

## Over the Hill at 65?

"I'm off to the cottage next week for a few days". Thus started a chain of events that would lead to me standing in front of a signpost on the shores of the Pentland Firth, against which was propped my bicycle, having my photograph taken on my phone by a passing stranger.

As long as I can remember I have secretly nursed an ambition to cycle from End to End of Britain. Lands End to John O'Groats always sounded so romantic, so enticing, so rewarding and ultimately so physically demanding that that I had never got around to doing it.



As a young man I had played Rugby to a very high level, coming close to representing my country, and was as fit as anyone of my age. Thirty years later I was ballooning into an overweight version of my former self with bad knees which gave me problems tackling the stairs and, more than likely, diabetes on the way.

Early in 2012 another former rugby player with whom I had a boozy lunch once a week said that he had been cycling and why didn't I join him. So I dug the bike out of the back of the shed, where it had lain unused for about 20 years since I completed the run from Clapham Common to Brighton in aid of the British Heart Foundation, and took him at his word. To start with it was painful, 5 miles took supreme effort and I felt extremely proud when I first managed 10 miles. We struggled on together for another 12 months, going out only at weekends but I started to get enthusiastic. By May 2013 I was into the swing of it and the old bike had to go, to be replaced by a Dawes Super Galaxy, second or more hand from ebay, and cycling suddenly became much easier. No longer was I struggling to change gear, cursing when the chain wouldn't drop to the small ring and coming to a halt on a steep hill because I physically couldn't turn the pedals. The new bike performed smoothly and sedately. Few hills were now beyond me and I started to explore further. In June, having returned from a week sailing a boat from Scotland to Cornwall, I went out



every day, managing up to 35 miles on some days and on 4<sup>th</sup> July an unbelievable 60 mile loop over Salisbury Plain that left me stiff and sore but determined to do more. My determination was helped by a natty little computer programme called Map My Ride which allows

me to log all my cycling and to plan new routes. Now I could judge what I was doing daily and working towards my next goal "The Century". 100 miles in a day is still a lot for me but in July 2013 it seemed unachievable: however on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2013 I cycled 108 miles across to Salisbury, down almost to Ringwood and back through Blandford. It took me nearly 10 hours but I DID IT!

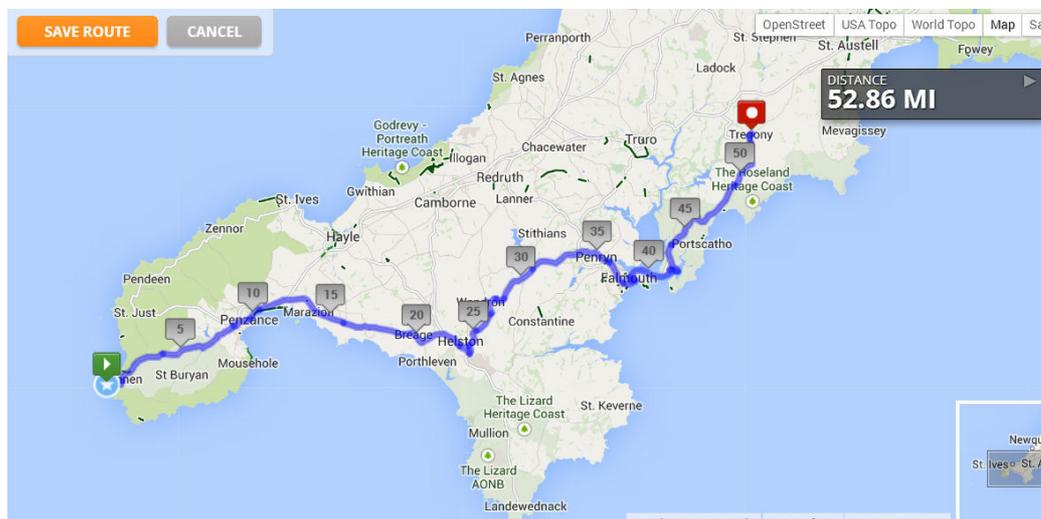
Now the curse of the enthusiastic cyclist really kicked in. My bike wasn't good enough. I needed something faster and lighter. The saying goes that the number of bikes needed is always N+1 and so I started to look for something racier. Hours spent trawling the web for information persuaded me that what I needed was a Genesis Equilibrium 20 and I was close to making a journey to Ludlow to buy a new one, to be fitted to my needs, when a "bargain" appeared on ebay which I snapped up. Never was the old saw that you get what you pay for more true. The bike that arrived was tired and worn and within a couple of months I had replaced all the running gear and wheels and ended up paying almost as much as I would have done for a brand new shiny 2014 model. However I now had something that should take me from End to End without problems and I started to plan my journey. Two friends had said, in passing, that they would join me on the trip but both now back-tracked for good medical reasons and I was left with the option of going alone or not at all.

Fast forward to Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> June 2014, and the announcement by my wife that she was going down to her cottage in Cornwall for a week. I looked at my diary: nothing in particular happening and I heard myself saying, "Why don't I put the bike in the back of the car and you can take me to Land's End so I can cycle home to Horsington?" No proper planning had taken place but I knew that it would take me 2-3 days so I rang one of my erstwhile companions who lives just outside Crediton and asked if I could stay the night on my way home. "Yes, that's fine", came the answer, so I was becoming committed. On Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> we loaded the bike onto the back of the car and set off for Cornwall. It was a grey drizzly day but the forecast was for better weather later in the day and I was only trying to get to the cottage in Tregony that night. As we hit Cornwall on the A30, the weather worsened and we saw knots of bedraggled cyclists struggling east, presumably on their way north to John O'Groats; my spirits took a turn for the worse. However at 1339 I set off from the coach park at Land's End still only intending to cycle home. The weather had cleared and it had stopped raining. I didn't bother with finding the official start line or taking photographs; I just set off. By 1420 I was

back in the middle of Penzance having been helped by a stiff south-westerly and headed for Helston. I remembered the journey from 20 years before when I had cycled it with my son, but the long hill from Penzance to Rosudgeon seemed much easier than I expected and I was soon in Helston. Unfortunately misreading the GPS computer on my bike, something I did quite regularly over the next couple of weeks, resulted in an unnecessary circuit around the town before I set off on the main road to Falmouth. Again the wretched GPS took me on a loop on delightful back lanes but led me back to where I had turned off the main road. I determined not to take any more notice of it but to plug on to Falmouth



on the busy main road. It was not a pleasant experience with heavy traffic and inconsiderate drivers but I made it to the waterfront and the ferry to St Mawes, for which I had bought a ticket on-line the previous day. I was instructed to put my bike towards the bows of the ferry and decided to stay with it for the short journey across Carrick Roads. Mistake.....as soon as we hit the chop in the outer harbour I got soaked. I made my way upstairs and chatted to some sightseers from Essex who were off to St Mawes for a couple of hours. Disembarking my damp self and bike, I cycled the 15 or so miles to Tregony, arriving before 1730 having averaged a creditable 14 mph whilst in the saddle.



After a couple of pints in the pub, a decent meal and good night's sleep I set off at 0830 for what I expected and proved to be a hard day. To get to Crediton from Tregony you have to cross Bodmin Moor and Dartmoor as well as plenty of undulating ground before and after. The first hour past the Lost Gardens of Heligan and through the outskirts of St Austell were quite pleasant and even the climb up to the Eden Project was OK but

between there and Lanhydrock the narrow lanes twist and turn and go up and down like a roller coaster.

I passed under the magnificent Treffry viaduct near Luxulyan and saw virtually no traffic so the journey was hard work but enjoyable.



Unfortunately to reach my destination I had little option but to

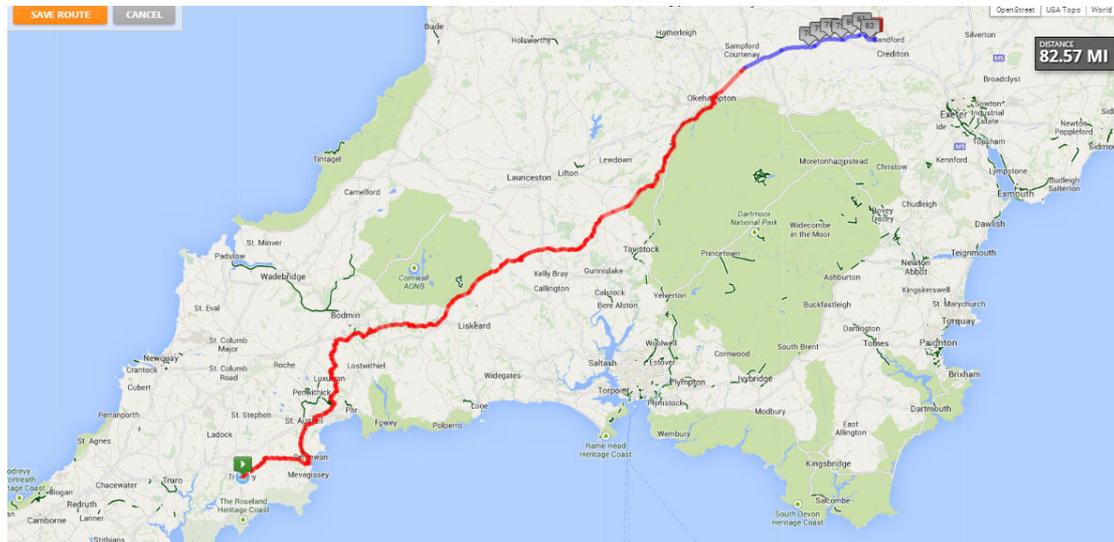
cycle along the busy A38 between Bodmin and Liskeard and was relieved when I was able to turn off at Dobwalls, and skirting the bottom of Bodmin Moor, made my way along lightly used roads towards Dartmoor. At Horsebridge I was to cross the Tamar, the border between Cornwall and Devon, but a couple of miles short of the bridge came across Road closed signs. Undeterred I kept going but as I came down the steep hill towards the river I could see there was a giant slew in the middle of the bridge removing the trees and detritus that had been swept down the river in the Spring storms and lodged against the old stone arches of the bridge. There was already a huge pile in the field which would keep the farmer in firewood for a long time to come. The machine occupied the entire width of the bridge with inches to spare either side but a friendly road worker told me that the slew would move out of the way and let me pass within 15 minutes, so I waited. Sure enough it was lunchtime and the machine rumbled off the bridge and a couple of cyclists who were coming from the other direction met me in the centre of the bridge and we swapped the usual horror stories of the steep climbs to come.

