

## Day 0. Home Farm to Thurso

Jim arrived on the dot of 7am to collect me for our 7.30 rendezvous to drive me to Bristol airport. We left at the appointed hour after a cup of tea, with my cycle bag that has now seen four flights and a couple of courier journeys and my 2 pannier bags, one destined for the hold and the other as hand luggage, with me hoping that I hadn't forgotten anything. We were no more than ten minutes into the journey when I remembered that I had promised to drop my car into the local garage for service and MOT. A quick text to Rob remedied that and although there were several delays en route we arrived at the airport in good time for me to drop the bags and make my way through to the departure lounge. The plane left on time, the trip was uneventful and we landed at Inverness airport five minutes early at 1155. Kevin was awaiting for me at arrivals for the taxi ride to the station, during which we discussed his antipathy to Jeremy Corbyn despite being a life-long Labour voter and that he would once again vote to stay in the UK if asked to do so.

I had to buy a train ticket and then conducted an internal debate as to whether or not to try to rebuild the bike in Inverness or wait till I got on the train. I decided to give it a go but, due to ham-fistedness I ran out of time and had to wheel it onto the train half finished. The trains on this route are only 2 carriages but have space for two bikes in each carriage. The first bike space was taken up by a buggy and the second was taken by another touring bike with camping gear which took up a lot of space. I had to perform my rebuild in the middle of the passage, moving the bike bag back and forth depending on which side the train door opened at each station so it took me a further hour and a half before I had put on the mudguards and pannier rack and had everything as good as I could get it.

I sat down next to the owner of the other bike and we chatted about our respective journeys. Ian is from Liverpool and is a much travelled and interesting companion. He didn't give his age but I would guess early

sixties and, as he said, the mortgage is paid and he has no need to work. He left Liverpool in the 80s when there was no work and set out to walk around England, completing about a sixth of the journey before returning to Liverpool to join the navy which took him around the world. He was now setting out to cycle around the north of Scotland with no fixed plan or schedule, carrying a tent and cooking stove . He reckoned if he only cycled a couple of miles some days he'd be happy: what a difference from my regimented approach.

The journey passed quickly as we made our way up the coast to Helmsdale where I shall spend tomorrow night before we headed due north inland spotting red deer and a curlew as we made our way across



[the Flow Country,](#)

the largest expanse of blanket bog in Europe. This was badly damaged in the early eighties by large scale tree planting making use of tax breaks available to the rich and famous but this was stopped in 1988 and there is still a lot of unspoilt moorland.

We arrived in Thurso about 20 minutes behind schedule and I took a further 7 minutes to wheel the bike, with the bike bag looped over my shoulder, to the Royal Muthu Hotel in the centre of town. I last stayed

here in 2014 after completing my trip from Lands End to John O'Groats and it hasn't changed much, still very old fashioned and in need of an overhaul. My room is about as far from the reception as it could be but is surprisingly large and well appointed. The bike is locked away in the basement which is full of dirty linen and I have boxed up the bike bag, ready to take to the Post Office when it opens at 0900, for return to Home Farm.



I decided when booking that I would have dinner here as well as breakfast. A more eccentric meal would be hard to imagine. The crostini were lightly toasted bread rolls with a large amount of leaves, cucumbers and sweet peppers and not much in the way of tomatoes. I thought I couldn't go far wrong with haddock and chips but was surprised when the fish was smoked haddock in batter, a first for me, but surprisingly tasty. Again masses of leaves and none of the advertised mushy peas. I asked what was to follow and was given a long list from which I chose fudge cake. About 5 minutes passed and the waiter reappeared to say that the fudge cake was still frozen and the only things available from the long list were a lemon meringue tart and ice cream. At least this was edible and didn't come with leaves! So a very strange meal in an almost deserted large dining-room but it filled a gap as I hadn't eaten since breakfast.

The weather forecast is for a dry start but strengthening winds to about force 7 in the afternoon with accompanying rain so the last bit of the journey will be testing. Hopefully I shall reach Helmsdale before the worst hits.

## Day 1 Thurso – Helmsdale via Dunnet Head

I didn't sleep particularly well, a combination of not having done anything strenuous yesterday and dozing on the plane, so was up and about at 0700 and shortly afterwards downstairs with the cardboard box containing the bike bag which I needed to get to the Post Office. I had been prescient enough to take a suitable sized box with me inside the bike bag and the bag fitted well. I'd also taken a roll of parcel tape to make the box and ensure it was secure enough to make it to Home farm (fingers crossed).

First, I had breakfast, a help yourself to more or less anything you might want affair. The cooking was a significant improvement on the previous evening and I did myself well knowing that I wouldn't get any lunch because the countryside I was passing through was distinctly lacking in food stops. I knew that the Post Office, attached to the local Co-op supermarket didn't open until 0900 but I took a gamble that I could drop the parcel, which was pre-paid, at the Co-op and they would pass it to the PO when it opened. Sure enough, after a bit of persuasion the girl at the cigarette counter agreed and I hope that it will arrive in due course.

The day was bright, hardly a cloud in the sky, and I was away by 0827 having filled the water bottles courtesy of the lady who was about to embark on the huge pile of laundry in the basement. I immediately found that the handlebars were in the wrong position and had to stop 3 times before I got it right. It was chilly and I wore my bib tights and a wind jacket all day despite the bright





sunshine on my way up to Dunnet Head, my first extreme which I reached at 0940, the time that I thought I might have been leaving Thurso, so I was well ahead of schedule. This was encouraging because I knew that the weather was forecast to deteriorate in the afternoon with strong winds and showers expected. I looked across at the lighthouse and saw a cyclist packing his gear underneath the stone wall and recognised Ian, my travelling companion on the train who, it transpired had cycled up there yesterday evening and camped overnight. We chatted and he was still unsure of his movements ("I'll probably go a bit

east and then maybe a bit west”) and I won’t be surprised to bump into him at Ardnamurchan, though it’s very unlikely.

I didn’t dawdle and followed instructions from Rita, who has suddenly acquired a Canadian accent, to head south. On the way I passed Carrig Lios where I had intended to spend the previous night, before realising that I needed to get rid of the bike bag before taking off on my bike. It looked nice, though remote, and there were some motor cyclists packing up outside, so my cancellation didn’t leave them without punters.



This is a countryside of straight roads and few trees and hedges and I made good time in light winds and sunshine. It is all farmed, with a surprising amount of barley still awaiting the combine, and some smart looking beef cattle and sheep: I saw no sign of any dairy farms. The only significant settlement that I passed through was Watten, alongside a large loch, and I stopped at the shop for a bottle of Tango which was reasonably priced at £1. The further south I went the farming lessened and I was soon in the midst of a huge windfarm in the Flow Country. I

didn't count but there must have been at least 40 giants owned and run by E-On between Watten and Camster



And they were starting to do good work as the wind increased as



forecast. 20 minutes later I saw the extraordinary [Camster Cairns](#). There are two Neolithic stone structures, one long and the other round which have been extensively and impressively

restored by Historic Scotland.



