

End to End for Papworth

www.papworth.org.uk

About this journey

On August 11th 2007, James (41) and Matthew (45) set off for a little cycle ride: from Land's End in Cornwall to John O'Groats, in Scotland. The route planned was some 930 miles – plus getting to the start/from the finish to the nearest train stations. I (James) had the idea in January 2007, having had it knocking around my head for a couple of years. I called Matthew one cold night and said "how do you fancy doing a little cycle ride this summer?" "Where to?" "John O'Groats". And that was largely that. Working out permissions and dates for work cover was the immediate issue, thereafter was preparation.

Preparation started with a book search, Stanfords (oh what a wonderful shop!) and Amazon. Stanfords supplied us with "Land's End to John O'Groats: the great British bike adventure" by Phil Horsley. It was a godsend in terms of maintaining enthusiasm, helping plan an approximate route, thinking about packing and the like: surely reading is training? It's a good read and has helpful tips like details of bike shops on/near route, some alternative routes and, perhaps most importantly, the local breweries operating in the areas en route.

Our aim – other than to finish – was to raise money for the Papworth Trust. If you enjoy reading this, find it useful or learn from it, please feel free to make a donation to the cause – we pedalled a long way for it! We paid for all our expenses prior to and during the trip so all the cash raised goes to Papworth. <http://www.justgiving.com/2007Lejog>

Matthew wrote a blog each night that can be downloaded via http://www.papworth.org.uk/fp/aspen/public/getFile.asp?field_name=FILE&class_name=DOCUMENT&instanceid=3393282&context=2252716



(In our defence, this was just after a training ride up and down the Lea Valley path! Matthew on your left)

Training

Oh dear. We forgot to train and I think we both paid for it. Matthew, the planner (OK, he's a bit meticulous...) of the two of us prepared a spreadsheet of planned mileage per week/weekend and managed to fall well short of that all the time. James, the play it by ear type, er, played it by ear and did even fewer miles.

Matthew's longest day ride in preparation was 104 miles. Over a weekend it was the same 104 miles and he also did a 40 mile loop one Saturday in the Derbyshire peak district – he lives on the Cambridge fens. James lives in London so hills are something of an alien concept to both of us. His big learnings from the Peaks were "get a triple" and that his average speed was way down on normal. His plan was to do about 3,000 miles training over 90 separate rides. In total, he did about 1300 miles training over 43 rides, mostly laden with his kit: "method training"

I, on the other hand has no idea how many training miles I did, although it falls into the "insufficient" category. I did however have no target training miles and on that basis, every mile on the bike was a bonus! My longest day ride was 100 miles (the Norwich 100 – a really nice ride, by the way). My longest weekend mileage was, er, 100 miles. I did lots of smaller rides – 18-30 miles – early on but a really bad hayfever season put pay to breathing (asthmatic). I also did a fair few miles lugging a 30lb toddler around London on the handlebars: "ice cream and shopping training".



(A training ride for James...)

Itinerary

The route/itinerary was worked out using Tracklogs (<http://www.tracklogs.co.uk>). I bought soft copies of Landranger (1:50,000) maps for the whole of the UK and worked the route on my PC. We had 14 days, so needed to average just over 70 miles a day. The route plan started with finding inns/B&Bs/hotels etc some 60 miles from the start of that day's ride as *the crow flies*. Using tracklogs, a straight line (track) was drawn between these two points, and from there the route was planned, on the computer screen with a mouse, trying to avoid major roads, dual carriageways and too much by way of hills. This was something of an iterative process, but we had days that were planned to range between 82 miles (day 3) and 26 miles (day 14) with a median of 73 miles. Landranger allowed us to plan using smaller/unclassified roads as well as B roads. Essentially, it's a western route with a cross to the east in the Scottish borders from Carlisle to Edinburgh.

You will note that the plans also included a break every 20-25 miles. On the few long training rides that we did, we worked out that a rest, a drink

and a bite to eat every couple of hours made for a more pleasant ride. So in the route planning phase, I looked for villages about 25 miles from the last one and assumed that we'd stop for isotonic alcohol, liquid carbs etc...

We do wonder how the trip planning would have happened in the days before the computer and internet. The process was so easy, and while it started on 5 1:200,000 OS maps, that translates to an awful lot of Landrangers. As it was... "Here's 60 miles, it's near this village, let's Google B&Bs in a 5 mile radius...OK, found and booked one, let's work the route".

Planned itinerary in detail (as per Tracklogs/OS Landranger)

Start	Finish	Distance m	Cumulative	Climb (m)	Cumulative	Descend	Cumulative
Land's End	Padstow	57	57	1,461	1,461	1,479	1,479
Padstow	Crediton	68.5	125.5	1,681	3,142	1,628	3,107
Crediton	Bristol	82.25	207.75	1,932	5,074	1,933	5,040
Bristol	Titely	73.5	281.2	2,071	7,145	1,923	6,963
Titely	Tilston	73.75	355	1,440	8,585	1,564	8,527
Tilston	Garstang	80	435	1,057	9,642	1,078	9,605
Garstang	Hesket Newmarket	77.6	512.6	2,103	11,745	1,978	11,583
Hesket Newmarket	Innerleithen	79.8	592.4	1,858	13,603	1,885	13,468
Innerleithen	Perth	73	665.4	1,555	15,158	1,692	15,160
Perth	Newtonmore	73	738.4	1,587	16,745	1,347	16,507
Newtonmore	Inverness	50.4	788.8	977	17,722	1,189	17,696
Inverness	Brora	63.6	852.4	1,152	18,874	1,163	18,859
Brora	Forss	53.2	905.6	1,063	19,937	1,057	19,916
Forss	JOG	25.5	931.1	323	20,260	326	20,242
	TOTALS		931.1		20,260		20,242

The plan was to stay in hotels/B&Bs/Inns en route, negating the need to carry a tent and all that would entail (a hot shower at the end of the day, someone else cooking dinner and breakfast, soft bed etc.). It was a tough decision to make. Our accommodation is noted and linked (as much as possible) as part of each day's ride summary. As this was going to be our main holiday of the year, we decided to splurge a bit as we went. We appreciate that our accommodation is not on the itineraries of most End-to-Enders.

