

My LEJOG (Lands End to John O’Groats) Adventure 7th to 16th July 2006.

The content of this report is for the sponsors of my LEJOG, so they can understand the effort by me and help share my experience. In the same way a camera only captures part of the scene, this merely scratches the surface of the whole experience. The only real way is to try it yourself! It should not be used or reprinted in part or whole without the permission of the writer. This consent will not be normally withheld provided a small donation is made to Breast Cancer Care!

Why did I do it? Well it all started a few years ago when I broke my foot. I have never been a “sporty type” but did enjoy the occasional game of squash or a run. Some time after the incident with the foot, my honorary membership to the League of Couch Potatoes arrived in the post.

I did find that, whilst initially attractive, the long-term benefits of the League were not too appealing. In order to rescind my membership I got out my old bicycle and started to cycle in the mornings. During 2005 most mornings I would cycle 6-10 miles then come home and have a shower prior to going to work.

I really enjoyed my early morning rides and found it a fantastic way to get some exercise and mental relaxation. You also get to see a lot of your local area in a relaxed and eco friendly way. An opportunity to explore areas and paths that you see every day and wonder where they go. The spurred me to be a little more adventurous and start to look at possible rides and challenges I could undertake. I subscribed to Mountain Bike Magazine, and the trails in there seemed more like competitive time trials so did not appeal too much. During one evening, under the influence of alcohol, the LEJOG ride seemed like a good idea at the time.

Having discussed it with several people, I felt almost morally obligated to do the trip. Whilst the idea initially, seen through the rose tinted spectacles provided by messers Fullers, seemed merely a simple collection of gentle daily rides, research was obviously required! I found many interesting accounts on the Internet, and it would seem not to be just the domain of the seriously fit professional cyclist but open to all ages and abilities. If you are interested there is a site worth a visit that has links to many such accounts, <http://www.users.waitrose.com/~ianclare/links.htm>. There were accounts from many varied levels of fitness and ages from 13 years to 85 years old. So after some thought (unusual) and absolutely no planning whatsoever (most usual), I decided to do this during 2006. For Christmas Céleste bought me the bible of the LEJOG cycle ride “Lands End to John O’Groats” by Simon Brown. The book is well written and breaks the trip down into 14 days, with information and topographical diagrams designed to frighten the casual cyclist, but not so much as to call the whole thing off. I was to find out that the reality was worse than the picture but more of that later.

Rob Kittler had heard about my quest and said he would like to join me. I agreed, knowing I was up against a man 10 years my younger and who had also successfully

completed the London Marathon. If all else failed I could always rely on sabotage to even the tables!

The weather in the latter stages of 2005 and early 2006 was less than good and being a confirmed “fair weather biker” on my motorcycles I saw no reason whatsoever to go out on the push bike in the wet and cold, so the training stopped. Having bought the bike in the November and as much of the kit was given to me as Christmas presents, at Easter I tried my first long ride. This being only the 3rd ride in as many months, I was obviously still in possession of those rose tinted spectacles! The plan was to cycle to my mums, only 120 miles, so I thought it would be a good taster of what was to come.

This was my first BIG mistake, to undertake a long ride with no training. The second was to set an unrealistic pace target. Being rather green I thought that could keep the same pace as my short early morning rides so I set off South, into a headwind, in the rain, and climbing up into the Cotswolds, whilst trying to maintain an average of 15mph. The wet trousers and wind coupled with the hills took its toll on the unprepared legs and when I stopped in Burford for breakfast I really was wondering why I was doing this. Céleste was already at my mums, but was put on standby for a collection. I set off again, the rain had stopped, but the wind was ever present, and just north of Marlborough after 60 miles I could no longer attempt even the slightest gradient and even walking was becoming impossible. International Rescue arrived and the bike and I was transported to my Mums house so I could spend 12 hours of inactivity. I was so disappointed with myself and seriously questioned as to whether I could undertake nearly double the distance on a daily basis.

Many words of comfort from close friends and family put me right and I started training again. I was building up to longer and longer rides, and getting a lot more comfortable with my abilities. I was actually enjoying riding in the rain as now not only did I now have the right kit, I also found it was cooler!

Rob then pulled out. Having just finished the London Marathon again in 2006, he decided that he could not do the LEJOG this year. This gave me some relief, and I did let it be known that I, in some ways, was glad he had pulled out, as he would not be keen to get up in the morning. In reality, the truth is, I was scared of being shown up!

Much of the training, whilst on the new bike was undertaken on the canal towpaths with mountain bike (MTB) tyres to make it a little harder. The training distance was built up and in the month before L day I was cycling rides of up to 20miles in the morning, and up to 40 miles in the evening.

During the last few weeks I had somewhat bored with training, and just wanted to “Get On With It”. The MTB tyres were swapped for hybrid tyres, these have a narrower section and higher pressure for less rolling resistance. The chain lube device kindly donated by Rory at Scotoiler was fitted, along with the tracker and trunk bag rack. I was now ready for the biggest challenge of my life (apart from persuading Céleste that I really did **need** a Private Pilots Licence!)

Day 0. Home to Lands End

A morning at work followed by a trip home later than planned. No packing had been done by anyone so after many rows, tears, threats, and slamming of doors we finally got on the road at around 8.30pm.

Past Worcester on the M5 (approx 1 hour into the journey) I realised we had not brought my Camelback water carrier. Given the current weather (hot and dry) this was like taking a soothing dummy from a small child and gave me a horrible feeling. An additional 2 hours in the journey, and not likely to get to the hotel until after 2am the following morning, was just too much to contemplate. We decided that the best solution was to buy one at the first cycle shop on the route, relying on bottled water till then. Not ideal as no bottle carriers are fitted to my bike, so a drink would involve stopping and getting a bottle out of one of the panniers.

We finally got to the Travelodge some 15 miles or so from Lands End, at half past midnight.

Day 1. Lands End to Tavistock

Up at 5.30, put the bike on the car bike rack and, having lightly greased ones important parts with Vaseline (prevention being better than cure) donning the cycle gear I then tried gently to wake Céleste. When that didn't work I tried a little harder (the bruises have faded very quickly).

