

Lands End to John O'Groats in 14 days

The 'End-to-End' challenge is so popular that an estimated 3000 people do so every year, following different routes to the one that I followed:



It was never my intention to make this years main cycling holiday the 'End-to-End' . I had been invited to join a friend who lives next to the source of the Danube to follow that great river from Germany into Austria. Then as the mass exodus of Syrians and other nationalities began following the Danube by foot, I felt uncomfortable making plans for a self-indulgent holiday in an area of such human suffering. So I decided to do something for others and cycling the 'End-to-End' for local children at the Tŷ Gobaith & Hope House hospice sat more comfortably with my conscience.

The planning process

To move my good intentions into a plan, an internet search was required. Page 1 of my search engine threw up lists companies offering 'End-to-End' supported rides.

Those who join a supported ride join a group of other like-minded cyclists who are accompanied by a vehicle that carries their personal belongings and stops at regular intervals along the daily route to supply the group with refreshments.

The cost of a supported cycling holiday includes route planning, booked lodgings, evening meals and breakfasts. At the date of my adventure a 14 day supported ride costed £2045. This is an awful lot of money and certainly exceeds my modest occupational pension.

Rather than join a supported ride I brought a Cicerone travel guide: 'The End to End Cycle Route' (2012) by Nick Mitchell (ISBN 978185284670). The guide enabled me to load a full set of turn by turn directions from the Cicerone website into my bicycle satellite navigation system. I then contacted a selection of guest houses mentioned in the guide and obtained their quotation for bed and breakfast.

My travel plan also required train journeys to reach Penzance from home and further trains to return from Scotland. The initial costing for train travel and overnight accommodation was £1,148. I then waited until special saver train tickets became available 12 weeks before the date of departure) and used that time to search for less expensive guest houses.

With very little effort I brought the cost of overheads down to £794, and could have reduced it further if I had imposed on friends and family to get me to Lands End and back from Scotland, and used youth hostels or camped overnight rather than guest house accommodation. I chose not to do so and was certainly happier to make my own travel arrangements at a cost of £794 rather than £2045 for a supported ride.

Having decided on the route, when and where to stay and cost, the next equally important part of the planning stage was to maximise the benefits of this bicycle ride for the hospice children. And doing things for charity doesn't have to be a financial donation:

- As my bicycle has a GPS tracker I would be able to supply 'log in' information to my contacts at the hospice who would then share a live map of my whereabouts with the children and the parts of the country being travelled through could be spoken about.
- The next challenge was to keep the children's attention by capturing their imagination. Recalling stories I had been told as a child and other classics, especially from Aesop's Fables, I decided to write 14 bed-time stories that would be relevant to my whereabouts on each day of my journey.

You can see a screen capture of my daily route and also read the children's stories on my cycling blog: <http://harlechjoe.wordpress.com> And lets face it, we are all children at heart!

The adventure: Day 1

It took 11 hours and 3 separate trains to travel from Harlech to Penzance, the station nearest to Lands End. The trains were all on time, the bicycle reservation system worked well and it was easy to load and unload my bike on and off the train without assistance.

Arriving in Penzance station at 7:30pm I cycled the 12 miles to Lands End in just over an hour. Here a dog walker kindly agreed to take my photo whilst his 4 legged friend eyed me up for his supper.

At the time of my arrival everything at the Lands End visitors centre was closed. Pleasingly the land-mark signpost was in place and although tempted to follow the pointer to New York that particular road was underwater and John O'Groats. was closer. I had intended to register my ride in a directory of end-to-end attempts that has been managed by the 'Lands End Hotel' but they have stopped doing it.



Day 2



From my comfortable guest house I cycled back to Penzance and followed a 4 mile coastal path along the shoreline of Mounts bay for this wonderful view of Saint Michaels Mount.

Quite a few road and several shop signs were printed in English and Kernewek, an ancient cornish Celtic language. I wondered whether Kernewek was now being promoted as a 1st language in the same way as Welsh.

My guide book had suggested the first full day of cycling went as far as Fowey. Yet there was still enthusiasm in my legs and plenty of day-light hours ahead, so I used the free for cyclists King Harry chain ferry from Fowey and continued to the beautiful harbour town of Looe where I stayed the night having cycled glorious 73 miles.

Day 3

From Looe in Cornwall today's journey would take me to Devon via the Torpoint chain ferry, which crosses the river Tamar between Torpoint in Cornwall and Devonport in Plymouth. The crossing was delayed as this merchant vessel made its way to open sea.