Each day's summary also includes our own record of distance/climb. There are two, but why? Well both of us carried a GPS and both of us also carried a more traditional cycle computer. So we had two means of recording altitude, four for distance. As they were unlikely to ever agree, we thought we'd record them all and average as appropriate. The distances are from Matthew's GPS and my GPS (which as I was navigator should have largely corresponded to the plan...). Differences between the two GPS's are unexplained, other than in the Grampians.

The summary for each day gives some details of the route - as well as a hill profile. If you would like the full tracklog (planned, actual or both...) track of the route for each day, these are available for £50 donation to the Papworth Trust. Contact James through *adogap* at *Gmail dot com*. Not sure what copyright restrictions are in place for providing hard copies of the actual route with the Landranger underlaid, so we're not prepared to do that - even though we (belt and braces) printed the whole route for ourselves, "just in case the GPS packs up". Each day was about 8 pages of A4 - we posted these in advance rather than carried them all the whole way.

The Bikes

Matthew - Marin San Anselmo. Triple on the front (48/36/26 teeth) and a rear cassette with a gears of 11/12/14/16/18/21/24/28/32 teeth). According to Sheldon Brown, that's 22 - 118 inches if you're that way inclined.



James: Pashley Moulton FX8 - uprated with a triple chainring (52/42/30) and a rear cassette of 13/14/15/16/17/19/21/23 - again all Shimano (Sora). Drop bars were also added, to add some flexibility of hand position. Effectively, the change of drivetrain and the drops meant that other than the frame/wheels, the whole bike was replaced.... This work was carried out by Paul Villiers of Villiers-Velo. <http://villiers-velo.co.uk/V-Works/main.htm>. Two bottle cages were fitted.

Both of us lugged bits of toolkit, 2/3 sets of cycling clothes, civvies, and then the essentials... iPods, cameras (and Gorillapod), phones, chargers for these, an abridged version of the book (pages (eg the West Coast of Scotland route) not needed were removed) and a good book.

Both bikes were originally bought for commuting to/from work and have evolved over time into these (ahem) lightweight sleek machines....



Day 1 - Saturday 11th August

Penzance - Land's End - Padstow

Distance: 57 miles (Matthew GPS), 57.3 (James GPS). Plan = 57

Average speed (cycling): 11.7mph

Cycling time: 5 hours 9 minutes

Road Time: 7 hours 10 minutes

Weather: Sunny and warm, wind out of South West

Accommodation: St Petroc's Hotel & Bistro, Padstow. www.rickstein.com. We got very lucky in March when James called them out of the blue asking if they could put us up for the one night on an August Saturday! Good food, but the only place in the whole trip where we ended up hand washing our kit - and then hanging it to dry all over the room.

The day started outside Penzance on the Paddington to Penzance sleeper train. Not the best breakfast for a big day's riding - left over stuff from the M&S at Paddington. Neither of us had slept well and after Matthew had done his big send off with BBC Radio Cambridgeshire (I think they thought he was at Land's End until 2 trains pulled out of the station simultaneously) we made use of one of the better decisions of the trip.... cab to Land's End. Booked the day before and by the time we got there, faffed around with photos, seeing other groups off and using the loo a lot, we set off at 10.00am.



Remarkably easy to Penzance, adrenalin working well. Good run to Camborne and a snack stop. A little detour (lost) in Redruth and the "highpoint" of the day. Lunch at a stop near Blackwater and a fast run on a main road into Newquay. My fastest speed of the whole trip was on this stretch at 42mph. There's a reason for that which only became apparent as the overall route became apparent. At Newquay, it all went wrong. We lost all our rhythm, did some stop/start map checks and then set off on a very busy, narrow coastal road on an August Saturday. It was horrible. Traffic jams on the downhill and no legs on the way up. Mawgan Porth was the worst. After that, we cut inland to Padstow and a relatively good last few miles. The morning had been far more productive than the afternoon. Cornwall we were told was bad but the edge is worse than the middle.



(Note: On the profiles, the distance and climb info is correct as per James' GPS. The timing is based on a Tracklog norm)

Day 2 – Sunday 12th August

Padstow - Crediton

Distance: 73 miles (M), 72.75 miles (J). Plan = 68.5

Average speed (cycling): 11.1mph

Cycling time: 6 hours 35 minutes

Road Time: 11 hours 44 minutes

Weather: Sunny and warm, wind out of South West

Accommodation: Great Park farm B&B, Crediton. www.creditonbandb.com

That Stein fellow lays on a decent breakfast although I for one felt it unable to take full advantage. So I carbed up and had a couple of eggs (this became my norm and when I missed the protein I really knew it). Matthew added some meat to his eggs. An early start at the ferry and a steady climb out of Rock with some great views to be had on the way although the soundtrack behind me of belched bacon spoiled it somewhat. This was the sort of climbing we would learn we could do. The morning was not a repeat of the previous afternoon. The climb topped out near Davidstow and we had fabulous run into Launceston where we had a bottomless mug of tea and some cake at the old (narrow gauge) railway station.

From there (hurrah, into Devon) to Oakhampton and more tea and cake at a railway station, this time on the cycle path overlooking Dartmoor. At that point we were doing really well and while the terrain ahead was steeper, it all only went pear-shaped when a fly landed in my ear and made himself a new home.



Along with the normal voices, I now had a buzzing deep in my ear. Very disconcerting and every few miles I'd stop and have a poke, shake, rock, dowse or do whatever I could to get it out. The scenery was stunning - although the hedgerows very high - alongside the single track roads we were using.

Finally a roll right through Crediton and a bath. Which seems to have drowned the fly. Although I have seen no evidence of his eviction. Dinner in Wetherspoons. Not quite Rick Steins but appreciated all the same!



Day 3 - Monday 13th August

Crediton - Bristol

Distance: 86 miles (M), 86 miles (J). Plan = 82.25

Average speed (cycling): 11.9mph

Cycling time: 7 hours 21 minutes

Road Time: 9 hours 58 minutes

Weather: Sunny and warm, cross wind for much of the day

Accommodation: Hotel du Vin, Bristol. www.bristol.hotelduvin.com. GREAT showers.

So after the 2 days that everyone said would be the worst, we had our planned longest. Bad planning, methinks. We could have stopped between Bristol and Cheddar but when doing the route planning we agreed to push on to Bristol. That meant three really nasty climbs at the end of what would otherwise have been a decent day, but which meant they would not have to be tackled first thing on the Tuesday.