We drove the last few miles to Lands End in light rain, and I was now seriously wondering why I was doing this. At Lands End we followed signs for "End to Enders". It was raining with a little more vigour and the place was completely deserted (no great surprise at 7.00 in the morning). The bike was removed from the roof rack and then I found the bike rack had been left in the hotel. As this was to carry the trunk bag, tracker and essentials for the day, I wondered if this was yet a further sign saying "DON'T DO IT". I could not let myself and sponsors down so IT HAD TO BE DONE.

I was still so keen to have the tracker working; the only way was to put it in the large zip up pocket in my waterproof jacket and for Céleste to find me later with the rack, and hopefully a replacement camelback. We duly booked in at the "End to End Club"; this was at the hotel reception. I set off into the drizzle in a north-westerly direction. The



sight of the rear lights of Céleste's car disappearing in the distance filled me with dread. However I was here, at the start, and it's not too difficult. Just take your time and pace yourself. Had I done enough training? Too late if not. Had I got sufficient clothing, spare parts? Who knows, who cares, I was a man armed with a (loaded) credit card and I knew how to use it!

The tracker and battery, weighing in at approx 1.5kg was doing a good job of pulling the collar in a fashion not dissimilar to a dog's choker chain so it was to my great relief that Céleste pulled up on the road in front of me some hour and a half later.

The rain had subsided and sunshine replaced the grim clouds. Thinking that the jacket could be dispensed with at this stage, initially seemed good, however the careful choice of speed on entering into a puddle defined whether the water splashed ones shoes and legs or all over my body. At speeds of above 15mph the water would be thrown off the front wheel forward, only to be then blown directly into your face! Thankfully the rack/trunk bag/pannier combination provided protection from that dirty water thrown up by the rear wheel so liberally over ones back and Lycra clad backside!



The gentle up and down slopes leading from Lands End lull one into false sense of security, and all too soon the gradients get steeper and more frequent. The uphill parts were hard work, but followed by a relaxing freewheel down the other side. In truth the down slopes can be anywhere between welcome relief, through exhilaration, to down right scary! At 60 or so miles in to the trip the first hard climb leads to Lostwithel. I do recall at the time wondering if it had been named by some early cyclist on his penny-farthing

wheeling, "I have lost the will to live" thus setting the name!

The climb out of Lisgeard from almost sea level to over 1000ft was a little tiresome, and is best tackled after a rest. The descent into Tavistock gives some relief, but the next climb is said to be much worse! Enough for one day and that particular treat was saved for the following day.

The high point of the day was passing a 30 mph speed camera on a down slope a 36mph and turning round and grinning and waving at the appropriate moment!

The day had ended in Tavistock, the gateway to the moors. At £180 per night the local hotel was not a serious contender so the bike was loaded on the car for a trip to Plymouth for a well-deserved rest and meal. The first day was completed with no major incident, other than my complete incompetence with the rack. 7.6 hours in the saddle plus a further 3 hours of breaks rewarded me with 92.7 miles at an average speed cycling speed of 12.3mph. To cap it all I also recorded a maximum speed of 44mph (admittedly downhill with a slight following wind).

Day 2. Tavistock to Bridgwater

The difficulty in raising Céleste from deep slumber was the only obstacle to the early start planned, and true to form some degree of force had to be applied. I, with my newly acquired camelback, and lightly loaded rack was ready for the worst that Dartmoor could throw at me, or so I thought. The road out of Tavistock left me in no doubt as to the menu for the day. The narrow road climbs steeply at gradients of 1 in 4 or 1 in 5 for some of the climb. The climb from a few hundred feet above sea level up to 1700ft was slow and laborious and the first two hours a lowly 5.2 average mph was all that I could achieve. At this stage the many people that had told me that to trip going south to north was uphill were certainly being proved right! A slight tailwind provided by the prevailing wind merely added insult to injury by ensuring that furious pedalling uphill at slow speeds was in complete calm, maximising the heat generation, and sweat was literally running down every limb. With my eyes stinging from the salty wash I finally arrived at the end of the first climb, close to Dartmoor Prison.

I rewarded myself with a few minutes break prior to a very welcome down slope. A further steep climb back up to 1700ft precedes the welcome descent into Mortonhampsted for a well-deserved breakfast. There is a very friendly café on the high street that did not seem surprised that I needed a jam doughnut to supplement the Full English Breakfast. They are obviously aware of the massive calorie burn required to haul a bicycle and fat git up two very steep climbs!



From Moretonhampstead a further climb takes a weary cyclist to the edge of Dartmoor and then on to the scariest decent of the whole adventure. Simon Brown has a wonderful way of understating and I am sure he is an estate agent in real life. In the bible he refers to this section as “A scary descent is then undertaken that tests any cyclist’s mental nerve...” In reality you have a single-track road with a gradient steeper than any I have seen anywhere, ever before. The centre of the road is dirt and rubble; the side tracks are overhanging with branches and undergrowth to attack the passing cyclist. A drop of over 1000ft is undertaken in a few minutes and at the bottom my brake discs were a cherry red prior to a dark blue as they cooled down. My wrists ached from the efforts of holding on for grim life and the strain applied to the brake levers.

After a short break to compose oneself, the terrain became a little friendlier and the route was now to head towards Bridgwater via Crediton, Tiverton and Taunton. I had My GPS to provide directions, and in a car the “shortest distance” and “shortest time” both have

their uses. Try as hard as I could I could not find a “avoid that bloody great hill” option. The Bible showed a height of less than 400ft climb out of Crediton, yet I managed a height of greater than 700ft. I am not sure if the estate agent skills were in use or my GPS decided to save me a few hundred yards and gain me an additional 300ft of climb! Many of the country types are very cycle conscious and hold back behind in their vehicles and then overtake when waved past, or the road is clear. I did however find that ALL diesels smell and older Land Rover Discoveries in particular do have a horrible habit of belching out copious quantities of thick black smoke just as they pass you! The day finished in Bridgwater, which has almost nothing to commend it as a place to visit. The hotel, however, was very friendly and food was second to none. The day’s efforts ended after 7.4 hours in the saddle, 2.1 hours rest and a lowly 82.6 miles at an average of 11.2mph. Considering the first two hours, the recovery of average speed was remarkable. Today I did see 48mph (the highest recorded on the trip) on one downhill stretch, and wondered whether I should be wearing leathers and a full-face motorcycle helmet!

