

Ed and Tom Barry's cycle ride from John o'Groats to Land's End

Started: Saturday 20th June 2009

Finished: Monday 29th June 2009

984.4 miles total over 10 days cycling

3 punctures, 2 new tyres and 1 new spoke

This letter is going to everyone who has helped us in completing this adventure – either by donating money to our charities, having us to stay, offering encouragement - or by withholding genuine thoughts that we were barking mad!

We couldn't have done any of this without Mum driving over 2,500 miles in our 'support car'. Not only did her driving mean that we didn't have to carry anything heavy on our bikes (big help) and spare tyres were never far away, but also that we had breakfast and lunch beautifully presented every day. Thank you Mum!

We gambled and chose to go against the tradition of cycling from South to North. We'd kept a daily look at the weather reports in the week before leaving and one was predicted to settle over the UK from Sunday 21st onwards. It was a decision that paid off as we had following winds for 8 ½ days – with one horrible day's exception towards Settle in Yorkshire with 98 miles of steep hills and strong headwinds that drove us to exhaustion at 9.30 at night on a cold mountain's edge. Our worst moment.

If you haven't been to John o'Groats before, it takes hours and hours to get there – and that's by car. I was collected at midday from school – 50 minutes after finishing my last A level – and arrived in the most northerly point of Scotland at midnight, still bathed in daylight. Not sure when or if people go to sleep around there. Straight to bed and a 7.00 am alarm to take us into our first day.

Day 1

John o'Groats to Bonar Bridge

105 miles. 13.8 mph average



John o'Groats at 8.30 on a windy, sunny morning is a beautiful but desolate place. The fingerpost to Land's End had been taken down for the night so we posed for our photos by a single white post overlooking the sea – then off westwards along the coast road into a howling wind.

Beautiful sandy beaches, Dunnet Head spectacular and past Dounreay nuclear power station to lunch after 50 miles in the Bettyhill Hotel – complete with welcoming coal fire and the Lions first game on TV in the bar. I voted the Bettyhill beach the most beautiful sight of the whole journey.

We turned south down Loch Naver valley – stunning – and headed via endless hills and the desolate Crask Inn (fine fruit cake) to our first night at Carbisdale Castle - a Youth Hostel. First night's celebration in the Bonar Bridge pub.....met Billy the dog: "Nice dog isn't he""He's a she!" came the reply from the owner in broad Scottish.

Day 2

Bonar Bridge to Ballachulish

122 miles. 13.6 mph average

Delayed start. There's an unwritten law in cycling which we were soon to understand, that no matter how early you get up, you always start later than planned. Lost maps, bottles and spanners but finally off to be greeted by the first of horrible hills that were to dominate the next few days. We thought it better to get hills over and done with early on when there's still some strength in the legs but we curiously got to like the challenge of steep hills by the end of the trip. The worst ones were the slopes that couldn't make their minds up whether to test you or not - and left us in a constant rattle of changing gears and losing and gaining momentum. Over the Black Isle into Inverness, east of Loch Ness to Fort Augustus where we met 7 of the crew of HMS Explorer at the top of a mountain – they'd docked their ship in Fort Augustus. We took the Great Glen Way along the canal – complete with moaning lock keeper – and via the Lovat Commando Memorial in rugged hills got to Fort William at 105 miles. Had to do the remaining 17 miles to Ballachulish in rain and near dark but were rewarded by a lovely hotel with room overlooking the sea. Beginning to get tired!

Day 3

Ballachulish to Lochwinnoch

118 miles. 13.4 mph average

Set off late again, cold and drizzly day, stiff and tired. Previous cyclists told us that day 3 is when things start to ache and hurt – they weren't wrong. (But it was to get worse on day 5!)

We had trained for this event by numerous 40 and 50 mile rides near home, but it's the repetition, day after day without a break that gets you, not the total mileage. Around the coast to Connel, to Lochawe and the first sign that Grandad was looking down on us – a 2 mile steep, steep climb and then 7 miles downhill to lunch in Inveraray.

Odd touristy town from another generation, full of tea shops. Waitress in our lunch spot – "no salad - cook doesn't do that here". Maybe if we'd asked for it deep fried?

Round Loch Fyne, past Strachor to Dunoan (Swine Flu capital of the UK), only to be greeted by the 900 ft alpine hill behind Greenock. A 900ft hill is bad enough at the start of the day but after 100 miles and 8 hours of cycling, it took it out of us. We arrived in Lochwinnoch late, cold and very tired.

Day 4

Lochwinnoch to Annan

99 miles. 13.0 mph average

The first day of 'not much happening' – except 2 punctures quickly mended. We were taken by how beautiful the hills of Ayrshire were – not the wild rolling mountains of the North but a small farming landscape, silage being taken in and a sunny, hot day. We finished at Annan, 7 miles from the Scottish border.

