

## **Land's End to John O'Groats**

August 2010

**By Mike Garnham**



Sorry Preston, but it was your own fault. You did just try a little too hard.

I could accept the deliberately mis-leading signage. That was a fair-enough tactic employed by most sizeable cities. I could just about tolerate the bomb-crater surface to the tarmac and I am sure that eventually my kidneys will return to their normal position. Even the 5 metre long cycle paths. Plenty of other places tried that one too. However, to combine all those ploys with a swirling, confusing, vortex of roads that all led in without any roads at all leading out, a truly cunning magnetic anomaly causing a 90 degree error in my compass, and, worst of all, a cycle path that led us along to the side of a 70mph dual carriageway then left us stranded in the middle just where a two lane slip road joined (death to the left of us, death to the right), well, that all became just a little too much even for the most phlegmatic to bear.

So, once we had hauled our bikes over the Arco barriers and somehow conjured a miraculous escape from this cunningly hatched plot, I'm afraid I had to vaporise the entire place.

It had to be done, if only for the sake of all those cyclists that follow in our tyre tracks. Preston is (was) on almost every end-to-end route, and goodness knows how many grand plans have ground to a nerve-shattered halt in this cyclist's Hades over the years.

Now that it is gone, the A582 joins the A6 seamlessly in beautiful open countryside at a peaceful little bridge over the River Ribble.



This is the story of a trip through a whole other England. Scotland is as Scotland always was, but there are so many Englands, and we set out to explore the one which is built around the likes of Much Marcle, St Columb Major, Egloskerry, Coleford (is there a more perfect village in all the world?), Grittleton, Hope-under Dinmore (OK, I know, but Oh what a name!), that little Shropshire gem, Cardington, as well as ancient market towns such as Leominster and Ludlow, Wem and Whitchurch. This is the England of church bells and canals, of small country pubs and village fetes; a place which understands how to locate the most gorgeous buildings or bridges in exactly the right spot in the landscape. A place where beauty seems to come before utility, yet it all appears to work. A place as timeless as if Thomas Hardy were writing about it still.

This England is of hedges and dry-stone walls, village greens and stone mile-markers. A country of English bond or Flemish bond brickwork, not Lego-inspired estate stretcher-bond. A delight of oak framed cottages, 400 year old front doors, and hand-made panes of glass in hand-worked lead comes. Porches and ivy, chimneys and thatch, thousand year old cathedrals and twice as old Roman roads. We immersed ourselves in this England for almost two wonderful weeks of gentle exploration. I can't tell you just how beautiful this country is.

This wasn't a metric sort of trip. We travelled in a quarts and yards sort of England. A place of ounces and hundred-weights, pints and acres. We didn't do 1608 kilometres. No indeed.

For days on end we pootled along in a rural idyll. We stopped to drink and eat flapjacks in field entry gates, and peed behind hedges. We took endless photos of sheep and cows, and enchanting, timeless rural hill scenes. Little arched bridges over bubbling little streams were a particular favourite, as were canals. We helped a few hand-painted traditional narrow boats "lock-through" at various places along our route, and cycled along excellent tow-paths on the Grand Western Canal between Tiverton and Taunton, then the Bridgewater-Taunton Canal. Later, the Union Canal in Edinburgh provided us with both a haven from the traffic and confusion, and the surreal experience of riding a canal tow-path high above a 6 lane motorway. How did they waterproof that joint?



Living in arable East Anglia, finding (hilly) fields full of animals was a delight to us. Around here they live in sheds. We delighted in all the wildlife we saw. We seemed to be followed by buzzards the whole way, and became very familiar with their screeches on the wing. We saw foxes and deer, rabbits and hares. A stoat (or was it a weasel? I can never remember which is which) skipped across the road in front of us in Shropshire. There were too many dead barn owls on the road for comfort, and we delighted in the seals in the Moray Firth in Scotland. I thought I saw an otter, too.

Each day we tried to set off as soon after our large B&B breakfast refuelling as possible, and to get the bulk of our miles done by lunch. This would enable us to enjoy a relaxed stop at a coffee shop somewhere, and after we had finished for the day, we generally had plenty of time for a good long walk around the town we found ourselves in. Without doubt, the highlight of our little explorations was the Shropshire market town of Ludlow, to Poet Laureate John Betjeman "the loveliest little town in England". This is my sort of England. A handcrafted sort of place.