Day 3 Bridgwater to Worcester

The hotel in Bridgwater was kind enough to provide a room for my bike all to itself, the only problem being it was up an uneven rickety wooden spiralling staircase. The only way up was in pieces and conversely the only way down was in pieces. At 5.00am, assembly of the bike took but a few minutes in the light rain. Initially I started off the days ride at 5.15 am in my windproof jacket, this was VERY soon changed to my waterproof jacket as the light rain was proving not to be as light as thought. The gentle tail wind ensured that the rain stayed with me as far as Bristol, including a severe downpour at the tail end of the weather front just to ensure I was totally soaked. I sheltered for a few minutes under a flyover on the A38 north of Bristol contemplating my options and decided that I could make the next mile to a hotel where I would be able to allow the storm to pass and have a much wanted breakfast stop. During the next 1760yards I began to realise that were I the owner of a hotel I would not allow a drowned rat looking like me within 100 yards of my front door. I pressed on and the weather finally passed, only to come back later.

When it did come back, I came to realise that when in a lay-by having a 5-minute break, and it starts to rain, there is nothing more to do other than to get wet. I was now seriously contemplating why I was doing this, after two days of hard cycling I had hardly put a dent in the journey! Perhaps if I were to leave the bike unattended and someone stole it – surely that would be a bloody good excuse for aborting the trip, and the sympathy and outrage may even get the sponsors to pay more? Today was a dark day and I had many a negative thought.

The first (and ironically the only) mechanical problem manifested itself in the cycle computer launching itself from its mounting across the road; fortunately the opposing traffic was minimal at the time. The fixing screw had come loose, and this along with the offending computer was collected from the road with several churchgoers just about to

enter their local parish church wondering who this red faced cyclist was in their local village trying to skim something across the tarmac as one skims a flat stone across a lake or sea. I knew I had a multi tool with which I could effect repairs, but frankly I did not want to raise any eyebrows further. It was also easier to place it in the panniers as the irritating beep beep it emitted when the peddle cadence was less than 65 turns per minute was frankly getting on my tits. One of the many functions it was capable of was to set a warning when the arbitrary limits were exceeded prompting one to change up or down a gear. Problem was, the large instruction book supplied, was put in a safe place when the unit was first purchased. It was so safe I couldn't find it prior to the start! The GPS gave all the same info and more and did not continually let me know I was not turning the



damn pedals at the Lance Armstrong recommended revolutions per minute. Being a Sunday, and there being no chance of a Tesco Breakfast before 10.00, I pressed on to climb up into the Cotswolds. The climb, whilst hard work, was rewarded by some spectacular views over Gloucester. The descent into Stroud was rapid and the Tesco breakfast most satisfying. Prior to descending into Stroud, I did however note the hill the other side of Stroud was exactly the same height at the one before it. I wonder why Telford was never

commissioned to build a bridge to ease the pain of the weary cyclist!

Céleste and the kids were enjoying themselves in a theme park, so during that day, so I took the opportunity for some longer than normal rest breaks and even had a delightful pint of Diet Coke with some friends who took the trouble to find me and direct me to the nearest pub for one of these rest breaks.

My whole eating pattern was changing. Initially I was just enjoying the excuse of having a cooked breakfast every day for ease, rather than the once a week treat. My dietary need was to develop in to full blown gluttony. Breakfast consisted of cooked breakfast, followed by cakes or doughnuts; lunch usually contained a meal and pudding, a mid afternoon chocolate break for energy and a full meal in the hotel or pub in the evening. The cycling was sucking sugar out of my body with such efficiency, so it replied by craving for food – much food!

Day 3 finished as a glorious sunny day with 104.4 miles completed during 8.1 hours in the saddle giving an excellent 12.9mph average speed and 3.9 leisurely hours of breaks and rain stops! The final resting place was Jct 5 of the M5, where Céleste's car then transported me and my bike to home for an evenings fettling on the bike and a very welcome sleep in my own bed!

Day 4 Worcester to Warrington.

Having rested at home, for yet a third time in four days, I had to find the correct balance of force and persuasion to try to raise the comatose wife from deep slumber. I know during the course of treatment for Cancer she has had many a full anaesthetic, and couldn't help wondering if the process would have been much simpler, and they could save the cost of an anaesthetist, had they chose to operate any time before 9.00am! Leaving the kids in bed we headed back to the M5 Jct5. Once there I loaded the bag onto the rack, saddled up and left. I was filled with trepidation, as from now on, I was on my own. No comfort of support vehicle within easy reach, only a phone call away. What could possibly go wrong? Most importantly I had credit cards, cash, mobile phone and blackberry. I also had spare inner tubes, multi tool, clothes, waterproofs, and no less than 3 battery chargers. These were: mobile phone, blackberry and a very heavy 12V lead acid battery charger that I fully intended to swap for a lighter smaller model prior to the start. Not being known for my preparation skills needless to say I hadn't.

The rack had a maximum weight limit of 7Kg, so during the previous evening the battery was slung under the frame using the tool tube borrowed from my KTM motorcycle by 2 super size cable ties. I did not dare, however, to weigh the remaining items crammed into the trunk bag and panniers. On the basis that if I did not know it was overweight I would not worry about it! The ultra lightweight aluminium and carbon fibre bike now felt rather similar to pedalling one of those 50cc Mopeds that had pedals fitted in the mid 70's (Yes I had one of those monstrosities!) The whole balance of the bike was now somewhat different, and to lift the rear end was a 2 handed job. I found even the simplest gradients more of a challenge, and tried to rack my brain as to the formula. My weight 75 kg (ok then 85) bike approx 15Kg so 7kg of luggage was only an additional 7%. $\text{Energy} = \text{force} \times \text{distance}$ so merely an additional 7% of effort on the uphill bit and of course the additional weight would help on the downhill as the rolling resistance and wind resistance would be largely the same. Wrong. The laws of physics have significantly changed since I went to school. The formula 7% extra weight = double the effort and no downhill advantage were soon proved to be the truth!

My ponderings were interrupted by a tooting of car horn and Céleste ushered me into a lay-by. Had she decided that she really could not do without me for a week and was going to insist I aborted the remaining trip and came home? No. "The tracker is not working" was bellowed out of the car window. Prop the top-heavy bike up, off with the gloves open up the trunk bag, peel off the Tesco carrier bag from the non waterproof tracking device to find all the LED's lit indicating the unit was working. "The tracker obviously takes a few minutes to register – don't forget the time quoted is GMT not BST so it's an hour out" "Oh" came the reply. 5 minutes to reassemble and I was on my way again.

