

THE WONDERFUL BUBBLE OF END TO END CYCLING

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G r o a t s

Steve McBride

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THE PROLOGUE

The records state that Letitia Sarah McBride died on 20th February 2010, aged 95 years – cause of death Alzheimer's Dementia. The reality, behind those statistics, is that of a unique, lovely and giving woman, who put the needs of others before herself throughout her entire life. It was so unjust and unfair that she should be so badly affected by such a devastating and unpleasant disease in the final years of her life.

As the Alzheimer's Society provides funds for research into its causes it was time to turn a negative into a positive and raise some money to help in the quest.

As 2011 began to ebb away the realisation dawned that the "*JOGLE*" would enjoy its anniversary the following year. Thirty years prior, twenty three members of the Merseyside Police had run from John O'Groats to Lands End. Memory dulls with time, of course, but because we ran it in a relay, over a five mile rotation, it wasn't too onerous. To attempt a repeat of the feat now would be physically out of the question, due wear and tear of the feet and old knees, but riding a bike seemed to be a distinct possibility.

So began the journey. In short, 10 months later, over ten September days, I would attempt to find a way from Lands End to John O'Groats, by pedal power alone.

Let's not get too carried away with the notion that this was going to be an outrageous feat of athletic endurance. When I would eventually complete the ride it was going to be over multi days, in comparison with the 2001 record of Gethin Butler, from Preston, who completed the route in a record time of 44 hours, 4 minutes and 20 seconds. Even a runner has completed it in nine days. Also from the early research it became clear that it was not the unique experience that I had originally thought and that, in fact, it was quite popular thing to do. Nevertheless, on the completion of my own ride I slept the sleep of the dead for three consecutive nights – so I was content that I had worked reasonably hard.

What did happen though, during those 10 days was astonishing. As my trusted bike travelled over 1000 miles -- 1086 to be precise -- it became a unique vehicle to access people and places that were simply wonderful; some were wonderful and weird; and some just plain weird. The plan was simply to ride from A to B, but somehow the bike gave a level of access, impossible in a car, to such interesting people and the unexpected. It was a real and genuine surprise and I am truly grateful for the experience. It was a blast!

Perhaps a little more astounding, is that on my return home I had totally lost my sense of reality. Believe it or not, even routine tasks like changing gear in the car proved impossible - I couldn't automatically find fifth gear, as I had done a million times before. I had to look at the gear stick to determine how I should do it. It was only then that I realised that for the previous ten days I had been in my own individual bubble, where the focus was simply to achieve the aim of getting from one place to the other. The bubble had been permeated occasionally with telephone calls home, but they were minor blips in the overall intensity of moving on.

Although my gear stick was proving temporarily illusive, what I had found was a new zest for life in the realisation that in this country we have so much to love and savour.

WIFE OR BELOVED

One of the major benefits of all those solitary miles was to give me an opportunity to think, long and hard, about who I am most grateful to for this unique opportunity -- my wife or my beloved.

On the basis that I want to live to see my 63rd birthday my wife Bren, or Brenda when she is in a strop, is utterly selfless - one of those unique people who are naturally able to give of themselves without asking for anything in return. In that way she is very similar to the way my Mum was. So, on that basis, it is fair to say that I have been, and continue to be, a lucky man. When I eventually returned home, at the conclusion of my ride, she told me that she had worn my favourite fleece top, during my absence, as a reminder of me. Did I mention I was a lucky man?

I think it is also fair to say that any police officer's partner would need to have a similar approach to life because the very nature of police officer's role is that of uncertainty - that of regular shift work and whether the respective partner will come home in one piece.

In my case there were several assaults, but Bren's main test was during the mainland riots of the early 1980s when the hours and hours of rioting were broadcast live on local radio. Only ten of my unit's hundred personnel survived the first night, in what turned out to be a protracted period - I was lucky, but the rest were admissions at the local casualty department. She was always a great leveller - a pragmatist and ultra supportive.

Overall, I hold my hands up and admit that she was the greater influence on the upbringing of our two fantastic daughters, Jennifer (Jenny) and Beverley (Bev). Overtime work was a necessity to make ends meet and in reality I worked five weeks in every four. This pattern was repeated for much of the girls early years.

On top of all that I was a keen road runner, firstly, to keep fit for my role within the police (I learnt very early on in my career the importance of fitness when I nearly needed a lung transplant after I let a car thief escape, after a foot chase wading through a wheat field) but secondly, this necessity quickly developed into a hobby. Again this was a year on year trend and I don't think there was one occasion when she complained.

Having said all that it was still a mightily close call who got "first dibs" at this chunk of gratitude, because my beloved is truly my bike, or to be more accurate my seven bikes.

I know! I know! Bren and the girls take the mickey - but they truly do understand.

Each one of the bikes is precious in its own right. I have a mountain bike for riding off-road and a track bike for riding at the velodrome. The remainder of the "stable" is made up of five bikes which are used dependent on the specific weather conditions, at any one time - although I will say it upfront none of them know much about getting wet. Okay, I do admit to being neurotic about getting any of my precious machines wet and grimy. My newest love is kept for the driest of all days and I have a utility bike which will be used in the foulest of weather. The other bikes are shod to match the weather conditions between those two extremes. When it is impossible to go out on the road I can go into the garage and train on a static trainer. So here endeth a pretty pathetic attempt to justify my passion.

The faithful steed that I chose to join me on our joint adventure was my *Terry Dolan* road bike. For those who are not aware, Terry Dolan is a born and bred scouser and operates his own very successful bike building business out of Ormskirk, in Lancashire. For a number of years he has sold lots of bikes, at home and abroad. His bikes have been ridden by World Champions and people like me. Our paths actually crossed, as kids, when we raced each other in Wavertree Park, Liverpool.

My Terry Dolan is a great machine. I've had it while. It is robust, has mudguards, but most importantly it has a triple chainset, which will provide the small gears that will be mightily important when the road starts to reach for the sky. I also knew, in my heart of hearts, that the weather wasn't going to be kind to "Terry" and as an inept - "for what I am about to do to you, please forgive me" - apology, I gave him a good liberal dose of Finnegan's Wax Oil, to ease the pain. To cut down on the risk of punctures he was given two new tyres - *Continental Gator Hardshell* - they were awesome - they had the philosophy of "hit me, hit me and hit me some more". I also gave all his moving parts a good liberal dose of a chain lube, which I had stumbled across, quite accidentally, in the build-up to our ride, but it was immense. The label stated "Xtreme Chain Lube, specifically formulated for a very long distance road and off road extreme conditions -- any weather -- any terrain -- any time -- anywhere -- cleans and lubricates while you ride". Pretty bold stuff - but by god was it proved to be right - the chain was in a far better state than me was when we arrived at John O'Groats. Those who might be interested in the technical side it is made by ProGold Lubricants.

BUT, Terry wasn't happy.

None of my bikes would consider themselves to be "tourist bikes". They all consider themselves to be more associated with the qualities of a Ferrari and given stronger legs and bigger lungs than I have, they may very well be right. What Terry was unhappy about was that I had lumbered him with a set of panniers that I had placed over the rear wheel. For both of our benefits I had gone to great lengths to limit the weight of equipment we were taking e.g., my shaving gel was no bigger than a 50p piece. Nevertheless, the total weight amounted to just over twenty pounds. The analogy for Terry was that it was like putting an elephant on the rear boot of the Ferrari (I am giving something away here -- I haven't got a clue whether a Ferrari has a boot). Terry and the elephant didn't like each other from the beginning and didn't get on, particularly when Terry started to accelerate downhill. Around 25 mph the elephant got the "twitchy bum" syndrome and panicked. It sent Terry into a violent convulsion. Terry didn't like it at all. I have to say I wasn't that happy either. In cycling science it is called a "speed wobble" - a rare event, but it is known to happen. In practical terms it didn't really matter - on the descents I just needed to be a bit more vigilant and the brakes were given lots more work to do

DELVING INTO THE UNKNOWN

With Terry sulking in the garage, the planning was going well. As I didn't have a "death wish" the main aim was to avoid all the major roads. Yes, it would add extra mileage -- but it was a no-brainer.

Even at this early stage my notion that this would be a fairly unique venture was slowly beginning to evaporate with the discovery that there are numerous books published on the subject. The most useful I came across was "*Land's End to John O'Groats -- the Great British Bike Adventure*", by the Phil Horsley. Amazingly one of the routes, which were described in the book, passed within half a mile of home. That was too much of a temptation to pass up, so the plan emerged that I would do four days from Lands End to home; followed by two days recovery; and then conclude with six days up to John O'Groats. In the purist terms, yes I cheated, but absolutely guilt free – I was sure my Alzheimer's sponsors wouldn't give a stuff, as long as I reached John O'Groats.

The Plan

Date	From	To	Miles	NOTES
12.9	Penzance	Tintagel	95	
13.9	Tintagel	Cheddar	105	
14.9	Cheddar	Eardisland	80	
15.9	Eardisland	Home	100	
16.9	HOME	R & R	nil	Clean Bike & Restock
17.9	HOME	R & R	nil	Clean Bike & Restock
18.9	Home	Penrith	94	
19.9	Penrith	Cumnock	100	
20.9	Cumnock	Dalmally	90	
21.9	Dalmally	Inverness	95	
22.9	Inverness	Helmsdale	80	
23.9	Helmsdale	John O'Groats	48	Return to Wick for B & B

The Omens seemed to be on my side too. When I was attempting to arrange my train journeys to the start and from the finish of the ride, the guy from *The Trainline.com*, was fantastic. He was determined to get me the lowest possible price for my ticket. In fact, I think he rang me back on three occasions, really excited that he had managed to break his previous record. I take my hat off to you, sir.

The training was going well too, albeit not entirely to plan. I had started nine months earlier and gradually built up the duration and intensity, until I was pretty comfortable being able to ride all day. However, none of my pre-planned six major objective rides were achieved and I hadn't been able to put together a single instance where I could ride these distances, back to back, on subsequent days - something I would have to do in those 10 days. A greater priority had taken precedence, in that, Bren's Mum had taken ill and admitted to hospital in July and was still an inpatient at the start of the ride. On the plus side riding roughly every other day gave more opportunity for the much needed rest required at my age. The additional rest also helped recovery from grumbling knees; a tight hamstring; and minor pulled muscles. Overall, in the scheme of things, although there was some doubt about my capabilities, I was reasonably confident.

