

# Lands End to John O'Groats 'The Hard Way'

Well after months of training and preparation the day had finally arrived, my lifetimes dream to ride from one end of the country to the other was about to start. The plan was to complete this classic ride in just eight days and I always knew that over such a short duration it was going to be tough. If only I had paid more attention to the route profile then I would have realized just how tough it was actually going to be!

The most common route is via the A30 from Lands End, thus avoiding rolling hills of Dartmoor, then over the Severn Bridge and to the West of Birmingham. Up towards Manchester and avoiding the Yorkshire Moors and the Pennines. Then passing Loch Ness and avoiding the cruel Cairngorms.

However, our route went straight up the middle of the country, seemingly taking in just about every major climb that the UK had to offer en route.

At 8 o'clock on Monday 16<sup>th</sup> August, 12 of us rolled out of the campsite at Lands End and the dream had started....



## Monday 16<sup>th</sup> August – Lands End to Postbridge.

In an effort to avoid as much traffic as possible we stayed on minor roads and also included the beach cycle path between Penzance & Marazion. Slowly crossing the spine of Cornwall through the non-touristy bits that you rarely see, and then crossing the River Fal via the King Harry Ferry. Eventually arriving in Tavistock and then the start of some real crippling climbs as we crossed the Dartmoor. The later part of this first day was very tough with the relentless up and down of the countryside. But we had been blessed with descent weather and a nice gentle tail wind to help us along. We stopped at a campsite at Postbridge, which was roughly 20 miles short of where we really wanted to be for the first night's stopover. The net result was that the following day would now have to be that bit longer than first expected. Distance for the day, 104.22 miles and 10,746 feet of ascending. Time in saddle - 7 hours, 27 minutes.

## **Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> August – Postbridge to Morton Valance, Gloucestershire.**

On leaving the campsite we were right at the bottom of a 1:5 incline, not a great start to anyone's day! We ploughed on regardless and still blessed with the same gentle tail wind and warm weather we were soon crossing the River Avon via the Clifton suspension bridge, complete with a Police escort by two Police officers on horse back. On one of the long climbs, one guy managed to break his rear mech, and we all thought that that was his ride over with. But would you believe that a chap following in a van witnessed the problems and offered to take John and his bike to a bike shop in Bovey Tracey to be repaired. The shop replaced his rear mech, also fitted a new chain, but the rear hanger on the frame was badly bent and needed replacing, however, they didn't have one in stock. Nevertheless, after ringing around they found a shop in Exeter that did have one. Without further ado, John and his bike were then taken to Exeter to have the repairs concluded. With his bike now fixed, John then set off for the overnight stop. Left with only a route card and no maps he found himself going in the complete wrong direction at times. He refused to give in, despite being offered help by the support crew. It was clear that he was running out of day light hours and in the end, reluctantly resorted to catching the train, with his bike, from Bristol to Gloucester, then riding the short hop to the campsite. The second half of the day was mainly flat but with more traffic as we headed for the campsite at Moreton Valance, just south of Gloucester. Distance for the day, 128.20 miles with 6,857 feet of ascending. Time in saddle - 8 hours 26 minutes.

## **Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> August – Gloucester to Bakewell.**

Considerably less climbing than the previous two days with mainly fast roads towards Tewkesbury, then on towards Evesham. As we approached Evesham we were met by Paul Salkeld, Roger Kings and John Mullen who rode with us till Redditch, great moral support, thanks guys. It was also a very odd feeling riding within a few miles of your front door after riding up from Cornwall? After Redditch we then had to navigate through the centre of Birmingham and under Spaghetti junction, not for the faint hearted it has to be said!! Once clear of Birmingham it was on to Lichfield and Ashbourne, before hitting the Peak District with more climbing, and finally a sting in the tail with a short sharp climb before the descent into Bakewell. This was the first night where the plan was to spend the night in the Scout hut on the floor as opposed to camping. But as the floor didn't seem quite so appealing, I decided to find a local B&B or hotel instead. So after we had arrived, I rode around around the one-way system to book in at a local hotel but in the process I managed to find a lovely sharp piece of glass. Dam....the puncture fairy had struck, but also resulted in a large slash in the front tyre rendering it scrap. Thank heavens that I had packed a spare tyre! The best was yet to come, the local brass band turned up for their weekly band practise only to find the Scout hut full of sweaty cyclists and a floor full of air beds and bags. So we had to vacate the hut while they practised. But personally I really enjoyed listening to them, it was a great end to the day. Distance for the day, 120.84 miles with 5,981 feet of climbing. Time in saddle – 8 hours, 17 minutes.

