

End to End At Last

In January 95 ex Chesh member and work colleague, Martin Berry came to see me at work and greeted me with the words - "I've got a proposition to put to you." Martin then proceeded to explain that his wife and daughter were planning a two week trip to Canada in May 96 and he saw this as an opportunity to fulfil a long held ambition to ride the End to End. It was something I had always wanted to do and so, after a discussion with my wife Pam, I happily agreed to do the ride with him.

Occasional discussions took place over the next 12 months or so regarding equipment, routes, accommodation, transport etc.

Martin had decided to travel light using his racing bike with a saddle bag. (He later compromised by taking a handlebar bag to accommodate his enormous supply of Mars bars). A pair of mudguards, a 13-28 freewheel and the 36/46 chainset off his mountain bike were the only mods necessary. I had decided to use my work bike for the trip but an accident on the way to work one morning led to its' well overdue retirement. I decided that a brand new bike was called for and, after much deliberation, a Dawes Super Galaxy was ordered. The supplier agreed to change the standard 22/32/42 chainset to a 26/36/46 and the 11-28 block to a 12-21. This gearing, I was convinced, would still enable me to climb near vertical hills. I already had a pair of panniers but these, I decided, were much too large for this sort of trip and so I ordered a pair of smaller panniers and a handlebar bag.

Martin had worked out a route trying to avoid centres of population but using main roads. I had read somewhere about a CTC route avoiding main roads and rang them for details. The CTC supplied three routes - one using main roads, one using mainly B roads using B&B accommodation and finally, the one we chose, a scenic route - 1000 miles in 14 days based on youth hostels.

We chose to travel to Cornwall and home from N.E. Scotland by train and well in advance we booked our tickets (not forgetting to reserve spaces for our bikes). We decided against booking our accommodation as this would not allow us any flexibility. We did however book the Hostel at St. Just for the night before the first leg.

All preparations complete we just had to bide our time and keep fit.

With only 5 weeks to go I was riding home from work when my left knee gave way. Even in my lowest gear (26 X 21) I couldn't pedal with my left leg. My first thoughts were that the ride would have to be cancelled - how would I be able to tell Martin? Although the knee problems eased over the next few weeks I still had niggling doubts whether it would stand up to 70 miles a day for 14 days. With only a couple of days to go I decided to swap my chainset for the one off my mountain bike to give me a lower bottom gear (not that I would ever have to use it). Funnily enough this was identical to the chainset that was fitted to the Dawes as original equipment.



The night before departure I tried to pack all my luggage onto my bike. However hard I tried there was always something that wouldn't quite fit in. Why I had to leave it to the last minute I don't know. It was fortunate that I'd got those panniers which were "much too large".

After almost 18 months of anticipation I said my goodbyes to my wife Pam (to whom I must say a big thank you for never begrudging me the time) and my children and I was on my way to collect Martin. A busy A6 took us

from Hazel Grove to Stockport for the train.

The train arrived on time and, with bikes safely installed in the guards van, departed dead on time. 8 hours later we were back on our bikes for the 7 miles or so from Penzance to St. Just, arriving at the hostel just in time for our evening meal followed by a walk in the evening sun. A phone call to the next hostel at Golant revealed that they had no vacancies so the next day we would have to find a B&B in Fowey or even Looe if we felt energetic enough.

My first night in a hostel is not one I will remember with fondness. Sheet sleeping bags are obviously not designed for people exceeding 5 feet 6 inches. If you put your pillow in the pocket provided in the bag it positions the pillow under your shoulders leaving your head unsupported. I was also to discover that approximately 25% of hostel residents snore from the moment their head hits the pillow until they get up for breakfast the following morning.

Day 1. St. Just to Lands' End to Fowey.

On Sunday morning the previous night's sun was hiding behind thick cloud as we sat down to a good breakfast. We hoped the weather would improve before we set off. It didn't - it started to rain. Breakfast over, we donned our waterproofs, loaded up the bikes and set off to Lands End.

