

For nearly two weeks in August, the smiling, sometimes weary features of **Marcia Roberts**, were a daily inspiration to the thousands of Facebook users following her progress from Lands End to John O'Groats and back. Her regular video reports along the route of her world record attempt to cycle a gruelling 1,725 miles involved many emotions – expectation, pain, exhaustion, exhilaration and relief. The 54 year old Portsmouth grandmother, who only took up Audaxing in her 40s, was forced to dig deep – but she achieved the fastest female record and awaits verification from the Guinness Book of Records. She also won hearts... and raised thousands for the mental health charity, MIND. This, in her own words, is how she did it...

**TO ANY WOMEN** reading this who might think that they couldn't tackle this sort of ride, I say: I'm living proof that you don't need to be an athlete to set a world record. You don't even need to be very fast. You just need determination, adaptability – and a strong desire.

When I arrived at Lands End at the end of the ride, with a small, cheering crowd with cowbells and balloons, I punched the air and shouted: "I did it!" I didn't cry, I smiled – a lot, and breathed a grateful sigh. I didn't have to sit on my bike again!

It all began on 23 August. My husband Del was going to support me – with our converted Transit van, Dora, and our dog, Jess. Del would be with me to John O'Groats and back down through most of Scotland – but work commitments meant he'd then have to head for home.

We drove to Cornwall on Saturday and stayed at my son's house in Bodmin. Usually I really struggle before an event, but for some reason I was quite calm. I'd done all the training. There wasn't anything more I could do, except ride.

My friend Mark Hummerstone was waiting at Lands End, along with another rider, Kevin, an Audaxer from Penzance. We were waved off at 6.38am. Kevin rode with me to Penzance. Day one was the best day's riding I'd ever experienced. For the first time, I felt like a proper athlete. I had amazing motorbike support between

# Marvellous

*How a 54 year old grandmother's determined pursuit of a world record gripped Britain's cycling community in the summer of 2020*

# Marcia's legendary Lejogle

Truro and Tiverton, thanks to the outstanding Steve Moir who'd offered his services out of the blue. I was nervous about riding the A30, so I took up his offer willingly. He made the traffic behave itself, but even better, he had a sign on the back of his bike, indicating just what I was doing.

It was mostly holidaymakers on the road, and as they passed they'd toot, cheer, wave and clap. With an amazing tailwind as well, I was flying along. My first day finished in Portishead and went pretty much according to plan. I was due to arrive at 11pm, and I arrived bang on time after 196 miles.

I knew progress would be slower the next day. I had towns to get through, and many more road junctions to negotiate. I also had to get from Portishead all the way up to Lancaster. But I resolved to stick to my plan of only thinking about one leg at a time – but the distance seemed vast.

With all the cycle paths towards the Severn Bridge closed, I messed around for too long, trying to find the approach to the path over the bridge. I arrived at Chepstow racecourse, already behind schedule, but I loved riding the Wye Valley. The roads were so quiet, and somehow I didn't feel the pressure that I normally feel when riding an Audax along the route. It



## MARCIA ROBERTS

is a 54-year-old Portsmouth grandmother whose day job is an IT manager, but she's also a motivation coach and blogger – *Middle Aged Woman on a Bike*, (<https://mawonavelo.com>) – covers a variety of topics, from cycling to mental health. She is the first woman to record an official time for riding the 1,725 miles from Land's End to John O'Groats and back. The time submitted to Guinness was 11 days, 13 hours and 13 minutes. Despite not being the eight days and 12 hours they set as the target, they've agreed to accept Marcia's time as the world record, subject to sufficient evidence being submitted.

## PBP – A HARD LESSON LEARNED

Marcia spent 2019 training hard for Paris-Brest-Paris. She was determined to improve her speed – and shake off her “full value rider” label. “I was usually riding events on my own because all my club mates were so much faster than me,” she says. “I needed to get faster, pure and simple, especially if I was to complete PBP in time.”