I have never understood why foreign tourists come to England and spend all their time in cities. They are so missing the point. Go instead to our market towns, Ludlow, Hadleigh, Okehampton, Bicester, whatever, and use them as bases to explore the real England. Why would you go to Birmingham when you could go to Shipton-under-Wychwood instead?



Who are we? I am a 50 year old retired County Cricketer, now providing architectural services in rural north Essex. I play regular squash, and have always cycled in the summers, but have rarely done more than 20 or 25 miles in a ride until this year. Squash and cycling were my winter fitness regime when I was still playing cricket, and I would just lie about complying with the physio's personalised fitness plans with their damned gym sessions.

I am married to Lorraine, who is the same age and is a primary school teacher. Three or 4 years ago she discovered that she is quite a talented runner, and has trophies to say she is "Best Female Runner" with her club for the last couple of years. Road races up to half marathons and cross country are her thing, and she has even stopped apologising to people that she passes. There isn't a competitive bone in her body, but every ounce of her 110 pounds is made of never-say-die keep-going-until-something-breaks material. She just keeps on going. She also has the makings of a decent triathlete.

We had talked vaguely about doing Land's End to John O'Groats for a few years now, but it could only really happen once the girls left home. Our only precedent was a hugely enjoyable cycling holiday we had in the Dordogne, France, some 18 or 20 years ago. That had come at the end of Essex's toughest ever season, extended by a week to take on the Australian champions, Victoria, and at a time when our daughters were so young as to be noisy ballast in child seats on the back of the bikes.

If we could enjoy a cycling holiday in those circumstances, surely we could enjoy taking on another big bike-based challenge? We initially talked of doing Lejog in two halves, maybe going as far as Warrington or Lancaster or thereabouts one year, and returning to finish it off the following year, but the more we looked at it, the more we convinced ourselves to take it on in one go. We did, and it worked out beautifully.







There is a right pace, a proper speed, for everything.

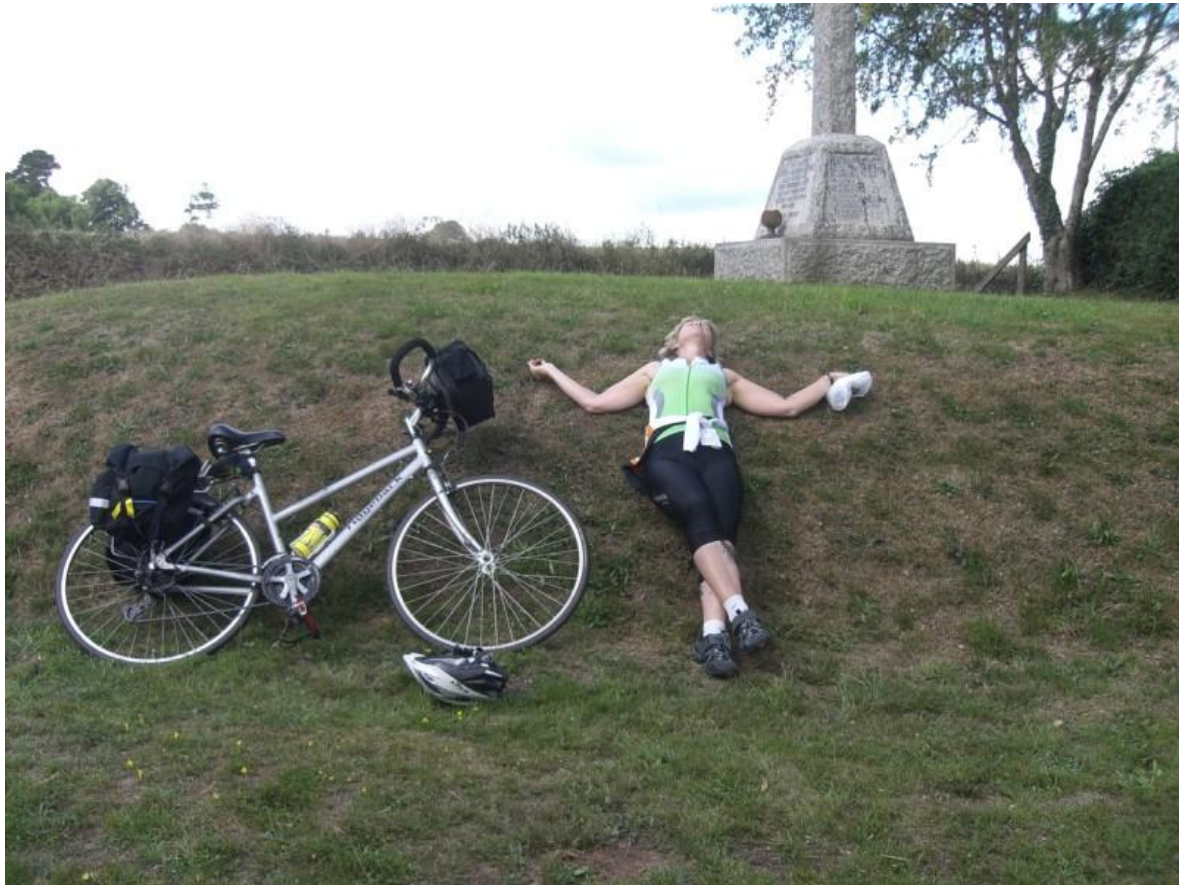
If you want to explore the inland waterways of Britain, accept that you will be doing so at a little under walking pace, and take joy in the meetings and greetings, and the slow emergence into new landscapes, but particularly, take joy at the anticipation. Endless anticipation, of what lies tantalisingly out of sight around the next slowly arriving bend.