The obligatory photographs were taken at Land's End against a backdrop of rain. Also waiting for photographs was a team of six who had finished the ride in the dark the previous night. They had done it in six days from North to South against the prevailing winds but had cheated by having their luggage carried by a backup van - the wimps. Greetings exchanged and computers zeroed we were off.



We retraced our steps on the A30 to Penzance before taking the less busy roads through Marazion, Goldsithney, Godolphin Cross, Nancegollan, Porkellis, Stithians and Peranwall to Deveran, stopping at the Old Quay Inn at for a welcome bowl of soup and a cheese and pickle butty. After helping the locals with their crossword we packed away our waterproofs and we were off again through Penpol, across the River Fal on the King Harry Ferry and on to Veryan Green. Here we went off course for the first (and certainly not the last) time. Tippets Shop was the next village mentioned on the route. It wasn't on the map and couldn't be found on any signpost. (We were using the recommended maps - 1:250,000 Travelmaster.) We eventually found our way to St. Austell via Tregony missing out on the delights of Tippets Shop, Tubbs Mill (with its dangerous hill), Pentewan and London Apprentice. Perhaps we'll see them next time. Now back on course we had ideas of getting ahead of schedule and maybe reaching Looe for our first stop. The hill out of Par soon dampened our enthusiasm and, on reaching Fowey, we'd had enough. Martin negotiated an acceptable rate for a twin room at the Old Quay House Hotel. The first day had been a very hard 66 miles. The "emergency" low gear had been engaged more than once. After showering and doing a bit of laundry the next priority was food. The Ship Inn provided a fine Minted Lamb and Ale pie helped down with a pint of Trelawnys and another of Hicks Strong Ale. A much better nights sleep was to follow.

Day 2. Fowey to Steps Bridge.



After another good breakfast we were soon on the Bodinnick Ferry and then back in low gear climbing steeply away from Fowey. We were soon lost again and rapidly losing the altitude we had just gained. Eventually we picked up the route again and descended into Looe where we stopped for a cup of tea and a scone. The route then took us, mainly on A roads, through Hessenford to the Torpoint to Plymouth Ferry. Plymouth was thankfully soon behind us as we rode northwards towards Yelverton. The sun was becoming rather hot and we were glad to find a roadside

cafe for some refreshment before we tackled Dartmoor. (Only a week earlier some hundreds of people had to be brought down off the moor because of snowstorms.) 20 miles of hard pedalling later we dropped into Moretonhampstead. The directions to the hostel were not too precise and after four or five miles we saw a couple outside a farm house and stopped to ask the way. Unfortunately I forgot to unclip my feet and fell in an embarrassed heap at their feet. "Just carry on down this road for four tenths of a mile and the youth hostel is on the right." At least ten tenths of a mile further down the road we found the hostel. Again it had been a very hard day - but only 63 miles. That evening we were offered a lift into Dunsford to the Rising Sun.



Having enjoyed my Minted Lamb & Ale pie the previous night in Fowey it was to be more of the same and for good measure a helping of apple strudel and custard. Several pints of Abbots Greene King were to ensure a good nights' sleep.

Day 3. Steps Bridge to Street.

The hostel was being manned by a temporary warden and no breakfasts were available and so we made an early start in overcast conditions. The start, out of the Teign valley, was again very hard and by Exeter

we were more than ready for breakfast. Exeter was very busy - the B3181 north was as bad as the A6. At Broadclyst we were relieved to leave this road and enjoyed the minor roads through Dog Village, Whimble and Talaton to Fenny Bridges. Then came the A30 to Honiton - a very busy dual carriageway. Again we were relieved to leave the main road just after Honiton and took the opportunity to study the route and the map. Very specific instructions were to guide us through a maze of minor lanes back to another 6 miles of the main road we had just left behind. We could see no good reason why we shouldn't continue on minor roads to Broadway where we could pick up the official route again. Things were not to be as simple as that. Many of the lanes weren't shown on the map and we got hopelessly lost. For a while it was fun riding up and down very steep hills going round in circles.





