

A Dream to the End

A brief account of an End to End ride in August 2010

The chapel at Stourbridge Crematorium was packed with mourners and there were as many more outside. We all wanted to pay our respects to Derek Homer, who was 77 when he died from a heart attack on a ride in Belbroughton on 6th July 2010. Derek was a member of Stourbridge Cycling Club for over 30 years and rode thousands of miles usually at a quick pace; he didn't like to hang about! After the service, small groups of mourners gathered outside and chatted about Derek, his achievements and their fond memories of him. Eventually conversations broadened to other cycling topics and I was surprised when a couple of old friends asked me if it was true that Bob Couldrey was planning a Lands End to John O'Groats attempt. 'No chance,' I confidently replied. It was not that I doubted his ability to do it but I play golf with Bob on average twice a week and he had never mentioned it.

However, I was intrigued by the question so that evening I sent him a brief text. 'R u riding End to End?' He replied, 'It's just a possibility 4 next year.' I thought about it for a moment and replied, 'If I drive for you next year, will you drive for me this?' I received a quick response, 'When u want to go?' I looked at the calendar and - in view of the spontaneity of the idea, the total absence of planning and no specific training - Friday 13th August looked like an appropriate date to start the ride. I quickly calculated that, in total, we needed one day to drive to Penzance, 5 days to ride and 2 days to drive home so 12th to 19th August looked about right. Any later than that would mean less daylight hours and I wouldn't be home in time to take care of grandson James while daughter Ailsa prepared for her second baby. I text these dates to Bob who must have taken a couple of minutes to discuss with Karen before replying, 'No problem, suggest we have a planning meeting sometime.' So that was it. I was going to have a bash at End to End!

I had fancied having a go at the End to End ever since Tony Eden and I rode from Hagley to Torre Vieja in Spain in 10 days in 1986 so I thought that 180 miles a day End to End would be a good challenge. I conveniently overlooked the fact that I was 24 years younger then, that there were two of us to share the work into the wind and that almost all of the Torre Vieja ride was in warm weather. Another reason for wanting to do an End to End at my age was that whilst my performances in LVRC road races against my peers were sufficiently decent to give me some satisfaction, my times at all distances from 10 to 100 miles against the clock were woeful compared to even last year. Clearly the Grim Reaper was rapidly catching up with me and I was losing the ability to ride fast. In my 65th year I felt that I had a reasonable level of endurance but poor top end speed. This, therefore, might be the ideal time to have a go at an End to End and might produce the satisfaction which was missing from time trials. I also subscribe to the notion that you don't stop doing things when you grow old, you grow old when you stop doing things. But I did accept that the risk of failure was high so I suggested to Ann that we didn't broadcast the attempt in case it failed before the end of the first day! Ann is brilliant about my cycling; she encourages me in every way not simply because I enjoy it but because she says it is part

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of who I am. Ann doesn't feel the same way about my golf; she hates the ridiculous etiquette around 'the captain,' the ancient rituals and the Rupert Bear clothes worn by some golfers but not by me!

I worked out a daily ride plan of a 5.30 am start with three sessions each of four hours riding interspersed with half-hour rest periods. The average speed would need to be 15mph and if I fell below that then there would be the option of another hour or so. I also produced a 'jobs list' for Bob and me. Bob's read, *'Hire van. All driving and detailed route planning. Write route cards for each of the five days. Guide me through difficult spots such as Bristol and Glasgow perhaps by going ahead. Locate cafes or provide food and drink at rest periods on ride days. Contact with Tourist Information Centres if necessary and locate B&Bs on each ride day. All bike and van maintenance. Buy stuff en route as necessary. Telephone contact with me en route. Take photos at strategic points. Contact Ann or others in emergencies.'* My jobs list read, *'Ride bike. Pay bills.'* I e-mailed it to Bob and received a short reply. 'Bloody hell. I'd rather ride the bike!' With the PC already switched on, I scanned Amazon for books which might be useful and ordered Brian Smailes' 'Lands End to John O'Groats – The Official Cyclist's Challenge Guide'. It proved to be a good buy mainly because of the directions for the 'official challenge route' which was more to the west than I had anticipated. Smailes' route crossed the Severn Bridge into Monmouthshire where I had anticipated the A38 from Bristol to Worcester. It also skirted Glasgow whereas I thought we might go over the Forth Bridge at Edinburgh. It also turned into the hills at Greenloaning rather than follow the flatter, faster A9 road round to Inverness. Still, that was it; we would have a go at the official route with all its hills rather than a faster version which is probably used by those racers who aim for 2 – 4 days. I gave Bob the route and he set about the more detailed planning and dug out his satnav which was to be immensely useful. I continued to scour the Internet for information on van hire and found that Thrifty Vehicle Hire was the cheapest for a small van at about £160 for eight days with unlimited mileage. I called the company's local office and had almost agreed the hire when I checked the 'unlimited mileage' statement. 'Oh yes, it's unlimited up to 1,500 miles then there's a surcharge of 13.5 pence per mile; but no-one ever does more than that in eight days.' I didn't tell him why I wanted a van, I just ended the conversation and called Hertz where 'unlimited' did actually mean 'no limit' and passed all the booking details to Bob.

Although my approach to Bob had been opportunistic, he is the ideal person to take on the onerous job of support driver. Bob has a huge amount of cycling experience and has performed to a high level; his PB for 25 miles is around 54 minutes. He knows what it takes to achieve an ambitious target and that sometimes it is necessary to suffer on a bike. I knew that if I showed any signs of weakness then he was the man who would remind me of the Armstrong philosophy that pain is temporary, quitting is forever. Bob doesn't take prisoners or suffer fools lightly. He is totally reliable and a very good friend who always makes me laugh with stories of Polly, the cunning family parrot, which adores Karen but hates Bob and viciously attacks him at every opportunity except when Karen is away on holiday when he sucks up to Bob to make sure he gets fed. I knew I needed Bob on the ride and I was delighted when he accepted the job.

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I prepared my kit and carefully divided it up into large plastic boxes so that it would be easily accessible in the van. I took six sets of shorts and tops, a couple of long sleeve vests, leg warmers, two gilets, a cape and lots of socks. I attached a cheap but serviceable rear mudguard bought from Poundland and front and rear lights to my Colnago Dream which would be my early morning and bad weather bike. I attached a rear light to my Trek which I planned to use in dry weather and, with its lower 39/25 gearing, on the steeper hills. I didn't want a computer on either bike; I know what an average of 15 mph feels like so I didn't need it for that and I certainly didn't want to know that I had done 70 miles so there were only 110 left to do! All I planned to do was ride the bit of road ahead of me and try not to count the miles. I did, however, wear a watch so that I would know roughly how long to the next stop.

At 10.00 am on Thursday 12th August, Bob and I packed our VW Caddy van and even found just enough room to squeeze in my Dolan time trial bike with its disc wheel. I thought it might be useful to have it if we found a reasonably long, flattish road with a good surface and a tail wind. It turned out to be a stupid idea. The drive down to Penzance was enjoyable and uneventful except along the A30 from Exeter where the dual carriageway was packed with traffic including a lot of speedy trucks which looked threatening. We also noticed a long section of major roadworks and signs banning cyclists on contra-flow sections. We decided to deal with that when we had to but wouldn't worry about it. We found our B&B in a reasonably quiet suburb of a charming Penzance resort bathed in warm sunshine. I gave Bob the double bed while I tested out the camp bed: accommodation is difficult to find in August and this was the best available through my Internet search. We strolled off along the harbour for coffee in a chic bar and then to Gino's Spaghetti House on the seafront where I scoffed pasta, Bob tested the pizza and we rehearsed our plans especially the supply of bottles which would alternate between Isostar and Technofuel. After the meal, I was delayed at the till and emerged to find Bob chatting to a woman with an expensive Nikon slung round her neck. She was from Perth in Australia and was visiting relatives and friends back home in the UK. She asked what we were doing and when Bob told her about the ride she said, 'Oh yes, how long will that take - three weeks?' When Bob told her it would only be five days she almost fell off the promenade into the sea. I began to wonder if I had got it right but it was too late to change plans now; we had only booked the van to the 19th.

I slept badly on an uncomfortable bed and was glad when the alarm rang at 4.00 am. Bob was immediately wide awake, saying 'Morning Tone, let's get at it,' and was rapidly into the bathroom while I sorted out my kit and stuffed my back pockets with three of my favourite The Fabulous Bakin' Boys Golden Oaty Flapjack Fingers from Sainsbury's which are much cheaper than energy bars, easily digestible and very, very tasty. Bob's get-up-and-go was an unexpected bonus. He wakes and is immediately fresh and ready for action which was exactly what I needed with the essential early start to each day. On that first morning we were ready to leave our room within half an hour of waking but I spent a few minutes fumbling around in my bag. 'What you looking for?' asked Bob. 'My hairbrush,' I replied. 'What the hell do you need a hairbrush for?' I mumbled something incoherently and walked down the three flights of stairs to pick up our sandwiches which the landlady had kindly prepared for us as a substitute for a cooked breakfast. We drove the 10 miles to Lands

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End along a narrow road in total darkness but we chatted happily until we arrived at the car park on the tip of Cornwall. By 5.20 am the Colnago Dream was ready; Bob took a few photos around the famous signpost and strolled off around the darkened hotel to gaze out to sea. He called me over and, for a few minutes, we looked out across the ocean towards America and watched a heavy black cloud roll in across the sky. The cloud blanked out the moon and so we waited until 5.40 when a little light began to show and we thought it safe to start. Bob and I wished each other the best of luck and I rolled off across the start line back towards Penzance. I found it difficult to contain my joy at starting the ride; I even slipped onto the 53 chain-ring for a time before returning to a more sensible gear as I rode along the winding, undulating A30; but that was it, we were off!