In the event the climb from the Tamar was stiff but not in the GOAP (get off and push) bracket and I was soon up on the top of Brentor, passing below the lonely church that sits on the plug of an ancient volcano, before whizzing down to Lydford Gorge and



lunch at the pub in Lydford. Just beyond Lydford there is an excellent cycle track, called the Granite Way, on the bed of the old railway that takes you all the way to Okehampton across the

extraordinary wrought and cast iron Meldon Viaduct and to the junction with the Dartmoor railway. Unfortunately it's not possible to follow the railway beyond Okehampton so there was a lot of climbing and descending to accomplish before arriving at my overnight stop at West Sandford at about 1630 having done about 82 miles of hard cycling.



I was greeted by my host suggesting that I join him on a 15 mile bike ride! I declined and said I would drive his car, whilst he cycled, to the Beer Engine pub where we enjoyed fish and chips and a couple of pints of Sleeper which is brewed on the premises.

The following day dawned bright and sunny and P joined me on the ride to Tiverton. After about 10 miles he hit a pothole resulting in punctures to both tyres and we used my spare tubes to repair them. We set off again and stopped at a bike shop in Tiverton to buy a couple of spare tubes so that I was prepared for any problems. The owner, a typical Local Bike Shop "old boy" asked if we were on the way to or from Land's End and I said that I had come from there but was cycling home to east Somerset. "Ah", he said, "Now's the time to do the End to End, you've got 3 weeks of good weather ahead of you". Another little germ took hold in my mind.

At Tiverton we joined the tow-path of the Grand Western Canal and immediately stopped for coffee and cake to keep us fortified. The towpath takes you along a lovely stretch of canal, under old bridges, with notices telling you to dismount when passing under them, and over viaducts with plenty of flora and fauna to look at. We passed by a

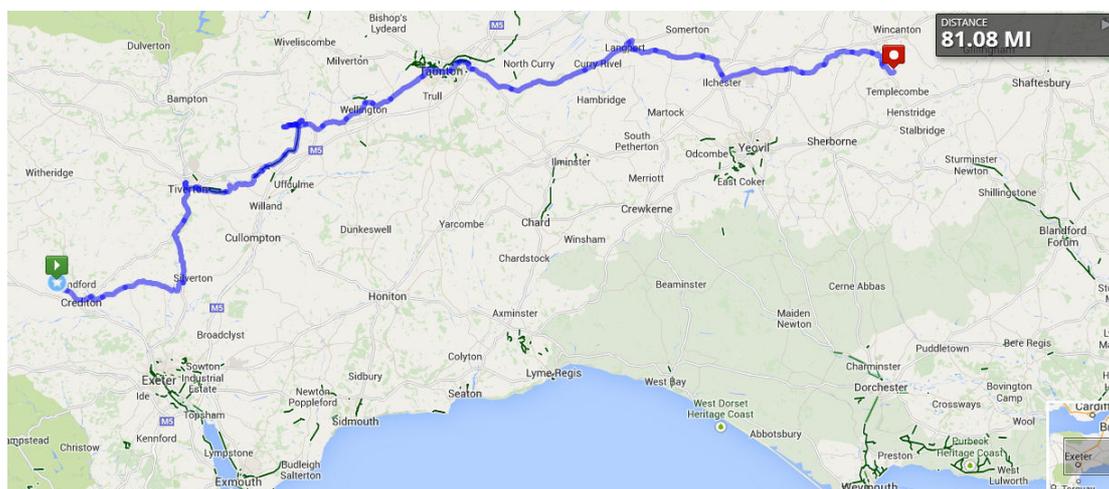


section of the canal that had recently been rebuilt after the banks had collapsed during the heavy rain of November 2012 and came across a horse-drawn barge that takes holiday-makers up the canal, the horse, out of his collar, munching grass and having his picture taken, before turning round to return to Tiverton. At Burlescombe P decided that he would turn



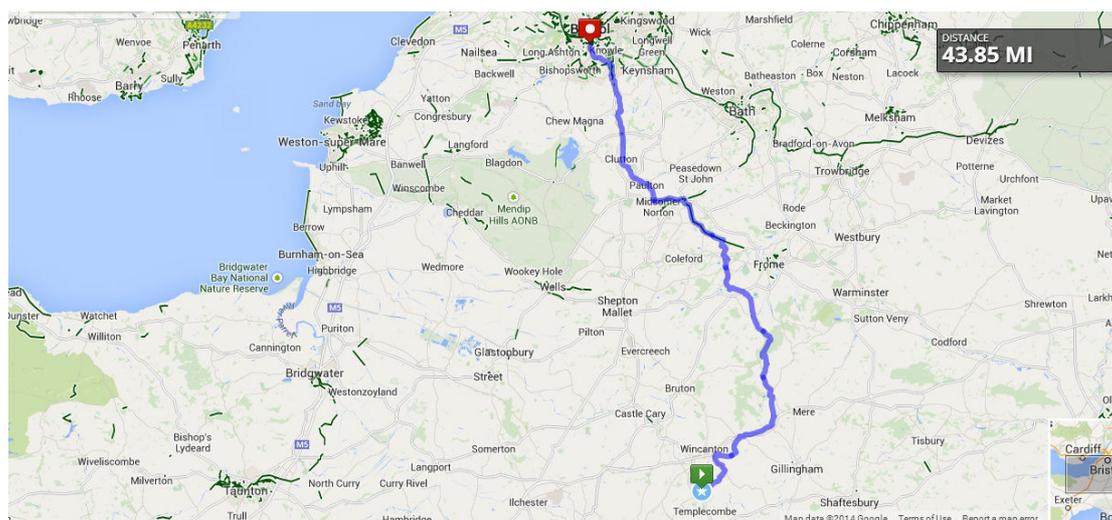
for home whilst I continued to the end of the towpath at Holcombe Rogus, past the old canal-side limekilns, where I was seduced by a signpost into climbing a steep hill by the promise of a pub lunch. At this point I had to return to major

roads and re-joined the A38 through Wellington and Taunton before turning onto roads that I knew well, taking me across the Somerset moors and levels to Langport, Yeovilton and home before 1600 after almost 6 hours and 81 miles in the saddle.



So that, I thought, was that. I'd achieved my aim and was home without any great incident. I looked at my diary: I'd agreed to do a leisurely bike ride on Friday with a couple of people and a 60 mile ride on Sunday with someone who had just completed a 660 mile ride to San Sebastian but what was happening after that? Business meetings on Monday and Tuesday but the rest of June was free of any commitments that I couldn't re-arrange or break. I'd spoken of my ambition to a couple of friends during the last year and they had said I could come and stay en route so I rang them and both were at home and able to accommodate me so it seemed fated that I should keep going. I asked my son whether he could do without me on the farm and he said "Go". I spoke with my wife, still in Cornwall, and she said "If that's what you want to do, Go". So I went.

Tripadvisor and Booking.com occupied most of my free time from Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> June and by Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> I had my entire route worked out on Map My Ride and entered into my bike satnav, overnight stays booked and my cheap and cheerful panniers packed with a pair of chinos and a shirt for the evenings, 2 T shirts, a pair of light deck shoes and some spare pants and socks. I planned to wear the same cycling gear all the way, washing it where possible to dry overnight. In the end I acquired an extra cycling jersey and packed a light wool sweater (which was never used) and a Regatta waterproof jacket with a hood. I carried 3 spare inner tubes, a puncture repair kit, 2 bike multi-tools and a hand pump in addition to 2 water bottles. The panniers were stuffed fuller than they should have been but I set off on the second leg of my LEJOG at about 1400 hours on 18<sup>th</sup> June. I had arranged to spend the night with another of my sons who lives and works in Bristol and the 44 miles over the Mendips by way of Midsomer Norton and Radstock took me about 4 hours.



A couple of pints of cider in the pub was followed by a pasta bake at the house to give me some "carbs" for the next day. As I went to bed I repacked the panniers and there was a nasty ripping sound as I closed the final zip: the stitching on the side had started to give way so I needed a replacement. Fortunately there is a branch of Evans Cycles in the centre of Bristol and I was there as they opened the doors. I bought a pair of waterproof Altura clip on panniers which gave me a lot of extra space and I was able to retain the original bag to put on top of the rack in between my shiny new purchases. For about £80 I now had more than sufficient space for my needs and my clothes would stay dry if the weather changed.



I left Evans at about 0900 knowing that I needed to cycle about 85 miles to my destination north west of Worcester. I made my way along the Portway which has a cycle track alongside it, through Avonmouth, where I got slightly lost, to Aust where the old ferry ran from, before the Severn Bridges were built and out into the countryside of the Severn Valley. The weather was lovely and the countryside beautiful: few hills and winding roads that kept the ride interesting. I find that there is little more disheartening than long, straight uphill roads where you can see for miles knowing that you are in for a lot of steady climbing. Much better to have winding lanes where you are not sure what is around the next corner and the back roads past Thornbury, Berkeley with its stately castle commanding the town, and Slimbridge, home to the wildfowl centre founded by Sir Peter Scott, son of the Antarctic adventurer, fulfilled this requirement exactly. Just past Frampton on Severn I joined the tow-path of the Gloucester and Sharpness canal at the Saul Marina. This was not a good experience. The surface soon became rough and the bike was experiencing a lot of pressure. The towpath narrowed and then disappeared completely for a while becoming a grass track before

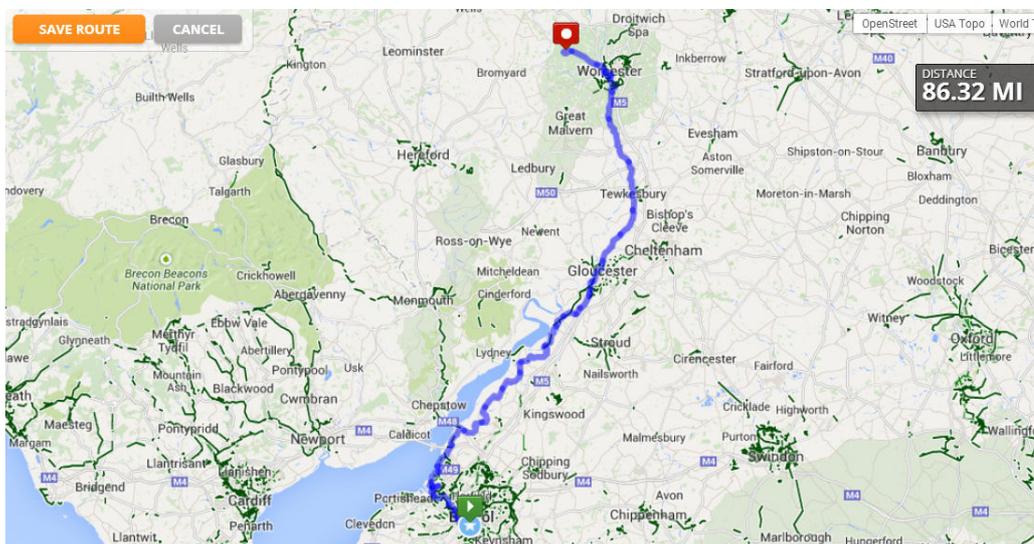


returning to the rough surface so, at Moreton Valance I made for the A38 Bristol to Gloucester road. Whilst this is a busy road there is a substantial hard shoulder which made riding reasonable and I made my way right through the centre of Gloucester, past Kingsholm rugby ground where I had played many times in my youth, and on towards Tewkesbury. I stopped for a late and excellent lunch of fish and chips washed down with a couple of pints of Doombar at the Longford Inn Beefeater Grill, just before crossing the A40.