With the aid of map and compass and refreshed by another of Martin's Mars bars we eventually found our way back to civilisation. By now we were getting quite hungry and so we stopped at the Post Office in Broadway for sustenance. Off again, we progressed through Puckington, Barrington, Shepton Beauchamp, Lambrook, Stapleton, Long Sutton and Somerton to the hostel at Street. The hostel is a very attractive chalet style building actually owned by the Quakers. Our room was about 8 feet square with bunks for 4. After the nightly rituals of showering and laundry we walked the couple of

miles into the town. On the main road through the town centre is the very impressive Clarks shoe factory and, just opposite, the Bear Inn (also owned by Clarks) where we relaxed over a meal and a few pints. On our return to the hostel the other two bunks in our room had been occupied. Above my bunk was a gent in his sixties who could have snored for England. I hardly slept a wink.

Day 4. Street to St. Briavels.

Street was another self catering hostel so we left early to get some miles under our belts before breakfast. First stop was Wells for more bacon, sausage, egg and tomato. Refuelled, we then made good progress northwards past Chew Valley Lake and then yet again we strayed off our route - missing the flattish B road, we took a minor road up Dundry Hill and then down into the less than desirable outskirts of Bristol. Back on the route we reached the Clifton suspension bridge, stopping to take a few photos in the drizzle, before crossing Clifton Downs and riding northwards to the Severn Road bridge. Riding alongside oncoming motorway traffic is unnerving, even separated by a substantial barrier. By the time we reached Chepstow racecourse, hunger was again getting the better of us so we stopped at a pub for a bar snack. Whilst there we rang the hostel at Welsh Bicknor which was our planned target for the day - no vacancies! Fortunately the hostel at St. Briavel had and also had the advantage of being some 12 miles closer. We followed the Wye on the A466 past Tintern Abbey and then crossed the river before climbing steeply to St. Briavels. The hostel is a castle, parts of which date to the 12th century. What a contrast to Street Y.H. this was. Our bedroom was vast with acres of space around the bunks and, of the 12 bunks in the room, only 4 were occupied. (By non-snorers!)



Day 5. St. Briavels to Clun.

After my best nights' sleep so far we sat down to a mass breakfast before collecting our packed lunches which we'd ordered the night before. We soon made up the 12 miles we hadn't done the day before through the Forest of Dean to Lydbrook and on to Ross on Wye - time for another pot of tea and a cake. I'd felt particularly tired after the previous days ride so I bought a tub of Isostar energy drink from a bike shop next to the cafe. From Ross on Wye we followed a beautiful route which



shares some of the Wye Valley Walk. The picnic spot at Capler Wood, looking down to the Wye, looked a suitable spot to attack our packed lunches. Our laundry, which hadn't dried the night before, hung drying from low branches whilst we ate. Onward through Fownhope, Mordiford and Bodenham to Leominster for another pot of tea and another piece of cake. This was to be one of the most pleasant days riding - the scenery was beautiful, the roads almost traffic free, not too many big hills and nice weather. Our stop for the night was Clun hostel. This had been an old mill which had been powered by water

turbines - some of the workings can still be seen. The warden offered to book the next hostel at Chester for us and recommended a local pub for our evening meal. Here we washed down our evening meal with a few pints of Dorothy Goodbody's Springtime Bitter. The bedroom in the hostel was again quite spacious with again only four non-snoring occupants and I managed an even better night's sleep than the night before.

Day 6. Clun to Chester.

In shorts and short sleeved tops we left Clun at about 9am and headed towards Bishops Castle for breakfast. The menu in the window of the Poppy House Cafe was a bit limited but, in need of immediate sustenance, we locked up our bikes and went inside. "Could you do us a breakfast?" we enquired hopefully. We were not disappointed and were soon tucking into more bacon, eggs, sausage etc followed by toast and marmalade. Bellies full, we set off again mostly along minor lanes through Bridges, Habberley, Pontesbury, Hinton, Lea, Nox, Ford, Montford Bridge, Forton and Yeaton to Baschurch. Shorts and short sleeved tops had now given way to tights, vests and waterproofs and we stood outside Baschurch Post Office eating hot pasties and Eccles cakes in the pouring rain. By Ellesmere we were dry again and ready for another drink and cake stop before the final leg through Overton, Bangor-on-Dee, Cross Lanes and Holt to Chester. We arrived at the hostel at about 5.30 with plenty of time to shower before our evening meal. A walk around the city taking a few photos nicely rounded off the day and got us in the mood for sleep.