However, it started terribly. The hill out of Crediton was a pig. It was steep and seemed interminable. The road was also fairly busy with nowhere to hop off and take a breather. Once we were over it ("it's all downhill from here" said I, knowing we'd passed the high-point of the day) we made a decision not to cross the Exe and start up the other side of the valley but put a few flatter miles into Tiverton and work our way from there. A bit of a stop start morning but once we got onto the Great Western Canal, we had a blast (first unusual wildlife: 2 Alpacas). We pulled out of the valley into Somerset we had a fabulous run down the A38 into Wellington (tea and fruitcake) and then into Taunton (easily navigated on cycle paths. Nice work Taunton). From there we had two short little climbs punctuating the Somerset levels. Fresh plums at the roadside in Westhay became lunch as nowhere appeared to be open.



We sat in Cheddar at 4pm and looked at the route ahead. Yuk. A very steep pull out of there, drop back onto the busy A38 and another up to the airport south of Bristol. Finally I had planned a little detour, which added a nice one up through the park to the Clifton Suspension Bridge -

well, it seemed appropriate, somehow. Three big steep hills in the last 20 miles, having done 65 miles already. Mmmm, nice! Somewhere along the way we'd pass into Avon or the metropolitan area of Bristol or whatever "county" Bristol is in this week. The long day was made longer and harder by these three hills. We arrived very tired at about 6.30pm. That felt late. Little were we to know.....



Day 4 – Tuesday 14th August

Bristol - Titley

Distance: 84 miles (M), 81.5 miles (J). Plan = 73.5

Average speed: 10.9mph

Cycling time: 7 hours, 41 minutes

Road Time: 11 hours, 15 minutes

Weather: Wet start to the day, grey and mizzle for much of the remainder

Accommodation: The Stag Inn, Titley. www.thestagg.co.uk . Great welcome, perfect food and drink!

What a long day! We made the call not to embarrass ourselves by walking up the city centre hills offered by Bristol. Instead, we headed down to the Avon and around the bulk of the city to get out. It probably added about 7 miles, which doesn't sound a lot but it was lashing down with rain. And despite being signed, not the easiest cycle path out of the centre of town. We went "off planned route" soon after leaving Bristol – and entering South Gloucestershire (I didn't even know this was a county) – and came perilously close to the "new" Severn Bridge. So much so that we did a good double check before making sure that the Sustrans signs were taking us to Chepstow, not Newport.



Ah Chepstow. What to say about Chepstow other than we spent too long there. One of us realised on the roll down the north end of the Severn Bridge that braking would be a problem with little by way of brake blocks. He waited until we reached the top of Chepstow to tell me this. A check of the book, a few phone calls later and we dug up 559 bikes DOWN in town... <http://www.559bikes.co.uk/559/clothing.htm> The nice lady who runs the place sold us blocks for both bikes and laughed merrily (but mercifully quietly) as we struggled to fit and adjust 8 sets of brakes. All in all it added about an hour and a half to our day...

So we decided that we'd not take the direct but "scenic" (for which read hilly) route due north of Chepstow but put a few miles on and stay in the Wye Valley to Monmouth. Tea and a "mayo which sat next to a can of tuna" sandwich in Tintern was lunch. In Monmouth we did a little roll down the High Street to the old bridge, and then back up again and continued our way north.

The roads were:

- a) Empty;
- b) Rural;
- c) Beautiful; but were also
- d) Slow;
- e) In very poor condition.

We had a really nice ride to Skenfrith for a welcome cup of tea and a few minutes out of the rain but delightful though it was, progress was slow. Through places like Grosmont and Ewyas Harold to Peterchurch where we decided to phone ahead to warn the B&B we'd be late. We had to use a phone box. A real novelty in this day and age but despite being on different networks, we had no phone coverage for the whole afternoon. These were delightful places, all tiny, picturesque and wonderfully rural. Where they sit in the big scheme of things (eg. "turn left at Hereford") is still a bit of a mystery but stunning countryside. With cider apples! Peterchurch was followed by a run-in with a stupid idiot in a Porsche Cayenne on a single track road and Dorstone: Home to Neals Yard Dairy and so no-doubt known to cheese-heads. However, it has another small claim to fame... A hill, just outside it. (note I am already off the bike, prepared for the trial ahead...)



I wish I could say it was a nice roll down. It wasn't as it was so narrow and twisty but we were both glad of the new brake blocks. From the bottom it was a steady climb up to our bed for the night and trouble from home.

Worried families had not heard from us and we did not arrive until just after 8pm. As it was, we had to stand in the garden (in the rain) to get a phone signal.



Despite the detour along the Wye Valley, the day was, so far, our 2nd longest miles, longest on the road and, worst of all, thus far our biggest day of climbing. We were tired.

Day 5 - Wednesday 15th August

Titley - Tilston

Distance: 79 miles (M), 77 miles (J). Plan = 73.75

Average speed: 11.3mph

Cycling time: 7 hours

Road Time: 10 hours, 15 minutes

Weather: Damp start, wet middle, dry end.

Accommodation: Tilston Lodge B&B, Malpas. 01829 250223

Today was the day we.... stuck to our route. No detours, no wimping out along valleys. Just follow the route. So any difference between the actual shown in the profile below, and the planned, shown in the table at the start, is down to lord knows what.

The profile tells the story of the day, which after yesterday seemed to be much better, perhaps because we had resigned ourselves to walking the worst bits, all pretence of cycling the day disappeared long before breakfast. From Titley we had a decent and downhill run to Presteigne, Gateway to Wales, or so it says on the sign.



At Presteigne - a very pretty little town - we stopped in the Post Office for stamps and other bits and I asked a local the way to the Cemetary, knowing that our route passed that way. She said "are you going up the

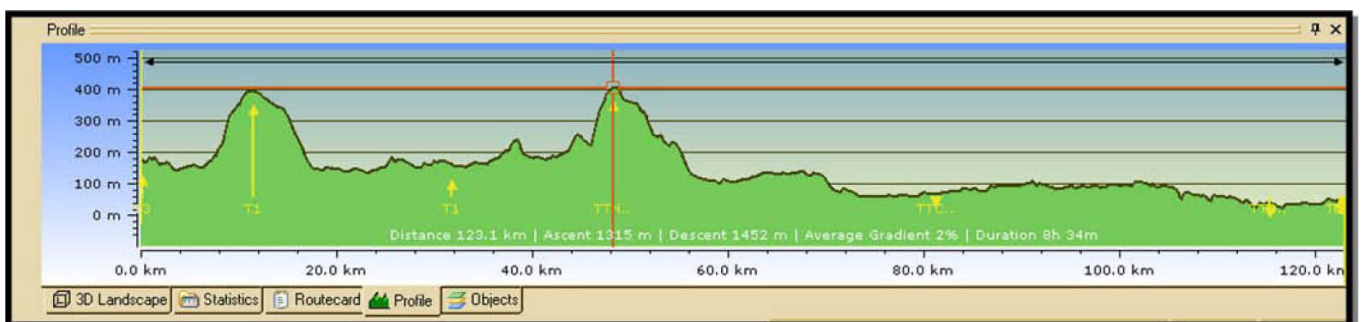
hill?" and gave me the most pitying look imaginable when I nodded. We were (ahem) fortunately on the right road. The hill was our biggest yet, over 200 metres up in about 4 miles. There's an observatory at the top of the hill, which should give you a clue! It was a nice walk.... followed by our best descent so far. It was a 5 mile roll, and was wonderful.