The A38 beyond Gloucester is much less busy and easy riding and I was soon in Tewkesbury with its beautiful Norman Cathedral: its massive crossing tower was said to be "probably the largest and finest Romanesque tower in England" by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner. Hard to believe on this warm and dusty day that almost the entire town had been under water when both the Avon and the Severn which meet at Tewkesbury broke their banks in 2007. Unfortunately for the residents, they live on

a flood plain and these occurrences will undoubtedly continue; but flood defences have been considerably strengthened in recent years so, hopefully, damage will be minimised.

On up the hill climbing up from the river valley there was a sharp crack, almost like a rifle shot, and I looked down at the bike expecting to see a burst tyre. However when I got off and looked, both tyres were hard so I remounted, only to hear an ominous tick each time the wheels turned. When I stopped again and looked more closely one of the spokes of the rear wheel had snapped off the axle and was hanging loose. As I had no spares and the wheel still appeared to be fairly true I wrapped the broken spoke around its neighbour and carried on towards Worcester where I hoped that I would find a bike shop to repair the wheel. The journey now became fraught. I expected, at any minute, that another spoke would break and I would be stranded short of my destination with a wheel that wouldn't turn: however the Gods of cycling were with me and I managed to get to the centre of Worcester without further incident. I duly found a bike shop but they were too busy to replace the spoke so I bought 3 spokes of different lengths and continued to my destination. I was staying with one of my oldest friends, with whom I had been at agricultural college in the late 1960s so there was no need to stand on ceremony as I was welcomed as one of the family. I removed the wheel and replaced the spoke and still had a wheel that appeared to be remarkably true, so I put it down to bad luck and went in to have a shower and get changed, ready to enjoy the small supper party that had been arranged; meeting with people I had not seen for a good while and sharing, with them, the disappointment of England's Football team being effectively eliminated from the World Cup by Luis Suarez



Next morning was again bright and sunny and I was recommended to take a route that would best show me the delights of the Worcestershire and Shropshire countryside on my way to stay with more friends just outside Oswestry. As this seemed to be largely the route I had already plotted I decided to try to follow the suggestion but barely 8 miles into the ride I had taken a wrong turn and found myself climbing a long steep hill out of the Severn valley before I realised that I was heading in the wrong direction. Grrrrr. I turned round and went back down the hill but still could not find the right road and struck off into the countryside trying to follow the satnav. It was a pleasant ride through a nice landscape but I knew that I was off route which concerned me. Eventually I found myself in Stourport, back in the Severn valley, so I knew I was heading roughly in the right direction and I continued on to Bewdley where I picked up

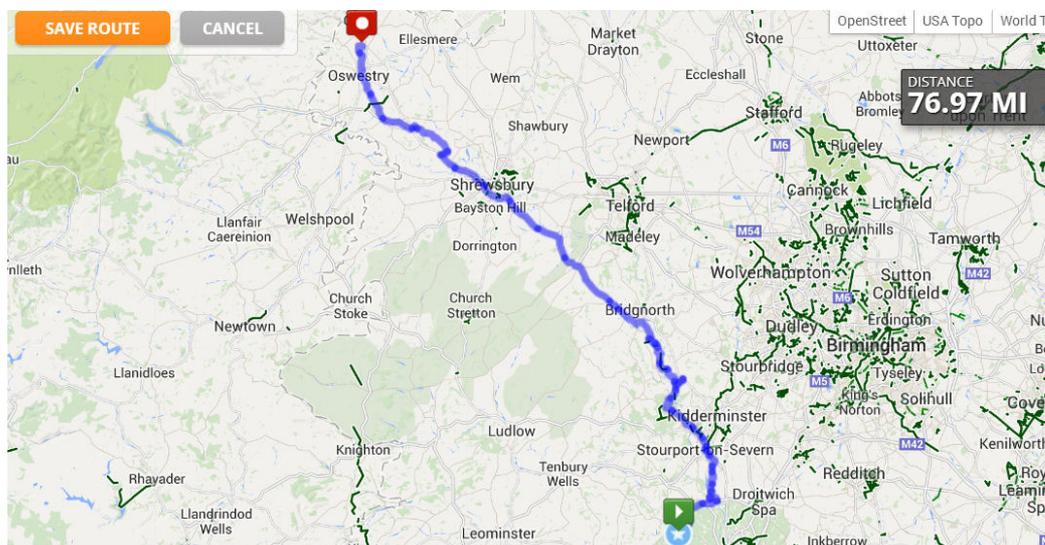


National Cycle Route 45 and decided to follow it. Just past Bewdley, as I was climbing through a lovely wooded area there was another bang and another spoke had snapped. The road, at this point, was quite narrow with steepish banks and I had to lug the bike off the road before I could do any repairs. As before, the wheel was still fairly true so I used the same first aid trick of wrapping the broken spoke around its neighbour and carried on, with the unpleasant knowledge that I still had 60 miles or more to go.

I now lost the track once more and found myself crossing the Severn by a footbridge at Arley. Apparently this was built in 1971 and is considered to be the 77<sup>th</sup> bridge from the source of the River Severn but, at the time, I was more interested in making progress. There was a steep climb again out of the valley and I realised after I had made it to the top that I was, once again, heading in the wrong direction and had to retrace my route, eventually finding myself in the Severn valley Country park where, still on NCR 45, I was able to follow a decent cycle path alongside the track of the Severn Valley Railway. Now life got really difficult as I slavishly followed route 45 which proceeded to take me across country, up unmade, steep paths which almost petered out completely, past Chelmarsh reservoir and then deteriorated into a very rough farm track before finally joining a tarmac road at Chelmarsh village. Bearing in mind that I had a broken spoke these surfaces gave me considerable cause for concern and I determined to try to get back onto main roads and look for signs to Shrewsbury which was my next main objective. Fortunately I

now found road signs which bypassed Bridgnorth and brought me onto the A458 at Morville.

Relieved at being back on reasonable road surfaces I was able to make good progress through rolling Shropshire countryside, past Much Wenlock with a sharp climb up Harley Hill which left me breathless for a few yards and on towards Cressage where I once again found myself in the Severn Valley all the way to Shrewsbury. On the way I received a phone call from my host for the night who said he would jump on his bike and come and meet me and guide me to his house. I told him my approximate route and we arranged to meet somewhere north of Nesscliffe.. I managed to get through the outskirts of Shrewsbury without incident: there are good cycle paths along the pavements of most roads but I again took a wrong turn and found myself on the busy A5, fortunately with a cycle path alongside. I was soon able to turn off and make for Nesscliffe through pretty countryside and villages and finally met R on the A5 near Knockin village which has a small store. R set a brisk pace as we made our way through Maesbury Marsh and Oswestry, eventually arriving at his farmhouse near Gobowen at 1647 after 7 and threequarter hours and 77 miles in the saddle, mightily relieved that no more spokes had broken. This being Friday night R made arrangements to take the bike to the LBS in Oswestry at 0900 the next morning to get the spoke replaced and we showered and changed before going to the Henlle Golf Club, which he owns, to have a drink before supper.



R is a former dairy farmer who gave up milking cows and put his prodigious energies into building a Golf Course from scratch on parkland which formed part of his agricultural holding. Having established the Golf Course he then invested the proceeds of land which he sold for



building, in a very smart clubhouse which is also hired out for parties and weddings.

When I visited the main room was being laid out for a wedding reception that was due to happen on Saturday and we had a drink on the terrace, chatting with some members about my journey. Back to his house for a jolly supper with friends, I had

a good nights sleep ready for what, I thought, would be a difficult day even without the wheel problem.

At 0900 on Saturday we dropped the bike into the LBS in Oswestry and were told that it would not be ready until 1030 so R took me for a drive to show me the countryside around the Welsh border. We wound our way up into the hills, past Chirk Castle, a National Trust property built by Edward 1 in 1295 to protect the English from the rebellious Welsh and on to Llangollen which has largely re-invented itself in recent years as a tourist destination following the decline of the wool and cotton industries that used to operate using the power of the River Dee. It's a pretty town nestling in a river vally below a dramatic limestone escarpment known as

Eglwyseg rocks. Since 1947 it has been the permanent home of the National Eisteddfod of Wales International musical festival which takes place annually during the second week of July and brings in performers



from all over the world. According to Wikipedia over five thousand singers, dancers and instrumentalists from around 50 countries perform to audiences of more than 50,000 over the 6 days of the event - quite a boost for the local economy. From Llangollen we climbed up the Horseshoe Pass with superb views across North Wales before turning round and back to Oswestry to collect the bike with its replaced spoke.

I guessed that the next day would be hard; not because of the terrain which would be fairly flat once I was down on the Cheshire plain, but because it meant negotiating the Manchester-Liverpool conurbation before my nightfall in Preston. Once the bike was fixed R offered to put me on the right road and we set off at about 1100 and parted company at Ruabon when he had to turn round and make his way back to the Golf Course. I managed to get through Wrexham OK although I should have taken a more direct route through the town but, wanting to stay off the main roads, I got hopelessly lost on the way to Chester. Having to retrace my route on several occasions, I ended up with yet another broken spoke and resolved to replace the wheel as soon as I could find a suitable bike shop. Getting through Chester was quite easy as there are good cycle routes through the city but I failed to find a bike shop to replace the wheel.