OFF WE GO

So, at 7:15 a.m. Wednesday 12th September 2012, Terry and I set off from Land's End to attempt the longest crossing in the UK.



However, in strict terms, we had started our journey three quarters of an hour before, when we left our overnight accommodation at the YHA Penzance, where I had survived a night with 50 men celebrating a stag do. Thankfully my pristine planning had included a pair of top of the range earplugs.

Even so, I was up at 4 a.m. and ready to go. It was pitch black and raining. Immediately after leaving the YHA, I started climbing what seemed like a wall. For the first time, in many, I said to myself, "Thank God I put that extra low gear on before I left" -- and I was still 10 miles to go for the official start.

Land's End was eerily quiet. There was not a soul in sight and not a car parked in the car parks. I was stumped. How was I going to achieve any evidence that I had actually started the ride, at that place -- I had intended somehow, to have a photograph taken. The signs indicated that the various shops would open at 10 a.m. and I was just pondering the implications of a wait for two and half hours, when a woman arrived on my left shoulder. To this day I don't know where she came from. I produced my camera from Terry's panniers and asked if she would be good enough to take a photograph of the event.

She replied "Please speak more slowly".

She may not have been able to speak English fluently, but thankfully, she could operate the camera better than I could. She returned the camera and as quickly as she had appeared, she was gone. I had all the evidence that I needed and I was quickly on the road and on my way. Even now, looking back, it still gives me the gitters - the whole episode seemed so unreal - weird even.

It was raining in patches now - rain or not, it didn't matter. I had my waterproofs on and I was feeling good -- slightly apprehensive about the unknown ahead, but really excited about the challenge. Cornwall quickly proved its reputation for having a difficult cycling terrain - it felt like I had climbed a hundred hills in the first hour.

Only 12/13 miles had been travelled, when disaster struck. I started the descent, from the high moorland, just south of St Just. As I dropped down the hill I noticed a sign which said "Cattle Grid Ahead". In all honesty, I didn't really take much notice - I had crossed over hundreds of cattle grids during my cycling career and certainly over the past nine months of training. They were routine. I kept the speed down to keep the elephant happy, but as Terry's front wheel hit the cattle grid it slid away and in a split second I had hit the road like a rag doll. I landed with an almighty thud on my right shoulder and the side of my head hit the floor. My helmet took the impact and I was fine. Terry was okay -- it was obvious that much of the impact had been absorbed by the panniers.

As I was gathering myself from the shock, it suddenly occurred to me that this might be the most embarrassing charity event in history -- having to explain to everybody that the ride was over after just an hour. After a few minutes, I remounted and we were off again.

As the minutes passed my right shoulder started to stiffen up, bringing back memories of my only other crash, which happened, spookily, almost ten years earlier - 3 days short to be exact. I began to worry that I had injured it again - in the sequel: *Return of Banana Man*.

On 15th September 2002, I was taking part in an organised event -- the *Bill Bradley Memorial Ride*. Bill Bradley died in 1997, aged 64, after a long career as an international competitor. He was twice National Road Race Champion, represented Great Britain in the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome and won the *Tour of Britain Milk Race*, on two occasions. In short, he was considered to be one of the finest amateur cyclists of his generation. My brother in law, Stan Brittain, rode with Bill in many prestigious events, at home and throughout Europe and is himself a silver medallist at the Olympics and a Tour of France rider. *The Bill Bradley Memorial Ride* remains to this day, as an annual event which takes riders on a course through the lanes of Lancashire.

I was riding, with a group of riders, through the lanes, near Preston. My elder brother, Stan, was riding alongside me. Stan followed in the footsteps of our Dad who was a lifetime cyclist, whereas in my early 20s, on joining the police, I drifted away from cycling -- somehow running was a better fit to the shift work expected in the police and the demands of a young family. He had a fabulous ability for endurance events and at the time he was competing in long distance time trials, some lasting 12 hours. He would have done my ride to John O'Groats on one leg.

As we rode through the lanes of Lancashire I took a banana from my back pocket, peeled it, gave half to Stan and ate the other half. This left me with the dilemma of what to do with the redundant banana skin. Clearly biodegradable, I made the decision to throw it into the adjacent hedgerow. Even though I knew it would degrade, I was keen not to deface the beauty of the area, so I threw it, as hard as I could, into the base of the hedgerow. However, somehow -- I can't explain it; the force generated lifted me and my bike off the ground with my bike above me. I landed on my back with my bike on top of me. My collarbone was smashed.

Ten years on and people still remember it - when Bren approached her boss for sponsorship a few weeks ago, he said, handing over a fiver, "give this to banana man".

LOVE AFFAIR

Just a few miles later, as I passed through St. Just, the crash was already becoming a distant memory; albeit a trickle of blood running down my arm and a throbbing hip remained as a subtle reminder of the dangers of encountering anything metal in the road. Without doubt my wet weather clothing had taken the brunt of the impact. It was literally the first time I was grateful that it was raining. I wasn't keen on repeating the episode, however. For the remainder of my journey to John O'Groats I purposely went out my way to avoid any grids and manhole covers, where in less deserted roads, when speeding vehicles would be in the mix, it would have been more disastrous.

In reality, the memory of the crash didn't have a hope of surviving because my brain was being flooded with the euphoria of the utter beauty of mile after mile of stunning scenery. "A love affair that lasts a lifetime" -- whoever wrote that comment on the website for the Cornwall Tourist Board got it spot on. In an area protected as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, I came across towns and villages, one after another -- St Ives; Hayle; Portreath; Porthtowan; St Agnes; Perranporth; up to Newquay -- each with their own charm, which increasingly took my breath away.

At the same time the sun was beginning to break through the rain clouds and I had a following wind. It was such a delight to be blown along -- particularly as the beauty of the terrain was being matched by its severity. The hills were many and steep -- but as the saying goes "what goes up must come down" and I was becoming completely immersed in the experience. The bustling streets of Newquay came and went and I was quickly on the road to Padstow.

I knew the area quite well, having been on holiday there a number of years ago, so it was literally a journey down memory lane for me. Yet, it seemed that the scenery was so much more impressive from the bike, in contrast to being in a car. Of course, the speed is so much slower, but somehow all your senses are that much more heightened -- you can see, hear and smell more. To give just one example: I had stopped at Watergate Bay to study my map. I was stood near the side of the road with the beach on my left side. I was sitting astride Terry, looking down at my map, when I heard a voice say "A Terry Dolan -- I had one of those." The voice belonged to a forty something, surfboard carrying man, in a black skin suit. It turned out that he was a keen cyclist some years ago, but had transferred his passion to surfing. His bloodshot eyes betrayed the fact that he had spent over five hours in the water that day, but in that moment, he was happier to talk about cycling and the "awesome ride you will have to Padstow". His enthusiasm carried me for the next ten miles and on arrival in the town, he was so right -- the ride had been literally awesome.

Padstow itself was delightful, bathed in sunlight and packed with visitors. I spent a very pleasant thirty minutes "people watching", as I waited for the ferry to take me across the bay.

Landing on the other side, I only had about 15 miles to go for my first overnight stay in Tintagel. Up to that point I had done about 85 miles. Each mile had been an absolute delight and without a doubt it was one of the most wonderful days of my cycling life, indeed life in general.

At the risk of overusing the term, I am about to use the word, “wonderful”, in another context. I had stopped at a petrol station, in the tiny village of Delabole, to refill my drinking bottles and to seek advice about where I could get an evening meal. It wasn't a particularly busy petrol station -- indeed it was distinctly quiet. The person looking after the place was a young lady, in their early 20s. Her name was Judy -- she was both wonderful and memorable. She knew everyone in the village and was delighted to recommend a local pub for the meal. What was unusual was her bright eyed enthusiasm for life and interest in everything around her - including my venture, and more so, the work of *The Alzheimer's Society*.

I was with her for about 20 minutes when the first customer, or what I thought was a customer, came in. I suppose he was in his early 30s and his most striking features were his pink striped hair, pink goatee beard and pierced ears, inserted with what looked like curtain rings. He wasn't a customer after all – they were friends. Judy told him about my bike ride and the link to Alzheimer's. It turned out that he had worked in a high dependency home for people suffering from Alzheimer's and was an expert in the subject. It seemed so completely astonishing that, in such a quiet place, I would stumble across someone so highly qualified. He understood what it meant to suffer from Alzheimer's and we talked for a long time about Mum's experiences and what it would have been like for her during that time.

I left so uplifted by their company.

In the very nature of things my good mood did not last long. Collecting my bike and looking round it was like a scene from *Independence Day* -- that big black cloud of invading aliens was hovering overhead.

Mercifully, I only had a short distance to travel to the local pub. Unfortunately, when I left an hour later, it was much the same. No matter - I only had about 5 miles to go and it was all downhill to the coast. Miraculously, as I descended, the cloud cover drew back, to reveal the most amazing evening sunset, which lit up the small and iconic town of Tintagel and its famous castle.

I had arrived. My first day was over -- but what a day.

What a day!

ELEMENTARY DR WATSON

A good night's sleep, followed by a brilliant breakfast, including probably the best porridge I've ever tasted, was just ideal in every respect. I was feeling really, really good.

Things had gone so well on the first day that it disguised a fundamental error in my planning and the roof was about to fall in. The next two days would prove instrumental in whether the whole house would collapse.

My planning process included pouring over maps for hour after hour. I would measure the map in inches and then multiply that figure by the miles those inches represented - to achieve a distance of approximately 100 miles per day. Then, I divided that overall figure by the planned average mile per hour, giving me the overall riding time.

However, the mistake I made was not taking into account the steepness and quantity of the hills and also the very nature of many of the roads. In order to avoid the main roads, as I mentioned earlier, I would use the smaller country lanes. On this second day, particularly for the first three hours, these country lanes were no more than narrow paths, which were largely used by tractors to get from field to field. The road surface wasn't always ideal and had a tendency to wander. The combined effect was to reduce the average speed drastically.

