

## **Mike and Jen's LEJOGLE 2012**



Michael and Jennifer Rea

### **Introduction**

Cycling the length of the country from Land's End to John O'Groats on our tandem has been a long held ambition that, until now, we just hadn't got round to. The reason for the delay was that we didn't want to just ride it as an end in itself, preferring to use the ride as a means to see and enjoy the wealth of diverse countryside enclosed within our relatively small island, and to do this would require a considerable amount of time. Having reached retirement the excuse that there was insufficient time available no longer applied so the planning started in earnest. Our initial research revealed that it is possible to choose from an array of routes worked out by others but, as this was to be "our" expedition, we wanted to work out our own route, so that's what we did. We decided not to follow a rigid schedule, preferring to be flexible on where to stop each day and where and when to take rest days. This decision meant that camping would be the most practical choice for overnight stops, even though this would mean that we would have to haul a heavier luggage load than if we used other forms of accommodation. We also decided to stay off main roads as much as possible to avoid traffic and hopefully to enjoy better scenery. Having realised that we had as much time as we wanted to complete the trip there seemed to be no reason why we couldn't go for the double and do the return journey as well, and we could change some of the return route to take in some more special areas.

During the winter months of 2011/12 many hours were spent devising a route using "MemoryMap", without which the task would have been infinitely more difficult. Planning for a daily average of fifty miles, the route and potential camp sites were identified and plotted, and the maps printed and laminated. We treated ourselves to a replacement for our old Dawes Galaxy tandem, replacing it with a bright yellow Thorn Discovery with Rohloff gears, set up to provide us with the lowest gearing recommended by Rohloff, to give us a fighting chance of hauling the necessary luggage load for the trip. Luggage was to be carried in a set of Ortleib Roller Classic panniers while the camping gear would be carried in a Bob-Yak trailer. The

extra luggage requirement imposed by the camping option is the down side of that choice, but the greater flexibility and freedom it provides definitely justifies it.

## **The Journey**

### **Monday 6<sup>th</sup> August                      Land's End**

Blue skies and sunshine greeted us on the day of departure, a good omen we thought, so loading the tandem and all our gear onto our son Christopher's car was done in good spirits, tinged with mild anxiety about what we were about to embark on. Today's task was to get to Land's End and to register the start of the trip. Tonight would be at a camp site close to the start, so the ride would really start tomorrow.

It was fairly late in the day when we arrived at a crowded Land's End, but we quickly unloaded the car and loaded up the tandem. It suddenly felt really heavy with its full load and the thought of setting off with such a big audience raised our anxiety level a further notch. Nevertheless, once registered, the obligatory photographs were taken and a nervous couple set off on what would hopefully be an epic tandem tour.

A five minute ride got us to our camp site for the night and we stopped to wave farewell to Christopher as he drove past on his way home, and we suddenly felt very alone.

### **Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> August                      Land's End to Cambrose**

A fairly comfortable night, although there is a strong desire to get some miles covered so that the doubts about coping can be allayed. We broke camp and loaded the tandem without any problems then set off in the rain. Any research about these trips suggests that some of the worst hills will be encountered in Devon and Cornwall, so we were expecting the first two or three days to be tough, partly because of the hills but also because it would take a few days for our bodies to become accustomed to the daily demands of pedalling with an expedition load.

Cornwall, a peninsula famous for its rugged Atlantic coastline, its Celtic roots, fishing, tin mining, and pasties. Our hopes that the rain might ease as the day progressed were not to be; it just got worse. Wearing wet weather clothing, and being subjected to a considerable amount of climbing, meant that our first day was not the most comfortable, but if we could cope with that we should be alright for the rest of the trip. After all, the weather couldn't be much worse, and it hasn't daunted our resolve!

Things did get worse. As we were climbing slowly out of Hayle, in the persistent rain, there was a loud bang as our rear tyre exploded! We had suffered our first puncture, a bad one as the tyre sidewall had a finger sized hole in it. It didn't take too long to replace the tyre and tube with our spares but, having suffered such major tyre damage on day one, our confidence in our tyres was somewhat dented, and to make matters worse, we no longer had a spare!

As this was day one and the terrain, as expected, was hilly, we purposely kept the mileage fairly low, stopping at Cambrose campsite, just north of Redruth, after 35 miles. A wet camp after a wet ride, but we felt good and our confidence was rising.

Distance for the day: 35.49 miles

**Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> August****Cambrose to Ruthernbridge**

The rain eased off as we broke camp so we started riding in dry weather but the day's route started with a hill, a very steep hill. One hill was followed by another, and another, and another, and although dry, the weather remained overcast. As a navigation aid we had a satnav that we charged via a solar panel mounted on top of the trailer. Unfortunately the overcast weather meant that the charging rate was slow so, by keeping the satnav on, we managed to flatten the battery, resulting in a few minor navigational problems. We resolved not to place too much reliance on the satnav in future, but to use it as an emergency tool so that it could be trickle charged while switched off for most of the time. This policy worked well for most of the trip and the satnav definitely proved its worth, getting us out of trouble when we really needed it.

During the planning stage we had optimistically hoped to cover a big mileage on day two so that our overnight stop could be at our own house in Bude. This aspiration failed to acknowledge the effect of hauling our heavy load up so many Cornish hills so we were forced to let common sense prevail by adding an extra day to reach Bude. We therefore stopped at a campsite at Ruthernbridge, just west of Bodmin.

Distance for the day: 36.84 miles

Total distance: 72.33 miles

**Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> August****Ruthernbridge to Bude**

An early start in good weather was welcome, but we suffered initially with more steep hills before the road improved for the final miles into Camelford, where we stopped for a picnic in the park. Now on familiar roads we pressed on to Bude for a night at home and a day off to sort out replacement spare tyre(s) and do some laundry.

Distance for the day: 37.01 miles

Total distance: 109.32 miles

**Friday 10<sup>th</sup> August**

Day off! Purchased new tyres/tubes. From now on we are carrying two spare folding tyres as our trust in them has been compromised by the experience of the first day. We probably won't need them but rather safe than sorry. Chains cleaned, oiled and adjusted; laundry done; feeling good.

**Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> August****Bude to Sampford Peverell**

Our son Christopher cycled with us as far as Holsworthy, which was nice and made us feel less alone. Jen admitted that she felt more nervous today because, until now, we had been riding towards home, but from now on, every pedal stroke would be taking us further away from home and deeper into our adventure. Exciting but scary.

Today we crossed our first county boundary, moving from Cornwall into Devon, a beautiful rural county of lush green grass and rolling hills. We enjoyed good weather today but still had many hills to climb, less steep than those encountered in Cornwall but generally longer, so just as demanding on our energy reserves. Arriving in Crediton we stopped at the local Tesco store to stock up with food for the night's camp meal and to replenish some of the many calories that we had burned. Hunger was to become a constant companion for the whole trip and Tesco stores were to become firm favourites to supply our calorific top-ups.

We were already feeling fitter, despite this being only the fourth day in the saddle, and today's mileage was to be the highest yet. We were clearly going to finish later than planned so telephoned ahead to the camp site at Sampford Peverell to advise them of our late arrival. We arrived there just after seven in the evening to a friendly welcome and a really smart site. An added bonus was that today was the day that a mobile chippy visited the site so, instead of having to cook a meal ourselves, we enjoyed a freshly cooked fish supper from a professional.

We were very tired after a long day's ride and I slept really well. Jen said that there had been a hum-dinger of a thunder storm during the night but I had slept right through it!

Minnows camp site at Sampford Peverell is highly recommended.

Distance for the day: 70.66 miles

Total distance: 180.02 miles

### **Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> August                      Sampford Peverell to Winscombe**

We had to deal with a few moderate hills as we bade farewell to Devon, but then we were able to look forward with relish to the approaching "Somerset Levels" and the flat terrain that the name implies. The cycling here was great and we were able to maintain a brisk pace for many miles. The scenic hills of the past few days were now replaced with a very flat area that was once a vast wetland covering about 160,000 acres. Over many centuries it has been drained by the creation of large drainage ditches to create fertile grassland.

We enjoyed today's ride immensely and found that, whenever we stopped for a break, we were invariably approached by people who were keen to chat to us about our tandem and our project. I guess a bright yellow tandem festooned with luggage inspires curiosity and conversation. Such approaches by complete strangers were to become a daily feature of our journey. Altruism is alive and well in the UK.