Dawn was just breaking as I approached the Tesco traffic island at the far end of Penzance where I saw a cyclist dressed in club kit and riding a nice Giant with expensive carbon wheels turn onto the A30 from a road to my right. It was exactly what I needed; a chance to ride on a wheel and save energy for as long as we shared the same road. I sat quietly close behind him for about a mile hoping that he would take me to at least Hale some six miles away. He obviously had no idea I was there until he heard me change down a sprocket. He looked behind and was so surprised to see he had company that he did a double-take, swerved left into the kerb and clattered into the tarmac right in front of me. I swerved to miss him and briefly wondered if I should stop to see if he was okay but decided I didn't have the time; I had to get to Bristol. I hoped that my Friday 13th would turn out to be significantly less painful than his.

The A30 is a mixture of single and dual carriageways sometimes cut between rolling hills. As the sun came up so did the wind which blew increasingly strong from the west. It was relatively easy to maintain speed when there were embankments to my left but most of the road was exposed to the wind which sapped energy. The A30 undulated ahead and there was little traffic at that early hour but after about 20 miles I saw the first of the flashing warning signs saying 'Major Roadworks. Cyclists must leave at the next exit'. Bob cruised up alongside and indicated that I should turn left into Cambourne as we had discussed the night before. The town was quiet and the side road ran parallel with the A30 so we lost little time. However, as we attempted to rejoin the main road some five miles further on, we were unexpectedly faced with another sign which said, 'Cyclists please find an alternative route'. But it didn't give any indication of what that alternative route should be. I glanced behind to Bob who held up both hands as if to say 'Search me!' so I made the decision to ignore the sign and accelerate up the slip road back onto the A30. The lanes were narrowed to allow the construction of a new hard-shoulder so I kept as close to the left as possible but suffered from trucks and caravans coming rather too close for comfort for the next five miles. It was a relief to emerge from that section and importantly I hadn't lost much time which was important because the wind was getting stronger and becoming a concern.

There are some long drags stretching miles ahead towards Bodmin, each drag followed by a fast descent which I enjoyed except when the westerly wind clashed with the draught from trucks to blow me all over the road; it was quite difficult to control the Colnago at times but I wanted to maintain my descending speed to help me up the next hill. The climb

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to the top of Bodmin Moor was tough; it was very exposed, quite steep and I had that damn wind to contend with. I was glad to see Bob parked in a lay-by with the van's rear doors open because that was the signal for my first rest period. I instantly realised that the first bit of kit which you need to pack on such an expedition is a soft camping chair with arms which you can sink into and be waited upon! Bob had his gas stove alight and was boiling a large kettle. I opened my sliced wholemeal loaf and plastered on a thick layer of Philadelphia cheese topped with marmalade. I was desperate for a hot drink so when the kettle took longer to boil than anticipated, Bob strolled over to a little kiosk which had just opened for the morning and bought us two large mugs of tea which brilliantly complemented my improvised sandwich. The Jolly Roger flag on top of the kiosk was blown horizontal and stiff as a board by the wind which hammered across the moor. It was very, very bleak up on top of the moor but I sheltered as best I could by facing away from the wind in Bob's luxurious chair. My half hour rest flew by and we were about to pack up when a local farmer in muddy wellies ambled over from the kiosk and, in broad Cornish accent, asked us how far we had come and where we were headed. He showed a genuine interest and at the end of our conversation he held out his hand and said, 'Good luck and here's a couple of chocolate bars to help you on your way.' We were struck by his kindness and thanked him profusely for his interest and gift. I was soon back on the bike heading for a long descent towards Launceston then on again along the now busy A30 towards Okehampton on the Edge of Dartmoor. The last 20 miles on that blasted road were no fun at all. The wind, the hills, the speeding trucks, the monotony of dual carriageways all combined to build frustration within me so I was relieved to see Bob standing at the verge to indicate that it was time to turn onto the quieter, more sheltered B3260 around Okehampton and on to Crediton.

The contrast between this winding, gently undulating side road and the manic A30 was immense. I briefly sat on top of the bars and smiled back at Bob who understood immediately and signalled a thumbs up. This was heaven; trees sheltering the road from that dreadful wind, little traffic, no trucks and beautiful countryside. It lasted until about five miles from Crediton when, at a cross-roads, there was the inevitable diversion sign around more road-works. We agreed that Bob would follow the diversion but I would press on hoping that cyclists could negotiate the works. It wasn't to be. A very large security guy in fluorescent overalls barred my way at the next diversion sign. I bleated out, 'Can I go...Need to get to...Is it ok if?' He interjected with, 'Cool man, be cool. You ain't goin' anywhere. There ain't no road anymore, we've blown it up. You've got to go up there.' He pointed to a little lane straight up a horrific hill which went on for miles. 'I can't ride up that!' I complained bitterly. 'Not my problem,' he drawled. I had no choice, I certainly wasn't going back to the A30 so I engaged my lowest 39/23 and zig-zagged up to the summit to turn right into an even narrower track which took me through three farm yards where each time I stopped for directions and eventually got back to the Crediton road. I must have lost 20 minutes or more and had no idea where Bob was. I continued on through the lovely market town, keeping a keen lookout for our van but there was no sign. In the official guide, Smailes says, 'The road between Crediton and Tiverton is very undulating.' I was beginning to realise that Smailes understated difficulties presumably so that he doesn't frighten off readers from having a go at the ride. The hills on this stretch are actually very steep and stretched me to my climbing limits. There was still no sign of Bob so near to the

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top of the last climb I pulled into a lay-by and switched on my mobile. There were a couple of calls from Bob telling me that he was near Tiverton and asking me where I was. I couldn't get a signal but was relieved that he was ahead of me and would surely wait. I continued on and after a few miles Bob appeared coming towards me. He pulled over and we had a brief chat about our future tactics for diversions; I swapped phones for a more recent model and drank a lovely tea from Bob's large silver flask and then we were off again. Tiverton was a delight. The sun briefly shone on the old stone buildings along the high street where, as I waited at traffic lights, four young lads emerged from a pub to climb onto their heavily laden bikes. 'Where you going?' I called. 'Lands End,' they replied cheerfully. 'Good luck, be careful,' I called back and wondered how they would enjoy the contrast between this beautiful setting and the horrors of the A30.

A few miles from Tiverton I rode under the M5 and onto the A38 towards Taunton. I was sad to leave the minor roads but needed to make up time lost on the diversion. The A38 was far less threatening than the A30, is reasonably flat and although the wind was still strong on the exposed road, I felt good and enjoyed a long session on the big ring and small sprockets. I reached Taunton ahead of Bob and flew round the outside of a long line of rush hour traffic leaving him way behind. Taunton looked like another attractive market town which, on another occasion, I would have happily browsed around but today was all about getting to Bristol as fast as I could. It was a good, clear route all the way to Bridgwater where more rush hour traffic blocked the high street but presented no problems to me. Bob caught up with me around Highbridge where we had our third and final rest in a lay-by. His soft chair, hot tea and Philadelphia sandwich worked their magic again. We agreed that I would ride on for another hour or so but that we would stop for the night somewhere around Bristol Airport which we guessed would give us about 180 miles for the day and leave us on target. Although I started off cheerfully enough from this last stop, I soon began to feel weak on some surprising sharp little hills. However, road signs to Bristol Airport became more frequent and I rode passed it with a degree of satisfaction. I saw Bob waiting at the top of the long, winding drag up Potters Hill. I signalled that I'd had enough for the day; it was after 7.00 pm and time to stop. Bob agreed and strolled off to a B&B alongside the van. It was closed but he carried on to the Wagon and Horses pub next door where he emerged smiling with a key in his hand. Our luck was in! He could not have found better accommodation for the night. Friday 13th had turned out to be good for us. We shared a comfortable twin room and, after showering, had a short walk downstairs to the restaurant where I devoured soup followed by fish and chips. We chatted about the day; he told me that my rear light and the reflective bands on the sleeves of my Stourbridge CC top showed up very well indeed in the dark which was re-assuring. He said he was unsure about the total mileage covered because he had retraced a couple of times after the diversion to try and find me. And we talked about our plans for the next day. On returning to our room, Bob checked the mileage in Smailes guide and told me that, according to the official route details, we had done 205.6 miles. Brilliant; that gave me a cushion of 25 miles which we might need in the days ahead.