Day 7. Chester to Slaidburn.

The target for the day was Slaidburn which was approximately 86 miles. We set off through Tarvin, Mouldsworth, Hatchmere and Crowton before taking shelter from the rain in the familiar transport cafe at Dones Green near Acton Bridge. By Lymm we were getting very close to home but there was no temptation to make any diversions via home as both our families were away being pampered in hotels. We crossed the Ship Canal after Warburton and then through Westhoughton to



Lostock Junction, Horwich, Belmont, Ryal Fold and Tockholes. As we rode through the outskirts of Blackburn we passed the end of Palm St. where I lived for 7 months in 70/71 whilst doing my workshop training at Philips Blackburn. Sadly, all the houses were now gone.

We pressed on northwards through Whalley, Great Mitton, Bashall Eaves, Cow Ark and Newton before arriving rather tired at Slaidburn. The hostel here is a converted pub and is manned by volunteers, one of whom greeted us with a complimentary pot of tea, pot of coffee and a few biscuits.

That evening we met up with my brother and his wife at the pub in the village - The Hark to Bounty. The food was excellent as were the three pints of Old Peculier. I took the opportunity to unload some surplus luggage onto my brother to lighten my load.

Day 8. Slaidburn to Carrock Fell.

The day started with chores, me doing the dusting and Martin hoovering. Bentham seemed a good place to aim for to find some breakfast, but first there was a long climb out of Slaidburn to contend with. Disappointingly, Bentham failed to provide breakfast and we were starving by the time we reached Kirkby Lonsdale. It was then after 12 o'clock and too late for a breakfast. A plate of plaice and chips and a piece of cake helped fill the void and soon we were in the saddle again heading along the B6254 towards Kendal. As we climbed the hill between Grasmere and Thirlmere, a cyclist, out on a training run, sped past us. I rose to the challenge and by the top of the hill I'd almost caught him and passed him on the way down the other side. Martin wasn't playing so I waited for him at the Threlkeld turn off.



The hostel at Carrock Fell was a welcome sight after another long climb through Mungrisdale and Mosedale. After a cup of tea and a shower we tucked into a huge plate of pie, mash and cabbage served up by the warden - Adrian. As hostels go, Carrock Fell must be one of the best. After tea and the washing up, the only other resident at the hostel suggested a run out to the local pub cum brewery - The Old Crown at Hesket Newmarket. A pint of Doris's 90th Birthday Bitter was followed by a Rally Supreme - brewed specially for a vintage motorcycle rally held there the previous weekend. After issuing dire warnings about the consequences of snoring to our chauffeur we



returned to the hostel for a good nights' sleep.

Day 9. Carrock Fell to Wanlockhead.



After yet another cooked breakfast we set off for Scotland - the planned stop for the night, the highest village in Scotland - Wanlock Head. The rain started before Carlisle and didn't stop. Obligatory photos were taken by the 'Welcome to Scotland' sign at Gretna. Our first taste of Scottish hospitality was in a cafe in Annan. Nothing on the menu was actually available. "Well what have you got then?" resulted in pastie and chips. When I came to pay the bill there was a big difference between what I thought it should be and what the dragon behind the counter thought. After much argument she

