

The Biggest Challenge So far.....



Lands End to John O'Groats

14 – 25 May 2012

My Diary

by

Jackie Randles

The Biggest Challenge So Far.....

The Leaders

Kenny
Andy
Jim
Alex

The Team

Matt - such a nice guy, always the same and so supportive.
Alistair - I never quite knew when he would appear – he would pop up from anywhere!
Norman – great company, stories to tell
Mike - great chap and such a stayer even with a dodgy knee
Duncan – a supportive team member
Rob – helped us all at some point, your advice and tips will always be with me “tap, tap, tap”
Alan – always laughing and ALWAYS talking!!
Euan – a huge support and great company
Delia - what a character and such a star on a bike and with a bike chain! Look – no hands!
Mouse – my reserve cycling buddy when Clare wasn’t around
Lucy – always at the front!!!
Clare – my bestest buddy
Myself

All of whom became my friends; at some point, I think we all did cycle with each other. The average age of all of us I was told was 53, my age.

We shared the good times and the laughs, the bad days and the quiet days.

Family and Friends

My husband Mike, 4 sons and 2 daughters who encouraged and supported me every step of the way and helped me make this happen.

Geoff who helped with the training and advice on my bike, cycling and nutrition and Noelle who gave even more encouragement, cups of tea and coffee.

Sponsors - Too many to list individually but I must name

Staffordshire Branch BAFBA
Elite Fizzique
J & M Randles (Farriers) Ltd
East Cheshire Chamber of Commerce and their members

The Biggest Challenge So Far.....

Lands End to Liskeard- 78 miles

Mike and I arrived in St Just, which is about 6 miles from Land's Ends on Sunday evening, we met some of the other riders and the team leaders. I was very nervous and at the same time excited about the whole thing, meeting the others and the ride itself.

I barely slept that night, I think that I managed 3 hours at the most and I was acutely aware that I needed plenty of sleep for the impending 78 miles from Land's End to Liskeard the next day and I was just as aware that I should eat a hearty breakfast to fuel me up for the day!

The morning dawned with fine drizzle and by the time we had grouped together by the famous Land's End sign for photographs the drizzle turned to rain and the wind blew – and rain it did for a solid 4 hours.



The start of the ride was flat and (forgetting the rain) was good riding, one hour in and my new overshoes gave up, I could feel my feet starting to get wet. Two hours in and water ran down to my elbow every time I took a sip from my drink bottle – I know that no mud guards didn't help me what so ever but by now my ass was wet through too ☹

The first water stop was civilised, still raining but we did have toilets, little did I know at this stage that this *was* a luxury and one that would become rare as the ride progressed – lol.

Lunch was amazing, the crew certainly did us proud and I for one began to look forward to lunch each day. We arrived at our first overnight stop at the Premier Inn in Liskeard in good time to find that our overnight luggage was already in our rooms. I shared with Clare that first night; the beginning of a friendship that I later realised would help get me through the next 11 days. Thank you Clare ☺

Liskeard to Exeter 61 hilly miles

Alarm set for 6.30 am, I had a better nights sleep but still had a churning stomach when I got up, nerves or excitement? (Maybe a bit of both, these feelings returned every day and I didn't settle until we were on our bikes and off). Downstairs with the overnight bags and for breakfast for 7am and then day bags and by our bikes by 7.30 for warm up exercises, this became the general routine for every morning. It was a chilly start to the day but dry.

I felt good this morning and set off well, the hills did not hold back – we were warned that after Tavistock it was going to be tough and tough it was. Rob was a star on one of the hills and gently pushed me up with a hand on my back whilst he cycled up himself. I did wonder where he was later that day when I was cycling so slow up a hill on Dartmoor that when I looked at my Garmin to see just how slow I was moving and I gently toppled over into the grass verge! 3.5 mph was falling off speed for me. I did consider staying there, the grass was long and comfortable, a little sleep may be? Okay, perhaps not..... I unclipped my feet from my pedals, stood up, re mounted and with great difficulty set off again – any cyclist will know that this can be a little tricky, clipping in and setting off on a hill is a challenge in itself.