Generally following the Severn River, the route was gentle, windy and very pleasant to start. Were it not for the huge mass of weight on the bike rear, I probably would not have even noticed the gentle hills.

During my early morning rides I often see rabbits and other wildlife scurrying for cover as I approach. Today I noted that cars and lorries can go hurtling past such animals and they hardly bat an eyelid but a slow fat geezer on a mountain bike puffing and panting like an 80 year old who has smoked all their lives send them into full panic mode!

In Bewdley I found my utopia – a café. As I was gingerly leaning the bike against the front of the café the lady came out and said, “I’ll open up the side passage for you – It will be safer there”. Not sure that she realised that the bike was worth so much, probably just the fact that it was obscuring part of her advertising sign!

A large coffee plus a significant part of a full English breakfast carefully inserted in to a large bread roll was ordered. Neither disappointed and a further large coffee and a cake was ordered to follow! Suitably fuelled and having received a donation of £10 from a gang of road workers in the café towards my sponsorship, I left.

Telford loomed and appeared to be like Milton Keynes, passing through without the GPS would have not been easy as the signposts are poor and all the streets look the same. The downside is yet again the GPS seemed to direct me via the highest point rather than round it!

The afternoon stretch passed along the A49, and it was here I was most concerned for my safety. As an old Roman road, across flat terrain, with a tailwind, 20mph was an easy cruise. However, 38 tonne Juggernauts sailed past at high speed only inches away. The preceding bow wave of air, pushing me in towards the kerb, and making me wonder if I was about to take a large mouthful of kerbstone. This was closely followed by the wake vortex sucking you along and out into the path of the following HGV. On balance I think I would rather have hills! Just to add insult to injury, lorries coming the other way had a bow wave of air that could almost stop you dead in your tracks.

The ever helpful support team in the form of Sue Fletcher had booked me in to a hotel just north of Warrington. During the now obligatory chocolate stop late afternoon, the exact position was loaded into the GPS and shortest route option selected (unfortunately there is no “teleport me there NOW” option).

Only 15.6 miles to go. At this stage in the day, to keep ones sanity and motivate, the remaining mileage is likened to a well known training route. 15 miles – that’s up to Sherbourne, down to Stratford up that nice gentle hill, across the river and back to Barford via Wellesbourne..... 12 miles - that’s.... and so on. My efforts to distract a tired body and brain were working, and I soon entered Warrington from the south in rush hour.

The focus was then conservation of momentum. Red traffic lights were bad – the effort involved in accelerating the mass from zero to cruise was now painful, and the technique of passing to the offside of a line of queuing traffic, and cutting across as it started to move or indeed, carefully crossing the junction on red drew many a scowl from the rush hour drivers.

Tesco seem to have a monopoly here as on the road out of Warrington there is a Tesco Store, a Tesco Extra, a Tesco Express and a Tesco Petrol Station all within a couple of miles! As the distance to destination subsided to yards, the welcoming site of the hotel was in front.

Cycling purposefully right up to reception, I strode into reception on a high, largely as I had not become part of the road kill of assorted animals and birds of all sizes all too apparent on the A49. “Reservation in the name of Lees” I enquired. “Err sorry no” was the reply. “Ok how about Fletcher” the high was rapidly lowering to sea level. “Sorry nothing in that name either” was the apologetic reply. “Cotswold lifts? I quizzed now wondering if merely the fact was a smelly, sweaty, red-faced cyclist was persona non-grata. “I am really sorry sir, but we have nothing in that name either? “Ok do you have

any spare rooms? I already knew the answer “Sorry sir but we are fully booked tonight”. Having cycled for 104 miles so far, even with a tailwind, this was a severe body blow. “Perhaps you are booked in to our sister hotel half a mile away,Oh yes you are”. The sense of relief was so great it managed to propel the tired limbs with a renewed vigour towards the much needed shower and rest.

The usual regime of store the bike, shower, wash cycling kit and put batteries on charge was followed by a visit to the pub. The pub attached to the hotel was very nice, and suitably attired in my pink printed tee shirt, I was accosted by a guy slightly younger than me. Fortunately, as it turned out, he had done the trip the previous October with his father, aged 62. Should be a doddle for a 46-year-old then I thought.

I was joined by Mother-in-Law and Brother-in-law and both were full of praise of my efforts so far. This did much to my ego and for the first time since I had started the ride I actually believed I could do it!

The day, including the extra bit to the correct hotel, was a creditable 105.3 miles in 8.1 hours in the saddle. My day’s average speed was 13.0mph, with 2.85 hours of rests, breaks and abortive hotel receptions!

Day 5 Warrington to Ravenstonedale (Kirkby Stephen)

The initial start was delayed, as rousing the night porter, to retrieve my bike from its resting place in the meeting room was to prove difficult. Not just Céleste then! I finally got in the saddle at 6.30am some half hour later than intended.

I had planned a slight detour into Breakell Lifts, and half way to the factory from my overnight rest, as I was cycling along, there was a car horn repeatedly being sounded behind me. The car went past with a waving hand out of the driver’s window, one of my work colleagues! An hour later, not sure if by careful monitoring of the tracker or by John advising of my likely arrival time but several people were outside to greet me as I cycled up the hill to the works. I was greeted with words of encouragement like “Pedal harder you fat bastard” and others even I dare not print!

After a couple of doses of caffeine I mounted up and left the grinning workforce on to my next leg of journey. I soon found out why they were grinning, as the relatively gentle cycling terrain of the midlands was to transform itself back to the hilly terrain again.

What was worse was, today, I had a headwind. Hills come and go, but however steep or long they ultimately have a peak and a down slope. Not the wind. It can transform a down slope freewheel into a continuous pedalling action, a flat section into a 4-5 mph lower speed, and what’s more it does not finish, it is there all day!

I had initially planned to breakfast prior to the Factory, but forgot, possibly as a result of the later start. My stomach was now protesting violently as to the lack of attention. A charming café in Newton was a sight for sore eyes and turned to be fantastic. Much of the food was prepared on the premises, complimentary cycle locks and to top that they gave me a free breakfast and donated a further £5.00 towards my fundraising.

The “Estate Agent” referred to this area as “quite possible to cycle for 15 miles without sight of a single human being”. He was not kidding. For the first time since Dartmoor, the population density was almost non-existent and places to stop and eat were becoming few and far between. The camelback water carrier was being refuelled at every opportunity, as you were never sure when the next opportunity for water would materialise.