sought a second opinion from another assistant who thankfully agreed with me. On the climb up to Wanlock Head we were bemused by a group of people coming down off the mountain in wellies and waterproofs all carrying plastic bowls. Puzzling what they were up to, helped to take my mind off the suffering. We were in for a major disappointment when we reached the hostel. We unloaded our luggage and locked our bikes in the bike shed. On the front door of the hostel was a warning from the water authority not to drink the microbe infested water without boiling - bad, but not so bad - we were very wet, cold, hungry, & tired after 87 miles. The warden's greeting of "Come back in 10 minutes - I'm having my tea." was too much. Martin and I took one look at each other and got back on our bikes - this definitely was not what we wanted to hear. Just a few miles down the road we rode into Leadhills and there we found the Hope-toun Arms Hotel where, in contrast, we were made most welcome, even being allowed to bring our dripping wet bikes inside. £23 for bed and breakfast wasn't cheap but it was well worth it.



Day 10. Wanlockhead to Loch Lomond.



At breakfast we met two of the plastic bowl carrying gents. It transpired that they were on a gold panning course run by Leeds University. Leadhills had been, we were told, the scene of a gold rush some hundred years earlier. We were proudly shown the fruits of their previous day's labours worth all of 50p! The start of this day's ride on the A74 was virtually traffic free thanks to the parallel M74 just a short distance away. Later in the day we had to contend with the Glasgow to Loch Lomond cycleway. The Glasgow end of the cycleway way is surfaced in a novel mix of equal measures of gravel, broken glass and dog muck.

The hostel at Loch Lomond is a huge mansion with, in good weather, a view of the loch. I must write

to the Guinness Book of Records nominating it for managing to cram the highest number of bunks into the smallest space. Space for luggage was non-existent. Two bunks were occupied by two young men from London doing the same route as us. They had done the Loch Lomond cycleway the previous day in the pouring rain and were having a rest day to recover from the resulting depression. Three of the remaining 12 bunks were again occupied by snorers.

Day 11. Loch Lomond to Glencoe.

After a continental breakfast at the hostel we set off in the rain on the A82 through Luss, Ardlui, Crianlarich, Tyndrum, Bridge of Orchy and Rannoch Moor where, as well as the hills, we had to contend with hail and sleet. Scottish hills are generally much easier than the hills of Cornwall and Devon - the climbs tend to be longer

but less steep and with some wonderful freewheeling down the other side. Dropping off the moor into Glencoe freewheeling was not an option - we had to pedal hard downhill in low gear against an



incredible headwind. After the experience of the of the night before we couldn't face another hostel so we sought advice from the Visitor Centre. "Try this one first. You won't be disappointed." We weren't. Kimberley House in Ballachulish was immaculate. That evening we enjoyed a meal and a few beers overlooking Loch Leven.

Day 12. Glencoe to Loch Ness.



Whilst enjoying a splendid breakfast we were entertained by a fallow deer in the garden. Mrs Chisolm, our host, warned us of the traffic on the A82 north to Fort William. Unfortunately the only alternative route given was a military track with a warning that even with an unladen mountain bike you may have to walk. We chose the main road as the lesser of two evils. Our host's warning was justified - just before Fort William I was passed by a car and caravan which missed my right elbow by a few inches. Martin was some yards in front of me and was visibly shaken when the caravan missed him by just a

few millimetres. This is most definitely a road to be avoided. On reaching Fort William we were ready for a break to calm our nerves. Whilst here I took the opportunity to buy a pair of gel mitts as both thumbs had become completely numb. They were a bit pricey at £19.99 but they did the trick. We asked about an alternative forest road to Loch Ness mentioned in our route. They advised us to

stick to the main road. This took us via Spean Bridge (and its' wonderful bronze Commando Memorial) and alongside Loch Lochy to Laggan where we had refreshments in a converted ice breaker, the Scot II, on the Caledonian Canal. When we reached the south end of Loch Ness at Fort Augustus, only 49 miles after Ballachulish, we found comfortable accommodation in a twin room at the backpackers' lodge at the monastery at the bargain price of £8.60. This was about 6 miles short of the Youth Hostel at Invermoriston but I for one had had enough of sleepless nights.