When planning my adventure I realised that there were 2 main options for negotiating Merseyside: one was to go to Birkenhead and take the Ferry and make my way through Liverpool or, as I decided, to make for the Runcorn Bridge. Again my powers of navigation deserted me and, although I could see the wretched bridge it took me a long time to find

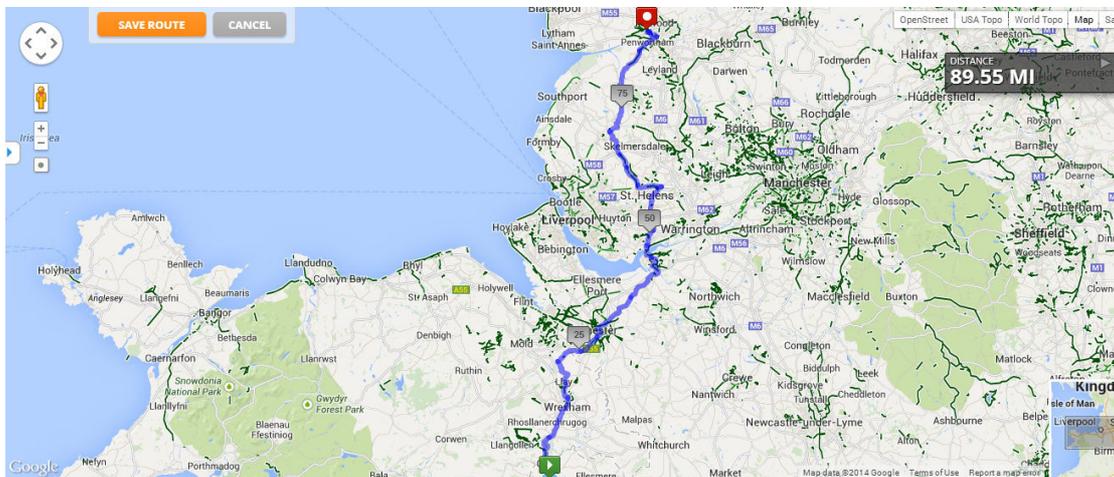


the road. The crossing is quite hairy. There is no cycle path and the bridge is quite narrow so I was glad when I finally made it across the Mersey to Widnes. Now life became really difficult. Largely because I had been consulting the satnav regularly the battery ran out and I

was left without my normal means of navigation. I thought to myself that surely there would be signs to Preston and set off in what I assumed to be a northerly direction, eventually finding myself on the outskirts of St Helens, so, at least, I was heading in roughly the right direction.

However I soon realised that I was going too far east and, taking a look at Google Maps on my phone (which was also low on battery) I turned west along the East Lancs road which, fortunately, has a good cycle track alongside it and I made good progress, turning north towards Rainford and Ormskirk. During the day I had become so lost that I had not stopped for anything to eat and I was getting low on energy so I stopped at a petrol station and piled down some rolls and treacle cake, washed down with Tango which perked me up a bit. At Bickerstaffe I turned, once again, onto back roads and headed for Rufford, unable to appreciate

the Tudor Rufford Old Hall because time was pressing and I was tired. I finally reached the A59 with signposts to Preston so decided to stick on it all the way. There is a cycle track on one side of the road which I used in places but mainly stuck to the main carriageway which was not too busy and made my way into the centre of Preston. Navigation was difficult but I managed to find enough power in the phone to get me, finally, to my B&B stop for the night after several wrong turns in the city centre. Unfortunately my room faced directly onto the busy Blackpool Road and I failed to get much sleep. However I strolled down to the Lane Ends pub and had a good steak and chips and a couple of pints of Boddingtons, recovering some of the energy I had lost during a 90 mile bike ride achieved in just over 8 hours.



The owner of the B&B was able to point me in the direction of Evans Cycles who, as it was Sunday morning, did not open until 1000. Wanting to be first in the queue I arrived outside the large store at 0915 and removed the rear wheel ready to make a quick swap when I had bought a replacement. At about 0930 an employee arrived and Jonny, who was



already inside opened the door, saw me and asked if he could help. I explained the situation and he asked me to give him 5 minutes whilst he got things in order and, brilliantly for me, had a new wheel, to which he added my cassette, ready to fit to the bike by 1000. In addition Evans said that they would return the old wheel to my home

for no extra cost. What wonderful service allowing me to get on my way to Penrith at 1015.

Because it was Sunday there were a lot of cyclists on the road to Lancaster and I was able to latch onto one or two of them to help me. As a result I made very good time through Garstang and on to Lancaster. On the way I was passed by several Vintage cars which were obviously on some sort of rally and I continued to see them until I reached Kendal.

Despite the fact that there is a cycle track that runs around Carnforth I decided, after yesterday's false trails to stick with the A6 which, at this point is not too busy and I was soon at Levens Hall, world famous for its topiary, and entering the Lake District. I had still not quite decided whether to go through Windermere and up the Kirkstone Pass or through Kendal and up Shap. I now had to make the choice and decided I would stay on the A6 as it was more direct. The traffic on this road was heavy and there are some quite long and steep climbs so I was glad to reach Kendal where I looked to have lunch before tackling the climb up Shap Fell. I couldn't see anything obvious in the centre of town which looked



completely dead, but, as I was leaving, saw the Duke of Cumberland which said it was open all day. I ordered a pint and asked what was on the menu only to be told that the chef had got married the day before and they were not serving food. The barman suggested a hotel in the centre of town but when I went

back it did not look inviting so I thought I would carry on and hope to find something on the way. I looked in on a petrol station but all they had was unappetising and expensive rolls so I kept going, until a couple of hundred yards further on I spotted the South Lakeland Retail Park which, at least had a Morrisons Supermarket and the usual array of Halfords, Comet and other such stores and was heaving with cars and people. I have not seen a more graphic illustration of how to kill the business centre of a market town, even in an area that survives on tourism. There was an area outside the Morrisons store selling plants and the man in charge agreed to let me leave my bike there whilst I went inside to have my daily dose of fish and chips in Morrisons cafe, albeit without a pint of beer but I was pleased to have a rest before starting the big climb.

From the outskirts of Kendal the road goes up and down for about 6 miles before you see the "Road liable to icing" signs that suggest you are near to a sharp rise in elevation and, sure enough, a couple of miles further on the road ramps up and you climb steadily until, finally, lungs bursting, you crest the hill and are able to look across at the Pennines away in the

distance to the east. I stopped for a few minutes, took a long drink of water and ate a Mars Bar, feeling on top of the world and enjoying the scenery and roadside flowers, when the solitude was spoiled by a procession of motorbikes screaming past. All the way down through Shap to Penrith I was plagued by these bikers. I suppose it is understandable that it is exhilarating to ride these sort of roads but it does spoil the enjoyment of the lone cyclist.

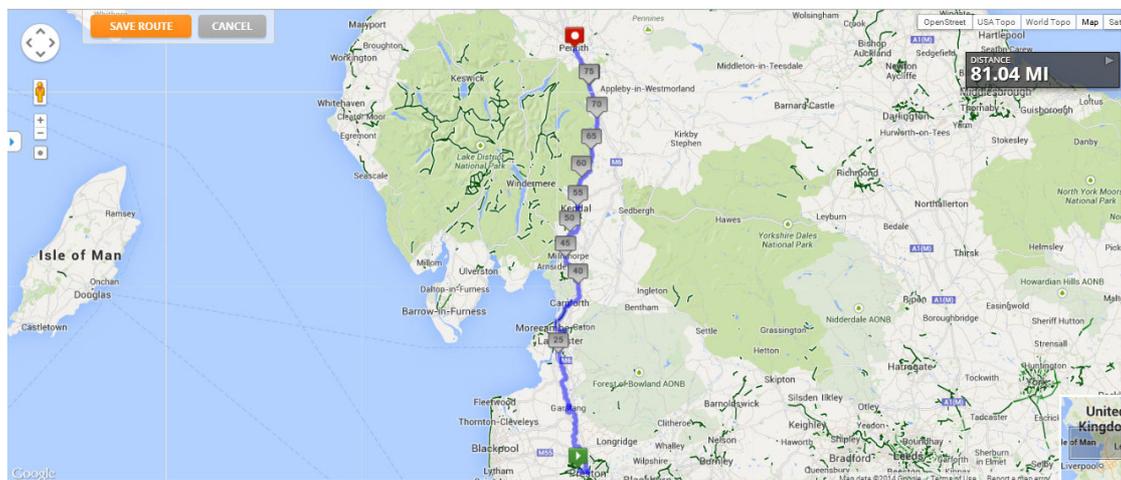


The road is now downhill virtually all the way to Penrith and, as it was still only about 3.30pm I stopped off at the first pub I came to in Shap Village. The Greyhound is south of the main village and has been completely renovated in recent years, having been allowed to deteriorate to dereliction until rescued by the current owners who are benefitting from the fact that the pub is on Wainwright's Coast to Coast route across England and on several LEJOG/JOGLE routes as well. I downed a



well earned pint of Thwaites whilst chatting to the barman about the history of the pub which, apparently, dates from at least the year 1680. I went on my way and reached my B&B in Penrith which I found without

difficulty at 5 o'clock. The owner, a Yorkshireman who had been in Penrith for 20 years was clearly used to cyclists and walkers and allowed me to put the bike in the back yard. As it was not raining there was no need for cover but there was a covered area if required.



This was the best B&B in which I stayed. The bed, although single, was comfortable, in a quiet room at the back of a large Victorian Villa and the breakfast the next morning was substantial and well cooked. I walked



around Penrith, up the hill to the railway station which, notoriously, was supposed to have a sign which reads "Keep back from the platform edge or you may get sucked off" Sadly, if it ever existed, it has now gone to be replaced by a more anodyne warning about the dangers of turbulence.

I continued strolling round the town with a view to eating and went into a pub which looked promising, only to find that they were only open for a private party and were not serving food. Nonetheless I had a drink and chatted to some farmers about their way of life, telling them about my farm back in Somerset and my challenge. As usual, the first question is "Are you doing this for charity" and a certain amount of disbelief that I could be doing it just because I wanted to. By now it was getting late and I went into a Thai restaurant with only 2 diners in it. Despite studying the menu for a couple of minutes no one came out to greet me so I left and moved on. Just up the road I found the Salsa Bistro a Mexican restaurant run by a Cumbrian and enjoyed chicken wings and fajitas with some unmemorable beer....and so to bed.

