



Introduction:

After years happily meddling about on bikes early retirement has allowed me to expand my range of cycling activities and look for more challenging rides. Recent trips to the Dolomites and mountains of northern Spain saw an improvement in my climbing abilities and stamina. A ride from southern France to Tuscany and back took me up some of the most attractive climbs of all, including Ventoux and Alpe d'Huez, and gave me experience of cycling big distances alone. I've long wanted to complete a double end to end cycle ride and I now had the time and the fitness to attempt it. The difficulties getting to the beginning and back from the end can be solved simply by completing a double. I live in York, roughly halfway between the two, so starting and finishing in York became the obvious solution. I also wanted to visit places that have a personal connection for me and planned a route that linked regions, towns and villages with a particular meaning so that this became both a challenge and a heritage ride. Why anyone would want to do such a ride was well expressed by Ernest Hemingway:

"It is by riding a bicycle that you learn the contours of a country best, since you have to sweat up the hills and coast down them. Thus you remember them as they actually are, while in a motor car only a high hill impresses you, and you have no such accurate remembrance of country you have driven through as you gain by riding a bicycle".

6 May 2015

Day 1:

York to Derby 99 miles, 679m ascent, 12.6 mph average

Up at 7.30 for usual breakfast of porridge after a pot of coffee in bed with E. I'd been preparing for this ride for months and now simply wanted to be off. Everything had been checked and sorted weeks before, bike stripped and re-built, maps and route cards prepared and everything packed. Left home at 8.10 to meet a friend who'd offered to guide me to Doncaster on the Sustrans route. It wasn't cold but there was a strong wind which didn't ease all day, sometimes severely, and for most of the day blowing from the south, against the direction of travel. We made our way to the Solar System route out of York and down to Selby, with some rough roads and impatient drivers – typically, lorry drivers show the most routine consideration for cyclists, exemplified by the skip driver in York who reversed 2 feet to allow us through the rush hour traffic. The Sustrans route follows an old railway line, small lanes, waterways and bridleways and even goes round an old airfield. Everything verdant green,

masses of flowers, including a field of cowslips. Birdlife abundant, goldfinches everywhere, their bright colours flashing by in almost every hedgerow.

Eventually we arrived at Bentley and time for S to catch a train back to York and me to start the journey. The route meanders around, probably 5 or 7 miles further than the direct route, but well worth it. The waterways were a real treat, from earlier economic times, probably now used mostly for leisure. We stopped at a sandwich stop just outside Selby. Simple, but filling – two friendly women who made up tuna rolls and gave us free tea and coffee when they heard where I was going. A place to go back to, two decent people.

Doncaster coincided with the first route-finding challenges, the first hills and the first rain. After a brief moment of panic at the thought of doing this alone, worked out where I was and got on the correct road. The route directions painstakingly put together over the weeks before the trip turned out to be accurate and the best guides. Followed these to Sprotborough, not the most appealing name, but an attractive village with appealing architecture. Churches invariably constructed of old stone, interesting and attractive. The bottom of the hill took me over a pair of old bridges and up a short climb complete with two hairpin bends and not too steep to be unpleasant. Followed series of villages with stone-built buildings, not quite what I expected in South Yorkshire, as well as the more expected WMCs and old Miners Welfare premises, sadly too often dilapidated, boarded up or ruined.

Some very pleasant villages, some with French-sounding names and even French-looking architecture. Just south of Old Edlington I tried to shelter behind a road sign on the B6376 so heavy was the wind and rain. Found cafe at Laughton Common where stopped for 30 minutes, damp but fine sitting on bin-liner out of the wind and rain. Steadily wound way south, hard work in the wind, at times desperately so, especially at the top of exposed hills. Reported to be 45 mph and I wouldn't argue with that. Gradually the wind eased, moved round rather than stopping, but still hard work. As approached Sutton in Ashfield route-finding especially difficult but eventually found way through, on to Ironville, what a lovely name, a rough track along the old canal and up to Codnor where route finding eased, apart from one minor hiccup before getting onto the B-road to Derby and into the city centre and the basic hotel. Meal at Nepalese restaurant and conversation with a German tourist who was en route to the Peak District, Glasgow and various whisky centres, interesting company. Now back in hotel, bike not yet cleaned (briefly lost D lock key, big scare), but time to finish log, listening to radio on this wonderful phone, sorting, then bed, read and sleep.

“After your first day of cycling, one dream is inevitable. A memory of motion lingers in the muscles of your legs, and round and round they seem to go. You ride through Dreamland on wonderful dream bicycles that change and grow”.

H.G. Wells, *The Wheels of Chance*

Day 2:

Derby to Stow, 81 miles, 838m ascent, 13.2 mph (Election Day)

The weather had changed markedly: little wind, bright sunshine and warm, although some dark clouds visible. Briefly cleaned and lubed bike before loading up and setting off. Breakfast was a modest 'continental' affair and hotel appears to be mostly occupied by people working in the area, some on night shifts. Leaving Derby could not be easier, go south following sense of where to go and then signs appeared for the A road and directions to Melbourne by B road. Children on their way to school but few signs of electors at the empty polling stations. Signage good everywhere in Derby, soon over the big exterior roads and onto attractive smaller roads with stone walls and attractive river bridges. I stopped at Melbourne, apparently the original place of that name and found a perfect, old-fashioned cafe, looking unchanged from the 1950s, including the chintz table cloths, the old signs, the picture rail and cornice. Given it was just after 9.00 it had a surprisingly steady flow of customers, two broad

types, older men, catching up with each other ('I've only 2 catheters left, I need to get some more'), looking after young children because the nursery was closed for the election; and young mothers, either with young children, or without, and all came in for cooked breakfasts, certainly not designer coffee. Actually, the cooked breakfast was very good and very good value, as were the almond slices, the coffee being less memorable. This was a warp in time.



Welcome Café, Melbourne

The whole village had something of this feel, with attractive buildings and architecture, then cycling into the gorgeous countryside that is Leicestershire. Attractive countryside and villages getting to the start of the Fosse Way, some interesting names, like Aston Flamville, and finally along Bumble Bee Lane to where I joined the Foss Way.



The Fosse Way was not quite what I hoped it would be: it might be an old straight road, but it's not quiet or hardly used. There were lots of signs warning of accident risk, listing numbers of casualties each mile or two, not what you want to read when on a bike. The speed at which many drove along this stretch of road provided the explanation of why there are so many casualties. There were some bottlenecks and long tailbacks, leading to impatience and crazy manoeuvres. The Roman approach to building roads in straight lines may have been an effective demonstration of their ability, simply following up and down hill sides, regardless of the terrain, but definitely not cycle friendly. I thought today would be a bit easier, but ended up doing a lot of ascent, not a quiet day, and the wind (and showers) occasionally lashed up from the south to remind me of yesterday's purgatory. Still, the countryside was lush and green, and everywhere was bursting with growth. I stopped at a farm cafe, quite a big concern, with a very full car park, but didn't stay long because it had none of the feel of somewhere like Melbourne and left after a bowl of soup. Actually, the Fosse Way went on for a bit too long for me, getting busier the further I went and the hills did not diminish – indeed, the longest literally took me up to Stow on the Wold (I now understand it's name) where I was staying at the attractive YHA hostel, along with a late-arriving party of teenage rugby players.

