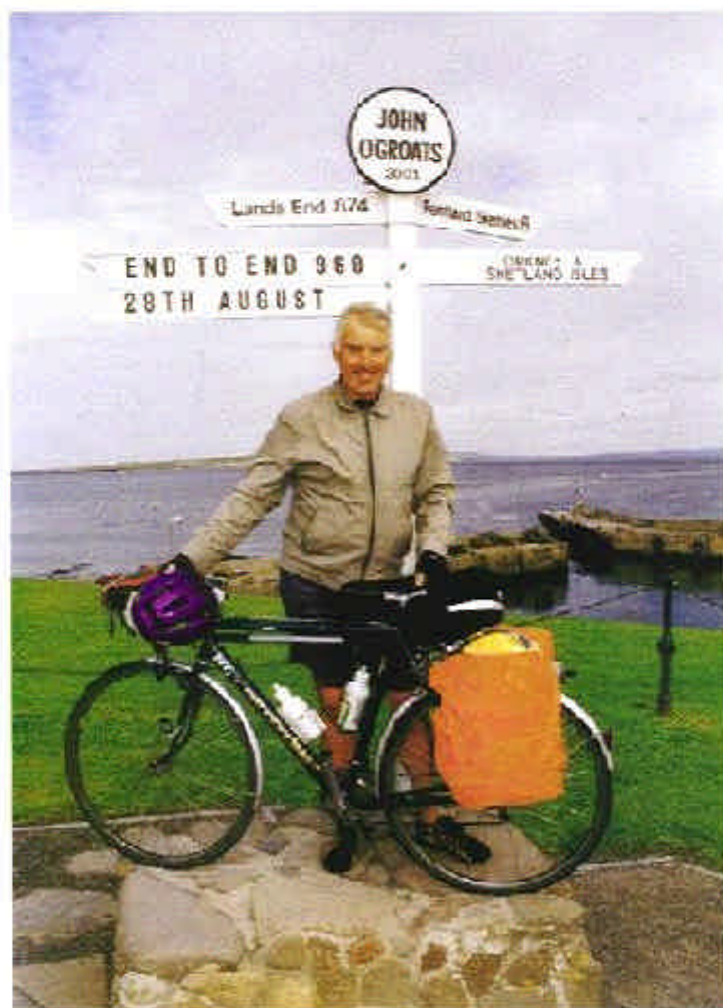


Land's End to John O'Groats Adventure

August 2001

by Derek Hunter



Dear Friends,

Well, I actually managed to undertake and complete the above, much to my own surprise. My wife, however, thought that I had a screw loose - why would anyone in their right mind want to ride so far and alone at that. The task however is definitely not for the faint hearted, but provided some care is taken with the planning and with a degree of luck, like having the prevailing wind behind you, a reasonably fit person should be able to complete the ride.

There are of course many other factors that can contribute and affect the outcome. Having good equipment, taking care about how to approach the task, and realising one's limitations are absolutely crucial. I rode a Cannondale aluminium framed bike with a 21 ratio Shimano gear system, Mavic road wheels with series 32 x 700 tyres and click pedals - these were just right for the job.

I did not undertake any special preparations for this adventure as I do attempt to ride the bike all the year round. In the winter, I ride in local club reliability trials in the north Kent area and during the spring/summer/autumn period, several charity events with mileages from say 25 through 100. I have also previously ridden in overseas charity events in Jordan and Egypt, and therefore am familiar with riding high mileages day after day. I have been looking for another challenge to undertake before really old age arrives. I had been considering the End to End ride for some time and came to the conclusion that in this my 63rd year, I had better get going while the enthusiasm and capability were still there. I am well aware that people much older than me have undertaken and have been successful in completing this ride but I did not want to take the risk in waiting any longer.

Therefore, one morning in mid July I sat down with an O/S 3 miles to the inch map, together with some data obtained from the CTC and the 'LE To J O'G - East of the Pennines Route' web page, and plotted a route and booked the whole thing up in about 2 hours - this included the train journeys from London to Penzance as well as from Wick to Inverness and then back to London, together with all the overnight stops for a total period of 16 days. I dismantled the O/S map book into convenient sized maps and together with a list of key points, placed each days ride into my map holder on the handlebar bag. The first and last days were spent on the train journeys and the ride covered 14 days at an average of about 70 plus miles per day. I also needed to be in touch with my business office during the weekdays and this was successfully achieved without too much inconvenience via a mobile phone.

