the cafe, whilst we had our break the sun was shining and then as we left the sky turned dark and the rain started again.

It was shortly after leaving Tain that we saw John O'Groats on the road sign for the first time, it was 86 miles. Now we are back on the popular route for end to enders we are seeing more and more cyclists heading in both directions. We wonder what weather the ones heading south will be blessed with and hope they have better fortune than us. Just after we passed through a small Coastal town called Golspie Sharon suddenly asked if I had seen the large bronze statue in the entrance to Dunrobin Castle. I said I had missed it so she said it was to some guy called Sutherland but she had not been quick enough to see whether it was Donald or Keifer! We laughed all the way up the next hill.

We had our final stop in Brora which was a coffee shop come picture framers, come florist. I love the way these quirky little businesses seem to survive in these remote areas against all the odds and I watched with interest as the old boy busied himself in his workshop while his wife efficiently handled the sudden rush of custom in the cafe.

We arrived at our overnight stop at around 16:15, the location is stunning and we have a great view of the North Sea from our room. This is a fairly remote location with no option for an evening meal so we had pre-booked a light evening supper which turned out to be courgette & potato soup followed by cheese and chutney rolls.

We now have only 60 miles left to complete our journey and we are both looking forward to reaching our final goal. We have mixed emotions in being so close to the end and are expecting a special day tomorrow.

Day 21: Helmsdale to John O'Groats

Culgower House is a fantastic B&B which must not go unmentioned. The facilities were fantastic, the breakfast was amazing and the price was very reasonable by comparison to others. After our supper on Thursday we sat in the lounge and had a good long chat with an elderly guest called Gordon. He told us all about his own adventures in his younger days, the most memorable of these was also on a tandem. This had been a trip from Bradford to Devon which had ended in disaster. Gordon had crashed badly on the Lynton to Lynmouth descent after ignoring the signs warning cyclist of the upcoming steep descent and advising them to dismount. He had hurtled full speed down the hill, lost control on a bend and had gone head first over the handlebars into the safety railings.

This being our final day I decided to break from tradition and forego my usual sausage sandwich in favour of something more special. I started with fresh orange juice, followed by a bowl of porridge which was undoubtedly made with cream, then I had a Scottish delicacy called a "Buttery" which was similar to a croissant but much heavier and quite salty. The final course was five scotch pancakes, three rashers of back bacon with lashings of maple syrup. This was all followed by two mugs of coffee. By the time I left the breakfast table I felt nothing like pulling on my cycle shoes and setting off for the final sixty miles, and I was wishing I had stuck with the habitual sausage sandwich.

We left exactly to schedule on a bright and sunny day. The first ascent of the day was a long climb out of Helmsdale which ascended about 800ft over a couple of miles at about 13% gradient. On the way up this climb we caught and passed another couple on a tandem who were also fully loaded with panniers. We had the briefest of chats as we overtook them and wished them luck for the final day. We then had a very fast and dangerous descent into Berriedale of which we were warned about by our previous nights host. We paused at the foot of the next climb for Sharon to monitor her blood sugar levels which had already depleted. As she had a quick bite to eat the other tandem sped back past us and commenced the next climb. The climb from Berriedale was more steep but shorter than the days previous climb and we soon passed the other couple who had already bailed out, and were walking up the steeper part of the climb. We span our legs with what little strength we

had left and gradually we made it over the top. We were soon speeding along a more steady undulating section towards the first coffee stop of the day, these had been two serious climbs but once again we had cycled all the way up without climbing off.

Whilst we were having coffee the other tandem pair had gone by but as we headed towards John O'Groats in the late morning we eventually passed them again whilst they were walking through a village searching for a shop. We passed a few other cyclist during the course of the morning, this is probably as all the various LeJoG routes are gradually coming together for the final run in. We had lunch in Wick having competed forty three miles in the morning leaving just seventeen to complete. We chatted to another couple of LeJoggers at the cafe who told us the road from Wick to the finish was nice and flat and they were intending taking it easy to enjoy the atmosphere of the last day. We set off again on the final leg of our journey, and they were right the first ten miles were nice and flat, however I really should have remembered the final sting on the tail, a stiff climb which sapped all the remaining energy we had in our legs. Once on the top of the climb we could now look down onto John O'Groats and see the final goal. We cruised down the final section enjoying the descent and soaking up the emotion of finally reaching the end. We paused to take a few photos by the village sign before speeding on down to the finish by the harbour side, arriving to a round of applause from all those who had already completed their journeys and who were sitting around with friends and family relaxing. We had a celebration cuddle and congratulated each other on completing the ride despite the poor weather we have had to endure. We were treated to two glasses of champagne from the families of another couple of riders which we had seen on the road earlier that day and had finished shortly before us. We then had our photo taken at the signpost, signed the log book in the journeys end cafe and then got the final stamp on our journey verification sheet. As we sat enjoying a welcome coffee the other tandem pair arrived so we gave them a round of applause as they crossed the finish line. They had stopped at their accommodation for the night and offloaded all their luggage for the final miles.

After we had booked into our hotel and showered we decided to stroll back down to the harbourside. As we wandered around we bumped into the American couple Janet & Dave who we had chatted to in Shap village ten days earlier. They had encountered several mechanical issues over the past week and had lost a few days on their schedule whilst they had a new wheel built. We had a good long chat with them before heading back for an evening meal.

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We have finally finished our 1021 mile journey, our moving average about 11.5mph and we have climbed over a fraction over 51,000 feet. We did not suffer a single puncture on the journey but had broken one gear cable, the temporary repair we carried out in Shropshire lasted the remainder of the journey.

We have both enjoyed the journey very much and have learnt a few things about ourselves on the way. We would have liked to have had better weather but on reflection we will look back at what we achieved with more pride knowing what we endured to complete this memorable journey.

We highly recommend everyone to complete a journey of this type.