Day 13. Loch Ness to Lairg

After a round or two of toast we had a 10:00 am start and rode alongside Loch Ness in baking heat. By the time we left the Loch at Drumnadrochit we had, disappointingly, seen exactly no monsters! Pleased to be off the A82 were soon taking a right turn and were greeted with a '1 in 7 for 3/4 mile' sign. 3/4 mile later there was another sign - '1 in 6 - Select Low Gear' I must be psychic because 10 minutes before seeing the sign I had an uncontrollable urge to select my lowest gear!

More refreshments were necessary at Beaulieu before Muir of Ord and Dingwall for lunch. The A9 took us along the Cromarty Firth to Alness for afternoon tea. From there we took a welcome and very pleasant B road for 14 miles before the route took us back onto the A836 to Ardgay and Bonar Bridge and past Culrain (Home of Carbisdale youth hostel). At Invershin we took the minor road along the Achany Glen to Lairg. This had been a tough day - 83 miles.



In Lairg we found a welcome 'Tiverton B&B' sign and we were greeted by a purple haired old lady in a short skirt and frilly blouse. It transpired that she was originally from Rochdale and had worked at Lewisses in Manchester for many years. A group of Dutch motorcyclists were taking up most of the accommodation leaving only a twin room. We were happy to take it, but our host insisted that we must see the room first. She took us into a spacious room and must have thought Martin and I were more than just good friends because as, she pointed out the two beds, she remarked "That's if you'll

be using two beds" We hurriedly made it clear that we would!

That night we ate at the local pub - the 'Nip Inn' - and tried to make it obvious to the locals that we weren't a 'couple' by talking about our wives and children.



Day 14. Lairg to Thurso.

We enjoyed a 'monumental' cooked breakfast in the company of the motorcyclists before making a late start at 10:30. The first 21 miles was the A836 to Altnaharra where the Altnaharra Hotel seemed a good place for lunch. Here we met up with the two Londoners. One of them had worn a hole in the wall of his tyre with a badly adjusted brake block. They had no spare but, fortunately, Martin had a piece of old tyre in his saddle bag for such an emergency which got them going again.

The hotel wasn't geared up to catering for hungry cyclists and when our cheese sandwich arrived it was about 3 inches square having had the crusts cut off. I can't remember how much it cost but value for money it certainly wasn't. On climbing back on our bikes, Martin discovered he had a flat - the one and only problem we had between the two of us during the whole ride.

Puncture fixed, we had a strong south-westerly behind us on the B873 along Loch Naver and then the B871 following the River

Naver to Bettyhill where we found more substantial, and much needed, refreshment. The North coast had at last been reached. The ride along the coast was very up and down with few sights of



the Atlantic. 78 miles after Lairg we were in Thurso. We had already planned to go on to the Orkneys after reaching John O'Groats so had decided to stop at Thurso for the night. Again a suitable B&B was found and our host welcomed us with a cuppa and a plate full of cakes which were soon dealt with. We would need a bed in Thurso again after our visit to the Orkneys but the B&B was already booked. Mrs Taylor advised us that a local Youth Centre acted as a Hostel and gave us directions. When we found it there was no sign of anyone or any notice indicating possible accommodation. We were just about to leave, and were resigned to spending a night on Thurso sta-

tion, when someone turned up. Unfortunately, he had only come to collect something before going off on a camp. He explained that the hostel only operated during the summer holidays. However, on telling him that we would have to sleep on the station platform, he took pity on us and gave us his spare set of keys. "Just pop them back through the letter box when you leave." What a 'good egg'. A donation to the centre was accepted and we were sorted.

It was a festival week in Thurso and we were entertained with marching bands as we sought out a suitable eating place.



Day 15. Thurso to John O'Groats (and to Kirkwall).

The final leg was only to be about 20 miles so we decided to take in Dunnet Head (the most northerly point) and Duncansby Head (the most easterly) before riding to John O'Groats.

On finally reaching John O'Groats we shook hands and posed again for the obligatory photos by the signpost.



Our achievement paled into insignificance when we met a guy in his 60's who had just walked it! He set off from Land's End the day after competing in the London Marathon!