Marcia finally decided to get a coach, Trevor Payne of Zone 6 Concept, to help her to prepare for the event. Feeling faster and stronger, Marcia finished PBP – but 24 hours out of time. “I was disappointed, but I already had my sights set on my next event in 2020,” she says. She began to train for the The Race Around the Netherlands, scheduled for early May. “Training became more structured, and I was riding in a new way that was completely alien to me despite having been a cyclist for most of my life. I was now training like an athlete,” she says. But it was an event destined to never take place, thanks to coronavirus. That’s when her mind turned to a new challenge – Lejogle.

PICTURE: CHRIS GODFREY



Main road...  
Marcia is tailed  
by her trusty  
outrider Steve  
Moir on her  
way through  
Summercourt

“ It was mostly holidaymakers on the road, and as they passed they’d toot, cheer, wave and clap. With an amazing tailwind as well, I was flying along ”

was just me, heading towards the market towns of Monmouth, then Hereford.

After Ludlow I hit a dodgy route. I turned off the A49 towards Ludlow racecourse because it seemed like a short cut, giving me some respite from the main road – except that it didn’t stay the lovely wide, quiet and flat side road I thought I’d found. Gradually it became single lane, winding and undulating. If you’re doing Lands End to John O’Groats at a more leisurely pace, then I highly recommend this route – it’s beautiful. But if you’re trying to set a world record, it’s better to stick to the main road.

At Whitchurch, more riders joined me and rode with me until my next stop. Word of my record attempt was out, and people were popping up all over the place. When I started the journey, my Facebook group had just 100 followers. By the end, it was ten times that number. Charitable donations were also increasing.

I got my one and only puncture near

Warrington, and fixed it under the lights of a pub. Then near Wigan, I found another “short cut” – a cycle path. It looked like it cut off a big corner, so I decided to chance it. But that turned out to be another mistake. The cycle path went on forever, but eventually it came out at a canal lock gate which I had to negotiate in the dark. Over the lock, then down some steps, then through a kissing gate. This was dreadful.

I ended up in some woods, trying to follow a cinder track. I wasn’t exactly lost, but it certainly wasn’t where I wanted to be. Eventually I popped out on to the road, relieved to see streetlights once again. I was still a long way from my destination, and it was now almost midnight.

I got my second wind, and found Daniel Jones waiting for me outside Preston to help navigate me through. He’d noticed that I’d plotted another “adventure” route through the town and decided to save me from myself. I was incredibly grateful. A little further along the route, one of my old cycling friends from Portsmouth met me and kept me company all the way into Lancaster, where we arrived, in the rain at 3am. Somehow, despite numerous delays, and terrible navigation choices, I’d managed to ride 216 miles. But on day three Storm Francis was due, and judging by the rain, it was already really close.

The next day started cold, dark, wet and windy. I’d managed less than three hours sleep. My plotted route out of Lancaster was over a bridge that was closed, so I started my day going round in circles trying to get to the other side of a river. Eventually I was on my way, following a coastal road overlooking Morecombe Bay. Despite being fully waterproofed, the north wind just drove the heavy rain through almost everything. My glasses were useless. My Garmin was

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wrapped in plastic – which steamed up. I couldn't see the directions. I couldn't tell where I needed to go. This turned out to be a bigger problem than the rain and wind.

Somehow I made it through Kendal, over Shap, and then through Penrith. By Carlisle I was struggling to go on. I was wet, tired, and exceptionally hungry. I stopped at the van for much longer than I should have, but eventually, there was a break in the rain, so I changed into dry clothes and set off for Greta Green and Scotland. The sun came out, and my mood improved – despite the terrible road surfaces and the saddle sores they would induce.

As night fell, the rain and the wind returned, and then sleep deprivation started to kick in just to add to the misery. By 10pm I was done. I was more than a whole leg down on my day – 65 miles short. I figured that if I could sleep for a couple of hours, I could get back on the road and make a dent into that final 65 miles. This became a bit of a theme as the ride progressed and I failed day after day to get into my fourth leg, as sleep deprivation began to plague me.