If you want to explore Africa, then the right pace is the speed an old Land Rover can manage. OK, ideally you would travel *with* rather than *in* said vehicle, but having one set your pace is to be guaranteed just the right balance between distance-covered and immersion-into Africa. I know. I spent six months travelling with one the length of the continent some years back, and Land Rover pace really is Africa pace.

I would contend that to get a real in-depth look at Britain, to immerse and to interact, to hear and to smell her, you should travel by bike. Slow enough and open enough to be totally available to all you pass or meet, yet fast enough to enable you to move on to new encounters each day, the purring of bike tyres on smooth tarmac is the audible confirmation that you are travelling at just the right speed.

You are going fast enough that you can do 60 or 80 miles every day and still enjoy your holiday. Yet you are travelling slow enough that you can say and hear the endless cheery “mornings” that punctuate your ride. You are even slow enough to hear “Ooooooh, the very best of luck to you” when you pass someone sweeping their front door-step as you start out on the infamous Helmsdale Hill on the A9 north of Tain on the east Coast of Scotland. Maybe not exactly what you want to hear as you are mentally girding your loins for the unknown monster ahead, but at least you are able to hear it. Whooshing past in a noisy blur of glass and steel just isn’t the same.

Grockels in Devon, Emmets in Cornwall, tourists everywhere else. Why do they rush around so much? Why do holiday-makers seem in such a hurry? Surely the point of a holiday is to break the strictures imposed on us by clocks and routines? Surely, surely people go on holiday without a watch? When I travel in Africa the only reason to have any knowledge of the time is to not miss the ‘plane home. I wake up with the sun, and get into the tent when I’m tired. Why then did the emmmets (“ants” in Cornish) and Grockels seem so full of angst, and in such a hurry in their cars? Why was the greatest danger to our life and limb on the trip from hyped-up stressed holiday makers in SW England? Their driving suggested that a great many of them would benefit from spending a few days wandering around on Zambia-time.



Name me none of your Helmsdales, your Berriedales, your Drifts, your Passes of Drumauchter nor even, dare I say it, your nine-mile-long Shaps. Name me none of these, nor any other of the legendary hills of the Lejog fraternity. Not even the nasty little sting in the tail that is Warth Hill on the very tip of North Eastern Scotland. None of them comes close to the monster that is Porthtowan. For thigh-burning, lung-bursting, front-wheel-lifting hills along the whole 999 miles of our Land's End to John O'Groats cycle ride, nothing, but nothing, came close to Porthtowan Hill on the north Cornwall coast. If you can get up that, you can get up any hill in Britain.

We could, and we did. Spin your lowest gear, and don't dare call it a Granny Ring ever again because you will always know that you needed it to have any chance at Porthtowan. Every hill in Britain should be measured against it. Goodness, it may even be as long and as steep as, dare I even say it, Porlock Hill itself! Yes, it's that bad. It doesn't bother itself with any of those sissy run-off sand-trap escape- roads things. You either get up it or you don't.