The next day I was to cross the border into Scotland. I had to reach Abington services about 40 miles south of Glasgow and was in no particular rush to start. I had a leisurely breakfast chatting to my fellow diners about my journey and finding out about them. There was an Australian couple, he born in Manchester but left when he was a child, she born and bred in Australia. They are regular visitors to England and were driving from coast to coast and seeing the sights. The other couple were from Southampton and most impressed by my intentions.

As my one shirt was now pretty grubby and creased, despite a rudimentary wash in the sink, and I now had plenty of room in my panniers, I went shopping. The Yorkshire Trading Company in King Street, that I had spotted on my peregrination the previous evening, had just what I required, a couple of short sleeved check shirts for £15 and I stocked up with Mars Bars for the journey. I hit the road at 1002 and for the first time joined National Cycle Route 7, which was to be my main route to Scotland from now on. I was on pleasant back roads when all of a



sudden I was in what appeared to be a farmyard. It was, in fact, Newton Rigg, Cumbria's agricultural college. 27 years ago I was working as land agent for Guardian Royal Exchange Assurance at Lytham Hall, Lancashire and one of the estate workers was keen to get some qualification to work in forestry. He was about 19 years old and very shy but the estate foreman and I suggested that it would do him good to get some college training which he duly did at Newton Rigg.

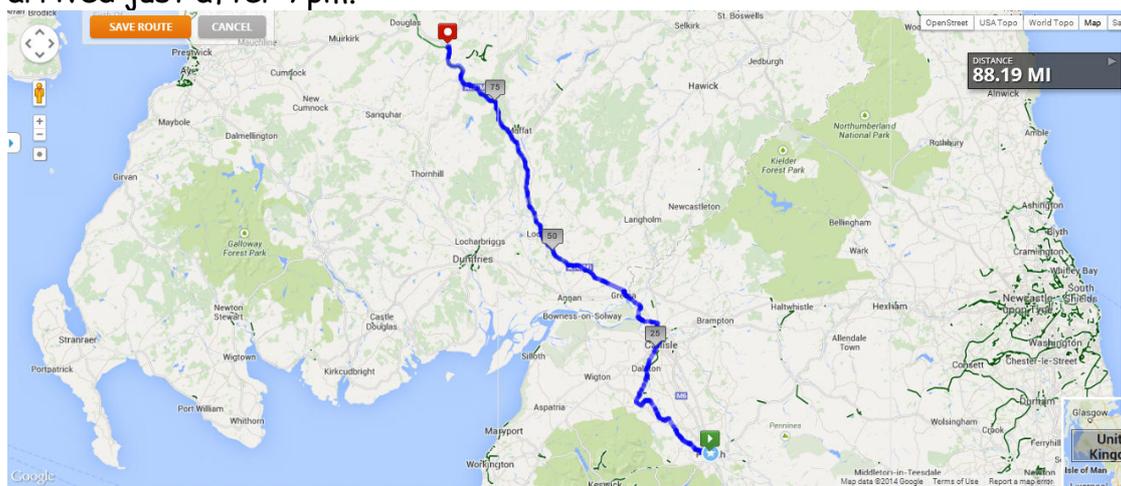
The road wound on towards Carlisle but, inevitably I missed a sign and found myself plunging down a steep hill knowing that I would have to climb up the other side of the valley. Sure enough a mile or so further on I saw a road sign with 17% gradient, gritted my teeth and made it up without GOAP. Around here I must have crossed the path that I and many others took when we cycled 100 miles in a day from Druridge Bay on the Northumbrian coast to Silloth on the Cumbrian coast in 1995, to celebrate the centenary of the National Trust. I eventually picked up signs to Carlisle and, negotiating my way through the city centre managed to find NCR 7 which I followed to Gretna, and, having stopped to take a photo of my bike in front of the Welcome to Scotland sign, arrived at about 1 o'clock in time for lunch at the Crossways Inn.



Suitably refreshed I pressed on up the B7076 which runs parallel to the A74(M). It's an uninteresting road with a poor surface which was taking its toll on the bike and at about 2pm I picked up a thorn in the front tyre giving me my one and only puncture of the trip. I duly logged it on my phone calendar and shortly after received a text from my son in Somerset asking if I was OK, as it had flashed up immediately on the home computer: the wonders of modern technology. I had 3 spare tubes so it was the work of minutes to replace, but difficult to get sufficient pressure with a hand pump. I was close to Lockerbie where, sadly 26 years earlier, Pan Am Flight 103 had exploded in midair, killing all on board and 11 Lockerbie residents on the ground, so I decided to go and search for a bike shop to get the tyre pumped up properly but could not

find one and so continued north on the B7076. The surface was abysmal in places and the bike was shaking itself to bits.

I kept going but at 5 pm about 5 miles from my final destination at Abington Services disaster struck as 3 spokes, all on the same side of my front wheel, broke simultaneously, almost bringing me off the bike. The wheel was badly buckled and I scratched my head wondering how to go on. Fortunately my phone was quite well charged so I searched for taxi companies in the area. I tried 2 without success so decided I would try to repair the damage. At this point a local cyclist on his evening workout came along and said that if I was still there when he returned he would, at least, get his car and give me a lift to the Hotel. I still had a spare spoke from the previous incidents but found it was too long so, having stripped off the tyre and rim tape I removed a spoke from the other side of the axle and put it in the middle of the damaged area and tightened everything as best I could. It did the trick to the extent that I was able to ride the bike very slowly and noisily to my destination and I finally arrived just after 7pm.



The receptionist booked me in and showed me where I could leave my bike and I then spent the next couple of hours trying to find a nearby bike shop that would have a replacement wheel. Unfortunately the nearest that I could find that would guarantee a replacement was dear old Evans Cycles, this time in Glasgow which was some 40 miles north. Undaunted I got telephone numbers of 2 taxi companies from the receptionist and persuaded one of them to collect me at 0915 the next morning, take me

to Glasgow to buy a new wheel and return. Cost was immaterial: I was determined not to be beaten by bike failure.

At 8 am I was on the phone to Evans: yes, they had a suitable wheel and would put it aside for me to collect as early as I could get to the shop. The cab turned up on the dot of 9.15 and we set off up the A74(M) to central Glasgow. Plenty of opportunity to chat



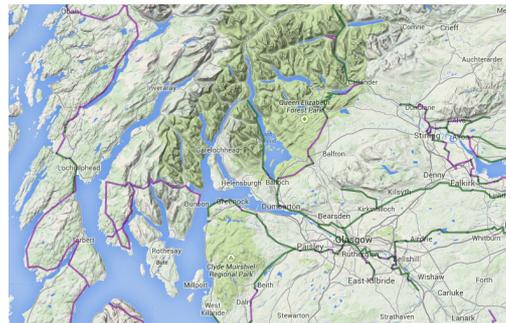
about the economy and Scottish Independence. Dougie was of the opinion that it wouldn't happen although he had a slightly romantic notion that it might be a good thing for Scotland. This seemed to be a general refrain from many Scots with whom I spoke and if they all vote Yes, it will happen. Evans were, once again, very efficient and had me back on my way within 10 minutes of arrival and agreed to send the old wheel home.

Anyway it was clear from the distances involved that the £50 I had in my wallet would not be anything like enough to pay the fare and he was unable to take a debit card so I asked him to keep a look out for a cash machine. Unfortunately we failed to see any but, knowing that there was one at Abington Services with a small charge for withdrawal I was not particularly concerned, especially when Dougie said he would knock the charge off the bill. So back at Abington I put my card in the machine and it was returned saying there were dispenser problems. I tried once more with the same result and so tried another card with no joy. Back to the cab. "Where's the nearest bank?" "There's an RBS Branch in Abington". "Ok, let's try it". So down to Abington Village a couple of miles away. I proffered my Lloyds Bank debit card... "Sorry we can only take an RBS Card". Now I was in a pretty pickle but fortunately there was a lady in the Bank who seemed to think that the nearby Post Office would let me have some money. And so it proved: I was able to draw £200 on my debit card which left me £40 change when I finally paid the fare! So the new front wheel had cost me about 3 hours cycling time and about £225 but at least I was back on the road.

After A Welcome Break all day breakfast and having repaired and loaded the bike I was on my way by 1200pm knowing that I would have to travel the journey I had already done twice that morning, albeit by a different route. My ultimate destination was Arrochar, just off the north end of Loch Lomond and I needed to go through the middle of Glasgow with a

dodgy navigation system and no printed maps. I was hoping to pick up cycle routes that I could follow all the way and the first part of the journey up the B7076 was relatively straightforward. However just short of Hamilton I lost the route and ended up going round in circles at the Strathclyde Country Park. Eventually I got back on track and picked up NCR 75 which took me into the heart of Glasgow. Lost again I asked a local cyclist who directed me right through the city centre until I had the good sense to find the River Clyde and get onto NCR 7 which, I knew, would take me all the way to Loch Lomond.

I must say that Sustrans have done a good job in raising the profile of cycling and persuading local authorities to designate cycle routes but their On-line maps are awful: very hard to follow and very slow to use. In addition the signage can be pretty poor. It's very easy to miss signs and end up a long way off route. My journey through Glasgow would have been so much easier if the signs had been better.



Having finally found my way onto NCR7 it was telling me I only had 20 miles to go to Loch Lomond. Yippee! However I forgot that there was a further 17 miles to go up the side of the Loch before I reached Arrochar and, in between, a couple of wrong turns, one of which could have been, literally, fatal.

When I reached Dumbarton there was a sign taking me across the bridge over the River Leven, but on the other side, nothing

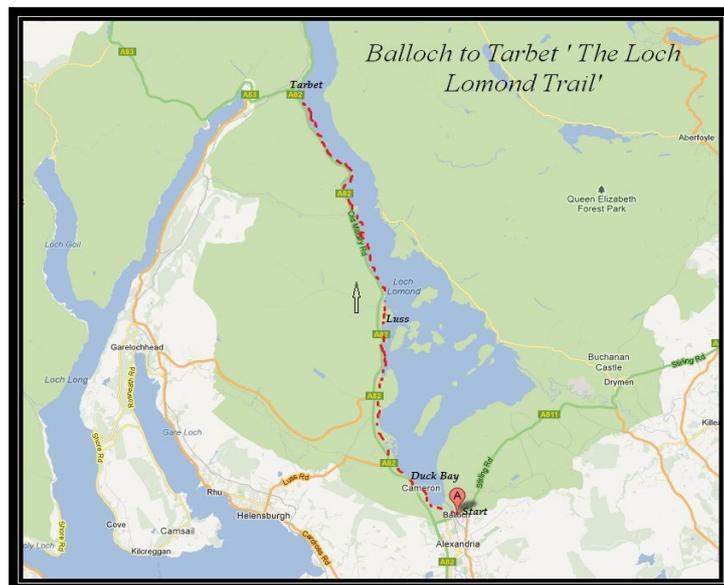


that I could see, so I went on for a bit, turned round and came back to the first sign and started to turn the bike at a junction to see if I could follow it any better. Unfortunately I only had one foot out of the pedal clip and, as I was turning, what was, with full panniers, quite a back heavy bike, I got my balance wrong and fell over into the road in front of a bus that was just behind me. Fortunately the driver was aware and didn't

move but it could have been very nasty indeed. I was picked up and dusted off by a passing jogger and, apart, from the usual bloody knee was none the worse for it.

