

JOHN O'GROATS TO LAND'S END 18 May – 5 June 2010
HELP FOR HEROES CYCLE RIDE BY RICHARD HARRISON



PROGRESS

First challenge was to beat the volcano so took a flyer when I saw the flight might be threatened and booked a rail ticket. Was fully vindicated and hopefully will get a refund!! The journey was very long but got increasingly beautiful in the afternoon/evening sun. Set off for Wick the next day by train and arrived at 1130. This is where the biking began. 18 miles to John O'Groats to "check in" get the photo and then really get going. Wind at my back and sun on my face what glorious conditions. 52 miles for the day saw me to Reay and thanks to Joy a charming B&B (the Old Inn) with a very friendly couple (Jean and Derek Murray). An immaculate room a wonderful hot shower and some great home cooking, lovely glass of red wine and a whisky to follow!! I could

really get to like this!!! Some advice from Derek on the route saw me head off after a great breakfast (Derek makes excellent marmalade). Turned off towards Kinbrace and then on to Syre and finally Altnaharra for my next stop 55 miles. Difficult decision to stop but my route is 87 to Inverness tomorrow and the next stop would have been a good way on. The ride was wonderful this morning. Amazing how with so much beauty although being very alone one does not feel lonely. The weather was sunny and the air was heavily scented with the rich perfume of deep yellow flowering gorse strewn around the country side. Virtually no traffic, a lovely single track road and my legs feeling very strong with the Raven running like a dream!! It really was greeeat! Am now at THE B&B in Altnaharra writing this. Tomorrow on to Inverness. I will update this whenever I get the chance. Very many thanks to all donors it really is terrific of you all to support this cause.

Update on 24/5 - What a great stay at Altnaharra delightful 3 course Dinner and B&B for £30. Mandy & Lindsay thanks so much for your kindness. At this point "Joy's Bug" caught up with me and the Echinacea couldn't cope. Was feeling pretty rough but after a shower and big breakfast felt just about ready for the road although knowing I had an 8 mile uphill ride right away to the top of the world and 88 miles to Inverness. I was determined to get there quickly to try and secure some antibiotics as it was my only chance knowing how vicious this bug becomes. Day was beautiful at least and the climb was actually very good and got a good rhythm going. Not much traffic at all, 1 car every 10 mins at most! Some great views and I even came across a Pine Martin in the middle of the road. Reached Inverness via falls of Shin and Tain but it was feeling like a longish ride as 5 o'clock came. Thank goodness for the National Cycle Network the traffic free aim is great and produces some very nice rides but more importantly as I approached Inverness feeling a bit weary it kept me safe when not at my most alert!! Managed to fight my way past reception at a surgery next day and was seen by a great Yorkshireman who couldn't have been nicer. Gave me the antibiotics and I got going headed for Kingussie, a conservative ride given how I was feeling and a later start. Some quite gruelling ups and downs early on but they did get me going. Thanks again to Joy she got me a booking at a lovely old place for that night. The ride was really quite nice that day and the weather holding up well. Met up with another cyclist by name of Ed (young guy in his 20s) doing the same overall ride as me and I expect our paths will cross here and there. Red squirrels abound in the garden in Kingussie, wonderful to see. Headed off again up Drumochter pass next morning. Route was using old A9 road and other tracks so almost all traffic free and marvellous, thanks again Sustrans!! My maps are great too! Beginning to feel better due to antibiotics and working hard. It is amazing how doing this continued level of exercise makes you enjoy so many simple things so much more... A glug of water, a lovely meal, sun on your body, sounds of the country, a friendly voice, it is marvellous. Have clocked up some 300 miles now. Made it to Dunkeld that night and the ride from Pitlochry to Dunkeld was absolutely glorious in the late afternoon sun. Dunkeld is a nice little place too situated on a river where I sat for my evening meal. Really feeling recovered now except for an annoying cough at night which keeps me awake for much of the night. Next day (yesterday) on to Perth an easy 20 mile ride. I arranged to meet Alan Joy's brother in Milnathort for a late lunch at 1400. But oh what a traverse across the Ochill Hills!! Some 15 miles and climbed to the top of the world and dropped again at least 5 times!! Beautiful and remote sheep farming countryside but it does take it out of you! Good to see Alan and had an hour and a half break. Headed on to Tillicoultry to stay that night with Martin and Joan (& Hector) and here I am about to set off to Berwick on Tweed via Edinburgh. Thanks for a brief but enjoyable stay Joan and Martin. THANKS SO MUCH ALSO to all the new contributors. I am feeling strong and keen to get going so hopefully your investment is safe!! Catch you again on my next update.