Day four didn't start too well. I woke after three hours and headed into the night to try to complete the missing leg from the day before. The wind hadn't subsided, but the rain had reduced to a



PICTURE: MARTIN MOORE

drizzle. It was dark and cold. I was more tired than I cared to admit. The next stop was Hamilton, but it was still 35 miles away. The road quality was poor, and I was beginning to feel very tender. Despite an empty road, I opted to ride on the cycle path that ran alongside the road, not because of safety, but for comfort. Much of the segregated path was new and nicely surfaced. The road was doing me too much damage. My pace had slowed to less than 12 mph.

A good route through Glasgow had been provided to me and I made surprisingly good progress. The sun came out, and I started to enjoy the ride again. Sunshine always makes the day seem better. I was also really looking forward to the Loch Lomond stretch. It didn't disappoint.

By now, the ride was way off schedule, so we rejigged start and stop points and the new aim for the day was to at least make it to Fort William. It seemed like a sensible destination and would enable me to make good progress towards John O'Groats the next day.

I was back into the rhythm of my pre-determined 50 mile legs again, although at a slower pace than planned. I was soon heading into the mountains. The ride was amazing – the storm, the saddle sores and the tiredness just melted away. I was in the Highlands, and I was in heaven. As the sun began to set, I reached the top of an area called Black Mountain. Del was waiting for me. It was the most stunning sunset, among the most beautiful scenery.

I knew that time wasn't on my side, but there are times when you just need to take in nature. At that moment I just wanted to soak it in. It didn't matter what happened before or after, this was the moment of the ride that I most wanted to remember.

But it had to end. I still had many miles to complete. I gave Del a clear instruction to not go too far ahead, as I might need a clothing adjustment and a hot drink before reaching Glencoe.

I hadn't thought to put on full finger gloves, and as day turned to night I began to shiver. Del was nowhere to be seen, and I needed to warm up. At last, I saw the familiar flashing beacon from the top of Dora. The cold brought out my angry side, and I launched into a verbal attack on my poor husband who was standing there, armed with a hot cup of tea. The tea was really needed – but Del told me to drink it quickly and leave, as I needed to make progress. This did nothing for my angry mood. I wrapped up in another layer and

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PICTURE: PAUL LEENINGS

Top banana... fruity snacks near Whitchurch

## INSPIRATION

In February 2020, Marcia and a group of friends, together with coach Trevor Payne, attended Mark Beaumont's Around the World in 80 days lecture tour. Beaumont, a British cyclist, holds the record for cycling round the world, completing his 18,000 mile route in September 2017. "I think this was a pivotal moment in toughening my mind," says Marcia. "I listened and learned. This was education rather than entertainment.

"It was his approach to the ride that was most significant. He said that trying to get your head around riding 18,000 miles was daunting – it could break you. So instead he split his ride up into 4 x 4 hour rides a day, with rest breaks or sleep in between. I realised that I could use this approach – this was how I was going to tackle the event."

In order to achieve the Guinness time of 8.5 days, she was going to have to ride around 200 miles a day, and be on the road for 16 hours a day, sometimes longer. "That didn't leave much time for sleep," she says, "but I'd worked out I could function on four hours sleep a night, with a few slightly longer sleeps along the way. Of course I'd never put this to the test for eight days in a row."

set off into the darkness to complete the pass towards Ballachulish. Once through the pass, the road levelled out. I was now at Loch Leven, with the lights of Fort William ahead. I needed to talk to someone – so I called my coach and just let off steam.

On Day five I woke feeling more energized and set off around 7am after a quick breakfast. Del followed along an hour later and met me further on, armed with a full McDonalds breakfast of pancakes and maple syrup. It was the perfect energy boost. The route from there cut across country towards Inverness, following Loch Ness.

