

Al & Mel's JOGLE 2009

A tale of two winds.

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Planning - the boring stuff.

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The boring stuff first.

Whilst I'm pretty certain Mel would have quite happily turned up at John O'Groats with a map and a bike, both his wife and I thought that a plan might be a good idea. The first plan was that Mel would have nothing to do with the plan. Things would be simpler that way. So, Mel got on with doing his end of the deal, and I booked up the B&Bs in about March time. I chose the end of May because it overlapped with the school holidays to make life easier for my wife, and chose the start date as 27th May because it's my birthday and I assumed I would remember it.

B&Bs were fairly straightforward to book. Just google the name of the town you're after and B&B (eg Ludlow B&B) and you're presented with a list on a map, with links to the B&B websites. Nearly all B&Bs contacted got back to me within the hour which made things easy. We also had 3 nights at friend's houses to ease the financial burden a bit.

The Plan

The plan looked like this.

Date	Name	Address	Tel:	Web	Total Cost
27 May	The Farmhouse	Midtown, Freswick, KW1 4XX	01955 611254	wilfarm.co.uk	£44
28 May	Blar Mhor B&B	Golspie, KW10 6SY	01408 633609	blarmhor.co.uk	£50
29 May	Ardlogie	Aviemore Dalfaber Road, PH22 1PU	01479 810 747	Ardlogie.co.uk	£56
30 May	Woodburn House	Pitlochry Ferry Road PH16 5DD	01796 473818	Woodburnhouse.co.uk	£65

31 May	John & Dawn				
1 June	Hizzy's	Hawick 23B North Bridge St - TD9 9BD	01450372101	Hizzys.co.uk	£70
2 June	Howard Lodge	Carlisle 90 Warwick Road CA1 1JU	01228 529842	Howard-lodge.co.uk	£60
3 June	Oast Guest Hse	Settle 5 Pen-y-Ghent View, BD24 9JJ	01729 822989	Oastguesthouse.co.uk	£60
4 June	Yew Tree	Cotebrook Fishers Green CW6 0JG	01829 732441	Yewtreebb.com	£50
5 June	Henwick House	Ludlow Gravel Hill SY8 1QU	01584 873338	Henwickhouse.co.uk	£60
6 June	--	HOME			
7 June	Dave Clatworthy	Taunton	--	TA5 2PY	--
8 June	Capella	Okehampton 31 Station Road EX20 1EA	01837 53607	Capelladevon.co.uk	£50
9 June	Mat & Nat	Fowey	01726		
10 June	Lamorna	Land's End			

Taxi – Nigel **01862 842260 07734700319**

Flight:393 Wednesday 27th May - Check in 11.20-12.40. Flight 13.20-14.45

Training

Both of us rode a fair bit beforehand. Mel has ridden mountain bikes for years, sometimes staying out of hospital for weeks at a time. He sorted out a road bike a couple of months before the off and managed to get lots of miles in. I tried to get the miles in, but with 3 small kids I found finding the time difficult. Having said that I managed 100 mile weeks fairly regularly. We only had two rides together before the JOGLE, but all seemed fine.

Bikes

Coming from a mountain bike background, Mel didn't (doesn't) know anything about road bikes. Instead of months looking at reviews, wandering around bike shops and asking advice he bought the first bike I pointed him in the direction of via an advert on a forum. When I asked him what it was like he said it was a 'fast black' colour. It was immaculate when he picked it up, and within a quarter of an hour looked like it had been pulled out of a landfill.

Never liking to do things the easy way I built my bike last year using an old Dawes Super Galaxy frame, respraying it, and then building it up to suit me. It took about a month to do but is very comfy and as strong as, um, a girder.

Us

Mel claims to be younger, taller and cleverer than he is, but he isn't. He is the director of a graphics studio in Stroud and drinks beer. his wife Jonquil, is lovely, which was a shock and his dog Gertie is bloody lovely.

I print t shirts for a living, I'm 38, with 3 kids and a lovely (read:understanding) wife. And a cat called Gloria. And 3 chickens called Beyonce, Shakira and Starry Petal.

Getting to JOG.

Flights were booked from Bristol to Inverness for £1 each + tax, a bargain that was countered by £150 for a taxi from Inverness to our first B&B in Freswick, 3 miles south of JOG.

The bikes were boxed up and put on a courier (West Coast Express if you're in the South West) for £16+VAT each.

May 27th 2009

D Day. It was my birthday, so I was besieged by my kids at some ungodly hour, and given some lovely presents. My wife always gets me brilliant gifts because her birthday is 3 weeks after mine, and if she doesn't deliver neither will I for her. Fair's fair.

Mel and Jonquil turned up at 10ish, we said our goodbyes and cadged a lift (cheers Julian) down to Bristol Airport. The longest I've been without my kids was 5 days, so I wasn't looking forward to this bit.

For my birthday I was given a bugle for my bike by Fran - thank you my dear - made me smile.