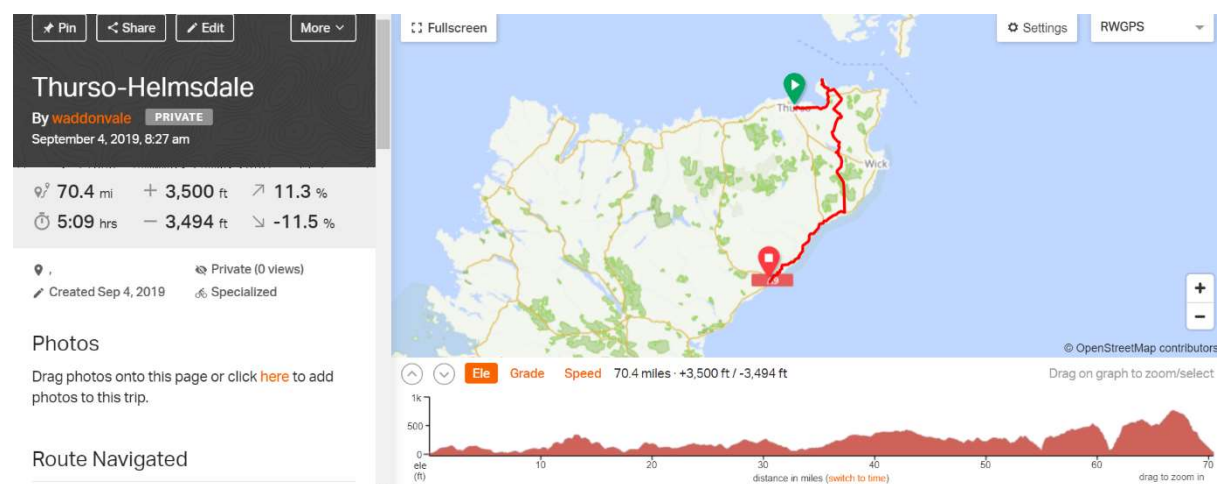
As it was just starting to spit with rain I didn't dawdle and having taken some pictures was soon on my way. The rain worsened and by the time I reached the A99 at Lybster I was wet enough to stop by a bus shelter and put on my overshoes and a waterproof jacket. This was the pattern for the rest of the journey, short sharp showers and sunny periods with an ever increasing wind.

I knew that I had some hard climbing to do at Dunbeath and was fortunate that there were roadworks happening that meant that I was able to climb the hill in the absence of traffic. Nonetheless with a pitch up to 12.5% it was hard work, though not overlong. Berriedale was another matter: a steep descent around a couple of hairpin bends and a



climb of up to 14% over two miles. I had to stop for a breather half-way up the hill but made it without pushing. More ups and downs, but not quite so severe, in frequent showers and winds which nearly stopped me dead a couple of times, brought me to Helmsdale and the Belgrave Arms where I was warmly welcomed by Landlord Craig who stowed my bike in a shed and showed me to a superior room to that which I had booked.

Because the hotel is full of students from Edinburgh University the restaurant is closed but Craig said I was welcome to eat what was on the menu for the undergraduates. When I came down to the bar for a beer I was given excellent tomato soup and a steak and mushroom pie courtesy of the University - although I don't think they've been told! Anyway, who am I to turn down free food? Bellhaven beer is just about drinkable and I had a couple of pints to see me to bed. The weather forecast for tomorrow is more of the same on my way to Inverness but the terrain, after an initial climb out of Helmsdale, is less challenging.



## Day 2 Helmsdale to Inverness

Craig, from Dingwall, learned how to cook in the RAF and then left and pursued a career in business. Wendy, his wife, who hails from Cheshire worked in HR and admin, so they have the perfect background to run a pub. 14 years ago they acquired the Belgrave Arms in Helmsdale which has 10 letting rooms of varying capacity and they do good business all year round. This week they have a bunch of geology students from Edinburgh University who do field trips during the day and lectures in the evening, which was most fortunate for me because I got a better ensuite room and a free

meal. The building needs a bit of attention but the ambiance is good and the bar was doing fair business for a Wednesday night.

Breakfast, overseen by Wendy, was good and plentiful, and I chatted to Bob, an engineer from Kidderminster, who was staying whilst visiting a firm at Dunbeath. I left at about 0900 in light spitting rain and I kept my wind cheater on all day, even when the sun broke through in the afternoon, as it was distinctly chilly.

The first hour was something of a switchback and became the pattern for much of the day. The wind was bang on my nose and I barely managed 11 miles. The day was grey and although the rain



never really developed it threatened for most of the morning. I took a picture looking across to Lossiemouth in the far distance across the railway track that I travelled along on Tuesday.

Just past Golspie, Loch Fleet penetrates about 5 miles inland and the A9 skirts around the edge giving rise to this intriguing sign that I doubt you will see in many other places. Do we need to be cautious because of their nasty big pointy teeth or do the otters need to be cautious about road safety?

Anyway, hardly surprisingly, I didn't see any.

I have been experiencing a nasty bump in my back wheel, especially at speed so shortly afterwards, as the weather seemed to be clearing and I fancied getting off the bike I investigated. It appears that there is a bit of a flat spot in the rim and I may just have to put up with it for the rest of the trip as I think it is unlikely that I shall find anyone to true it at short notice. It's annoying but probably not serious.

More footling hills, hard work in the wind through countryside that was completely cultivated. Much of the oat and barley crop was still to be cut but I came across fields of straw and one where the combine had been abandoned at the end of a row as the storm struck.

I swept down the A9, now becoming quite busy but much wider

and with a hard shoulder that allowed me to cycle in relative safety, towards the Dornoch Firth which





is crossed by a bridge.



I was quite expecting this to be hair-raising but there was a good cycle lane in both directions and I negotiated it safely and shortly afterwards snaked past the Glenmorangie Distillery, open for visitors, but bypassed by me.

It was lunchtime as I entered Tain and the first thing I saw was Lidl so I stopped to buy supplies which I ate in the car park. It must be one of the most picturesque settings for a supermarket with sweeping views across the sea to the area that I had just left.



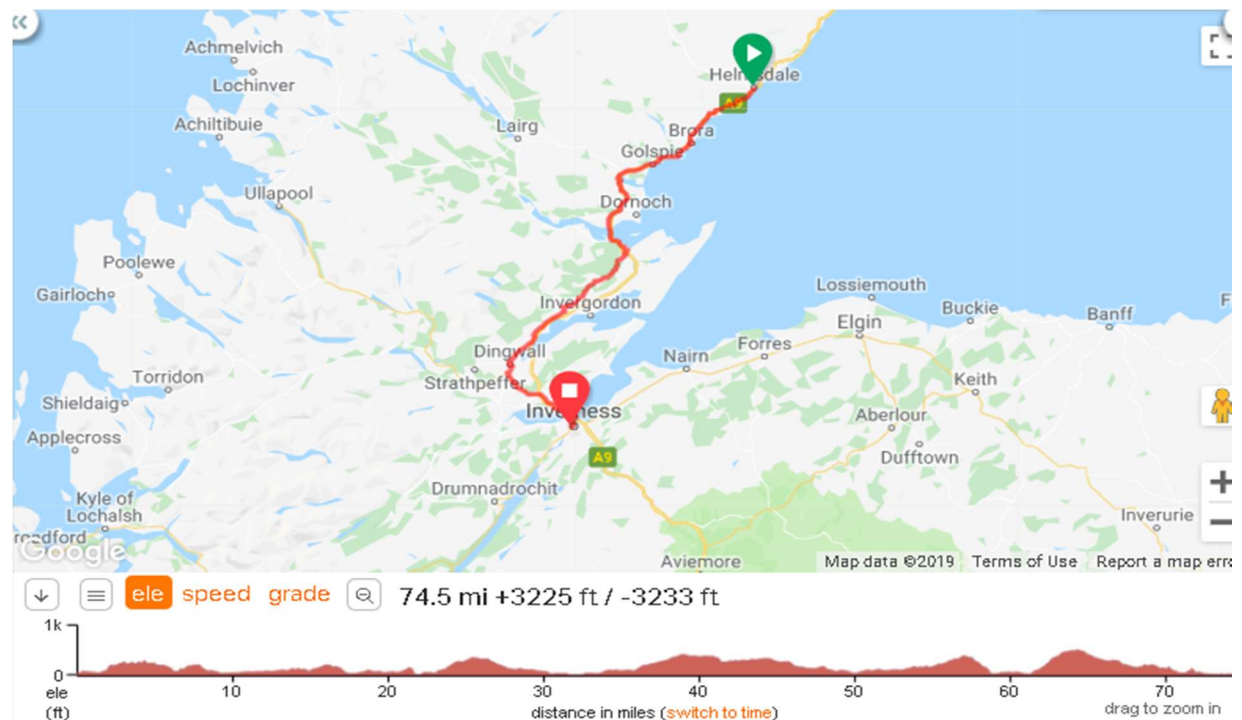
From Tain I left the A9 and took to some lovely quiet back roads, through woodland and intensively managed farm-land. The terrain was gentle and the cycling easy except for the wind which was strengthening all the time. By the time I reached Alness on the edge of the Cromarty Firth it was blowing Force 5 gusting 6 and a long climb out of Evanton was made even harder. I was glad to drop down to Dingwall but was soon into more climbing with three miles of 5-6%, fortunately, because I had turned the corner, with the wind now behind me.