Update on my birthday 26th May written from Clive and Mary's home, who have been so hospitable and are looking great and enjoying their new life in the Northeast. Had a bloody ride

from Tillicoultry to Dunbar. At first all was well to Alloa and then on to Dunfermline on a track like the Bath - Bristol Cycle way. Dunfermline confused me totally with cycle way signs everywhere and inconsistent signposting to the Forth Road Bridge. Gave up and rode as directly as I could see and eventually got across. Was now cycling east into increasing wind and rain and then got very bogged down getting through Edinburgh!! A moment of truth, cold and wet and tired with some 20 miles to go to Dunbar. It really was thinking of the cause that got me going on this bit. Hit a really bad pothole when my glasses fogged up and got lost at a junction in the middle of nowhere with no signposting. Eventually got to the hotel at 1930 which Joy had booked me (thanks again to her for this). The first pint did not touch the sides and later had a ravenous meal of lamb shank!!! Set off South next morning which was brighter and a lot colder. The NCR routed me down a horrendous drop to the sea and then an almost vertical climb back up again, standing on the pedals for some two miles.. Couldn't see the sense in the route!! Headed by the most direct route to Berwick on Tweed and after 30 miles arrived in good spirits. Had a great cafe latte in a shop in the very pleasant centre and bought an "Innocent" smoothie to fill my bottle with, nectar!!!! Headed on for Bamburgh which is a very beautiful little historic place and the ride there was quite scenic down the coastline in the sun. On to Sea Houses and then across to Alnwick. Problems finding somewhere to stay but eventually found a lovely guesthouse, brand new, near the centre "Oronsay" B&B run by Charlie and Christine. 79 miles today. Things definitely more expensive further south!! Lovely Italian meal and a few Peroni beers, think I have clocked up nearly 480 miles now. Next day was my birthday (Charlie and Christine even gave me a card at breakfast!!) my knees feeling a bit sore and stiff so maybe an easier day meeting up with Clive and Mary over at Knowesgate West of Morpeth. The ride over of 26 miles was gruelling (moral is never say it is going to be an easier day) with about five massive ascents and descents. Eventually got there and it was great to see them both looking well. Some lovely food and company and an invitation to spend the night, how could I refuse, it was raining outside to boot!!! Have revised my route a bit in order to make better progress, the NCRs are not that efficient and I need to get more southerly miles in the bank!! Thanks to all for my birthday wishes and thanks too to all the latest donors, we are really getting to the target and it is thanks to you all for this. Heading South again in the morning refreshed and ready to keep going. Will update again soon I hope.

Update on 1st June. Hello again, I am updating this from Bath and home having arrived here for an overnight stop. It is great to be home even for such a brief stop and to see Joy who is looking great and as usual full of surprises. I have done 1000 miles now and for those who don't know John O' Groats to Lands End by the fastest routes is some 875 miles. I passed that target when I was up near Nottingham on Saturday night. I left Clive & Mary having lost nearly three hours due to a mobile phone saga. I had not been sleeping well due to getting over the remnants of the "bug" still I tended to be pretty woozy in the morning and stuck my phone unwittingly in my wash bag!!!! Anyway it had its funny side!! The start of the ride to Durham was great, still with my tail wind and through some lovely countryside passing Hadrians Wall. A couple of really big climbs out of Ebchester and then hitting my record speed of 39.9 Mph descending for a nice flat ride into Durham. Really liked Durham and was there by chance for the cycle "tour" race which was great to watch in the evening. Headed on in the morning knowing I had to really strike out for York. Had a terrible start after another bad night's sleep. The cycle route was poorly surfaced and more like an obstacle course. My pannier hit a post and whirled the bike round and I ended up in a bed of nettles!!!! Feeling terrible and sore!! Things really picked up though as so often happens and I had a lovely ride down the Vale of York which is beautiful. North Allerton was a lovely stop where I spoiled myself with a delicious lunch and Latte Latino at "Bettys". This was a long day though and some 83 miles saw me riding into York with a beautiful run along the Ouse in the evening sun. Stayed in a great little B&B (the Old Vic) once again courtesy of Joy. Thanks to Pat (the owner) for