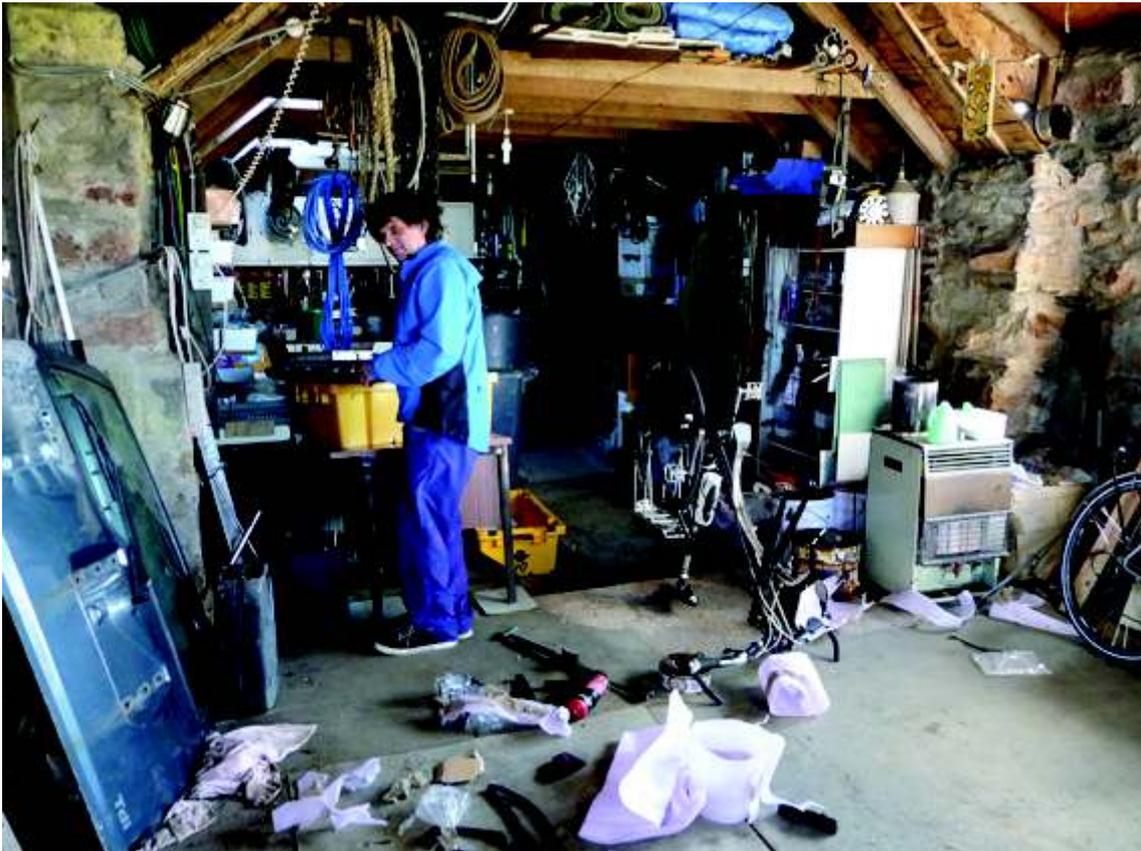
Customs took it off me. The sods. As if I was going to bugle the pilot to death. To add insult

to injury I could hear the security people playing with it as I skulked off into the security lounge. Then it dawned on us that we were on our own. Mel said that he laid out all the pages in his map the night before and it was more than a room long. We contemplated that for quite a while.

The flight was on time, and we were met at the other end by Nigel in his minibus. It took us about 3 hours to meander up the A9 that we would be doing in the reverse direction in the next few days. Nigel, although English, had lived in the area for a quite a few years and was knowledgeable about the area, pointing out handy diversions (off the A9 to Embo / Dornoch for example. Dornoch turned out to be stunning).

We got to the first B&B at 5pm. Freswick is in the middle of nowhere, and our B&B was in the middle of it. Our hosts gave us a warm welcome and showed us our room. Luckily Mel is only 5'2" tall because the ceiling was very low. I just had to stoop, as usual.

By prior arrangement, the B&B had taken delivery of our bikes, and had said they would take the boxes to the recycling centre for us, which was a bonus. The owner of the B&B (forgotten name - sorry) had a huge old workshop in which we reassembled the bikes; mine was back in one piece in about 10 minutes, but, unsurprisingly, Mel's wasn't. He'd had to bring a pair of Schwalbe Marathon Plus tyres up with him (Chain Reaction Bikes delivered late), and on fitting them realised the mudguards wouldn't fit without a fight. When the rear mudguard won the fight it was removed, bent in two and hidden in the bike box. The front 'guard was beaten into submission but rubbed a bit. We were in a slight panic trying to get the bikes back together because we didn't know what time the hotel at JOG finished serving food, and neither did the owners of the B&B.



Middle Earth

It was nice to get back on the bikes again and we had a traffic free but windy scoot up to JOG where we necked a well deserved pint and devoured a chicken curry. We then decided that we might as well start the trip then and there, so cycled down to the harbour and took some photos.



The place was deserted, and as has been documented a thousand times, it's pretty shabby. Not shabby chic, shabby shit. And that was it - the start of the journey. Reset the bike computers, then back to the hotel for another pint. Maybe two. Cycling back from JOG to the B&B was stunning. Still light at 10.30pm.



Stroma



Back in the B&B we sorted panniers out and got a decent nights sleep. We'd need it.

28th May - Day 1

We had breakfast with a fellow guest who was trying to persuade her teenage son that moving to the region was a 'good idea'. It clearly wasn't. It seems that the only reason to live this far away from civilisation is to get / run away from things down south. She was a gardener by trade, and to be honest we didn't see much in the way of gardens for the first 50 miles.

We packed everything up for the first time, filled the water bottles and tentatively set off at about 9.15am. Navigation was easy today. Head south. So we did. We had fresh legs, so didn't notice the rolling hills. The scenery wasn't that scenic. As previously mentioned, the few houses present didn't really inspire. Even the knackered old fences looked like Shane MacGowan's teeth. The only livestock to be seen were sheep, and they looked fairly miserable too. We passed quickly through Wick, having been warned by the taxi driver that the women of Wick were ravenous for all men. We avoided eye contact at all times, although at one point Mel started circling a car park for no apparent reason. We were passed a couple of times by vintage tractors seemingly doing the end to end too (the banners across the back of the tractors gave it away). We then repassed one of them who shouted 'are we still on the A9?' This made us chuckle - it's about the easiest road in the country to navigate.