We then meandered across Shropshire and a very nice cup of tea and "cyclist rocket fuel" (known as fruit cake to the non-cyclist) at Little Brampton. A very steep short pull at Totterton and some beautiful country houses outside Linley before we saw the signs for "The Bog". At which point it started raining and we guessed why it was so called. You'd generally expect a bog to be low/flat, like a marsh., rather than at the highpoint of the day's ride. We'd revisit "The Bog" in Scotland. The Stiperstones were wet and the descent from them pretty hairy. And then it all went very unmemorable! A flattish, relatively fast few miles to Coedway for a sandwich and a large glass of lemonade for lunch (at The Old Crown and Diamond), followed by more of the same - quiet, empty country roads and tiny quiet villages - to Tetchley. Where we lost an hour. Matthew got a puncture to his front tyre and we spent time finding and fixing the thing. The big lessons were that anything requiring us to work on our bikes takes an hour and that Treseme shampoo (barely diluted) works better than Swarfega at removing oily gunk from your hands.



A Snickers in Ellesmere and then we put our heads down for the run to Tilston. Some gorgeous villages around here - here being somewhere between north Shropshire and South Cheshire. However, in this last bit Matthew lost his waterproof jacket and the weather forecast for the following day.....

Dinner was OK - very pub food-like and we had our first taste of what we would call "the North" - beer with a head!



Day 6 - Thursday 16th August

Tilston - Scorton (Garstang)

Distance: 84 miles (M), 84 miles (J). Plan = 80

Average speed: 11mph

Cycling time: 7hours 40 minutes

Road Time: 10 hours 45 minutes

Weather: Wet and windy in the morning, wet in the afternoon

Accommodation: The Priory, Scorton. www.theprioryscorton.co.uk

The worst day by some distance. It started off without a cooked breakfast (2 eggs in my case, I realised the protein was useful) and wet. We had decided to get our heads down for the 25 miles or so to Warrington: there are bike shops in Warrington. So we did, except it decided to lash with rain for most of it, particularly bad through the Delamere Forest Park. Soon after that, I got a puncture - of sorts. I had green goop spurting out of the hole which was worrying. It turned out that I had a patch (from an old puncture) fail. A very kindly farmer lent us his barn to spend our regulation hour in the dry while doing the repair. He also had a compressor which enabled me to get the tyre back up to 85psi - tough with a baby bike pump!

We had been warned that Warrington was not attractive. They were right - apologies if you are from there but after the delightful run from Bristol, Warrington was a bit of a shock, even if we did manage to avoid the worst of the traffic. Even then, the run into Warrington was really nice: the Dutton Viaduct fantastic. It sort of got worse about the time we crossed the ship canal. We got on the Trans-Pennine Trail/Sankey Trail only to get off it again and re-trace our steps through ex-industrial land to D&M Cycles in Hood Lane, Great Sankey (01925 653606). They were another god-send. Helpful in selling us a waterproof, lube, more brake blocks, tweaking our gears to make them run better and storing our bikes while we popped over the road for some lunch as well as giving us a tip to continue our route north - one we ignored!

It was 2pm by the time we got going again and we reckoned we still had 50-odd miles to go. The Sankey Trail soon petered out into a muddy path which had clearly been designed to deter cyclists. We made the call to come off the path at Newton-le-Willows to keep going north rather than loop more westerly (and into the wind).



(The result of the Sankey Trail)

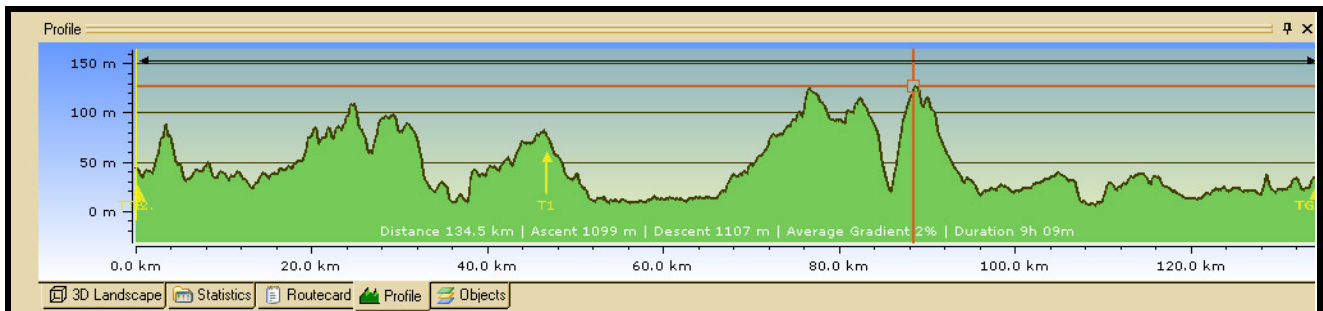
We were pushing hard and had our heads down – partly due to the wind and steady climbing and partly as there was not much to see. I live in London so I know sprawl but this seemed endless. The highlight – quite literally – was in Orrell. At a bus-stop a group of teenage girls all seemingly had been to the same hairdresser and shared the same bottle of peroxide. Once past, I heard Matthew behind me... “bleeeaaaach!” It made me laugh at the time.

Once out of (and down from) Orrell, the roads opened up a bit. A nasty short climb (walk) at Appley Bridge followed by relative (and relatively flat) countryside to Leyland. Preston was a pain to navigate, partly as we got there at rush-hour having made not bad time but we were tired. To be honest, neither of us remember much about the whole afternoon as we put ourselves under some time pressure and pedaled.