I asked one of the ferry men whether he knew what was being carried. He explained its cargo was China Clay (Kaolin), a profitable local export. He told me that millions of tonnes are exported to the ceramics industry in Italy, Spain and Portugal as a raw material for tiles and sanitary ware.

If what I was told is correct, isn't it incredibly sad to see the Cornish family jewels being exported when tiles and sanitary ware could be manufactured in Cornwall, creating employment with a smaller carbon footprint?



The City of Plymouth was fairly easy to cycle through and in next to no time I reached the village of Yelverton for a lunch break before ascending onto Dartmoor, characterised by its ponies that were peacefully grazing and its prison that I hurried past.



The climb onto Dartmoor was rewarded with wonderful views and a welcomed descent to my overnight stay in Exeter, 58 miles from Looe.

Day 4

Cycling from Exeter in Devon, 71 miles to Wells in Somerset was far easier than my previous days cycling with fewer strenuous hills and much improved road surfaces. This provided a glorious combination of less effort for more speed and a shorter day in the saddle. Even the weather was on my side - a dry, cool day with a slight breeze.

My route took me through several picture postcard villages including Stoke St Mary where I stopped to photograph the 'Half Moon Inn' that was to feature in my children's story.

It never ceases to amaze me just how beautiful the English countryside is and how fortunate I was to be touring cycling.

After a leisurely lunch I made my way towards the Somerset village of Somerton and noticed a ladies purse on the road. The purse was bulging with credit cards, a driving licence, 'National Insurance Card' and many bank notes.



I stopped in Somerton and asked where I could find the police station and was told it closed several years ago. The nearest one was in Glastonbury, a town that I was passing through as part of my route

Glastonbury is dominated by its 'Tor' which has spiritual associations that are reflected in the culture of its townsfolk, with many 'New-age' middle aged people, (who looked rather old-fashioned) and an aroma of narcotics in the air.

Glastonbury is equally well known for its Biennial music festival. As for a police station, no chance. I was given directions to the town fire-station where the police have an office. The fire station was deserted and a paper notice displaying the opening times of the police office said it be manned in the afternoon for 2 hours the day after next. So I continued my journey to the town of Wells, my destination for today where I found a police station. Its front door of the police station was locked and a notice asked callers to use a telephone on the wall for assistance. After 20 full minutes of waiting, my call was not answered. Fortunately I noticed a policeman walking from the rear of the police building towards the car park in front of me. Hanging up the telephone I went over to him, thrust the purse into his hands and reported my find. He made a note of my details and asked if the owner could be given my contact details to which I agreed.

I felt relieved the purse and personal effects was now in the safe hands of the police. It would have been nice to have received an email of thanks from the owner but hey-ho, I'm sure she was grateful.

Day 5

Wells to Monmouth, a distance of 57 miles, was one of my shortest cycling days so I had a lie-in and hearty breakfast before setting out to enjoy the delights of Bristol. As this was a Saturday, commuter and school traffic would be avoided.

A steep climb up the Mendips from Glastonbury was less strenuous than the climbs I had faced in Cornwall and the subsequent descent took me past a large expanse of lakeland at Chew Valley. My

guide book says the lake is a special protection area due to the plants, birds and other wildlife it supports although I only saw glimpses of it through the hedgerows I cycled alongside. My route then passed through the traffic free Ashton Court Estate that offered a panoramic view of Bristol that I later navigated through without difficulty.



Leaving the southwest of England by cycling under the Clifton suspension bridge the route into Wales crossed the Severn Road Bridge where my guide book recommended stopping to look around.

A convoy of lorries passed by and their weight caused the deck of the bridge to wobble. Gulp, I didn't like that at all, or the considerable distance beneath my feet to the water below and vigorously pedalled along and off the bridge into Wales for an easy cycle ride through Tintern and onwards to Monmouth.



Day 6

I love staying at Guest Houses and am frequently spoilt by their owners and last night was no exception. I was welcomed with a pot of tea and several slices of home made Victoria Sponge coated with home made jam. The owner even washed and tumble dried my laundry and made me a packed lunch for today..... lucky me !

Rested and raring to go the first part of today's Sunday morning journey was a straight and very quiet 'B' road all the way to Hereford. Here I was delayed when scores of runners crossed in front of me . They were wearing tabards that stated their run was raising funds for a local hospice. Cycling beyond Hereford my route followed the Welsh boarder. I stopped for lunch in a village named Clun, a local beauty spot that is named from the river it nestles alongside.