Day 3:

Stow to Bristol, 59 miles, 476m ascent, 14.2 mph

This was something of a planned easier day, ahead of the big days to come. Woke early, feeling reasonably ok, but rusty when got up. Waited for breakfast at 7.30, ate quickly and went to get bike. One of the benefits of arriving early night before, and with a pleasant garden, was the time to properly clean and sort out bike – worth doing, 2 days of rain and muck getting in all the gears. Wet wipes quickly removed dirt and road debris, lubed chain and locked away. For supper went to nearby Co op and bought pizza for supper. Packed up bike and was away for 8.15, feeling little taut early on but fairly quickly began to go better. Unfortunately, the two metal straps fixing the rack to the seat stays broke, meaning the rack rolled backwards and hit the road. I was able to bend the bits of metal round the P clips, tie tight with zip ties and carry on, stopping periodically to check ok. Cirencester 19 miles from Stow, and only 9 from where the incident occurred, so hoped would last. The smartphone told me there were at least 3 bike shops in the town, decided to avoid Halfords and went to the Independent Bike Shop who were able to effect a good repair. They also obtained excellent coffee from the café next door who make them a unique and very strong brew. Stupidly, I was concerned about the metal holding up when I fitted the rack but I didn't replace the fittings – my mistake, but sorted now.

Left Cirencester on another A road, able to go faster now and body beginning to get into gear. Seems to take me 3 days to get into the daily routine, the need to eat frequently and body learn to recover, like it now takes me 20 miles to warm up for a ride. Anyway, road became level, mostly, and through Tetbury, another gorgeous Gloucestershire town of old buildings, wisteria and Range Rovers. Also had particularly fine public conveniences, the gradual loss of which is a growing problem for long distance cycling. As I approached Westonbirt Arboretum so the attractiveness of the buildings, the lushness of the scenery and the scale and variety of trees increased. I had been advised not to eat there because of the expense, but a simply stunning place, somewhere we visited occasionally with our children in years gone by.



Westonbirt Arboretum, Gloucestershire

I now moved onto quiet white and B roads and one of the best bits of the trip so far. Village after village of old, attractive Cotswold stone buildings, old churches, schools, and always an abundance of sweet smelling wisteria. Stopped at lovely café in Sherston where group of cyclists outside – turns out they were on a charity ride and good choice for a stop.



Village view, Gloucestershire

Badminton was nearby and must be due an event because signs everywhere. Eventually crossed M4 on a very busy road, before moving onto tiny roads and Cycle Route 17. Again, virtually deserted, very attractive scenery, lot of downhill and body now up to rushing uphill as well. Came into Pucklechurch and decided to take direct route into Bristol. This brought me onto the Bath – Bristol

cycle route, an old railway line, and simply the best I've been on, 8 miles into the centre of Bristol, well surfaced, very well used and a joy. Usual problems route-finding the last mile, would not have managed without smartphone maps – Bristol not simply the attractive city it was in 1970s, now uber-cool, full of bars, cafes and restaurants. Many cyclists, shared pavements, well signed, a good place to cycle in. Ate a lot and took a long walk around Clifton and the centre with very fond memories of university days here in the 1970s. I also stocked up well with cereal bars.

“Cycle tracks will abound in Utopia”. H. G. Wells

Day 4:

Bristol to Okehampton, 97 miles, 1475m ascent, 12.7 mph

Planned to be the first of the long days. It was. Breakfast at 7.30, talking with someone from north east who was motor-cycling to Marazion, aiming to get there tonight via the A39 – what a sensible plan. Getting out of Bristol could not have been easier, over a bridge, to St Mary Radcliffe church, picked up the A38 and followed out to the airport. Unfortunately, had not taken in about 300 m of ascent, and the wind had also returned, probably not at 40 mph but certainly well into the teens, if not as hard as 20 mph, straight from the south west, exactly the direction of travel, so immediately a hard cycle. Now stopping each hour, eating (something) and drinking. Very pleasant hill into the Mendips beyond Churchill and with Shipham at the top. Sheltered from the wind by the woodland, but shortly gave way to incessant wind that hounded me from there and across the Somerset Levels where there was no respite and what should have been easy 15 mph territory became hard 12 mph terrain. Through Highbridge, to Bridgwater and then onto Taunton where stopped for tuna rolls, a coffee and rest, 43 miles.

Moved onto Wellington and, shortly afterwards, turned off the A38 onto the quiet lanes that lead to Tiverton. Cycling heaven, even the hills are a pleasure, along narrow lanes between deep hedgerows, all with an abundance of flowers and grasses. The road meanders downhill to Tiverton, past Blundell's School, a pleasant enough town to stop in, but today I chose to go on, really liking the road to Bickleigh by the river and looking forward to the climb up and over to Crediton.

Slightly more up than I recalled but always enjoyable. Interestingly, Crediton had no open cafes on the main street at 3.30 on a Saturday afternoon. Eventually went to Tesco Express where bought more cereal bars, a drink and a banana from a friendly, chatty young assistant, quickly consumed and on way again. Route finding from Crediton easy, follow to Yeoford, Hittisleigh then Whiddon Down. Names like 'Yeoford' are better heard than read and need the local Devon accent with the extended 'o' sound to really sound right. Approaching the area of the second part of my childhood it was as if the voice in my head developed a Devonian inflexion. It was quite hard, with a lot of ascent, but eventually came through to Whiddon Down after following the gorgeous Devon lanes with their red soils pushing through and, in places, red sandstone outcrops edging the lanes.



Deep-cut lane west of Crediton

Rather more up than down to Okehampton, it seemed to me, and best part of 1500m of ascent. Waitrose provided instant gratification – sandwiches, soup, ready meal and more, some eaten right outside the shop, the rest brought back to the YHA hostel and cooked there. Bike cleaned and lubed and locked away. Showered, cooked meal and now sorted. Place full of 10 Tor's parents, complete with modern technology so they could track exactly where their offspring are. They're also dissecting the election result – I'm trying not to listen. Tomorrow meet Mick F, someone at school with my brother and who I've not seen since 1964, to ride for a few miles from just west of Okehampton. Will be a tough day but hope fine – and hope the wind will then blow me northwards.