The run north to Garstang was slow initially. The trouble with towns is pesky traffic lights and other reasons to stop. At Garstang, just to really make our long day worse, the heavens opened and we got a good soaking before arriving at Scorton.

The team at the Priory have Scorton sown up. A haven for cyclists. Not Hotel du Vin but welcoming, warm and able to meet our needs of washing, web and beer!

Oddly enough, while still “North”, we both felt that we’d gone through the north of the southerners’ imaginations. The industrial, red-brick terraces of Warrington are what spring to most southerners’ minds when thinking of “up north”. By the time we got through Preston we’d passed through and were in the wilder countryside. Perhaps we southerners should cross the M62 more often...



Day 7 – Friday 17th August

Scorton (Garstang) – Hesketh Newmarket

Distance: 71 miles (M), 73.75 miles (J). Plan = 77.6

Average speed: 10.9 mph

Cycling time: 6hours, 30 minutes

Road Time: 9 hours, 50 minutes

Weather: Rain into Lancaster, sunny thereafter

Accommodation: Denton House Guesthouse, Hesketh Newmarket, Cumbria.

www.dentonhouseguesthouse.co.uk

The half way day, on time and as we started the day with an accumulated 455 miles, we were not far of half distance. Rather than repeat our mistake of

the previous evening by staying on the (flooded) tow-path, we put ourselves on the A6 for the 10 miles or so to Lancaster. Our busiest "open" road of the trip so far.

At Lancaster, Sustrans stepped in and we sat on the Lancaster Canal towpath for a fantastic ride through to Carnforth. To our right, the Pennines, ahead, the Lakes and to our left, Morecambe Bay. Fabulous views, easy flat terrain.



Sustrans took us through the Yealands - and at some point into Cumbria - not that we'd seen a county sign since entering Shropshire. The run through Dallam Tower was wonderful and we had a planned tea break due at Milnthorpe. We found the Sandhams Tearooms and they did a grand job of feeding us.... custard, pudding, fruitcake and tea. On leaving they thrust a piece of fruitcake into my hands "in case you need it". We made the decision over tea to a) cheat a bit and b) put our heads down to get to Bowness on Windemere.

The climb out of Milnthorpe was busy with traffic but enlivened - for me at least - by being joined for a few miles by another Moultoner. This one heading from Lancaster to Penrith to see his parents for the weekend. We parted company at Levens and we did the undulate thing to Bowness. This was fun as we were pushing for a fixed number of miles and had a definite time - the ferry departure! We hit the ferry at Bowness only to realise we were in the wrong place. The cheat was not to go west across the lake but north, up to Ambleside. So we hammered into town and made the ferry with about 3 minutes to spare. We used the time well... we ate lunch on board!

Busy to Grasmere and the nasty climb north out of there. Although oddly enough, as soon as we were out of Grasmere the traffic volume declined markedly. Tourists are sheep!

We went to the west of Thirlmere and had the most fantastic run along the lake (reservoir) side, after which we simply crossed the A591 and continued our way north. This part of the Lakes was stunning. Neither of us had visted before but the road was empty, the scenery stunning and it was surprisingly flat - although a closer look at the route planned would reveal us following a valley floor (again!).



We had something savoury in The Salutation in Threlkeld at about 4pm. Mother made us a fresh sandwich and it was delicious. She also sponsored us a tenner which was above and beyond the call of duty. From there we went through Mungriside up to Calebreck and down to Hesket.

Mmm, Hesket. The B&B is nothing to write home about but next door the pub is amazing in so many ways.

<http://www.theoldcrownpub.co.uk/>

The food is great. Doris' 90th a really nice beer and the whole place was buzzing – OK, it was a Friday night! Most definitely worth the climb at the end of the day and it capped off our best day by far. Lovely scenery, differing terrain, a surprise (we'd been dreading the hills in the Lakes), good food all day and yet more acts of kindness. Perhaps we were cycling into this now!



Day 8 – Saturday 18th August

Hesket Newmarket - Innerleithen

Distance: 81 miles (M), 81 miles (J). Plan = 79.8

Average speed: 12 mph

Cycling time: 6 hours, 45 minutes

Road Time: 9 hours 40 minutes

Weather: Rain to Langholme then sun/showers

Accommodation: Glede Knowe guesthouse, Innerleithen. www.gledeknowe.co.uk

Our fastest average speed so far. We MUST be cycling into it! That said, getting the legs moving first thing in the morning was hard. The first 5 miles were slow and hard and both of us thought we were going to struggle all day. As it was, once the legs warmed up, it got better. The relative roll to Carlisle made it a bit easier. In Carlisle we stopped for cash, a battery for the bike computer, some snacks and ended up wishing we were “normal”: browsing the shops like everyone else on this damp Saturday.

From Carlisle we had the flat run to Longtown and a good tea/rocket fuel break. Somewhere between there and Cononbie we crossed into Scotland. Persistent rain greeted us. We phoned home and said we'd done the End-to-End.



Handily (and in keeping with Matthew's previous Scottish experiences), the rain got heavier by the time we reached Langholme and more tea. Much less by way of fruit cake north of the border, but already the accents were definitely Scottish and the Irn-Bru out in force.

After Langholme the roads got much emptier and while we had three steady wet climbs across the Moorfoot hills, the scenery and lack of traffic were a joy. We'd planned a tea break in Eskdalemuir but the only place that we could find open was the phone box. So we stood under a tree munching on our M&S sandwiches. I got the days maps, and book, out of my bag out of "teabreak" habit. We had a very surreal conversation:

Me: You do realise, there's probably a great coffee shop serving Scotland's best cappuccino just around the corner

Matthew: It's the middle of bloody nowhere
(pause)

Me (looking at book): Oh, hang on, there's a Buddhist centre a mile up the road that has a cafe

Matthew: you sure?

Me: It's what the book says. Might be worth a try to see if it's open

Matthew: I'm finishing this ham sandwich first.

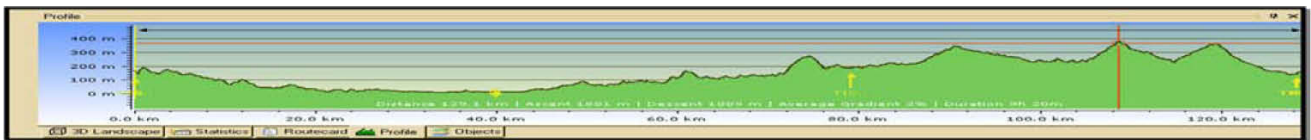
So we had a cup of chai tea, cake, a sit down and a very surreal "middle of bloody nowhere" experience.