Tonight's camp at Winscombe, a few miles north-west of Cheddar, would put us in an ideal position to get to the Severn Bridge tomorrow. A nice grassy pitch and the weather is still good.

Distance for the day: 55.08 miles

Total distance: 235.1 miles

### **Monday 13<sup>th</sup> August                      Winscombe to Redbrook**

Another day of changing scenery would see us crossing the Severn estuary into Wales. The roads for the first few miles were relatively flat so we made good progress, despite the rather damp weather. Our first obstacle was the Avon Bridge, which carries the M5 over the River Avon. Clearly bicycles are not allowed on motorways but a cycle path has been provided at the side of the bridge, although finding the access to it was anything but straightforward. After a slight delay we eventually got the necessary directions from a local cyclist and were again on our way. A few more minor navigational problems, and worsening rain requiring the use of uncomfortable wet weather clothing, and we arrived at the eastern end of the Severn Bridge.

Opened in 1966 the "Severn Bridge" comprises four elements that collectively link Aust, on the English side, to Chepstow on the Welsh side. The four parts are the 514ft Aust Viaduct, the 5240ft Severn Bridge, the 2440ft Beachley Viaduct, and the 1340ft Wye Bridge. It carries the M4 between England and Wales but a cycle track has been provided too. Crossing on this cycle track was quite exciting, although the movement of the bridge as traffic passed was quite unnerving. Historical note: I last crossed this bridge on a bicycle in the year that it opened!

Lunched in Chepstow, stocked up for our evening meal, then enjoyed a pleasant ride to our intended destination, the CSMA Whitemead Park camp site at Parkend. What a disappointment! Throughout the entire trip this was the only site that refused to accommodate us!

Tired and a little worried we carried on, not knowing of any other camp sites in the area. We passed through Coleford, doing an awful lot of climbing, and stopped to consult the map. Having asked a passing lady for any local knowledge of camping facilities, we were able to carry on with new hope of possible farm sites. The first of these only took caravans, having no facilities for tent campers, so we again carried on, you've guessed it, uphill. A passing farmer pointed us to Cherry Orchard Farm at Redbrook, and we camped there. It was basic but had everything we needed and a friendly welcome; and our relief at finding somewhere, as time seemed to be running out, was profound.

Distance for the day: 58.44 miles

Total distance: 293.55 miles

## **Tuesday 14th August          Redbrook to Presteigne**

Today we headed first to Monmouth, located at the confluence of the rivers Monnow and Wye, just two miles from the English border. From Monmouth to Ewyas Harold took us through some very pretty countryside but the road surfaces caused us some concern. It has to be admitted that we had chosen very minor roads but the state of repair was truly awful. With pot-holes galore and slippery moss down the centre of the narrow lanes, we often had to choose which of these two evils to negotiate and had to keep our speed low to remain safe. Coupled with the plentiful supply of fierce hills, it was hard work.

Stopping for lunch at a nice looking pub in the village of Grosmont we were told that there would be nothing to eat until their expected food delivery arrived. While we waited we chatted to a couple outside the pub; the man was interesting in that he was dressed in clothing from a bygone era, including a tri-corn hat. Wish we had taken a photograph! We waited for half an hour with no sign of the anticipated food delivery and then decided that we really should carry on.

We arrived at Ewyas Harold and fed ourselves at a small shop before continuing. A couple of miles further on we encountered our second mechanical problem which manifested itself as a loud metallic scraping noise. My mind instinctively started to consider what possible mechanical failure could create such an awful noise and was it likely to be serious enough to stop the trip; I am by nature a born worrier! It turned out that all the rough surfaces had caused a bolt to shake loose, so loose that it had disappeared and no longer held the front mount of the trailer's mudguard. The mudguard had therefore rotated so that it was underneath the wheel and scraping along the road, hence the noise. We managed to effect a temporary repair using cable ties until a new bolt could be acquired. The temporary repair actually lasted for the rest of the trip.

We later stopped at a pub (don't remember quite where) for something to eat, only to be told:

"We don't do food on Tuesdays".

We tried another pub shortly after and got the exact same response! What is wrong with Tuesdays and pub food? Is this a Welsh custom? We ended up stocking up at a convenience store with everything necessary for an evening meal and did the last uphill miles to our proposed camp site at Holme Marsh, only to find that the camp site shown on the map no longer exists. Oh dear!

We checked in our planning book and found that we had a telephone number for a site just outside Presteigne, about another eight miles further on, so we rang it and got a positive reply. It turned out to be a really nice site with excellent facilities so we decided to have two nights there so that we could have a well-earned rest and get some laundry done.

Distance for the day: 58.42 miles

Total distance: 351.98 miles

### **Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> August      Day off**

This would be a lazy day, albeit a wet one. We got the laundry done and then walked the mile into the village for a pub lunch. The pub that had been recommended by the camp site warden had a notice on the door saying “Closed today” which, after the “no food on Tuesday” fiasco, started alarm bells ringing about us ever getting a pub meal in Wales. Fortunately we ended up in a hotel bar where we did indeed enjoy a meal.

We stocked up with more food before a wet walk back to the camp site, and then lazed away the rest of the day just eating and snoozing.

### **Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> August                      Presteigne to Montford Bridge**

It was raining when we were packing up and we thought that we were in for another wet ride, but by the time we left the rain had stopped. The cycling today was much easier than recent days with some hills but none of the lung bursting type that we have seen so many of before. We had some minor navigation problems, caused mainly by a lack of concentration. We both seem to suffer from the same problem in that we are so absorbed in the countryside through which we are passing that we forget to keep tabs on precisely where we are. We then find that we are at an off-route location because we missed a turn. It's usually fairly easy to make a correction to get back on track but it is irritating that we keep doing it.

Stopping at a pub in Wentnor for a cup of coffee we saw what other customers were eating and, as it wasn't Tuesday, we decided to have a meal. We sat outside in the sunshine to eat; life is good! The rest of the day was spent cycling through some of the prettiest countryside of the trip so far, stopping to chat with several people en route. We bought supplies and ice cream in Pontesbury before crossing the appropriately named “Rea Brook”, which becomes the “River Rea”, and arrived at Montford Bridge in time for tea.

Distance for the day: 48.51 miles

Total distance: 400.49 miles

### **Friday 17<sup>th</sup> August                      Montford Bridge to Acton Bridge**

Apart from the seemingly mandatory climb at the start of the day, and the rain that is an ever present feature of our journey, today was a relatively easy ride and we finished the day earlier than anticipated.

Passing through Ellesmere we encountered “hundreds” of cyclists in varying sized groups. After chatting to some of these we found out that the local college was running a weekend cycling convention which was catering for 500 cyclists, all enjoying a few days of riding in the area.

The final miles for the day were through the beautiful Delamere Forest but the rain, which by this time had attained deluge proportions, took some of the pleasure out of it. Dropping Down from the forest to the Woodbine Cottage camp site, the rain eased so we were able to set up in dry conditions and look forward to a leisurely evening with no meal to prepare as there was a pub next door. Better still they were offering “two-for-the-price-of-one” meals.

Distance for the day: 55.13 miles

Total distance: 455.62 miles

### **Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> August                      Acton Bridge to Clitheroe**

This was a day that we had agonised over during the planning stage because, looking at the map, there was no way through this industrialised part of the country without having to negotiate many towns in quick succession. The excess of urban areas where the road systems had been designed primarily for the motorist, meant that our plotted course was to be of only limited use in some towns, where the one-way

systems would thwart our attempts to stay on course. The satnav kept us out of real trouble for most of the day and, to be fair, the ride was much more enjoyable than our fears had anticipated. The short rural areas between towns were really very pleasant, far nicer than the map suggested.

We stopped in Leigh, having seen the hallowed Tesco sign, and enjoyed a huge picnic lunch to replenish some of the much needed calories. Altruism flourished again as we were approached by many interested passers-by, full of questions about the bike and where we were going. We are constantly in receipt of good wishes, which are much appreciated, and we are gratified by the number of really nice people that we are encountering on a daily basis.

Heavy use of the satnav through all the towns today, and the overcast (but dry) weather, meant that the solar charger had not been able to keep up with the battery's demands, so the satnav turned itself off just before we got to a turnoff, which we consequently missed! We soon realised our mistake and backtracked for a couple of miles, glad that we did because we soon came upon a country café at Tockholes and stopped for coffee and cake. These impromptu refreshment stops really enhance the journey.