I slept well and woke to the alarm at 4.15 am. Bob was immediately up and about; he peered out of the window and then disappeared down to the van to sort out my bike. He re-appeared looking glum and wearing wet weather clothing. 'It's pouring down,' he said without any emotion. 'What!' I replied angrily. 'I didn't expect that,' I grumbled. 'Better find

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your hairbrush then we can get going,' he smiled. It certainly was raining hard. I set off at 5.40 wearing gillet and cape but within a few miles I could feel the water penetrating my shoes and outer shirt. The sun was not properly up and the main road through the city of Bristol looked very, very slippery under lights. I was cautious around all of the many traffic islands and didn't bother to stop at red traffic lights because there was little traffic about and I just didn't fancy braking too often on such slippery surfaces. I was relieved to get out of the city and through the Avonmouth docks and onto the long, almost deserted A403 which is flat as a pancake but, on that Saturday morning, was dead into the rising wind and rain. After an hour or so I reached the cycle-path to the Severn Bridge and thrilled at the views along the river and into Wales. I met up with Bob at an island after the bridge and enjoyed a brief chat mostly about the rain which astonishingly had stopped...and we were in Wales which is supposed to be wet! But the rain started again almost immediately and by the time I reached Chepstow racecourse it was pouring down relentlessly. Despite that, the ride along the Wye Valley on the A466 was an absolute delight and, in the dry, would be magnificent. It really is a most beautiful area and, with no tourists around at 7.00 am, Tintern Abbey was quite spectacular; I looked out for a decent hotel so that I could bring Ann some time in the future. The countryside was so green and the air was incredibly fresh. Despite the fact that I was soaking wet and the roads were treacherous, I loved it.

I reached Monmouth with Bob who overtook me at the traffic lights to guide me through the town. Having turned right onto the A40 I assumed he then turned left into the town to go shopping because our next town, Hereford, was signposted along the A40. But then I wondered why he needed shops so early in the morning and so I did a u-turn on the dual carriageway (which displeased a few drivers) to follow him into Monmouth. I caught up with him as he too was u-turning to find out where I had gone. 'It's this way, you pillock,' he mouthed through the windscreen. It was entirely my fault; I thought I knew the way to Hereford but hadn't taken sufficient notice of Bob's late night briefing to realise that we were taking Smailes Classic route to Hereford rather than perhaps the faster A40/A49 route. But I was happy to see that I was back on the A466 which I had enjoyed so much from Chepstow but the gradient towards Hereford changed dramatically. It was a steep climb out of Monmouth and then a series of hard climbs and fast descents for five or six miles; in the dry it would have been scintillating but in the wet it was just hard; the wind-chill on down-hills made it quite cold too. I saw Bob parked up at the top of a particularly long drag and as I passed by he said, 'All downhill now.' I foolishly believed him and within 30 seconds I was back grovelling on my lowest gear up the steepest section yet. I was relieved to see him again just after joining the A49 with three miles to Hereford; the back doors of the van were open and Bob was brewing tea. It had finally stopped raining and I used the half hour to change into dry clothes but decided to keep my wet shoes and socks on in the hope that they would dry out fairly soon. It proved to be a mistake. The ride through Hereford city was much easier than Smailes predicted and I was soon back on open country roads into a headwind towards Leominster and on to Ludlow.

I knew that national champion Isla Rowntree and Olympic silver medallist Louise Robinson had talked with Bob about possibly meeting up in Ludlow where they live to be near their superb 'Islabike' factory but I had not anticipated the large 'Dig in Tony' banner painted on a dismantled bike box on the town's bypass. It was great to see them so I stopped for a

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few minutes while Isla treated Bob and me to tasty cakes and Louise poured hot tea from a thermos. It was a memorable interlude and we thanked them for giving up their time to meet an old man on a bike then it was off again into an increasingly strong wind. Chris and Tony Jeavons called out encouragement from the side of the road somewhere near Craven Arms and then drove past me to call out again before turning off at Church Stretton. As I approached Shrewsbury there was a cloudburst which sent us diving into a service station with a Burger King attached. Bob offered to look after my bike while I disappeared into the toilets to try and dry my clothes under the hand-drier. Several of the male 'customers' were a bit annoyed at my monopoly of one of the two driers but I reasoned that my need was greater than theirs. When I emerged 15 minutes later Bob was talking to another cyclist who we had passed earlier. He had a rucksack on his back, a map of the UK on one side of A4 and a compass; he too was riding End to End but, not surprisingly, had meandered around Gloucestershire and got lost. He hoped to reach Manchester's suburbs in a few days where he would be picked up by his sister for a rest at her home. He complained about the weight of the rucksack and so Bob advised him to look for a bike shop and buy a pannier rack. I then had fifteen minutes to bolt down my Philadelphia sandwich and top up with flapjacks. Fortunately the heavy rain had moved away and it was only drizzling when I set off towards the city centre hoping to easily pick up the Whitchurch road. But it didn't turn out quite like that. There was a massive flower festival in the city and the whole of the town centre was closed to traffic. I wandered around the back-streets and asked pedestrians for directions but they were all visitors and couldn't help. I eventually stopped a police officer who understood my plight and pointed me in the right direction. Ten minutes later I was clear of the city and approaching the Battlefield island which is a famous landmark for many time trials along the A49. I knew the road well and, despite the headwind, slipped onto the 53 chain-ring and pretended I was just out for another 25 mile race. Bob noticed my enthusiasm and later said that I looked purposeful for the first time that day; I think that was a complement but I wasn't sure.

Whitchurch was reached in the dry and then it was on again along the uninspiring, reasonably flat A49 towards Tarporley and on to the outskirts of Warrington where, for the first time in two days, the sun shone brightly on a group of customers drinking happily at tables outside a rather attractive pub. The scene was such a contrast to most of my day that it raised my spirits considerably. Another mile further on I entered another small suburban town and was overwhelmed by the smell of fish and chips. That was it; decision made: we would stay overnight in Warrington and I would treat myself to fish and chips again! According to Bob's VW speedo we had done 178 miles (Smailes records it as 184.5) so we were on target and didn't need to go on any further. Bob disappeared into a handy Premier Inn just 50 yards off our route and emerged smiling. The extremely helpful receptionist told him that she couldn't offer a twin room but if we would accept a double, have a shower and a meal at the adjacent restaurant, she would arrange for it to be converted into a twin by our return. It could not have been better so we showered quickly and disappeared to the restaurant where I had a small glass of Cabernet Sauvignon, soup and garlic bread with delicious fish and chips. Bob enjoyed a pot of tea followed by sausage and mash. It may not have been exactly what a nutritionist would recommend but we enjoyed it. Back in our room, I examined my sore feet and saw that my left foot was swollen and rubbed raw in places, presumably through wearing wet shoes and socks most

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of the day. My left hand was numb and I had aches in other places which I thought could be eased by wearing two pairs of shorts. Bob and I talked briefly about the route for the next day and, if the rain held off, we agreed that I would use my Trek bike for the first time because it had a lower gear which would be useful on the Shap climb. I tried to dry some clothes and my cycling shoes on the heated towel rail in the bathroom but was largely unsuccessful so dug out my spare shoes and some dry kit from a box in the van. I treated my swollen feet with cream and sprayed Savlon onto the raw parts of my toes and split nails; I expected more problems from this damage. All I could do about the numbness in my left hand was to massage it and flex my fingers whenever I could; I have had this problem before and assumed that it would pass.

Sunday morning dawned dry and after Bob had ensured that I had packed my hairbrush and I had bolted down my Philadelphia and marmalade sandwich, I set off at 5.40 am precisely on my Trek towards Wigan. It was a good start to the day; it was dry, I had eaten and slept well and the Trek felt a little more responsive than the Colnago which had worked brilliantly in the poor conditions on Friday and Saturday. I wore two pairs of shorts to make life a little more comfortable. The 14 miles to Wigan passed pleasantly enough because there was very little traffic on the roads and there were lots of interesting sites along the route through the conurbation. In Wigan town centre I was amused to overtake a young couple who were clinging together as they walked barefoot along the central reservation. There were groups of girls in party dresses who shouted out to me as they staggered home after a long and boozy night out; I assumed the lads were sleeping it off somewhere but it was noticeable that it was the girls who were out and about at that early hour. At this point I must have lost concentration because, although I saw workmen, tipper trucks and rollers in the road ahead, I failed to notice that the new tarmac on my side was coned off and dangerously soft and sticky. My wheels sank into it up to the top of the rims before I steered away onto the old road to my right. There was much shouting and abuse from several workmen as I weaved between them and their machinery but my speed was sufficient to carry me away from any harm they might have inflicted.