The constant nagging of the headwind was taking its toll and Sue had booked me into the Fat Lamb at Ravenstondale. Ravenstondale was

recognised by the sat nav, which was a relief, but did not seem to have many streets. More worrying were the directions "Take the A683 out of Sedburgh and you cannot miss us". 10 miles out of Sedburgh, up hill, into wind and there was still no sign of the Fat Lamb. Was this some kind of initiative test?

Having not seen a car in either direction for the last 20 minutes with the rapidly approaching onset of desperation, over a slight crest in the road there was a group of trees in the distance, was I hallucinating?



Fortunately not, it was the Fat Lamb and even stranger the car park was half full and the place quite busy. The welcome, the food and the Landlord’s Daughter were fantastic. If you need a chill out I can thoroughly recommend the Fat Lamb.

The headwind and hills had knocked a little off the plan, but today 90.3 miles were completed in 8.2 hours in the saddle lowering the day’s average to a lowly 11.0mph. A sign of the headwind

demoralisation factor was the 4.25 hours of rests and breaks.

Day 6 Ravenstondale to Dumfries

The Fat Lamb had prepared me with a packed lunch, and whilst I did enjoy my Major Breakfast every morning, given the sparse population, it could be breakfast, lunch or survival rations if the worst became the worst. Day 2 had taught me that when the going gets tough, the not so tough get walking, and today was no different. During one of my walking stages, a voice from behind said, “You’ll never get there like that”. The voice belonged to Andy, a bus driver from Hounslow, who was doing the LEJOG on his hand

built bike. The wheels were narrow enough to pass as circular saws, ultra lightweight frame, dropped handlebars etc. Were it not for the bulging panniers I doubt if he would even slow for the hills! Andy had been planning his LEJOG for 20 years, and his chosen route whilst tortuous to take in various friends, relations and parent's houses, and his accommodation was all booked. He even had his train ticket back. What a guy – I was in awe of this meticulous planning and asked where he was stopping for lunch! When we did stop for a lunch break he produced the most enormous U lock and cable from his panniers that weighed more than his bike – no wonder he struggled with the hills! One thing was noticeable, and even with a headwind my pace was up. It is all too easy to allow one's speed to decay when the mind wanders, and often whilst on my own I had found I was cycling with little pedal pressure, and the speed could easily be ramped up 3 or 4 mph. With someone with you, of similar ability, this does not happen and you tend to push each other along.

I had noted in training once the benefits of slipstream. I was overtaken by 3 young ladies in the full tight Lycra gear on racing bikes. They would change leader once in a while and the following two would tuck in behind to be sucked on in the slipstream allowing them to rest a little. I am not sure if it was the view or the slipstream but I had no problem with following them VERY closely for 4 miles until I turned off!

The roads were generally quiet B roads so most of the time we were cycling 2 abreast chatting and the miles flew by, even without slipstreaming. On the up hill sections where the speed dropped below 10mph some rather irritating flies would gather around one's face and would not be put off by waving of hands and they certainly did not speak

English. I do recall repeatedly asking them to "clear off there's a good chap". The only solution was to pedal harder and faster to the crest as once the magical 10mph appeared on the GPS and trip computer screen they disappeared into the wake vortex.

We met a few guys cycling the other way and they were topping 20mph with the wind assistance on the flat.

All too soon it was time to say our good byes. Andy was cycling 70 miles per day and going up the East Coast route, and I had planned to do the West. Shortly before Gretna Green we split and I carried on to the Scottish border on my own. I had no need to check the GPS for position as a rain shower warned me of the proximity of the border! One great thing about Scotland, every bus stop had a shelter. I



headed for the nearest and donned the waterproof jacket. Gretna was only 1.5 miles and I knew the retail outlet there had café's and other places to eat. The rain stopped just before the border, and I headed for the café as my stomach was now rumbling with lack of food. I have to say this was the first time on the trip I really felt ripped off. Two meat pies (one is just not enough anymore!) with chips and veggies plus a litre of water was just under £10.00. I can feed the whole family at our local balti house for less than £18.00! On principle I ate very slowly, taking up a full table for 4. One chair to support the camelback, now containing some very expensive water; one to support by dripping waterproof jacket; one to support my phones, GPS and other valuables; and one for me. I stayed long enough to make some calls, send and receive a couple of emails generally long enough to plan my final stint of the day to Dumfries.

An hour or so later the rain had stopped and I set off towards Annan. On the road into Annan the heavens opened once again just in case I had forgotten I was in Scotland. This time it was heavy and cold. A suitably placed bus shelter was the chosen changing place and I changed into the waterproof jacket once again. Superman never had this much trouble! Mind you he always wore his underpants on the outside! On Annan high street the rain became so heavy I headed for a covered alleyway between the shops. This was monsoon weather. Having only eaten less than an hour ago the sugar reserves required a further top up. This was in the form of some lovely truffles the size of tennis balls from a bakery alongside the alley.

When the rain subsided to a gentle downpour I set off once again in my quest for shelter and a bed. Only 20 miles to go. A year or so ago a cousin had a caravan on a site in Annan – oh how I wished it were still there! With the wind blowing the rain directly into my face I was wondering if isolated showers in Scotland were different to England, if so the next 4 days could be hell!

I arrived in Dumfries wet and despondent. The day's figures were better than expected, although heavy rain of the afternoon had extended the breaks, the day finished with 92.3 miles covered in 7.7 hours in the saddle giving a moving average of 12.0mph and 4.3 hours of breaks. Had it not been for Andy I am sure it would have been a lower average speed.

Day 7 Dumfries to Paisley

The weather forecast for today filled me with joy, clear skies although a slight head wind. I do recall one account I had read in the Internet where someone had said, "Don't bother with the weather forecast – live with it!" Even so I did check every day, not that I could do anything about it, but I could at least decide how well to bag the pannier contents in plastic bags! The previous day had forecast occasional showers, and on that basis everything was well protected and remained dry. No need today. After the flies yesterday, as well as the factor 30 sun cream, I sprayed most of my body with industrial strength insect repellent. It was so strong I left the hotel room coughing and spluttering; hopefully the effect on flies would be more dramatic!

It was a lot colder today, and the windproof jacket was donned to keep the body heat in a little for the first 3 hours.



The route whilst basically following a reasonably direct route still had time to divert through the occasional Scottish Castle.