Day 5 Okehampton to Sennen, 107 miles, 2125m ascent, 12.3 mph

This was always going to be a hard ride and so it proved. Usual cooked breakfast at YHA, very pleasant, and friendly staff, even if the old railway station is tired and run-down. Okehampton was the closest rail station for much of my childhood and I remember termly journeys to deposit and collect brothers on their way to boarding school, before even this link was terminated at Exeter. 10 Tors parents were early risers and clearly some find tracking their teenagers trying because some said they had to go for a run to de-stress – didn't quite get that. Immediately downhill, then turned uphill and the wind started, not more than 20 probably but was to be pretty constant and only eased when hidden in the Cornish lanes or, very occasionally, when the route deviated. It is tedious, going on about the wind, but so is riding in it for several days. Within 3 miles I'd done 300 m of ascent – Devon and Cornwall are reputed to be the hardest parts of any end to end, and so this was proving. The hill also took me into the mist, the combination of wind and mist cooling me and I stayed 'cooled' all day as the wind didn't relent. But, the old A30 is a relatively little known treat, a wide old A road, reasonably surfaced and practically deserted. After 10 miles I met Mick just where he said he'd be, sheltering in a bus shelter. A rather distinctive character, still with the lovely Wigan 'burr' in his voice, clearly obsessed with bikes (who isn't?), cycling and all things cycling, he was good company, a strong cyclist and full of interesting stories. His bike was an immaculately maintained Mercian Vincitore (the fancy lugs one), complete with Campagnolo Chorus and Brooks Team Professional, a brass bell and an up to date Garmin mapping system. He also wore a Mercian jersey and brown leather cycling shoes. He was a lovely companion and extremely knowledgeable. We talked a little about my brother, St Michael's primary in Wigan and quite a lot about him and things he has done, and the miles whizzed by, soon just short of 40 and time for us to part. We took the B road south of Launceston and then the white road up to Minions and then down, for miles, across Bodmin Moors south eastern side – it really was great cycling. Mick descended like a pro, with me trying to stay with him, he wasn't slow in ascent either, nor did the hills stop him talking as I struggled to breathe, let alone talk, and stay

with his wheel. Gave usual cyclist's 'modest' account of his cycling, 'not done much this year, not fit, etc', whereas I justified my lack of *vitesse*, to myself, with the obvious need to conserve energy with many more days to come. He told me numerous tales, including how he built the wheels he was riding, various crashes he had had, and we prattled on about families and variously put the world to rights: I could go on, but a lovely man and very kind to meet me and keep company.

We parted at the main A road, me to go to Lostwithiel ('oh, that'll take you up Lostwithiel hill' said Mick – whenever a hill has its own name you know you're in for some fun – or pain: Simon Warren would approve), St Austell and then Truro, soon after which I'd take the little lanes down to Goldsithney and Marazion. Turns out a massive motor cycle ride was taking place today, so for company as I braved the hill were literally hundreds of what I thought were poorly silenced motor bikes – in fact, a memorial ride, perfectly organised and marshalled and testament to the good will of so many everyday people. The A road meant no route finding problems but was sometimes very busy and an endless stream of long, draggy hills, up and down, and occasionally I passed stationary motorcycles – their lack of silencers clearly indicating a more general lack of maintenance. Good lunch stop at a garden centre on edge of St Austell. The hills continued all the way beyond Truro and I was relieved to turn off eventually onto the familiar small lanes heading for Porkellis and Nancegollan, lovely names and with fond memories of a family group on an earlier end to end ride. Actually, my unease about moving onto the small lanes with only large scale map was entirely misplaced as signage pretty good, helpful locals and, best of all, the lanes had high banks or walls which meant I was sheltered from the wind and the hills, although often sharp, were not long, so sped through, going past Godolphin House, a favourite place to visit for E and I, then to Leedstown and down to Goldsithney and onto Marazion.



Godolphin House

I couldn't resist taking photo of bike with St Michael's Mount in background from Marazion.



St Michael's Mount from Marazion

On to Long Rock and food stop, then through Penzance and the final, not easy, 10 miles to just short of Land's End and a very well equipped and comfortable hostel complete with good food provisions, fruit and cereals. Group of 4 setting off tomorrow to JOG, anxious to know my plans and schedule. Couldn't remember exactly how many days planned, so couldn't tell them. I next saw them riding north on their final leg to JOG just as I was going south so only half day difference. In the end didn't go to chip shop or the pub, settling for bowl of porridge and a relax. Tomorrow not quite so far and the wind promises to blow me all the way to Holsworthy. Ha, that would be something.

Day 6

Land's End to Holsworthy, 100 miles, 1823m ascent, 11.7 mph

Rose promptly, breakfasted on porridge, cereal and coffee, tried to dry clothes that had stayed wet overnight, lubed and packed bike and set off at 7.50 for Land's End, probably little more than half mile away. Strong winds all night, 20 mph, and heavy, damp sea mist. Very gloomy at the End, handful of people there to meet relatives about to embark: for some reason, they'd heard about my ride ('oh, are you the guy who's ridden down from York and going up to John O'Groats?'). Anyway, few quick photos, not much visible, fog horn (more of a siren than a horn) sounding out regularly, then off.



Land's End first thing

Felt sluggish for first few miles, in spite of the following wind, little disconcerting, but probably the legacy of the previous day's excessive efforts of mileage, ascent and the wind. Mick later wrote to me that he was completely knackered, and he did 60, the last 20 of which saw him blown back to Gunnislake, and required 2 pints in the pub and full Sunday roast to recover. Anyway, I gradually warmed up (the wind has strong cooling effect, whether from front or rear and I was troubled feeling cold all day today in the wind, even following, and even with sun at some points) and was soon whizzing past Penzance, through Long Rock and then the delightful cycle path and lanes through to St Erth and Hayle. I took a photo of the finger post near Trevair, a campsite we'd been going to since mid-1980s and with a lifetime of memories to cherish.



Finger post near St Erth

Coming into Hayle I was horrified to see the view filled up by a concrete monstrosity called Asda – why does everywhere have to have a 'superstore', impacting on local businesses and leaving empty

shopfronts or charity shops? I went to Warrens bakers, claiming to be oldest Cornish pasty maker anywhere, where I bought a pasty, a sausage roll and a flap jack then cycled to a deserted Gwithian Towans for second breakfast. The pasty really was delicious, and I don't normally like them, so the best I've ever eaten, warm, delicious, and so was the sausage roll and flapjack – and the setting? Peerless. Lay down on the grass, clear blue sky, fierce surf, privilege to be alive.



Gwithian Towans

Back to the cycling, followed the cliff road up past the two cafes, on to Portreath, wonderful weather and following wind, following road round and ending up going down to Porthtowan, not quite as intended because very steep hills in and out but, so what? Eventually came through to Blackwater and the start of the road to Newquay. Previous times using this road have seen it quiet but today seemed to go on a long time and lots of traffic so relieved to turn off just beyond Quintrells Down and meander across to St Columb Major. The lanes are the delight of Cornish cycling, often linked to cycling routes / Sustrans, and with good reason. Soon made it through to St Columb, don't think have visited before, like an ancient hill top village, all small lanes, close together houses all huddled together. Circled through it several times trying to work out how it was put together and where anything was, before venturing into an elderly-looking fish and chip shop called Pop's Plaice, run by a man from Reading, still with his accent, who'd been there for 30 years after childhoods working on his uncle's farm and helping in his uncle's chip shop (not sure whether same uncle or different one). Very little custom, saw one other in the hour I was there (I needed a rest) but served delicious fish (plaice) and chips, complete with mushy peas, coke and coffee. The fish was flown in from Iceland and Greenland, cheaper (and better) than local fish, he assured me. Appears the Russian factory ships are responsible for decimating local fishing stocks and encouraging local fishermen to sell to them, with money, cigarettes and vodka. I have climbed a number of times with Russians and I have some understanding about how vodka features in their world. Pop told me how St Columb Major has declined in the 30 years he has been here: pubs shutting down, whole range of shops, butchers, newsagents, shutting down, to be replaced with nothing. The by-pass which stops traffic getting stuck in the narrow streets also means that traffic doesn't stop and people aren't buying local goods. Factory units built at great cost go unfilled until big brewing company offers to take on 5 year lease with significant commercial privileges: the council had no choice but to agree. So, built at great cost, not attracting development of local business and losing money with contract to big multi-national: Cornwall may have great beauty but it has suffered terrible economic decline.