The weather was borderline grim. Drizzle until lunchtime, when we realised that we needed to find somewhere to eat but there was nothing. Stopping at Dunbeath we found the Spar shut, and the pub next door shut too. We eventually found a post office over the bridge at the top of the hill. It was shut on Thursday afternoons.

We both knew we had a hard afternoon ahead with both Berridale and Helmsdale to climb, but without any food and another 40 miles to go things looked a little bleak.

Cresting a hill, we saw both vintage tractors in a layby, parked up next to a motorhome. One of the drivers shouted out of the motorhome so I doubled back to scrounge some water for my bottle. We were quickly ushered inside and fed dirty great ham and mustard sandwiches and fruit loaf. We swapped stories, and left thoroughly restored a quarter of an hour later.



She couldn't resist fingering my helmet.

The run downhill into Berridale was awesome. Mel discovered that the handling of Fast Black downhill and loaded up was 'exciting' and took to the wrong side of the road around some hairpins. It's amazing that you can hear people screaming in their cars as you pass them at 35mph. The weather had now cleared up and the slog up Berridale was a sweaty one, but not as bad as feared. At the top we stopped for a grin and a drink, then wobbled on towards Helmsdale. Which had been moved. We didn't pay much attention in the taxi, but going north to south Helmsdale is a mere blip.



From Brora to Dunrobin Castle was a nice canter, but we started to notice just how crazy the bus drivers were. The lorries were fine though. As we approached Golspie we were hit by a fierce headwind which completely sapped us for the last 5 miles. Horrible stuff and not what we needed after 65 miles. We eventually got to the B&B and Mel tried to sell his bike to the landlady. She looked horrified. So, first day, 70 miles, legs aching but OK, and the same went for Mel. The B&B (Blar Mhor) was a lovely house and we had a ground floor room (no stairs, hooray).

Talked to the family at length which was nice, but it dawned on me how long I was going to be away from them.

We walked down to the seafront and had a meal in the Links Hotel (I think), and a couple of pints. At this point we realised that a couple of pints were all we needed and indeed, all we could handle. We both slept well until 5am when the insane combination of white curtains and early sunrise took over. Arse.

29th May - Day 2

Being new to the road bike, Mel became confused and had a wee in his bib shorts thinking it was a wetsuit. It did keep him warm, and kept the flies away from me.

Knee was a bit sore so I taped it up for the first time with kinesio tape which seemed to help

straight away. The GPS said 84 miles for the day when I switched it on which was a shock because I'd only planned it as 75. The sun was shining, bright blue sky, but my legs just didn't want to work. They normally take about 10 miles to wake up so I kept on plodding on and was rewarded by a fantastic morning riding around Lochs and mainly flat roads. Vick (wife) phoned with a problem at work and I felt hugely guilty. She was stressing, probably planning what to do with the kids at the same time and I was riding around stunning Scottish scenery.



Mel and I noticed that a lot of the houses were very Breton looking; bung on a set of shutters and you wouldn't know where you were. Coincidentally, most of the time we didn't know where we were, and when we did we were usually lost.

At one point we stopped behind a farmer herding his sheep around a loch. He was more than little cheesed off by the time we saw him, dancing around and shouting at the top of his voice.



Then, just around the corner we spotted a group (pod, team, um, glut) of seals sunbathing on a mud bank. They were about 50m away and looked like slugs. Either that or they were 5m away and they were slugs.



Slugs

The lanes wandered along the coast to Dornoch which was beautiful, and strangely empty at 10.45am. We did spot a coach from Cirencester (about 15miles from home) which was strange.

Again, very French looking architechture.



Dornoch

We rode down to the ferry, which was alive and well on Mel's map. Unfortunately it hadn't run for 'years and years' according to a greenkeeper. Never mind, a nice little detour, now back onto the A9 for a bit.

We decided to amble on down to the Nigg ferry and sail over to the Black Isle. The sun was out, the road was flat, what could possibly go wrong? We did notice that we were the only people going down the 7 mile road to the ferry, and laughed and joked about there being no ferry. There was no ferry. Do you spot a theme here? A local chuckled, and said it didn't start running until 1st June. Thanks for the signposts Scotland.



Look, no ferry.

It was now 12.40, we had to back track back onto the A9 after a 14 mile detour, on top of the 86 miles already planned. Which makes 100 miles. Bugger.

Passing through Tain we headed towards Invergordon for lunch where a huge cruise liner had belched out a blob of Americans for a few hours. The sun was belting down, so we sat outside a pub, sharing a table with a couple of Yanks in shell suits who had nothing better to do for 3 hours than sit down and eat and drink. Not sure what they did on board, but I'm sure it involved the same. We felt quite sorry for them; yesterday they had docked at Bergen (nice), tomorrow they were in Edinburgh (great), the day after Newcastle (canny), but today was Invergordon (shite). There really was nothing to do. A couple of 'Scotlandish' people with dubious accents met them with a gazebo stacked with orange wigs and tartan. I would have stayed on board and had spit races down the side of the ship. As a huge coincidence there has just been a report on the radio of a stomach virus on a cruise ship on the Cromarty Firth - welcome to Scotland! So, it was 2pm, we'd done 14 miles more than we needed to, and we still had 60miles to go...so we did.