The day became more and more demanding as it went on, the hills kept on coming.... The descents were fabulous but marginally marred by cross winds. (Nice) Matt, Clare and I were together for a few hours that morning and we took a small diversion through Princetown from where we were able to see Dartmoor Prison.



Dartmoor Prison



Matt and myself



Lunch again was fabulous but it was at the bottom of a hill in order to get the best shelter possible as there were scattered rain showers and a few hail showers so, immediately after lunch we had a hill to climb ☺

Dartmoor conditioned me for quite a few days to come, I felt that every time I went around a bend in the road I would be faced with yet another wall to climb.

We stopped at the Premier Inn opposite Exeter Train Station, I shared my room with my bike only that night so I got the chance to strip it down and clean it, the only time for the whole ride that I managed to do anything other than clean the chain. (Sorry Geoff)

Exeter to Chepstow 94 miles if you didn't get lost



Preparing for warm up!

Commuters using Exeter Train Station were entertained today; Andy decided that the best place for a warm up was the station car park.

Today we took the roads through Tiverton, Taunton and followed the road to Bridgewater, the roads were flatter but we had 38 miles to ride to our first water stop, it was worth it – we had public toilets which, after the previous day were a treat.



Euan, Clare, Matt and myself teamed up today, the scenery was breathtaking and we had probably far too many photo stops. Into Cheddar and up the very steep Shipham Hill to lunch at the top – not only did we have another amazing lunch but for the second time in one day we had a WC!!!!!!

The sun was warm and it was hard to get going again but we did, a larger group of us set off together but soon we realised that we had lost Clare. We stopped at the bottom of a long hill and waited, Alistair went back up the hill to look for Clare (I did consider doing this myself but not for long – lol). The first puncture of the trip but the good news was that the support vans were there so help was at hand.

The day progressively became warmer as we made our way towards the afternoon water stop 2 miles before Avonmouth Bridge. Clare had arranged to meet a friend at this waterstop so the two of us left about 30 minutes after everyone else.



Avonmouth Bridge

Avonmouth Bridge came and went and we headed towards Severn Bridge only for Clare to get another puncture! It was late and we were both tired, there was a problem with the valves and Clare couldn't get enough pressure which resulted in a slower ride topped by a headwind and then making a wrong turn onto Severn Bridge cycle path. We should have turned up the northern side of the bridge but it later transpired we were *not* on the northern side. Top tip for the route planner – say on which side of the cyclist the traffic should be – left or right!!!

Clare on Severn Bridge



The last 10 miles of what turned out to be 101 miles on the day was the worst, my right hand had virtually given up as the carpal tunnel problems kicked off and the only way which I could brake or change gear was to go down on my drop bar. My left knee started to hurt and by the time I got off my bike at the Beaufort Hotel in Chepstow I struggled to walk.

It was 8.30pm, we had been cycling (on and off, but more on than off) for 12 hours, I was close to tears and then when I found that everyone had waited for us so we could eat together I struggled to hold it together.

Clare and I were sharing that night, the room was small and we had to get cleaned up for dinner, my knee was swelling by the hour and by the time I got to bed it was HUGE. Clare went in search of a bag of ice; she sorted me out and left me to get some sleep, in agony that I was there was a funny side to the evening. When Clare came up to bed, she switched on her bedside light and put her nightie over it to dim the light in order not to wake me. On returning from the bath room the nightie got too hot and burnt filling the room with smoke and waking me. Dangerous but funny, we waited for the fire alarms to go off wondering how to explain this one to our fellow exhausted cyclists when the hotel was evacuated. Luckily (or not) the fire alarm remained silent.