her very kind donation and words and a great breakfast. Had a brief walk round York in the evening which I find a lovely place too. Bad weather forecast for Saturday and another long ride ahead if I was to reach Northampton by Sunday night where Huw my old cycling chum had decided to ride out and join me for a few days of the ride and offer moral support!!! Still not sleeping well and feeling a bit desperate, Joy told me to get some strepsils for night time. I topped up as usual on a fruit smoothie in one of my bottles, a great natural energy drink and delicious!!!! My target was Nottingham (over 90 miles) but I found Doncaster a bit of an obstacle and not very pleasant especially in the rain. This was around 3 pm and a couple of drivers, from whom I asked directions, advised me incredulously that Nottingham was 60 miles away!!! (well actually it was 40!). I pressed on a little bit down hearted by this news and thought I might stay in Worksop. This part of the country is a bit depressed and I decided to press on into the evening and see how close I could get to Nottingham. Riding through Sherwood Forest I got to the outskirts of Mansfield and Joy found me a great little place late on. Only 13 miles shy of Nottingham so I was pleased. Next day it was to be another 80 + miles to Northampton so I left early having slept well for the first time thanks to the strepsils!!!! A blustery day but the wind mainly with me. Was a bit taken aback by Leicester and Loughborough which seem more like India!! Must be worrying to feel in a cultural minority in your own country!! Got to Market Harborough knowing that there were only 18 miles left and a nice ride in to Northampton in the evening sun on an old railway line ahead. Mkt Harborough is also a really nice little town so I stopped for a big Moccachino at Neros!! Huw had arrived in Northampton so I was in touch with him and Joy had fixed us up with a great hotel at a bargain rate!! The ride ended up being 92 miles as I had to get over to the other side of town and out a bit but a cyclist out for a whizz helped me find the place and we chatted as we rode to the hotel. Great to see Huw and lots of back slapping and reminiscing!! I had promised Joy we would get to Bath by Tuesday evening so a long ride ahead to Hungerford on Monday. Nice country roads and still a gentle but following wind. We were slow getting round Northampton but then things picked up. Had a good stop at Stowe for a late coffee after passing Silverstone and then pressed on to Oxford which we reached about 3 pm for a quick lunch. We still had 30 miles to go passing through Wantage. We had had a good few hills but were warned that out of Wantage it would be monstrous and so it was !!! Once up on the Downs though a lovely fast, sweeping, undulating ride in the evening sun, a final climb and then down into Hungerford. 92 miles in all! The ride across to Bath on Tuesday I knew would be shorter and reasonably kind following NCR4. A good few hills nevertheless and loads of rain. Bought a "lardy cake" each to give us some stodge in the rain . Reached Devizes and then it was all towpath. Amazing series of some 30 locks on the canal!!!! A muddy ride into Limpley Stoke saw us get there at about 3pm. Spent the evening washing down the bikes and getting ourselves sorted out. Lovely to see Joy and she spoilt us with some delicious food as always!!! Lovely to see home too and the things she was secretly doing to it!!! Onwards tomorrow and next stop Taunton!! Until my next update hope you all keep well and thanks again for all the donations by cheque and on line it is marvellous to see us inching towards the target!