The very early start of yesterday, which had occurred entirely outside the plan, ironically proved to be one of the cleverer tactics in trying to manage time during long-distance bike riding. Although I travelled a significant distance, at no stage did I feel under any pressure and I finished at a reasonable time. However, the difficulty of being reliant on bed and breakfast accommodation is that you can't expect people to get up in the middle of the night and start preparing food just for you, in order that a very early start time could be achieved. So, on this second day I was on the road at 8.30am - a reasonable start time for all concerned. Nevertheless, I couldn't afford to hang around.

Of course, at this stage I was completely oblivious to my planning error.

Basic stupidity does not help either! I can't explain it, apart from maybe I was still drunk from the emotion of the previous day and being looked after so well overnight, but I turned left instead of right as I exited from Tintagel. This took me 10 miles off course and the only route available, to get me back on course, was along many of the tractor paths, mentioned above. The true implication of my stupidity was that for the first ninety minutes of my day I was climbing solidly and losing time constantly.

Don't get me wrong. The ride was as beautiful as the first day -- the only problem was I going in the wrong direction. The truth of the matter was that after three hours riding I was probably two hours behind schedule.

On the plus side it was sunny, warm, and I had a following wind - again. I loved every minute of it -- even though I was getting pretty anxious as the time passed by. Progress began to pick up as I made my way through Okehampton; Launceston; Crediton; and Wellington, but again not using the main roads turned the day into a navigation extravaganza -- the maps were out a thousand times, which absorbed more time.

On the road from Wellington to Taunton I was getting concerned. I worked out that my speed of travel I would get me to Taunton about 8:30 p.m. I knew it was 30 miles from Taunton to my intended overnight accommodation at the YHA Cheddar, equating to two hours riding time, as a minimum. As such, Cheddar would be reached at 10.30pm, or even 11 p.m. My concern was that the YHA may have closed by that time. I had booked an evening meal, but I guess by this time it had been given to the dog.

I made the decision, rightly or wrongly, to seek a bed for the night in Taunton. The implication of that decision was that I would have to make up the 30 miles shortfall the following day. It would be tough, but doable.

CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE

This 3rd leg was always going to be important because it finished in Eardisland - only 10 miles from where part of my family live, including my brother, Stan. It is a beautiful part of the country, in the heart of Hereford, just outside Leominster.

The plan was to skip breakfast and get as early a start as possible. There would be no stopping and to push on.

Panniers packed and I was on the road by 7.30am. Obviously skipping breakfast wasn't the greatest idea in the world as nutrition is critically important in any endurance event, but in a multi-day event, like this one, it was even more important and I needed to find "portable" food pretty quickly. Thankfully almost all garages, newsagents, and convenience stores all sell a whole range of cereal bars which are great source of carbohydrate and energy. It was a desperate tactic, but a very early start had worked before.

However, there was a greater problem. The previous evening, whilst touring the streets of Taunton, looking for bed and breakfast, I had become disorientated - I didn't know exactly where I was. Helpful advice twice turned into a blind alleys and time was evaporating already. The third piece of advice sent me down what was, for all intents and purposes, a motorway. Something wasn't right.

As I passed a BMW garage dealership I noticed a man in a smart suit walking around an elevated car park, about 15 feet above me on my left. I think he was putting out windscreen adverts. I was desperate at this stage, needed help and no one was around. I stopped, pulled onto the grass verge and tried to attract his attention. I think he realised I was looking for directions, but he couldn't quite hear me. With that he left what he was doing and climbed over the perimeter wall of the garage -- this in a very smart suit -- and dropped down onto the grass verge. He told me I was miles away from where I should have been and gave me immaculate directions to get me back on track. I haven't a clue how he got back - climbing back up wasn't an option, I don't think. I owe him a great debt and it yet again reminded me of how wonderful people can be.

I had already lost about 45 minutes.

It was raining in spells and on the roads to Cheddar my wet weather gear was packed and unpacked several times - again redundant time. The final nail in the coffin was that the wind direction had changed from behind me to a pretty strong head/crosswind. On the plus side, the road over the lovely Somerset Marshes was as flat as a pancake, which allowed me to push on for the 30 miles I had lost the previous evening. On balance my average speed was reduced.

The plan to raid a convenience store for food wasn't working either; there were no shops to be found anywhere.

Normally, that would have been a disaster, but fate had been kind again to me.

During the planning stage I had *Googled* the location of the Cheddar YHA that I was initially due to stay at the previous night and coincidentally, for some reason, the map also highlighted the location of a cycling shop, Cheddar Cycle Shop, near to the YHA.

Not only did they stock the exact food that I needed, the staff provided detailed instructions on how I could negotiate the complicated passage through the major road bridges of Bristol. Their intervention was incredibly vital. Although, I had detailed maps of the area, in reality, I could have wasted hours wandering around the streets of Bristol.

So I left, with renewed confidence and with enough sports nutrition to feed an army. Now everything was in place to make a “non-stop” strategy possible. Even now, when I look back, I wonder whether it was purely a coincidence and it did give me the shivers that such a double bonus could just land in my lap.

Leaving Cheddar my good mood improved even further when the sun began to break through the rain clouds. Everything was rosy. I even enjoyed climbing the brute of a hill on the fringes of the town. I had climbed some hills during the first two days, but this one was special – steep and long.

By the time I had reached its summit it was now quite warm -- time to jettison the wet weather gear and put some sun cream on. I pulled over, stripped off and very quickly was back on my way. In the very nature of things the steep climb converted into a welcome prolonged descent and life was good.

I looked at my watch for a time check; or rather I looked at my bare wrist -- no watch. In those next few minutes of panic my brain was trying to unravel what had happened. I could remember looking at my watch when I arrived at the bike shop and my only deduction was that the watch had come off, at the top of the hill, when I was in the process of stripping off.

I had a dilemma – time was tight; do I push on, or do I go back? Of course, there was only one option. Back we went! It was probably about 5 miles, but it was all uphill. Bugger! Bugger! and Bugger! - this was going to cost the best part of an hour to return back to where I was then. As I trudged back up the hill I think I was in shock. Certainly I was frustrated and angry with myself, but the worst was yet to come -- no watch. I searched and searched the area where I had previously stripped off, but couldn't find it. It had been a total waste of time.

My black mood slowly improved as I made my way towards Bristol. I was a little apprehensive, but overall, in gleeful anticipation of negotiating the bridge labyrinth over the Bristol Channel and onward into South Wales. Basically, this meant crossing the River Avon, shadowing the M5, a transition through the Avonmouth Docks and then the crossing of the River Severn, shadowing the M48 -- the Seven Road Bridge. Bizarrely, just six days later the "Cycling Weekly", a traditional cycling publication, regarded by many in the cycling fraternity as the “Cycling Bible”, contained an article on the subject. It said "The Old Severn Bridge -- crossing the older upper River Severn Bridge is something every cyclist should do at least once. It's a truly spectacular experience."

They will get no argument from me -- it was amazing! When they were designing the motorway crossings of the River Severn the designers were clearly enlightened thinkers and ingenious. What they did in simple terms was to build a cycle path that ran alongside the motorways. It was an unbelievably surreal experience -- there I was trundling along, high up in the air, with bullets of lorries and cars just feet away, thankfully on the other side of a substantial barrier.

My determination to push on at all costs succumbed to the splendour of those moments and the need to take photograph after photograph.



The descent from the bridge brought me into Chepstow and onward into gorgeous South Wales. Stan knew the area like the back of his hand and had sent me a detailed map, which guided me from here to my overnight stop in Eardisland. The route would take me through Monmouth and then through the enticingly entitled "The Golden Valley", which Stan had highlighted as being particularly beautiful. Wales, being Wales, the flat roads of Bristol were replaced with a staircase after staircase and progress became slower. Of course, now that my watch had been made redundant, I didn't know precisely how much slower.

By the time I reached Monmouth I guessed that it would be middle to late afternoon and I still had a fair way to go. It was going to be a very late finish, so I tried to ring Bren to pre-warn her. As I mentioned, before, she is not one to panic, but in these circumstances it would test anyone's resolve. Unfortunately, my mobile had other ideas -- there was no signal. Tradition wasn't on my side either, because, not one but two, old style telephone boxes had plenty of straw and cobwebs in them, but no equipment.

I couldn't help but smile at the irony of the situation, because my mobile was the subject of quite heated discussions, particularly with Jenny and Bev, before I had left. Let me say that my mobile is not the most modern, but it works fine for me. One of the disadvantages is that the charger is like a brick and I had made a decision, on the basis of weight control, that I was to leave it at home. For Jenny and Bev, their phones follow them everywhere and an essential part their modern life. For them, it was incomprehensible that I wouldn't have mine switched on at all, except when it was really needed. That strategy had worked really well -- the irony now, of course, was that the phone didn't.

While I am talking about mobile phones isn't it quite astounding how they have changed the way we interact together? Now to be fair, I haven't been on an extended train journey for decades, but I was astonished how people talk about their most intimate personal life, completely unaware and ambivalent to the fact they are not exactly alone. There were numerous times when my jaw dropped, but the most notable was a young lady, perhaps aged 19/20, who got on the train at Plymouth. The train was packed. As she got on the train she was talking into her mobile. Still talking she put her bags on the rack and sat down. She was locked into her own personal bubble and completely oblivious to what was around her.

Clearly she was talking to someone, but that someone wasn't saying very much. The young lady talked, talked, and talked some more. A very brief synopsis was that she was a university student and had gone abroad with a gymnastics team for a competition.

A short, two minute extract went something like this:

"I had such a terrible time. During the first day warm-up I fell on my ankle -- it hurt like hell. I knew I had sprained it but the coach insisted I go to hospital. A hospital! A hospital! I had only sprained my ankle. When I got there they said I needed an MRI. I told them "an MRI, an MRI, I have only sprained my ankle". Anyway, I was there for hours and in the end guess what -- a sprained ankle. That was it. I was on my way home.