Porthtowan Hill was the price we paid, and the prize we won, for taking the scenic route along the cliffs of North Cornwall. Most other end-to-enders get out of Devon and Cornwall as fast as they possibly can, travelling along the busy and dangerous A30 trunk road. If you can get to Tiverton, they say, you can get to John O'Groats. Even with the continuous climbing-then-descending-then-climbing again, we rather enjoyed ourselves in the glorious West Country.





It is just a question of turning the pedals. It doesn't always matter how fast you turn them, so long as you keep on turning them. End-to-ending requires lots of turns of the pedals, probably in the region of 300,000. Sometimes we turned big gears on fast flat roads in good conditions, and could sit at around 20 mph. More often we battled into headwinds. Sometimes, the headwinds were so fierce that we were in our very lowest gears battling to keep moving forwards at four or even 3 miles per hour, on the flat. One morning, neither of us got into our second chain-ring, let alone our third. Downhill included. Funny, though, how if you keep turning the pedals you get there in the end.

Whilst on the subject of numbers, Map My Ride and Bike Route Toaster (programmes built around Google Maps, but giving breakdowns of distance and height climbed) tell me that we climbed about 40,000 feet in total on our trip. This is about a third more than the height of Everest, and twice Kilimanjaro. That is a lot of going up. We cycled 948 miles in total from Land's End to John O'Groats over 18 days, doing between 50 and 70 miles each day except for three half-day breaks we gave ourselves to meet friends and relatives, explore Ludlow, and visit the Edinburgh festival fringe. Other numbers include 4 punctures (2 in one incident at a cattle grid), and one broken chain 15 miles from John O'Groats. I don't know what our average speeds were, and I don't care. The bike computers tell you these things, but so what?

In addition to the Lejog mileage itself, we had to cycle to the station at Colchester to catch the London train, then cycle across London to get the Penzance train, then it is 11 miles from Penzance to Land's End. At the other end of the trip, it is 20 miles from John O'Groats to Thurso, the nearest train station. Add all that lot up, and we did 999 miles in total. Yep, a couple of spins around the car park from a thousand miles. Didn't that make us smile when I worked it out on the train home!



Sod you, the motorists who think that any passing of a cyclist that doesn't involve actual contact is plenty good enough. Sod you. You couldn't stop us. Neither could the motorists who think that carrying long lengths of wood sticking out of the passenger window is a good idea. You three didn't stop us either. Neither could the lad swinging a snooker cue around his head on the footpath, nor the big tattooed bloke with the out of control dog running into our path. You couldn't stop us. Not even Preston could stop us, although it tried so, so hard. Even the ugly fat guy in the black BMW who loudly abused us for daring to share the same effing road as him, in Preston of course, couldn't stop us.

Farmers towing mediaeval torture instruments that waved around lazily behind big lumbering tractors: you tried hard too, but you didn't stop us either. Jobsworth bureaucratic bumlbers who designed death-trap cycle lanes couldn't stop us, nor could the thousands of people who treat cycle lanes as one long car-park. The inventors of that tarmac that resembles Brighton beach solidified, or the special rippled tarmac that appears to be saved for cycle lanes: you didn't stop us, although you certainly shook us around a bit.

The Road Crater Department of many local councils have been extremely busy recently, it seems, but you couldn't stop us either. Gloucestershire County Council clearly hasn't laid any tarmac at all in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but that didn't stop us either. Whoever strews the rocks all over the cycle path alongside the A9 up the Pass of Drummauchter: that was a great try, and you held us for a while, but we beat you in the end too. All those Local Councils who grow huge stands of brambles and nettles, low branches and big tree-roots to obstruct their cycle paths: good work, but we got through anyway. To the idiot policeman who passed within 18 inches of our right elbows at 60 MPH outside Penzance, on a perfectly clear and empty straight road: you set the very lowest example of driving on our entire trip, and that was before we had even got to the start line. But you didn't stop us either. Sod the lot of you, but try as you might, none of you could spoil our trip.



I say this to all of you bike-hating drivers: for every idiot driver there were a hundred, nay, a thousand good, decent drivers who gave us plenty of room. Truck drivers were exemplary, the length of Britain, as were bus drivers almost without exception. For every aggressive, impatient, revving driver sitting on our tails, there were hundreds of others who gave us a bit of respect and treated us with patience. You could try as hard as you like, you angry, rushing, snarling drivers, and you traffic management experts who don't even know what a bike is, but you couldn't stop us. None of you. You couldn't stop us, nor could you spoil our trip. Not a bit of it.