Despite the insect repellent those flies were certainly more prevalent today, and I could not believe the speed and size of swarm that would engulf the hot and sweaty cyclist on the up hill sections. Whilst irritating, they appeared to be only flies. That evening I discovered to my horror that the swarms of flies must have contained some nastily other

insects as I had several bites, including 2 the size of golf balls one just above each buttock in the area covered by my shorts. Knowing how badly I am affected by biting insects, plus Scotland's well-deserved reputation for midges, I did start taking anti-histamine tablets and rubbing anti-histamine cream into the bites. This was to continue until the end, although far less than I expected actually managed to get through clothing, sun cream and insect repellent.

The gentle low level cycle route of the "Bible" followed disused railway tracks, and unfortunately my GPS does not have cycle routes. My experiences locally at home trying to follow the Warwick Loop (a 30 mile circular route) where there are some signposts, and some missing, it takes a number of attempts to find the correct and full route. As the signposts are only for those travelling in one direction you have to know it very well before doing it in reverse! www.sustrans.co.uk does a reasonable job of showing local routes (although interestingly enough the Warwick Loop is not on it). I could not be bothered to try to find the route on sustrans on the Blackberry, so opted to allow the GPS to route me.



Again it showed its preference to be as close as possible to the satellites and the road climbed to a hill above Paisley. Nice view but unnecessary climb!

The good thing that I could use the hill to propel me faster through the outskirts of Paisley so there was less danger of losing my wheels!

I had arranged to be joined for the evening by a girl I went to University with who now lived in Scotland and together we spent the evening

reminiscing, as we had not seen each other for more than 20 years.

The day's efforts added 92 miles in 8.2 hours, giving a lowly 11.2 mph average. 3.5 hours were taken in addition as rest time.

Day 8 Paisley to Fort William.

The forecast today was cold to start, but milder later. Half an hour after leaving the hotel, I considered stopping to put on long trousers as they had certainly got the cold bit right. I headed out of Paisley for the Erskine Bridge. The golf was on at Loch Lomond so the early start ensured I was well past the golf course before there were any traffic issues. The chosen place for my first nosebag was a small café on the northern tip of just past Tarbet on the A82. A café on the edge of the Loch with stunning views and I have to say a very satisfying Full Scottish Breakfast.

The climb up into Glen Coe generally follows the railway line so the climb whilst long is not by any means too strenuous. The scenery however is probably the best on the whole trip. Lunch was at the Green Welly Stop for a lunch prior to the second major climb of the day.

The blackberry was bleating with some vigour, and generally I would ignore it and pick up messages and emails during my regular rest breaks. Céleste was calling me with Alex's SATS results, so I headed for a lay-by so I could take the call properly. The top-heavy bike was propped up, off with helmet gloves etc. You may recall me mentioning the bow wave effect from heavy lorries. Coaches have a similar effect, and as I was parked in a lay-by on the right hand side of the road, a coach coming down the hill towards me arrived with its bow wave. The bike started to fall, and I grabbed for it to prevent the possible damage, cursing the driver. Once passed, I then propped the bike back up, and noted my gloves had been blown away by the bow wave. One was visible 25 feet away in the heather; the other despite searching the area thoroughly the other had disappeared. Now I was really annoyed, and questioned whether or not the coach drivers parents were married at the time of his birth!

I do recall being asked by my children why I wore gloves and helmet, to which I had flippantly replied, "So when you fall off the gravel rash is limited to your arms body and legs!" In reality, the helmet is to protect ones most important asset, the brain, the gloves

for comfort. I often cycle early in the mornings when it is cold, and also they protect my hands from overgrown hedges and brambles on the cycle paths. The padding also provides some comfort on the heels of your hands from the handlebars. As I would arrive in Fort William after 5.30, I was hoping the shops would be open late. Due to the terrain I was now heading West, this, added to the funnel effect of the hills meant a



severe headwind. Not only was it hard work on the flat and uphill, but also now I even had to pedal down hill. The spectacular scenery, and views over the Irish Sea, however, more than make up for the efforts required. Without doubt this was the most picturesque scenery of the whole trip.

Having stayed in Fort William a couple of times, both with the family and my motorcycle chums, it was almost home from home. I knew the layout of shops (and which was the best Indian Restaurant). Replacement gloves sourced from the mountain shop, and whilst not as good as the lost ones, at least would provide protection and comfort.

Despite the headwind of the descent of Glen Coe, a measure of the gentle up gradients is shown by the day's figures. 102 miles completed in 8.1 hours giving 12.6 mph average. At least 30 minutes of the 3.2 hours of rests was taken up in the glove incident!

Day 9 Fort William to Bonner Bridge

Today was the day to cross from West Coast to East Coast following the shores of Loch Lochy, the Caledonian Canal and Lock Ness. As there are not too many lakes on slopes in the UK, so, for once, I was prepared to believe the topographical display in the "Bible". All of the previous day, and much of today was on roads I am familiar with, although usually at a somewhat more rapid pace on my motorcycle. This is why I enjoy cycling so much, as now I had the time to look and listen to the environment surrounding you. Same roads, same scenery, completely different enjoyment. One is an on the edge

adrenalin rush, the other gentle physical exertion, and complete mental relaxation close to nature. Man has made some fantastic structures and technical achievements, but as yet to create the UK, highest peak in Ben Nevis 4406ft, or the 1000ft depth of Loch Ness. Both are on the agenda for today's stunning scenery. The Caledonian Canal was built by Telford in the period of 1804-1822 and links 29 Lochs across a natural fault to provide a passage between the North Sea and Irish Sea to allow passage for



shipping. Today used primarily for pleasures craft, one can only marvel at the whole magnitude of the works to link these Lochs, without today's earth moving machinery. The route follows the shores of Loch Lochy, Loch Oich, and on to Fort Augustus at the beginning of Loch Ness. Fort Augustus was today's chosen breakfast stop, and a charming Café alongside the end of the Caledonian Canal where it joins Loch Ness was chosen for the task.

In the café was a David Belamy look alike and sound alike, with his a group of American tourists, that he was obviously providing a guided tour of the Scottish Highlands. My

immense breakfast was made all the more enjoyable by listening to tales of tigers attacking whilst riding elephants in Africa. I am not quite sure of how that fitted in with the Scotland tour, but the tourists were obviously impressed! Once the African Tales were exhausted, their attention was then turned on to me. David Bellamy had spotted the poster on my Camelback. We then had half an hour or so of discussion on my tour. I would like to think they were as equally impressed by my banter as they were by their guide. I did watch with interest as they left and looked at my bike parked outside. They seemed most interested in the saddle, as it would appear to be somewhat narrower than the standard fit for the average American backside!