However, on the climb out of Eskdalemuir, the road was in such great condition I felt (through the handlebars) a blister on my front tyre. Closer inspection revealed a bulge in the sidewall and tread. This was worrying. Would it get me where I needed to go, or need replacing? At Tushielaw we stopped for tea and (still warm) fruitcake as well as an old-tech search for a bike shop in Edinburgh. We met Paddy in the pub, cycling to Barcelona with no training whatsoever who told us that the best and most convenient bike shop in Edinburgh was the Edinburgh Bike Co-op. Pub payphone and Yellow Pages were put to good use and a call revealed I'd likely need a replacement at some point - and had the sense of humour to suggest that a blow-out on a downhill would be far from fun. As they could

get my odd sized tyres in on a Sunday morning we decided we'd head for there to avoid any problems later on. Hooray!



Today we realised we could "do" these hills. High they were but not steep and we were able to get a rhythm and grind up them. The roll down to Innerleithen and crossing the Tweed was our best end to a day so far. A nice long steady freewheel!



Day 9 – Sunday 19th August

Innerleithen - Perth

Distance: 76 miles (M), 76.5 miles (J). Plan = 73

Average speed: 12.7mph

Cycling time: 6 hours

Road Time: 10 hours

Weather: Rain for first 30miles to Edinburgh, then dry but cool

Accommodation: Parklands Hotel, Perth. www.theparklandshotel.com

A wet Sunday dawned offering us a nice cool wet north wind for our run to Edinburgh. The direct route to Edinburgh was OK, although we benefited from it being a Sunday. I can imagine that a weekday would be traffic-filled. We decided to put our heads down and head for cup of tea and cake at Penicuik. Which was shut. Really shut. So a swig from the water bottles and some cake left over from our wholesale size shop at Longtown yesterday "did". It was decent progress and made us realise that while dull and scary, the "main roads" would make for quicker progress. It was also a steady ascent.

We did the undulations into Edinburgh and headed straight for the Edinburgh Bicycle Co-op <http://www.edinburghbicycle.com>. A stones throw from our route to boot! All being well this would be a quick and painless stop. Unfortunately, no. The tyre had not arrived, and there was no record of my having requested them. So it was ordered at about 11.30, and arrived at about 1.15pm which on a Sunday was brilliant although I was pacing around like an expectant father. Two arrived (they only had standard Marathons, not the smaller Marathon Slicks) and we had them change both tyres, tubes and all the brakes again.

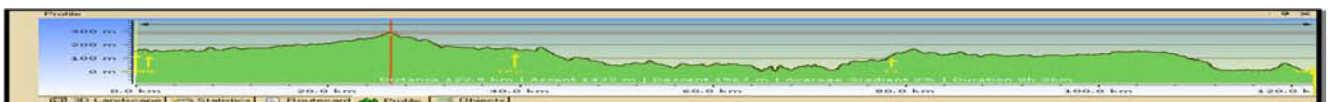


£80 odd later we were finally ready to go 2.15pm. With 45 miles still to go, we whizzed through Edinburgh as fast as we could, feeling that we were missing something and followed the signs to the Forth Bridge. Crossing it I nearly got flattened by one of the service crew vehicles and was still quietly cursing them as we passed the stationary vehicle with driver chatting to a woman on the wrong side of the railing. It did put my bad day in some perspective.



We did the climb up through Inverkeithing and decided that we needed a cup of tea. One hotel declined our custom, although we were both convinced that had we been asking for an altogether different kind of service we would have been welcomed. No offence if you are reading from Inverkeithing but in the short time we spent there we decided that JK Rowling had struck upon the idea of the Death Eaters in Inverkeithing. At Dunfermline we decided to detour off our route and take a more easterly one through Kelty to Kinross.

Kelty will remain in my memory as having 6 businesses open at 4.30 on a Sunday afternoon: 1 bookie, 2 offies and 3 chippies. Skincare by Kelty! At Kinross (another tea break) I asked a local the best way to Perth. My planned route clearly included a big hill or two and he suggested an alternative through Glenfarg which turned out to be a beautiful run. Impossibly, it seemed mostly downhill, while my original plan had been up. We did the last 45 miles in 4 hours 15 minutes, including our photo and tea stops. That was fast, for us!



Day 10 – Monday 20th August

Perth – Newtonmore

Distance: 75miles (M), 55 miles (J). Plan = 73
Average speed: 10.7mph
Cycling time: 7 hours
Road Time: 10 hours 25 minutes
Weather: Bright wth showers, headwind
Accommodation: Ard-na-coille, Newtonmore. 01540 673214

Not a good day, really not a good day at all. It was always going to be a very tough what with us starting to cross the Grampians. Today would be largely uphill and remote. Leaving Perth was gorgeous along the Tay, and picking our way to Dunkeld was a challenge as the route was the wrong side of the A9. We had a very nice cup of tea, and the obligatory cake, in the tearooms at Birnam and suitably refreshed headed through Dunkeld itself and off to Pitlochry. A quick lunch in Pitlochry and off to Blair Atholl for a final top up of water bottles and calories. The route, the Sustrans one, is stunning from Pitlochry. It's a gradual climb on empty roads or on the old A9 itself. The climb was made worse for us by a keen headwind.



We decided that we needed to break the rest of the day down into 5 mile chunks. Stop for a breather and a drink after 5 miles, and get going again. All was well with this approach, although it was slow progress at 45 minute intervals between stops.

And then it all went horribly wrong. As we neared the top of the Drumochter Pass the path – gravel at this point – is effectively the side-walk (although why anyone would walk (or cycle it for that matter) is a mystery). This was a decent bit of luck as while quietly spinning away I suddenly got a horrible sound from the back of my bike and a feeling like the chain had come off and jammed. However, it was worse than that....