However, I would advise anyone contemplating the journey to make sure that everything you wear is hi-viz yellow, and that your wills are up to date.





The half ton Ayreshire cow with after-birth still hanging under its tail nearly stopped us, well, nearly stopped me at least. Tony Weaver of the Cape Times in South Africa is a friend of mine. (I have never met him, but he is a friend. Isn't it a weird world?) He said to me that 50 was only a number, and he was, of course, dead right. What difference did it make to the enraged mother cow as I climbed the fence near Aviemore in the Highlands to try to help it with what appeared to be a still-born calf? As she charged me and pushed me backwards on the morning after my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday it didn't make the blindest bit of difference to either of us that I had reached 50. All that mattered to the cow was to try and kill me, and all that mattered to me was not slipping over and being crushed.

I can remember thinking that I could shout and wave my hands and the cow would back off like they did when I was a youngster in Devon, where I grew up surrounded by cows, and I would then inspect the still calf. Next, I can remember thinking that this cow had a remarkably large head, plenty big enough to take my two big hands side by side on its forehead with room to spare. I remember also thinking, maybe afterwards, that normally I was quite good at reading an animal's body language. I understand elephants and hyaenas pretty well, and have a clue what badgers and baboons are going to do next. How had I got it so wrong with a domestic cow?

I should have backed off when it started nodding its head up and down, and, believe it or not, it did actually paw the earth before it lowered its head and charged me. That I am writing this at all is probably due to the tiredness of labour, for it gave up after shoving me backwards for a few yards, in a few seconds. I cleared the nearby barbed wire fence in impressive style, and took a photo. I'd only been trying to help. Poor old Lorraine could do nothing but watch and scream, and much as we tried to joke about it afterwards, the memory still pains her. I set the photo as my desk-top, but it seems to have been changed!





If Lejogging (cycling from Land's End to John O'Groats) or Jogging (cycling from John O'Groats to Land's End) were meant to be easy, as we kept telling each other, everyone would do it. It isn't easy. As well as being a reasonable test of one's fitness, it is also a test of one's hardiness and determination. Take the weather, for example.

We were Lejogging rather than Jogging because the prevailing winds in a British summer are from the SW. In theory. For at least 14 of the 18 days of our trip, however, we faced winds from the NW round to the NE. Headwinds.

Headwinds are cruel to cyclists. It isn't just the numbers, although a cubed relationship between speed and wind resistance (ie double the speed and the wind resistance increases 8 fold) shows how physically important the moving air is. Psychologically, putting a lot of effort in and seeing no great result for it, hour after hour, can be tough to deal with. When you feel the wind trying to pull your helmet off, thrashing you with little twigs and leaves or even water, and resisting your every effort to move forward, you can start to get a little fed up.

Remember, though, what you can achieve by just turning those pedals. Even 4 mph on the flat in the lowest gear is faster than you could manage walking, and way faster than giving in and sitting in the shelter of the nearest dry-stone wall or hedge. So keep on turning those pedals. No one said this was going to be easy.

When the rain starts, pull on a rain-jacket. That was as far as our preparations for wet weather went, although we had developed a method of keeping our maps dry and yet still visible. After all, our trip was August, at the height of summer. It wouldn't rain much, would it? We packed lots of sun-block.

When it rains a lot, pull into a bus shelter or a pub and wait a while, maybe put on an extra layer, and maybe towel down a bit. When it rains for 8 solid hours, unrelenting, steady, solid, reliable English rain, there is nothing else for it, I'm afraid. You just get wet. You have to keep cycling, so you just get wet. Soaked. I don't mind wet legs and arms. I'm OK with a wet torso, and a wet head is nothing. However, to have wet feet, cold wet feet, now that is torture. Wet feet slopping around in wet socks in soaking wet heavy shoes, with puddles of water moving around between your toes, for hours on end.

Our view of one of the most beautiful areas of Britain, the Cotswolds, from Trowbridge to Gloucester was much the same as the view from behind the waterfall at Livingstonia, Malawi. All we saw was sheets of water running past your eyes, with an occasional distorted green flash when the wind blew a hole in the cascade. Our helmets were brilliant at concentrating the water straight down our necks, and in a continuous sheet across our field of vision. Curiously, they seemed intent on keeping our ears dry. Yep, if it were meant to be easy, everyone would be Lejogging.