Other criteria for me were to do the journey unaided and alone - no support car or back up supplies and no one for me to hinder, or be hindered by. I rode from home to Paddington and then back home from Kings Cross on arrival from Inverness. I carried all I needed in two medium sized panniers and one handlebar bag. In hindsight, it was probably a little too much luggage, but none the less, it was manageable and did enable me to look reasonably normal in the evenings when I was dining in restaurants.

Initially, I considered to do the ride just for me, but on further consideration, felt that such an effort should at least benefit others if at all possible, so I got in touch with St Christopher's Hospice in Sydenham, London and they kindly prepared some sponsorship leaflets and I have managed to collect in a short time, £1,000.00 which has now been forwarded to them, with more to follow.

I also decided to use Travel Inns, Welcome Lodges and similar types of accommodation with only a couple of B & B's at locations where lodges were not available. This did make it a little more expensive but the facilities available at each lodge ie showers, heated towel rails, on site

eating facilities etc. provided more comfort, convenience and meant that I did not have to go hunting around for places to dine in the evenings. The pre booking also ensured a place to stay as well as an objective to reach each day.

As this write-up is intended to be of some use to others who may contemplate undertaking a Land's End to John O'Groats venture, I now provide some detail of the route I took and whether variations should be made and why, together with comment on clothing, food, and other matters.....

I looked at routes others had taken and decided that the shortest distance of 874 miles involved all main roads and in particular the A9 which is hilly and very busy and was not recommended by those in the know. Other less direct routes however, at well over 1000 miles seemed just too long. I therefore looked to compromise by using some yellow and white roads in the early and later stages of the ride - also to take a middle route over Shap and through Dunoon rather than the westerly course via Arran or that through Edinburgh to total about 960 miles which should be possible in the 14 riding days I had made available.

I arrived in Penzance at about 4 o'clock on the Tuesday afternoon the 14th August 01, then rode on down towards Lands End and began to discover some minor problems with the bike. For some reason, the rear brake had got out of adjustment and required to be completely reset to stop it rubbing. I also discovered that engagement of the smallest chain ring was going to be a problem and needed to be selected well before it was really needed, for under load, it just would not engage properly. This difficulty was to occur throughout the ride and eventually required the fitting of a new chain as the existing chain became damaged after wrapping itself round the bottom bracket several times. The extra weight of the pannier etc also had to be got used to and may have contributed to the above..

Prior to the ride, I had not really tried out or tested a fully laden bike and I would therefore advise anybody to do this without reservation. Minor irritations that one might note during local rides, should be addressed, as they can become major problems on a trip like this. I was lucky and managed to accommodate the problems as they arose, but to a less mechanically minded person, these difficulties could have ruined their attempt.

Well back to the ride - once I reached Lands End, I went through the usual ritual of signing in and having photographs taken before setting off back along the A30 towards John O'Groats. For me, this meant 1 mile for I was to stay at the Old Manor Hotel in **Sennen** and very nice it was.

In the morning, I woke up to diabolical weather - it was misty with a steady drizzle - not the best omen for a 1000 mile bike ride. I set off in good spirit on the first 65 plus mile stage to Lostwithiel and it was not long before I and everything I was carrying, was soaked through as I had not really prepared properly for a wet all day ride. I proceeded off the A30 through Penzance and then headed due east via the A394, then through Trescowe along minor roads to emerge on to the A39/A390 at Penryn and then via Truro, St Austell and on to **Lostwithiel**. Whilst the minor roads were nice to ride on (not withstanding the weather), the main road was a nightmare in the rain and quite dangerous, but other than going well off track, there seemed no other way. There were also some pretty formidable hills, particularly Penpillick just before Lostwithiel, most of which I walked up and it was with great relief that I clocked into Mrs Sanders B & B and with the assistance of an Aga, managed to dry everything out. For the rest of the ride, I made sure that the panniers were fully covered with the orange waterproof covers that had been provided.