Whilst following the shoreline of Loch Ness, I met a Belgian couple, coming towards me, on a cycling holiday of the highlands. He was obviously a very keen cyclist, although the girlfriend seemed less keen. He was keen to discuss their (his) plans and had all the gear. He was also very interested in my tour. We were talking for a couple of minutes before his girlfriend struggled up the slight incline to join us. I did think at the time how important it is to cycle with someone with a similar level if you are to cycle with

someone. I wonder if she was still his girlfriend at the end of their holiday!

Two thirds along the Loch, the route leaves the shore at Drumnadrochit, the home of the Loch Ness Monster Exhibition. I do recall asking a Scotsman if he believed in the Loch Ness Monster, his reply was, "I believe it brings in a lot of tourist money!" What an example of marketing – probably more famous than Manchester United Football Club! The route, after such a gentle period now climbs very steeply. The Estate Agent says "Only the determined will remain in the saddle". I was obviously not one of the Determined! The shock of such a steep gradient not seen for a couple of days reminded me of the strenuous nature of the task. I stopped for lunch at a café in Beauly. After a full lunch and pudding I managed to actually fall asleep in the Café. I was woken by giggling and laughter from the other patrons, and left the café very embarrassed.

I had one more gentle but long climb and a leisurely descent to Bonar Bridge, my chosen resting place on the penultimate day. The hotel was easy to find and overlooking the bridge. The rather charming receptionist/barmaid/waitress (yes it was a small hotel) showed me up to my room, on the first floor overlooking the bridge. I thanked her and after eating the complimentary biscuits and half the sugar sachets provided in the room as I had missed my mid



afternoon chocolate stop on the basis there was no where for a chocolate stop! I went into the bathroom to start the ritual of shower and wash the cycle clothing to find the shower was in pieces.

Back down to the bar, and another room was sorted with a lot of apologies. No problem, I had second helping of sugar and biscuits.

I was chatting to the bar staff, whilst waiting for my meal, "So what is Bonar Bridge famous for?" I asked. "Burning down hotels" was the reply. Apparently there were two hotels in Bonar Bridge; both had severe fire damage last year. Should I be really staying here? Frankly I was too tired to care. After the meal I was lying on my bed talking to Céleste when she received a call on the landline at home. Promising to call me back she ended the call. I woke up several hours later with the phone still in my hand with missed calls. The body was perhaps trying to tell me something!

Nevertheless the day's efforts were good with 100.4 miles covered in 8.1 hours at a creditable average of 12.5mph with 3.4 hours of rests and breaks.

Day 10 Bonner Bridge to Wick to John O'Groats and back to Wick.

Whilst it was a Sunday, I cannot believe how quiet the roads were. Only 90 miles to the target and the last 17 are to be without luggage! Sue had booked me into Wick, so the plan was to book in and do the last few miles with an unladen bike.

The population density was low, so the hotel had prepared me a packed lunch. As the previous night I had retired early and fell asleep, it was sitting on reception desk for me. I did note that there were two packed lunches on the reception desk, and whilst initially they appeared to be the same, on closer inspection I found that mine seemed to have two



chocolate bars in it whereas the other didn't. Shame on me!

I was surprised how gentle the landscape was in northern Scotland, more like Surrey but without the people! The route followed the coast road up the A9 and A99, with stunning views of the coastline and North Sea. The few and far between towns were unlikely to have a café let alone an open one so I used the packed lunch for breakfast after a couple of hours. Pressing on, I was looking for a lunch stop but was not at all convinced I would find one. The sign on the closed

petrol station as I left Helmsdale said "last petrol for 38 miles!" It was not joking, fortunately the bike did not need petrol, but the rider certainly needed some food.

In the middle of nowhere, there was a museum of some kind, I was not at all interested in the museum, but it did have a Café. That's lunch sorted then!

The coast road did have the occasional dip and climb where rivers were meeting the North Sea, and on one particular occasion I achieved 42mph on a long straight down hill stretch, the climb up the other side was too long for my tired legs and a spell of walking was called for again. Interestingly when I got to Wick I had forgotten about this until one of the locals asked how I got on at Beridale. I replied I did not remember it “Och you wood it’s a mile and a half doon and a mile and a half back up again” Yes I remember 3 minutes of pleasure followed by 20 minutes of pain!

I booked into the hotel at Wick, removed everything apart from the tracker and battery (I was not going to be accused of failing now I was so close!) I ate all the complimentary biscuits and several of the sugar sachets from the room and headed for the goal. I had a following wind, and made good speed for the last 17 miles. At one stage I was passed by



a Taxi coming the other way, with a cycle rack on the back with the passenger waving and grinning furiously as they passed. The local taxi firm make a fortune out of cyclists, as there is only one train in the afternoon. Often they have little time to make the train, and sometimes even race the train to the next stop!

John O’Groats appeared over the last slight hill, and turned out to be a disappointment to me. A few houses, one B&B and one Pub/hotel. Arrival time 16.10.

First pint 16.11. Second pint 16.15. Apart from a few locals that had obviously seen this several times before, there was a German couple, who were amazed at the feat, and a couple of Motorcyclists from Solihull touring around the north of Scotland. I was reliably informed by a Taxi driver that there are NO Gatso cameras north of Inverness – have to remember that one! They recognised me from the scotoiler sticker on my back and had passed me some time earlier. Another pint whilst surveying bikes, they looking at mine, me wishing I were on one of theirs! Another pint later, I said farewell and set of somewhat unsteadily back to Wick.

The hotel was refurbishing the floor in the bar, so was not doing meals. I enquired as where was the best place to go. “Do you like Indian food?” “Is the Pope a Catholic? I replied. “The Indian restaurant has an all you can eat buffet on a Sunday night” Sorted then. Up to the room for a shower, the usual routine with the cycling gear. I did not notice the sign outside the shower saying “Run the hot tap in the sink until hot then there will be hot water in the shower”. Took 5 minutes of various tap settings before I got the shower to flow with hot water. It was one of those where if you moved either tap a fraction you were rewarded with either scalding hot, or freezing cold water. Not to worry, a little care in setting was all that was needed. As usual the task of washing the cycling gear was a mix of showering with clothes on and a grape treading action with the top and shorts in the shower tray. During part of the transition from stage one to stage two; obviously, part of my body obviously just touched the shower tap. The resulting

scream could probably be heard in John O'Groats as I leapt out of the shower as superheated water was burning the upper part of my body.