Chepstow to Shrewsbury 93 miles

I didn't sleep much last night, my knee and hand were agony, the alarm went off at 6.30 and I couldn't get out of bed. Clare went downstairs for more ice and bought me some breakfast, I ate breakfast and took 3 painkillers and by 8am I managed to hobble downstairs. Kenny didn't say a lot to me that morning but I later found out that he wanted to tell me not to ride that day but took one look at my face and bottled it.

The next best plan was for me to start slowly with Euan and Clare, Kenny and Alex would meet me with some Volterol to rub on my knee and something to strap it up.

It was a warm day and set to get warmer, I had to walk with my bike for a while as the road from the hotel out of town was uphill. At the top of the hill I gingerly got on my bike, clipped in and soon worked out that the only way to ride was to push down and pull up with my right leg so that my left leg just went through the motion with no pressure. Kenny and Alex met us after about 8 mile, rubbed my leg with Volterol and strapped my leg up with the best thing we could find – insulation tape (and it worked) Alex then rode with us.



Another stunning village



Clare, Euan and Alex

The first half of the day was undulating, it was hard work and I hurt but as the day wore on, I was able to use my leg a little more. We rode through Hereford and stopped for lunch on the village green in Leintwardine – Andy yet again had managed to knock together an amazing feast and the local hotel let us all use their washroom facilities and what facilities they were!!! More painkillers and more Volterol I mounted my trusted steed and continued through Bishops Castle and on towards Shrewsbury. Clare got another puncture on the approach to Shrewsbury, Alex had gone ahead to arrow us through the busy city, Alistair and I wound our way through and eventually arrived at the Lord Hill Hotel which definitely was as good as its name suggested!

Tonight I shared with Lucy but as Mike my husband, Geoff and Noelle (friends) were to join us all for dinner I didn't have much time to chat. Tonight was great, the food was fabulous and spirits were high (as was I with all the painkillers that I was taking) and I had some extra company.

I slept well tonight and I was grateful for that as we had a long day tomorrow and two very busy towns to negotiate.

Shrewsbury to Preston – via Whitchurch the nearest point to my home and 92 miles of potholes ☹

Although each day I continued to be nervous I did learn to master eating a good breakfast and the Lord Hill served the best up to date.

My knee still hurt but it there was a big improvement today, Volterol, Ibuleve, Arnica rubbed into my knee (my idea) and 3 painkillers saw me on my way.

Another warm day took us through the roads out of Shrewsbury and through to Whitchurch, familiar stomping ground for me, I rode out this way during the build up in my training for this ride.

I was a little embarrassed today when Euan pointed out that whilst riding through Cheshire he had never seen so many high performance cars, ladies beauty salons and as many potholes anywhere..... hmm I had to admit that this is true.



Alex tried her best but no amount of CPR would bring him to life

It was a long, long way to lunch (62 miles) and Clares knee gave up around 10 miles south of lunch, Rob was the man of the day and pushed her most of the 10 miles to lunch. We negotiated Warrington and all the roundabouts, potholes and awkward drivers, we ate lunch and on then to Preston.

I rode with Mouse all afternoon; we paced well together and arrived in Preston safely but very tired only then for me to have problems with the room, the hotel management and the shower, Clare and I had to move to another room.

I was tired, physically and mentally, Mike was coming up to join us for dinner and I wasn't good company for anyone. I went to bed straight after dinner – definitely a bad mood bear.

Preston to Carlisle 90 miles including Shap

This morning I woke up and my mood was not much better than the previous night – this was to be the lowest day of the whole challenge for me.

I set off alone and met up with Rob and Lucy around Garstang, I rode with them for 13 miles as we weeded our way around Lancaster city and onto the first water stop at Carnforth.

It was a dry day and the sun was trying to make a breakthrough by mid morning, I left the water stop alone and rode for most of the next 40 miles alone. This was the first time that I had to use my directions and my map and not rely on the others, through Kendal I cycled, picking up the A6 to Shap and Penrith. I looked for a toilet in Kendal but was informed by some local people that they were closed; this was to have a huge impact on the next 10 miles or so ☹

Shap!