The next day started out much better as I made my way out through Liskeard still on the A390 and on towards Tavistock. Just after Callington, I took the side road up Kit Hill and headed through the lanes towards Okehampton. However, the weather changed for the worse in the afternoon with frequent showers and more prolonged rain squalls. This minor road route also proved to be very hilly as seems to be the norm in the west country, but eventually I reached the Travelodge at **Okehampton West** from the A386. Whilst the day had only been 40 miles long, due to the rain and the hills, it seemed to take for ever. If I were to undertake this adventure again, I would catch the earlier train from London, get down to Penzance as quickly as possible and start to ride back to cover 25 to 30 miles the first day. I would then take the A30 route which is the main road but mainly dual carriageway with less steep hills - it also reduces the overall time by one day - however, it rather depends on what one is trying to achieve.

The next day, the weather started good and remained so which was a great relief. The route was also very picturesque but hilly all the way through to Tiverton using the B3215 out of Okehampton, A3072, A377 and A3072. Beyond there on the A361 and A38 to **Sedgemoor** via Taunton, the road, whilst busy, was quite easy to ride and I arrived at the Welcome Lodge after nearly 80 miles, in good shape and for a change, did not have to dry out.

On each morning, I have tried to rise early and breakfast as soon after 7am as possible to allow an early start. It seems much better to get most of the days riding in before lunch with say one mid morning stop - this then makes the afternoon a much more leisurely experience and with one or two exceptions, I was able to maintain this process throughout the two weeks.

My fourth day did not start well. The weather had again turned very wet and was to stay as such all day. I also lost my balance on the bike in the car-park and fell over on to the panniers and gear system due to the road camber and heavy load. Fortunately, I got away with only a cut leg - it could have been much worse. I set off through the lanes making for Avonmouth, got off route and found myself heading towards Weston-Super-Mare on the A370. This cost time and I was well displeased - I eventually got onto the correct route B3133/B3124 found the cycle routes to negotiate the Avon Bridge and was then en route through Avonmouth on the A403 to the Severn Bridge crossing into South Wales. The A466 to Monmouth was most pleasant, but the route onwards to Hereford onto the A49, very hilly. Perhaps if the weather had not been quite so diabolical, the ride could have been much more pleasant, but it was not. I also had one of the pannier brackets fail, leaving the pannier rolling down the road. This was no doubt damaged when the bike fell over. I was able to refit the pannier on to the bike by devising an alternative strapping system which held up for the rest of the ride. My panniers had plastic hanging brackets which did seem subject to shear failure so I would recommend metal brackets to anyone wishing to use panniers. Arriving in **Hereford** at the Travel Inn was a great relief after over 90 miles and the evening was spent drying out, with the hope that for the rest of the ride, the weather may be better.

From Hereford, my route was to take me all the way up the A49 until it meets with the A6 at Preston, but before that, there was a slight deviation to Nantwich in Cheshire at about 82 miles. This part of the ride was on relatively level roads with none of the sharp up and downs of the last few days. The weather was again rather fickle with sharp showers and some continuous rain towards the end on the day. During the late afternoon, I found myself on the same course as the Mid Cheshire 12 hour event as it was a Sunday. Of course, they would all steam past me with much gusto but I did stop at one of the feeding stations to get a flavour of the event. Most had only an hour or so to go on the final circuit, but I needed to get moving, so it was on to the Premier Lodge in **Nantwich** after another soaking.

The next day, I had intended to go only as far as the Travelodge near Lancaster, but the weather looked good for a change, so I arranged to ride further on into Carnforth and stay at Mrs Craigs B & B - this totalled about 90 miles for the day. I was feeling in good shape and found that I was pushing larger and larger gears as I seemed to be getting fitter as time went on. I had read from other riders of this course that this may be the case. The section through Warrington was rather busy, but once clear of Wigan, the going was great, until I reached Preston. Here, it seemed that all the traffic lights turned to red whenever I arrived at them. I felt that it took for ever to get clear of the town, but the consolation was the run up to **Carnforth** with a good cycle lane on a good surface.