I don't mind the heat, but climbing out of Inverness the heat was radiating from the very black tarmac and we were dripping with sweat. Half way up a climb Mel pulled over - his headset had siezed making the bike pull to the right uncontrollably. I hadn't noticed because his default riding style is 'uncontrollably'. A good wiggle didn't do it, neither did a really good one, so with Fast Black led on its side Mel squirted some chain lube into the

headset. This seemed to work so he squeezed the oil as hard as he could and the bottle burst all over the bike and into his bar bag. I sacrificed a sock to mop up as soon as I'd stopped laughing. The next picture I took was at Tomatin at 7pm. I miss that sock.



Tomatin. 7pm and 15 miles to go...

At Daviot we got off the A9 and onto the B9154 and ended up going up a rotten steep hill. We refilled our bottles at a camp site at the top for the third time that day and plodded on. Legs were tired now and there wasn't much banter.



8pm

The GPS seemed to count down the miles very slowly, but eventually we got to a crossroads with a signpost to Aviemore. There was a shout of 'Mel!' which scared the brown stuff out of the both of us. It turned out to be Cabby - one of Mel's mountain bike clan who was on his hols about 6 miles away and decided to leave his missus for the night and buy us beer. We whizzed through Aviemore and found the B&B and quickly showered. My knees were really bad - it took a good few minutes to climb the stairs in the B&B. Mel was giggling like a child as I staggered over the footbridge into Aviemore looking like a toddler climbing Snowdon.

After 105 miles we had a well deserved pint in a packed out Aviemore pub. It was a gorgeous evening and it seemed more like Ibiza than a Scottish ski resort.



The Gruffalo eating lots of curry.

One thing that did cheer me up was when I saw a sign for red squirrels, and then I thought I saw one dead on the road. "Is that a red squirrel?" I asked Mel.

"Well, " he replied "it's got a lot of f***ing blood all over it. Is that what you mean?"

(Christ, is it only) 30th May - Day 3.

The B&B (Ardlogie.co.uk) was lovely, and close to the centre of town. The only gripe being

white curtains again. We sorted ourselves out and were on the road by 10am. I necked painkillers and made sure my knee tape was in the right place but the first 10miles were hard on them. The scenery was awesome, and we did the morning mainly on bike routes like this one.



Not bad these Scottish cycle tracks.



Flat, gorgeous and easy. And that was just Mel.

Then we needed lunch and decided to head onto Dalwhinnie, which was a bit of a drag into a headwind. There was a distillery there, and so bound to be places to eat, especially if they were anticipating American visitors. Incredibly, there wasn't.

We were lucky to find a park bench and emptied all the crap we'd been avoiding - hairy

peanuts and the like. And that was lunch. We knew the next town was Blair Atholl 23 miles away, unless that had moved since Mel's map had gone to print, so filled up the water bottles and readied ourselves for the big climb.

After 500m we came across a huge roadside restaurant. We swore a lot and went inside for quite a while. Mel became overfriendly in the car park with two middle aged blokes with matching Lidl cycling shorts and polo shirts. Well really, who would have matching.....oh....I see.

The next hour was probably one of the hardest I've had on the bike. My knee was screaming and we were being blown backwards by the wind going up over a mountain. As hard as we could go we averaged 7mph for the hour.



Looks easy. Wasn't.

Thankfully it got easier and we found a bridge which I let Mel play on whilst I did grown up things.



1/2 Man, 1/2 Monkey.

The last 20 miles into Pitlochry were very scenic, and my knee seemed to ease up. The B&B was awesome (woodburnhouse.co.uk) - the landlady gave us our own self-contained flat with a washing machine and our own rooms. Luxury. There was also a parcel waiting for me from my wife and kids (and a card for Mel) which brought a tear to my eye. My son had written "You're incredible, so keep on going." Accurate and touching. My daughter had written "I hope your bottom doesn't explode". Again, accurate.

Whilst Pitlochry was a cracking little town (one of the few I'd like to revisit), the restaurant we chose was pitiful. Avoid Bistro No.1 like the plague, although that's probably on the menu.

Quite a long day in the end, about 80 miles, but legs didn't feel too bad.

31st May - Day 4

Another glorious start with a good breakfast and blue skies. Had a slightly disconcerting conversation with a Geordie and his American wife. He 'entertained' us with his 'hilarious' anecdotes, and his catchphrase (his words) 'shut up or I'll f***ing hit ya'. Mel and I backed silently out of the room.

Anyway, I found a deer leg which made up for it.



I couldn't find the rest of the deer which worried me a bit. Maybe PsychoGeordie ate it with his full English? I carried it a bit on my bike rack, but then started to question myself. It seemed like quite a nice lucky charm (although not for the deer), but I refused to wear it around my neck until the flies had died down a bit. So I waved it in front of Mel and threw it away. Happy days.

We had lunch in by the riverside in Perth, which again seemed a pleasant place. There were lots of lobster red people wandering around. I introduced Mel to M&S Percy Pigs which helped us up a few hills subsequently.



To be honest, riders on the Tour de France could benefit from, and should really avoid Percy Pigs. Going out of Perth we climbed up a nasty hill at about 11mph, effortlessly. Mel said it was the wind, I say Percy.

We took bike paths and lanes until we saw these two bridges looming on the outskirts of Edinburgh.



A few miles later we reached the bridges.



Going over the Forth Road Bridge was nice, because it was flat, and we really, really like flat. It was also like coming back into civilisation, the first big city we'd had to pass through.