I hated Shap, I had travelled this road in a car many times as a child, I had seen back then many a car at the side of the road with overheated engines and burnt out clutches and here was I with

just a bike..... In the last 40 years Shap had not changed at all. It was bleak and it was hilly..... in fact it was just one very, very long hill.

The directions that I had said that it was 5 miles up hill but when I looked at my Garmin read out on my return home it was nearer 11 miles. I felt really low and I was about to take on one of the most challenging parts of the ride, Matt and Mouse came by and rode with me for a short while until I stopped for a break – they carried on. I need the loo and I was uncomfortable, eventually I did find somewhere in a field of sheep who were very inquisitive, as I stood up again feeling much better I realised that I had been on full view to the traffic coming down the hill, I then managed the rest of the climb to Shap Summit.



Shap



Shap

The decent to Shap Village Hall was fantastic, my parents, sister, daughter and her husband were there to meet me and once again, Andy came up trumps with a fantastic Hotpot lunch.

Another 25 miles to the hotel and although I was alone my mood began to lift, on my approach to Carlisle I had a strong desire for some fish and chips but sadly I didn't find a chip shop on my route. I felt so much happier now, I believe that Shap had been my problem, I knew Shap and I had dreaded it.

I haven't mentioned this but although I have done a lot of miles each week and many hours in the saddle in preparation for this trip I was not expecting to have such a sore ass! The first 20 miles or so each day were bareable but then it became sorer and sorer with every mile..... Any amount of udder (chamois-lol) cream didn't seem to help for very long – my only consolation that most of us had the same problem!

The Best Western Cumbria Park Hotel was lovely, I was on my own tonight, I enjoyed a long soak in a Radox bath, I have never particularly been a bath person preferring showers but as the days progressed the facility of a bath became very important to most of us, especially the girls.

Carlisle and across the border to Kilmarnock, Scotland 101 miles



Starting the day with a group photo we left the hotel and within 100 yards we almost had a multi bike pile up as the rider in the lead (Alan) stopped to pick something up that he had dropped, none of us were really concentrating, lol.

Today most of us rode together, Alan who was Scottish asked if he could cross the border first and welcome us all to his country and after 11 miles we did cross the Scottish border into Gretna Green. This was a particular milestone for me and I do believe that we all felt pretty much the same, serious photo shoot here, lots of happy smiley people. Jim, Kenny and Andy were there too and Alex was riding with us that morning.



We cycled through the village of Gretna, through some wonderful country towards Dumfries, passing through village after pretty village and enjoying the views and the lazy sunshine. We stopped for lunch two miles short of Sanquhar – the home of the oldest pub in the world.

Our ride continued through Cumnock to Kilmarnock where once again we would rest our heads at the Premier Travel Inn on the Moorfield Roundabout. I shared with Clare again that night and I just managed to escape Clare's routine stretching exercises with a telephone call from my daughter – lol

Kilmarnock to Inveraray 80 miles

Once we had managed to work out which way we were going on leaving the hotel (I went round the roundabout twice) we were on our way, it was a cool start to the day but not for long, the sun was with us for the day yet again.



Largs

We cycled to a town/village on the coast called Largs where we enjoyed lying on the green in the sunshine and eating the best icecream ever – thank you Duncan.



On to Gourock where we re grouped to take the short ferry crossing to Dunoon, 4 miles on and we stopped for lunch at Benmore Botanical Gardens and were in for a treat! The guys had organised a BBQ, picnic benches and all, the sun was warm and moral was high.

We followed the road around Loch Eck to Creggans and then around Loch Fyne and to the afternoon water stop. Clare and I were the last to arrive at the water stop, we had taken time to take photos, talk to locals (as you do) and generally idle our way in the sunshine, lol.