The next day was for me, going to be the real test of this ride - the make or break ascent of Shap. In my mind, I had made this day the difference between success and failure. In the event, it really turned out to be a bit of an anti climax. The morning ride up from Carnforth to Kendal was most plegsant and the early slopes to the final climb up Shap were nothing like as bad as I had thought they would be. Mind, I did have the wind in my favour and this really did help me to ride all the way to the top at 1400 ft without a break. The descent down into Shap village was most exhilarating and I rewarded myself with a second breakfast of the day. From then on all the way through to the Welcome Lodge at **Gretna Green** on the A6, the road was good and the weather fair until the last half hour when the drizzle returned. Mileage for the day was plus 75 so I was glad to have given a little from the previous day.

I was now in Scotland, but in fact, still only half way to John O'Groats. There was no going back - the ride had to be completed come what may, and I was really looking forward to visiting many parts of Scotland that I had never been to before, but before that, a few notes about food, drink, clothing and accessories.

I carried very little on the ride in the way of food and drink; two bottles of orange glucose and a few kit-kat bars. I had a good breakfast each morning at about 7 o'clock - normally a mid morning break - sometimes another breakfast, and a good pub type lunch in the early afternoon with the occasional beer - maybe an afternoon stop if the day was long. In the evening, at least a two sometimes a three course dinner in a Beefeater or similar style restaurant between 7 & 8 o'clock. Sleep did not come easily, going over the days events and contemplating the next days ride - however, I was always able to rise the next morning without problem.

As well as the panniers and handle bar bag, I used a plastic map carrier to hold the map of the day mounted on the front bag, a fold up tyre, two innertubes, a basic tool kit, a cycle lock and a couple of small halogen lamps in case of a night time emergency on the road and a camera with lots of spare film to record interesting aspects of the ride.

Clothing on a ride like this is most important. I rode in shorts all the time as I do through most of the year. I had one pair of lycra cycling shorts, some cycling underpants, a pair or regular shorts for some days and train rides and some slacks for the evening. I used three cycling tops (one long the others short sleeved), a small jacket and the usual wind/showerproof top - these were sufficient to cover the variations of hot, cold and rain that were encountered. As well as a crash hat, worn all the time, cycling gloves, glasses and click on shoes, the other most useful item were some waterproof shoe gaiters - whilst they did not always keep the water out, they did keep the feet and lower legs warm especially in the worst weather. I did try an old style cape one day, but it was near useless. For the evenings, a couple of tee shirts and trainers proved to be adequate. I showered every evening and paid very special attention to the rear end, bathing it carefully and applying liberal amounts of Savlon which seemed to work as I was relatively free of a sore bum for the whole ride. I also had a personal hygiene bag with razor, soap, first aid kit, headache tablets and other nick nacks.

Leaving Gretna Green early the next day in the mist, the journey to Dumfries on the A75 took little time. However, I would recommend that the B724 through Annan could be a better and less busy route. I was now on the main A76 to Kilmarnock and it was to be a long day with over 90 miles to cover. It was here that I met up with another end to ender who had spent 2 weeks getting to this place against my one week. She was taking a more devious route involving the yellow and white roads and where possible, cycle tracks. I spent some time with her up to Thornhill where we had lunch together, but I found that we had only covered about 20 miles in 4 hours and it was already mid afternoon. I then set off to finish the day and it was well past 7 in the evening before I arrived in **Kilmarnock** at the Travel Inn. This was by far the longest day I spent travelling. It was nice to have company for a while, but the interlude did not suit my ride objective - at least the weather had been kind although a little cold.

Leaving Kilmarnock the next morning, did involve some dual carriageway riding for a while up to Stevenston, but beyond there, the A78 up through Largs to Gourock was most pleasant and reasonably flat. It was on this section that I had the chain problems and determined that a new chain could be a worthwhile investment before getting into the wilds of Scotland. The Ferry crossing to Hunters Quay was quick and convenient and by recommendation of a very nice Scottish couple out cycling for the day, I visited the only cycle shop in Dunoon where the chain was replaced and the gear system adjusted - even so, I still had some minor gear problems during the rest of the trip. The ride from Dunoon on the A815 round the loch to the Fernpoint Hotel in **Inveraray** was one of the highlights of the ride to date - the weather was great, the scenery lovely and the breeze behind me. Inveraray was also most picturesque and well worth another visit at a later date - mileage for this day was just under 80.