I now had a long swoop down towards the Moray Firth where I crossed the Kessock Bridge into Inverness. Curiously this bridge only slopes in one direction and I'm delighted to say that it was in my favour and the wind was behind me. I met three poor cyclists coming in the opposite direction on the narrow cycle path and pulled over to let them puff their way to the top.

I was soon passing through the trading estates and crossing the Ness river before landing at the Quaich B&B where I am spending the night. I last stayed here 5 years ago after I had completed my Lands End to John O'Groats and before flying out of Inverness

airport with the very same bike bag that I used this time. The road between Tain and Inverness was all covered during that trip, although I didn't recognise much of it. In 2014 I didn't cross the Dornoch Bridge but made my way up to Bonar Bridge before heading north to Borgie and John O'Groats.



It's not been a great day for photography but the weekend, when I get to the west coast, looks better.

## Day 3 Inverness- Corpach

I went to Wetherspoons King's Highway pub in the centre. It was an easy walk across the pedestrian bridge, cheap and met my needs. I had haggis, neeps and tatties and a pint of Doombar all for the princely sum of £7.15. With a pint of beer costing upwards of £3 anywhere else £1.99 for Doombar seems extraordinary. OK service leaves a lot to be desired and the ambience is dreadful but at those prices when you're on your

own, it's a bargain. This morning I breakfasted with a couple from New Zealand who are doing Scotland. She was born in NZ to Scottish parents so has some history: we had a pleasant chat and went our separate ways.

I started badly by losing the route out of town and went around in a couple of unnecessary circles, but once I picked up the route it was plain sailing. The road out of town towards Loch Ness was quiet and soon developed a cycle track all the way to Dores on the Loch side.



This was one of General Wade's Military Roads. General Wade was sent by George I to Scotland in 1724 and reported that most of the men capable of bearing arms in favour of James Stuart, The Old Pretender, were ready to rise and that troops were urgently needed to quell any rebellion. He immediately set out to build roads capable of moving troops supportive of the King to strategic points in the Highlands. The first such road, built at a cost of £90 per mile during 1726 and 1727 linked Fort George at Inverness, Fort Augustus in the centre and Fort



William in the south. The road is now the B852 along which I was travelling. This follows the loch side but roller coasters along making cycling quite hard work.



I continued to Foyers where the really steep pitches started and I almost had to GOAP before I reached the Falls of Foyers which is a honeypot for tourists, and has been since Victorian times. The Falls themselves are spectacular but their power is what makes them more interesting. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century a process was discovered to refine Aluminium Oxide into the metal that we know today and British Aluminium Company was formed to take advantage of this. In 1894 they purchased about 8000 acres of land comprising the Foyers sporting estates and including the aforesaid Falls which could be indirectly harnessed to produce the large quantities of hydro-power which was needed in the process. The water that fed the Falls was dammed to form a Loch and water was sent down pressurised pipes to feed the generating station at the base. This produced more than enough power but at the expense of

the Falls. However in 1967 the plant was closed and the Falls allowed to return to their former glory



There is a monument honouring the work of what became Alcan and some walks around the Falls that illustrate some of this history. There is still a hydro plant running off Loch Mohr and a distribution station at the



Lochside.



From Foyers the road started to climb, at some points very steeply until it joined with the B862 and passing an old stone bridge at Whitebridge



climbed to 1262 feet over moorland as the sun started to show its face.  
I was mighty glad to reach the summit and have a breather



before the steep descent to Fort Augustus which has a set of locks for  
the Caledonian Canal allowing boats to travel from the East to West



Coast without going around the north tip of Scotland.



Here I stopped and, beside the canal, had some of the best haddock and chips that I have tasted. If you're ever in the area drop in.



I  
now



followed the canal along the towpath which was hard gravel, fairly well maintained but subsiding in places. This continued between the canal and the River Oich until we reached Bridge of Oich where a swing bridge takes the main A82 across the canal.



I watched a small boat being allowed through before crossing the road and following the path of the old Fort Augustus railway to Invergarry. This ill-fated railway was built at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century but the link to Inverness was never completed and it was abandoned in 1946. Much to the benefit of hikers and cyclists the route has been adopted as part of the Great Glen Way and gives a good hard surface along the south side of Loch Oich. At Invergarry an attempt is being made to restore a

short section of the line to attract visitors.



I now followed the path of the canal to Laggan locks where I joined forest roads to the north side of Loch Lochy, surely up there with Boaty McBoatface in the naming stakes. This was a generally good track but with a lot of climbing and descending. By this point I was getting pretty tired and didn't enjoy it as much as I might have done if fresh, but I made it to the tarmac road at Bunarcaig before finally hitting the canal for the last 7 miles of the journey to Corpach, just north of Fort William. Ben Nevis is sitting under heavy cloud but the forecast for tomorrow is for an improvement and, hopefully she will show her head for the hundreds of fell runners who are competing to run to the top and back in the fastest possible time. Local G.P Finlay Wild has won the men's event every year since 2010 but has yet to beat Kenny Stuart's record of 1 hour 25:34 set in 1984. Victoria Wilkinson holds the ladies record of 1 hour 43 minutes.





## Day 4 Corpach-Salen

Having had a hard day cycling it really didn't need a long walk to find food. I had an internal debate as to whether or not I wanted it but decided that a pint of beer was called for and, if I was to have a drink, I might as well eat as well. It took me 25 minutes to walk along the canal to the Lochy pub which was showing wall to wall Scotland v Russia in the Euro qualifiers. The beer was Bellhaven cask, just about acceptable, and the food was really rather good macaroni cheese and chips. The walk home, by the main road took about 20 minutes and I didn't get to the blog until after 9pm. Consequently it was almost midnight before I finished.

The morning dawned, as forecast, bright and clear and Ben Nevis was showing itself in all its majesty.

Unfortunately, Corpach is to the west of the mountain so the picture I took was almost directly into the sun. Apparently Finlay Wild duly won the Ben Nevis race again, ten in a row, but the 1984 record still stands.



Toby and Bev are Australians, he in the telecoms business which has taken them around the world. 10 years ago they decided they'd had enough of working apart and decided to buy Mansefield House, as its name implies a former Presbyterian Manse, a six letting room B&B. Bev quietly and efficiently runs the front of house and Toby does the maintenance and cooks a very good breakfast. Toby cleaned my water bottles and filled them with chilled water ready for my departure at 0913. The bed was comfortable and the shower worked well so I was happy with the experience.



The Road to the Isles follows the line of the

West Highland Railway joining Fort William to Mallaig. The first 13 miles are predominantly flat and follow the shore of Loch Eil, a tidal inlet of Loch Linnhe, but a good 50 miles from the open sea. The railway runs between the road and the loch and is shielded by a dense deciduous tree strip which prevents much view of the loch from the road.