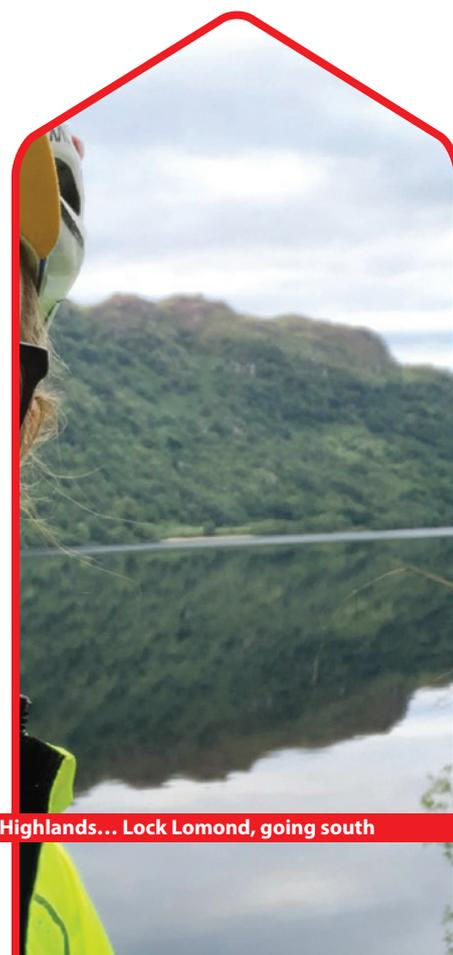
To avoid having to deal with Inverness, I'd decided to cut across country, despite knowing that there was a very steep hill that would need climbing. My logic was that even if I had to get off and push it would be easier and quicker than dealing with Inverness traffic. I was right, and despite this hill reaching 21 per cent at its steepest point, I didn't have to push. I did find it amusing though that the moment that I stopped to catch my breath, my phone rang, and it was none other than Katie Butler calling me for a chat to see how I was doing. That was such a welcome interruption. From there, the road through to Beaulieu and on to Dingwall was lovely.

“ I arrived at the A9 – at rush hour. It was the angriest road of the ride so far. There was zero tolerance for a lone cyclist, and it wasn't long before I was looking for an alternative route. ”

Eventually I arrived at the A9 – at rush hour. It was the angriest road of the ride so far. There was zero tolerance for a lone cyclist, and it wasn't long before I was looking for an alternative route. At Tain I ate again, to ready myself for the night slog to John O'Groats. I wanted to get there before the end of day five so that maybe I could still complete the ride in ten days. I'd resigned myself to the fact I wasn't going to finish within the original target of 8.5 days.

The drizzle came and went, and temperatures plummeted. As I reached Helmsdale, I reflected on messages I'd received from Lynne Biddulph, the current female LEJOG world record holder, and the other record holders who were willing me forward.

The new road had been opened only the week before, and it was glorious – the best I'd ever ridden. I reached Dunbeath to find Del waving at me in the middle of the road, directing me to the van. I knew I needed sleep, even if just an hour or two. I



Leaving the Highlands... Lock Lomond, going south



sent a message to the dotwatchers who'd been waiting up to see if I was going to get to John O'Groats, and told them to sleep. I'd make a fresh bid for the turnaround point in the morning.

After around an hour's sleep, I was up again, heading towards Wick just as the sun came up. It was windy, and there was still the odd rain shower, but the morning was amazing. I rode the final few miles to John O'Groats to find Del waiting for me, cup of tea in hand. I was slightly outside my new target, but I'd made the halfway point in five days, one hour and 45 minutes.

I left John O'Groats at 8.30am, looking forward to having a mighty tailwind but it was not to be. There was a fierce cross wind, and although slightly favourable, the gusts threatened to throw me off the bike. This was one of the most stressful legs. It was physically draining. Tiredness had caught up with me. Del, aware that I'd been craving pie and chips for days, spotted a chippy – and delivered. It was already 6.30pm when I left Brora. After Tain and as darkness fell, so did my ability to stay awake. I struggled to stay upright. The southbound A9 seemed to be endless. I arrived at the Cromarty Bridge junction to see the familiar orange flashing beacon. I handed my bike to Del, ate, and then settled down to sleep.