Anyway! On to other things.

Things are good in the romance stakes. I only see him every third week as he is gigging a lot now, but it works well. His wife is a bitch. She is hanging on for all she can screw him for, but he's put his foot down and things seem to be coming to a head.

Just hang on a minute, my Mum is ringing. Hiya, Mum, I'm going to be 15, 20 minutes. Can you pick me up? Okay see you there!

Hiya, I'm back. Mum is going to pick me up from the station. Anyway how is your John?"

As the word "John" left her lips she stood up, put the phone down on the seat, she had just vacated, reached up to take her case down from the overhead rack, rummaged around for about 30 seconds, took something out, and put it back on the rack.

Picking the phone up, she sat down again. She put the phone to her ear and without a pause; she said "You don't say!"

The train pulled into the station and she got off. The phone was still pressed against her ear - the call had lasted over 90 minutes.

Returning to my own reality, that of rapidly diminishing riding time; no watch; no phone; no ability to contact either Bren or the Bed and Breakfast I was due to stay at that night, I continued to press on as best I could against what had been a constant headwind.

Darkness started to fall, so it was probably about 7 p.m. Stan's "gorgeous" Golden Valley came and went in a cloak of darkness. Of course, as it was Stan's back garden, I was reasonably sure of my surroundings. I knew that it was a sumptuous part of the country, almost entirely agricultural, with beautiful little towns. The downside for me, at that moment, was this same geography, with no ambient lighting, had generated the type of darkness that completely enveloped me – all I could see was the 20 feet or so that was illuminated by my lights. Everything else was oblivious.

I suspect that a key junction came and went in the darkness and inadvertently I ended up riding through the streets of Hay-On-Wye. I could feel my brain become increasingly disorientated as the sense of panic mounted - I was about 10 miles off course and I was increasingly running out of time. With no way of contacting my overnight hosts there was a real fear of the unknown.

I needed quick advice about how to get back on the road to Leominster and Eardisland, but there was no one about. That's worth repeating -- NO ONE was about. Hay-On-Wye was deserted. I am sure people do live there, but they had been whisked off by the aliens or something. It was a ghost town!

Finally I found a lorry driver parked up, asleep. I have to say he was unbelievably gracious as I woke him from his slumbers - I think he detected the vibes my panic. Being a lorry driver he knew exactly what I wanted and I was on the road again.

From here on in it was going to be an adrenalin fuelled pursuit of desperation as I chased the clock. Pressing on the pedals as hard as I could I plunged into the darkness again. I couldn't detect what the terrain was like in front of me - whatever was in my way, I just put my head down and ploughed on. To add a further complication, although I knew many of the local communities, one of the exceptions was my destination - Eardisland.

My lights were really good at what they had to do, but clearly illuminating the few feet in front of me wasn't good enough. For the remaining 15, or so miles, I decided to hold the front light in my hand, which would provide the extra flexibility to see better the directional signs and thereby avoid another wrong turning.

For what seemed an eternity I pushed on, and on. It was eerily quiet. For the whole time I only saw one car and that was going in the opposite direction. Then suddenly, my lights picked up the directional sign I had yearned for.

Hallelujah, I had arrived. I cruised into the centre of the village. The sense of relief was so profound, but I still needed to find the Bed and Breakfast.

I tried my mobile -- no signal, but a few moments later I came across a phone box. Pessimistically, I opened the door, and although there was the obligatory straw and cobwebs, the equipment was in place and it worked. I nearly kissed it!

John, my bed and breakfast host, answered. I apologised for the late arrival and gave him a brief explanation. He said "Where are you?" I replied "I am in a telephone box in the centre of the village". He replied "I don't think we have a telephone box in the village". I was dumbfounded. He said "What can you see?" I said "Well just outside the telephone box there is a sign for a school". He said "Steve, we definitely haven't got a school in Eardisland - I think you are in Eardisley - and you are about 10 miles away".

I was numb. My thoughts and emotions were just jumbled up in a mess. He concluded "Don't worry! We will see you soon and we will have the kettle on".

As I rode back out of the village, the emotional haze began to clear and I began to realise what had happened. As my torch had picked the sign out, for what I then knew as Eardisley, my desperate mind only picked the "Eard" part and that was more than enough.

I ploughed on as hard as I could and three quarters of an hour later, I had arrived. Strangely I didn't feel that tired, but I was emotionally exhausted. I apologised profusely and asked "What time is it?" John replied "Quarter to eleven!" and bizarrely I was surprised - I thought it was later. I had been on the road for over 13 hours and travelled 144 miles - the predicted epic had materialised.

HOME SWEET HOME

My hosts, John and Sue, were delightful and made me feel very welcome -- even at that late hour. The promised cup of tea was steaming on the kitchen table as soon as Terry was unpacked. There still remained the not too small issue of preparing for the next day. Clearly there was a tension between sleep time and an early breakfast -- sleep won, but it didn't really matter because I was making my way home -- and could arrive at any time of my choosing. Essentially, pressure was off.

Breakfast provided the ideal opportunity to expand the few words we had exchanged the previous night and it turned out that John and Sue had built their bungalow themselves. They were rightly proud of what they had done - it was gorgeous and situated in a wonderful position, just on the edge of the village that was awarded the "Best Small Village Award 2011". If I left it to your imagination you probably could not do it justice. It was simply stunning -- beautiful cottages linked by paths and roads, bedecked in multi-coloured flowers, and dissected by a wandering brook.

As I left the village behind, the day was going to be a fairly straightforward ride in comparison to yesterday's epic. Yes, it was going to be another long day in the saddle, but psychologically I was in a good place. Although there was a headwind to cope with, it was warm, sunny and the terrain wasn't going to cause the same problems as the first three days had done. My route would take on me on minor roads through the lovely Welsh Marshes; Shropshire; and Cheshire.

In short, it was 133 miles of pure joy and I arrived home, safe and well, 10 hours later.

The strategic decision to take a two day sabbatical, midway, proved to be more beneficial than I had imagined. Plans had already been made for Terry and me to receive some tender loving care. In reality, Terry's only need was a minor readjustment of the gears and my needs were resolved through a sports massage -- even though it was proving difficult to climb the stairs, I had anticipated that my legs would be a whole lot worse.

If I am to be brutally honest I knew that to have a sports massage was good for you, but part of my brain was always sceptical that they were as good as they were claimed to be. The science baffles me -- it's something to do with realigning the muscle fibres, but in practice how so it worked -- the stairs became a pushover.

On this subject, I should now disclose that my daughter, Bev, owns and manages a very successful sports injury clinic. I know, I did say earlier that I was a lucky man, but I think I must also add this to my growing catalogue entitled "How To Be Fortunate". (In the interests of family harmony I feel I have to mention that my other daughter, Jenny, is a very, very good Primary School Teacher).

So with the planned benefits for Phase 1 already achieved - Bike better; Rider better - the benefits for the 2nd phase would ultimately be determined by a televised weather forecast that was broadcast just before I left. The prediction was that on the third day of this second phase there would be severe rainfall. Since leaving Land's End there had been several bouts of rain, but *Gore-Tex*, to the power of three, coped amicably.

Gore-Tex, to the power of three, was a *Gore-Tex* jacket; cap and overshoes. They were assisted by a really clever invention called *RainLegs* -- a waterproof smock designed to cover the lower abdomen and upper parts of each thigh. On the basis that the rain largely falls vertically, they protect the thighs from a soaking, but allow body heat to escape.

Even though it would mean extra weight I made the decision to pack full-length *Gore-Tex* trousers, in addition. It would prove to be one of the best decisions of my life.

The two day sabbatical wasn't entirely plain sailing though.

Bren very quickly noticed the wound on my elbow, from the crash, but I managed to persuade her that I had simply knocked it. I am not sure she believed me, but thankfully she didn't press the issue. The wound on my hip was easier to hide and I got away with it.

ONWARDS AND UPWARDS

The first leg of this second phase would take me from home to Penrith – about 100 miles. It was going to be very like the day from Eardisland -- mostly flat roads, with some climbing early on and finishing with the monster climb of Shap.

Equally, it was going to be a day of no pressure. Much of the ride would be on familiar territory as it contained many of my traditional training routes, plus, I had purposely carried out a recce of Preston, as part of the planning, in an attempt to unravel the maze of its streets. In short, I knew where I was going.

Morning dawned and with rain beating down it was going to be a day for *Gore-Tex* to the power of three, plus *RainLegs*. When it's raining the last thing you need is a headwind. It just makes it that much more unpleasant, due to the rain being driven into your face and clothing. Unfortunately, it was what it was and I needed to get on with it.

The day was going well and, the rain apart; it had been thoroughly enjoyable experience as I rode through the beautiful lanes of Lancashire and Cumbria.

This “feel good” factor was stimulated even further by quite a bizarre set of circumstances, in the southern Lakes, which linked to fond memories from the past.

Throughout my early 50s my passion, within cycling, was the specific discipline of Time Trialling. These are events over set distances, completed in the shortest possible time. These distances range from 10 miles to 100 miles. For the more hardcore enthusiasts there are even time trials that last 24 hours, the winner being the person who travels the furthest. In any given event there could be over 100 riders and a small number of those would always be in the mix to pick up the prizes.

At my level, winning prizes was just not going to happen, so my whole focus was improving my time over the shorter distances of 10 miles and 25 miles. Consistent with the principles of sports science, riders would generally improve, year on year, as their strength and endurance improved. In 2006, I hit my competitive ceiling. On roads near Levens, in the Lake District, I had set my fastest time, over 10 miles, at 22 minutes one second. Now, in Time Trial terms if you are able to do 10 miles in 21 minutes you were regarded to be a “tasty” rider. So that's me, two seconds short – “the nearly man”. Don't get me wrong, it had taken me five years to get to that level and I retired from racing a proud man.

Imagine my surprise and delight, as I was making my way through the same area of the Lakes, when I unexpectedly stumbled on the same lay-by in which, six years previously, I had struggled to regain my composure, after the conclusion of my final race, moments earlier.

It was a very satisfying feeling and I found myself smiling from ear to ear.