At Kinlocheil the water finishes and the road starts to move upwards, but not fiercely and 13 miles into the journey, which took me under an hour, you reach the Visitor Centre at Glenfinnan. Glenfinnan is known



for two main things; the first is the Monument to Bonnie Prince Charlie who raised his Standard and claimed the British throne on that spot. He



was almost successful getting as far as Derbyshire before his advisers persuaded him to return to Scotland where he was soundly defeated by “Butcher” Cumberland at the battle of Culloden and fled back to the Highlands before taking a boat with Flora MacDonald “Over the sea to Skye” from pretty much where he landed a year before.



The second claim to fame is the 21 arch

Glenfinnan railway viaduct, constructed entirely of concrete between 1897 and 1898. It's an impressive structure but now more famous for being used in the *Harry Potter* films as location for the Hogwart's express. Thousands now flock there to watch The Jacobite Steam Engine pull a train of maroon coaches to Mallaig and back each day and I joined a coach load of German tourists to watch the action at about 1050.

Once the main attraction was past I got back on the bike and started some serious climbing. The weather was chilly but there was scarcely a cloud in the sky and I was quite warm in my wind jacket when I reached the summit and started the long descent to Loch Eilt. Part way down I heard the sound of another steam train and was just in time to film it as it passed by. I'm not sure what it was, but possibly the first train was fully booked and they put on another. It's clearly good business at £41 for the return trip or £63.25 if you travel first class.

Loch Eilt was calm and serene with clear peaty water, surrounded by rowan and birch trees. I stopped and drank in the scene. Traffic was

scarce so there were even moments of silence to savour.



It didn't last, a stream of noisy motor bikes shattered the calm and I continued on my way towards Lochailort, another sea loch which



showed evidence of fish farming.



The road hugged the coast with beautiful views across the calm waters to the Cuillins of Skye in the far distance behind the Morar peninsula.



I half expected to see a family of otters playing on the shore but had to content myself watching a bird diving in the bay.

I hoped to stop for lunch at the Glen Uig Inn to give myself a bit of a rest before the next major climb, but despite notices outside advertising accommodation and food all day, the building was locked, so I continued. The climb was just over a mile and topped out at about 10% but with some easier bits at regular intervals where I stopped and shed my jacket. I felt quite good when I crested the hill and swooped down the other side to sea level at Loch Moidart.

Moidart is famous for being the place where Bonnie Prince Charlie, yes him again, finally left Scotland forever with 7 companions who became known as the *Seven Men of Moidart* although there is some debate as to whether or not Moidart is where he originally landed rather than



departed. Anyway to commemorate his companions seven beech trees were planted 100 years or so later in marsh land beside the Loch. The originals were destroyed by storms and replanting has not been very successful so what is there now looks rather scrubby and undistinguished



The road now climbed again to give a mile of the steepest slopes of the day but my legs were up to it and I hit almost 40mph as I descended to Acharacle where I found a shop and bought a couple of delicious danish pastries and a bottle of orange drink to make up for the lack of lunch. One more climb and I was over the hill into Salen where I am staying the night. As I was rather early Ella hadn't finished preparing the room so I went up the road to the Salen Inn for a cup of tea.

It's been a glorious day, little wind and bright sunshine. The mileage has been low and I think I can count this as a bit of a rest day before I make for Ardnamurchan, my second extreme and then on to Oban by way of

the Isle of Mull tomorrow.



## Day 5 – The second extreme

Last night I walked the 100 or so yards up the hill to the Salen Hotel for some food. The hotel is run by Yorkshiremen from the owner to the barman and the chef. They served Green King IPA which was a distinct plus and the food was excellent. I started with a delicious pate with a sweet relish and oatcakes and went on to a haggis stuffed chicken breast that was served with properly cooked veg. The chocolate fudge cake was obviously baked on the premises and the whole meal was the best I have had so far.

Ella is German and is a very talented photographer of the Ardnamurchan peninsula where she has lived and run Salen B&B for 9 years. She is also a very good cook and baker as I found out at breakfast which I shared with a couple from Munich who had been sailing around the Inner



Hebrides and were now embarking on a land tour. They are great lovers of all things Scottish, especially whisky, and have bought a barrel, which will not be drinkable for another four years, from the Ardnamurchan Distillery



They had a wooden core from a barrel which smelled sweet and heady and were off to visit other distilleries in the area over the next week. Ella's bread and apple cake were delicious and her fry up was the best I have tasted with some delicious haggis, sausages and black pudding. My room was enormous and so was the bathroom but, strangely, my clothes weren't dry by this morning and I had to wear them damp.

I knew that I had some pretty testing country to cycle over but, in the event, it was worse than I anticipated. To start with the road followed the shore of Loch Sunart, which I photographed from the hotel in the afternoon sunshine of yesterday.



but went up and down like a yo-yo with short pitches of double digit climbing. The weather was overcast and chilly, a total contrast to yesterday. I was heading for Kilchoan about 20 miles to the west from where I would catch the Calmac ferry to Tobermory at lunchtime. During that journey I must have been passed by at least 50 motorcycles of all shapes and sizes coming from the opposite direction. The road was narrow with passing places but the motorcycles didn't check me too much and I was able to keep going up the steep pitches, climbing at one



point to almost 600 feet but



occasionally stopping to take pictures of the tranquil loch.

I made it to Kilchoan in under 2 hours but knew that I had a testing climb ahead of me before I arrived at my second “extreme”, Ardnamurchan Point, and so it proved. Although the road only went up to about 300



feet I had to do that in both directions as there is only one road and there were several short climbs of up to 16%.

Anyway, Ardnamurchan Point was reached half an hour earlier than I had anticipated and a

motorcyclist took a picture of me and the bike in front of the lighthouse which is now a museum.

I didn't venture inside but, instead went into the nearby café for a cup of tea and had a further picture taken with Corrachadh Mor which is by about 5 feet the actual extreme, in the background.



Ardnamurchan point also features what must be the most westerly set of traffic lights in Britain as the road to the lighthouse twists around a blind bend.

I confess I went through them on red.

The way back was not as fierce as I had feared and I was back at the Puffin café in Kilchoan for a further mug of tea before catching the ferry to Mull at 1335. The heavily pregnant

woman serving was a marine biologist, originally from South Wales and she and her husband, a yacht skipper from Mull had only just bought the café. She said business had been good through the summer and her





family  
planning  
was

impeccable with the baby due in 5 weeks, as the visitors disappeared.