The A49 from Wigan to Preston runs parallel to the M6 which takes most of the long distance traffic leaving the A road to local traffic. One consequence is that the authorities spend little time and money on maintaining the less popular route so the road surface is poor. The 20 miles to Preston were enjoyable because the road was relatively flat and quiet but it was painful because of the vibration from the road; I was constantly trying to find smooth sections of tarmac to ride on even when it meant using the wrong side of the road. I expected to have problems trying to find my way through Preston but none materialised and I was soon heading out again on the A6 towards Garstang and the 25 miles to Lancaster. Near Garstang I saw familiar 'Cycle Event' signs at the side of the road and wondered what was ahead. The signs became more regular and suddenly I was overtaken by an aero-helmeted racer on a Cevelo with a disc wheel. Then another appeared coming towards me; and another. All were on time trial bikes and carrying bottles so I assumed I had got caught up in a 50 or perhaps 100 mile event. I recognised VTTA Chairman George Nowland in his distinctive Science in Sport kit. Number 53 overtook me and slowly drew away. I changed into a higher gear and gave chase. Later, Bob told me that he was watching from the van and praying that I didn't get caught up in

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the excitement and start racing and get disqualified for taking pace! However, he entered into the spirit of the thing by parking ahead and calling out to me, 'You're two minutes down; speed up.' I had some sympathy for the racers because, although it was dry, the wind was increasing and blowing from the north-west and certainly wouldn't give any help on the Garstang to Lancaster leg of the 12-hour. (The event was won by Julian Jenkinson of the UTAG Yamaha team with 292.49 miles and veteran George did a super 251.17 miles.) The race turned off the A6 halfway to Lancaster so I was left alone to battle into the wind. My route took me past the main entrance to Lancaster University's campus south of the town where my daughter Ailsa has studied and which I had visited several times in the early 1990s; it is a wonderful location with terrific views up to the Trough of Bowland. Lancaster is a beautiful city and I enjoyed visiting it again particularly on the far side of the river where there are some superbly restored warehouses now used as student accommodation and private apartments. But then it was back on the A6 and into the wind, grinding out another 20 miles through Carnforth with Morecambe Bay to my left onwards to the outskirts of Kendal where I waited briefly for Bob to lead me through the town and on towards the famous Shap road which is often the first main road in England to be blocked by snow.

I knew that Shap was steeper and longer than any of the drags on the A30 in Cornwall but I expected the conditions to be similar with lots of trucks and other speeding traffic but I was very, very wrong. The road began to climb almost as soon as it left the outskirts of Kendal and on that morning I was almost alone on the road. The warm sunshine countered some of the pain from the headwind. The views across the countryside were beautiful and, as the road meandered upwards, I was increasingly thrilled by the scenery especially to my left where the hills of the Lake District disappeared into the distance. This was not what I expected; I thought I would just have to suffer the climb when actually I delighted in it. I was helped by the fact that a couple of years earlier after the end of an LVRC road race, a good friend of mine, Olympian Phil Bayton talked with me about how to improve my climbing. 'You need to lose some weight and you must improve your technique,' he advised. 'Practice holding the brake hoods, stand high out of the saddle with your weight well forward and develop a rhythm with your breathing in tune with your pedalling; increase your cadence and don't try and push massive gears. Go out on Camp Hill and do circuits out of the saddle.' I took his advice and soon felt more confident when the road went upwards. Phil certainly helped me to enjoy Shap. I revelled in every inch of it, even the last mile up towards the barren summit where I ignored red lights at road-works because I had no intention of losing momentum. The views all around were breathtaking and I was pleased when I saw Bob taking photos. The peace and tranquility were only broken by big bikes thundering over the hill as they raced each other to town signs. I was later told about the 'unofficial record' for motorbikes on Shap where speeds of up to 140 mph are achieved between two recognized marker posts. I was a lot slower than that but I probably enjoyed it more. But I had my first 'mechanical' on Shap. I noticed a slight pinging noise when I rode out of the saddle and suspected that my rear mechanism was catching on the spokes. I stopped to check but the mech was well clear. Bob pulled up and asked me why I had stopped. I told him about the noise but he simply tapped his temple with his forefinger and said, 'That's where the problem is.' I didn't agree but I certainly wasn't going to argue. No point in spoiling a wonderful day especially when the air temperature was nudging 24

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degrees. From the top of Shap it was a long, fast descent through Shap village towards Penrith. It was on the descent that I felt my ride had really started. I had never been on roads this side of Shap before and it was extremely unlikely that I would meet people I might know; almost everything in front of me would be new and fascinating which I intended to enjoy to the full. There was no way that I would fail now; there was no going home before John O'Groats.

I arrived at Penrith ahead of Bob and slowly rolled through the outskirts of the town until he caught up. It is quite a large and attractive town just outside the Lake District National Park and was busy with tourist traffic when we arrived. But the traffic did not cause us any problems; we were soon out of it and back on the A6 again running parallel to the M6. This was where the joy of Shap was extinguished as the pain of riding 15 miles into a strong headwind kicked in. Smailes says, 'This is quite an undulating road where you can make good progress.' I'm sure you could with a following wind but that wasn't my experience. I didn't find any fun in it; it just had to be endured for an hour. And Carlisle was no fun either. The town was blocked with cars, trucks and tour buses; Bob led me through traffic islands and one-way systems all jammed with cars and tour buses belching out fumes. I could tell that Bob was irritated by the traffic as he sliced through it with me chasing along several meters behind. I caught a brief glimpse of a castle and impressive railway station but was glad to cross a bridge on the far side of the town to pick up the A7 and the prospect of a 15-mile leg to the Scottish border. A couple of miles outside Carlisle I came to a large island with lots of speeding traffic east-west; Bob shot past me and seemed uncertain about which exit to take. I had expected to turn left but he led me straight on and immediately turned into a small lay-by. It was time for an official rest and he also wanted to double-check the route. He chatted briefly to a couple who were unloading bikes from a Transit and came back to tell me that we were on a road which would eventually take us to Gretna Green even though the official guide did indeed take a different route to the left which, he was told, had recently been upgraded to near motorway standard and not recommended for cyclists. I had no doubt we were on the better road and so tucked into my sandwich and banana while Bob chatted again with his cycling friends to learn more about the local area and their experiences of cycling round most of the UK. After half-an-hour I was back on the Trek and heading along a quiet, flat road to Longtown before swinging left along a river towards Gretna Green. The large road sign announcing we were in Scotland appeared suddenly round a bend. We stopped and took photos; I sent a text to Ann to tell her we were on the border and she replied with, 'Blimey, are you there already?' It obviously felt like quite a short time to Ann but, to me, Penzance could have been a lifetime away. After a couple of minutes I was back on the road and passing the famous Blacksmiths Shop wedding venue and there just happened to be a romantic young couple peering through its windows. How sweet.

But the next 60 miles turned out to be far from 'sweet'. The B7076 runs tight up alongside the A74(M) and probably hasn't been resurfaced since Robert the Bruce last passed that way. The road is long, straight, rough boring and – into the wind – depressingly tough. It has no redeeming features. When I had studied my road map a week or so earlier it seemed to me that it would be good to use my Dolan time trial bike on this leg which is why I packed it into the van. But the surface was so rough that I had no intention of risking

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£55 tubulars so I stayed with the Trek. All I could do was lightly grip the bottom of the bars, engage the 53 chain-ring and churn out the miles. The poor Trek bounced over pot holes and the bars vibrated painfully in my hands. My feet felt sore and I rode out of the saddle for quite long periods to ease the pain which even my two pairs of shorts could not prevent. It was a slog into the wind along this long, straight road; I held low on the bars to minimize my frontal area but had to work hard to maintain the necessary 15 mph average. But I was distracted at the tiny village of Ecclefechan which stands on a cross roads 16 miles after Gretna. Two fire appliances, a couple of ambulances and a dozen or more emergency service personnel were dealing with two vehicles which had smashed into each other, one was upturned in a garden and the other buried into a church wall. There was glass and debris everywhere. Small groups stood around apparently in shock that such an accident should happen in such a quiet spot. Five miles later I passed Lockerbie where, in December 1988, Pan Am Flight 103 from London to New York was destroyed by a bomb, killing all 259 passengers and crew and 11 more people in the town. By contrast, my pain was temporary and I knew how lucky I was to be able to do this ride. And so it was back to searching out the smoother bits of tarmac, skipping from one side of the road to the other in order to minimise the vibration. The toes on my left foot were painful and I considered cutting off the end of my cycling shoe but to do that I needed a knife from the van and Bob was not around. I grovelled on towards the village of Beattock, turned right for a brief leg on the A701 and, thankfully, there was Bob standing in a lay-by. I rolled up to him, unclipped my feet, hung over the bars and said, 'You can be a cruel b.....d sometimes.' He just smiled and gave me the cyclists' eternal response, 'You'll be alright.' I sank into his wonderful chair and asked him to search out a large bowl which I filled with water to soak my feet for a while. A couple of motorcyclists were parked up nearby; they saw my distress and one of them came over and said that they didn't have much but would I like a packet of crisps? We both thanked her for her kindness but assured her that all was okay. But when I told Bob that I really fancied a Coca-Cola he obtained it from a driver who was taking a rest in the same lay-by. People can be very kind.