THE FINAL UPDATE - from home on 6th June 2010 - After some careful planning at home it seemed that I should be able to reach Lands End whilst Huw was still with me. It was great having the companionship and just like old times. Huw rides a Titanium bike and with a shorter wheel base, one that is built to be faster on steep climbs than my Raven so I had to get used to being second on the steeper climbs, he is a very strong cyclist too! It was not difficult leaving home because I still felt very focussed on the ride and just looked forward to the next phase and eventually getting home properly. My bike has been wonderful over some really bad roads at times, I haven't even had to pump the tyres once let alone suffered a puncture and the Rohloff

gears are as solid and dependable and simple as ever. For anyone who finds derailleurs complicated and fussy this is definitely what you want.

We headed off to Wells on minor roads and had a really good ride for the 20 miles or so it took. A few hills but nothing much and that is all part of riding anyway. Sun was shining and believe it or not the Easterly winds continued behind us!!!! We stopped in the fantastic cathedral square and had some sustenance (yes a smoothie plus other items). At this point we took to NCR 3 which seemed an efficient way of getting to Taunton for our next night stop. The Somerset levels were great to cycle along using route 3, felt like a trip back in time. Glastonbury centre has a funny sort of bohemian feel to it and was good to cycle through. Then on to Bridgewater still on NCR 3, easy riding mainly flat. Went past St Johns Street Cycles birthplace of the Raven (my bike) and then pressed on to Taunton on the pretty canal paths which were confusing initially but an easy ride though not particularly fast. Joy had arranged a farmhouse B&B for us on the other side of Taunton ready to take straight off onto the road we needed next morning. What a great place to stay!!! Yallands Guesthouse, which, whilst engulfed by modern housing, remains a very pretty and comfortable oasis of tranquility. The couple running it were very friendly & helpful. Some 68 miles done today. Next morning and we knew that the Devon hills were soon to be upon us so we psyched up for it!! We had the ideal build up. At this point we had opted for quieter B roads rather than NCR 3 and that proved a good choice. Gentle hills to start with, some pretty little villages to stop at and gradually steeper sweeping climbs which we really enjoyed as we could keep good speeds up. In fact we over took an elder statesman racing cyclist on one climb and could not have done much for his morale as we cycled comfortably by with all our panniers etc.. It would be good if some older racing cyclists could recognise the need to have lower gears but it seems that there is real machismo and "never say die" in it and they don't want to admit the need to change. There was a beautiful high level ridge ride for some 7 or 8 miles before dropping into South Molton and a welcome pasty. A look at the map told us things were going to get more brutal and so it was!! Before reach Great Torrington, a hill top village, we had two monstrous 1 in 4 descents and climbs in quick succession. Problem was the descents were such sheer drops it was too dangerous to build up much speed on them to help with the climbs so these were a long grind up from base zero!!! Still we conquered them, and there is always a sense of triumph in doing that. We rewarded ourselves in Torrington with great "Hockings" Devon ice creams, supposedly the best!! They were delicious!!! We immediately dropped from the great heights we were at and followed our old friend route 3 again which, although containing some stiffish climbs, did not throw any more brutal ones at us. Joy booked us another farm house in Holsworthy. We had thought at the start of the day that we were going so well that we might get further but the climbs had taken their toll and Holsworthy at the end of a 70 mile rides seemed a good achievement and kept us on target. Thorne Park Farm is a delight and a place of real tranquility. David and Marlene who run it are really nice and looked after us very well (warm scones and tea on arrival!!) with some interesting chats about farming to boot. Next morning (Friday) we had St Austell as our target with an interesting looking ride ahead following NCR 3. Given we were now very near Cornwall we felt that the major hills were largely behind us and so it proved (ish). Weather was beautiful and warm still with that Easterly wind which at times felt like a gentle hand against one's back. Was it? I think so! An amazing ride once we reached the higher levels beyond Week St Mary and eventually managed to break away from the old boy telling us his life story whilst perched on top of his BSA cycle which probably hadn't seen a drop of oil since the last King died!! Very high, flat and peaceful with an alpine scent and freshness in the air from the pine trees of Davidstow Wood. There is an old airfield there and only the occasional car, wonderfully serene. We eventually dropped down into Bodmin with an easy ride including the "Camel Trail" and felt we had the journey cracked for St Austell which was another 15 miles or so beyond. Trouble is though when the ride has an easy