There were lots of other cyclists around, so we were careful not to concede points. To explain: we had devised a points system - if someone on a bike overtakes you, you lose 10 points, if you overtake someone, you gain 10 points. If you're not riding your bike at the point where someone overtakes you, the points don't count. This last rule saved our bacon, but often meant we had to throw the brakes on and dive into a hedge to avoid points being taken away. We made the rule up after going into minus figures fairly early on in the ride. There were no rules about the person you overtook. A child with stabilisers (double points, four wheels) and 80+ year olds were very satisfying.

So, lots of dodging through sightseers on the bridge, and onto a bike path to the centre of Edinburgh, which went through very upmarket properties. No points lost.

We met up with Mel's hashing mates, having previously booked the night with Hoggy. It was the day of the Edinburgh marathon, and they'd all run at least part of it, and been in the pub since lunchtime. We sank a couple of pints, then went back to Hoggy's for a shower and change. Back to Cafe Royale, and then onto a Thai restaurant. As well as our amazing points system, we also had a 'Three Pint Rule' which we had yet to stick to. For the sake of, um, symmetry, we invoked a 'Six Pint Rule' and regretted it for the next two days. We slept well.....

1st June - Day 5

...but had to get up again. After a full English breakfast every morning so far, we opted for porridge and toast, which made a lovely change. We set off into the commuter traffic at 8.50am, and lost quite a few points as we made it out of the city. The weather was red hot again - for some reason we felt quite dehydrated. And when I farted it smelled of lemongrass. When Mel farted it didn't.

Within 10 miles we were in the countryside again, with some amazing scenery. The B709 to Innerleithen was stunning.





Mel cleans up the Hobbit Hooves



We stopped in Innerleithen (good bike shops) for lunch and more sun cream. We also bought a bike lock because we thought we might need it. I cleverly threw away the packaging so we didn't have to carry it. When we came to use it, we realised we didn't have any instructions and I was told off.

And then the beer caught up. No matter what we did we had no energy whatsoever. This was only a 50 mile day, but we really struggled for the last 25 miles. The scenery remained

nice except through Selkirk (big hill, didn't stop, didn't look interesting), and when we got to Hawick. For a town I'd not heard of it was fairly big, and fairly soulless too. Some of the locals are very scary and as good an advert as any to scrap the Day Release scheme. The library (I'm guessing underused) and the town hall were the only attractive buildings we could see. We searched in vain to find a pub with a garden (did I mention it was hot?).

The B&B was nice (www.hizzys.co.uk) with a decent shower, and a locking door to keep the scaries out.

We led on our beds from 7.30pm, and I struggled to stay awake through the Gadget Show which finished at 9. Damn you Hoggy and your Scottish beer. Great sleep.

2nd June - Day 6

We had a good sized breakfast next to a cinema sized TV screen right next to the table. The presenters on breakfast TV were actually bigger than us. First time we've had Haggis for breakfast too. I put in my notes that Hawick was 'pikey and angry'.

So, straight out onto the A7 to Carlisle, and within a mile Mel had nearly killed a teenage schoolgirl who stepped out into the road. Her mates called her a 'spaaaaaz'. We pedalled faster, and before long were back in the country.

Mel stopped to take a photo and found that a herd of Percy Pigs had melted to death on and in his camera. After a great deal of camera sucking Mel pronounced the camera dead. I changed the batteries and gave it life once more.

We stopped at Langholm for a coffee. Mel strutted around to show them who was boss.



The locals were petrified.

We spoke to an old rider who had legs like Twiglets (Mel's nose put the whole of him in a shadow) - he must have been in his 70s. He had just come from Carlisle (where we were heading) for his regular run. We set off as he sat down to a cuppa. We lost points to him about 1/2 an hour later. His bike was obviously better than ours.

We hit England at midday, it was exactly at this point that the good tarmac and bike routes

stopped. Mel missed the sign and had to be shouted at to turn around and come back.



In comparison, look at the 'Welcome to Scotland' sign.



Nobody likes a show-off.

We made Carlisle shortly afterwards and wandered round the boring, generic city centre. Thankfully we had left the Scottish hags behind and there was plenty of hot British women to leer at.



The City Centre, like many others in England, is a prime example of 1970s planning hell. All town planners from this era should be rounded up, injured, and made to live in a 1975 Barclay's Bank.

We checked into the B&B at about 2pm (another 50 mile day), changed and went in search of 'The Best Pubs in Carlisle'. They weren't very good. A very nice meal followed at Dempsey's, and then early to bed.

3rd June - Day 7.

And so onwards to Settle. We were fairly pleased to get out of Carlisle by 9am. Mel started to make up games to pass the miles. Today's game was 'Who can see the person with the most clothes on.' His other games weren't much better, in fact we stopped after he came up with 'Who can see the person with the most shoes on.'

The countryside was fantastic, but the A65 was appalling.



We knew the legendary Shap fell was in our path so we were expecting a tough day. At the bottom of the hill it said the peak was 1600 odd feet, so I kept on looking at the altimeter

until I got to a flat bit at around 1400 feet. I stopped in a layby and looked around and up. We were at the top, I was sure, and a granite monument seemed to confirm this.



The climb wasn't half as arduous as we'd anticipated, and the drop down the other side was awesome - I clocked 41.7mph and was devastated to find that Mel clocked 41.9mph, although he wouldn't let me look at his computer to verify this. Not for the first time I thought that North to South seemed a much easier ride. And that Mel was a cheating bastard.



The last few miles into Settle undulated like, um, hills.