Said goodbye to Pop, enjoyed the conversation with this friendly but slightly world-weary chippy and set off on what might be an awkward link route. In practice was another joy, following the planned route, easily, lovely lanes, all with hedgerows packed with blue- and whitebells, scarlet campion and various daisies. The goldfinch is the most common bird I have seen throughout this ride; lots of dead badgers on the road, few dead hedgehogs, some dead rabbits, one dead fox (young one). Quite a few buzzards, the masters of the Devon (and Cornish) countryside, sitting on top of telegraph poles looking down at me. Came to Nanstallon and followed the lane down and then the start of the steepest hill on the whole ride. I stopped near the bottom because it crossed the Camel trail, old railway line from Bodmin to Padstow and now cycle track, and with excellent tea rooms and also a vineyard, so they sold wine and cider as well. Had to forego this, but excellent cake and coffee. In fact, a delightful spot because in the sun and sheltered from the wind so I could stretch out and relax. Back on the bike, hard graft up the hill (this was principle reason for a triple) and then the start of the long B road to Camelford, mostly uphill but usually quick. Hard slog through Camelford itself because bottom of deep valley but soon back onto the small lanes from Hallworthy, much of it cycle routed, sheer delight, with long downhill from Bodmin Moor, fast and enjoyable, apart from the cold from the speed and the cooling wind. Fairly easily took me over to North Tamerton, up towards Clawton and then Chasty. By some margin the roads from North Tamerton to Holsworthy the worst I encountered anywhere – not sure why, maybe heavy use by farming equipment.

Arrived at Holsworthy, depressingly poor and run down. The XX, an old pub, I was probably last in it 40 years ago, and usual approach to customer care – try and ignore, be impolite and unhelpful and make out that the ‘locals’ are all that matters – don’t know why. Room in rather poor condition, it was uncleaned, one of the beds unstripped from previous occupant. I knew what I feared things would be like but was very disappointed that my fears were realised. Good shower and then bar meal and some beers. In conversation with the barman it came out that I used to live in Holsworthy, my family was here for 35 years (my father was a local doctor), knew a lot about it and actually cared about it. I then became a ‘local’ and was treated to normal conversation and service. If only someone could tell local service businesses that their approach is wrong. Anyway, have eaten, warmed up, feeling much better and looking forward to tomorrow’s ride: will be longest so far on this trip, 110 miles, but known terrain so no route-finding delays, wind in my favour and can take some more direct routes if I want to. Good YHA in Bristol with easy access to food and supplies and see E the following night!

Day 7, Holsworthy to Bristol, 110 miles, 1439m ascent, 13.8 mph

This was also going to be a long day distance wise, but with little more climbing than expected. Woke to rain and wind; problem with phone charger meant would have to sort out today. Earplugs worked very well with the chiming church clock: XX short stone’s throw from the church, noted for chiming each quarter hour and the full hours, and with carillon every third hour, but not after 9.00 until 9.00 in morning – ear plugs required. Expecting breakfast to match everything else but was pleasantly surprised to be presented with large range of cereals, full cooked breakfast and good coffee. Another guest departed while I was there and said he hadn’t used the soap because no one had put it out. I could have said I didn’t use the toilet paper because ..., and that the other bed in the room was turned back but not stripped – I could have gone on. However, the Londoner who served me was friendly, with her own take on how Holsworthy is. She comes from Barnet and had been coming to this area for years so they moved 16 years ago, now living just below Soldon Cross with her husband and dog, a terrier / bearded collie cross. She likes the XX, and said the owner was a good employer who always had schemes to help his business and the local economy. However, businesses are closing down, the cattle market has moved outside the town, the pannier market is no longer worthy of the name, and the formerly prosperous square looks as if half the businesses had closed down. Can’t help but feel sad for this place from my childhood which was hit hard in the foot and mouth outbreak. I packed and left at 8.20, onto soaking wet roads and a newly visible sun. In fact, the roads soon dried out and the A3072 is a little known gem of a route out of Devon for cyclists. Mostly good or excellent smooth surface (the sound of tyres hissing along the road is one of those sounds that says all is well in the world),

some hills, some quite brutal, but even more lengthy, gentle downhills which, with a strong following wind, meant cruising at 30 mph without pedalling.

“You never have the wind with you – either it is against you or you’re having a good day” Daniel Behrman, *The Man Who Loved Bicycles*

The road from Hatherleigh to Jacobstowe is a beautifully secluded road, shaded with pine trees, rolling up and down as it speeds forwards. Some sharper hills slowed me briefly, but no great problems. Crediton provided solution to the charging problem (replaced cable) and led me onto the highlight of this leg, up and over the hills past Cadbury Castle and down to Bickleigh.



Bottom of the hills, Bickleigh

The group at Land’s End told me they would be avoiding these hills – they don’t know what they missed. Easier going this way than the other day towards Crediton, and with some very fast descending before Tiverton and the lovely lanes back to the A38. The A38 was simple, fairly busy, and generally tedious but it served its purpose. Ate in Taunton, head down, 21 mph wind from due west so quite often unpleasant cross wind until eventually turned more east with 24 miles to go and up and over some of the big hills before Bristol. Managed to get to the hostel at 6.15, for a day of about 9 hours, not bad. The wind continues to be a challenge, at least mostly in favour today but so cold. Weather forecast said some places will have a frost tonight – will wear warmer clothes tomorrow.

Day 8, Bristol to Shrewsbury, 107 miles, 1312m ascent, 13.5 mph

Pleasant morning out of Bristol, up Park St and across the Downs, very easy route finding, such an attractive city in the bright sunshine but cool temperatures. Lots of other cyclists about, really a good example of a ‘cycling city’. Easy riding under M5 and down to the Severn, beautiful light, and quiet riverside took me along to the access to the Severn crossing.



Approach to Severn Bridge crossing

Bright sunshine accompanied the crossing before the lovely road from Chepstow to Monmouth, along the Wye and past Tintern, one of the most pastoral and peaceful routes anywhere.



Tintern Abbey

Followed the easy and quiet road to Monmouth and a pleasant cafe stop inside the old town in cafe run by enthusiastic and friendly Chinese woman. I sat outside, sheltered and in the sun, wanting to soak up its warmth as I ate. A couple wanted to talk about my ride: I simply wanted to fuel up and go. As I got on the bike outside a woman on the pavement said she had passed me several times, was I doing end to end? Turns out she is supporting her husband, Kevin (in blue), doing ETE, and was due

to see several times over next few days. There is an innate friendliness about people associated with this ride.