Having ridden less than thirty miles that day I didn't feel any particular satisfaction - we should perhaps have done Lairg to the finish in one go (98 miles).

We booked a return ferry ticket from John O'Groats to Burwick on the Orkneys - with hindsight we should have booked a single because we were to discover that a ferry operated from Stromness to Thurso. This would have enabled us to see more of the Orkneys - perhaps next time. This aside, The Orkneys were well worth a visit. The riding isn't easy but the roads are quiet.

We saw the Churchill Barriers built between some of the islands. These were built using mainly Italian POW labour. These were constructed to prevent German U boats gaining free passage to the Fleet anchorage in Scapa Flow. To get around the terms of the Geneva Convention, where POWs are not allowed to work on 'war work', the barriers would serve as causeways to allow road access between the islands. A previous at-

tempt to close the channels had been made by sinking blockships. These can still be seen at low tide. They weren't entirely successful because, on the 14th October 1939, a German submarine (U.47) evaded the blockships off Kirk Sound and torpedoed and sank HMS Royal Oak with the loss of 833 lives in Scapa Flow. Shortly afterwards Churchill ordered the construction of the barriers but they were only completed in September 1944.

No-one should visit the Orkneys without visiting the Italian Chapel. This was a Nissen Hut converted to a chapel by the Italian POWs. Inside it's hard to believe its' humble origins. Many years after the war had finished many of those who had worked on it came back to The Orkneys to show their families their craftsmanship. The people of Orkney promised to maintain the chapel after the POWs had returned to Italy.



Again it wasn't difficult to find a comfortable B&B in Kirkwall, Orkneys' largest town.

In mid-June it never goes dark in Orkney. One consequence of this was that hunting owls were a common sight in the day.

Day 16. Kirkwall to Thurso

The last full day of our trip was to retrace our route to Burwick, catch the ferry back to John O'Groats and then the twenty miles back to Thurso to our self-catering hostel. We enjoyed a take-away supper and then each of us found a suitable (and separate!) bed for the night. Tomorrow would be an early start.

Day 17. Thurso to Marple.

Alarms were set for 5:30am as we were to be on the first train out of Thurso at 6:28! It was a cold morning and as we posted the keys through the letter box we were thankful we hadn't had to sleep out on the station platform.

The journey home was in four legs - Thurso to Inverness, Inverness to Edinburgh, Edinburgh to Preston, and finally Preston to Stockport.

At Inverness we met up with another cyclist who appeared to be waiting for the same train as us. He looked a bit battered having come off worse in an encounter with a sheep on a steep drop. As the train approached a railway official approached us and greeted us with a pleasant "I hope the three of you don't think you're getting on this train with bikes. Only two bikes are allowed on a train." Fortunately the other gent was waiting for a different train.

Whilst on the last leg from Preston to Stockport it became evident that the train went through Stockport to Buxton stopping at Hazel Grove. We still owe British Rail the extra! Martin had about a mile to ride from the station home - about three miles for me (and up another hill). After 1141 miles it was nice to be home.

Looking Back.

Would I do it again? - definitely.

Would I use the same CTC route? - parts of it yes - parts of it definitely not.

Would I use Youth Hostels again? - maybe, but only the smaller ones in out of the way places. B&B would be my preferred accommodation.

I had expected to come home weighing a fraction of what I was at the start. We were always hungry and always looking forward to the next cake and tea stop - the result being I lost all of two pounds.

I also expected to come home super-fit. Pam and I rode out to an evening 10 a few days after my return. I went on my road bike and couldn't pedal on the big chainring! O.K. my heart rate and recovery rate were better than they had ever been, but quick I wasn't.

One problem with averaging 70-odd miles a day is that you don't get much time to explore - I had taken my National Trust card with me but never had the chance to use it. Setting a daily target of 50 miles would have left a couple of hours per day for exploring.

This May it will be 10 years since we did the ride but I remember most of it as though it was last week.

Phil Fern