We arrived at the B&B which was clean, but very dated. It also had a bizarre 'modesty blind' in the corner of the room in front of the shower, which was in fact a venetian blind bolted to the ceiling at 45 degrees to the wall. I am still kicking myself (and Mel) that I didn't take a picture. I also had another parcel from the family, which contained another bugle from Fran. Awesome for me, not so awesome for Mel and all other traffic.

We watched the Lions game at a local pub I'd spotted on the way into the village. Angus, my son had told me that the kick off was 6.10pm, which seemed a little odd, but he was spot on.

A couple more pints, and we were in bed by 9.30pm.

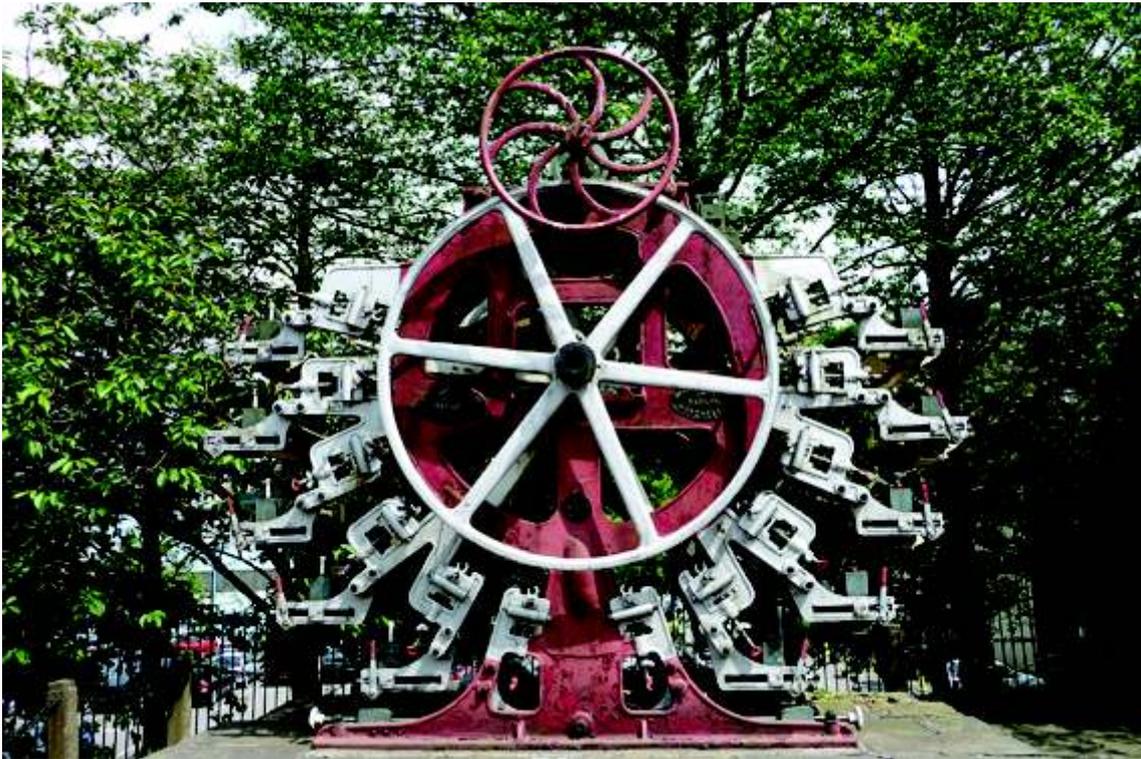
4th June - Day 8

In my notes I've written 'best sausage' and I'm assuming this refers to the breakfast, not a competition I've entered whilst naked.

The weather was still very warm today, and the wind was fine (and still behind us) but my legs took a good 20 miles to warm up. I was in a routine that was as follows.

0-10 miles	would gladly trash the bike, then burn it.
11-15 miles	backside starts to hurt
16-20 miles	I've been sodomised by a telegraph pole
21 miles plus	all fine and dandy.

I took my first photo at 2.15pm today, only because I felt I had to have some record of the day and not because it was a nice subject. Our route took us through Blackburn, Bolton and Wigan.



It turned out to be the only photo I took all day. It was grim. Lots and lots of traffic lights, hundreds of boarded up shops and pubs, nothing to smile about. Three laps of Clit heroe, sorry, Clitheroe didn't help matters either. Mel and I were accosted here by an old bloke with shorts and long red socks and sandals who told us lots of stories that we weren't that keen to hear. Mel diverted his attention by saying 'look, he's got a shiny horn' half way through a sentence. We pedalled off quickly, and in the wrong direction.

We went from inner city grime to Cheshire Polo Club in 15 miles, which was a bit of a shock, and got to thankfully the best B&B so far (www.yewtreebb.com) at 6.30pm after 85 miles, and we were both knackered.

A nice meal (wabbit) in a pub in Tarporley follwoed, with Ben, a guy who was doing the end to end in the opposite direction. We exchanged notes and drank beer. Ben was both younger and seemingly fitter than Mel and I, so it was nice to see him struggle down the stairs of the B&B like an eighty-five year old.

5th June - Day 9

We were given £5 by the landlady for our charity which was unexpected and much appreciated.



The B&B.

Today was to be an easy day. Too easy. We realised at the 1st crossroads that we didn't know which way to go (which is a bit worrying when there were only two options). Not for the first time we used Mel's Magic Bell which had a built in compass. The compass was fairly erratic, but more trustworthy than either of us. So, we set off and 5 miles later realised that we were going in the wrong direction which was a shame because the road was nice and the wind behind us.