Oh dear, when we reached Blackburn, the last of the towns to be negotiated, and with a one-way traffic system to confuse the hardest of navigators, the satnav battery was still too flat to help us. What looked reasonably straightforward on the map proved to be anything but, and we got hopelessly lost, going round in circles with an increasing fear that we might never get out of the town. Helpful passers-by got us back on track and we put our heads down to make up some of the time that we had wasted going round in circles.

We were pretty well worn out when we finally arrived at the Clitheroe camp site so we booked in for two nights; tomorrow would be a rest day.

Distance for the day: 63.52 miles

Total distance: 519.14 miles

## **Monday 20<sup>th</sup> August                      Clitheroe to Shap**

Today's route was supposed to be special, even though we knew that it would involve some tough hills. The Forest of Bowland is a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, a large area of gritstone fells and deep valleys. The name "forest" relates to the traditional meaning of a royal hunting ground and is nothing to do with trees. After the urban character of recent days, we relished being back out in the country, and beautiful country, or so we thought.

We broke camp in pouring rain and pedalled away in full waterproofs, so we were soon hot and wet and remained that way for most of the day. We toiled over the Forest of Bowland, having underestimated the severity of the climbs and, despite our efforts, we were denied the benefit of the promised views; all we saw was mist! This for me was a low point on the journey. Such anticipation and expectation, only to be denied the simple prize of a view.

Our camp site in Shap was reached with relief; it was cheap and cheerful with very basic facilities so one night was enough. Pitching the tent in the dusk we failed to notice that we overlooked a railway track until it was too late. Trains passed by regularly all night long but, surprisingly, the sound was quite soothing rather than annoying.

Distance for the day: 63.09 miles

Total distance: 582.24 miles

## **Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> August                      Shap to Annan**

Yesterday had been hard and we were both feeling tired but the threatened rain, as we broke camp, failed to materialise and we enjoyed a rare dry day.

The miles flowed by at a brisk rate as our spirits lifted at the prospect of crossing the Scottish border today. We took advantage of the dry conditions and the easy roads and enjoyed the day. We had located a camp site about five miles past Annan so stocked up with food for the evening and camped overlooking the Solway Firth. The camp site had some of the best facilities that we have ever encountered on a camp site.

Distance for the day: 56.85 miles

Total distance: 639.1 miles

## **Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> August                      Annan to Carsphairn**

Reaching Scotland was a real milestone and we started the day with renewed confidence. An early headwind was a nuisance but the road to Dumfries was good so we made good progress. Tesco again provided sustenance when we reached Dumfries but we failed to identify accommodation for the night, even with the efforts of the Tourist Information Centre. Our target for the day was the small town of Carsphairn but there were no campsites listed and the only Bed & Breakfast was fully booked.

The Satnav eased our way through Dumfries and we headed to Moniaive on a road that was uphill but with a manageable gradient. Short sharp showers became a feature of this stage of the day.

The charming village of Moniaive dates back to the tenth century. Sheep and cattle are the mainstay of its economy and it is also home to several writers and artists. Each year it hosts various festivals including a folk festival, a bluegrass festival, a horse show, a horticultural show, clearly a thriving community. It also has a delightful teashop where we stopped for a pleasant lunch and where we also met up with another tandem crew. Keith and Fiona from Edinburgh were out for a ride and, after lunch, accompanied us for a few miles as we headed towards Carsphairn. The first few miles of the road to Carsphairn were uphill and, as we were hauling luggage and Keith and Fiona weren't, we found it increasingly difficult to keep up with them, so we bade each other farewell and bon voyage. It had been a pleasant and welcome interlude.

At the top of the climb we met another cycle tourist going in the opposite direction and stopped for a chat. He told us that it was all downhill to Carsphairn and we reciprocated by telling him that it was all downhill to Moniaive, so we were all happy.

There was nowhere to stay in Carsphairn and we had seen no potential wild camp sites. I had, however, when looking at the area on GoogleEarth Streetview, seen that the local Heritage Centre had a patch of grass adjacent to it where I now thought we might be able to put the tent. As it had started to rain again we really needed to find something or carry on further into the unknown. I knocked on someone's door and asked if anyone was likely to object to us camping and was told no, so I asked if they would fill our water bottles and went and put up the tent. We were reasonably out of sight and even benefited from the Heritage Centre's toilet facilities.

As a camp site it got us out of trouble but was not where we really wanted to be so we decided to get an early start the following morning and have breakfast when we reached the next town, Dalmellington, about ten miles further on.

Distance for the day: 52.99 miles

Total distance: 692.09 miles



## **Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> August**

### **Carsphairn to Ladyburn**

An early start with just ten miles to Dalmellington for breakfast. It was cold and damp but not enough to warrant wet weather clothing. It was also a steady climb so we soon warmed up and arrived in Dalmellington after an hour of steady pedalling.

We couldn't find a café open so we had to make do with coffee and Scotch pancakes from a convenience store, but it was sufficient to ease our hunger and warm us up. We then found a supermarket to stock up with food for the rest of the day, but while there some idiot reversed his car without due care, as he was busy chatting to his passenger, and sideswiped our trailer. Fortunately no damage was sustained, except to his pride; he was extremely apologetic!

Our day's ride continued in improving weather and we arrived at the Walled Garden Campsite at Ladyburn, near Maybole, nice and early and were able to enjoy a relaxing afternoon. The site is within the walled garden of the historic Kilkerran Estate, home of the Fergussons. The weather was now warm and there was no wind, which only seems to appear when we are riding, and is always blowing against us. The downside of this improved weather was that we were plagued by the infamous Scottish midges. We had midge nets to cover our heads and midge coils to burn in the tent to mitigate their impact and, without these precautions, we would surely have been driven mad.

Distance for the day: 24.18 miles

Total distance: 716.28 miles

## **Friday 24<sup>th</sup> August**

### **Ladyburn to Brodick (Arran)**

Today we had to get to Ardrossan to catch the ferry across to the Isle of Arran. With the possibility of delays through several towns, due to the navigation problems that they so often create, and the fairly gentle but numerous hills, we needed to get away early to be reasonably sure of getting to Ardrossan early enough to catch the ferry. As well as these potential problems we also had to put up with more rain.

Our first main town of the day was Ayr, where Robert the Bruce held the first Parliament of Scotland in 1315. Today it is the largest port town on the Firth of Clyde. Walking through the centre looking for a food shop we were again approached by several people attracted by the bike and eager to ask about it and our journey. Whichever part of the country we find ourselves in there seems to be no shortage of nice people.

Well-fed at Tesco's we carried on through Prestwick, Troon, Kilwinning, on an excellent wide and well surfaced cycle path until the final section, which was signed "Ardrossan Ferry 4 miles". The cycle path then turned into a narrow, rutted and overgrown nightmare, so we turned back to use the normal road.

We arrived at the ferry terminal having just missed one ferry so had a two hour wait for the next one. We didn't really mind as the sun had now come out and we were able to dry out while enjoying a relaxing picnic. As more passengers for the ferry began to congregate several families, in turn, came over to chat to us about our tandem/trailer rig; it certainly attracts attention.

The ferry crossing to Arran took about an hour and we were amazed at the number of passengers. Once we had disembarked we had only a short distance to ride to the camp site at Glen Rosa, the only one in this part of the island. There was a nice looking Fish and Chip shop next to the ferry terminal! Why not? It will save having to cook this evening. So we sat and enjoyed freshly cooked cod and chips; it was delicious.

It didn't take us long to pedal the short distance to the campsite, which was described as "basic", and I was a little worried that I was putting Jen into a less than ideal situation. As it turned out it was quite pleasant, with very few tents, so we were almost on our own. The main problem was that we were plagued by midges, urgh!

Distance for the day: 43.98 miles

Total distance: 760.26 miles

## **Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> August**

### **Brodict to Lochilphhead**

With another ferry to catch today at the top end of the island, and a long climb to get there, an early start seemed like a good idea. Nobody told us that Glen Rosa was notorious for midges and the experience of the previous evening continued as the little varmintes were biting away like crazy. By the time we had loaded the bike we were both covered in little red dots that belied the intensity of the itching and it was a relief to get underway.

Once moving the ride was very pleasant, with no traffic and great scenery, so we made good time initially. However, as on most days, we soon began to climb what we knew to be a very long hill; not particularly steep but steep enough and very long. Just before the hill we passed a runner and I half-jokingly shouted that he would probably overtake us when we hit the hill and went into our low granny gear. I wasn't wrong and he did! During a brief easy bit we overtook him again and we all laughed at the absurdity of the cycle/runner leapfrog situation.