I waited at the slipway for the ferry and was amazed to connect to

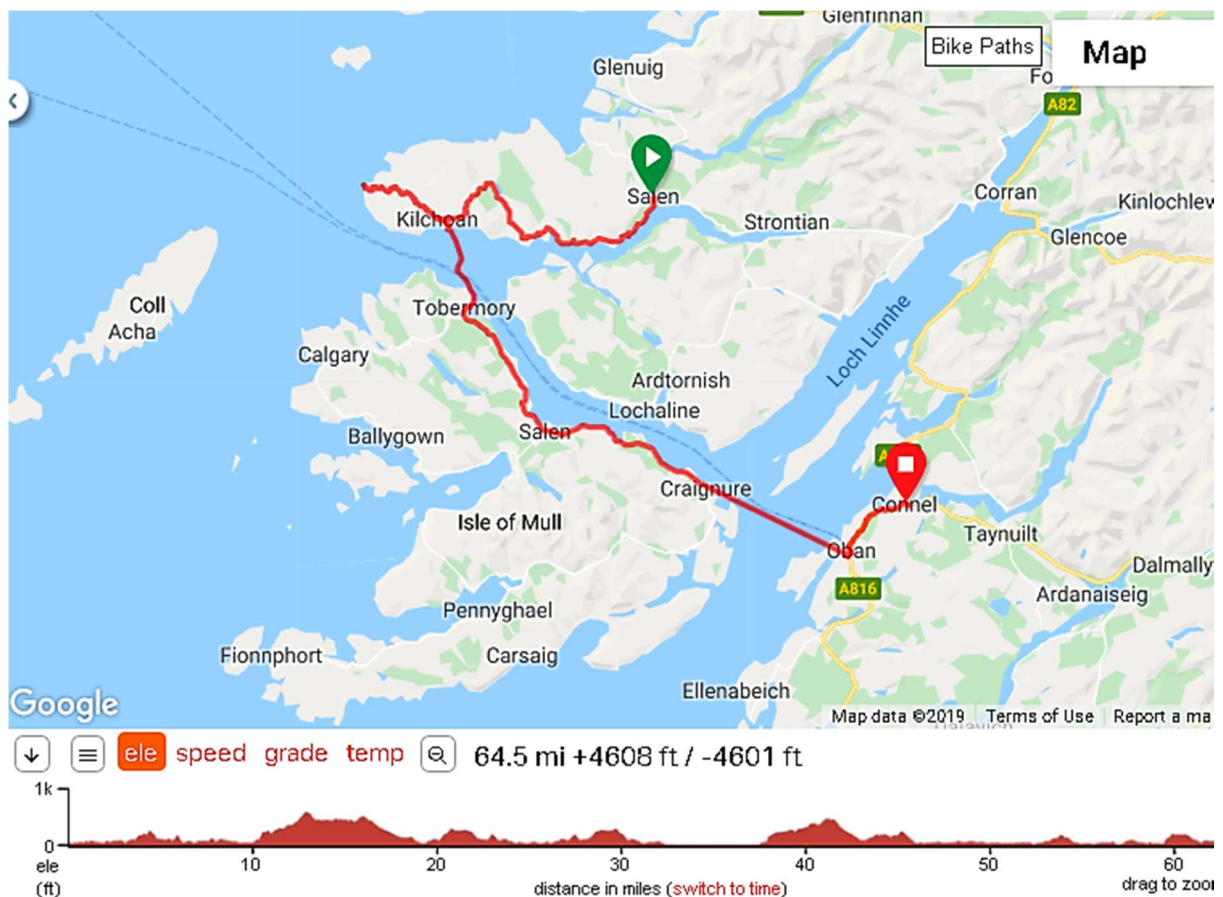


Calmac free WiFi. There was a proper bike shelter and a waiting room

out of the elements. It was still very chilly and the wind was increasing, so very welcome. Also, I thought rather incongruously, to the left of the picture is an electric vehicle charging point.

The ferry journey to Tobermory took about half an hour and I now had two and a half hours to cycle 21 miles to Caignure to catch a further ferry to Oban. I had decided on this way of doing things because, otherwise, I would have had to back-track. In the event it worked very well. The initial climb out of Tobermory is very steep but levels out in about half a mile. The climbing continues at 3-5% for about 2 miles which was hurting with all the effort I had already put in. The A848 from Tobermory to Caignure is a strange beast. The first five miles were on a wide road with hard shoulders but this then became single track with passing places for the next 10 miles, until about 5 miles from Caignure it reverted to a wide carriageway. The weather had deteriorated to a Scotch mist that quickly fogged up my specs and I can't say I was sorry to leave misty Mull on a much larger ferry than the one earlier in the day. I was first on and first off which meant that I avoided tangling with the traffic in Oban

The last 7 miles of the journey from Oban to Falls of Lora Hotel in Connel was miserably damp but I finally arrived at about 630pm.



## Day 6 – Connel – Balloch

I grabbed a bite to eat on the ferry from Craignure to Oban, macaroni cheese and chips to make up for missing lunch. As a result when I arrived at the hotel I wasn't all that hungry but was told at reception that if I wanted to eat I would need to make a reservation immediately, to eat by 9pm when the kitchen closed. I booked a table for 8pm, which was the latest they could manage and went upstairs to do the usual offices and start thinking about my day for the blog. I duly presented myself and had a pint of Bellhaven and a very pleasant dish of smoked haddock in a light mustard sauce with mash and "seasonal" veg which always seems to consist of carrots, peapods and broccoli but was well cooked. That was enough and I retired to write the blog and ensure that the clothes were dry courtesy of a hot radiator.

The day dawned dull, rain was forecast and I went down for breakfast at 0800. The waiting staff in a traditional Scottish hotel such as the Falls of

Lora



named after the rapids that form beneath the Connel Bridge at certain points of the tide, always seem to be of a type, elderly ladies who buzz about efficiently, tending to several tables and making sure that the punters are well looked after. The food was unremarkable; cooked in advance with rather leathery scrambled egg and dry sausage. It filled a gap and I went back up the two flights of stairs, with no lift, to pack up. My room was small and had ensuite loo and wash basin but no shower so I had gone down the corridor to wash myself the night before.

I lugged the panniers downstairs and paid the bill and my bike was round the back where I had left it the night before. As I loaded up the luggage it started to rain heavily and by the time I was five minutes down the road I was feeling wet. I was on major trunk roads all day and I was concerned about the traffic, especially as, in several places, I knew the roads were not wide. However the A85, which is the main road from Oban to Tyndrum, was mercifully quiet and once the rain had settled to a mixture of scotch mist and spits and spots I enjoyed the ride along the side of Loch Etive





and later, Loch Awe. Loch Awe has an excellent smokery and its produce is world renowned. It also has an amazing bit of heavy engineering hidden inside Ben Cruachan that towers over the Loch. In 1959 work was started to build a hydro-electric station that could pump water in both directions. Use of electricity is intermittent and it was realised that if you built a dam high on a mountainside, water could fall down pipes and generate electricity through turbines. In times of low power demand, water could then be pumped back up to the dam, using electricity that could not be stored, ready for the next surge in use: a simple but very effective concept that is still in use today. Cruachan was not the first of its type but, despite early problems, remains one of the most efficient and 50,000 visitors a year see the huge turbine hall built inside the hollow mountain.

I had no time to stand and stare and continued along the A85 as it climbed up



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to the moor above Tyndrum. The slopes are fairly gentle and I made good time with very little traffic. The weather improved a little and I stopped to take some pictures.

At Tyndrum the A85 joins with and becomes the A82, and I stopped at Brodies mini-market, which has been catering for weary travellers since the 1930s, and bought a packet of Jaffa cakes, a banana and a bottle of orange for immediate consumption