It was another early start on the way to Fort William. In my original planning, I intended to turn left off the A819 and go west along the A85/A828 & A82 to Fort William. However, the landlord of my overnight stay in Inveraray suggested I turn right instead and then left up Glen Orchy to meet the A82 through to Fort William - it turned out to be much shorter but the climb over Black Mount to 1114 ft and the run to the lunch break at the White Hotel on the West Highland Way was quite difficult. The ride through Glen Orchy however was well worth the effort - very quiet, single track road with many good views of the river and its rapids. There was a short climb after lunch and then a long pleasant descent down through Glen Coe and across the bridge at Ballachulish to the Travel Inn at **Fort William**. No rain, fair winds, a bit cold and less than 70 miles instead of the plus 85 I had been expecting.

I was now getting well into Scotland - the weather in the south was very hot - about 90 deg, but up here, it was in the mid teens C and warranted windproofs. All was well up to Spean bridge on the A82 where I had another falling over, fortunately onto a grass verge. This was due to being unable to unlatch the click pedal whilst on a steep ascent when the gear would not select downwards. It could have been worse. It was then plain sailing through to Fort Augustus for lunch. From here, there are two ways - one along the A82 on the north side of Loch Ness to Inverness - the other up the B862 and along the B852 on the south side of the loch - they are both about the same distance, but the B route is the more picturesque. However, to use the B route, one has to encounter a very steep and long climb out of Fort Augustus - it must have taken me well over an hour to walk up the hill, but I was well rewarded for the effort by wonderful views all the way down to the **Inverness** with nice warm sunshine, 65 miles for the day and being the 25th August 01, my 63rd birthday, a very fitting end to the day. Inverness Travel Inn was my lodge for the night and that evening, I had an extra special dinner.

One of the problems with this type of schedule is that one gets very little time to see the places one stays at or travel through - at least one gets a taste and I have every intention of coming

again, particularly to Scotland, to visit many of the places I have passed through - and that definitely means Fort William and Inverness.

With just two days of riding left, I was looking forward to the next phase of the ride as it would be through very remote areas. The morning ride out of Inverness was uneventful, but one sees the signposts to John O'Groats on the A9 showing just over 100 miles whereas the route I was taking would be close to 130 miles. After passing Dingwell, I took the B9176 to climb over the hills down to Bonar Bridge on the A836. From Bonar Bridge, the road again rises up through Lairg (a very pleasant looking place) and on past Dalchork towards Altnaharra. The road is single track with the occasional car and the odd cyclist. The last 5 mile descent into **Altnaharra** was most welcome and it was very nice to receive the hospitality of Mr & Mrs Barry.

The evening before I had a brief encounter with the local midges but in the morning whilst loading the panniers on to the bike, I really came under a concerted attack. I am sure that Altnaharra must be the world centre for midges for my legs and arms were covered in bites and it took a couple of weeks before the itching stopped. I even had insect repellent with me but had failed to use it in time. Once clear of Altnaharra, the B873 through Syre was an easy ride all the way to the north coast, but it was again chilly and there was some light rain. After a brief stop at the Tourist Office cum cafe at Bettyhill, I set off along the A836 towards Thurso and found the road had far more hills than I had expected. After another brief lunch stop in Melvich, I arrived in Thurso late afternoon and clocked into the Station Hotel having covered just under 60 miles.

Over the period of the ride, one meets up with some most interesting people. I have already noted above, the young lady I met briefly near Dumfries and I hope that she did successfully complete her adventure. I also met several other end to enders, the first in fact, as far back as Tiverton. There were two young ladies with a support car covering the journey in just 9 days and I am sure they were successful. There was also the young man I met up with on his last day covering the section Lairg to John O'Groats who had a three car entourage - he was not enjoying the ride and would never ever consider such a venture again - but I am sure he did finish his 10 day stint..

I also met up with an older gentleman accompanied by his granddaughter. They were riding with a support car from John O'Groats to Land's End - because they lived in the West Country and thought that this would be the best way round to travel. They were 6 days into their ride and were suffering head winds all the time - I saw them just south of Penrith with still a very long way to go. Perhaps, if time was not of the essence, they may well have got home. The last couple I met was on the train from Wick to Inverness. They had finished the day before me after taking about a month to complete the ride. As a holiday adventure, they were very well equipped and had obviously enjoyed the whole experience. I also met up with several other casual cyclists on short tours or the like and it was very useful to hear their comments on the terrain ahead.