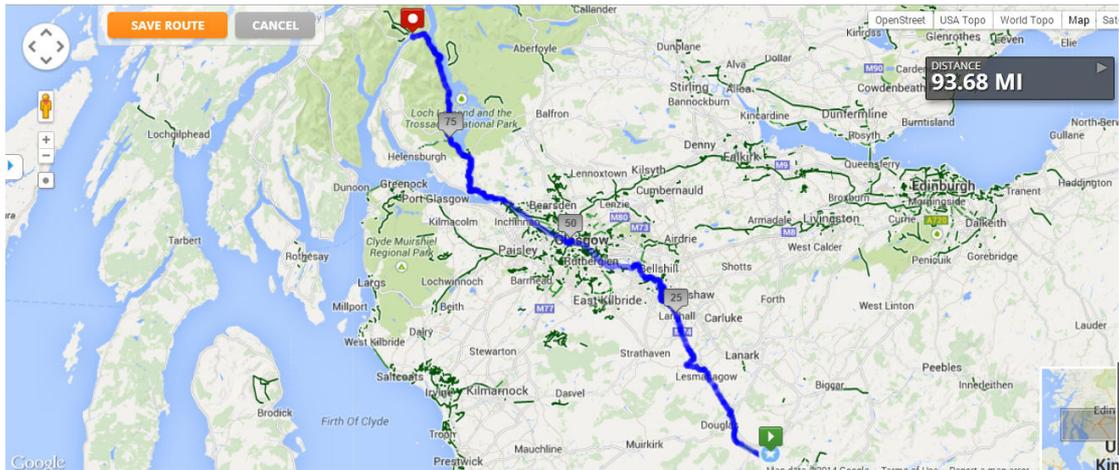
So off I went across the bridge for the second time and just spotted a blue NCR sign that took me alongside the River Leven. Once on that track, and in places it was unmade, I pushed on to Loch Lomond through Alexandria and Balloch before joining Regional Route 40 at the loch side. This road runs up the side of the loch away from the busy main road but is not particularly well made in places. At least it is fairly well signed as the West Loch Lomond Cycle Path and takes you through Luss and Firkin

Point to Tarbert at the head of the Loch. By this point it had started to rain, not heavily, but enough to make me cold and miserable and the thought of another 15 miles of cycling was not appealing. However I knew I had to make my objective so kept going. Although it was light until at least 10pm at



these latitudes the overcast skies had made it quite dark and I was amazed, at one point, to see what appeared from a distance to be a tarpaulin in the middle of the cycle track. I was even more amazed when it turned out to be someone trying to put up a tent in the middle of the track. I think I surprised him as more than he surprised me but he got out of my way in time and we avoided a collision.

Finally at about 8pm Tarbert came into view and I knew I only had a short climb and descent into Arrochar which is on the shores of Loch Long, finally arriving wet and weary at about 8.30pm with 94 miles on the clock, which was to prove to be the longest journey of the trip. I booked in just in time to have a shower and get into the hotel restaurant before it closed. The beer tasted very good that evening and I treated myself to a bottle of wine as well.



The Arrochar Hotel, with wonderful views over tidal Loch Long, has the faded glory of Edwardian times: 76 bedrooms and huge dining areas that are now seldom used by the look of it. I stored my bike in one of the dining areas and was able to dry it off with some old towels I found lying around.



The food was good and wholesome, a Haggis starter with sea bass to follow, both well cooked. I retired to the bar for another beer before bed and talked with the barman who was from Hungary. It seemed that most of the Highland hotels are staffed by east Europeans. I

wonder if they are aware of the remoteness of some of the places they are assigned by Agencies. This one said he had intended to go to Cornwall but had been too late in applying. I can't quite imagine how the gentility of Arrochar compares with the surf of Newquay but he seemed reasonably content with his lot. The bed was the smallest I have slept in for a long time and I fully expected to end up on the floor if I turned over. Fortunately it didn't happen and I passed the night sleeping fitfully.

Breakfast the next day was good: porridge and a full cooked breakfast is a good way to start a day of cycling and today, I knew, would involve some hard climbing to start with. I made my way back to Tarbert and followed



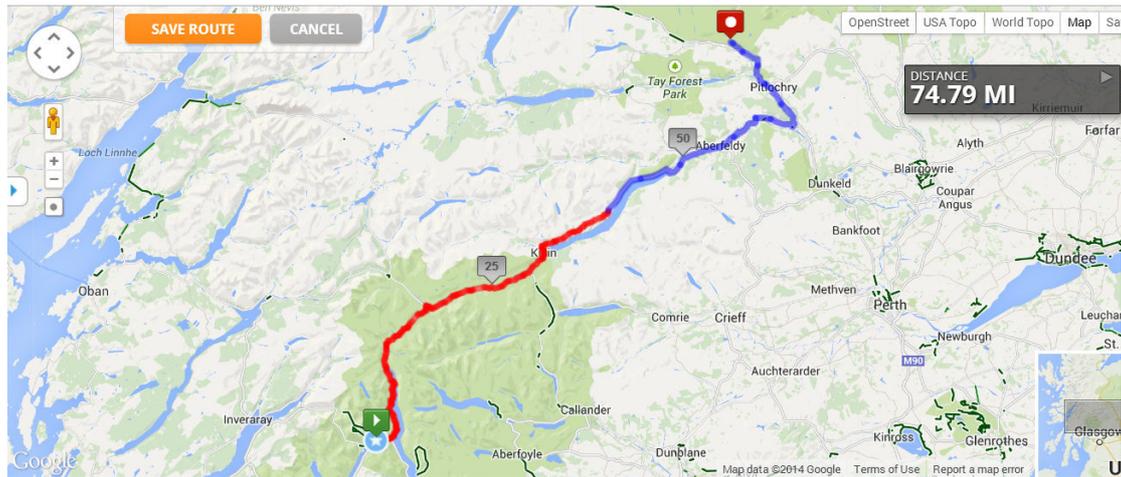
the A82 up the 6 mile 550 foot climb to Crianlarich. Hard work but beautiful scenery and a bit of sunshine helped keep me going and I stopped for a pot of tea at the Crianlarich hotel where the A82 meets the A85.

I followed the river Dochart down to Killin where my satnav told me to take NCR 7 along the south side of Loch Tay to Kenmore: however, wary of cycle routes from yesterday, I decided to follow the signposts on the main road to Aberfeldy. It was probably a mistake involving a major climb out of Killin, following the A827 on the north side of the loch at the foot of Ben Lawers and plenty of rolling road which left me breathless at times. Fortunately the Ben Lawers Hotel saved the day at lunchtime and I had a couple of pints of ale, soup and a steak pie to keep me going before rolling down to Kenmore which I remembered well from the time that we visited my brother-in law and his family when they lived close by. Hugh had been involved in the reconstruction of the Crannog, a 2000 or more year old lochside dwelling which is still a tourist attraction in Kenmore 30 years later.



Staying with my determination to stick to the main roads, I climbed out of Kenmore on the A827, ignoring NCR7 which follows the river Tay on the other side of the valley. This took me to Aberfeldy, on past Grandtully to the junction with the A9 where I reverted to NCR7 which follows the River Tummel through Pitlochry and along the B8019 through the rather sinister Pass of Killiecrankie where in 1689 the Jacobite army won a Pyrrhic victory over the forces of William of Orange, only to be soundly defeated at the Battle of Dunkeld the following month. There is a visitor centre at Killiecrankie and I stopped briefly hoping to have a look round but, unable to find a safe place for the bike, continued to Bridge Of Tilt which was my overnight stop, arriving just before 5 after an enjoyable ride of about 75 miles, knowing that the following day I only had a relatively short journey to Aviemore to look forward to.





Bridge of Tilt Hotel, on the edge of Blair Atholl has motel rooms and I was assigned one of these into which I was able to put my bike. I put the phone and GPS on charge as I did each day of the journey and then washed my cycling gear and hung it up to dry overnight. This seemed to work well and was dry by the time I came to put it on after breakfast. Into the bar for steak and chips whilst watching the Glastonbury Festival broadcast and being served Wyke farm butter with my bread. Just like being back home in Somerset! The beer was unremarkable and I went back to my room and watched television for a while.

Although I was in no hurry to leave in the morning I was awake early and went for breakfast at 8 o'clock and was on the road before 9. As I had less than 60 miles to travel to Aviemore I took it steadily, following the



B8079 to the House of Bruar. This extraordinary shopping centre is in the middle of nowhere and is full of clothing, mainly for the outdoors. I was getting quite cold at times so resolved to go in and buy a lightweight fleece that could easily be packed in the panniers. In the event I

bought both a fleece and another merino wool undershirt which I generally wear when cycling because it seems to help deodorise me. The road ahead was now a cycle track alongside the A9 and I was most grateful not to be on the main road which seemed very busy. The surface was generally good for the long climb up Drumochter and I reached the summit by 1130. Sustrans reckon that this is the highest point of their routes at 1516 feet above sea level. I briefly paused on the way up to look at a bench constructed from old skis.



I looked across at the hill beyond to see if I could spot any deer and was delighted, when I looked back at the bench, to see a roe deer on the edge of the bushes no more than 30 yards from me. We looked at one another for a couple of minutes before the deer took fright and disappeared.