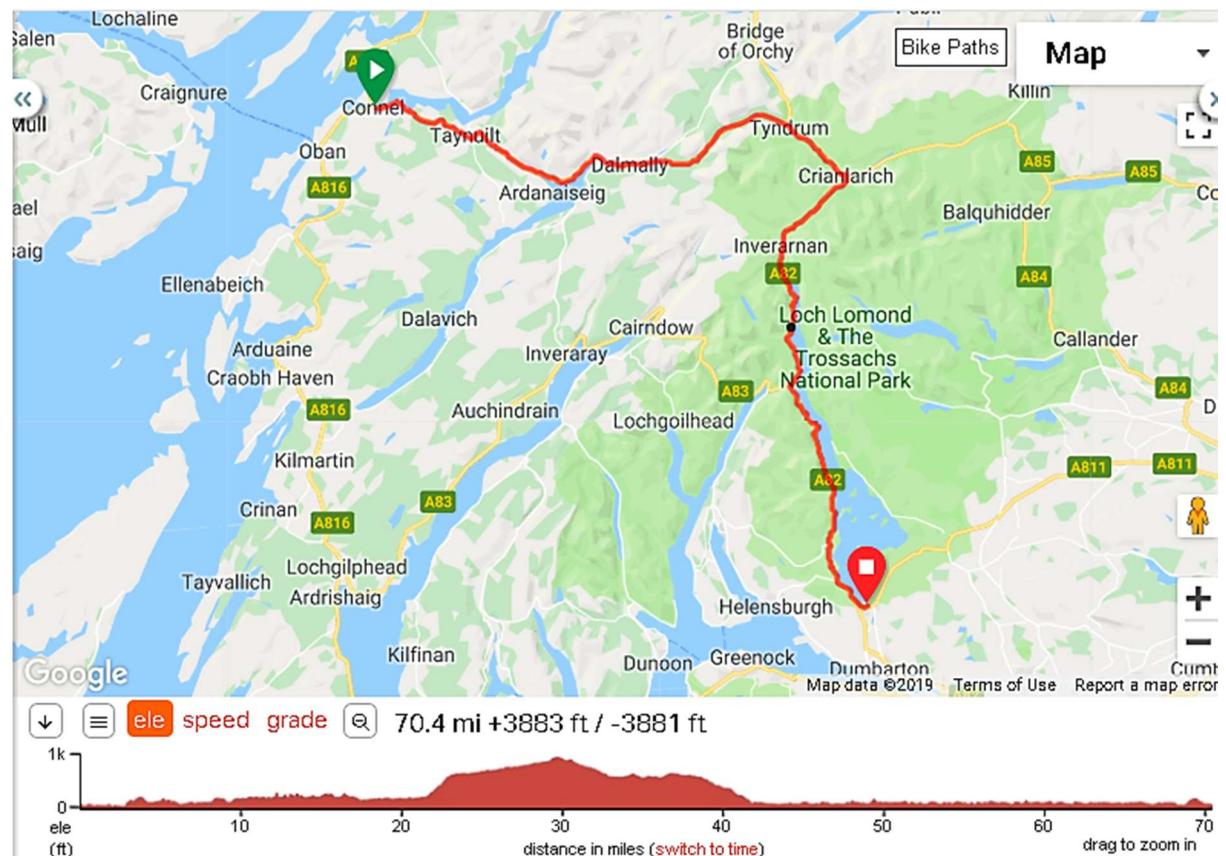
As I continued towards Crianlarch the rain came down more heavily to the extent that I stopped for shelter in the bus stop by the Crianlarich Hotel. My timing was impeccable in that as I restarted the rain ceased and I had an exhilarating ride down towards Loch Lomond.

I was now retracing steps I had taken in the opposite direction when cycling from Lands End to John O'Groats in 2014, but had forgotten just how far it is from Crianlarich to Tarbert on Loch Lomond. The road starts off well but narrows down and twists and turns, getting steadily worse as it winds along the Loch shore. The traffic was heavier and there were a few moments when I cursed inconsiderate drivers.

53 miles into the journey, cyclists and pedestrians leave the main road and take to a dedicated path of varying quality both in width and surface



but at least you are away from the heavy traffic. It was then a further 17 miles during which I again got soaked by a shower, before I arrived at the Lomond Park Hotel in Balloch where I am staying the night. It's been miserably wet at times so far from enjoyable but, at least, the climbing has been easy and the Hotel has a good radiator to dry my clothes for tomorrow.



## Day 7 – Gawking in Glasgow

The Lomond Park Hotel in Balloch is part of a large entertainment complex. There is a busy bar and a huge nightclub that, fortunately for me, only operates at weekends. The reception looked shabby and the man on reception was keener to talk to a saleswoman than acknowledge me: however he eventually did so, said he would put my bike away and gave me the key to Room 6 which was as shabby as the rest of the place. Someone had obviously broken the door down recently and the repair was poor, but it was only for one night and at least it had a heater on

which I could dry clothes. They also have a bistro style restaurant which is where I decided to eat and I was glad to have done so. A hot and tasty tomato soup was followed by beef stroganoff with rice and “seasonal” vegetables, you’ve guessed, the same as the night before. I finished with a lemon cheesecake and was more than happy with the meal.

The double bed was uncomfortable and I tossed and turned all night. However when I got up I felt OK and went down for the continental breakfast that was included in the price, cornflakes with some fresh fruit and tea and toast. As I was the only one down at 0800 I had a long chat with Anne who was in charge of breakfast. She has a grown family and felt happier in Balloch than anywhere else despite having done lots of travelling. She told me about her childhood and swimming in the Leven River that runs from Loch Lomond to the Clyde. “They called us the Chemical kids because there was so much pollution in the river. They reckon we’d glow in the dark!”

I set off shortly after 9, in no particular hurry as I only had about 60 miles to travel. I’d asked Anne what she would do if she had an hour to spare in Glasgow and she immediately recommended the Riverside Museum which specialises in all forms of transport.

The weather was fair and I immediately joined a good cycle path beside the river which looked pretty healthy and fast flowing.



I passed the Loch Lomond distillery before realising I had gone wrong and had to retrace my steps. The way to Dumbarton was all off road on a hard surface and I had done the reverse journey in 2014: there is still a strange narrow path for about 100 yds in the middle, presumably because the landowner won't give any more room and I was through Dumbarton on mainly side roads and onto the Forth and Clyde Canal towpath in under an hour. Strangely although the towpath runs between the canal and the river I didn't see the river until I reached the centre of Glasgow because it is screened by trees and houses. I passed a grandiose



monument to a short-lived Royal Navy ship-builder in Dalmuir



The Beardmore works was only open for about 25 years but built some of the Dreadnoughts that ruled the oceans in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Opposite the sculpture was an unusual lock system that drops the water



below road level so that boats can pass under a bridge without it being lifted.



A natty solution to the problem. I continued to follow the canal until, opposite Screwfix, I turned towards the Clyde and saw the blue Titan

crane that was used by the John Brown yard to build, amongst many others, such ships as HMS Hood and the SS Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth. It was decommissioned in the 1980s but is now a listed monument,



towering over Clydebank, which you can go up and, I believe, do a bungee jump. The cycle paths through Clydebank are well surfaced but there is a lot of broken glass to contend with: fortunately my tyres coped.



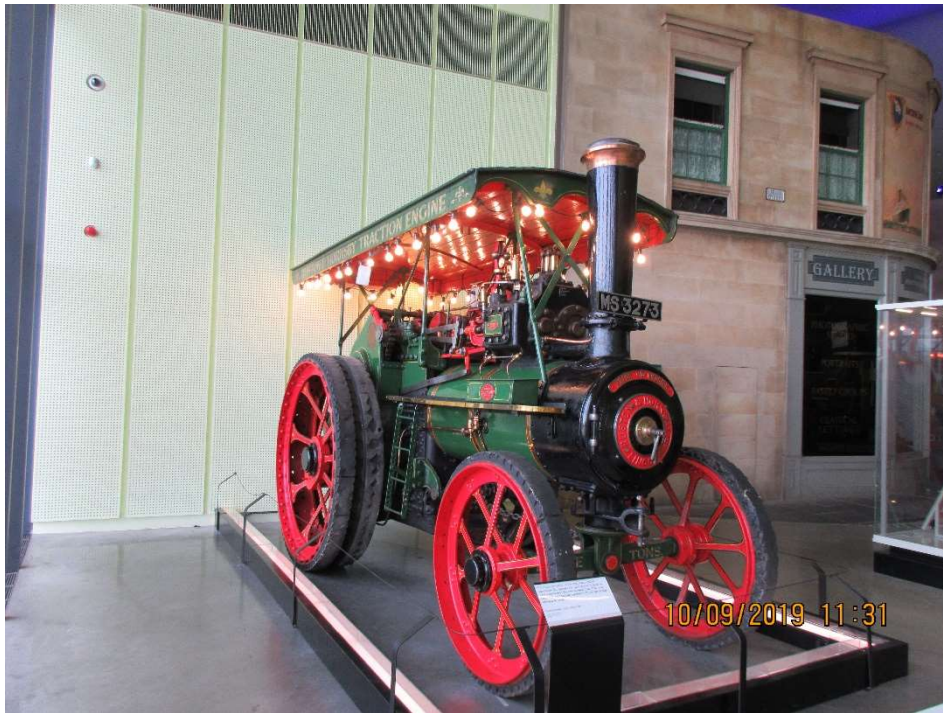
I could now see the Riverside Museum but needed to push my heavy



bike over a pedestrian footbridge to get over the main road beneath. On the other side was yet another distillery, the Clydeside Distillery.