The road from Monmouth to Hereford goes through some attractive countryside, undulating and steep hills, beautiful views, fields and hedgerows, some of the most stunning on the whole ride, quiet roads all the way from Chepstow to the A49.



On the A466 going north

Eventually come through to the A49 into Hereford, less pleasant but fast. Stopped at small café in the town, the Cranfield Centre, working with NEET (16 – 18 year olds not in education, employment or training), offering experience and apprenticeships. Delicious food, friendly staff. Told me met man some years ago with trailer doing end to end – Mick F? Followed this to the quiet A4110 road then quiet B roads through the delightful Leintwardine and onto Craven Arms and the A49 into Shrewsbury, with short respite via Church Stretton. Very pleasant road until A49, but then at least quick and through the town to meet E. Eventually found Italian chain restaurant, very pleasant and sufficient food. Benefits of leg massage proved tonight.

Day 9, Shrewsbury to Bolton le Sands, 107 miles, 611m ascent, 14.5 mph

Hard to set off promptly and strong easterly wind all day which always made it cool, if not cold, and, at times, made cycling very hard. Quiet A and B roads to Wem and Whitchurch then A49 again. Met E at transport café on A533, pleasant, friendly staff, good food: the pleasures of E supporting me, however, meant each start harder than should be. Followed A49 into and through Warrington, more interesting than might sound, and the A roads to Wigan and beyond. Going reasonably quickly, Wigan duller than last time visited and didn't hang around, although this was where I spent my first nine years and attended my first primary school. Saw three heavily laden bikes with overweight men going south in Charnock Richards: aware of a group of three men, 'fatties on tour', doing this ride, so maybe them. They did not look happy. But they were doing it. Preston pretty unpleasant, only eased by riding with Kevin, for few miles although he seemed to want to race everywhere. On to Garstang, and the A6 to Lancaster, very busy and slow in the town, and finally to Bolton le Sands and Red Bank Farm campsite – what a simply stunning setting. Italian restaurant for supper, very pleasant stop and meal.



View from Red Bank Farm campsite over Morecambe Bay

Day 10, Bolton le Sands to Hawick, 111 miles, 1352m ascent, 15.1 mph

Sunny dawn, nearly still, beautiful setting overlooking Morecambe Bay. Leisurely start, not off until 8.30, but very important to relax as well. E carried luggage again, so easy first half.



Delightful road along A6070 and then the A65 into Kendal, through lush, green countryside, stone built walls, cattle and sheep – an idyllic setting to cycle through. Ascent up Shap attractive and nowhere hard, through beautiful countryside and villages. Privilege to see copper coloured hare in the bright sunlight running round in circles then gallop away across field. Long and fast descent from summit to meet MW just south of Penrith and from where E returned home. The A6 provided wide, quiet, straight and fast progress to Carlisle, from where followed the smaller roads to B6357 and then B6399 to Hawick, again some very attractive countryside. Hedgerows often of beech, unusual, and most of it still not in leaf only the old leaves still visible providing brown colouring at this time of year. Pleasant café stop in Newcastleton, shortly after entering Scotland, and we then made it to very pleasant B&B, not too late, after following delightful road up and down the hills, generally not too steep but with some more demanding sections. No issue with M staying (he only confirmed joining me for the weekend shortly before I started), we even had large sitting room to ourselves. Indian meal in the town and pub stops, not at all special but served the purpose.

Day 11, Hawick to Bankfoot, 108 miles 1657m ascent, 12.9 mph

Good accommodation at Hawick and good breakfast. Damp start with strong and persistent west wind. First miles out of Hawick saw 300m of ascent, at times in winds that rendered us almost stationary, regardless of effort put in. Eventually descended to Selkirk and the delightful road to Caddenfoot and the attractive lanes south of the River Tweed to Innerleithen. School at Caddenfoot now closed, sadly, but lovely lanes and paths through the pine woods. Winds never relented today. Very pleasant cafe in Innerleithen before fantastic B709 up and over Moorfoot Hills, for me one of the highlights of any cycling in this part of Scotland. Started in dreary rain, watching keen golfers playing a rather poor course, now better known in the mountain-biking world for the woods behind. Mark Twain is said to have observed that ‘golf was a good walk spoiled’: on a day like this hard to disagree. One of the delights of this ascent is never being sure which way the road will go, hidden by the encroaching hills, and only gradually making its way up, never too steep and always a pleasure. The wind was hard, occasionally across us, rarely behind us, and usually from the front, making some of the descents slow affairs.

The view from the top was as worthwhile as ever, as was the fast descent on smooth tarmac on the far side. Eventually reached the A7 and agreed to follow into Edinburgh. Not a good idea: wind against us, road surface from poor to appalling and nothing appealing to look at. Slow progress but eventually got into central Edinburgh where took time before we found a pleasant enough café in the New Town, albeit not cheap. Left the centre, soon picked up the old railway track and once more sped on, this time sheltered for a short while by the old cuttings from railway days. This came to an end and once again had to endure very strong and persistent winds as we went over to the Forth Road Bridge. Kevin reappeared as we pondered which turning, and soon disappeared up the road and out of sight: he has no luggage, of course, and was a little disappointed to hear that we would be staying 20 miles further up the road than he. It's not a race, is it, and it's not competitive?



Forth Road Bridge

The Forth Road Bridge was almost uncyclable for me, such was the force of the wind, and I was genuinely fearful of being blown off my bike. M seemed less concerned and was faster across the Bridge. Not enjoyable. The other side saw us follow the usual route through Hill of Beath, all the time being buffeted by the winds, usually from hard left but occasionally full frontal. The wind made us slow and made us tired. The four miles to Kinross were absolutely at our limits, only to discover the cafe at Kinross, now Cafe 89, was closed, as was the other one. Ate two cereal bars and set off for Perth, probably 20 miles distant, then 10 more to Bankfoot: it was 5.00. We lost the cycle route but followed equally fun lanes steeply into the hills. At one point we pulled over to the side of the road. M was just getting off his bike when a particularly sharp gust of wind caused him to topple over, with foot still fixed in the pedal – those who ride with cleats will understand exactly this process. At this point at the side of the road there was a gap between the verge and the hedge filled with a deep ditch, complete with a foot of water at the bottom. For reasons known only to M, he fell backwards into the ditch with his bike still attached, crying ‘help!’ I pulled the bike off him, carefully, in case his foot was still attached, and then pulled him out of the water, all the while trying to stifle laughter. A car happened to be passing, and stopped with incredulity at what they’d just seen – their attempts not to laugh were less effective than mine. M is sometimes critical of my careful attention to detail with packing, such as making sure that covers are closed, zipped or tied. On this occasion his bar bag was not closed which meant he deposited most of his useful items in the ditch, such as his puncture repair kit. His waterproof phone cover was not put to the test because his phone wasn’t in it. Unfortunately, it was in the ditch. M jumped back into the water and, up to his knees and elbows, searched the bottom frantically until he found the phone, a really useful one with things like his OS maps and phone numbers. The phone had stopped working and would not switch on again (later that night it started to work again and, in fact, so pleased was it with its recovery that it woke M). I offered M a towel to dry himself or his phone, and offered spare clothes, but these were declined with what seemed like bad grace. He was soaked and got back on his bike to carry on up the hill. I continued although for some time (hours, in fact) I had occasional laughing fits at the memory of his fall. This was nearly as good as the time he fell into one of the deep drainage ditches in the dark on Fort William’s golf course after a late day on Ben Nevis, after we down climbed from high up on Tower Ridge with a broken crampon. I walked down a slightly different route and nearly drowned in the bog, which M thought very funny, even more so when my legs got cramp as I stumbled in the bog. The golf course ditches were deep, necessitating my help to get him out. The car park at Torlundy means the golf course is avoided these days but older climbers will remember well the antagonism between golfers and climbers at that time. This was the same evening our favourite pub in Fort William had a cross-dressing night and initially refused us admission because we weren’t wearing women’s clothing – makes you wonder why I still do things with M.