Settling down to eat my packed lunch and a cup of coffee a couple sitting nearby struck up a conversation. They asked where I had cycled from and where I was heading for, so I explained what I was doing and why. They had a King Charles Cavalier Spaniel named Ruby who looked rather frail. My heart sank with sadness when the owners told me they had brought Ruby to Clun for her last

treat before being put to sleep the following day. I promised to dedicate a chapter of my children's story to Ruby and have now done so.

At Shrewsbury I completed my cycling for the day having ridden 80 miles. Although today's distance is higher than my earlier days of this trip, the terrain had been flat and the absence of head wind enabled good progress to be made.

I parked my bike under the 'Quantum' sculpture to give a sense of proportion to its size. It is massive and must have drawn on considerable design and engineering skills to build. 'Quantum' celebrates the scientific achievements of Darwin, whose place of birth was Shrewsbury.



Day 7

Cycling from Shrewsbury I saw many signs for 'Percy Throver' gardens. When I married and brought our first home I used to watch 'Gardeners World' and Percy's advice helped me to tend my 1st garden. I wanted to visit the 'Percy Throver Garden Centre' but somehow managed to miss it completely, so I now have a reason to return to Shrewsbury and spend more time exploring the area.

Today's cycling followed quiet unclassified roads through the Cheshire plains and a wonderful lunch break at the Meadow Lea Café that I knew would be a good place to stop. A sandwich followed by home-made cake, coffee and an ice cream was enjoyed in the company of several other cyclists who had also made their way here for a lunchtime treat.

After cycling just 58 miles I stopped for an overnight stay on the outskirts of Runcorn.

Day 8

As a resident of North West Wales I have had numerous bicycle rides to and through the North West of England. My routes have avoided traffic congestion by following the Deeside marshes, the 'Trans-Pennine Trail' and most recently the Sefton coastal path. Today would be different. My route would be along busy urban roads.

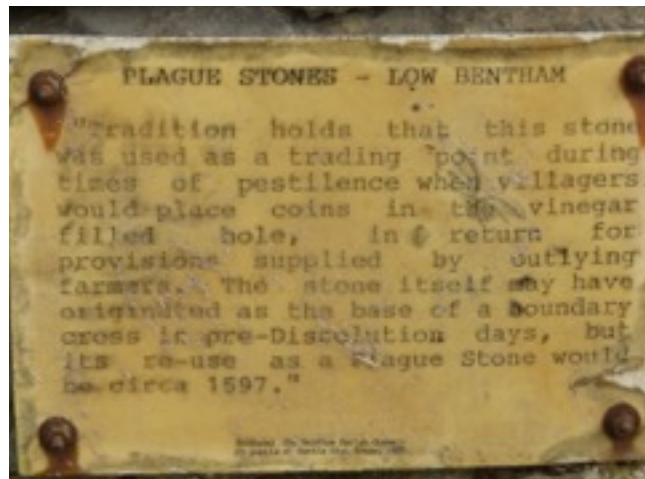


To hopefully avoid the morning rush hour I left Runcorn at 6:30am and very quickly discovered the roads were already busy, either by night workers or people setting out to join nearby motorways for destinations many miles away.

'A' roads took me through Warrington, Birchwood and Leigh. By the time I had reached Bolton the morning rush hour, characterised by processions of slow moving buses, gridlocked cars and the morning chorus of sirens from emergency vehicles was in full swing. The strained expressions of motorists reminded me of the years I had spent stuck in '*going-to-work*' traffic. Some drivers sipped from mugs of coffee, others were chatting on their mobile telephones, others were doing both. Respite from the madness of life came after cycling over the green 'Wainwright Bridge' in Blackburn and along less busy 'B' roads towards the beautiful Forest of Bowland along Watling Street.

I remember Watling Street from school days as being an important Roman road and it took me through the village of Hornby (I wonder whether this place is associated with model trains?) to the village of Slaidburn for lunch and onwards to 'High Bentham' that took nearly 4 hours of cycling over the steepest of moorland roads to reach. The moors were filled with the sound of bird-song.

Today's cycling had covered a distance of 75 miles and it was early enough for a walk around the village. The main road threaded its way downhill to another village, aptly named Lower Bentham where I noticed this interesting plaque on a dry-stone wall.



Day 9

Last year I had a wonderful cycling break touring the southern lake district, and today the route took me back into Kendal and onwards to Windermere. On that occasion I had insufficient time to visit Dove Cottage, the home of William Wordsworth. Today's route took me past its doorstep so I stopped for a visit.

I had hoped to find a postcard with daffodils overlaid by a verse from that famous poem, or even a book of his poetry. Neither were to be found.