phase in the middle you have to tell your legs not to pack up for the day because there is more to come, but they don't always listen!!! Still sticking to NCR 3 we pressed on through leafy "dingly dells" with some false turns here and there when we missed a "subtle" Route 3 sign. Following NCR Route signs is a bit like "wood lore" you have to be prepared for them to appear anywhere in any shape and size!! St Austell is not a place to linger but once again Joy came up trumps with a great farmhouse type place (train P-P race horses actually) ready for our final day's start. Another 68 miles in the bag today!! Little Downton farm near Hewas Water was great and the family very helpful. Their son, Chris, who was visiting was very helpful in devising a good route for our final day's ride to Lands End. A very comfortable self contained annex in a peaceful location with a good breakfast was just what we needed to prepare. I had 2 bowls of porridge, poached egg and smoked haddock plus a raft of toast!!! I still found it hard to believe that this would be the last day because St Austell did not seem to me in my mind to be close enough to Lands End even though we knew that 70 miles should do it!! Again Route 3 was to be our main line of attack with a few deviations as recommended by Chris. We headed for a lovely up and down sort of ride (nothing brutal) down the Roseland Peninsula to the King Harry Ferry. This was really nice and added an interesting dimension to the ride. The weather was not sunny today and it was cool, but any wind was still behind us. Climbing out of King Harry on the far side we moved on towards Camborne on Route 3. Before Camborne the road turned into a traffic free trail related to the tin mining history. Although not difficult as such the soft surface, bumps and lumps and constant twists and turns did not make for good riding and we would have cut it out had we known. Camborne does have a bit of a depressed air to it and didn't tempt us to linger beyond a late picnic lunch. It was pretty evident to us that St Ives and the Blue Hayes was not going to be possible en route to Lands End because would be late enough as it was. I called Malcolm and he wished us well so we will have to celebrate with a Caipirinha or two another time!! When Hayle appeared on the map I really began to believe that we were getting there, it was almost like home territory being familiar from our previous visits to St Ives and I knew that was not so far from Lands End. However we had still to make it on to Penzance and then a further 12 miles out on the far side. The Route 3 ride along the sea front at Penzance whilst not very fast was nice because we were right by the sea. We chose the alternative Route 3 ride out of Penzance avoiding what was labelled the much hillier coastal route. Trouble is the climb out was pretty brutal in itself, very long and verging on a 1 in 5. When we came back on Sunday to catch the train we found a way round this hill (albeit downhill this time) which would have been much more civilised on the outward ride. Once up though we felt it was going to be an undulating ride which largely it was with little traffic as we followed Route 3 and the weather was not great anyway! Now we were counting the miles down. We entered Lands End at 1730 on the main road rather than Route 3. It has a long straight stretch leading up to the granite portal "LANDS END". I felt the tears welling up in my eyes as we headed down this road and Huw graciously made sure I was in the lead. I cannot describe how it felt to ride in, tears, joy, pain, ecstasy, comradeship, solidarity, thankfulness all mixed up and whirling round in my head. A woman there with her husband and their son treated us like celebrities which was so kind and I just want to say thank you to her if she reads this site as I did give her a little card. Huw treated me to an official photo!! I just want to say that it was so worthwhile as a ride but the sponsorship and the cause gave me a massive lift whenever I needed it. 19 days, 1280 miles in total and endless memories of kind people and all the different parts of our wonderful country seen in some detail. It was like threading beads on a necklace one by one and at the end it spelt "Great Britain". Thanks to one and all of you for your sponsorship and interest (with cheques, cash and site giving plus Gift Aid we are now approaching 3000 pounds), to Joy for helping so much and so patiently with booking the accommodation and thanks to Huw for his comradeship and friendly banter along the final phase. Thank you, thank you, thank you. *Richard*