The Riverside Museum was a two minute ride back up the river bank and I locked up the bike and put on some fairly respectable clothes for the visit. I reckoned a couple of hours would be enough and would give me plenty of time to reach my destination which was still over 40 miles away.

What a fascinating museum it is; and it was, indeed about two hours before I had seen it all and had a sandwich and drink to send me on my way.



At the entrance was a showman's steam engine and a related exhibition

And we moved through a street scene into a huge Hall full of cars,



Trains, trams, motorcycles bicycles and associated kit and caboodle including a mock-up of the Glasgow Subway railway, the third oldest in the world, which has now been totally updated.



Also on display are the two bicycles used by eccentric inventor and cyclist, Graham Obree in breaking the world hour record.





Outside, moored on the Clyde is the Tall ship Glenlee



and, on the day, they were offering free trips down the Clyde in a water taxi. The museum is free to visit but, as is usual in such places, they ask for donations and I was glad to put £5 in the collection box for a couple of hours of enjoyment.

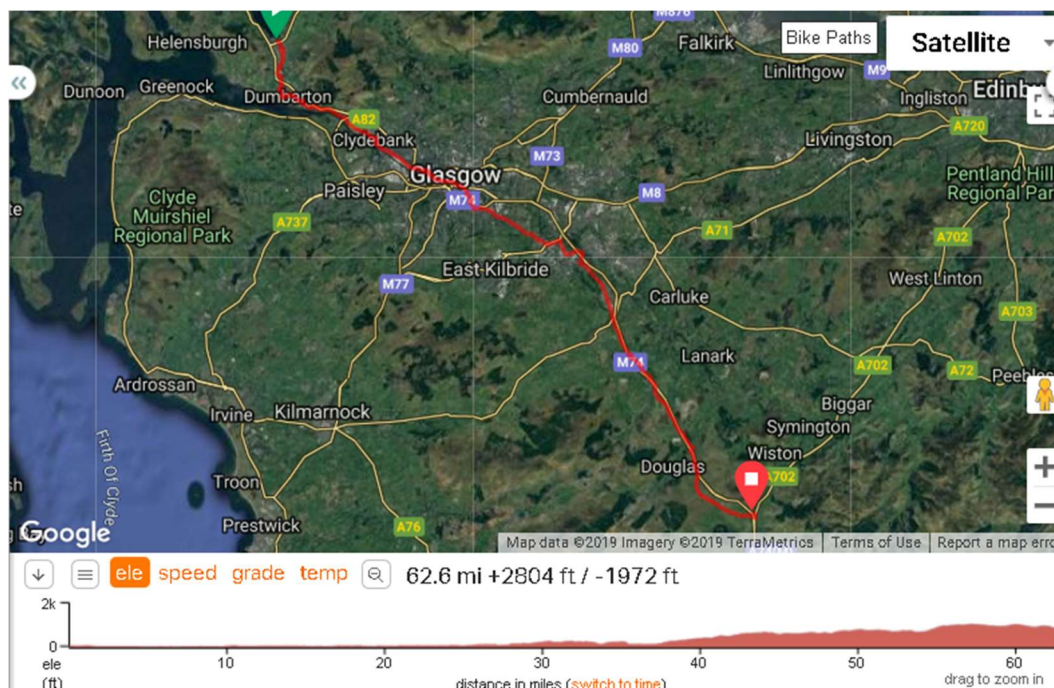
But I still had a way to go before I could rest and I continued on the Clydeside cycle paths until they ran out at Rutherglen and I had to join the traffic on the busy road through Cambuslang and Blantyre.

Back down a very steep hill to the Clyde valley and further cycle paths through Strathclyde Park until I joined the A72 at Chatelherault, which became the B7078 for the remainder of the journey. This extraordinary



road  
has a  
cycle  
track  
that is  
almost  
the  
same  
width  
as the  
road,

properly tarmacked and running for fully 15 miles. It was a joy to cycle along, even though the wind had picked up in my face and the surface deteriorated towards the end of the journey. Heaven knows why it has been built: there were few users today but it would be nice if there were more paths like that nationwide.



## Day 8 Downhill to England

If you've ever driven north from Carlisle to Glasgow you'll have been past, if not stopped at, the Motorway Services at Abington. They're in the middle of a large moor with nothing much around them but a belt of sheltering trees. It was there at the Day's Inn that I stayed last night. I used it on my way to John O'Groats from Lands End in 2014 and was sufficiently impressed to want to stay there again. You get a large double room with lots of space for you and a bike, the bed is comfortable and there is a bar in reception where you can get draught lager or bottled beer. Breakfast costs extra and can either be a continental style in your room for £5.99, or you nip next door and have a cooked breakfast at Harry Ramsden for £7.99 which is £2 off the price if you're not staying at the hotel. Neither option is particularly good value but take it or leave it and I took the cooked option.

When I arrived, the receptionist said they had a lot of cyclists staying that night and once I had washed myself and the kit, I came out to find an assortment of MAMILS and OMILS who are doing an escorted LEJOG which is taking them about two weeks. They were heading for Stirling where they were staying two nights with a day off from cycling before



pushing on up to John O’Groats. There were also other rather keener and younger sorts who looked as though they were heading off into the night on the Deloitte Challenge, after a food break.

I went across to find out what food was available and if ever there was an illustration of why we are turning into a nation of fatties this was it. Harry Ramsden has chips with everything, there is a Noodle and Rice bar with sauces dripping in sugar and carbs and Costa coffee where you could get paninis. The shop had sandwiches and sausage rolls. I looked for salads and fruit but there were none that I could see. I ended up having rice and sauces as a starter and then Harry’s fish and chips. It was fine but I would have liked some veg other than mushy peas.

The weather forecast was for the remnants of Hurricane Dorian, which has caused such havoc on the other side of the Atlantic, to blow through overnight and leave today breezy but dry. When I woke up it was still blowing a hooley so I thought I’d delay my departure until 10 and hope that it would back off. I took my time over clearing up and having the mediocre breakfast and set off into what seemed a very stiff breeze as I cycled up the short hill to the roundabout that would take me to the Motorway ( not a good idea) or down the valley into Abington village and onwards to England.

The road I was following is the old trunk road that has been superseded by the A74(M) and so is wide and, generally, well surfaced with a hard shoulder which is sometimes marked as a cycle lane.



Occasionally there is a separate cycle lane from the road, and this made for very easy cycling. The advantage to cyclists of our free to use motorways is that the only traffic on the original road is local and infrequent. After a short initial climb, it was downhill all the way and what a difference that makes, even with the wind in your face. I crossed over the motorway and back several times, skirted around Lockerbie, scene of one of the worst terrorist outrages of all, when the Pan Am Clipper Jumbo carrying a plane load home for Christmas 1988 exploded in mid-air after a bomb planted by a Libyan detonated, killing all on board and 11 people on the ground making it the deadliest terrorist attack in the U.K.