As is the way of the world, that sense of euphoria came to an abrupt halt, almost immediately, with the onset of the type of rainstorm that happens rarely – “stair rod style”. The rain was so intense I had to take temporary shelter in the lee of a small wooded area, as vehicles on the busy main road, to and from Kendal, slowed to a crawl, with their lights on – this in the middle of the day.

Thankfully, the storm blew over fairly quickly revealing open bright skies -- the ideal change, just in time to tackle the climb of Shap. It has a reputation of being a brute, but being able to take it steady and enjoy the panoramic views across the Lake District it certainly provided one of the most enduring memories of the trip.

From there it was a simple task to descend the last few miles to my overnight accommodation at Penrith.

So a fairly routine day, but it was never going to be ordinary. Today, I was going to push back the boundaries of sports science and test out the hypothesis that the use of gel shoe inserts would make the term "saddle sores" redundant in the dictionary of all cyclists.

As I said earlier, the training had gone reasonably well and I told my body that I was ready, but no-one told my bum, or specifically the two "sit bones" -- the two little tinkers that are in constant contact with the saddle. They were really finding life hard, even though they were well looked after by *Sudocrem* and *Bepanthen* -- the two big hitters in the "botty stakes".

Over the years I have done other hilly, multi-day rides, without posterior problems -- the difference with this ride was the style of riding I was required to adopt. The accepted practice, when climbing hills, is to alternate between a sitting position and a standing position, dependent largely on the gradient at the time. When you are in a standing position clearly you are not in contact with the saddle and these periods of brief respite tend to alleviate any sense of saddle soreness. Unfortunately, for this ride, Nelly the elephant would start to get hysterical again if I even threatened to lift my bum off the seat.

After over 480 miles of road vibrations there was already an increasing sense of discomfort in the undercarriage area. It wasn't terminal, just a little uncomfortable. During the two-day break I stumbled across a potential resolution though -- gel shoe inserts. I know it sounds a bit bizarre, but the logic was that what was good for bunions could be good for "sit bones". A trip to "Boots" provided the hardware for the experiment.

Strategically located to protect my tender "sit bones" the two inserts were kept in place by my figure hugging cycle shorts and I set off from home in a state of anticipation and real confidence. However, throughout the ensuing journey the gel pads continued to chase each other around my arse. I would put them back and they would escape again.

Candidly, I was dumbfounded.

How could this happen? Surely my eleven stone weight and friction, should have kept the gel pads in position.

I offer any PhD student, out there, an opportunity to find an answer.

The overnight stay in Penrith was to be in a Travelodge. I had stayed there before. In 2007 a group of us did the coast-to-coast ride. So I knew what to expect and it was conveniently placed for a launch into the second day.

Bizarrely, I couldn't find it. I knew it was situated very close to the M6 exit and by car it was as easy to find as "shelling peas". It was an entirely different proposition on a bike. Forced onto the pavement/cycle path by the weight of traffic the junction proved to be the ultimate "Bermuda Triangle". I'd lost all sense of direction and I went back and forth for such a long time. Thanks to the numerous pedestrians, that I accosted, I eventually found my way through.

Bren would have been proud of me, today! Every evening, when I rang, she would say "Have you had something proper to eat today?" Basically, she meant "three proper sit down meals". I would always try and divert the conversation, because she couldn't and wouldn't accept there was any alternative. The harsh reality of a challenge like this was that you had to achieve the daily mileage, whatever it took. Sometimes that meant riding non-stop all day and the right type of food had to be found "on the go". Indeed that was an essential part of the challenge – to balance the various priorities and be innovative in attempting to provide sufficient energy to keep going, as well as nutrients, for recovery.

Answering her first question was usually very easy, but she is so much cleverer than me and she would follow up with the more difficult question, "What did you have, then?" Immaculate questioning technique and I was stumped. I've known some good detectives over the years, but Bren would have been up there with the very best.

Today was different! At lunchtime, at Lancaster, I had my first *Subway* experience – a sit down meal that included a tuna salad roll that was so big it was impossible to eat in one session. It was as monstrous as the Shap climb, that I would encounter a few miles later. Now at Penrith, the meal at the Little Chef, adjacent to the Travelodge, was really, really good. One of the genuine delights of long-distance riding is that you can eat as much as you want, including naughty stuff that you would avoid at all costs at home, and still lose weight. In fact, I had lost half a stone since Lands End.

Tomorrow would be a significant day as I would be invading Scotland, with my target being Cumnock, a small town just south of Kilmarnock.

THE SPONGE CAKE

It was 4 a.m. and I had a dilemma.

Based on the quality of the previous night's meal, I really had my eye on the Little Chef's luxury muesli and porridge for breakfast, but as the sleep gremlins had got me I had to decide whether I should wait or make an early getaway - without breakfast.

Common sense prevailed and at 6 a.m. I was walking out of the Travelodge into the darkness, lit up like a Christmas tree. I had no less than five separate lights on my helmet alone, two on Terry and one attached to the rear of my high-vis "Respro" jacket - it is highly visible -- yellow, orange with reflective stripes -- and I felt distinctly safer wearing it. The combination was so bright I gave a hell of a shock to the night receptionist.

Of course, the past days have demonstrated the huge benefits of such an early start. However, it would not remove the pressure completely, because today would see a significant change. For the first time, since Eardisland, I would be out of my comfort zone -- my only point of reference was the maps I had pre-prepared, but I had no knowledge of what the maps represented. The road up to Carlisle, shadowing the permanently busy M6, seemed to be fairly straightforward, and in reality it proved to be so. It was after Carlisle and approaching the border with Scotland which caused me the most concern. There were only two roads heading north - the A74 - which, to all intents and purposes, was a motorway extension of the M6 and the A7.

Logically, I had prepared myself for the A7 to be busy, but in reality, it was worse. It was a nightmare. Thankfully, it was now daylight and although I had dispensed with my lights, I kept my "Respro" jacket on. I needed it so much! The traffic count was incredible -- it was like a second motorway, but on a single carriageway road; and the lorries and cars wanted to push on. It wasn't the place for a bike. Thankfully, I only had to survive for 5 miles, but that 20 minutes seemed like a lifetime.

It hadn't been the greatest of start to the day, but things would improve drastically and then drop off at the end of the day. It was like a sponge cake, which had a delightful filling, but both of the sponge layers were disappointing. The delightful filling was the exquisite countryside upon crossing the border into Scotland, around Gretna Green, and onwards following the Solway Coast Heritage Trail and into the Caerlaverock Nature Reserve - an internationally important wintering site for geese and wading birds. It was such a contrast to the mayhem of the A74. Apart from its beauty, it was such a tranquil area and I was at peace with the world again. The road hugged the upper shoreline of the Solway Firth for about 25 joyous miles, before it would arrive at Dumfries.



About midway, I stumbled across a fellow cyclist heading in the same direction.

Strangely, I hadn't encountered many other cyclists' en-route, since leaving Land's End, which is quite surprising in these times when cycling is becoming increasingly popular. Certainly, at home, I would often encounter dozens of cyclists, in groups or otherwise.

John was about 65, stocky, with tree trunk legs that complemented the large heavy boots he was wearing. His bike was a traditional touring bike, heavily laden with bags front and rear. He had set off from Wolverhampton, two weeks previously, for one his regular cycling holidays. The fact that was still working in a factory made me feel very humble, considering I have already been retired for 11 years. As we started chatting he told me that earlier that morning he had had to return to his bed and breakfast, a 40 minute round trip, to retrieve his spectacles.

Of course, I knew what that felt like after my experience in Cheddar, when trying to retrieve my watch. We empathised with each other.

He then went on to tell me that, quite astoundingly, he had just spent three nights in Dumfries Hospital, with food poisoning. Apparently, on the day he became ill he had stopped at a cafe and eaten a meat pie -- such a simple and routine event which could affect anyone, at any time. It was a stark reminder about the fine line between good and bad fortune that everyone could experience on a long distance challenge such as this.

Just a few miles south of Dumfries I stumbled across a beautiful new cafe. It was on the shores of the River Nith, which runs into the Solway Firth, and to all intents and purposes it was like a yacht club, with boats, of all shapes and sizes, moored alongside.

It was about 11:30 a.m. and maybe a bit early for lunch, but it was too good to pass up.

I don't know how long it had been open, but everything was pristine and the place did not look a day-old. The food was gorgeous too, which matched the scenery out of the window.

A few minutes after sitting down two local ladies, in their 70s, approached my table and asked if they could join me. At the time, I thought it was mildly strange, because there were plenty of empty tables nearby. They were a lovely couple, although I could only understand one word in every three. God knows how they coped with my semi-scouse accent, but we seemed to be getting along fine -- in fact, I am sure one of them fancied me rotten. The other lady was more concerned with which motorbike I was riding!

Nicely refreshed by the food and my unexpected company, I set off towards Dumfries.

Unfortunately, the sponge cake syndrome reappeared immediately after leaving Dumfries, because the main road north, the A76, although not as busy as the A7, was almost as unpleasant and I had roughly 50 miles of it to endure before I arrived at my overnight accommodation.

Traffic was constant, with more lorries than cars, presumably making their way to Kilmarnock, the Port of Troon and Glasgow. To make matters worse the terrain was tough and there was a headwind. The next four hours proved to be a real mental slog.

SOWS EAR OR SILK PURSE

I was so delighted and relieved when I arrived at my overnight accommodation, in a lovely Tudor style pub, in Cumnock. That night, I fell asleep slightly anxious about what the weather was going to be like the following day. The advanced weather forecast had predicted that it was going to be bad, but I was hoping against hope that the forecast could have changed.

I didn't need my alarm clock the next morning. The rain battering on my bedroom window was more than enough to confirm that the weather forecast could not have been more right. It was going to be a wet one! Yet none of us would know that this would just be just a precursor to the worst storms to occur in the UK for 30 years, just four days later.

No matter!

I had good waterproofs and, of course, I had the secret weapon in my panniers -- full *Gore-Tex* overtrousers. So it was going to be *Gore-Tex* to the power of three, plus one, today. Just to make sure I also put a pair of waterproof socks over my cycling shoes and under the *Gore-Tex* overshoes.