The length of the hill, combined with the sheer weight of our load, finally defeated us and we had to walk up the final section to the top. We then enjoyed an equally long descent!

On the final approach to the Lochranza ferry terminal a couple with a tandem were just coming out of a guest house and they flagged us down, so we stopped to say hello. They were from Tyneside and had broad Geordie accents and were clearly enthusiastic tandemists. The funny thing was that, so far on our journey, we had encountered very few tandems, but this one was the same make as ours and was rigged just like ours with panniers and a BobYak trailer. What are the chances of that? We both took photographs to capture the moment.

We had a picnic while we waited for the ferry, crossed to the mainland, then followed the coast up to Lochilphhead at a steady pace in good weather for most of the way. Jen spotted heavy rain off to the side and decided that we were going to get caught in it. I told her not to be so negative, stating that it would probably pass us by. She was right, of course, and we got another soaking!

Once the tent was up the sun came out – ah well!

Distance for the day: 39.93 miles (plus the ferry ride)

Total distance: 800.2 miles

## **Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> August**

### **Lochgilphhead to Barcaldine**

It was pouring with rain when we woke and there was nothing to suggest that it was going to change so we just got on with breaking camp with the double problems of rain and midges. I guess that all the practice has made us reasonably efficient because we managed to be ready in good time despite the conditions. By now the ground was completely waterlogged and as we walked about the water went up through the cleat holes in our shoes so we started riding with soaking wet feet, and they stayed that way for the whole day.

A steady undulating ride got us to Oban where Tesco's once again provided us with lunch and provisions for the evening. A very steep climb out of Oban, and crossing the Connel Bridge, put us on the final thirteen miles to the C&C club site at Barcaldine, by Loch Creran. By the time we got there the sun was shining so we put the tent up and managed to dry it out. This is another campsite within a Victorian walled garden, very pleasant and sheltered. We planned to have a day off here and felt relaxed and content. Even the midge problem was mitigated to some degree by a slight breeze, which is all it takes to frustrate the little blighters in their quest to plague us.

Laundry and a bit of bike maintenance is all that we have to do tomorrow so we are looking forward to a lie-in and a day of relaxing. Bliss!

Distance for the day: 50.79 miles

Total distance: 850.99 miles

### **Monday 27<sup>th</sup> August                      Day off at Barcaldine**

Although this was a day for a few chores followed by relaxation it would have been remiss of me not to mention the attention afforded us by the people running the campsite. They were so good to us that we felt like royalty. We were provided with camp chairs, a flask of hot water complete with tea bags and coffee, and were even given hot quiche to supplement our rations. Nothing was too much trouble and we had a thoroughly enjoyable time here. Highly recommended!

### **Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> August                      Barcaldine to Fort Augustus**

The tone of the day was obvious as soon as we awoke to hear the rain hammering on the tent, and we broke camp with the expectation of another long wet ride. Fortunately, much of the ride as far as Fort William was on well surfaced Sustrans cycle paths, away from the traffic, with only short sections where we had to use the main road. We were already pretty wet, as the rain was both heavy and persistent, when I felt the need to warn Jen that we were about to get even wetter, as a “waterfall” was cascading off the steep hillside right onto the cycle path. There was no way to avoid it so we just rode straight through it; short but very wet!

The next hazard was indicated to us by a blue flashing light ahead while we were travelling on the main road. The heavy rain had caused a landslide and the road was covered in mud, rocks and water. Cars and lorries were taking it in turn to crawl slowly across the obstacle and all we could do was wait our turn. There was no way that we could have ridden across it and our only option was to push the bike while ankle deep in the muddy water; most unpleasant. We then spent a few minutes engaged in sock wringing.

The final insult came at a junction in the Sustrans path. As the path had been listed as the route to Fort William, and the signs at the junction indicated branches to various other destinations, the lack of a sign saying “Fort William” inferred that it must be, by default, straight on. Big mistake! We had gone two miles before it became clear that we were heading into Glen Coe, so we had to turn round and retrace our path, so four extra wet miles added to our day of hardships.

Once back on track we found a welcome café and managed to calm our frayed nerves over hot coffee and a bacon roll. What a morning!

Boosted by our snack we made good time for the twelve remaining miles to Fort William where, on arrival, the sun came out. Tesco’s again provided lunch and provisions for the evening and we steamed in the sunshine as we picnicked, but it didn’t last and we were soon re-joined by our companion, the rain, albeit lighter than before and, as we turned east towards Spean Bridge and Invergarry, we enjoyed the benefit of a tail wind. We enjoyed the afternoon’s ride as we were really flying along, reaching Invergarry earlier than expected. This had been our intended overnight destination but, as we were making such good progress, we had a quick coffee and pressed on to Fort Augustus, which offered better prospects for camping. We hoped to find a Fish and Chip Shop but didn’t, so it was haggis in the tent, a truly excellent meal after a long demanding day.

Distance for the day: 71.59 miles

Total distance: 922.58 miles

## **Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> August**

### **Fort Augustus to Dingwall**

They have vicious midges in Fort Augustus! And we had to endure another wet start, and it was up a very steep hill. Why are we doing this? It's supposed to be fun!

We had opted to take the road to Inverness on the eastern side of Loch Ness as it would be a much quieter road with little or no traffic. The first few miles were tough, with a lot of steep climbing, made worse by the heavy rain. Things improved later and we enjoyed some long downhill stretches, although coasting when soaking wet requires no physical effort so you get very cold.

We arrived in Inverness for a late lunch – guess where – yes at Tesco's. I remember reading some time ago that Inverness has more Tesco stores than anywhere else and is referred to by many as "Tesco Town". It works for me!

Inverness is regarded as the capital of the Highlands of Scotland, sitting at the eastern end of The Great Glen, where the River Nevis enters the Moray Firth. It is close to Culloden Moor, site of the famous Battle of Culloden of 1746, when Bonnie Prince Charlie, the Young Pretender Charles Edward Stuart, was soundly defeated.

Leaving Inverness we headed towards Dingwall in better weather. After about ten miles of excellent cycling the heavens opened again and we were forced back into wet weather clothes, uncomfortable but necessary. We sat and steamed in a café at Beauly before the final few miles to Dingwall, where the sun came out.

We got the tent up and did some much needed laundry, so dry clothes tomorrow, bliss! The next day's weather forecast was not good but with John O'Groats so close, nothing but disaster was going to stop us.

Distance for the day: 57.54 miles

Total Distance: 980.13 miles

## **Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> August**

### **Dingwall to Lairg**

There was heavy rain during the night but by morning the weather was fine with the prospect for a rare dry day of cycling. We had our customary uphill start towards Evanton but then enjoyed a delightful ride in sunshine with views over the Cromarty Firth. We were passed by a group of cyclists who were also doing LEJOG but they had support and were on lightweight bikes and carrying no luggage. Having chatted to us for a while they wished us well and sped off while we continued with our heavy load.

After Evanton we headed into increasingly remote country with a long climb followed by a long exhilarating descent. An unfortunate headwind was a nuisance and slowed us down but we felt good and our target was getting closer with each pedal stroke. Bonar Bridge, on the Kyle of Sutherland, provided a pub where we had a meal so that we wouldn't need to bother cooking in the tent. It also meant that we would have a spare meal on board as we entered some of the remotest country of the trip, where re-supply might be difficult.

On the outskirts of Lairg we stopped at the Tourist Information Centre for coffee and cake, then rode the last half mile to the campsite. A pleasant enough site with basic but adequate facilities and the cheapest of the trip so far.

Distance for the day: 40.69 miles

Total Distance: 1020.8 miles

## **Friday 31<sup>st</sup> August**

### **Lairg to Melvich**

It was a bitterly cold night with a crystal clear sky and a full moon. This is still the height of summer but we rose to a white frosty morning. My usual routine of mopping off the condensation from the tent differed from normal as I was wiping off ice instead!

We headed north, climbing a gentle gradient for many miles on a single track road. The map indicated that this was very isolated country and the reality matched the expectation. One of the few places

where we thought we might enjoy a coffee was the isolated Crask Inn, where we arrived at about 9am. The doors were open and there was evidence that people had eaten breakfast at some of the tables but, despite shouting and ringing the bell, no-one appeared so, disappointed, we carried on without the anticipated coffee. Some time later we reached the Altnaharra Hotel where coffee and cake were enjoyed.