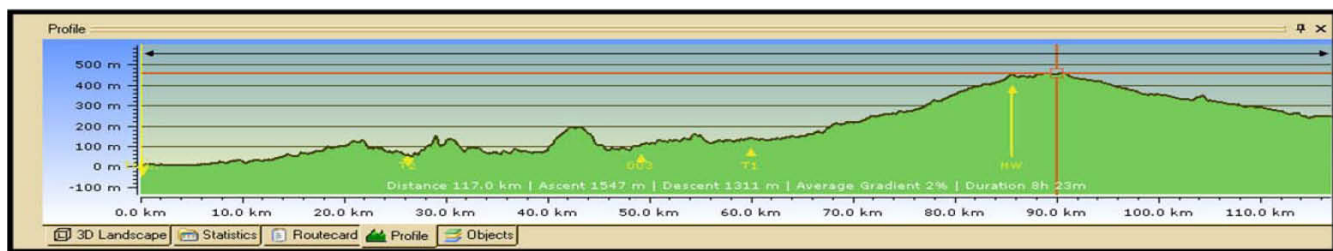
Somehow, the rear mech had managed to wrap itself around the cassette and split in two. That was dead. Fortunately, the drop-out, on which it hangs was only badly bent and not broken.

After kicking the ground and cursing the fact that I would not complete the whole End to End, the calm and sensible brother got on the phone. While he was arranging a pick-up, courtesy of the ETA (which we'd joined prior to setting off) <http://www.eta.co.uk/page.asp?ref=cycins>, I got on the phone looking for a bike shop that would have the bits I needed – the numbers of bike shops gleaned from The Book. There were none in Pitlochry but Inverness had the Shimano Sora long rear mech that I would need. So I got a lift from where I lost my transmission to Newtonmore for the 6.30pm train to Inverness.

Matthew, meanwhile, at about 4.30pm, put his head down and made it over the top of the pass and headed the 20 miles to Newtonmore. It was largely downhill from Dalwhinnie but he faced a headwind and so was struggling to get to 10mph on the downhills.



He arrived, late, exhausted and with a pretty upset stomach at Newtonmore at 7.15pm. I arrived in Inverness just after that and as well as trying to find somewhere to stay the night, was trying to work some way of getting



back "up" the road to finish the ride properly.

This is the profile for the day. The waypoint (NW) just before the cross (highpoint) of the day is where I lost my ability to ride. Matthew did the remainder by himself. I did 55 of the 75 miles on the day. More uphill than down!

Day 11 - Tuesday 21st August

Newtonmore - Inverness

Distance: 53 miles (M), 19 miles (J). Plan = 50.4

Average speed: 11.6 mph

Cycling time: 4 hours, 30 minutes

Road Time: 6 hours, 20 minutes

Weather: Rain to Aviemore, then bright. Still a headwind.

Accommodation: Rocpool Reserve Hotel, Inverness. www.rocpool.com

Matthew woke up feeling awful. He ate very little the previous night but the B&B were great in making sure he ate something. On any other day he'd not have got on the bike, but knowing we had to finish, on he got.

Meanwhile, I was heading to Bikes of Inverness

<http://www.bikesofinverness.co.uk/BOI.htm> . I had called them at about 4 the previous day and they expressed little surprised when I wandered in to them with a broken "shopping bike" at 9am. They took it in and before I left the shop it was up on a stand and being disentangled. The really good news was that the drop-out was not broken although it could still break while being straightened:

"what happens if it does break?"

"you have no rear mech and no way of changing gear"

"so I'd be doing the rest of the ride on a single speed bike?"

"yep, that's about it"

I left them to it and headed to go get a cup of coffee to drown my sorrows. I was so low I went to Starbucks - our first of the trip! I headed back to them at about 11.30 to get my kit so I could check us in to that night's hotel. Great news, they had already finished, no broken rear dropout, and seemed delighted to take the vast sum of £70 from me for the parts and labour! They even cut and fitted me a new rear spoke, that I know had been broken before we got to Warrington!!

I cycled to the hotel, checked in and about half an hour later, Matthew called from Tomatin. He was headed to Inverness, not on the planned route but he told me where he'd be going. I got ready, threw my bike in a cab and headed out the 20 or so miles to Moy to meet Matthew. When I got there he had a new companion. Les, from Attleborough, was doing the same thing but camping and putting in some very long days. He couldn't remember what time he'd set off that day, or how many days he'd been cycling. We headed into Inverness together. Although en-route, my rear mech was making all sorts of noises, so I sent Matthew to the hotel and I popped back to Bikes of Inverness. This time they dismantled the rear end, re-tapped the thread on the drop-out and put it back together.



I again collected the bike and they refused payment - "we should have fixed it properly this morning". I hope the £20 helps with their Christmas drinks. Amazing service and a real joy to find people so helpful in getting me back cycling again. I want to sing their praises from the rooftops but am also wary of dropping them in it should another needy soul arrive on their doorstep.



Matthew found some legs to get him to Aviemore for tea, and then faced Slochd Summit, the second highest point of the trip. Once over that, it really was all downhill from there... He was still a bit pale when I met him and so he clearly had a really tough morning and end to the previous night. He puts it down to not drinking enough water or eating properly. For which read "insuffucient fruit cake".

On the plus side, after today, the remaining days were all planned to be short.



I rejoined the cycling on the downhill from the New Waypoint (NW) at Moy.

Day 12 - Wednesday 22nd August

Inverness - Brora

Distance: 58 miles (M), 58 miles (J). Plan = 63.6

Average speed: 12.8mph

Cycling time: 4 hours, 30 minutes

Road Time: 7 hours

Weather: Mist burning off to sunny spells. Light winds

Accommodation: Royal Marine Hotel, Brora. www.highlandescapehotels.com

Mizzle in Inverness and a ride through an industrial estate to start the day. Kessock Bridge was our first uphill of the day, it's a suspension bridge so I thought of it as the Eleventh Bridge (we'd done Forth and Severn). Yes, it can be that dull...). Again we veered off the planned route, this time we decided to go over the hill rather than around it. Amazing, I know but by this point we really knew that barring major bike failure (again) we would finish this ride and we were simply going through the motions and getting it done.

From the top we dropped into Munlochy and were back en-route. We avoided the "main road" into Fortrose and had a gentle pull for the better part of 15km. We knew it was uphill, but our legs finally had some go and we were happily going along at 12mph. A very strange feeling for us. The reward was a two mile roll downhill only to start climbing another 60m on the road to Cromarty. For some reason we had a blast. We had a rhythm, speed and (initially) a gentle downhill and we bombed along for a few very nice miles. We stopped to collect a tea at Cromarty which we drank on the Nigg Ferry. Riding a bike down a wet slipway while holding a steaming hot cup of tea was one of the more amazing feats of the trip!