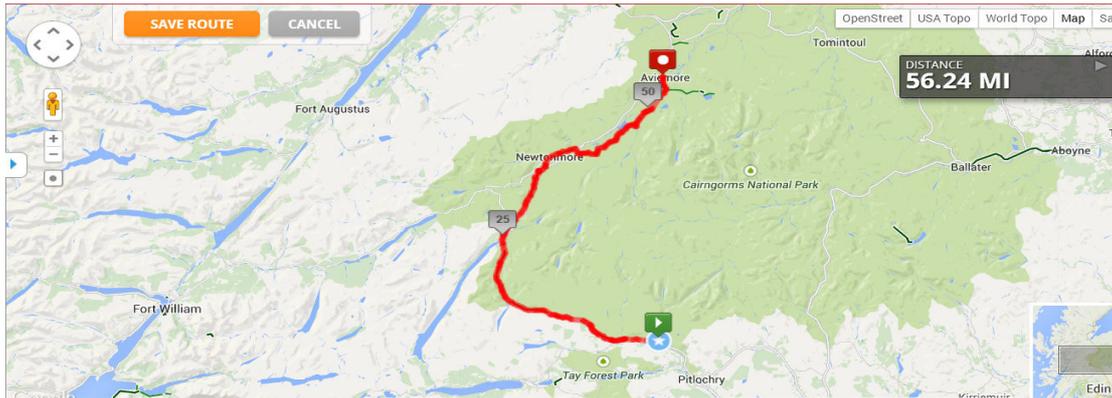
The cycle track continued alongside the A9, in places becoming quite rough. In the distance there was still snow in corries on the hillside but the day was fine and the cycling enjoyable. At the head of Loch Ericht I joined one of General Wade's Military Roads, built originally to get troops quickly into the Highlands to

suppress the Jacobites, and shortly afterwards passed the Dalwhinnie Distillery. The cycle track continues to follow the Military Road, at times right alongside the Highland Railway which goes from Perth to Inverness, the infrequent trains briefly disturbing an otherwise peaceful environment.



35 miles into the journey I came across the Ralia Café, a rather strange building which is a stop-off for travellers on the A9. As it was lunchtime I stopped for some excellent soup and sandwich with a bit of cake and a pot of tea: a pleasant break in the journey. I carried on to Newtonmore where I,

somewhat unexpectedly, found a bike shop and took the opportunity to borrow a track pump to properly inflate my front tyre which had been running under pressure since Abington. Passing the Highland Folk Museum I went on to Kingussie where NCR7 parts from the main road and heads off into wooded hills. I followed it and had a delightful journey through the forest before descending towards Aviemore, my destination for the day, which I reached just after 3pm.



Aviemore is a substantial town, on the railway and developed for the skiing season. It has several shops, bars and restaurants and, having booked into my hotel and done my washing and appliance charging, I wandered down the main street and did a bit of shopping before stopping for a beer. In the distance there was still plenty of snow on the north facing hills and it was a pleasant evening just to wander around. I ate an unmemorable meal in the hotel restaurant: It was fine but can't recall the content, had a couple of beers and went to bed fairly early, knowing that I had a hard day tomorrow.



I left Aviemore at 10am after a good breakfast and followed NCR7 as it mirrored the main A9. There was a steady climb for about 12 miles before a rapid descent towards Inverness punctuated by a very steep pitch close to Culloden. However Inverness was reached and after a few false turns I crossed the Beaully Firth by the Kessock Bridge which has a cycle track to save the cyclist from the heavy A9 traffic. The cycle path continues alongside the A9, crossing under it to emerge on the north side of the road. In negotiating this underpass I, once again, managed to unbalance myself and went over backwards, thumping my head quite hard on the pavement - thank heavens for cycle helmets. Again a bloody knee was the upshot.



At Tore the cycle track left the A9 which runs north east to cut across the Cromarty Firth whilst NCR7 follows the A835 towards Maryburgh and Dingwall where I stopped at the delightfully named Batty's Baps for some soup and a bacon butty. At Dingwall the A9 reappears but the cycle

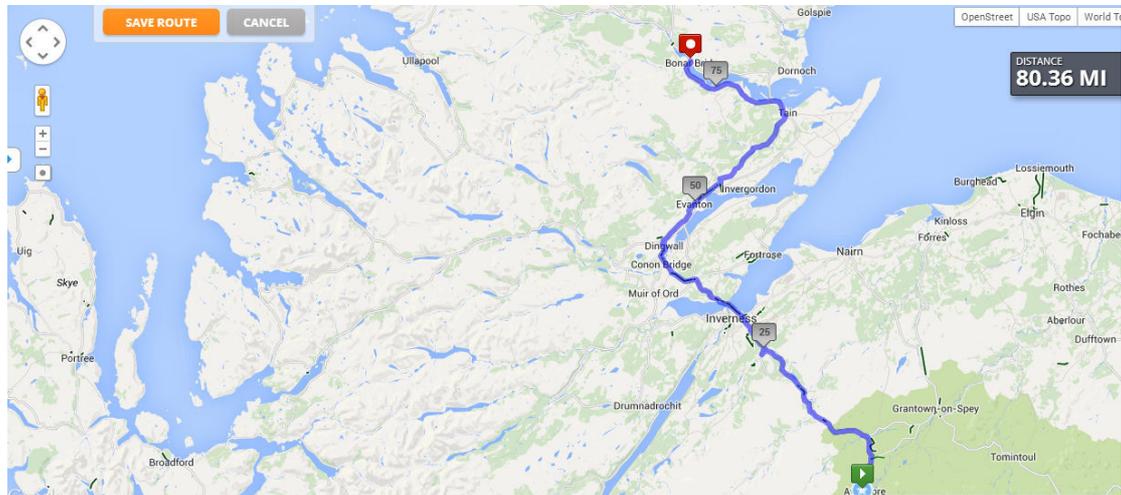
track stays away from it and heads along wooded roads for Evanton and Alness and eventually Tain where I, again, managed to get lost trying to avoid the A9. Eventually I was forced onto it for a short distance past Glenmorangie Distillery before it disappeared over the Dornoch Firth Bridge leaving me to take the A836 towards Bonar Bridge my stop for the night.



During the day I had noticed that there was quite a lot of play in the pedals and, on closer inspection, it was apparent that the bottom bracket bearing was in a poor state. I thought it would probably last the distance



but as I was passing through Ardgay on the south side of Bonar Bridge I noticed Heaven Bikes and thought it would be worth calling in the following morning to see if it could be replaced. However I carried on to the Dunroamin' Hotel in Bonar Bridge which I reached at about 5.30pm.



After a shower and shave I went for a wander into Bonar Bridge but there was little to see, so went back to the hotel for a couple of pints and a chat with the locals before dinner. Iain, the owner, was somewhat eccentric but a very good cook and the food was excellent: liver and bacon with mash cooked just right and a good sponge pudding to follow. Very thin curtains didn't help sleep but I felt quite rested by morning and ate a hearty breakfast of porridge and a fry up.

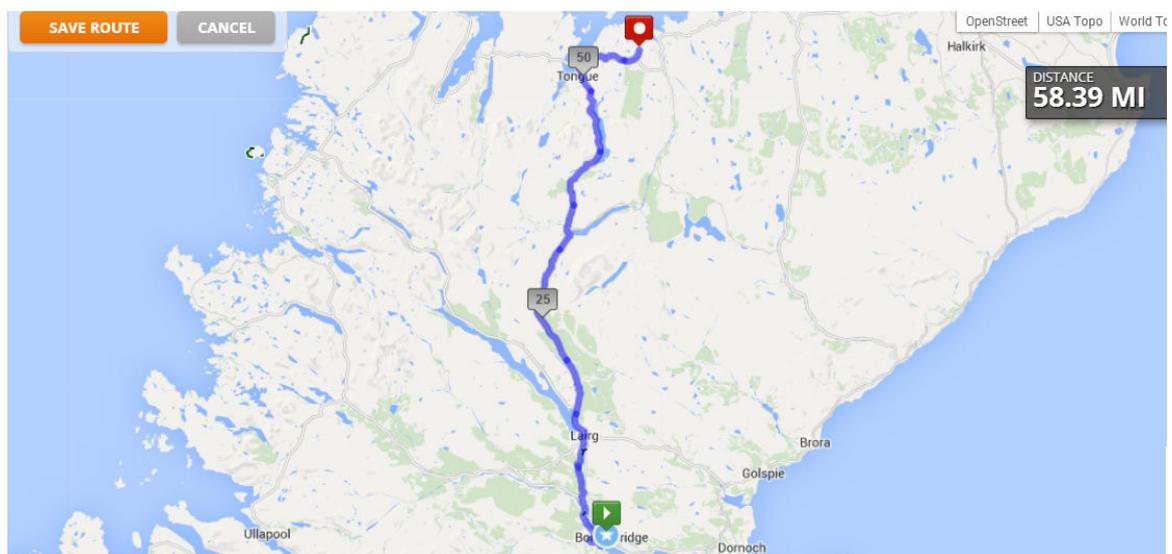
Because it was Saturday Iain had discovered that the bike shop didn't open until 10 but I did my usual trick of arriving early, hoping to be the first in the queue. In the event the owner, Chris arrived at 10 and was able to immediately replace the bottom bracket whilst I went next door for a cup of tea. There was a bit of a problem with the card machine which meant that I had to go next door to the shop to get some cash but all was paid for and I was on my way by 11am.

Returning once again across the Kyle of Sutherland which is the estuary for 4 major salmon fishing rivers, Oykel, Shin, Casseley and Carron, by way of Bonar Bridge, I passed my hotel and headed for Lairg. There was a steady but relentless climb for 27 miles past the extraordinary Crask Inn, which must be one of the most remote pubs in Britain. It was a little early for lunch so I passed by but was later to regret doing so. The road drops quite steeply to



Altnaharra and I arrived at the Hotel at about 1.50pm in time, apparently, for food. However I went into the bar, called out, wandered around the ground floor and kitchen and could find no sign of life so left hungry. After Altnaharra the road ramps up again as the road rises 500 feet in 4 miles and I was glad of the descent to Loch Loyal where the road follows the shoreline on its way past Loch Craggie and on to Tongue. I stopped near to Tongue for a cup of tea and some cake and then carried on to Borgie Lodge Hotel, my stop for the night which I reached by 4.30pm after 58 miles of cycling.

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I stowed my bike in a garage and went up to my room for the usual rituals, watched a bit of television and then came downstairs for a drink. I was amazed by the scene in the bar: it was packed with people eating and drinking and I got into conversation with some of the locals. Apparently it is the only bar in the area so tends to attract a good trade, particularly on a Saturday evening. Unfortunately there was no decent beer but I made do with Tennent's cask and had a bit of a chat. The talk strayed to Independence and there was one very committed Yes voter who was convinced Scotland would be better off on its own. He had worked as a Financial Adviser in London for 4 years and thought Scotland would be better off in all respects. Others were less convinced, but, again, there seemed to be a feeling that it would be a close run thing but that the vote would go against Independence. Later I went through and had an excellent dinner of soup and sea bass with a glass of wine. An enjoyable evening.