Heading off again we soon branched off towards Bettyhill and, having seen virtually no traffic all morning, encountered lots of big 4x4s carrying rich toffs out for a day's shooting and fishing. None of those that we saw fishing seemed to be having any success. We also went through the regular decision making process of whether or not to don our wet weather gear, as the rain was starting to develop. Eventually the rain became heavy enough to force the decision so we arrived in Bettyhill hot and wet. There was a nice little café where we stopped for more coffee and also tucked into a huge baked potato with cheese, beans and salad, finishing off with apple pie and custard. While there another wet cycle tourist came in and, seeing us in our cycle clothing, asked if he could join us for lunch. He was an American and we spent an enjoyable time conversing with him about his and our various exploits. His beat ours hands down as he had cycle toured in many countries. He showed us some of his routes on his cell phone picture library, one of which was a complete circuit of the USA. Wow!

After a pleasant lunch we headed off east towards Melvich where we hoped to camp for the last time before reaching John O'Groats. It was a hilly ride into the wind but at least the rain had abated for a while. As we were putting up the tent at Melvich we were again subjected to a stair-rod example of Scottish rain. Never mind, we're used to it now!

Distance for the day: 60.21 miles

Total distance: 1081.0 miles

### **Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> September      Melvich to John O'Groats / John O'Groats to Dunnet**

We set off feeling a bit excited at the prospect of reaching our target today. The weather was reasonable, if a little windy. Thurso provided the necessary Tesco store but woe, woe, and thrice woe; no BLT sandwiches to be had! We scoffed an alternative with a hot coffee and, feeling good, we hammered down the road for the final few miles to John O'Groats, arriving there at 12:15pm. A couple who had seen us at the Balcardine campsite several days ago recognized us, or at least recognized our bike, and came over to say hello and well done, which was rather nice.

We took the obligatory photos to verify our arrival, got the required JOG stamp as another verification, and went to the café for lunch. Jen spotted "Pizza LEJOG" on the menu and we both decided that it couldn't be ignored so we ordered two, not realising that one would have fed both of us. Nevertheless we were pretty hungry and we managed to polish them both off.

While we were lunching the rain and wind had picked up and neither of us felt like staying to camp at John O'Groats; it's not the most inspiring location, especially in bad weather, so we toggled up and rode back the twelve miles to Dunnet, where we had seen a much better campsite. The rain and wind were appalling but we reached Dunnet in record time, and we were soaked! Fortunately the rain stopped but it remained windy. We didn't care; we were on a high because we had succeeded in our endeavour and no Scottish weather was going to dampen our spirits today!

Distance for the day: 50.17 miles

Total distance to John O'Groats: 1118.7 miles

Total distance: 1131.2 miles

### **Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> September      Dunnet to Bettyhill**

Well, our ambition to cycle from Land's End to John O'Groats has finally been fulfilled and the decision to continue the journey in the opposite direction has been made. As we are both feeling fit, and can think of no compelling reason to curtail our expedition, the journey continues, but to set the record straight from the outset, contrary to popular belief, the route back is not all downhill!

Our hope was to do a big day today and reach Lairg, as the only other camping option, other than a wild camp, was to use the dubious site at Bettyhill, which we had been lead to believe was not particularly good. Unfortunately the headwind that had frustrated us while travelling towards John O'Groats on this road had changed direction and was now blowing from the west, so the expected tail wind was instead another headwind. The wind and hills together foiled our plans for a big mileage day and we were reluctantly forced to end the day at Bettyhill.

Being Sunday the café that we had used on the way up was closed so, that pleasure denied, we booked in at the campsite which unfortunately lived up to its reputation. The view over the sea was the only redeeming feature but the facilities were dreadful. The only other tent belonged to some lads that were sampling the surfing beaches in the area; their opinions of the campsite matched ours and we were all keen to leave as quickly as possible the following morning.

Distance for the day: 39.41 miles

Total distance: 1170.6 miles

### **Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> September      Bettyhill to Lairg**

After a stormy night we gladly said farewell to Bettyhill, looking forward to a relatively easy day to Lairg. We still had to deal with an annoying wind but the rain held off until the last half dozen miles into Lairg. A mid-morning break at Altnaharra set us up for the long but gentle climb that we knew was to be rewarded with a similarly long and gentle descent.

On arrival at Lairg we stocked up with provisions and booked in at the camp site. Once the tent was up the rain stopped and we enjoyed a relaxing evening with a good tent meal.

Distance for the day: 46.51 miles

Total distance: 1217.1 miles

### **Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> September      Lairg to Dingwall**

With a relatively short day in prospect it was one that we could look forward to enjoying; after all it wasn't even raining when we got up. However the lack of rain was spoiled to some degree by a fierce wind that blew from the direction that we would be riding into. The wind was quite strong most of the time, punctuated with even stronger gusts, and we set off apprehensive about the potential for a miserable ride. As it turned out we managed to make fairly stable progress, albeit slowed considerably by the wind.

Bonar Bridge was a planned coffee stop but our 9am arrival preceded the café's opening time by an hour so we had to make do with the convenience store. While there we met a couple of cyclists on their way to John O'Groats. Using B&Bs for their overnight stops they looked so fresh and clean compared to the everyday campers that we had become.

The rest of the day was a steady grind of wind and hills which, although hard work, was quite enjoyable, at least until the final half dozen miles when the wind became even stronger. It became so bad that, as we came round one particular bend, a strong gust was almost successful in ejecting us from the road. We were so unnerved that we felt obliged to walk for a while as it was impossible to ride with any stability. We suffered two such instances like this before arriving in Dingwall.

Fortunately we had a nice sheltered spot on the campsite and the luxury of a day's rest tomorrow to recover from this short but taxing day. I should point out that, despite the day's trials, we managed to enjoy it. I guess we have become toughened by the daily routine and feel that we can now cope with whatever fate throws at us. We are indeed in fine spirits!

Distance for the day: 40.39 miles

Total distance: 1257.5 miles

### **Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> September    Day off in Dingwall**

We spent the day relaxing and filling up with calories in an attempt to mitigate the constant hunger that has become an all-embracing part of our lives. We also spent time working out some variations to the route through southern Scotland, trying to identify potential campsites at appropriate distances. We managed to achieve that aim, on paper at least, but time would tell! Cleaned and oiled the bike and basically just enjoyed a day of rest.

### **Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> September    Dingwall to Fort Augustus**

Within an hour of setting off, in true tradition, we had to stop to tog up in our rain clothes. We like to get an early start each day but the down side of this is that we often pass through towns before the cafes are open, and today this happened in Beauly, so we pressed on to Inverness before stopping for refreshments. Despite this being known as “Tesco-Town”, due to the abundance of Tesco stores, we could only find a Co-op store so that had to do. Having become used to using Tesco as our main source of food replenishment, we actually felt slightly disloyal not using them in “Tesco-Town”.

Fed and watered we made the decision to use the road to Fort Augustus on the north of Loch Ness rather than repeat the upward route. Any concern about problems from the traffic proved to be unnecessary as lorry drivers treated us with great respect, giving us plenty of space. A tiring ride out of Inverness into the wind got us to Drumnadrochit, one of Jen’s favourite place names, in time for lunch and, as a bonus, the rain stopped.

We didn’t have too much further to go to fort Augustus so we enjoyed a leisurely lunch and a friendly chat with a group of American tourists, eager to ask about our machine and expedition. Leaving Drumnadrochit we passed the ruin of Urquhart Castle, which dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Although a ruin it is still an impressive structure perched on a headland overlooking Loch Ness, and is well worth a visit.

We arrived in Fort Augustus reasonably early and sat in a pub drinking coffee before heading to the camp site. Near to where we pitched were two tents belonging to a couple of hikers. One of them came across to chat and it turned out that they too were from Cornwall, he from Polperro and his friend from Newquay. After he left for a shower his friend emerged from his tent. The look on his face was priceless when I said “Aren’t you from Newquay”, until I confessed that his friend had told me.

Distance for the day: 56.11 miles

Total distance: 1313.6 miles

### **Friday 7<sup>th</sup> September                      Fort Augustus to Ballachulish**

Another wet midgy start to the day but it dried up before we started riding towards Spean Bridge where, we were reliably informed, there was a good café. We had a good ride to that café and enjoyed a well-earned refreshment stop before continuing to Fort William for lunch.