Bob and I agreed that I shouldn't try and do much more; we planned that, after my usual sandwich, he would drive ahead to the village of Abington where he hope to find a hotel and I would struggle up the final 15 miles alone so that I could crawl along at whatever pace I could manage. I sprayed more Savlon onto my feet where I noticed that the nail on my big toe had split open and looked quite sore. Still, only 15 miles to go and the only bit of it I enjoyed was when Bob came back to me with about five miles left to tell me he had booked us into a super little hotel and restaurant in Abington which is a beautiful little village in the Upper Clyde Valley famous for its fishing, its walks and it's off-road cycling on the Rome, Arbory and Tinto Hills. It had been a day of contrasts; Shap was wonderful, Gretna to Abington was dreadful but no-one said any of it would be easy. That evening I abandoned my usual fish and chips and instead enjoyed 'Aberdeen Angus Black Beef' even though I had difficulty cutting it with a numb left hand. Bob enjoyed a meat pie and gave me all his vegetables. Back in our room, Bob took a call from an old cycling friend John Davies who moved from Stourbridge to the west of Glasgow some 10 years ago. John arranged to meet up with us on his bike some time next day. I found a text from Melissa which said, 'Hi Dad, hope you are enjoying your holiday.' A HOLIDAY! Who said this was a HOLIDAY? Clearly, Ann had not told anyone about my ride in case it failed

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spectacularly so, when Melissa called me at home, Ann simply told her that I had gone to Cornwall with Bob and our bikes for a few days so she assumed it was for a holiday in the sun. The van's speedo said we had done 178 miles that day; Smailes reckons it is 197.8. I didn't particularly care which was right because either way I was still on target and I suspected the best was yet to come.

At 5.00 am Bob came back from the van to tell me it was dry but misty and cold. I put on an extra vest, finished my Philadelphia and marmalade breakfast, and treated my feet with more Savlon. Under supervision from Bob, I packed my hairbrush and other bits and pieces, then helped him to load the van. It certainly was cold, misty and, at 5.40 am, still dark as I rolled away from the hotel. I immediately knew that I needed more clothing so turned back and took a gilet from the van where Bob told me that the van's thermometer registered 4 degrees and the ice warning light had already flashed on. There was a difference of 20 degrees from the previous day on Shap where it was around 24 degrees; welcome to British summertime. There was almost no traffic on the smooth A73 and, although shivering in the cold, I enjoyed a rapid descent towards Lanark passing fields of brooding, sturdy Highland cattle and then, amazingly, a herd of Llamas! Surely the glass of red wine from the previous night had not been so strong that I would confuse Aberdeen Angus with Llamas? Fortunately, Bob also saw them and he is teetotal. But yes, I checked later and there is indeed a herd of Llamas registered to Ann Knowles-Brown at her farm in Elvanfoot. Despite it being cold and dark, it took less than an hour to cover the 20 miles to the large, historic market town of Lanark which, in the half-light, looked beautifully clean and attractive.

Bob had carefully studied the route for the next 40 miles which skirted to the east of Glasgow and into Stirling. Smailes guide was a little complicated but we managed to follow the detailed directions and I was happy that, if we became separated, I should be able to find my way through. Somewhere around Wishaw, a smartly clad cyclist in matching green and blue club kit pulled out from a lay-by just ahead of us and joined me on the road. It was John and it was really good to see him. We couldn't ride side-by-side because the traffic was quite dense but we managed to say hello and swap a few bits of news. We had not gone far before we were diverted from our planned route by reconstruction works and all our detailed planning went out the window. We were lost on a housing estate. Bob caught us up, stabbed information into the satnav and said, 'Straight on.' He led us up narrow, winding roads through more dense housing estates, into countryside and back again and up a hill where John dropped me which was something he had never done before and I knew he relished it. As we emerged from another housing estate and into a traffic jam, John asked me if Bob knew where he was going. 'Of course he does, he's great with a satnav. Just follow him.' I prayed that Bob did know because if we got lost I knew that John would text all his friends to tell them that this pair of Sassenachs hadn't got a clue what they were doing, all in good humour of course. Eventually Bob led us onto the A80 where there were massive road-works to upgrade the A road to motorway standard. It was clogged with traffic so John and I had to squeeze down the inside lane to progress to the start of the M80 proper where we thankfully turned off onto a much quieter road towards Stirling. John and I pulled over to wait for Bob who was stuck in the traffic and we chatted about his work as a national level BC Commissaire which he loved and about his

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participation in his local club, the VC Glasgow South. It was a most enjoyable interlude which John concluded beautifully by presenting Bob and me with smart VC club hats. 'Thank you John, that's very kind and generous of you,' I said. 'Who said I was generous? This is Scotland. There's an invoice in the post for £4.95 each!' It was good to know that some things never change.

On the way to Stirling we passed through Bannockburn and I noticed a tour bus discharging passengers into the famous museum which tells the story of Scotland's most famous battle in 1314 when King Robert the Bruce took on the much larger English army to win freedom for Scotland. The whole area has a rich history and just a few miles further on in the outskirts of the beautiful city of Stirling with its famous university, Bob and I marvelled at the Wallace Monument which celebrates the Battle of Stirling Bridge in 1297 when William Wallace led the Scots to victory over our King Edward I and 'his reign of tyranny and terror'. The monument stands proudly on a hill overlooking Stirling and I was a little sad that I didn't have time to stop and look at it more closely. But then I was on the A9 for a while, skirting Dunblane where, in 1996, Thomas Hamilton had gone on a shooting spree at a school killing 16 children and their teacher before turning the gun on himself. My ride certainly took me through some notable places.

Five miles after Dunblane, I turned left off the very busy A9 onto a country road which immediately ran upwards towards the imposing Ben Clach at 533 metres. And so began the most magical part of the whole journey. There was no other traffic on the road which meandered upwards into the hills dotted with purple heather and the occasional tree. It was a perfect place for cycling with clean air, challenging hills to climb, uninterrupted views of beautiful countryside, and no traffic to disturb the peace and tranquility. I loved it and was glad we had turned off the A9 which would have been a faster route north but dire compared to this part of God's country. I rolled through Braco village with its tiny shop and post office then flew downhill into Muthill where I zig-zagged through the village which consisted mostly of well maintained cottages and an old church all built from an attractive reddish stone. It was very peaceful and I said to myself, 'I could live here.' The feeling became far stronger when I passed a golf course advertising annual memberships for £150! The old Roman road then ran dead straight to Crieff which is the main town of the Strathearn district lying on the southern edge of the Scottish Highlands. I didn't like Crieff because it stood at the top of a steep hill and its main street looked shabby compared to the city of Stirling and the village of Muthill. Its only redeeming features were a strong smell of delicious coffee from a corner café and a golf course with incredibly green fairways on the far side of the town. But I was now in the Highlands proper and the route through Glen Almond and over Meall Reamhar at 620 metres and the descent into the glen and Amulree village was exhilarating. The narrow valley through the village is just wide enough for the road and the River Almond with the scree, rock and heather-covered slopes of Meall Tarsuinn and Dun More towering up on both sides. The sad remains of tumble-down walls and moss covered foundations are all that remain of generations of crofting families cleared out from the Highlands in the 18th and 19th centuries. The Highland delights continued on for the next 10 miles to Aberfeldy where the dead flat road followed the river for a while before turning steeply uphill to Glengoulandie Deer Park and the Loch Tummel forests. It was on this spectacular road that I noticed a dead deer on the roadside,

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presumably hit by a car, which was a warning about the need to look out not just for wandering sheep but deer too. At Tummel Bridge the road ran between Loch Rannoch and Loch Tummel; the peace and beauty of the area continued to impress me greatly so much so that the pain in my feet, my left hand and through my shorts seemed almost irrelevant to the joy of the experience. I promised myself that one day I would revisit and find out more about this fascinating and beautiful country.

The descent off Torr Dubh to the tiny village of Trinafour was dangerous so I took it carefully; there was no point in pushing hard and taking risks only to crash on a gravel bend. Bob had parked just before the village on the grass verge of an unfenced lane to the left which I had to take in order to rejoin the A9. We chatted happily about the amazing contrasts of the day so far while I ate my traditional sandwich and drank his refreshing, hot tea. We were both in good spirits; it was difficult to be otherwise in these Highlands! Immediately after my rest, the one track lane shot upwards and, with a full stomach, I had to zig-zag on the steeper parts between sheep which totally ignored me. I reached a windswept open moor with a solitary fisherman enjoying the peace of Loch Errochy and all too soon made the final steep descent along the single track lane covered in dangerous grit with a final kick-up back onto the A9 at Dalnacadoch. The 75 miles from Braco over the Southern Highlands with its spectacular hills, dense forests, bleak moors, isolated farms, rushing streams, pretty valleys and delightful stone cottages clustered in tiny villages had been a truly magical experience and I was sad to leave it behind instead having to cope with grinding out the miles along the main A9 towards Inverness.

