

Les Slow cycles Land's End to John o' Groats in May 2015

Brave, stupid or just plain mad

When I decided that I was going to join the 940 mile ride from Land's End to John o' Groats last autumn I got a variety of reactions. Many friends were concerned for my sanity and safety though one did tell me that they knew I would do it all. I can be very focussed, some would say obsessed, and those closest and dearest to me feared that I would drive myself to the edge of destruction and beyond. On the eleventh and last day I now recognise that I was on that edge.

The Gathering

The accommodation at the Youth Hostel in Penzance was basic but the food was amazing and has rightly won awards. Food had to be high on our agenda as we were expecting to burn around 5000 calories every day. Riding with me were my youngest son Tim and also Rich Jones; for the first few days Andy Brooks was our support driver – he did a brilliant job.

Day One (Land's End to Saltash, Plymouth – 86 miles, 7110 feet ascent)



We got up early with a cunning plan to ride the 10 miles from the start back to the hostel for breakfast. It was a wonderful morning, bright and cool and the seascape looked stunning in the early sunlight. Today the breeze would be behind us. Highlights of the day included lunch at The Star Inn at Porkellis (a

fantastic community pub), discovering St Hilary and enjoying a delicious meal in an Indian restaurant in Saltash. I should have savoured the bath at the Travelodge more; it was the best of the few we would see.

Day Two (Saltash to Taunton – 79 miles, 7480 feet ascent)

We rode over the Tamar Bridge and on to Yelverton for breakfast, then tackled Dartmoor. I was amazed that my legs were still in good working order and while Tim stopped to take photos of wild ponies and beautiful landscapes I plodded along and did not have to get off my bike at all except to take in the views. As I arrived in Moretonhampstead for lunch I realised the others were not with me. Rich had had an argument with a cattle grid and was lucky to survive unscathed. As we left the café, an

elderly couple gave Andy a donation to the ride. In Taunton the hospitality at Temple Methodist Church was outstanding. We were strangers but they welcomed us like long lost friends. We went to their Saturday evening supper club and enjoyed very comfortable beds at Ron and Anne's.

Day Three (Taunton to Monmouth – 77 miles, 2490 feet ascent)



It was hard to leave such a wonderful group of people. We took part in a short early service and stayed for breakfast which, by special request, included porridge! It was also lovely to meet up with my niece Helen who lives nearby. Crossing the Severn Road Bridge seemed to take forever and the sudden appearance of the stunning

Tintern Abbey took me completely by surprise. We were sorry to say goodbye to Andy who had got us off to such a great start always anticipating our every need. But we were also very grateful to have Hilary join us as the driver for the rest of the journey.

Day Four (Monmouth to Shrewsbury – 84 miles, 4400 feet ascent)

Rain, rain and more rain. We got soaked especially Tim who hit a submerged curb in Hereford and fell off his bike into a deep puddle in front of a bemused bus queue! At Bampton Bryan we stopped to take photos of a voluptuous ancient Yew hedge and later followed part the route of the Shropshire Way through Clun and Bishop's Castle that I remembered from our walk with good friends Pete and Chris in 2012.

Day Five (Shrewsbury to Preston – 90 miles, 4020 feet ascent)

It had only occurred to me as we approached the Old Station B&B the evening before that it might be next to a railway. Trains of all shapes and sizes regularly passed within a few feet of our bedroom window all heralded by the bleeping of the adjacent level crossing. Lord Col and Lady Margaret were our hosts and we were well fed and accommodated. Rich could not resist looking up their ancestry online. Most of the day was spent in busy urban areas negotiating traffic and junctions and crossings but it was also a delight to meet again Rich's dad Nick with two chaplain colleagues in a supermarket carpark.

Day Six (Preston to Carlisle – 93 miles, 3650 feet ascent)

Tim posed for photos at the entrance to Lancaster University and went for a sprint round the block for old times' sake. In the city centre I bought a padded seat cover from a rather startled cycle shop assistant but I was



becoming increasingly desperate!

Lou and Katy met us for lunch at

Sizergh Castle. It was very hard to

move on. As the ascent of Shap Fell

began, I told Tim not to wait for me

and he quickly disappeared into the

distance. I selected my lowest gear

and put my head down. Amazingly

I was able to keep on going! The

sense of achievement at the top

was worth all the effort and I began

to think I might be able to finish this brave, stupid and just plain mad thing.

Day Seven (Carlisle to New Lanark – 80 miles, 3060 feet of ascent)

Soon after we crossed the border at Gretna Green the temperature dropped and the wind speed increased. The road surface was poor and we were never far from the drone of traffic on the M74. I punctured near the end and, to cap a hard day, the approach to the hostel involved a fierce uphill climb. I was too tired to take much notice of Robert Owen's World Heritage mill site where we were staying.

Day Eight (New Lanark to Crianlarich – 86 miles, 2610 feet ascent)

Glasgow is a great city to cycle through but for Hilary in the support car it was a real challenge and would have been impossible without a SatNav. Disaster struck when Rich's left knee finally gave way. It had been giving trouble since the second day and now was impossible to bend. He had no option but to join Hilary in the car and as Tim and I cycled on along the shores of Loch Lomond we discussed solutions. Tow rope?

Day Nine (Crianlarich to Drumnadrochit – 103 miles, 5050 feet ascent)

I was especially looking forward to the descent of Glen Coe and followed Rich down with his heavily strapped left leg pointing diagonally outwards towards unsuspecting sheep. We crossed Loch Leven at Ballachulish bridge and stopped for lunch in Morrison's carpark at Fort William. When Tim's chain jumped off, a passer-by stopped to ask about the ride

advertised by soggy signs on his bike and gave a donation. The ride up Great Glen should have been a delight but fatigue was settling in and we made the mistake of following an unsuitable forest track for 7 long miles.

Day Ten (Drumnadrochit to Crask Inn – 80 miles, 3730 feet of ascent)

At Inverness Tim and Rich were able to hire a tandem and it was wonderful to hear the giggles as they got used to three legged cycling; setting off uphill was always alarming to watch! The weather closed in and I retreated into my own shell just wanting the cold wet day to end.

Day Eleven (Crask Inn to John o' Groats – 82 miles, 3080 feet of ascent)

We needed to set off as early because we aimed to drive straight back to Bradford at the end of the day. I was in single-minded survival mode, missed my footing coming down the stairs of the bunk house and went sprawling across the floor. I hardly noticed the beautiful Loch Naver and could not believe how steep the climb was at Betty Hill as we turned east along the northern coast of Scotland. Now, the gentle undulating roads



seemed like mountains but with the wind finally behind us my eyes closed as sleep beckoned. No! I must not do that! Tim was alarmed enough when I told him what had just happened to wake me up. He said something about a final hill near the end. How unfair! I tried to keep some strength in reserve. 30 miles to go ... 20 ... 10 ... When Tim told me that we had just gone over the last hill I could not believe it. Are we there yet? Just a few more yards. Yes!

Epilogue (940 miles – 46700 feet ascent – 84 hours – all in 11 days)

I have promised that I will not do it again but may be allowed to do the Coast to Coast though the country has not been specified. Three weeks on, the wounds have healed and I am still half a stone lighter. Together we raised over £8000 and the sponsorship continues to come in. Half of my £2600 goes to “Young People Count” here in Pocklington; the rest goes to the Joshua Project in Bradford run by Rich and his team. Thanks to all those who supported me in anyway especially my long-suffering and very dear wife. The prayers and love of you all went with us. God bless. Les