We eventually descended into Perth, after some delightful hills and countryside. The flatlands of Perth and northwards not fun, and the A9 used as a necessary route to Bankfoot. There had been gala day in the village so the Inn found it hard to cope, to serve us, etc. Adequate meal, but not special, and agreed that M could sleep on the floor. Good night, delayed breakfast (the door upstairs was locked, interesting if there'd been a fire), not one of the best, and we were off about 8.45.

Day 12, Bankfoot to Inverness, 111 miles, 1247m ascent, 13.1 mph

Immediately into tough winds, constant all day from the west. Unfortunately our route snaked an inverted S shape, so spent first 50 miles going into it, often severely so, but then improved, occasionally following (so we free-wheeled at 22 mph, it was that good). Unfortunately, we had to get up the Drumochter Pass so, after delights of the route to Pitlochry and it's coffee the serious work began, often painfully so. At times standing in the pedals barely made any forward progress. Should have been fairly easy progress but was tortuously slow, burning huge reserves for so little progress. Dalwhinnie gave some respite and, as we turned and the following winds began we sped into Newtonmore and then Kingussie before the delights of the B road to Coylum Bridge and the Alpine Nursery. One of my bucket list rides, never fails to provide beautiful scenery, wildlife and foliage, capped off by the best cake in the UK at the Potting Shed. Told the cook my view and, given I'd cycled the length of UK, felt I was entitled to my opinion. M caught train back south at Aviemore and I went on to Inverness, not fast because of hills and wind. Stopped to help change a car wheel for a father and his daughter who were having some difficulties. Got to Inverness, rushed to Morrisons to buy food for tomorrow and ready meal for tonight. Sorted. YHA accommodation decent, including own bathroom and good facilities.

Day 13, Inverness to John O'Groats, 145 miles, 1771m ascent, 13.3 mph



Approaching Cromarty Firth going north

Monster day, but well worthwhile. Woke to NO WIND, in spite of forecast. Managed to be cycling by 7.35 and immediately enjoyed the sensations of no noise and no resistance. However, the A9 is a very busy road, with lots of fast traffic and large lorries and often little offered for cyclists. Nig Ferry not working at the moment so no choice about route (*actually, it is possible to leave Inverness going westwards and then turn north and avoid the A9*). At Evanton was able to turn off and map showed B9176 route up and over, then down to the A836 road to Bonar Bridge. The Lairg route is very long

but the weather Gods seemed to be offering me a window: I took it. The views were stunning, a quiet B road, and very little traffic.



From the B9176 looking north west to Bonar Bridge – no ripples on the water!

The pleasure of cycling with no wind can't be overstated after 12 days without much respite, even if it did rise later in the day. Eventually long fast downhill and the equally quiet road to Bonar Bridge, when a light rain started but stopped after Lairg. Quiet road up to Lairg and then the wilderness road that follows over the top and eventually to Bettyhill – long way (Bettyhill 93 miles) but worthwhile. No steep hills, sweeping and swooping, mountains in the distance covered with old and recent snow. A few fishermen, a few logging lorries but never busy. The most beautiful wilderness road I know in the UK and well worth the effort.



Between Lairg and Bettyhill

Eventually came out at Bettyhill and found a cafe where had huge meal.



Going up the A836 before Bettyhill, looking towards Torrisdale Bay

The roads east of Bettyhill would normally be called ‘hilly’: today the hills were brutes, little respite, always up or down, often long or longer, but with the wind at first behind me then across me. Stopped in Thurso for breather and more food, sorted out phone calls, then the final 20 miles to JOG, getting there just before 8.30.



The signpost at John O'Groats

Longest day I've done on a bike, and feeling it this morning, but shorter day today (86 miles) and wind blowing south east, so hope no real problems. Delightful and friendly guest house, where the owners couldn't do enough. Last night, immediately after my arrival, the host, Mark, said that orcas (killer whales) had been spotted off the headland – did I want to go and see them? Fast car ride and then saw several of these beautiful creatures close in to the cliff, where dozens of people were congregating to observe. They continued along the coast and could not be seen again, but a real privilege. Hosts wanted to talk late into the evening and hard to get away and to bed, although was planning later start than usual.



Duncansby Head after the Orcas

Day 14: John O'Groats to near Tain, 85 miles, 1052m ascent, 13.7 mph

Rose after 8.00, and probably good idea. Feeling groggy after yesterday. Breakfast with the enthusiastic Mark and Mary. Very kind hosts, very good breakfast. Eventually got away at 10.10, latest start during the whole trip, but shorter day so seemed fine. Straight away, heavy rain and strong wind from the west, not the forecast north west. At times very difficult to go forward and very hard work – unfortunately, the route turned further west so wind problem increased. Some other riders on road, just starting from JOG, tough start to a long ride for them, in appalling conditions. Probably not helped by seeing an older man on a steel bike with luggage ease past them on the hills, but I did have 2 weeks of cycling in my legs, I was going well and didn't have many days to finish. Passed the group of 4 I had seen at LE some days before going strongly close to the finish – shame we didn't stop, I only worked out who they were as the fourth went past. I stopped at shop in lieu of cafe, and able to buy coffee and other bits. After half hour went back out and began to shiver severely – it was very cold and wet. Kept going, and gradually some easing of the wind, slight, but all helped. Some hills, including some sharp and long ones but continued to progress. Stopped in Helmsdale for large and long lunch break and then continued. Arrived at 6.45, lovely B+B, kindly offered sandwiches and biscuits. Warm fire, TV and all comforts of home. Expecting an early night and then early start to Dalwhinnie, with return ride over the top and down to Alness. However, second evening in row without proper meal and was to feel the affects tomorrow.