Day 5

Annan to Settle

98 miles. 12.5 mph average

Two things happened today in quick succession – we left Scotland at Gretna Green and passed half way in our journey. Glancing at a map, you'd never think of Scotland as being such a large part of the British Isles. Through Carlisle – its strong, dominant castle reminds you of the town's northern outpost role in previous years – and Penrith with the sole aim of avoiding the hills of the Lake District. Beautiful rural countryside north of Tebay and lunch at Orton in the sun. Feeling good.

But...we were met by steep, long hills and a severe headwind as we cycled through Tebay, Kirby Lonsdale and towards Clitheroe. It wasn't to be! The previous 4 days distance and climbing took their toll and we ran out of gas in Settle on the high moors at 9.00 pm. A very tough, exhausting day.

Day 6

Settle to Whitchurch

106 miles. 13.8 mph average

Today's map showed a spaghetti of motorways west of Manchester – and somehow we had to pick our way through it. Not easy, and much of it not fun. We both decided we can live long and happy lives without ever visiting Leigh again, but surprisingly, towns are towns and country is country – so we had a good share of rugged hills overlooking England's industrial past.

Quite a contrast to get to 'Footballer Country' west of Knutsford – a Ferrari salesman's paradise - and down to the Shropshire hills and Whitchurch.

Day 7

Whitchurch to Upton Bishop, Ross on Wye

89 miles. 14.6 mph average

The success of big rides like this revolves around one or two big decisions – and we made the right one today. Despite the beauty of the Shropshire hills, we decided to stick to our first main road so far – the A49 – as we headed south. Despite the gales, rain and 38 ton lorries inches away from us, we had our fastest ride of the whole journey along a road that falls constantly along the valley from Whitchurch in the North to Hereford in the South. Great walnut cake in Shrewsbury, satisfaction at avoiding the hills and arrived in Ross at 7.00 pm. Only 3 more days to go, feeling a lot better – we really can do this!

Day 8

Upton Bishop to Taunton

91 miles. 13.0 mph average

With over 7 hours each day in the saddle for 7 days in a row, we hadn't yet developed any injuries – the odd niggle, sore hands and neck – but my knee packed in soon after we started today. Behind the knee cap exists a confusing mass of moving parts, sinews and muscles and up the first hill they all conspired to give me sharp pains each time I pedalled. More Ibuprofen, more deep heat and more gritted teeth got us to Chepstow where a kindly lady at Boots sold me a neoprene knee support which seemed to help.

Over the Severn Bridge to Bristol, lunch next to Clifton Suspension Bridge and joined by dad's brother Alex to head off to Taunton – hot, slow, stiff but we got there by 7.30 – signs to closeby Glastonbury but no Bruce Springstein chords to be heard.

Day 9

Taunton to Wadebridge

99 miles. 13.9 mph average

We were joined today by Anthony Cooke-Yarborough (fresh from his Help for Heroes ride to Paris) and we had the most enjoyable day yet. Good weather, his fresh legs to drag us along at speed and despite all warnings about the hills of Devon, we plotted a route that took us smoothly to Cornwall with a strong tailwind blowing us along at 20 – 25 mph in the last stages. (Tour de France stages regularly *average* 28 mph or twice our wind assisted average speed) We finished at 99 miles and couldn't muster the extra mile to make the century. One more day to go!

Day 10

Wadebridge to Land's End

59 miles. 12.4 mph average

So close! But for 30 miles it felt like cycling through treacle. Hills, diversions and winds all conspired to slow us down – by now, we just want to get this over with! – but the last 5 miles to Land's End were filled with sunshine and the realisation that we were, after 984 miles and over 70 hours in the saddle, going to finish what we had set out to do from the blowy north east of Scotland.

Nicola was there to photograph us over the finish line – we celebrated with a Cornish pasty, a pint of bitter, rested knees and a 5 hour journey home to Oxfordshire.



With special thanks to

Kevin, John, Neil and Linda at Giles Cycles in Carterton for providing everything we needed from our bikes to bottles. Johnny Lorimer for predicting that the wind would be behind us. AJ for his encouraging drink on the way to John o'Groats. Clare and Harry Forbes, Andrew and Harriet Gordon Brown, Lucinda and Robin Parish, Kate and Mark Edwards, Deans, Belinda and Andrew Scott for having us to stay and spoiling us. Alastair Fothergill for lunch in Bristol. Alex and Anthony CY for joining us on their bikes. David and Brenda Vaughan for tea nr Okehampton. Fifi Williams for joining us at Shrewsbury and providing a wonderful welcome on our return.

With many thanks

Ed and Tom Barry

www.justgiving.com/edbarry

www.justgiving.com/tombarry