We got to our desultory little B&B in Gloucester soaked through, with wrinkled skin on our toes and fingers like we'd lain in a bath too long. Our Polish host said we could use her airing cupboard, thank goodness, as every single one of our possessions not in a plastic bag was soaked. We had to dry out individual bank-notes. We hung our shoes and our bags and our diaries up to dry on the curtain rails. All our cycling kit was of course saturated, and if it didn't dry overnight we would have to put it on wet the following day.

This served only to strengthen our defences. The following day we went straight to the nearest bike shop and bought overshoes, and requisitioned a few more plastic bags from the B&B. On the rest of the trip we never bothered with the weather forecast again. Well, what difference did it actually make? Whether it was wet or dry, hot or cold, windy or calm, we still had to keep turning the pedals. Now, at least, we could do it with warm dry feet!







Preparations for End-to-Ending are at least as difficult as the ride itself. For a start, you have to knock your body and your bike into good enough shape to take on the rigours of a near 1000 mile ride. Your bike should have a new chain and rear cassette just before you set out, because they only last 1000 miles. All the moving parts need checking. Your body is an altogether different matter, and the amount of work required depends on the state that it is in. You have to prepare it to cycle for at least 5 or 6 hours every day. If you are a weekend cyclist, like we were, then you may even have to do more mileage in preparation than you do in the actual ride.

An early decision is whether or not you will be supported (ie, have a vehicle along the route following you, carrying your gear, and organising stuff such as B&B's, evening meals, campsites etc) or whether you will be carrying panniers. If unsupported, will you camp, or will you use B&Bs and Hotels? Any end-to-end which doesn't involve carrying panniers is, frankly, cheating, and I shall be asking you to go back and do the job again properly! As a matter of interest, our panniers/ bar bag combination weighed about 9 and 7 kg fully loaded. Take that lot up Porthtowan Hill, ye pretenders, before I'll truly respect you!

The next task is to pick a route. This isn't easy, and you will nuance it and change it as the ride approaches. The main factors to plan for are getting out of the SW of England without climbing too many hills, getting through the seemingly continuous urban sprawl that joins Liverpool to Wigan to Warrington to Manchester. Preston. Oh god. Then there is Preston.

The final decision is east coast or west coast of Scotland? Frightened by the prospect of cycling the A82 along the Great Glen, and by the legendary Scottish midgets, we opted to go along the East Coast route. We also chose to avoid Bristol, and from what I have read of people's experience with Avonmouth, we made the right decision. Instead, we explored Somerset, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire, some of which was brilliant, but most of which was lost behind a screen of continuous falling rainwater.

As this was our summer holiday, and thus a scenic and interesting route was more important than a fast one, we ended up slightly off the path beaten by most end-to-enders. This worked really well, as exploring the country was just as important as getting to the final destination. We always tried to choose B roads and other minor roads instead of busy trunk routes, but you do pay the price, generally, with poorer road surfaces and more winding and thus slower journeys.

A couple of the variations to the "usual" route that we took included avoiding Bristol, as I described, and taking the Eskdalemuir route through southern Scotland between Langholme and Peebles. If you are in this neck of the woods, and if it isn't raining, then you must, must go this way. It is gorgeous, and surprising. You will be almost entirely alone all day. Maybe a logging lorry may rumble by. You will just be bimbbling along in the Scottish countryside, with a few stiff climbs to keep you concentrating, when all of a sudden you'll turn a corner and see a Tibetan Monastery! It is on the maps, so it won't be entirely unexpected, but it is such a colourful and out-of-place thing to find in a Scottish valley. You must stop in and visit the Temple itself, which is highly decorated internally, and have a wander around the grounds.

The biggest couple of tips I can pass on is to have lots of hi-viz cycle clothing, and to go on the Cycle Touring Club forum, where lots of experienced end-to-enders are happy to share their knowledge and experience with newcomers. There you can discuss the merits of following the old A30 route through Devon and Cornwall, what sort of midget protection works best, and where to find a decent bike shop in Peebles amongst a myriad of other topics.