Fort William is a magnet for hill walkers, climbers and tourists and the local businesses certainly know how to profit from this. We needed a canister of gas for the camp stove and one shop I tried wanted £9.99 for what we normally get for £6. I told them they could keep their gas and we found some elsewhere at a slightly less inflated price. Times may be hard for businesses but they should remember that times are also hard for their customers!

The weather had again turned wet when we arrived at the camp site at Ballachulish and again we were faced with finding a suitable lump of ground for the tent in a field that was waterlogged. Fortunately there was a hiker’s shelter right next to the tent where we could park the bike out of the rain. For anyone who might wonder why we didn’t sleep in the shelter, it is much warmer in a tent, as well as being midgy free.

Distance for the day: 50.99 miles

Total distance: 1364.6 miles

## **Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> September      Ballachulish to Luss**

Breaking camp was done in thick drizzle rather than rain and, as stated before, the ground was waterlogged so our feet got soaked. However by the time we left the weather was improving and the ride was great. We were entering Glen Coe, arguably the most famous of all Scottish glens. It is without doubt surrounded by stunningly beautiful scenery which is impossible to do justice to in words or photographs. You really need to go there to appreciate the magnificence and the atmosphere of the place.

Despite the beauty of the place it is notorious for the “Massacre of Glencoe” in 1692 when the Glen’s inhabitants, the MacDonald Clan, were killed. Thirty eight men were killed in their beds or trying to flee, and another forty women and children died of exposure in the harsh winter conditions after their homes were burned to the ground.

Our initial ride through the glen was inevitably uphill, but the gradient was not too severe and we made steady progress while gazing in wonder at the beauty around us. This was so worth the change to our original route and has to be a highlight of any cycle tour in Scotland. After climbing for several miles we were rewarded with an exhilarating descent for several more miles before starting another session of steady climbing and another exhilarating descent. Rannoch Moor was at its best, with patches of mist to give it atmosphere.

As we were approaching Bridge of Orchy a passing minibus slowed to our pace and an American voice shouted “hello”. As we looked up he pointed to his camera, asking if we minded having our picture taken. As we smiled in response at least four of the vehicle’s occupants raised their cameras and clicked. We were flying along at the time so I guess it looked pretty good.

A coffee break at Bridge of Orchy set us up for the next stretch to Tyndrum where we stopped at a very busy café, full of day trippers. We had a huge lunch to replace some of the many calories used for the morning’s climbs and then continued on flatter roads towards the camp site at Luss on the banks of Loch Lomond.

Distance for the day: 60.23 miles

Total distance: 1424.8 miles

## **Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> September      Luss to Ayr**

An early start on a Sunday morning meant that there was unlikely to be much traffic about and we were able to reach the Erskine Bridge with relative ease, helped by the lack of any real hills. We indulged ourselves at the Costa Café on the edge of Dumbarton before crossing over the bridge and heading to Greenock which we reached soon after.

Greenock has the biggest Tesco store that we had yet encountered, so we stopped to stock up for the evening meal and to refuel with calories. While waiting for Jen to do the shopping I chatted to various passers-by, one of whom said that he had seen us recently on the Isle of Arran; it was the bike that he recognised. Another elderly fellow reminisced about his own cycle touring exploits as a youth many years ago; a true kindred spirit and a pleasure to listen to.

As we headed away from Greenock and turned south we were confronted by a headwind that would force us to increase our work rate for the rest of the day. During a breather in Largs we were approached by a local who was speaking a sort of pigin German; for some reason he had assumed that we were German???. We quickly put him right, after which the conversation became more understandable.

The miles continued to clock up and it was clear that this was going to be one of our biggest mileage days. To make matters even tougher it started to rain heavily but, with only a few miles remaining, we made do with rain jackets and just let the rest get wet.

We were now on a major A-road in heavy rain, and were both getting tired, so we had a fairly miserable final six miles, arriving at the camp site just after 5pm. Not the best of sites but it would serve our purposes, and there was no way that we could have ridden any further, having done 85 miles. Jen said she had spotted a Premier Inn a few miles back; if I had seen it I might have been tempted. Never mind we are here now but I am at a loss as to how the Scottish tourist Board could award this site four stars. I don’t think I’ll give their ratings any credence in future.



Distance for the day: 85.1 miles  
Total distance: 1509.9 miles

### **Monday 10<sup>th</sup> September     Ayr to Carsphairn**

Today's first couple of miles into Ayr were negotiated in the early rush hour traffic so were fairly stressful but, having stocked up with food for the day, we were soon heading out into the country again. Our slow progress during the morning was down to our fatigue after yesterday's heavy mileage into a headwind and we were both struggling to maintain progress and enthusiasm. Nevertheless things improved and we rewarded ourselves with a refreshment break at a café in Dalmellington.

Full of fresh calories we headed out towards Carsphairn only to be stopped by a van driver who told us that there had been a serious accident on the road to Carsphairn and that the road would be closed for ages. He said we would need to look for another route. There is no other route!! We carried on and found a long queue of traffic and saw two badly smashed up cars. Riding to the front of the queue we asked a lady police officer what the score was and she told us that two cars had crashed in two independent incidents because of the greasy road surface, and that the road would be clear in about twenty minutes. Relieved at this news we waited and chatted to the nice police lady. We were allowed through quite a while before the bigger vehicles and were wished Bon-voyage by the whole police contingent.

As this was a short mileage day we arrived in Carsphairn quite early so whiled away a leisurely hour in the local tea shop before presenting ourselves at the B&B. This was the B&B that had been booked up on the northward journey but we had made sure to book ourselves in ahead of time for the southern journey, and we were really glad that we had as camping outside the Heritage Centre was not something that we wanted to repeat!

We were welcomed by Marian and Ian who run the Kirkholm Bed & Breakfast and we enjoyed a really pleasant stay in their care. After so much camping in pretty dire conditions this taste of comfort raised our bruised spirits considerably and set us up to continue our epic journey with renewed vigour. Oh, what a comfortable bed! And Jen got a great photo of a woodpecker from the bedroom window.

Distance for the day: 27.72 miles  
Total distance: 1537.7 miles

### **Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> September     Carsphairn to Annan**

I'd checked out the map for today and decided that the route was so straightforward that I could stow the map and just ride. Silly idea really and sure enough I missed a turnoff and we found ourselves heading to Castle Douglas. It didn't matter too much as the added distance was only a few miles and the route was pleasant enough with the added bonus of that rare commodity, good weather. As it turned out we had a most enjoyable morning's ride on good roads, arriving in Castle Douglas in time for a leisurely lunch stop.

Refilled with baked potatoes and coffee we headed off on designated cycle-route-7 with the expectation of a few tough hills, because designated cycle routes always seem to include tough hills! Never mind the hills, the road was quiet and the countryside pleasant so the enjoyment factor remained high.

Stopping for a rest after one of the hills, we were joined by another cyclist who told us that the rest of the road into Dumfries would be much flatter, which boosted our spirits. He asked us if we were looking forward to watching the Tour of Britain cycle race, but we were unaware of the significance of his question as we had not seen a newspaper or listened to a radio since starting our trip. It turned out that a stage of the Tour of Britain was scheduled to finish in Dumfries in about an hour and a half's time, and it was a sprinter's stage which one of our heroes, Mark Cavendish, was expected to win.

We pedalled on with renewed vigour, looking forward with relish to this unexpected bonus. As we approached the town we saw the kilometre countdown markers for the race and then the crowd barriers at the sides of the road. Then, as we rode the last few hundred yards into the town centre, the developing crowd cheered us, and the children waved their flags, as if we were celebrities. I just rode along with a cheesy grin on my face while Jen smiled and waved at our "fans". This was a one-off happening that couldn't have been planned for and will never be repeated. What a laugh!

We parked the bike and asked an official for some details of the race. While doing this there was a loud bang, like a gun going off. Oh no, not again! It was our trailer tyre exploding!

We had a spare inner tube for this wheel but no spare tyre; after all, it's only a bogey wheel and is not subjected to any drive or braking forces, so we won't need a spare tyre, will we?

I asked a convenient policeman, who had ignored the "gunshot", where I might find a bike shop and quickly followed his directions with the trailer wheel under my arm. What a great little shop, just like the old days; a small workshop with lots of bike bits all over the place. They quickly sorted me out with a new tyre and tube, and even fitted them for me. Once bitten, and all that, I bought a second tyre as a spare in case it happened again!