Clare chatting to the Locals



Jim was patient and had waited for us, then he dropped the bombshell – he pointed to the hotel where we would be stopping that night, it was across the water but we had a 15 mile ride around the Loch to get to it!!



Water Stop



Inveraray – across the Loch!

Inveraray has to be one of the prettiest places I have ever been to, the Argyll Hotel where we stayed overlooked the Loch and the hotel was very nice, I shared with another 'Jackie' that night who was joining us for the next days' ride. I did find it difficult to 'gel' with a new face, I was tired and the other Jackie was bouncing!

We enjoyed a fabulous evening meal and Clare gave an after dinner speech to the amusement of us all.

Each evening Kenny would talk to us all about that day, what had gone on here and there and not once did miss the chance to tell all, Squarky the chicken was presented to anyone who had been 'a problem' ie punctures, ran red lights, etc etc Squawky then had to travel on the bike of the unfortunate individual who had been nominated. A medal was awarded to the 'best' person of the day, maybe for helping someone else etc

Inveraray to Spean Bridge 84 miles

I cannot remember much about this day so I am guessing that it was fairly flat - lol, Mouse and I stopped to take some photos Highland Cattle and calves who, when Euan arrived took exception to him and came charging over..... so, so funny.



Mouse



We took the A85 to Connel, crossed the bridge to Ballachulish and then the A82 towards Fort William, we crossed Fort William and saw the infamous Ben Nevis and made our way on to Spean Bridge.

The stay at Spean Bridge was in Chalets which I shared with both Clare and Lucy. We were joined before dinner by Mike Catamole (Chanel 4 horse racing presenter who was joining the ride for the next day), he arrived when we were all sat on the verandah of one of the chalets with drinks flowing freely. Mike commented as he joined us that 'this looks like a scene from the film 'Deliverance' – I am sure he didn't really mean it.

Spean Bridge to Invershin 100 miles with a very cheeky climb



We took the A82 out of Spean Bridge and upto the Commando Monument where we stopped for photos with Mike Catemole all supporting our Bob Champion tee shirts.

Through Invergarry and to the morning waterstop in Drumnadrochit, on towards Beauly where we faced the hardest climb since Dartmoor – short but tough – that was kenny's description and not mine. I am not sure I would be able to describe that f***** hill without lots of swear words..... lol

Once again the day was warm and sunny; I think that although we had a very wet start in Lands End we must have been one of the luckiest LEJOG'er teams with regards to the weather.



Stunning views and pretty villages were the order of the day

Chilli and rice awaited us at our lunch stop today in Dingwall and yet again Clare and I were the last to leave, Euan was to cycle with us for 10 miles or so and then he shot off for an early finish.

Four of our team escaped a nasty accident today when they came face to face with a car on the wrong side of the road overtaking a lorry on a bend, all was okay but everyone was shaken including the lorry and car drivers who stopped.



Last water stop of the day



View from the Penthouse Suite

Clare and I arrived at Invershin Hotel and I was met by Alex who told me that I had the best room of the day, what could only be described as the penthouse suite..... It was fantastic..... the bed was soft and squishy and I couldn't wait for bedtime to climb (and I mean climb) into it – the best night's sleep of the whole trip. Some of the guys were not so lucky with 7 of them sharing a 'cabin' with one bathroom – oops.

Dinner tonight was different, we had potato and leek soup followed by minced beef, mashed potatoes and peas but I have to admit it was nice to have some 'home cooking'

Invershin to Thurso 80 miles and some tough climbs



Single Track 'A' Road

We left Invershin and continued north to Altnaharra, the road on which we cycled for 25 miles was an 'A' road, it was single track and excellent surface, we saw very few vehicles and even less houses, farms or cottages. We stopped at the remote Crask Inn where Kenny had pre ordered homemade cake and freshly brewed coffee, the Inn was delightful as were the owners.