The first hour I averaged almost 12 miles per hour, the second hour I was up to 13 and by the end of the third hour I had travelled 40 miles and hardly felt puffed when I stopped at Ecclefechan shop for an egg sarnie and a bottle of Lucozade. I thought it would be a good idea to take a break and sat outside the shop for about 35 minutes to eat my lunch and took a snap of the Ecclefechan Hotel opposite







By 2.30, 50 miles into the journey, I was outside the Blacksmith's Shop in Gretna where, traditionally, couples below the age of 21, ran away to be married when their family disapproved, and were legally wed by the

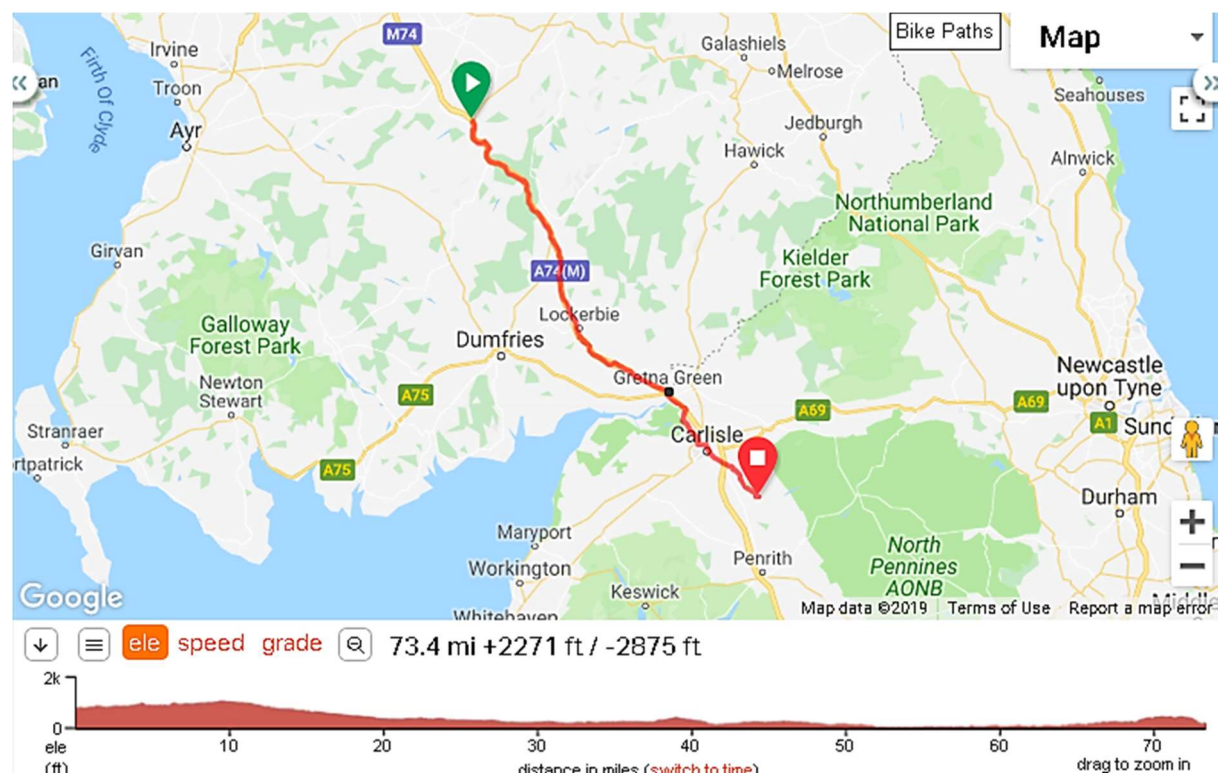
Blacksmith. As I stopped to take the picture a horse and carriage carrying a bride and groom came past.



It is a sign of the times that the Chapel just down the road is closed and up for sale. A few minutes later I

crossed the boundary into England: who knows, maybe it will be a hard border soon – I sincerely hope not.

I took to the side roads and across the low ground by the River Eden as it ox-bowed its way to the Solway Firth climbing up and down through the villages and then wiggling my way through Carlisle, avoiding the centre and out through Botchergate (great name) and out on the London Road. Having cleared the traffic in the city I was now threatened with a closed road. I ignored the signs on the grounds that there are few places you can't get through on a bike and managed to get past the blockage in Cumwhinton. Only four miles from my destination I was faced with the steepest hill of the day and then up and down a couple more times before I arrived at the Fox and Pheasant at Armathwaite, a lovely traditional pub with friendly clientele. The worrying thing is that the pub is in the bottom of the Eden valley and I'll have to climb my way out of it tomorrow morning.





## Day 9 – Across the Pennines

Armathwaite is a small village about 7 miles south of Carlisle on the Carlisle to Settle railway, the route of which I have followed for much of the day. The route includes the Ribbleshead viaduct which I passed on my tour of the English County Towns, but not today.

Steve and Pauline have managed the Fox and Pheasant pub in Armathwaite



for two and a half years but have been in the pub trade for much longer. I arrived at the pub and was greeted by Kelly, just returning from maternity leave, and Steve who had just been out walking the dog. The bike was put in the front room, tables all laid up, not required this evening and I was ushered up to a very nice room on the first floor. The double bed was the most comfortable I have slept in on this trip and the bathroom had a decent shower and sink to wash the clothes.

I had a quick pint of Robinson's IPA which went down well and then went upstairs to do the usual and start the blog. When I came back



down Kelly's husband with 14 week old, and very well behaved, baby was there and several other locals turned up for an early evening drink. I got chatting with Steve, who had just returned from sailing his boat single-handed to the Isle of Man, about what he had done and what I was doing. Dinner was potted shrimps for which I developed a liking when we lived in Lytham, and a vegetable curry followed by a very toothsome bread and butter pudding. Pauline took over as babysitter and a few pints later I went off to finish the blog. It was nice to be drinking and chatting in a traditional pub very much like being at home in Somerset.

This morning I breakfasted on a good FEB, cooked by Steve, and chatted to a couple from Cambridgeshire who had been staying for a couple of days. I set off at ten past nine knowing that I had to cross the Pennines into Yorkshire.

The early part of the journey was up and down through typical Cumbrian countryside, stone walls and belts of trees on steep banks.



The day was grey and overcast but dry. I lost the way a couple of times because, stupidly, I had failed to program Gary Garmin with the route and Rita had reverted to her Canadian voice and was only speaking reluctantly. I had to stop at every junction to make sure I was heading in the right direction and, even then, managed to go astray to the extent that I barely managed nine miles in the first hour. At times the way was steep and had me puffing and I was soon skirting the North Pennines with cloud cap down to about 500 feet.

At Hilton I was faced with a road block, with the bridge being rebuilt by three stonemasons. I consulted the map and the diversion would take me well out of my way so asked if they would let me through. Although they were not supposed to do so they kindly allowed it and I cycled on through the village. The road had recently been resurfaced and I was making better time when suddenly I was aware of small arms fire and saw red flags beside the road. I was cycling through the Warcop army ranges but there were no barriers to prevent my progress so I went for it and got through to the A66, a narrow and busy road. I had to brave the traffic for 3 miles until I was able to turn off at Brough.

I had planned to lunch at Brough but wasn't hungry so kept going up onto the moors. This was where the climbing really started with steep pitches for a mile or so, flattening out and then starting again. The weather had worsened as I climbed into the clouds and I was now feeling wet despite wearing my rain jacket. I passed another sign saying that the road was closed but kept going over newly surfaced roads. I saw a brace of lone grouse hunkered beside the road and saw another singleton flying over in front of me. Sheep ran away from me and larks struggled to fly in the now gale force wind. Thank goodness it was generally behind me because I'm sure I wouldn't have managed the

journey if it had been in my face.



The reality was much bleaker than any picture I could have taken and by the time that I reached the Tan Hill Inn, serendipitously, at 1732 feet, the highest Inn in Britain, thus giving me a fifth extreme, I was ready to dump the bike and go in for a cup of tea. Amazingly the place was



heaving with people eating and drinking at 3pm.



The cup of tea improved my spirits and I then had a long run down to cloud base, feeling cold and miserable. 12 miles later I reached the village of Reeth which is clearly a honeypot for tourists with a large number of hotels. I stopped at the shop and bought a banana and a packet of Jaffa cakes to provide some energy for the final six miles. Mostly this followed the valley of the River Swale but the sting in the tail was the steep climb up to my hotel at Downholme. All in all it's been a pretty miserable day; in good weather the views would have made up for the steep climbing but it's done and I can look forward to several

days of downhill or flat countryside.