With our equipment fully functional again we watched the finish of the race stage which Mark Cavendish won. Jen managed to get a photo of the final lead out, with Bradley Wiggins leading Mark, who shot off his wheel to cross the line in first place. Magic!

We struggled through the dispersing crowd to get out of the town, stocked up with food at a Supermarket, and nailed the day's final miles to the Annan campsite, arriving at a respectable 5:30pm. What a great day!

Distance for the day: 60.9 miles

Total distance: 1598.6 miles

### **Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> September                      Annan to Shap**

The five miles from the campsite into the town of Annan were ridden in the familiar "shall we. shan't we" mode, regarding our waterproof clothing. The good weather that we had enjoyed yesterday was clearly a short-lived pleasure and today would prove to be far less pleasant.

Having filled up with calories in Annan we headed off to the English border after nineteen days in Scotland. We arrived in Carlisle just before the start of another stage of the Tour of Britain, so we again got caught up in the atmosphere, with the inevitable delay. We watched the bikes go past and then walked through the crowds, looking for a café. We had to walk as the crowds were so thick as to make riding impossible. We failed to find a café and, as we were making our way out of the town, the heavens opened, so we were forced to shelter and don our waterproofs before setting off towards Penrith.

During a lull in the rain we stopped to eat some lunch in a small hamlet that had seats under a tree on the village green. As we stood with a packet of tortilla wraps and a box of Dairylea cheese triangles, the heavens really opened and even the trees failed to protect us from the deluge. We were absolutely soaked to the skin, the Dairylea box resembled soggy papier-mache, and for the first time we both simultaneously felt our resolve falter as we were both fed up with being constantly cold and wet. The strain sometimes begins to tell, and this was one of those moments.

Whatever was to be the result of our sombre mood, we first needed to get somewhere, so we cracked on to Penrith. For a while the rain eased but then hammered down again. The rain came down faster than it could run off the road so the road was covered in huge puddles. We were so wet that we no longer cared and we just ploughed through the puddles, wet through to the skin.

Can you believe it? When we arrived in Penrith the sun came out!

Like drowned rats we went into a café and fed ourselves while contemplating what to do. The rest and warm food revived us sufficiently so that we felt ready to continue, so we went to the Tourist Information Office and sought information on possible Bed & Breakfast establishments in Shap. We made a booking at "The Hermitage" and suddenly the mental pressure lifted.

With only ten miles to go we set off and were amazed at the number of cyclists we saw going the other way. We stopped to help one of them who was struggling with a puncture, and he told us that they were all on an organised LEJOG with full support, so they weren't carrying any luggage; all they had to do was pedal. I think he said there were 500 of them.

The Hermitage proved to be a wonderful old 17<sup>th</sup> century house, full of charm and character, and the thought of not camping after such an awful day was enough to raise our spirits to previous high levels. Unfortunately there was no evening meal available at The Hermitage but our host recommended one of Shap's pubs so we went there. I think we went to the wrong pub because, although the food was OK, the service and the atmosphere were grim. This was the least friendly pub I have ever been in, with the most

apathetic barman on the planet. We ate and left! Cakes and coffee back at the B&B would be a good enough finish to the day; we were feeling good again.

Distance for the day: 57.65 miles

Total distance: 1656.2 miles

### **Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> September                      Shap to Clitheroe**

The Hermitage breakfast was huge! It was also top quality; a true English breakfast with fried everything, including home-made sausages. Surely enough calories to see us right for a while, although the first few uphill miles would see many of them burned off.

The tough climb was followed by a nice long descent which took us comfortably into Kendal where we purchased a map to give us an alternative route option that would avoid the road over the Forest of Bowland that we had used on the northward journey. That had been a hard road with no reward of a view because of the poor weather. Visibility today was also poor so why put ourselves through such pain again for no view? Coffee and cake in Kendal, with a free refill, set us up nicely for the next leg of our revised route and off we went.

Our next stop was Kirkby Lonsdale, a pretty little town where we stopped and lunched on some of the provisions that we were carrying. While there the weather took a turn for the worse and it was clear that the rest of the day would be ridden in steady rain. The remaining miles to Clitheroe were up and down all the way so we were happy when we finally arrived there.

A quick trip to the supermarket for tonight's meal and then a short ride to a very wet campsite. The warden said that the ground was so wet that there were very few areas suitable to camp on but they would make sure that we were found a patch of grass as they were reluctant to turn away anyone travelling under their own steam. (Take note Whitemead Park; shame on you!) The ground was pretty soggy but who cares, we got here after a demanding day and didn't fall behind schedule. Shower, dinner, chocolate, bed, contentment.

Distance for the day: 68.95 miles

Total distance: 1725.2 miles

### **Friday 14<sup>th</sup> September                      Day off in Clitheroe**

I woke at 5am and was about to start the usual routine until I listened to the rain hitting the tent, and the wind howling outside. It was enough to make me say to Jen:

"How do you feel about having a day off here?"

"OK" said she, so back to sleep we both went, not rising until 8:30am.

The rest day did us a power of good, giving us time to relax and to eat nice fresh food, lots of it, and also gave us time to work on our route revisions, identifying campsites at appropriate daily distances, where necessary.

### **Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> September                      Clitheroe to Acton Bridge**

What a difference the weather makes! 5am today and, although a little chilly, it was dry, and it looked set for the day.

The first part of the day saw us having to negotiate Blackburn, which had caused us so much trouble on the way up. This time though, we were better prepared, making sure that the satnav batteries were well charged. We got through Blackburn with no problems and carried on to the nice café at Tockholes for a refreshment stop. Bacon and sausage barm and a huge mug of coffee. Life is good!

The rest of the day was the unavoidable passage through the various small industrial towns that make up this part of the country. The terrain is actually much nicer than the map would suggest so we quite enjoyed it. The town of Leigh provided a Tesco store for picnic supplies and then the rest of the day gave us

an enjoyable ride to Acton Bridge in sunny conditions and no hills! The only downside was the awful state of the road surface, potholes galore demanded high concentration levels.

Woodbine Cottage again provided camping facilities and we ate at the pub next door.

Distance for the day: 57.55 miles

Total distance: 1782.8 miles

### **Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> September      Acton Bridge to Montford Bridge**

A fairly uneventful ride today through pleasant country with only gentle hills and reasonable weather, except for a slight but irritating headwind. Whitchurch had the necessary Tesco store for a food stop and we are probably being unfair to the good people of Whitchurch, but they all seemed a bit on the grumpy side. We wish them well and hope that their day becomes more cheerful.

Just outside Burlton we met a cyclist heading north on a pannier laden bike, so we stopped for a chat. He was on his way to John O'Groats and, although clearly enthusiastic, seemed very disorganised. He had done no real planning or preparation and was relying entirely on a book of someone else's trip-account for his route and overnight stops. He was keen to pick our brains about where we had been and what camping options might be of use to him. He made copious notes in his book and seemed well pleased. We voiced our concerns about how cold he might find it further north but he seemed unperturbed and carried on, a happy, if scatter-brained, LEJOGer.

We carried on to a relatively early finish (2:30pm) and a leisurely camp at Montford Bridge.

Distance for the day: 51.29 miles

Total distance: 1834.0 miles

### **Monday 17<sup>th</sup> September      Montford Bridge to Presteigne**

Our revised route for this leg turned out to be really hilly compared to the route up so the change was probably not the best idea. Well it wasn't all bad and despite the hills the scenery was great, rural England at its best.

There is a very special food shop that we happened upon on the way up, Hignetts of Pontesbury, and we stopped there again today for a high class picnic and the best bacon rolls ever. Another refreshment stop at Bishop's Castle made for another pleasant interlude. One thing we have definitely become really good at during this trip is "the refreshment break" and we are now masters of it; practice is important and the rewards are most satisfying.

The afternoon continued with more hills but at least the weather was kind to us and we arrived at Presteigne early enough to enjoy a relaxed evening.

Distance for the day: 45.53 miles

Total distance: 1879.6 miles

### **Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> September      Presteigne to Frampton**

A good road got the miles ticking away at a fair rate to start with but some long hills later were a sting in the tail. Short sharp showers were again the order of the day, for the first few hours at least, but the afternoon weather was quite nice.

Hereford was the first major town so we stocked up with food and then headed out towards Ross-on-Wye. This all sounds straightforward but the traffic in Hereford was horrendous and we ended up leaving on a different road to the one we really wanted, meaning that we had heavy traffic all the way to Ross. Although heavy the traffic was well behaved and caused us no problems.