Reluctantly leaving the beautiful Crask Inn where we had sat outside in the morning sunshine drinking coffee and enjoying the cake we carried on along the single track A road and then onto the A873 towards Betty Hill, across a bridge and a hill to climb to lunch.



Crask Inn

The last lunch stop of the trip and then we continued on the A836, there was little traffic on this road but it was narrow and very hilly. I cycled with Clare who as always came flying past me on the decents but I managed to just about nail her on each climb – with Robs’ words “just keep tapping away on those pedals until you get to the top” in my head, I conquered each one.

At the water stop near Reay, Jim, Clare and I started chatting to some holiday visitors who were asking what we were doing and they kindly donated £10 to the trust.



View from the A836 to Thurso



Matt's Birthday

On
we

went to Thurso for our overnight stay, Clare and I shared a room for the last time, we enjoyed yet another entertaining dinner and helped Matt celebrate his birthday. As tomorrow we were only going to be cycling 26 miles we all stayed up a little longer, tomorrow – JOHN O’GROATS!!

Thurso to John O’Groats 26 miles including a detour to Dunnet Head



Dunnet Head

This morning we woke up to a foggy day and it stayed that way right up to the end of our journey. We did go to Dunnet Head, the most northern point of Scotland but visibility was poor.

After re grouping at a café less than a mile from John O’Groats we cycled together to end our epic journey and cross the finish line. Mike, my husband and Dave my son were there to see us in and the champagne was flowing.

Official photos, hugs, words of congratulations and tears followed – we had made it – ALL OF US!!!!



We had travelled 993 miles from one end of the UK to the other, climbed over 46,000 feet and not once had we stepped foot in a motorised vehicle of any description. We had raised at that point over £45,000 for The Bob Champion Cancer Trust and money is still coming in.

I am so proud to have been a part of the team, to have had the best organisers and leaders possible who kept the whole journey fun – thank you to you all ☺

Inverness – The last night but what a night!

We took the coach from John O’Groats to Inverness and immediately on arrival we were introduced to Bob Champion, we were all presented with medals and certificates and celebrated with a glass of champagne.



After a shower and rest I decided to take a walk to the shopping mall and on my way I bumped into Bob Champion and he invited me for a coffee, we chatted for half an hour and went our separate ways, what a great guy and I felt privileged to have spent some time with him.

Dinner in the evening with the rest of the group and leaders and Bob champion completed the day, Andy had made a dvd of some of the photos and moments captured throughout our journey.

Euan, myself and Alex





The Biggest Challenge So Far.....

And finally...

I am writing this page first, odd I know but I wanted to remember how I feel.

It is 9 days since I finished my ride; I totally underestimated how tired I would be when I came home and how many days that tiredness would continue.

Now this could be because I am 53 and about to be a granny (lol) but I think it is

more likely to be due to the fact that I have used about a months worth of energy in 12 days and now it is payback time.

I still feel very emotional and I really don't know why that is – yes the tiredness will play a part; but a part of me wishes that I was about to start the challenge..... and then I remember Shap and I am so glad it is over!!!

I have special memories about everyone from my epic journey but special mention to;

Jim from Adventurous Ewe who managed to organise other trips that he had running at the same time. He took charge of all the water stops and I am guessing lots of other stuff that we didn't know about.

Kenny, the team leader, what a star, nothing was too much trouble as was the same for the head chef Andy – the two of them made quite a double act, they made the trip fun and they made it happen ☺

Alex, I am not sure how she did it, Alex cycled with us, managed to get ahead of us all and sort out rooms, menus etc. She was a constant support and 'confidant' for all but never missed an opportunity to tell us to "man up" when required!

I miss the rest of the team, the camaraderie, a two-week window in my life that will never, ever be forgotten. Thank you to all my LEJOG'ers team mates who may read this.

Note; I have decided that I will re visit Shap, I will ride it and beat it, yes I did ride it before but not well – it has to be re done ☺ (with a toilet stop in Kendal first!!!!)