I was on the road again by 7.30am on

day seven. Around Inverness I was trying to navigate from memory – not the best idea after six sleep-deprived days. But once on the right track, I was heading alongside Loch Ness again. My saddle sores were causing me real problems, and I was struggling to sit. My pace was slow. I needed to freewheel as much as possible due to the pain.

A dotwatcher who learned that Del was about to depart, offered to take over support for a couple of days and see me through past the Lake District with her mobile home. We met up with Nicky, her dog Meg, and her five-star mobile home at Glencoe and hit it off straight away.

She parked at the top of the first of the Glencoe climbs, with food – a jacket potato I'd craved since day one. It was the best I'd ever tasted. Once more I'd reached these mountains at sunset, and once again, it was stunning. But this time there was no stopping to lap it up – I was already so far behind, and the temperature was dropping quickly. I was cold and tired. When I spotted Nicky near Crainlarich, I knew it was time to stop. The pain and sleep deprivation had caught up with me, and I was wasting huge amounts of time.

After breakfast on day eight I set off along the banks of Loch Lomond, and was joined for the first time in days by another rider. Michelle rode with me as far as Dumbarton. It was lovely to be riding with someone again.

Through Glasgow I retraced my route and was met with yet more riders – Martin, Alan, Ian and young Frazer, who rode with me to Hamilton. The company made the hours pass quickly, and I finally started to feel warmth in the sunshine. I was eating well, and my energy was restored. The goal for the day was no sleep until we crossed the border into England. Could I get down to Lands End in two days and a few hours? In theory it was possible, but I wasn't moving at anywhere near my original pace.

I struggled again with tiredness on day nine but navigated Penrith without any issue, and headed towards Shap Fell which was where my journey with Nicky was due to end. I was comfortable that once I got to Kendal, it would be much easier to fend for myself, and I was happy to go solo.

The target for the day was Shrewsbury. Loads of riders came to join me for short sections of the day – too many to mention by name. In Wigan, Norman Lomax cooked pasta for me. It was great. He rode with me through Wigan and Warrington so I didn't make the same mistakes as I had going northbound. Company helped to keep me awake, but it was clear I wasn't going to get

## PREPARING FOR LEJOGLE

A world record has always been on Marcia's bucket list. She did some research and found there wasn't a female record for riding LeJoGLE "I figured I only had a short window of opportunity before someone much faster than me would either set it or break it," she says. "So I decided to be the one to set it... even if I only held it for one day."

As the pandemic gripped the country, Marcia spent the time planning. She submitted her record request to Guinness. "They confirmed the record was there to be set – but they decided I'd have just seven days to ride it," she says. "I'd originally planned on it taking between 10 and 12 days, so that was a shock. I appealed and they compromised – with eight days and 12 hours."

Marcia felt she could do the ride in 10 days. "It was within my ability" she says. "But now I had to adapt my training to increase my mileage to 200 miles a day"

There followed many weeks of careful route planning, choosing mainly main roads for speed. It was also important to plot a course which avoided Covid hot spots. Ultimately she chose a route popular with other "End to Enders". But working from maps doesn't always paint the whole picture. "In hindsight I don't know why I didn't just ask the Audax community," she says. "There would have been a wealth of local knowledge, which would have definitely improved the route."

anywhere near to Shrewsbury that night. I made it to Northwich, considerably short of where I had hoped to end up.

Temporary insanity still had me believing that even though it was already now day ten, I might still be able to make Lands End by the end of the next day. My theory was that if I could get over the Severn Bridge that day, it was only 200 miles to the end, and I had done that northbound by 11pm, so why couldn't I do it again southbound and finish before midnight? But things were now quite different.