The morning weather report for the area predicted moderate winds from the south so I looked forward to being blown along towards Inverness at a good speed and with little effort. The hills from Braco had taken their toll and I felt tired when I turned off the lane onto the dual carriageway where lots of speeding trucks promised to drag me along in their wake. But I was shocked and almost distraught when I found I was into a strong headwind and had to struggle along at well below my target speed. How could that happen? How could the weather forecasters get it so wrong? I needed help, not opposition! I had no choice. I held low on the bars, head down in concentration and pushed the 39/15 gear as best I could. The A9 dual carriageway wound through the Pass of Drumochter at 459 metres where I briefly looked to my left towards the imposing A' Mharconaidh over 500 metres higher. And then blessed relief! The wind changed. I suppose the terrain plays tricks with the wind – and with cyclists - because after the Pass it was easy to slip onto the 53 ring, engage the 13 sprocket and cruise at 20 mph. The trucks which sped by may have helped a little and, unlike those on the A30, they always gave me a very wide birth which was comforting. Bob had parked up ahead of me where the road split onto the A889 to Fort William; perhaps he thought that fatigue might lead to mistakes but there was no danger of me leaving the A9 and so, when he saw my speed, he smiled and called out, 'Show off!' It was about 20 miles to Aviemore where we knew there would be overnight accommodation but, as I approached the town, Bob was parked up again and we had a brief chat about how I felt and what did I want to do; stop or carry on for a time? It was around 6.00 pm and conditions were pretty good so I said I wanted to go on for another hour so we agreed that we would press on through the Slochd Summit to the village of Tomatin where Bob thought he had read about 'services' which presumably meant beds

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for the night. That last hour turned out to be much harder than anticipated. Yes, I was tired and the road rose upwards for some distance and so it was just another case of grinding out the miles to make best use of the dry conditions and the tail wind which was noticeably turning against me. I was glad when Bob turned down the slip-road to the village and enjoyed the downhill run past beautiful houses owned, presumably, by business people from Inverness. But there was no sign of accommodation and, when a jogger gestured to Bob that we should just carry on and we would be okay, it proved to be unhelpful advice. We did try one B&B but it was full. At the far end of the village where the lane rejoined the A9, we had a chat and decided to load the bike into the van and drive off towards Inverness and the certainty of accommodation. It meant that we would have to retrace next morning in order to ride the full distance but we had no viable alternative. The van's speedo said we had done 186 miles that day, Smailes reckoned it was 197.8, either way it was enough.

Halfway to Inverness we saw a sign on the side of the road 'Torguish House B&B'. Bob swung the van around into the driveway of an impressive house with a beautiful stained glass door. There were large stone garden ornaments for sale in a compound to the left of the house and pens full of geese and hens on the other. There were numerous other features which added to the mystery of a beautiful house in an isolated location. Bob emerged from the front door with a smile and a key so our gamble on pushing on from Aviemore was vindicated. Bob carried in most of our luggage and I hobbled in on sore feet and cramped legs behind him. The house was packed with bric-a-brac, tin toys, wooden model boats, paintings, posters, solid old furniture including a huge oak table to seat at least 12 people and lots of quirky works of art. Every inch of space in the large house seemed to hold a treasure of some kind and would have sent Paul Martin of 'Flog It' into apoplexy. Bob noticed that there were several copies of 'Ice Station Zebra', 'The Guns of Navarone' 'Where Eagles Dare' and other books by Alistair MacLean displayed prominently on bookshelves and he asked if there was a reason for this. Angie, the daughter of the owners, told us that the house was originally the Manse for the local church which was now separated from the house across the other side of the busy A9 and that Alistair was the son of the vicar and grew up here. Apparently the church had been destroyed by fire a couple of times and much of the furniture in the house was built from salvaged timbers; it all added to the fascination of the place. Angie asked one of us to sign in but as I took up the pen she said she thought I looked too knackered to do it properly so she asked Bob to do it for us. We asked about food and were told that there was a pub about 15 minutes drive away which served meals until around 9.00 pm so, if we hurried, we should just about make it. Angie then disappeared into the kitchen to consult her mum and returned to tell us that, because we were planning to leave at 5.00 am and I looked so exhausted, her mum would be happy to cook breakfasts for us as an evening meal and we could also serve ourselves to croissants, toast, cereals, tea and coffee next morning at no extra cost. This was an unbelievably generous and kind offer which we accepted with profuse thanks. During our meal, Angie told us how her family had moved north from Middlesborough, how much they loved the Highlands and, even though business had dropped off dramatically in the last couple of years, they could never contemplate returning south. She also told us that there were some very steep hills on our route to John O'Groats, that it was a windy, desolate place with no redeeming features. It didn't matter to

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me; this was not a holiday. Our chat was interrupted by rain hammering on the window. Not a good omen for our last day in Scotland; the wind had definitely turned and brought rain with it.

By 4.30 am we had enjoyed our continental breakfast and were making our preparations to leave. Bob carted our boxes to the van while I treated my feet to more Savlon and tried to massage some feeling into my left hand which was numb from vibration through the handlebars. Bob drove the eight miles back to Tomatin with the windscreen wipers on full. We drove slowly through the two-mile stretch of major resurfacing works on the carriageway to Inverness. I decided that it would be safer to ignore the traffic lights which shut down one carriageway and ride inside the cones because the new surface looked very slippery with standing water from the heavy overnight rain; it was still dark and I certainly didn't fancy being overtaken by speeding trucks throwing up spray which might hide me from other traffic coming up behind. At 5.40 precisely, I shook hands with Bob and disappeared up the road on my Colnago with its rear mudguard catching some of the water and my lights full on. Within ten minutes I was cold and soaking wet from the driving rain which splashed up off the road. I knew that the weather was unlikely to improve much in the short-term so I settled in to driving round the pedals and ignoring the discomfort and accumulated pain from four full days of riding. John O'Groats was only about 140 miles away so it was a relatively easy day; or not. It was a gradual uphill climb to our overnight B&B but from there it was downhill to Inverness to cross over the Moray Firth on a spectacular bridge which would rate as a 4th Cat climb in the Tour de France. From the crest of the bridge I glanced to my left across Inverness town towards the Caledonian Canal and Loch Ness; it was a stunning view which deserved far more of my time but I had to concentrate on keeping a straight line near the kerb but far enough away from the gutter to avoid the worst of the streams of water caused by the heavy rain. It was still early morning but the traffic was already heavy and the carriageways were narrow which brought the trucks dangerously close. There was a cycle-way for some distance along the road from Inverness but, needless to say, it was poorly maintained and likely to result in punctures so I took my chances on the main road.

From the Murray Firth it was onwards over the Black Isle where the dark, low clouds and driving rain made it easy to understand why it was so named. There were road-works on the long, low bridge from the Isle across the deep waters of the Cromarty Firth where the road then turned right along the coast for a while. It was probably a pretty view but my head was down into the wind and I cared little about the scenery around me; I was thoroughly wet and cold, my feet were painful and I still had no feeling in my left hand. It was a long steady drag up to the outskirts of Tain village where I noticed the Glenmorangie Distillery. On another occasion, it would be a good place to visit and for a fleeting moment I wondered if the owners might pity a poor bedraggled cyclist and offer a few free drams. Somewhere near there, Bob was parked up with the kettle boiling and the soft chair ready. The rain had eased for the first time that day and I tried to find some dry clothes in the van but wasn't particularly successful. And anyway, dry clothes would be wet again within ten minutes so I searched with little enthusiasm. My Philadelphia cheese was finished to be replaced by peanut butter and marmalade on fresh brown bread purchased by Bob. After two mugs of hot tea I was almost ready to go when I noticed a plastic bag on the front

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seat. Plastic bags have numerous uses including improvised capes. Bob saw what I was thinking and instead of adapting this small plastic shopping bag he unrolled a bin liner and skillfully cut out three holes before pulling it over my head. 'There you go, that'll be ten pounds,' he said with a grin. I immediately felt much better and rode off up the road into the wind and rain which had held off just for the duration of my rest period.

In better weather the next 40 miles would have been as spectacular and enjoyable as the ride over the Highlands. From Tain the A9 continued on along the coast with some good climbs over headlands and stunning views out to the North Sea. On the rare occasions that the rain eased I did actually marvel at my surroundings and was grateful for the opportunity to appreciate this incredible part of the UK. My spirits were remarkably high helped by the fact that the bin liner really did make a difference! It was hard riding but I enjoyed it; I even sang Mama Cass's classic 'It's getting betterrrrrr, Growing Strongerrrr, warm and wilderrrr, Getting better everyday, better everyday,' quietly to myself at first and then out loud, much to the astonishment of a few sheep and the occasional walker. There were some very pretty coastal villages such as Golspie and Brora to ride through and enjoy. Bob stopped at a few of them to take photos to remind us of the better parts of a tough day. I was nearing the final test of the whole journey; after a rapid descent off the headland into Helmsdale it was time to climb the long, steep road out of the County of Sutherland towards the even steeper hills around Ord of Caithness and Berriedale. I hoped that Bob would come by because I thought about changing onto my Trek with its lower gearing but he was ahead of me preparing for my last stop so I had no choice but to continue with the Colnago. I was lucky on the big climb from Helmsdale. The wind eased and the rain stopped for a while and there was even a small patch of blue sky. I tore off the bin liner and rode high out of the saddle just like Phil had taught me. I enjoyed it until the road entered low cloud and the temperature dropped considerably. But over the top the wind seemed to turn and helped me a little across the bleak moors. I had agreed with Bob that, on this last day, I could afford to ride in three-hour rather than four-hour blocks so I was relieved when I saw the van parked in a lay-by with its back doors open because that meant a half hour rest was due. I sank into his chair and pulled off my shoes to give my sore, wet feet some respite. Bob handed me a mug of tea which was most welcome. I expected to dine on more peanut butter and marmalade but Bob had a surprise for me; he gave me a mug of hot vegetable soup which tasted absolutely magnificent and cheered me up enormously. While I supped that, I noticed Bob empty the contents of two cans of corned beef, two large cans of beans, one tin of chunky vegetable soup and a pack of Smash for six servings into a not-too-clean pan. 'I think that's what Jamie Oliver would call a casserole. And tell me, how many platoons of the Royal Highland Dragoon Guards are you planning to feed from that lot?' I asked. 'All for me, no point taking it home,' he grinned. It boiled up into an orange mush which only Bob could enjoy; he managed to eat all of it but later admitted that it tasted foul.