It was a shame it was raining because it could take the shine off a potentially glorious day, particularly north from the ferry at Gourock to Dunoon and onwards to arrive at Dalmally, under the shadow of Ben Nevis and Glen Coe.

Unfortunately, today's start would be a double whammy -- the dreadful combination of heavy rain and twenty more miles, on the A76, in the rush-hour traffic up to Kilmarnock.

My high visibility *Respro* jacket was going to make an appearance for the second day and although it was daylight I put every light I had available on my bike. In reality, if you had to design a situation in which you were trying to achieve the most hazardous road conditions, this was it. Visibility was poor, due to the torrential rain, the road was flooded and the weight of traffic was just incredible -- just one long string of vehicles of all shapes and sizes, which kept coming and coming.

Of course, from my perspective I had no option. My only priority was to get past Kilmarnock, where the roads seemed, on paper at least, more sensible.

And so it proved!

As soon as I left Kilmarnock, to head further north, the roads became so much quieter and I could relax a little. The bad news was that the rain was still chucking it down and I was getting colder.

A vacant bus stop became a temporary refuge as I stripped off and put on more warm clothing, under my waterproofs. It was so bad; I decided to put my *RainLegs* over the top of my *Gore-Tex* overtrousers. By now the rain had been a constant factor for three hours and bizarrely I was beginning to embrace the experience. However, when the rain ultimately began to invade my waterproofs it started to become unpleasant, as my body got colder and colder. The rain had also got through both my *Gore-Tex* overshoes and waterproof socks - cold feet are not great for morale, either.

I decided that at the next town or village I would seek out a general convenience store and buy a bin bag to put on under my *Gore-Tex* jacket. The idea was to keep out the rain, but also to improve the warmth. Sod's Law dictated, of course, that the next village didn't have a general convenience store - so no bin bag.

My morale was beginning to fail as I started to ride away from the village. As I did so, I noticed a somewhat elderly chap standing in his garden. He seemed oblivious to the rain.

For some unaccountable reason he shouted to me. Maybe he saw the distress in my face, I don't know.

I stopped and explained what I was looking for and he replied "Oh! I've got lots of those. I'll get you one!" and promptly disappeared into his house.

His garden was a little unkempt with various old household items discarded haphazardly around his garden, including a rusting old *Holdsworth* bike, still locked into a turbo trainer.

His name was John and was about 75 years old. He was a lovely, charismatic man. He had been born in the area and raised his family there.

Sadly, 10 years before, his son had been killed whilst walking with his girlfriend along the pavement, a short distance from the house. A lorry driver had fallen asleep and mounted the kerb.

More incredibly, he went on to tell me that recently he had been an inpatient at Perth Hospital, for treatment to a kidney problem, when the surgeon removed the wrong kidney - he removed the healthy kidney and left the diseased. As he said, without any anger or emotion, "the surgeon couldn't tell his right from his left".

Almost in the same breath he said "Have you got a moment. I've got something to show you!" and he took me to the side door of a very large single storey garage, which was adjacent to the house. He opened the side door and it was like a walking into another world. In direct contrast to the dishevelled state of the garden the inside of the garage was immaculate. Along every wall there were racks of engineering equipment, neatly stored. At the front of the garage there were four huge diesel engines - but no ordinary engines -- they were works of art -- a combination of chrome and beautiful paintwork. It turned out that he was a retired engineer and his passion was to buy redundant diesel engines and renovate them for sale.

We talked for what seemed like an age. I forgot that I was on a timetable to head north and just enjoyed his company. As we talked he put on a heater in the middle of the garage. It was like a jet engine. My clothing was dry in seconds.

A delivery van curtailed our chat and I was on my way again, a dry man reborn - reshod with a black bin bag.

Ten wet miles later I stumbled across a petrol station and it was "fill your boots" time. I upgraded my bin bag to "heavy duty" and covered my sodden waterproof gloves with white pedal bin liners, which were tucked into my sleeves.

Since Land's End I had thanked so many courteous drivers with a "thumbs up", it almost caused a repetitive strain injury. However, it didn't seem entirely appropriate that any courteous driver, on this day, should be greeted by a flapping soggy white pedal bin liner.

Riding a bike, in contrast to being enclosed in a car, gives you a certain extra advantage in terms of safety - you are able to listen to approaching traffic from behind. More so, you can interpret by the particular approach what type of driver they are. The huge majority were absolutely fantastic -- proficient, courteous and patient. Even some lorry drivers' en-route to Kilmarnock showed fantastic patience and refused to overtake in circumstances that would have put me in danger. Sometimes the driver was prepared to sit behind for some distance.

However, it wasn't all "beer and skittles".

Whilst negotiating the Bristol Docks, on a much brighter day than today, I was riding along a wide straight road at a normal distance from the kerb. Traffic was overtaking me on a regular basis, when a car pulled up alongside me on my right hand side. It slowed to my speed and the female driver shouted out a stream of expletives that any disorderly drunk would be proud of. At her final syllable she accelerated so hard that a plume of diesel engulfed me and the road.

Presumably, a previous boyfriend (Lucky Sod) was a fellow cyclist who had jilted her for a more expensive model (bike I mean).

Either that or she was insane -- like the driver on the A9, north of Inverness, whose wing mirror missed me by no more than three inches and that at 70 mph. I would like to be kind and suggest the unlikely explanation he may not have seen me - Terry and I were dressed to impress. Either way, he was either criminally insane or criminally incompetent.

The latter was clearly the case for a female driver exiting the M6, at Carlisle. She looked right through me as I approached her exit from her right. Two seconds later she would have hit me broadside. Her response was to smile the smile of someone who had just farted unexpectedly, but no apology.

Thankfully, these were the unique minority and in saying thank you to the majority, I recognize that the minority get you killed.

The small roads which took me to the ferry port at Gourrock were a delight, but not as much as the abandoned telephone box that gave me short respite from the cold for a few minutes. It was now six hours of constant heavy rain and I was becoming fatigued.

The town itself gave me the opportunity of discarding the pedal bin liners and replacing them with genuine rubber gloves. Unfortunately, the only colour they had was yellow, but when one is desperate

The Ferry was extremely efficient and the half an hour passage gave me enough time to sort my bike and clothing out. I tried not to look in the eyes of my fellow ferry passengers as I walked off the ferry with my new rubber gloves.

Still chilled, on arrival in Dunoon, the rain had mercifully stopped, although the roads remained wet. I decided to "push on" and work that much harder to try and raise my body temperature.

The road up from Dunoon, to the shores of the Loch Fyne was just stunning. Both sides of the road was tree-lined, with both sides meeting overhead as a canopy.

If that wasn't spectacular enough, a large eagle flew out of the trees on my right, turned and flew in front of me for what seemed an age, before heading off again to the trees.

Truly inspirational and the memories of the previous drenching were gradually melting away.

Passing through the beautiful town of Inveraray, The Gateway to Argyll, it was beginning to get dark. I knew I had another hour's riding before I arrived in Dalnally, for my overnight bed and breakfast stay. Similar to the geography of Herefordshire this area could also generate dense impregnable darkness. It was so dark that once I arrived it took me ages to find the actual B & B.

It had been a long and arduous day -- 111 miles, in nine hours of riding time.

Unfortunately, the implications of the weather continued well into the late evening. Terry needed a thorough re-lubing and I had to attempt to dry out all of my clothing.

GREAT GLEN MEMORIES

The bonus of arriving in complete darkness is the surprise of genuine beauty the following morning. Dalmally is a gorgeous village.

The weather had changed as well - it was a bright, but cold.

I was really excited and intrigued what the day ahead would bring. It had the potential to be the most stunning few hours on a bike as I travelled from Loch to Loch, through Fort William, then finishing at the end of the Caledonian Canal, at Inverness. The canal is regarded as a 19th century engineering masterpiece. Constructed by engineer Thomas Telford, it runs some 62 miles from Inverness, in the northeast, to Corpach, near Fort William, on the west coast. It provided a quicker and safer route in contrast to the sea journey over the top of Scotland. One third of the entire length is man-made, the rest being formed by a sequence of four Lochs, known as *The Great Glen*. One of these Lochs is the famous Loch Ness.

However, everything wasn't great.

The previous night my morale had been bolstered by the fact that the bed and breakfast had a special drying room, but as it turned out it proved to be a sickening disappointment, because by morning my clothing was still damp, if not wet. Not great, when there is a need for warm clothing, particularly early on.

Additionally, after breakfast, it took an age to sort out all my kit, so my dry stuff would not be contaminated by the wet. As a consequence, I did not leave Dalmally until just before 10 a.m. This would have major implications later, because this leg had been planned to be one of the longer of the second phase.

Within the first hour, alone, I had ticked off not one, but three, Lochs and was riding along the shores of one of the biggest - Loch Linnhe. This area means a lot to me because, in addition to this year being the 30th anniversary of the JOGLE, it is, coincidentally, the 30th anniversary of my participation in the internationally famous *Three Peaks Yacht Race*.

In June, 1982, the Merseyside Police had entered a five-man team -- three sailors and two runners -- to race from Barmouth to Fort William against 29 other teams. Our transport was a 38 feet Trimaran called "Merseybeat". Along with my mate, Charlie Swanborough, I was one of the runners. It was our job to link the three legs of the sea passage from Barmouth to Caernarfon in Wales, Ravensglass in Cumbria, and Corpach in Scotland. It effectively meant running from those ports over Snowdon; Scarfell and Ben Nevis and back again. In the event we finished second, overall. There you go -- the "nearly man" again, but in reality it wasn't ever going to be our running prowess that would, or would not, lead to success. The greater factor was that we had a yachting European Champion skippering the venture, along with his talented crew.

It was still very early in the ride and whether or not it was connected to my damp cycling shorts, or not, I was already having an attack of the dreaded "sit bone" syndrome. In short, my bum was getting sorer and sorer.

Like an oasis for a thirsty man a café/restaurant appeared on the horizon and the plan emerged that I would use their toilets to rescue the situation.