Nigg was shut, really shut. The doors of the hotel were open but that really was about it. No-one was in the place. Flat and uneventful to Tain for a sandwich, cake and the inevitable tea. I had no idea that Glenmorangie was in Tain, and I had no time to stop and loiter either.

From Tain we finally made unavoidable acquaintance with the A9. It's not nice. If you cycled up the A30, it's no doubt a dream but it's busy, not wide and not a good place to be a cyclist, especially if you got this far on minor roads. We did stop for some great pictures at Dornoch Firth Bridge and The Mound but other than that, it was keep in, keep moving and keep alert.

Somewhere along this stretch (OK, 6 miles south of Dornoch), we came across our first sign of John O'Groats (or John o'Groats as it's signed). Only 85 miles to go.



We stopped in Golspie, although lord knows why as it was largely shut and we figured we could make the final push to Brora without the unavailable tea. The hill out of Golspie will go down in memory, however, as the last we walked any of....

A side note on walking hills. Credit to you for not doing it. I took the view that exercising a different muscle group was valuable. I also worked out that on many, many occasions, Matthew (the more stubborn rider) was pedalling like mad and going the same speed as me on foot. Where he was faster, he was invariably still getting his breath back by the time I reached him ready to pedal.

I got stroppy with an oncoming Mercedes as we turned right off the A9 in Brora. I was ready to turn right and slowing but he slowed down meaning that eventually I had to stop and put my feet down. Unknown to me, Matthew was behind me and had slowed quicker than I but had forgotten to unclip his feet. The Merc was slowing to avoid a Lester sprawled all over the middle of the A9!

We made the hotel in plenty of time to go and get the massages I had booked the day I booked the hotel. And very nice it was too. Until she touched my thigh muscles and I went through the roof!

A really good day. Shame about the beer in the hotel.



Day 13 - Thursday 23rd August

Brora - Forss

Distance: 62 miles (M), 60 miles (J). Plan = 53.2

Average speed: 12.7 mph

Cycling time: 4 hours, 50 minutes

Road Time: 6 hours, 45 minutes

Weather: Bright with some mist. Light north westerly wind

Accommodation: Forss House Hotel, nr Thurso. www.forsshousehotel.co.uk

We both woke up anxious. Anxious like we'd not been for over a week. Neither of us said we were anxious, but we were. We took an early decision to stay on the A9 as far as Helmsdale. The plan had been to go due north at Lothbeg but the contour "shading" dissuaded us. So at Helmsdale we stopped for refreshments and then headed off up the A897. It runs due north while the A9 hugs the coast. However, a glance at the map - and in reality the roadsigns - reveal that the 897 through the straths runs right through the middle of nowhere. This was wilderness and we had 38 miles of it. Nearly half of it was up a gentle slope, but we were anxious of bike failure, bad weather, an accident or all three.



As it was, there were cars every 10 minutes or so, which lessened the worry. The fact that it was stunning cycling also helped immeasurably. Really stunning countryside and a joy to cycle through. We planned to stop at the Forsinard Hotel for some lunch. This was just after we finally left the railway behind and the top of the hill. We'd been alongside the railway line (the route home) since we went to bed in Perth. Matthew found this annoying as it reminded him of home. For me, it got in the way of the views.



At Forsinard we stopped, had a sandwich and a chat with the owner. An ex-marine who, in between a bit of gillie-ing and stalking, was in the hospitality industry. On giving a rough synopsis of our route he came over all misty-eyed thinking about shooting some very big gun at the top of The Bog, in Shropshire.

The rest of the trip north was largely downhill and we had a quickish run past Dounreay to Forss Bridge. The hotel was lovely, and the Whisky bar

nicer (if you like that sort of thing). The Orkney ale was rather nice though. Before dinner, we wandered down to the river and stood at the bottom of the mill race. After a few minutes Matthew swore he saw a fish climbing the waterfall. Sure enough, the salmon were leaping up the waterfall to spawn upstream. An event that normally happens in the late spring... I managed to get a photo with my little Canon point and shoot camera.



Day 14 - Friday 24th August

Forss - John O'Groats

Distance: 26 miles (M). 26 miles (J). Plan = 25.5

Average speed: 12.9mph

Cycling time: 2 hours

Road Time: 2 hours 30 minutes

Weather: Misty then bright. Cool with southerly winds

Accommodation: Sleeper train from Inverness to Euston

OK, let's finish this. We were up with the larks and decided that Matthew's final radio interview (BBC Radio Cambridgeshire, again!?!) would happen from Thurso. So we pulled out of the hotel and hot-footed it to Thurso. While I drank a pot of tea, he spoke to the good people of Cambridgeshire. From Thurso we barely said a word to each other but pedalled hard to the finish. Matthew did pause to note that the roads were straight enough to remind him of the fens....



We both felt that we'd never do it. It seemed to be an age coming and just as we thought we'd done it, the road would take a sharp turn into a headwind, or up a hill or both. Finally, we arrived in the village and turned left down to the port. A real anti-climax if ever there was one. Both of us felt flat although relieved it was over. Matthew couldn't wait to get home.



I took a photo of the fruitcake I'd been carrying since Milnthorpe (the photo is probably still on the wall at Sandhams Tearooms). We waited for our cab over a cup of (now unsweetened) tea and headed south into the headwind to Wick.

Lunch in Wetherspoons, and the train home. Very uneventful.



So there we have it. 957 miles of England, Wales and Scotland by bike. I loved it. Matthew enjoyed it but missed home more than he enjoyed it. The whole ride was a pleasure: seeing and smelling the countryside, towns and villages, architecture and building materials, topography and geology, wildlife (including leaping salmon) and people. The generosity and kindness we experienced were wonderful and so far removed from the Six O'clock News. People in this country really are much better than you'd believe if you stayed in your car or in front of the telly. I am not saying that it wasn't boring, hard work or at times I didn't long for it to be over. It was and I did. But I'd do it again, and I'd recommend that anyone with a modicum of fitness (look at us!), the time and the motivation get out there.

Matthew (I did warn you about him) kept a record of the calories burned (by wearing a heart rate monitor each day). If you really want a reason to get out on your bike, here it is. He burned 50,500 calories. OK, he offset that with a few bits of fruitcake but that's a lot of calories burned.

In true awards styleeee, lots of thanks. Family, friends, sponsors, bike shops – especially Bikes of Inverness – and Tamara and Hugo.