Last January's floods had caused enormous damage to this part of England and one of many roads, the A591 over Dunmail Rise had been partially washed away. The A591 was on my cycling route to Keswick and today the road reopened, how lucky was that ! The other piece of luck was the road

had opened a week or so earlier than expected and many motorists were still using different roads, so the A591 had very few users.

Close to the top of Dunmail Rise I spotted this AA telephone box and remembered the large AA door key my Dad kept on his car keyring to get inside these.

When taking the photograph I thought this AA box must be one of the very few still in existence, then in Scotland I passed several more. Perhaps they are have been kept in areas where mobile telephone signals are poor?



I have never been inside an AA telephone box as they were located in remote places I wonder ed whether they are stocked with flasks of hot soup, cream cakes, and packets of biscuits.....umm, perhaps I should ditch the CTC and join the AA

Tonight was spent in the pretty lakeland town of Keswick, 55 miles from High Bentham. Here I found a launderette and spent a relaxing hour watching my washing trundling around in circles.

Day 10

An early morning shower and freshly laundered clothes revitalised me for todays bicycle ride into Scotland.

A steady and lengthy 15 mile climb from Keswick was rewarded with a wonderful descent into Carlisle where I joined NCR 7 and crossed the boarder into Scotland.

A picnic bench on the other side of the boarder sign was occupied by a fellow cyclist eating lunch, so I continued cycling and quickly arrived at Gretna Green for my lunch.



Stopping at the famous Blacksmiths forge I noticed that the complex has been developed for civil marriage ceremonies. Provision has been made for wedding catering and there is a suite of rooms for overnight stays. The complex looked really smart and offers a wonderful venue for marriages.

Tonights overnight stay was at a guest house in Moffat, roughly 73 miles from Keswick.



Day 11

Glasgow came into sight. During my working life I made many visits to an industrial site in a poor part of town known as Govan. My memories of the City were of grey buildings and traffic congestion.

Over the years the passing of time has changed things for the better. My route took me along this wonderful tree-lined cycling path, NCR 75 into the heart of the City.



The river Clyde runs through the City of Glasgow and many say the river is responsible for its wealth. In days gone by the trade it brought and the industries it supported would have done so.

These days the river bank forms a very pleasant pedestrian and cycling route with a mixture of high quality housing, less salubrious areas, university and office buildings. Ornate bridges cross the Clyde at regular intervals. Many are for pedestrians, others for trains and others for road users.



On the way to Dumbarton I stopped next to this sculpture where a passer-by took my photo. It is called 'Bankies Bike' and the famous around-the-world cyclist Mark Beaumont unveiled it 8 years ago to promote safer cycling in this area.



After cycling through Glasgow and its suburbs my route took me to Dumbarton where I enjoyed a well earned Pie & Pint and stayed overnight.

Day 12

Today provided me with one of the most scenic days of cycling that I have ever experienced.

From my overnight stay in Dumbarton I cycled alongside the 'West Loch Lomond Cycle Path' for well in excess of 10 miles before joining the A82 which today (a Saturday) carried very little traffic.



From Loch Lomond I made a steady ascent of the Great Glen and enjoyed a spectacular panoramic view of the Scottish highlands.

Amusingly I was passed on several occasions by a group of a dozen or so road cyclists who were part of a supported LEJOG ride. Each time they went by and disappeared into the distance I would catch up and pass them at one of their numerous rest breaks. On the last occasion they invited me to stop and join them for refreshments. I politely declined, not wanting them to delay my progress.

Today's bicycle ride ended at Fort William, 86 miles from Dumbarton where I had stayed the previous evening.



Day 13

Prior to departure I had read several online stories from people who had cycled from Lands End to John O'Groats in which writers expressed concern about the cycling route to Inverness. Some commented that a cycling path alongside the Caledonian canal presented a puncture risk, others warned the A82 was dangerous to cyclists due to its narrowness and volume of traffic. Others wrote that the B862 involved steep climbs, extra mileage and exposed moorland.

My choice was to stay on the A82. It follows the most famous of Scottish Lochs, Loch Ness. It looked absolutely beautiful and as today was a Sunday, the volume of traffic was not great and the absence of large goods vehicles reassured me that its narrowness would present no greater risk to my safety than it had done all day yesterday.



So staying on the A82 all the way into Inverness was a joy. The road was flat I arrived at Inverness early in the afternoon having covered 68 miles.

Day 14

This was another great day of cycling in Scotland. My journey out of Inverness overlooked the Moray Firth where numerous Oil rigs were moored. I wondered whether this was a sign of an industry in decline.