Our first stop was in Wem where I bought Mel a bugle. It had a slightly higher pitch than mine, and so blended brilliantly on Bohemian Rhapsody.

Before we got to Shrewsbury I thought I saw an old friend who I knew was doing LEJOG (going north) at the same time. I shouted 'Tom!' and he nearly fell into the ditch. It wasn't him. Mel thought I'd developed Tourette's and kept shouting 'Are you Tom?' at all passing cyclists.

We bumped into the tractor boys briefly - they seemed immune to the huge tailbacks they created behind them - had a quick chat and they invited us to a party at their place, which was unfortunately a bit out of our way.

We went through the centre of Shrewsbury (more fun than bypasses) and coming out the other side we saw Mel's wife Jonquil going in the other direction. Instead of weeping with joy, Mel said 'the engine sounded nice didn't it?' Jonquil sorted us out with food and couldn't stop grinning. And then, for the first time since JOG it started raining.



Mel & Gertie.

Meeting up with Jonquil cheered us both up (and we weren't very down to start with) - it seemed like a big step closer to completion. I think we both realised for the first time that we were close, and that we could do it. It was 25 miles to Ludlow and we hammered along and did it in an hour and a half. Jonquil went ahead. A week before I'd had a call from our proposed B&B (www.henwickhouse.co.uk) to say they'd had a bereavment. They had arranged another B&B - The Cecil Guest House. We turned up wet and fairly tired, to what looked like a cross between Crossroads and Fawlty Towers. Even the sign had a letter missing. The landlord - clearly thrilled to find someone stupid enough to stay there - gave us a tour. Why we didn't just turn around and walk away I'll never know, but we didn't. The room was shocking. Tiny is being generous, and the en-suite barely functioned. The flush was faulty (with a little sign saying so) and the shower was stuck on one temperature - magma. Awful. Awful. I mentioned to him about the bereavment at Henwick house to which he replied that they'd simply overbooked. So, if this is the case, thanks Henwick, and sort your booking system out (how difficult can that be), and to the Cecil Guest House, one night was far too long.

We escaped for a pint after having most of our skin burnt away by the shower. Jonquil was camping, so we headed to the nearest pub to wait for her. We chose the Squirrel. Another stunning choice (should have used the Magic Bell Compass). It was one of those pubs that sells a main course for £3.95, and at 6.30pm it was full of bargain food hunters with no shame or senses of taste.

Joquil whisked us away ('doesn't that engine sound sweet?') to The Charlton Arms, which sorted us out. It rained like hell all evening though, which didn't bode well for the next day.

6th June - Day 10

This was to be a special day as we were passing through our respective homes. We got on

the road by 8am, which we probably would have done in any case to escape the Cecil. It peed down all morning, and for the first time on the trip we were both getting cold. We met up with Gary, one of Mel's mates after a couple of hours. We tried to get a message to him not to bother because of the weather, but he came anyway! He jollied both of us up, someone new to bore, and kept us going up hills. At 11am Jonquil stopped us in a layby and filled us with hot soup, God bless her. Gertie sat on my feet to warm them up. Mel changed his bib in the van and the sight was horrific..

The weather dried out, and so did we eventually as we got the the outskirts of Gloucester, suing familiar bike routes for the first time on the ride. I called ahead to my mates and parents who were going to meet me on the A38. A couple more of Mel's friends joined the peloton and we headed down the A38 to come upon two massive cider tanks being transported on low-loaders.

They each held 800,000 litres of cider, which is nearly a whole night. The electric cables had to be lifted to allow them through, and I expected a little more than men with sticks.



We whizzed along the A38, and I met up briefly with family and friends. Mel and his friends turned left towards the Old Spot in Dursley for an afternoon of beer, and I headed on down the A38 towards home.

It was 10 miles until I saw the family and the only time I'd ride on my own the entire trip. Instead of being energised I crawled home; the last 5 miles my pace was glacial.



I knew that the family was at the local Church Fete, so I headed there instead of home. Angus, my son, saw me as I went in the entrance and winked in a way only cool 9 year olds can. I cuddled up behind my wife who screamed, and then screamed some more. A pint of ale was thrust into my hand (again, thanks Julian), and I just held my wife and grinned for a long, long time.

Although it was amazing I knew I had to be on the road at 9am the next day, and I'm not much good at the goodbyes thing.

Once the kids were subdued and put to bed, Vick and I headed off to a raucous 40th birthday, where Vick danced the night away to bangra music. I leant against a post in a marquee, too scared to sit down in case I couldn't get up again.

7th June - Day 11

I was up at 6.30am with Edith - straight back into the old routine. I packed the bike, and a friend, Phil, turned up at 9am. We met Mel and Gary the Hill at a hotel on the A38, and then had to say goodbye to everyone for a second time.

Being local we knew that the day was going to be flat and luckily the wind seemed to be if not with us, then across us. The forecast was appalling but one thing we have learnt is to ignore the forecast and just go. We stopped at Temple Meads station for a coffee and were quickly attacked by seagulls.

The rest of the ride was just about as flat as it gets. We managed an average of over 13mph, about 2 more than normal. It was good to be riding with Phil - I'm sure he will do the End to End before long, as will Gary. Not knowing where our hosts were we found a pub in Cannington and had a few well deserved beers.



Eventually Mr Ferret and Ashley turned up and Phil and Gary got a lift home. A glorious evening ensued. After a sumptuous curry we jumped in the car and headed to Lilstock beach.

The light there was awesome. As was this memorial of stones.