Desperate situations demand desperate solutions and I knew I had some Ibrupofen gel in my small, but vital pharmaceutical stash - it was worth a shot.

However, to reach the toilets I had to pass the restaurant entrance and simply the smell from the food was too much to resist. It was somewhat irresponsible, because I was already fighting the clock from my delayed start and I should have been cracking on, but it was soooooo! worth it. The food was exquisite and I even had a double helping of ice cream with their scrumptious apple pie.

Spookily, the only table available was overlooking Loch Linnhe, so I spent a very pleasant 30 minutes or so attempting to track the path that "Merseybeat" took all those years ago. It prompted such lovely memories in the same vein as those from that lay-by in Levens, three days earlier.

I don't know whether it was the Ibrupofen or the sudden impulse to use a second dryer pair of shorts under the damp ones that resolved the situation, but it worked. It was so successful that this combination became the norm until I arrived at John O'Groats (except, by then, both sets of shorts were dry, if not a little smelly.)

Fort William was very busy and for the life of me I just could not find the route that Charlie and I had taken, 30 years before, from Corpach to the base of Ben Nevis and back. There was no time to dally either, particularly as my indiscipline had put me further behind.

As I left Fort William my thoughts drifted back to the bed and breakfast, in Dalmally. The owner of the bed and breakfast was Margaret, a bubbly and charming lady, in her 30's. Brought up in the village, she went to university in America, where she met her husband. They had then returned and set up their business a few years ago.

She was a genuine delight. I didn't see much of hubby, but as we said our goodbyes; I said to him "What is the road like from Fort William, up to Inverness?" He said "Phew!" and held his hand up at 45°, inferring, I guess, that it was very, very hilly. I responded with a surprised "Really!" And in return he replied "I don't know I've not been there". To this day I am still unsure what was happening - it could even been his attempt at American humour, I don't know. The nonsense of it all was that he was absolutely spot on -- it was 60 miles of the most insanely hilly terrain. Leaving Fort William and starting my passage of *The Great Glen* the road went up, and up, and again, up.

Ironically, I was completely comfortable with the situation, though. It was a lovely day and traffic was fairly light. The wind wasn't helpful, but it wasn't a head wind. Perhaps, the most important reason for my positive psychology was my conviction that for much of the 60 miles to Inverness it would be as flat as a pancake, or at least downhill.

My logic was based on the fact I was going to effectively ride along the banks of a canal that cannot flow up hill. I just had to persevere, top out at the summit, whenever it came, and my reward would last for mile after mile as I descended.

I thought the summit had arrived after just 6 miles from Fort William, at Spean Bridge, where there is an immaculate monument erected in the memory of the officers and men of the *Commandos*, who died in the Second World War. Their training base was just 4 miles to the northwest, in an even more barren and hostile environment -- clearly they were hard men just to survive their Basic Training.

The assumption that the summit had been reached was outrageously wrong and as time went by my psychology became more and more bruised -- because there was no one single summit. Although, I had been right about riding along the shores of the waterway, what the map didn't show was that the road was a series of large humpbacks, climbing and descending for more than four hours, while beneath me, to my right, the watercourse flowed serenely on, at a more even keel.

It was a score draw between the exhilaration of the countryside and my mounting fatigue.

Two hours away from Inverness the road descended into that dense and impenetrable darkness, again. At the same time it started to rain.

One hour away, I was basically at the end of my tether.

I stopped at a tiny petrol station to buy some emergency calories. I was only in there for no more than two minutes. On leaving, the attendant followed me out and locked the door -- *he was leaving for the night!*

I could only imagine what would have been the consequences if I had arrived just a few minutes later. If I hadn't been able to buy that food, at that time, I am convinced I wouldn't have made it to Inverness.

It was such a weird thing to happen.

As each mile clicked off in the darkness I was desperately seeking some sign that my overnight destination was getting nearer, when, cresting the latest hill, in the distance I could see the bright glow that only a major city can generate.

I was armed with my Google map and it seemed a pretty straightforward task to locate my overnight accommodation. What I hadn't catered for was one-way streets and no entry signs.

I wasn't in the mood for any faffing so I accosted the first person I came across, actually a couple. They were walking towards me on the pavement, on my left. I asked them for directions to Argyle Street, where my bed and breakfast was located. He told me that they had just been there and pointed in the general direction. As I followed his outstretched arm, pointing up towards the sky, I saw with no exaggeration, what must have been about a hundred steps. He then looked at Terry and his loaded panniers and said "I'm not much good to you am I. We are on holiday here."

Even so, I knew I was close and knew the general direction. With the help of another passer-by I was standing outside my accommodation a couple of minutes later.

It was 9:15 p.m. Another 127 miles had been ticked off and boy had I felt it.

I rang the doorbell and Ruth, my female host, opened the door with the phone to her ear. It was Bren. She was ringing to ease her growing anxiety.

To my greatest shame I was so focused, since leaving Fort William, in fighting the terrain, I haven't given a thought to ring her. Surprisingly, she showed no hint of annoyance, just relief that I had arrived.

She should have been fuming. I had been thoughtless!

She had a right to be concerned, too! Ruth told me later that only a few weeks previously another cyclist had been on the same road as me and been knocked off his bike. The police found him three days later, lying unconscious in a ditch, alongside the road. Thankfully he recovered.

DUST-CART AFTER THE LORD MAYOR'S SHOW

After a stunning sleep I wandered down to breakfast contemplating what had happened the previous day. Without doubt it had been the Queen stage of the entire route. Whatever happened now until John O'Groats it could not possibly match the scale, intensity and majesty of yesterday.

I walked into the small dining area and who should be sitting there, but the "man of the hundred steps" the previous night, and his wife. They were a lovely couple and we spent a delightful half an hour chatting about our separate forays.

Overnight, as was my normal routine, I studied the maps for today and I became a little curious about the bridge from Inverness, across the Moray Firth. I was in two minds! Would it be busy, because it carried the major A9 and was the only route north, or would it be quiet because it was a road that effectively led to nowhere? I bumped into Robert, my male host, as I left the dining room. I asked him for advice and he said "You will have no problem Steve. It will be really quiet." It was nice to know and in any case I had no choice. It was that, or I go home.

The weather was gorgeous -- bright, with white fluffy clouds in a blue sky, although there was a chilly breeze coming off the sea from my right hand side. The scenery was again going to be one of the best you could wish for, particularly when crossing the bridge I had asked Robert about earlier. It provided the ideal platform for a beautiful panoramic view of the city and the Highlands beyond.

Robert was clearly crackers, though. The A9 was not just busy, but incredibly busy! How he could consider this scenario to be "really quiet". After my experience with my American guy and now Robert, maybe I just need to stop asking advice.

The A9 was just about doable, (and anyway I had no choice) but crossing the A9 Bridge was not a place for a bike and I opted to leave the road and follow the cycle path. It wasn't an easy decision because the cycle path was littered with glass and other debris. Coincidentally, further on, when I called into a cycle shop, the assistant told me that it was a local tradition for the night-time revellers, presumably fuelled by alcohol, to throw their empty bottles from the cars into the Moray Firth, below. Many, of course, failed to make it past the cycle path. So, the cycle path wasn't great, but there was no option and I got away with it -- no punctures.

Thankfully today's ride was going to be the shortest ride in the whole venture -- just over 70 miles, heading for the charming fishing port of Helmsdale.

The stark reality was that I would be on the A9 for most of the day. It was so busy that I thought I had a tail wind. In reality, it was the draught caused by the traffic pulling me along. It wasn't pleasant - it was definitely "*the dustcart after the Lord Mayor's Show*".

On the plus side, due to the short nature of today's leg the pressure was off and anyway as each successive road diverting traffic to the Western Highlands came and went the traffic volume fell progressively.

Just a few miles south of my overnight stay, at Helmsdale, I passed a walker on my left hand side. He had a huge backpack and a walking pole in each hand. As I went past him I noticed that he had a sort of breastplate which said he was walking in aid of Alzheimer's. I turned in the road and went back and it transpired that he was walking the coast of Great Britain and had been doing so since February 2010, raising over £56,000. His name was Philip Williams, a writer, broadcaster and photographer. He explained that he had started in the South West, made his way up the east coast and was now on his way back. Quite astounding!

Helmsdale was so quiet that literally the cash withdrawal facility was just that - a hole in the wall, in circumstances that would give any Crime Prevention Officer the jitters. It was such a delightful place to stay, as was Sharon's bed and breakfast. The food was especially good. Sharon's hubby, Tommy, was a chef and caught the breakfast mackerel himself, from a friend's fishing boat, which was based in the port. There was also salmon on offer, which he had caught from the local river. Pretty special by any standards!

The final day in the saddle would be a direct copy of the previous day, from Inverness - without the traffic. The weather was gorgeous -- bright, with white fluffy clouds in a blue sky. The scenery was again going to be the best you could wish for, but with the added bonus of ribbon upon ribbon of white horses, driven along by the chilly breeze coming off the sea from my right.

My legs were sore, but that it wasn't unusual. Indeed, each morning as I started off, and until the blood could circulate, it was slightly uncomfortable. Psychologically I was in a good place. Again there would be no pressure of time. I only had about 60 miles to negotiate until arriving at John O'Groats. After that another 15 miles, or so, would see me back to my final overnight stay, before heading home.

Final Stats

Date	From	To	Miles	Ride Time (Hours)	NOTES
12.9	Penzance	Tintagel	100	8	
13.9	Tintagel	Taunton	110	9.25	Truncated stage - Cheddar original destination
14.9	Taunton	Eardisland	144	13	+ 13.9 deficit
15.9	Eardisland	Home	133	10	
16.9	Home	R & R			Clean Bike & Restock
17.9	Home	R & R			Clean Bike & Restock
18.9	Home	Penrith	101	8	
19.9	Penrith	Cumnock	108	8.45	
20.9	Cumnock	Dalmally	111	9	
21.9	Dalmally	Inverness	127	9.25	
22.9	Inverness	Helmsdale	71	5.25	
23.9	Helmsdale	John O'Groats	58	5.45	Plus 15 miles return to Wick

PASS OUT THE CIGARS

Today, it would be "CIGAR DAY"! By now, I was pretty sure I was going to make it. Congratulations were in order. Today would be one long celebration. I felt that warm glow of satisfaction that wells up after any plan has gone well.