It stopped raining for a while so I quickly undressed and climbed into clothing which was a little drier. Just then a jogger came towards us from the north; Bob called out to him and he came over for a chat. He was 'running' to Lands End, 30 miles a day for 30 days. This was his second day. Whilst he had a tough job, Bob and I had sympathy for his wife who was driving his support car which must be the most boring job ever. She must have loved him a

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lot. We wished him well as he shuffled off and just then a couple of young women rode slowly towards us on mountain bikes loaded down with panniers, bar bags, saddle bags and back-packs. They wore shorts, tee-shirts and trainers and they looked exhausted. We assumed that they were attempting End to End but we reckoned that they would need to discard a lot of baggage and allow plenty of time if they were to succeed. As they rolled on south, a cloudburst sent us scurrying into the van. The rain hammered down and I had no intention of starting my last 45 miles in such conditions. For the first time on the whole trip I extended my rest period by ten minutes but felt no shame. There was no point in heroics at this stage; I had time and miles in hand and wanted to enjoy – as best I could – the last stage to John O'Groats. While we waited for the storm to ease, I mentioned to Bob that I considered swapping the Colnago for the Trek because I knew there were steep hills to come. He thought that the Colnago had worked well in some atrocious conditions and that it was unnecessary to change it now. He was right; the Colnago Dream deserved to cross the end line. When the rain eased I rode off towards Berriedale and the steepest climbs on the whole journey. I could still taste the soup as I descended a 13% drop into a valley followed by a long climb of the same gradient back onto the moors. Then there was another descent and another long 13% climb but this one had traffic lights on it. I ignored the red light and rode inside the cones to the amusement of a couple of workers who cared not one jot about my misdemeanor. Four lads on heavily laden mountain bikes waited at the lights at the other end of the road-works; I had just enough time to ask where they were heading. 'Lands End,' one replied. 'Good luck. This is the easy bit,' I called out. All five of us smiled. And then it was on towards Dunbeath and one more rapid descent and just one more long, steep climb which I relished.

At the tiny coastal village of Latheron, I turned at last off the A9 onto the A99 which runs along the coast with, in better weather, spectacular view out to the North Sea. But on 17th August 2010 it was grey, cold, windy and wet with minimal visibility. The only highlights on the run-in to Wick were a few grey-stone villages and the several ancient monuments; the Scots clearly embrace their history and record it in stone whenever they can. A few miles from Wick on a very bleak stretch of road I saw Bob jump out of the van and stand at the roadside to call out, 'Two riders at two minutes.' This was a coded message to say, 'Speed up, catch the two ahead and have a rest from the wind on their wheels.' I slipped the chain onto the big ring and chased hard. I caught the two just as we entered Wick where they climbed off outside a café and disappeared inside! Perhaps it was fate; I had had no help from any cyclist other than for the brief period outside Penzance when the Giant hit the road.

Wick was a surprisingly attractive and vibrant old town. I rolled through at about 3.30 as pupils were leaving the high school to catch their buses home. There were some very attractive old stone buildings, more impressive monuments and flower gardens and lots of shoppers along the busy high street. I was impressed with what I saw but was concentrating more on the last 17 miles to my final destination. Outside Wick the wind blew even stronger, as Angie had predicted, and rain fell in sharp showers. Thankfully, the last leg was reasonably flat but over a very bleak, treeless landscape with no redeeming features. At another time it would have been miserable riding but it was my last few miles and I was happy to be there. A few other riders came towards me, all loaded up with

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panniers and bags. There was one elderly woman in particular who had packed every inch of her mountain bike with bags stuffed full with kit which helped to reduce her speed to less than 7 mph...and she had the wind behind her on the flat! I wondered what her plans were and what chance she had of succeeding. With a few miles to go, I crested a ridge through the desolate Freswick village and saw a few buildings on the coast: it was my final destination. Bob cruised up alongside, wound down the window and, with a deadpan expression, said calmly, 'Big ring.' I grinned back and tried to move the lever with my left hand but my fingers were numb and slipped off sending the bike swerving to the left towards a ditch. I just about managed to hold it upright and laughed at thought of crashing and being unable to finish with just two miles to go. It was downhill to the coast and so, with the big ring engaged as ordered, I flew across the bold white line across the road and rolled the last couple of hundred yards to the surprisingly attractive little cluster of buildings which marked the end of my ride. That was it. Done it. I was surprisingly emotional with a feeling of absolute and total relief that it was over. I kept away from Bob for a while because I didn't want to look stupid. I thought about how the ride had been initiated and knew that Derek would have enjoyed playing a part in it. Bob was smiling as he walked from the car park to shake hands on a job done. We explored the few buildings and noticed the resident photographer remove his signpost which has a special slot to hold a temporary sign to show the visitors home town and its distance from John O'Groats; it was exactly 5.00 pm and he had finished for the day!

We went to the harbour wall where there is another famous signpost where all visitors pose for photos. Bob took a few of two Londoners who had driven up to catch the ferry to the Orkney Isles where that worked on the oil rigs. I didn't join in, I was too tired and relieved it was over. But that was it; done it. I text those two words to Ann, got changed, packed the van and we were off south to find a hotel for the night.

After an hour or so, we entered a small coastal village where I noticed the attractive Golspie Inn Hotel right on the main road. I stumbled inside to be greeted by the most charming manager who assured me that she could indeed offer us a twin room for the night and, yes, we could book a table in the dining room whenever we were ready. Bliss. The room provided just a touch of luxury, the shower was powerful and hot, and there was a kettle with lots of tea bags and a couple of sachets of chocolate. That was all the luxury I needed. Wonderful. An hour later we were shown to a table in the dining room and offered a menu which Bob declined and instead ordered his favorite omelette. I ordered soup and 'Beer Battered West Coast Haddock' served with chunky chips and minted mushy peas. It was a special occasion so Bob ordered a shandy with just a little beer and I had a large glass of wine. We shared a very pleasant meal; the haddock was superb and Bob gave the thumbs up to his omelette. We had lots to talk about including the prospect of him and several friends doing their own End to End next year. I told him how grateful I was for everything he had done for me. He had been absolutely brilliant at everything including his use of the satnav to guide me through the difficult parts of the route and his organization of the rest periods so that I had a chance to recover, especially when it was cold and wet. But perhaps his most valuable quality was that he was so damned cheerful all the time and some of it must have rubbed off on me. The bottom line was that, with Bob as company,

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there was never any thought of failure. He would not have allowed it. As far as he was concerned, we would do it. And so we did.

End to End Plan – August 2010

1. Official Guide

Purchase 'Lands End to John O'Groats – The Official Challenge Guide' by Brian Smailes. Challenge Publications. About £5 from Amazon

2. Start and End Travel

Van travel days 12th to Penzance, 18th and 19th return

3. Ride Plan

Total distance = about 900 miles

Ride days 13th – 17th August = 5 days

Distance per day = 180

Ride days = on road by 5.30, off road by 19.30 = 14 hours including 1.5 hours rest

Daily ride time = 12.5 hours. Average mph = 14.4 mph

Ride days	Wake 4.30 then on road by...
	05.30 -- 9.30 = 4 hours ride then .5 hour rest
	10.00 – 14.00 = 4 hours ride then .5 hour rest
	14.30 – 18.30 = 4 hours ride then .5 hour rest
	19.00 – 20.30 = 1.5 hours then B&B

Van behind except for 19.00 when ahead to locate B&B

4. Bob' jobs

Van hire

All driving and detailed route planning including route/ride cards for 5 days

Daily telephone contact with me as necessary

Guiding through difficult routes e.g. Bristol perhaps by going ahead

Locating cafes or providing food and drink at 3 rest periods on ride days.