And the beach hut made from flotsam and probably more jetsam was a treat. It's not

sizeable but you could spend hours there - the detail is spectacular.



Back to Mr Ferret's for an early night, and I slept well.

8th June - Day 12

A huge breakfast was plonked in front of us. There must have been a lot of empty chickens in Somerset that morning.

The wind was with us all morning and the miles came easily. We spent a good few miles on a towpath even though the Magic Bell Compass told us we were wrong to.



Bridge Towpathery.



Another sign with a bent corner. Why? And more importantly, how?

At lunchtime we hit Devon. During the planning stages I'd read a million times about the hills of Devon on the CTC forum so I made sure we only had 50 miles a day for the last couple of days. However, they were still a bit of a shock. I live in the middle of the

Cotswolds so I'm not a stranger to a vertical piece of limestone with a 'hill' sign next to it, but where I live we have flat bits in between. Up and down, repeat. Up and down, repeat. At least half a dozen were fairly nasty too, with a particular favourite by the turning to Belstone.

The last 4 miles were particularly hard as we came into Okehampton. Welcome to the west. The B&B was lovely (www.capelladevon.co.uk). Mel & Jonquil found one 100m up the road that would take Gertie, and we had supper in a pub called the Fountain. There was a poster on the wall about some fool trying to break the record (a scarcely believable 6 days) to do End to End to End. Rather him than me.

9th June - Day 13

I was looking forward to today - we were heading towards my friend's house near Fowey, an area I know quite well because of frequent visits. On the other hand, all the hills I'd driven around were starting to creep back into my memory.....

So, on the road by 9, and into a sodding great big hill going out of Okehampton. We hit the edge of Dartmoor after about an hour. Jonquil was walking Gertie on a firing range which livened up their morning.



We got the collective horn just outside of Gulworthy.



And then had a cracking downhill blast into Gunnislake, followed by the hardest hill of the trip. 500 now Cornish feet in about a mile which makes it steeper than Berridale. It was a belter.

At the top we saw the sea (or the Plymouth estuary) for the first time since Scotland. We were getting excited now, but feared every big downhill because we knew that a dirty great climb would follow.



The sea.

We wobbled over the hills and down to the Boddinick ferry, probably at the lowest average speed for the trip so far.



As luck would have it I knew my way to the Galleon on the edge of the river, so we spent an hour there and then up a couple more hills to Mat and Nat's in Twydrreath where Mat cooked a huge paella. It was lovely to see them, but instead of long rambling chats we normally have I was in bed by 10. One day to go.

10th June - Day 14

As ever, we were up and on the road by 9. I was due back in Cornwall to see M&N in 3 weeks, so we could catch up then.

We had a fairly easy start on the A390 through St Austell, then we turned left and headed towards St Mawes. The hills were horrific. If I lived here (and I've talked about it a lot), I'd burn the bike.





Dropping down into St Mawes.



Mel, Queen of Falmouth.

Although getting the bikes on the ferry was quick and easy I can't recommend the crossing at £14 for the both of us. It was only 5 minutes! The King Harry ferry (a little further north) carries vehicles and is a lot cheaper.



The bikes what did it.

Falmouth was easy to navigate, but the GPS still said 25 miles to go, when we were expecting 15. My parents and Jonquil were waiting at Land's End so we called them and told them to get comfortable....

From now on the hills were bigger and more frequent and our main concern was lactic acid build up. Our legs were working hard to the top of a hill, then freewheel down the other side, then when we came to pedal again our legs were on fire. The first 50m uphill was getting very painful. We had a quick blast along the A30 which wasn't too bad. I'm sure we were being filmed for a documentary by all the helicopters overhead, but apparently they were from RAF Culdrose.

Coming through Penzance was a nice feeling, quickly replaced by more hills and lactic acid. The 6 miles the other side of Penzance were the hardest of the entire trip for me, although this may have been partly psychological. I spent most of my time in Cornwall looking at the altimeter, knowing what was coming next. We only started smiling one mile from Land's End, and crossed the line in a heap. Our relatives were there to meet us and take pictures, and I peeled away to phone Vick who whooped down the phone.

We had a pic by the signpost, then a beer. Mel and Jonquil set off to find a campsite for the night and I was sad to see Mel go. My parents and I went back to our friend's B&B in Lamorna (<http://www.lamorna-valley.co.uk>). If you want a bit of luxury after a ride this is the place to go, so thank you Barbie and Dick.

Miles: 974(good shortcuts Mel)
Punctures: 0

Breakdowns

Mental - lots, mechanical - 1.

Conclusion.

I realise just how lucky I was to be able to do the trip. Being self-employed does help, but my staff were very good and kept things running smoothly whilst I was away.

My wife was amazing juggling 3 kids, school runs and surprise packages at the B&Bs. The kids also played their part - I made sure I had a good chat with them every night. The conversation with Edith (21 months) was the same every night.

"Hello Edith"

"Hello Daddy"

"How are you Edith?"

"Fine. Love you daddy, bye"

Phone goes dead.

The first time she did it I had tears of laughter running down my face but by the end of the trip I couldn't wait to hear her say it every night. Also thanks to my parents who picked me up from Land's End - I wasn't going to cycle home....

I was also lucky to go with Mel. Even though we've worked together for years, we had only been out on two rides together - it could have all gone horribly wrong, like his navigation did on a daily basis. But it didn't. Now when we meet we don't shake hands, we hug each other, which can only be a good thing can't it? Jonquil in the support vehicle saved our spirits on more than one occasion, and Gertie for licking the salt off of our legs.

You can still donate at www.justgiving.com/edith2009