All trips are really about people. The most obvious people to influence your enjoyment of the trip are those you travel with. Choose wisely. Mine smiled a lot, and that really helps. Next in importance will be the B&B proprietors who can vary from the “couldn’t do enough to help” category to the “give me your money, and don’t ask for extra milk” bunch. Thankfully, our unscientific sample gave us plenty more of the former than the latter, but asking beforehand whether there are drying facilities, covered lockable cycle storage, and a place to eat within walking distance eliminates most of the problems. Drying facilities was always the big one. Carrying two sets of cycling gear (one you are wearing, one spare), means you are washing clothes through every day. Lycra dries very quickly and easily, but socks, and the padding in your shorts, don’t.

After partners and proprietors, there were lots of snippets of people’s lives that made our trip so interesting. We met a forensic scientist going to the Scillies; a solo Lejogger recovering from major surgery who had developed a new way of sanitising honey to accentuate it’s anti-bacterial qualities; a pair of old friends who had walked just about every inch of Britain’s long distance footpath’s yet still retained their boyish enthusiasm; a professional Baritone singer who is a talented engineer, metallurgist and steam train enthusiast; a couple from Canada who had dropped into Heathrow and caught the trains from there to Penzance and on to Thurso just because they liked trains; a local lad in Portreath who described the route to Porthtowan as flat; an artist; a shooting and fishing guide; a retired Air Force pilot and Golf Club captain; an expert furniture maker; lots of teachers; a boring old chap who was walking coast-to-coast solo because, presumably, he had bored all his potential partners to death; a youngster pedalling his tandem alone to Edinburgh from Bristol to appear at the Festival Fringe, busking along the way to pay for it all; a group of youngsters Lejogging over 2 or 3 months and putting on theatrical performances in schools along the way; a dairy farmer in the Shropshire hills who lets us help with the milking (I’m still trying to get the cow shit out of my clothes); a guy in Langholme who showed me the mason’s marks on the local arched bridge made by the great Thomas Telford when he was an apprentice; and so on and so on.

Endlessly interesting. Only available if you make yourself available, and what better way to be available than to travel on a bike?



Somebody, (probably Tony Weaver actually, as you soon learn not to quote near journalists!) will tell me who it was who famously said something about the journey being more important than the destination. Mark Twain, was it, or Confucius? Anyway, whoever he or she was, I bet they were standing at John O'Groats when they said it.

If ever a journey was about the travelling rather than about the destination, it is this one. John O'Groats is a miserable little tacky tourist- trap-cum-ferry-terminal in a bleak, wet and windswept corner of the North Sea. Nothing grows taller than about 2 feet high around here, and everything that manages this grows with a permanent 45 degree lean away from the prevailing wind.

They charge you for using the toilets. They charge you (£10, I believe) for standing in front of the famous sign to have your photo taken. You can stand in front of Saint Paul's Cathedral, the Taj Mahal, and the Eiffel Tower and not get charged for taking photos. Not at the signpost at John O'Groats. Oh no. The best building is derelict, and our posed photos crossing the Start/ Finish line had to be carefully worked out to avoid the acres of builder's Heras fencing and "Danger, Keep Out" signs.

We had stopped earlier at a tired-looking hotel a few hundred yards away to ask where we should go. A loud Yorkshireman in front of me demanded attention from the pretty barmaid by telling her how far he'd travelled from South Yorkshire to get there. "Four hundred bloody miles, and nowt to drink the whole bloody way". In a car. "Hmph", I humphed. "Hmph. I've cycled 950 miles to get here, and I can't find the finish line".

Never mind all that. Never mind how cold it was. Never mind how awful the surroundings. What really mattered was that getting to John O'Groats meant we had succeeded. We had made it!



Actually, more important still, it meant that a 35 mile fight with a howling northerly gale right in our face, on our only day when we were up against the clock, was over. It didn't mean the cycling was over, because John O'Groats is 20 miles from Thurso where the B&B and the train home were to be found. Heading to Thurso, thank goodness, meant turning west out of the headwind. The last nasty long hill to John O'Groats, Warth Hill, into the thundering, sapping wind, had reduced Lorraine to tears. OK, it was probably me badgering to keep the pace up, worrying about our deadline with the Post Office in Thurso, that actually did the damage, but, tears, hills and gales, nothing stops Lorraine turning those pedals. Indefatigable, resolution in a tiny frame, relentlessly, endlessly cheerful, and leading with a smile, she turned those pedals until we got there. So did I.

And we're pretty damn proud of ourselves.

**Mike Garnham**  
**August 2010**