## **Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> August – Bakewell to Reeth, South Yorkshire.**

Into the Dark Peak, passing Ladybower reservoir and then climbing up towards Langsett on our way to the Yorkshire Dales. The first part of the day was clear and bright with plenty of urban cycling through Huddersfield before Skipton and the Dales. Yet more rolling countryside and then on to the Mother of all climbs out of Bolton Abbey before arriving at the campsite at Reeth. With over a hundred miles done, this was a cruel and very sadistic end to the day. So many false summits on this ascent, it affected us all with very poor moral. Then

just to finish the day off, as we rolled into the campsite, down came the rain. Pitching the tent in the rain is never good, let alone when you are very tired and physically drained. It continued to rain, and was really heavy at times, all night long, but most of us were so knackered we slept through it. Distance for the day, 107.73 miles with 9,474 feet of ascending. Time in saddle – 8 hours, 24 minutes.

### **Friday 20<sup>th</sup> August - Reeth to Selkirk.**

After a rather damp start, the day brightened up. But it was to be another day of hard climbing, high moorland and forest roads as we left Reeth on mainly quiet roads. On towards Hexham and towards Kielder Water, at this point the weather turned and down came the rain and the wind was now right in our faces, this was the worst afternoon by far. We crossed over the Scottish borders at 17:30hrs and still had 40 miles to ride before our planned overnight stop at Selkirk. This was a very hard day, huge amount of climbing, combined with lots of miles we had ridden, had taken effect on most people. The last 10 miles seemed to take forever, even if most of it was downhill. With no camping available, the plan was to spend the night on the floor in the local Scout hut. However, with no shower facilities, this saw a large number of us running down the road to the nearby swimming baths before they closed. Distance for the day, 122.06 miles with 12,042 feet of ascending. Time in saddle, 10 hours 16 minutes.

### **Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> August – Selkirk to Glenshee.**

In comparison to the day before, the day was pancake flat as we rode on towards Edinburgh and navigated city traffic before crossing the Forth Road Bridge. Crossing this bridge was quite a memorable moment for most of us, but more climbing shortly afterwards soon bought the reality back. On towards Perth and the foothills of the Cairngorms, stopping overnight in Spittal of Glenshee. Four miles from the finish one poor lad had his chain snap, and had to be recovered by the Support Crew. But in true fighting spirit, once he had repaired his chain at the campsite, he then rode back to the spot where he had been recovered from and rode back. Distance for the day, 118.56 miles with 7,590 feet of climbing. Time in saddle, 9 hours, 1 minute.

### **Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> August - Glenshee to Inverness.**

Within 20 minutes of leaving the campsite we were onto the first of four huge mountain climbs up and over the Cairngorms, so no chance to warm up in advance. As we descended the first pass, nothing prepared us for what was to follow! The second and third climbs were equally as bad. On towards Braemar and Tomintoul and one last climb out of Tomintoul before the downhill run to Grantown was something special for all the wrong reasons. This final ascent had a leg crippling 25% gradient right at the start, then a hairpin to the left, then a hairpin to the right and up to what we thought was the summit. How wrong could we be, as we crested the top the road dipped downwards slightly then rose upwards at an alarming angle? To make it worse, it was dead straight. The only way I can think to describe it would be like a long ramp rising up to heaven. But 50 minutes later we were now descending, this was where I reached a rolling top speed of 58.4 mph!!! This was the shortest day in terms of distance, but it made up for it with the hard climbs. Thank heavens the weather once again had been very good to us, with a tail wind. I cannot begin to imagine what it 'could' have been like? Distance for the day, 98.97 miles with 7,200 feet of ascending. Time in saddle, 7 hours, 23 minutes.

## Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> August – Inverness to John O’Groats.

At last the final leg and the weather had finally turned for the worst as we left Inverness in the rain and a headwind. The plan was to stay on the costal road all the way to John O Groats. It really was a miserable start to the last day, the temperature had dropped quite considerably, and everyone was really suffering. However by mid morning things had brightened up and spirits were lifted as we ploughed on to the end. As we neared the final destination, the rolling countryside started to drain what bit of energy we had left. Then with a couple of hours to go, the heavens opened and we were now riding into horizontal rain and a horrible headwind. The last 10 miles can only be described as torture, slightly uphill, into the eye of the storm, terribly depressing. I looked at my GPS and we were struggling to maintain 7.5 mph, which speaks for its self really doesn’t it? Distance for the day, 121.12 miles with 6,588 feet of ascending. Time in saddle, 9 hours, 21 minutes.



### Overview

As a group we had our fair share of mechanical problems along the way. Such as, half a dozen punctures, two scrapped tyres, broken spoke in a front wheel, two frayed gear cables, snapped rear mech and bent rear hanger, broken STi lever, loose handlebars and a broken chain.

But special thanks must go to the support crew who did a brilliant job, supplying us with drinks and food every 30 or 40 miles. Plus, a full cooked breakfast every morning and a freshly made evening meal every night.

*Statistics for the 8 days: -*

923 miles

66,478 feet of ascending

Average speed – 13.3 mph

Time in saddle – 69 hours, 15 minutes

Would I do it again? - Yes, but certainly not the same route!!!

Alan Weaver