Contact with Tourist Information Centres to locate B&Bs – and also see Handbook

Locating evening meal

Bike and van maintenance

Buying stuff en route

Telephone contact with me en route

Take pics

5. My jobs

Ride bike

Pay bills

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6. My Kit

Trek with rear light
Colnago with mudguard and lights
Spare tyre and 4 inner tubes
Puncture repair kit
Bungees and bike blankets
Tools and cleaning rags
WD40
Pump
Water bottles x 4
Helmet
Handbook
Mobile phones x 2 with charger
AA map
Travel kettle
Plates, bowls, mugs, cutlery x 2
Flask
Large water bottle
Bowl
Towels
Blanket
Watch
Alarm clock
Blank route cards and pens
Glasses x 2

7. Bob to provide

Cooker
Sleeping bag – emergency use
Satnav

Sun glasses
Cream and sun cream
Razor, toothbrush, soap
Evening clothes inc Track suit
Credit/debit cards/cash
Camera
First Aid kit
Emergency telephone numbers
Shorts/jerseys x 5
Yellow jersey
Gillets x 2
Cape
Shoes x 2
Hats x 5
Mits x 2
Socks x 6
Vests x 5
Muesli
Sliced bread, peanut butter, marmalade
Bananas, flapjacks, bars
Isostar and Carbo powder
Tea and coffee

End to End Review September 2010

1. Finance

Actual costs incurred for two people; one rider and one driver

Van hire Hertz 8 days	196.06	
Diesel	193.47	
Toll Severn Bridge	10.90	
Accommodation		
Penzance B&B	60.00	
Bristol Pub B&B	45.00	
Warrington Premier Inn	51.00	
Abingdon Hotel	90.00	
Daviot B&B	76.00	
Golspie Hotel	78.00	
		400.00
Evening Meals		
Penzance Italian	22.60	
Bristol Pub	22.10	
Warrington Pub	22.73	
Abingdon Hotel	27.50	
Daviot B&B	Inc as B&B	
Golspie Hotel	27.00	
		<u>121.93</u>
Total		<u>922.36</u>

2. Mileage End to End

Day	Places	VW Caddy Van Speedo	Smailes Official Guide
1	Lands End to Bristol Airport	Diversions. N/A	205.6
2	To Warrington	178	184.5
3	To Abington	178	202.4
4	To Tomatin	186	197.8
5	To John O'Groats	138	144.1
Total			934.4

From The End to End Club Website

There are many routes to choose from when going from one end to another, as a general guide the direct route (via motorways) is about 838 miles, or avoiding motorways (but still on main roads) is about 891 miles.

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E Mail to Brian Smailes 12th September

Hi Brian, In July this year I bought your publication 'Lands End to John O'Groats - The Official Cyclist Challenge Guide'. It was an invaluable planning tool for my 5 day ride 13th - 17th August. I followed your route all the way with short exceptions forced by road closures at Crediton and around Glasgow. Many, many thanks. The only question I have is about distances between places and the fact that our vans speedo registered fewer miles than your guide. E.g. from Bristol Airport to Warrington our speedo gave 178 where your guide shows it as 202.4. In total our van's speedo showed about 875 for the Challenge route where your guide seems to show about 934. I will be grateful if you could help me with the apparent differences in miles between places. I will be delighted if you are right and our Hertz VW van is wrong!! Many thanks and best wishes, Tony Taylor

Reply from Brian 14th September

Hi Tony, Thanks for the email. I have just returned from helping a charity cycle ride from Lands End to John O'Groats but a different route this time and over 12 days, although there were 27 cyclists.

At both ends it says the length is 874 miles, but that is as the crow flies and we go around the roads. I used the most direct route which I thought I had put in as 910 miles which I worked out as accurate as possible. I am fairly sure that you did more miles than you think after allowing for the ups and downs and winding roads.

When I worked out the route, I did make allowances for the heights up and down as well, which a map doesn't show. I know it was quite a difference but I have traveled routes in one car from A to B then in another car and found doing exactly the same route from A to B can show differently. That may also help to explain the difference.

Anyway, you did it and I know it is something you will remember for the rest of your life. Congratulations!

After cycling it both ways and walking it down, I intend to walk it on the same route up from Lands End in May 2012. There are not many walked and cycled it both ways. Incidentally, I do certificates for it as well, which are a lot cheaper than the ones Lands End try to sell cyclists.

It would be good to have a copy of your draft notes if you can e mail them. I look forward to reading them.

Best wishes, Brian Smailes

Posts on Stourbridge Cycling Club Website

(I am second claim member of SCC)

By [Isla Rowntree](#) Saturday August 14th

Veteran club member Tony Taylor is currently in the middle of his solo, supported ride from Lands End to John O'Groats

He left Lands End early Friday morning and managed an excellent ride through Cornwall and hilly Devon on the first day to complete about 180 miles. Day 2 was very wet in the morning when he starting riding at 05:40. The hoped for prevailing south westerly has not materialised and so far he has had to battle a very stiff northerly wind. In spite this he was still in good spirits when he passed through Ludlow yesterday, and he put in another fantastic ride to make it as far as Wigan for his overnight stop. The last news today was late morning when he was passing Kendal, and looking forward to the psychological boost of crossing the border into Scotland later today. However, this is only a little over half way. If anyone has any messages of encouragement for Tony, please post them here and I'll make sure they get passed on.

By [Chris Halford](#) Sun Aug 15, 2010 2:35 pm

Well done top riding by a true gent

By [Roger Allen](#) Sun Aug 15, 2010 4:49 pm

Respect! Not easy even if there was a tailwind! Best wishes to your forthcoming achievement, Tony.

By [Isla](#) Sun Aug 15, 2010 8:44 pm

Tony has had another barnstorming day, making it as far as Abington, South Lanarkshire. Another 177.5 miles today!

By [Chris Jeavons](#) Sun Aug 15, 2010 9:29 pm

He really is doing a fantastic job riding all those miles each day. Caught up with him at Onibury and Church Stretton he was going very well and with Bob looking after his needs he won't want for anything. I have been in touch with (Ginger) John Davies who lives in Newton Mearns and given him Bob's mobile number he will surprise Tony out on the Road tomorrow should be a nice surprise . Allez, allez Tony

By [Isla](#) Mon Aug 16, 2010 9:25 am

10:15 Monday. He's just passed Dunblane, and for the first time on the trip so far may get a bit of helping wind later today!

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By [Chris Jeavons](#) Mon Aug 16, 2010 6:31 pm

Just txt'd Bob he said Tony has only got 130 miles left to do, currently looking for a bed for the night most B&B places are full Bob said if he can't find any digs he will make Tony ride to the finish (what a cruel task master) what a dam fine ride he has done.

By [Isla](#) Tue Aug 17, 2010 6:37 am

116 miles to do at 07:30, rain again.

By [Chris Jeavons](#) Tue Aug 17, 2010 9:51 am

Tough start this morning for Tony cold and wet by time he had done the first couple of hours he was wet through even his cape wasn't keeping the rain out, Mother Nature trying to put a damper on things. Contacted Caithness CC yesterday and gave them road numbers and eta times asked if any club men were around could they give him a cheer as he neared the finish, there club chairmen replied and said he would see what he could do thought it would be nice if some one was there when he finished, top man Tony well done.

By [Isla](#) Tue Aug 17, 2010 3:58 pm

Tony reached John O'Groats this afternoon. What a fantastic achievement.

By [Chris Edwards](#) Tue Aug 17, 2010 9:36 pm

Excellent. A ride that every cyclist wants to do but few get the chance. Well done Tony.

By [Bryan Hedges](#) Wed Aug 18, 2010 8:08 am

Congratulations Tony, a great achievement.

By [Keith and Pat Green](#) Wed Aug 18, 2010 1:18 pm

Congratulations Tony, that was awesome.

By [Richard Coleman](#) Sat Aug 21, 2010 2:02 pm

Wow that's an impressive ride even for you Tony.

Well done and many, many congratulations.

By [Tony Taylor](#) Thu Aug 19, 2010 8:13 am

I had no idea that my progress was being reported on this website and so it was a delight to read your contributions late last night. Thank you for your interest and support which is greatly appreciated. Biggest thanks is to former SCC member Bob Couldrey who did a magnificent job in keeping everything on track and in particular for guiding me through

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Glasgow's rush hour traffic on a series of roads which resembled a building site; Bob was brilliant throughout and there is no way that I could have done it in 5 days without him. He is thinking about setting up an EtoE Consultancy – I strongly recommend him! In a few days time I will produce some notes on this site which might be of interest to other SCC members who could be thinking of having a go next year. It's probably too late to do it this year – we saw snow ploughs being driven into the hills in readiness for an early winter and our van's ice warning light flashed on several times.

Once again, many thanks for your support. It's a superb challenge and a brilliant route especially from Crieff to the Pass of Drumochter. Give it a go – you would love it!! Best wishes, Tony

By Terry Rowntree Thu Aug 19, 2010 6:47 pm

An absolutely awesome ride Tony, you are a credit to the Club - and the more mature rider. And of course Bob too, who has a reputation for supporting very generously long and arduous cycle projects.

E Mail from Isla 21st Aug

We really enjoyed coming out to see you, and following your extraordinary progress. What you achieved is immense – the ride in itself is enormous, but what very few people will appreciate is just how hard the conditions were. You were very unlucky to get that headwind almost all the way, it will have had a massive impact on your speed and overall time, not to mention moral. We are still in awe! Well done. Isla and Louise.

And Finally

Many, many thanks to Bob Couldrey for his magnificent support throughout the five days. The Jobs List shows what he did and I hope the above account conveys how he did it; he was brilliant throughout. I strongly recommend him as an End to End Consultant! He is experienced, extremely competent but above that he is so cheerful even in the worst of our summertime weather. Thank you Bob. You were great! Tony

19th September 2010