Ross to Gloucester was the next stretch on roads that I had cycled a lot in my youth, more years ago than I care to remember, and I had forgotten about the long hills out of Ross, but after those it was an excellent ride. We were on a revised section of our route now and had called on our son's help to identify a suitable campsite around Frampton-on-Severn, as we had no internet access while travelling. He found us one at Apple Tree Farm, where we arrived at 5pm; and excellent site with good facilities.

Distance for the day: 73.37 miles

Total distance: 1952.9 miles

### **Wednesday 19 September      Frampton to Cheddar**

We had decided to stay on the main A38 for most of the day and, as far as Bristol, we made good progress. We found a pub, the Mason's Arms, just before Bristol, that was offering breakfasts and we couldn't resist. Coffee and a big fry-up did us a power of good and set us up for the rest of the day. While there a collection of old American cars appeared in the car park and all the owners came in for breakfast. I guess it was some sort of enthusiast club; all the cars were immaculate!

Staying on the A38 should have got us through Bristol without problem but all of a sudden the A38 signposts ceased and we were left with the satnav and the sun for direction. Needless to say the one-way traffic systems confused the picture but we managed to get through the town relatively unscathed, and eventually the A38 signs appeared again and we were soon back in rural surroundings.

We turned off the A38, heading for the Cheddar Camping and Caravan Club Site, and had stopped at a junction to check the map when a car full of youths shouted abuse at us so I waved my annoyance at them. A few minutes later they returned and pulled up alongside us, clearly looking for an argument. It seemed that they had taken exception to the fact that we had stopped on the junction and, as far as they were concerned, were in the way, even though we were right at the edge of the road. I pointed out that they were now stopped in the same place and presented a far bigger obstruction than we possibly could. The stream of foul language that this generated from them, clearly a substitute for reasoned argument, destroyed any credibility that they might otherwise have had. I remarked how proud their mothers must be of them and suggested that they should leave us alone. They drove off at speed, still shouting abuse. I guess they felt they were "really 'ard".

Although we didn't go up Cheddar Gorge the road we took ran sort of parallel to it, so was long and steep. We rode some and walked some, arriving at the campsite at a respectable 4pm leaving plenty of time for a relaxing evening. C&C site so good facilities.

Distance for the day: 50.22 miles

Total distance: 2003.2 miles

### **Thursday 20 September      Cheddar to Sampford Peverell**

It had rained during the night, the sort of rain that is pleasant to listen to when you are snuggled up in a cosy sleeping bag, but it now looked set for a fine day to come.

Normally we have a little moan each day when we set off because there is invariably a hill very near the start. Although we moan about it, it does at least have the benefit of warming us up. Today however was different insofar as the initial hill was down instead of up and was also long and steep. Yes we started the day with a descent of Cheddar Gorge which was scenically spectacular but, as we were just coasting, it made us very cold. The descent took us into the village of Cheddar, which has been a centre of human settlement since Neolithic times and is famous the world over for its cheese.

Once we were back on the A38, bearing in mind we were now back on the Somerset Levels, we tore along flat roads with no wind to impede us; it really felt easy. Hoping to find somewhere around Bridgwater for a refreshment break we were well pleased to see a sign reading "Ollie's Café – All Day Breakfast". Our Grandson Oliver will be dead chuffed with that!

On went the brakes and in we went for a coffee and, well why not, a fried breakfast.

Staying on the A38 all day made for really easy navigation and we arrived at the Sampford Peverell campsite at an unprecedented 2:45pm so we relaxed with ice cream, cakes, tea etc. The end is so close now that we are actually starting to feel excited. Barring a catastrophe, three more days should mark the completion of our journey.

Distance for the day: 51.12 miles

Total distance: 2054.3 miles

## **Friday 21<sup>st</sup> September**

### **Sampford Peverell to Bude**

We knew that today was going to be long and quite hilly and I think that, with this in mind, we probably pushed the pedals a bit harder than was really necessary, so by the end of the day's ride we were pretty well worn out.

The first milestone was Crediton, where we stopped for refreshments and then just followed the main road through Copplestone, Bow, Hatherleigh, Holsworthy, and into Bude. The hills were expected and made us work hard, but at least there were exhilarating downhill sections to compensate.

Somewhere between Bow and Hatherleigh we were met by our son, who had come out on his motorbike to look for us. It was an unexpected and pleasant surprise, giving our high spirits a further boost, and for the next few miles he popped up at random locations with his camera to take shots of us in action.

We had hoped to eat at the Bickford Arms at Brandis Corner but arrived after they had stopped serving food, so we made do with what food we had on board before tackling the final miles to Bude, arriving at 4pm with a huge home cooked meal and our own bed to look forward to.

Distance for the day: 63.69 miles

Total distance: 2118.0 miles

## **Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> September    Bude to Fraddon**

A straightforward day today on familiar roads so we knew where we would need to work hard and where we could relax. It was a bit chilly but at least it wasn't raining and we soon warmed up on the hills and were ready for our first break in Camelford where we relaxed for a while in a café.

Camelford to Wadebridge was a great ride, especially through the Allen Valley, a twisting road through the trees where we flew along at high speed, thoroughly enjoying ourselves before arriving in Wadebridge in time for lunch.

Wadebridge is normally a very quiet place but today it seemed quite vibrant with lots of people about making the most of the sunshine which has been in such short supply throughout the summer. In a small square we found a café with tables outside and relaxed again over a long lunch, as we had plenty of time left to get to Fraddon where we had booked into a Premier Inn for the final night of the trip. No more camping for us!

We arrived at Fraddon at 2:30pm and relaxed for the rest of the day. The staff at the Premier Inn gave us a ground floor room and allowed us to keep the tandem in the room, so its security was assured. A good meal at the Brewer's Fayre restaurant, next door, and all's well with the world!

Distance for the day: 43.3 miles

Total distance: 2161.3 miles

## **Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> September    Fraddon to Land's End**

Having slept well and enjoyed an "All-you-can-eat" breakfast we dressed in our waterproof clothing for the final day of the trip. The weather was wet and miserable but it wasn't going to dampen our spirits today and we would happily take whatever it threw at us.

The rain stayed heavy all day but we hoped to make fast progress by staying on the main A30 all the rest of the way. The theory was that, as it was Sunday and the weather was bad, the traffic would be light. That theory proved to be ill-founded and the traffic was heavy but didn't really bother us. Against all the odds we actually had a tail wind so we just pedalled and ate up the miles, even if we were soaked.

A Costa Café appeared near Redruth and we sat and steamed while enjoying our favourite Costa Americano and triple chocolate muffin before going back out into the rain and hitting the road for Penzance. We made such good time that we stopped again in Penzance and killed some time over another coffee as our son Christopher would not be arriving at Land's End to collect us until about 2pm.

The final few miles to Land's End were up and down in ever increasing rain and the wind had increased and was now very gusty, so the riding that had been so good all day became quite hard, a real sting

in the tail. Nevertheless we arrived at the finish at 1:50pm, not caring about the awful weather. We had done it, Land's End to John O'Groats and back again, had amazed ourselves, and felt on top of the world!

Christopher arrived and we loaded the tandem onto his car, not without difficulty as the wind was really strong. The drive home to Bude made us realise the magnitude of what we had achieved; did we really ride that bit in just two days?

Distance for the day: 46.28 miles

**TOTAL DISTANCE: 2207.6 miles**

## **Epilogue**

This really has been a very special journey and, although very hard on occasions, I have no regrets about undertaking it. We were unfortunate to have had to endure what seemed like an unfair proportion of wet and windy weather which at times came close to breaking our resolve to continue, especially on the return leg of the journey. However, on reflection, the harsh conditions were just part of the story and, in a perverse kind of way, made our final achievement even more gratifying than it would have been if the weather had been more favourable.

This was a tandem tour which, by definition, involves two people. I want to pay tribute to Jen, my wife and trusty stoker who, throughout the whole journey, pushed herself, probably beyond her expected limits of physical endeavour. She was the one who always insisted that we press on rather than fall short of a day's target. We each sort of evolved a set of routine chores that made the camping work efficiently, even though the weather often made it far from pleasant.

We both had high and low points during the trip but, even when we were both a little edgy, I think we helped each other to conquer our doubts, leading to our ultimate success.

Thanks Jen for making this expedition a success – I'm proud of you!

**THE END**