Day 15, Edderton to Dalwhinnie, 91 miles, 1290m ascent, 12.2 mph

Very good night's sleep after very pleasant evening in front of a fire and TV. Should have slept longer (rose at 7.00 for 7.30 breakfast). Ate well and left by 8.30 – kind hosts and a lovely house. Decided to go back over the top towards Alness and almost immediately found a road connecting to the top road, saving several miles and avoiding the long hill – much better than the A9 and turned out to reduce the planned length of the day – a bonus. Went past groups of small children walking up the hill to school, some of whom raced me – don't think would have taken much to beat me today. I started very slowly, so the shorter miles really helped. Met cyclist on the top who had 90 miles to go. His mouth was surrounded by scabs, a legacy of cycling for days in the cold winds. He had skull cap, leg warmers and had bought long fingered gloves to go over his mitts. He described one day when he felt almost hypothermic – I could believe him. He was going the same way I had come up, then over the Dornoch Forth and up to JO'G, a further 90 miles – or 3 x 30 as he worked it out. Seems we all have our mental devices to break down long miles into something more manageable. For me, I break down into segments of 10, viz 10:90, 20:80, 30:70 and so on, and I prefer to get to 50:50 and then 60:40, for obvious reasons – whatever works for you, use it. He was flying back from somewhere tomorrow, after night at JOG. Like all cyclists, asked about where to get food – said Helmsdale seemed pretty good, with choice. Warned some severe hills, but he'd heard of them, and rattled off the names. With that, we wished each other 'good luck' and carried on our ways. I found the first few miles hard – 200m ascent immediately, and was nervous about rejoining the A9. In fact, nothing like as busy as when I'd come out of Inverness and the wind benevolent.



Cromarty Firth going south

First day I felt warm: fresh wind first thing, but bright and even warm sunshine. Once over the bridge into Inverness seemed to spend ages getting free of it. Sat down just off road by first junction and ate some bars, enjoying feeling real warmth from the sun, even though lorries rushing by. Gradually made way south with intention of joining the Cycle Route that went towards Culloden before cutting up. However, I couldn't follow signage so used phone map to get past, joined A9 for short distance to Daviot and then picked up the cycle route again, same as the first LEJOG I did. Still not going well, and plodding up the long hills. Think misjudged eating (no meal last night, delayed lunch today), with immediate impact. Lovely route, lot of ascent, then to Carrbridge and eventually reached Aviemore, where found really good cafe above Mountain Sports shop – excellent food and slow service, which was ideal today. Talking with another cyclist, her first cycle tour and returning to Edinburgh by train.

She'd met the cyclist with the mouth sores yesterday and commented about the need to protect exposed skin to wind rash and sun – I use Shea Alchemy creams. Left Aviemore, feeling better, and made good time to Kingussie on the B9152, a fast and pleasant road with the main traffic on the nearby A9. Unfortunately, from Newtonmore was exposed to cold wind into face as made last 10 miles to Dalwhinnie, unpleasant end to the day, with prospect of more tomorrow. Meeting E and J at the bunkhouse here, warm, spacious, and just us 3 tonight. Prospect of leg massage may help me complete the ride, but only looking at one day at a time. Ate very well this evening and good breakfast next day will help.

Day 16, Dalwhinnie to Edinburgh, 106 miles, 1183m ascent, 13.5 mph

A mixed day: no luggage made it instantly easier but the wind was blowing with its usual vengeance today. Dull, overcast, strong wind from west. First 6 miles uphill, gradually, to Drumochter summit: never steep but with wind hard in my face a hard start, 200 m ascent. Seems whichever way I ascend the Drumochter the wind will be opposed – still, easier without luggage. However, gave way to 14 miles downhill on the cycle route, in places steeply, almost MTB trail, so fun and fast. Joined road, which also seemed to go downhill. By now the wind was fully behind me so fast cycling all the way to Pitlochry. Met 3 older male cycle tourists on steel bikes and with full luggage, about to start uphill – hard to hide my glee at not having to go up the Drumochter again in the wind. Met with E and J in cafe in Pitlochry then continued delightful route to Bankfoot, beautiful wooded scenery, virtually no vehicles, even at one part through estate park and by the river. This is cycling luxury. Came to Bankfoot where met E and J and then followed route to Perth. Wind getting up from the west and at times slowed me down, then hard left into Perth along river, pleasant and fast. Cycling through Perth stayed on route right along the wide river Tay, until signage disappeared. Smartphone showed way forward, along by port and then up and over to Bridge of Earn. Steep climbing into the hills coincided with severe winds opposing me, got harder as it got steeper and over the tops. Hard pedalling down to Kinross, quite unpleasant and hard work. Lovely cafe stop in the old Courthouse improved things and the winds to the Bridge somehow were not so bad, even following the flat road from Kinross. I'd feared that the Bridge would be hard work again but in fact was straightforward, with lots of other cyclists speeding across so I joined them. Fast ride into Edinburgh and once onto the roads again raced someone on MTB with massive tyres, all the better for jumping the tram lines. He shot past me as I joined the road and I think was surprised that I was with him at the next lights. I then left him behind, I'd like to think to his astonishment, as we sped along Prince's St. We met at various lights and chatted – a fun way to arrive at the YHA. Two days left, still not over, but getting closer.

"Get a bicycle. You will not regret it, if you live".

Mark Twain, "Taming the Bicycle"

Day 17, Edinburgh to Hexham, 97 miles, 1641 m ascent, 13.8 mph

Away by 8.30 today after pleasant night in the YHA. Followed easier route out of Edinburgh, the A772 and some B roads to get easily outside Edinburgh and onto the A7 to Galashiels, much easier than the other day. The A7 soon joined the new railway to the Borders, not yet open, but with much road re-surfacing and pleasant going, not too busy, but rather too many construction lorries. Not going well, probably overall tiredness now. Eventually reached Galashiels and struggled to find anywhere to stop, settling for Subway and certainty of getting enough calories. Long break, then hard start before turning onto delightful quiet lanes south of Melrose, going up and into the Eildon Hills, up and down but delightful hedgerows, again beech, masses of (just finished) daffodils, bluebells, campion, forget me nots, and fields full of sheep with lambs, as ever, most with two lambs. Minto delightful, old church, lovely golf course, and steep downhill to Denholm, on to Chesters and then the A6088 to join the A68 to Carter Bar: both roads virtually deserted. Much of my stamina also virtually deserted, so going slowly at this point. Relieved to meet E at Carter Bar, where we watched the flags flying at 90 degrees to the flag poles in the strong winds. Long break, with flapjack, sandwiches and coffee. Then

set off down the hill, slowed down by the wind, never over 40 mph (with no wind would freewheel faster than that), and road appeared to go downhill for many miles as I sped onwards. Had planned to go via Bellingham, but decided to stick on the still-quiet A68, possibly a mistake as it turned into long and longer uphills and downhills, and eventually almost a switchback, where the downhills only occasionally took you to the top on the other side. Then turned onto the Hexham road, feeling very tired but managed to get there. Stopped in village called Acomb by the A69 road with signs prohibiting bikes going further. Called E (who was in pub with M and A), and decided to accept lift and then drive up v steep and v long hill to campsite. Undecided where to start the next day, but, in the event, driven back to pick up point so could complete a pure double ender. Pleasant evening in the pub, good meal, and pleasant campsite on the racecourse.