Next day, the 28th August 2001, was to be the last stage of the riding adventure and I was somewhat sad as the ritual of each day had become quite exciting with an end in view. The last 20 miles was reeled off in good time and I arrived at John O'Groats in the mid morning. In fact I got to the famous signpost having clocked just under 960 miles total and found myself quite alone. It was sometime after I had signed in at the "The Last House in Scotland" that some visitors and the photographer appeared. This time, unlike my start at Land's End, I had a professional picture taken and the result is quite good. After having a light snack and a quick look around the few shops, I set off back along the road to Wick feeling in good spirit.

It was during the 18 mile ride to Wick, that I really appreciated the prevailing wind I had enjoyed for the most part of my journey up from Land's End. It turned out to be quite a slog and the thought of having to battle 1000 miles of headwinds in either direction would have filled me with horror. I am aware that some have done this and they have my most sincere admiration. The train from Wick to Inverness left in the late afternoon and the journey through the wild countryside was most pleasant. After an overnight stop over in Inverness at the Travel Inn, I caught the very full 07.55 am direct train service back to Kings Cross, London and then completed the final 15 mile ride back to my home in Bromley Kent.

My wife had seen me out of the back gate on the morning of the 14th and I arrived back through the same gate in the late afternoon of the 29th August 01, having ridden over 1000 miles in total, in a period of 16 days and without support. Whilst I encountered rather more rain than I had hoped for, in general, the weather was fair and never too hot. August made the roads rather busy, especially in the west country, so another summer month may have been better, but who can tell. My original criteria for the ride had therefore been met and other than some minor changes to the route and perhaps slightly cheaper accommodation, I would not wish to alter anything if I were ever to consider undertaking such a foolhardy venture again.

This is a worthwhile adventure to any reasonably fit cyclist and I very much recommend anyone to participate - it is certainly an experience to look back on for the rest of one's life.

A satisfied finisher.

Derek Hunter






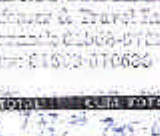
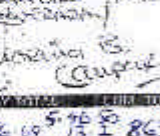




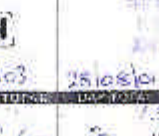
PS If anyone ever wanted to call me to discuss any aspect of my ride, then please feel free to do so:-

email: derekhunter@fsbdial.co.uk

OLD MARKET
120A
LANE 2ND
TR19 2AD
01752 675307

Highway 1 Day
Lanes End
from London

LANE'S END TO JOHN O'GROATS RECORD SHEET

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
 T.A.O. 14/8/01	BED & BREAKFAST S. M. SANDERS BENTHAMS LOSTWITHIEL CORNWALL PL22 0RA TEL: 01208 972472	 800 011 1111 Travelodge Lanes End	WELCOME STEAK LTD SEDDENMOOR SERVICE ARE. MS Wolway North Road Wolway, Barnstaple Somerset EX24 4LL Tel: 01594 750491	 Travel Inn Hartland
DAY TOTAL: 1184.90	DAY TOTAL: 62.86	DAY TOTAL: 37.36	DAY TOTAL: 77.24	DAY TOTAL: 86.47
Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10
2 PREMIER LODGE Premier Lodge Hartland 201 Limes Hill, Hartland, Devon PL28 8AB Tel: 01594 750491	 Mick's Cafe Lanes End	 Wilton's Lanes End	 The Moorfield Lanes End	 Preston's Hotel Lanes End
DAY TOTAL: 533.00	DAY TOTAL: 50.60	DAY TOTAL: 2.22	DAY TOTAL: 9.20	DAY TOTAL: 26.69
Day 11	Day 12	Day 13	Day 14	Day 15
 Travel Inn Lanes End	 The Lanes End & Barnstaple Lanes End	 Station Hotel Lanes End	 Travel Inn Lanes End	 Travel Inn Lanes End
DAY TOTAL: 69.36	DAY TOTAL: 65.04	DAY TOTAL: 67.20	DAY TOTAL: 54.68	DAY TOTAL: 26.69
<p>Total 118 7948 2944 6700 approx 14-15 miles</p>				
<p>Highway 1 Day Lanes End from London</p>				
<p>14 8 '01</p>				