I had even packed away my heart rate monitor that I had used since Land's End -- no need for that today.

However, like everything else in life, one should not take things for granted. Almost immediately after leaving Helmsdale there was one almighty hill, which candidly was a bit of a shock. Nevertheless, this was a celebration day and I was well prepared to take on whatever was in front of me. When it occurred the second and third time my cigar was well and truly snapped in half.

Don't get me wrong. It was a lovely day. I had plenty of time to reminisce about all the wonderful things that had happened previously.

I even had the entertainment of leapfrogging a team of three fellow cyclists who were riding the route, supported by a mobile home and car, which had a huge sign on the rear which said "Caution Cyclists Ahead". They were going much quicker than I was, working as a team, taking turns at the front. However, they also stopped on a regular basis -- which meant we were leapfrogging each other for hours.

About lunchtime I arrived at the lovely town of Wick -- the final town before pushing on a short distance to John O'Groats. It would also be my final overnight accommodation -- again B & B.

Although Thurso is the most northern town in the United Kingdom, Wick, just 15 miles short, is the most northerly town on the west coast. As such, you would expect it to be a very traditional Scottish town, but in reality it is so enigmatic -- a surprising mix of the very new and the very old.

On entering the town there is a new retail park, with Homebase and other like retailers present and on exiting the town there is a huge Tesco Megastore. Isabel, my bed-and-breakfast host for that night, explained that since the arrival of the new interlopers the town had changed significantly. The Garden Centre, that had been present for generations, had closed, as had the butchers, clothes and shoe shops. On the positive side she said that people were travelling to Wick from all parts of the Highlands to visit the new stores, particularly Tesco's. As such, Wick was a unique microcosm of the retail sector across Britain.

Isabel was a lovely gentle woman, with a very warm nature. She was very proud of her bed and breakfast enterprise and she had the right to be so. It was a lovely bungalow, beautifully kept, with a stunning view of Wick Harbour and the adjoining ocean.

Pride was a common trait in all the owners of all the B & B's that I had visited, throughout my journey. I swear that when I complimented Keith about the quality of his bed-and-breakfast, at Tintagel, he was a really emotional - it meant that much to him.

More so, they were prepared to go way beyond what would be expected of them. They all deserved a cigar of congratulation.

John and Sue Brown, at Eardisland, where so concerned about my late arrival they asked their son, a Special Constable who was on duty that evening, to try and locate me; Sadie from Cumnock donated half of her fee to Alzheimer's; Margaret, from Dalmally, stood over me, holding a torch in the rain and the cold, so I could carry out the re-lubing of Terry in the pitch black; and Sharon, from Helmsdale, rang Bren at home the day before my arrival to enquire about the type of food I would prefer. They were a bit special and I am so grateful to them all.

However the efforts of Ruth, in Inverness, deserve a special mention. Ruth was undoubtedly a Sergeant Major in a previous life. She was tough, compassionate, highly organised and nothing fazed her. In short, she was in charge.

On arrival she told me to put Terry in the front lounge. Bearing in mind that Terry had just had a drowning for two hours he wasn't really deserving of anything better than a shed or garage. The lounge had a polished wooden floor and it was beautifully decorated. I hesitated and suggested it wasn't a good idea. Suggesting it wasn't a good idea; wasn't a good idea, in itself. Very quickly, Terry was tucked up for the night in the lounge, leaning against a display case which contained framed photographs and other lifetime memories of Ruth and her extended family. I felt very humbled.

She then volunteered to launder all my clothing, which was still wet from the previous day's drenching - it was waiting for me outside my bedroom, upon waking, bone dry.

Before going in the dining room for breakfast, I stopped off at the kitchen and knocked on the door. Her husband, Robert, answered. (You may remember him - he was the person who taught me never again to ask a Bed & Breakfast host for an assessment of road conditions). I asked whether Ruth was available and he replied rather sternly "What do you want? She is busy."

If she was the Sergeant Major, he definitely was the Corporal. I never got to thank her. However, the real boss was their huge grey hairball of a cat that eyeballed me everywhere I went. I am not ashamed to admit that I was intimidated. The bugger even refused to move when I was attempting to get Terry out of the lounge, but Terry's rear wheel intervened to end the stand-off.

Wick was also the place of departure for my rail journey home. The railway station was as quiet as the town. When I arrived on the platform for the first part of the journey; to Inverness and onwards to Edinburgh, I was met by the Scotrail Train Manager who said, "Good morning. Are you Mr McBride?" I was a bit taken aback by my sudden celebrity status, but as it would turn out, I was the only passenger on the train.

He was a very efficient chap.

He examined my ticket on the platform and instructed me to disrobe Terry of his panniers, which were to be stored in the overhead luggage. I thought at the time he was being a little pedantic, as the issue had never raised its head all the way to Penzance. He then examined my ticket, for a second time, as the train left the station.

Come on, now! - what do you expect a very efficient man to do when he has nothing to do?

When I was planning the venture I had been extremely anxious about the train journeys, having not been on a long distance train journey for several decades, plus I had the additional worry of how I would cope with Terry in tow.

Overall, I have to say that the service was impressive, albeit patchy, dependent on the individual service provider.

Virgin Trains were impressive in how they manage cycle transport. A special, but linked compartment, that allows you to take as much time as you want in making sure the bike and luggage are as secure as possible, before walking straight through to your seat. This was in direct contrast to the *Cross Country* service where the Train Manager shouted at me, as I attempted to make Terry secure, "You can't waste time doing that. You are delaying the train." This meant that the bike was unprotected until the next station, when I had to sprint down the station platform, lock the bike and sprint back to my seat. Not entirely fabulous! I am not too sure who would pick up the compensation bill if Terry had been stolen.

If I had to present the award of "*Train Provider for LEJOG 2012*" it would be *Scotrail*. Their service was well thought out with the bikes nicely secure within the seating area – they even had their own seat belts. The big bonus of this, of course, is that the bikes are always in sight of the owner.

The most bizarre set of circumstances that occurred on any of the train journeys was on the *First Great Western* service from Plymouth to Penzance.

I have to admit that I was paranoid about picking up any infection on the way down to Lands End, obviously because it would have scuppered the whole enterprise.

My worst nightmare happened when a female passenger got on and sat two seats away from me. She had a "mother and father" of an infection - the most severe cough and cold that one could imagine.

Either it is testament to my neurosis, or good planning; I had purposely packed a handkerchief soaked with Olbas Oil, for such a circumstance. So it was promptly whipped out and placed strategically under both of my nostrils. The sensitive person that I am I didn't want to offend the lady so I spent the next 45 minutes looking out the window, but slowly getting high on the fumes.

Each station came and went and she refused to get off. By this time the carriage was getting emptier, so I made the strategic decision to take the initiative and move out of her range.

I moved about twelve rows ahead. I had just put the Olbas Oil instrument away when the bloke behind me sprayed the air with a series of World Championship sneezes.

There was definitely a conspiracy in play and I spent the rest of the time standing up by an open window of one of the exit doors. In contrast, during the long journey home, delayed by flooding between Penrith and Carlisle, I would have encouraged anyone, who had less than typhoid, to blow directly up my nose.

It was only about 15 miles from Wick to John O'Groats, mostly through farmland, with the road gently descending to the coast on all sides. It occurred to me how farming would be so difficult in a place where weather would not be your friend. It was pleasant to ride a bike though, particularly now having a following wind. I found myself riding at over 20 mile hour, which Terry and I found surprisingly easy.

John O'Groats itself was slightly artificial, in direct contrast to the spartan countryside, surrounding it. A collection of buildings, some very smart, had clearly emerged to satisfy the commercial potential and it is certainly a popular tourist site.

The most surprising thing for me was the number of cyclists, in small groups, scattered all over that area, having their photograph taken, in mutual congratulation. I knew that the End to End challenge was becoming more popular, but maybe I need to revise my estimate upwards.



I celebrated with the largest cake I could find. Ok! I am lying. It was two of the largest cakes I could find. I wanted to give Terry a big hug, but with typical English restraint I gave his handlebars a quick tap.

As I sat devouring my cakes and a mug of fabulous hot chocolate, my thoughts turned to how fortunate I had been. I don't think it was just luck. I like to think that Mum had a hand in it.

What happened at Land's End was just plain spooky. I can't explain where my photographer came from or where she went to.

Then two days of strong winds helped me on my way and, okay, Mum buggered off after that, but even angels get bored.

I would even suggest that my accident was a bit of "tough love" - warning me about the more dangerous risks to come later and even the day's drenching across southern Scotland was essential to ensure the ride qualified as a genuine challenge.

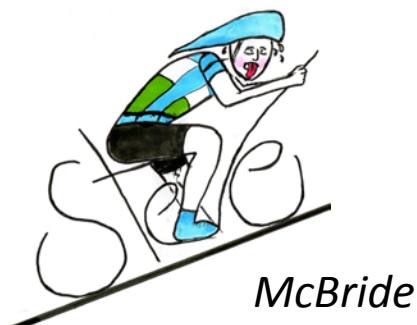
However, perhaps the most persuasive examples were the two occasions when I was at my lowest ebb: that hard, hard day to Eardisland and stumbling across the cycle shop and the food that was the key to get to the finish that day; and the garage closing so soon after me arriving at Loch Ness, when I was close to giving up.

I think it all adds up to persuasive evidence that something was going on. The eagle that flew in front of me, from Dunoon, however, was the clincher.

At times, though, Terry was a bit overcrowded with me, the elephant and Mum.

As I rode away from John O'Groats, I don't know whether it was the satisfaction or relief of completing the challenge, or that I still miss her, but I found myself sobbing uncontrollably. Terry pretended he hadn't noticed, bless him.

Mum. This one was for you!



EPILOGUE

In hoping you enjoyed riding pillion with me, preferably without a sore bum, can I thank you wholeheartedly for your generosity in supporting *The Alzheimer's Society*.

With your help we managed to raise a final total of £1883.