The day started slowly and didn't really get much better until I left Hereford. First, I stopped for breakfast at a lovely canal side café, staying way too long. Then I discovered that my phone battery wasn't lasting long, but I didn't have a charger on me. I sent an SOS to Paul Jennings, who had offered his services for 'anything you might need' when passing through the Whitchurch area. He came armed with a battery pack, oil for my chain (it was grinding terribly), some food, and some cheer. He drove back to the café where I had breakfast, and rescued the high-vis jacket that I had left behind, then met me further down the road. I very much needed his cheer, as I had become a bit of an emotional wreck.

Then I called Del who gave me good news. He was able to come back – support me, carry my stuff, feed me and be a mobile bed again. I called Trevor, my coach, and had another cry. I met Del at Hereford, where I was fed, changed into clean clothes, and ditched much of what I was carrying. It was midnight before I left, after just 100 miles ridden.

Andy Stewart, an experienced LEJOGLE rider, came out to meet me between Hereford and Monmouth. Having someone riding with me helped to keep me awake. We stopped for a moment at Tintern Abbey, just to look at it all lit up, and then made it our mission to get over the Severn Bridge. On the bridge, sleep deprivation hit. No matter what I did, I just couldn't keep my eyes open. Even though my accommodation was only a mile away, I had to stop riding and shut my eyes. We finally arrived at the Severn View services at 4am. The total mileage was just 135 miles, and I'd ridden for only 11 hours.

I still harboured the delusional feeling that I could reach Lands End either by the end of the day, or in the early hours. If I did it before 6.38am I would still have ridden it in 10 days and some hours.

On day 11 I made steady progress

through Portishead, towards Weston-Super-Mare, and on to Bridgwater. I was so relieved as I headed towards Taunton to see the familiar sight of Steve, my motorbike outrider. He was now going to ride with me all the way to the end. I was overjoyed. The remaining miles through Somerset and into Devon are a bit of a blur.

I had another nap on a bench on the road to Exeter, and another in a bus shelter – all very Audax-like, but not particularly world record-like. I was really struggling, and just wanted it to be over.

There were only 100 miles to go, but it was the longest 100 miles of my life. I knew I just needed to keep moving, but that was easier said than done. I was still struggling with saddle sores, and was feeling every bump. I lacked energy, and I was only staying awake with Red Bull and coffee.

Heavy rain then set in. Steve and I were stopped by the police and they asked if we would leave the A30 and find another route! We were escorted off

before Bodmin and had to navigate from there to the services further on.

I made such slow progress and struggled to pedal up the hills but I was determined to keep moving. I'd only one objective – just finish. Even being topped up with Red Bull and coffee wasn't helping me to stay awake.

At Penzance I was joined by more riders, including my son, who guided me along the Penzance seafront and on to the Lands End road. Suddenly I felt a second wind and upped my pace. I just couldn't wait to get to the end.

I arrived at the entrance to Lands End around 7.30pm, riding through the visitor centre towards the famous signpost, with my new peloton following me, just in time for an amazing sunset. I'd done it.

Throughout the journey I was joined by my "invisible peloton" – hundreds of strangers whose kindness and support was out of this world. I apologise to all those who came out to ride with me whose names I haven't mentioned. It's been a truly horrible year for so many, so I am extra grateful to each and every person for supporting both me and my charity.



End once more... with her son Daniel Smith at the finishing post

## Mental Health

Marcia was determined there should be a point to the ride, other than simply personal achievement. "I'm not as young as I was, and have always been a very ordinary, non-athletic person," she says. "I wanted to show that you didn't need to be young and fit to do something epic. It just takes a strong will and lots of determination – Audax teaches you that.

"But I also wanted to raise money and awareness for mental health. I became very aware of the impact of the pandemic on my own mental health, and that of some good friends. I could see that mental health services were going to be required every bit as much as medical services – and yet charitable mental health funding dried up overnight as all normal fundraising events were being cancelled. I just wanted to help."

She has, to date, raised more than £11,000 for Solent Mind, a mental health charity...and fundraising is still open. You can donate at <https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/marcia-roberts>