Some time later, with a very sore chest, I headed off to the Indian. The buffet was not vast but for starter you could choose between Chicken Pakora, Chicken Tikka or Onion Bhaji. I had all three. Main course was Lamb Bhuna, Chicken Tikka Massala, or Chicken Madras. I had all three. Just to top up I added Rice, Keema Nan, Bombay Potato and Mixed Vegetables. I needed no less than 4 pints of lager to wash this lot down and left the restaurant at 9.45pm. Still somewhat hungry I called in the sweet shop on the way back to the hotel for chocolate, lots of chocolate. The lady in the shop asked me where I was from as she recognised part of my accent – turned out she used to live in Stratford-upon-Avon, less than 10 miles from me!

The final day, up to John O'Groats was 90.3 miles covered in 7.3 hours at an average of 12.5mph. I am not sure, nor do I really care, how long it took to cycle back to Wick!

Overall I covered 952 miles at an average of 12.1mph in 78.8 hours over 10 days. I also drank more than 50 litres of water, plus other fluids taken on during breakfast and lunch breaks, this does not include the 7 pints of beer to celebrate the victory either!

Getting Home.

For once there was a plan! The train is 16 hours, so I really did not fancy that. Although a good friend from home was working in Carlisle, and had offered to pick me up, I knew that would be 12-14 hours. I had opted to fly home. Wick to Edinburgh, and Edinburgh to Birmingham. I would be home (according to plan) at 8.30 in the evening if I left at 4.00 in the afternoon with an hour and a half transfer at Edinburgh. The local bike shop in Wick sorted the problem with the bike. For £30.00 they package up your bike carefully and send it by carrier. I even had a plan for the Monday morning, there was a flying school where I could hire a plane and fly around the local area and islands. Sorted. Monday morning started with light drizzle, although the forecast was to clear early on. Weather forecasters are not best known for accuracy and today was no different! The bike shop was supposed to open at 10.00, but at 10.30 there was still no sign of life. His father owned the bakers next door so he took the bike in. I did wonder if we would ever be reunited again, but it did arrive back the following week!

I made my way up to Wick airport, much more than the shed in a field I was expecting, and found a modern passenger terminal with more staff than passengers.

The rain was replaced by fog, so the flying would have been a non-starter. More worrying was also commercial flights would also be a non-starter. The Met Office Aviation Forecast obtained on my Blackberry was no comfort whatsoever, and showed the fog to be in all day. The desk informed me that the flight was leaving the Shetlands without the Wick passengers; however the pilot would try an approach and land if possible. The fact that she would not check me in was a bit of a giveaway as to the likely outcome.

Sure enough the sound of a turboprop was heard on approach, and then the engine sound increased in pitch as the pilot was obviously aborting the landing. As we could not see the runway, it was no great surprise he couldn't either!

I, and the other 4 waiting passengers, were in turn called to the desk. "We can offer you a flight at the same time on Wednesday, or we can transport you by minibus to Edinburgh where you can fly out tomorrow morning", "Tomorrow would be preferable" I replied, now wondering if I should go and get my bike back. "You can fly at 06.40, 08.30 or 10.20, do you have a preference?" "6.40 please", at least the day would not be a complete waste.

The minibus picked the 5 of us up less than half an hour later. I chose to sit in the front and pass at least some of the 5 hours by talking to our driver. Less than 3 miles and we were into bright sunshine and clear skies, only Wick, it would appear, was fogbound. We spent a lot of time discussing my trip, and where I stayed, route, experiences etc. He asked, "Where did you stay in Wick?" "At the Queens Hotel just at the top of the high street" I replied. "Oh that belongs to my brother in law". Good job I hadn't launched into the way I felt about being poached alive by the shower!

The trip was 5 hours, with a comfort break at Inverness. Oh how I wished I had taken the train.

We arrived at Edinburgh Airport tired, cramped and at about 9.30pm. The BA desk was unmanned and after 5 minutes I managed to grab a member of the airport staff, and asked where the BA staff were "Oh I think they have finished for the day". He agreed to try and find someone from BA. No one at Edinburgh knew we were coming, accommodation had not been booked, and what was worse, we were informed, "Loganair do not pay for weather delays." Five very annoyed, tired and fed up passengers pointed out we had booked with BA and as one of the five was 85 years old, surely they were not suggesting we slept in the departure lounge. Common sense prevailed and eventually we had a minibus into the centre of town to a hotel. The trauma of the afternoon had taken its toll, and there was no alternative other than to retire to the Bar!

At 2.00am we had sufficiently recovered from the trauma and retired to respective beds for a very short sleep prior to a minibus back to the airport at 5.00am.

Just when I thought I had everything sorted, the train from Birmingham to Leamington was delayed! I eventually got home at 10.00 Tuesday morning.

After the trip, initially, the sense of relief was overwhelming. During the next few days this was replaced by a major sense of achievement. I understand that while I was away the Daily Telegraph ran an article on "What to do in your mid life crisis" where LEJOG was a favourite. Not needing now to have a mid life crisis, all I need to do is allow my newly acquired muscles to return to their rightful state of flab!

Would I do it again? Probably to celebrate my 50th Birthday. But I would like to go back to some of the places again. I would happily spend a week or so up in the Highlands, although probably with some transport with an engine!

I will probably do some other daft trips, but I will certainly cycle from Barford to my Mums – just to prove I can!

Some Observations:

- There is a huge difference in road surfaces, and sometimes you even cycle along the white line, even though it's like cycling on a tightrope, just because it's smooth!
- Light lubrication of ones important parts with Vaseline or some recommend savlon or sudocream is most important
- When deciding what to take as luggage, take the lightest you can. Lay out on the bed or surface only what you NEED. Then throw half of it away!
- There is an awful lot of road-kill of animals and birds
- Rain is wet
- What goes down must go back up
- When you see a picturesque hill in the distance, it is only picturesque when it is in the distance!
- Very few local authorities pay anything other than lip service to the needs of the cyclist
- If you have the will to succeed you will succeed.