Day 18, Hexham to York, 101 miles, 1243 m ascent, 13.1 mph

Leisurely start, not away until round 10.00, but tired and need some down time. E drove me to pick up point from last night after large breakfast and further stocking up on banana cake. There was a short diversion for bikes to get across the A69 that I hadn't see at first last night. Slow start through Hexham, but not as long or steep as up to the racecourse, and then followed road to Blanchland. Lovely countryside, some beautiful attractive villages passed through, over small bridges, lovely stone buildings. Hills sapping. E turned off to go to visit friend in Durham, while I continued to Blanchland and then Stanhope the steep(er) way.



Blanchland in the sun

Magnificent moorland, bright sunshine and the lack of early morning wind, although soon gave way to a wind from the south – not what I wanted. Having crossed the moorland felt had earned the long and steep downhill into Stanhope – barely 20 miles, but very hard and tiring and desperately needed to stop for some fuel. Friendly café in centre and long stop. Then followed A road eastwards to rejoin A68. This final turn left me going in a southerly direction with the winds coming northwards. A68 has long, and very long, hills up and down so hard cycling, albeit through attractive countryside. Eventually got through West Auckland and reached the start of the B6275 Roman road leading south to Scotch Corner and the final run-in to York. Huge downhill spoiled by brisk wind that cooled and slowed but the views simply stunning, looking out over miles into Vale of York. The straight road was hard because of the wind but most direct route home. All up hills now feeling very hard, especially the one just before Scotch Corner, and the awkward route finding that followed. Met with E again for

long stop, with coffee and food, and then penultimate leg, through attractive countryside that I know well having worked in North Yorkshire for many years. Followed the route to Morton on Swale and then the road south to Newby Wiske. Met with E for the final time on the bridge over the A168, just ahead of the quiet road through the villages on the final 25 mile run in to York. Wind never abated but I raised my pace and went quickly, through Cundall, Helperby, Flawith and Tollerton, one of my favourite routes out of York to the cafes at Masham and further into the Dales, but now the road that was taking me to the end, to where I could stop the pain of the past few days. Came to Shipton, then Overton and the York ring road. Decided to follow the Shipton Road and go over Clifton Bridge: I shot up the slight hill on the other side, and over from the lights, then downhill and I was home. Spotted arriving, E opened the door and D photographed me: it was over, I'd completed a double ender, I'd done the YETHEY.



Arriving back in York

Summary:

Departed 6 May, returned York 23 May

York – Lands End	443 miles	5593 m ascent
Lands End – John O’Groats	899 miles	11321 m ascent (11382 m descent)
John O’Groats – York	480 miles	6409 m ascent
Totals	1822 miles	23323 m ascent

Route:

Used cycle.travel website as mapping tool and all routes contained there. Usually took most direct line but avoided main roads where practical. Some old main roads now very quiet because of nearby motorways or dual carriageways (A30, A6), some not so quiet (A38) and some have cycle routes alongside them in places (A9). It is hard to avoid duplication in some areas, so repeated route from Crediton to Bristol and from Cromarty Firth to Edinburgh, otherwise separate routes each way. Much of the route familiar to me which removed time-consuming route-finding difficulties. York to Bristol mostly new but from then on familiar roads. Had not cycled from Whitchurch to Carlisle direct before but quite a lot of the countryside familiar to me. Many climbing and holiday trips to Scotland mean this is both a familiar and favoured place to be.

Accommodation:

As a predominantly solo and relatively fast trip I decided not to camp. All accommodation arranged beforehand. The benefits of this for me outweighed the potential problems. The downside is that the journey is 'locked', with no ability to be flexible, take a shorter or longer day or a rest, or deal with a major unexpected event. The benefits are not looking for accommodation during or at the end of a day, which can be time-consuming and frustrating when all you want to do is rest and recover; the bookings provide a discipline that helped keep me on schedule; and booking ahead allowed choice and better rates. At the end of the day, if there is a major problem it is generally possible to catch a train, a bus or use a taxi to catch up or, in extremis, hitch a lift with the bike (I recall cycling up the Pyrenees with E in 1979 and a tractor with trailer offered us both a lift to the top – we had all the camping gear on the bikes and did look a bit overladen: I declined and E felt unable to accept – this has been pointed out to me on a number of occasions since). In France, Italy and Spain I have only once had a delay finding accommodation at the end of the day (in La Spezia, and probably a major event on), sometimes in a group of 4, but alone I did not want the added pressure so booked beforehand.

I particularly liked the hostel accommodation at Sennen and at John O'Groats; the YHAs at Bristol and Edinburgh; Red Bank Farm campsite; the B+Bs in Scotland; the bunkhouse at Dalwhinnie. Others were functional and, one place, better not say any more.

Sources of advice:

Two main sources: the *CTC forum* probably the best advice, comments, support, feedback, opinion, expertise, criticism and pomposity on any subject to do with bikes, or, for that matter, any subject not to do with bikes; and the www.cycle-endtoend.org.uk website which contains the biggest repository of information about the End to End, including the biggest set of journals anywhere and live information about who's on the road at any time. Essential reading and those who partake of the knowledge might wish to make a donation to help keep it going.

Equipment:

Bob Jackson, Reynolds 731 os tubing.

Brooks Swift titanium saddle. Randonneur handlebars, leather bar tape. Garmin 200 cycle computer.

Ultegra groupset with Dura ace bottom bracket and chain. Triple, 52/39/30, and 12 – 30 cassette.

Wheels: Ultegra hubs with Chrina rims, built by Spa Cycles of Harrogate. 25 mm Gatorskin tyre on front, 28 mm Continental GP 4000s on rear (couldn't fit 28 mm on front). No punctures. Normally ride 23 mm – the extra width provided a little more comfort.

Small pannier, waterproof bag on rack and small bar bag: 4.5 kg luggage.

2 spare tubes, folding tyre, spare spokes from Spa, multi-tool with chain breaker, tyre levers and repair kit, spoke key, mini pump, small bottle of White Lightning, first aid kit, coconut-scented shea butter skin cream with sun block to protect face and skin and arnica to ease aching muscles, small plug with 2 USB sockets + cables for phone, Garmin and LED lights. Cut up 2014 road atlas, numbered, in poly bags. Took lightest Kryptonite D lock but left this with partner from Shrewsbury onwards: never an issue. Smartphone provided radio, music, photos, books (Kindle loaded – I read a lot), e-mail, messages, internet and phone contact, as well as containing maps. Took Bluetooth keyboard allowing me to write detailed account. One change of cycle clothes + off-bike wear and more warm clothing than usual because of cold, including lightweight down gilet. It was a real pleasure to put the gilet on at the end of the day. Leg and arm warmers; skull cap.

Weather:

I thought May would be a good month to go. It was, scenery spectacular, but the weather was pretty poor. I read later that May was one of the coldest on record. I don't know about that but the wind was a major challenge on most days, I was cool on many days, sometimes downright cold. I ride all year, I'm used to climbing in winter and I generally don't feel the cold so maybe just unlucky.

However, another time I would take: full gloves (on long tours I often stop wearing mitts because they smell but on this trip warmth more important); full length legs; an extra base layer (used Merino long sleeve but would have used another short sleeve underneath).



Our *Chat Noir*