My final day of cycling dawned bright and I breakfasted well on the usual porridge and full breakfast, this time with scrambled eggs for a change. I had noticed on my way in the night before that there was a steep climb immediately after I rejoined the main road to Bettyhill and I was puffing well by the time I reached the top. The profile of the route for the day showed that there was a lot of climbing and descending before I reached Thurso so I was prepared for it, but it was hard work and at times I wondered if I would be wiser to stay in Thurso and go onto John O Groats the following morning before catching the lunchtime train to Inverness. However once I was past Reay and the now defunct Nuclear power station the road levelled out and I made good progress to Thurso. I made my way through the town, noting the Royal Hotel where I was due to stay that night and picked up the NCR1 signs on the east side of the town. The route takes you away from the main road but the countryside is uninteresting and the roads straight and featureless so the ride was tedious. However I was now so close to my final destination that I kept going. The NCR takes you unnecessarily around the houses in Castletown

before, once again, taking to the countryside and I was soon in Canis Bay, heading downhill towards the sea, joining the main A386 through Huna until, suddenly, sooner than expected, there I was in John O'Groats.

The run down to the John O' Groats hotel and the ferry terminal which mark the start/finish line is a nice way to end a marathon. As you approach the hotel there is a rather forlorn sign into a large and, when I passed it completely empty but for an official photographer, parking area "To the ORIGINAL John o' Groats signpost" and something to the effect that it has been there for 60 years. I had done some research and had found out that there is now a permanent signpost outside the hotel which has the information about distance to Lands End etc so that was good enough for me. There were several people taking photos of each other in front of this sign, but no other cyclists.



I leant the bike against the post, gave my phone to a bystander and he took a couple of pictures. It was 1339, coincidentally exactly the same time that I had left Lands End.

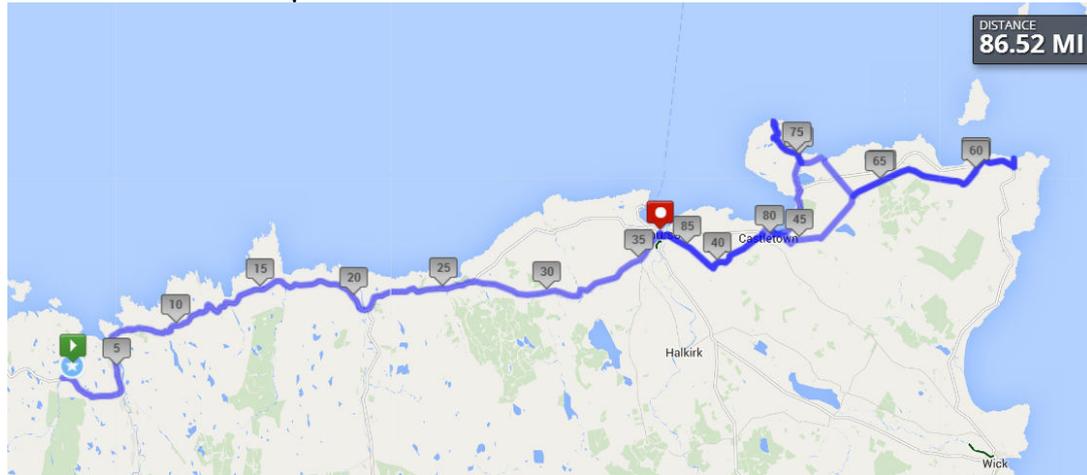
I left my bike propped against a wall and went into the café for a bowl of soup and some cake, sent copies of the photo to my nearest and dearest and thought about the journey. Had it been fun? Was it hard? Was I relieved to have finished? All these thoughts went through my mind and the emotions were mixed. At no point in the journey did I feel physically incapable of going on. I am sure that I could have cycled back home again if I wanted to. I felt as fit as I have felt in the last 30 years and yet it was all rather anti-climactic. I shouldn't have expected anything different. Nobody knew that I had cycled over 1100 miles in 14 days and, even if they had known, why would they have cared?

Anyway my journey was still not finished as I wanted to get to the northernmost point of mainland Britain which is Dunnet Head about 14 uphill miles away from JOG. So, refreshed by food and drink I set off. The weather was sunny but there was a chilly wind and I was wearing the fleece I bought in House of Bruar with my rain jacket on top. To start with I went along the main road back towards Thurso but, after passing the Castle of Mey, summer home of the Queen Mum for many years, the road forked off to the north and I started to climb. It was not steep but

quite hard work after all I had done that morning. Nevertheless the photograph of me and bike in front of the Granite marker at Dunnet head, was taken by a passing Austrian tourist at 1539, exactly 2 hours after the one at JOG.



I now had about 12 miles to cycle back to the Royal Hotel in Thurso where I was to stay the night and I arrived there at 5 pm.



I had arranged for a bike bag to be delivered to the Hotel by Rutland Cycles so that I could pack the bike ready to take on train and plane back to Somerset. I had booked an Easyjet flight from Inverness to Bristol before leaving home and there was a train at 8.39am or 1.39pm. It's strange how 39 minutes keeps cropping up in my timetable. I booked in, paid my bill and proceeded to dismantle the bike in the basement of the



hotel. I removed the wheels and mudguards and put them in the special wheel pockets; took off the rack and then unbolted the handlebars so they could sit neatly in the bag and finally removed the seat. Around the bag I packed my panniers and cycle bag and was able to find some bubble wrap in the basement to help protect everything. I

retained one of the panniers with my overnight requirements and then lugged the whole thing up to my room which was, fortunately, on the ground floor. At this point I sent a text to my wife saying, simply, "Safely back at hotel in Thurso. Lazy day tomorrow and fly back Tuesday". She immediately responded with "That's a bit of a dry message, aren't you chuffed to have done it?" I had forgotten that her mobile phone doesn't do pictures so she hadn't received the photo of me at JOG

grinning from ear to ear! Anyway at 6.09pm I responded "Well pleased. Haven't you got the photo? I suppose it's a little anti-climactic after all that effort but I'm a happy, tired bunny thanks."

I decided that I would take the bus to Inverness as it runs more frequently and at better hours than the train which goes across to Wick before making its way south. The added interest was that the bus would travel down the main A9 which was an alternative and slightly more direct route to JOG than the one I took. I knew, from other people, that there were a couple of hills on the A9 at Helmsdale and Berriedale that had a fearsome reputation so I was interested to see how they compared with the inland route. Sure enough, when we came down them I could see that they deserved their notoriety and I was glad that I had gone via Bonar Bridge. Also, even this far north, the A9 is still quite busy, unlike the Lairg route where I saw very few cars. I arrived in Inverness in the early afternoon and tried to get rid of the bike bag which is quite unwieldy. However I couldn't leave it at the bus station and the lockers in the adjacent railway station were too small to take the bag.

Although it has wheels at one end of the bag it is an awkward shape to pull. After a lot of trial and error I discovered that the easiest approach is to wrap the shoulder straps around a forearm and pull on the end strap. This way the bag is much better balanced than trying to sling it over a shoulder.

Eventually I decided to take the bag to my B&B and call a cab to take me



to the airport the following day. I struggled across the Greig Street footbridge over the River Ness but fortunately the B&B was in Greig Street and I was able to book in and take the bag up to my room. I spent the rest of the afternoon wandering

around Inverness and took a sightseeing bus tour which was not very interesting but gave me some idea of the geography of what, if you discount Kirkwall in the Orkneys (which grandiosely describes itself as "The City and Royal Burgh of Kirkwall"), is Britain's most northerly city. I went back to the B&B for a shower and then went out to The King's Highway, a Weatherspoon pub which had both Doombur and Adnams Broadside on offer. Watching some of the tennis and football and eating fish & chips in the pub, I got chatting to a Thursonian in the bar and he was most impressed by my feat. He insisted on buying me a pint and when he returned he also brought a whisky chaser. Despite the fact I have

given up drinking spirits I felt it was churlish to refuse it and knocked it back.

The B&B was nice and quiet and I slept well - perhaps the effect of the whisky. Breakfast was good, Continental with a well boiled egg and ham and cheese. The owner was originally from Jordan and had spent much of his life as a Tour Guide. He had a damaged leg and decided that age was catching up with him: time to settle down with his wife and small child to run the B&B. He has been successful with one house and now wants to expand, buy another house and build his enterprise. He had a meeting with the bank manager to discuss finance the day that I left. I hope he succeeds.



As the flight was not due to leave until 1400 I had more time to kill in Inverness and was able to visit the local museum and learn more about the area and its history. The owner of the B&B had arranged for a cab to collect me at 1130 and take me to the airport. The taxi driver was interested in my journey and we chatted about it on the half hour journey. He had been a semi-professional footballer in his youth but had succumbed to injury. He was much more convinced that Scotland should remain in the Union so, a straw poll of the conversations that I had during my journey suggest that they will remain in the United Kingdom. I arrived at the airport in plenty of time and got rid of the bike which I had booked in on-line, costing me more than the airfare! I think I might have been able to



get away with it as cabin baggage included with my seat but wasn't prepared to be told that it was too big. As I booked in I was told that the flight was delayed for an hour so even more time to kill. There's little more tedious than an airport lounge with expensive food and drink and little to do, but I had my Kindle and was able to read to pass the time.

When I was passing through Bristol I had tentatively arranged for my son to come to Bristol airport to collect the bike bag and allow me to rebuild the bike and cycle home. However when I was packing the bike up I realised that it would be a major undertaking and so I contacted my other son who kindly agreed to collect me and take me home. I was able to keep him informed about the delay so that he didn't leave home too early. The

plane touched down about an hour late and I was through immigration and outside waiting for J to pick me up, which he duly did without having the pass through the car-park (for which you have to pay whether or not you park) and we were on our way back home in good time. I was treated to a bottle of champagne and a slap-up meal having completed my journey, after 15 days and approximately 1132 miles on the road.



Lessons I learned along the way:

1. Carry paper maps as well as a GPS and phone. It's easy to run out of power and find yourself stranded.
2. Make sure your bike is up to the journey. Wheels, in particular take a battering from our poor road surfaces
3. Take a decent lightweight camera: my phone wasn't good enough.
4. Talk to lots of people along the way
5. You're not too old at 65 to ride these distances.