What isn't in decline is the business of tree logging. It is amazing that one machine can fell and strip a tree of its branches, cut it to size for transportation and stack it on top of other logs within 15 minutes. Yet these trees have taken decades to grow and yet, as consumers, do we place a high value on the finished product of junk mail and other printed materials?



By lunchtime I had arrived in the village of Lairg. It was a chilly day and the door of a nearby closed cafe opened. Its lady owner beckoned me inside saying:

‘ Come in out of the cold. We close every Monday and host a lunch club for the elderly. They aren’t due for another hour so come in from the cold’

What a wonderful and unexpected act of kindness. She gave me tea and biscuits and refused payment. Before leaving I made a generous donation into a charity box on the shop counter.

My route then led along a steady, lengthy incline to Altnaharra. Here for the first time in my life, I saw several different herds of Deer roaming freely in the Highlands. What an amazing, wonderful sight - they were as big as horses.

Having cycled 80 miles I stayed at an Altnaharra guest house for the night. The hosts were amazing. Not only did they provided me with a 3 course evening meal I was allowed to use their house phone to make a short call to my wife (there was no mobile telephone signal).



I asked what it was like living here in the winter and was told that Altnaharra is frequently cited as the coldest place in the UK. As recently as one week ago it was still snow covered. They keep warm by burning peat that is dug from the rear of their property and much of their food is grown in their garden, fished in the nearby lakes or culled meat. The local store is 20 miles away in Lairg and an arrangement exists for the post van to deliver sundry items.

Day 15

After a wonderful breakfast I left for my last full day of cycling before reaching John O’Groats.

From Altnaharra a 20 mile descent made cycling from the Highlands to the outskirts of Bettyhill effortless. A glimpse of the North Atlantic reminded me that my journey was nearly over.

Bettyhill is also the only place in the world where the working week lasts longer than elsewhere.



My route then took me along the north coast of Scotland to the village of Reay and its adjoining nuclear power plan, Dounreay. This facility, like others in the UK and throughout Europe is being decommissioned, never to be rebuilt due to safety and environmental concerns.

Here in North West Wales the Welsh Assembly and UK Government feel that the construction of a new nuclear reactor can be safely located on Anglesey and that mini nuclear generators are safe enough to be located at another North Wales decommissioned nuclear site located in the foothills of Snowdonia at Trawsfynydd.

I wonder why the safety and environment concerns that exist elsewhere in the UK and Europe do not apply in North West Wales?

Today's bicycle ride ended in the village of Mey for my final overnight stay having cycled 69 miles.



Day 16

Gosh, what a cold day. Dressed in a base layer, then normal cycling clothing with a topping of water-proofs I set off into the mist for the final 7 miles of my 'End-to-End'.

30 minutes later I arrived at John O'Groats where a passer-by took my photograph. I look really plump in my layered clothing.



Feeling relieved rather than ecstatic I escaped the dreariness of John O'Groats and cycled back to sunshine and 'The Castle of Mey' the former summer home of the late Queen Mother. Here I enjoyed a reasonably priced pot of tea and a giant slab of 'Queen Mothers' chocolate cake - yummy.

As far as castles are concerned this one is large and without being the size of Royal palaces, it is extremely homely. I fully understand why the Queen mother enjoyed her summer retreats here.



Relaxing to reflect on the past 16 days

- I enjoyed the excitement of setting out and cycling through Cornwall and Devon. I then experienced easy cycling along the Somerset levels, Welsh Marches and Cheshire plains.
- Urban cycling from Runcorn to Blackburn was the least enjoyable part of the ride, yet this was quickly forgotten amongst the sound of birdsong in the Forest of Bowland that lasted well into the beautiful Lake District.
- I loved Scotland. Its scenery, the provision for cyclists in Glasgow and above all the kindness and generosity of the people I had pleasure in meeting.

Despite the 'End-to-End' being spoken as a '*Right of passage*' for people to call themselves cyclists, I don't support that perception and don't have to prove anything to anyone.

Rant aside, the act of cycling from one end of the UK to the other does provide evidence of a physical and mental ability to cycle distances of a reasonable length on a daily basis in all sorts of weather.

Before setting out someone asked about the cycling distance between Lands End to John O'Groats and my reply was this varied according to what route would be followed and that my distance was roughly 1000 miles. The person I spoke to exclaimed:

'1000 miles, now that really is a very long way to cycle'

I wasn't being modest in my reply that cycling an average distance of 70 miles a day at roughly 10 mph isn't strenuous and having completed the ride that view hasn't changed.