

The Snail Trail



Yippee!!...?

Land's End to John O'Groats

a leisurely bikeride, 1,205 miles,
from April to June 2008

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Some headings from notes of a cycle/camping trip, Land's End to John O'Groats, from April to June 2008 – 1,208miles.

INTRODUCTION

If all of the accounts of this tour were laid 'End to End' and a bicycle ridden over them I shouldn't be a bit surprised. Some people will do anything for publicity.

("End to End" is cycle-speak for this classic tour, abbreviated "E2E")

REASONS

The most worthy is for charity, but I was too indolent to take the trouble and too shy to beg. In contrast, mine was rather negative, to get it out of the way and clear the decks for something else. I thought that the E2E was a bit corny; too many people have done it. My effort was prompted by an encounter with an Aussie couple on Paddington Station, unpacking their bikes for their attempt on this classic long distance ride, when I was on my way to another tour. They were surprised I hadn't ridden it, being a 'native' - people came from all over the world to do it - and their mild rebuke festered for a few years until it surfaced in 2007 when I gave in and started preparing.

Why do so many people suspend common sense and embark on such a demanding endeavour? For most it is something of an ego trip, for the kudos; others for fulfilment, renewal, redemption. A pilgrimage. An adventure, roughing it; a particular urge that comes over me from time to time.

DIFFERENCES 1

So what was so different about my trip, to justify yet more paper to be ridden over?

Well, my venerable age -1 was in my 80th year, old enough to know better, Then there was the time it took, 6 weeks. Most accomplish it in two or three, but I was camping, carrying twice as much weight as the more usual b and b-ers and shopping for food - slower. No disadvantage if you have the time I was blessed with. It could take as long as it took. And I had a son at home who looked after that end, to further reduce the burden. Ideal. Not many enjoy the luxury of an open-ended trip.

And I travelled for the greater part alone, another unusual aspect. From Nicholas Wallaston's "Tilting at Don Quixote": "Yes, I prefer to travel alone. For one thing, unprotected, I'm more sensitive to the world around me. For another, I'm more approachable by strangers. And I'm more alert to my own thoughts, free from the need to be unselfish". One of my selfish indulgences is to write a journal, which is time consuming and can be antisocial if accompanied. All of my cycletouring heroes (mostly women) travel alone, usually because they are authors. But the principle reason for my isolated state was that no other cyclecamper of my acquaintance was available to devote the time necessary to do it My Way.

DIFFERENCES 2

The other differences which added to the attraction of the enterprise were the differences in landscapes and accents, from southwest to northeast; many distinct regional differences in such a small country. The West country, the Midlands,

HIGH LIGHTS

1. Back in London, cycling sedately from Euston down to Charing Cross on a fine balmy morning with a glow of accomplishment, commuter cyclists whizzing about me and the traffic behaving surprisingly considerately, with the comforting thought that the train home would be almost empty at that early hour.

2. The two short stretches accompanied by Lucy, then by Diana, two experienced cycle campers who had been doubtful about my being let out alone. Ideal companions, I was appreciative of those boosts to my moral and sad when we parted.
3. Freewheeling down the Pass of Glencoe on a beautiful day, superb scenery and all downhill to the campsite.
4. Finding a cycleshop open on a Sunday morning in Fort William, Off-beat Bikes.
5. The many kindnesses along the way, from a free cup of coffee from a postmistress in a small village with no cafes and before the pubs opened, to breakfast from a lovely couple who'd invited me to camp in their garden, The Manse at Inverdren.
6. The last evening, sitting in the doorway of my tent eating my dinner and looking across the calm Pentland Firth to the islands in a pearly light, feeling satisfied, both with the noodles and sardines and actually getting there. Idyllic.
7. The gold medal presented to me by my club inscribed "You are the Greatest!" . . . well, gold foil covered chocolate. Yummee!
8. Through Gretna, the "Welcome to Scotland" sign. I was more than halfway.

LOW LIGHTS

1. My route from Charing Cross to Paddington, where I caught the train to Penzance, goes through St. James' Park, Green Park and Hyde Park. Cycling briskly along a path in Hyde Park down to the Serpentine the peace of a lovely sunny morning was broken by a crash, a bang and a wallop as I descended three unseen steps. I nearly came off - my handle bar bag did come off. I expected to find a buckled back wheel, but it was ok. Remarkable, considering the load that I was carrying. The tour had almost ended before it began.
2. Losing a pedal, requiring an 8 mile slog to windward on one pedal and a spindle after the loss of the other one. Very wearing. Hence the urgent need of the cycleshop.
3. The combination of three days of viscous midge attacks and the loss of Radio 4 at the beginning of the Great Glen. Thankfully the midges relented and reception was restored thereafter.
4. Lucy's accident, ending our short partnership on my tour. It took me a few days to recover. Sadly, it took Lucy much longer, but she's back in the saddle now.

PEOPLE (lots of them, but these come to mind)

Hamish, at The Barn, near Invergordon, Cromarty. It was getting late and I was desperate for somewhere to pitch my tent, tired, cold and hungry. He was warden of a youth centre, impressively large log cabins in the woods and invited me to stay the night. I was grateful that whenever I needed help along the way, invariably someone sympathetic would turn up.

The Pakistani gov'nor of The Black Bull, Tarbolton, South Ayrshire. I was fascinated by his broad Glaswegian accent. "That's a fair weight you're carrying" he commented. "I think it's a very unfair weight!" I retorted. He asked me where I was going and when I told him he directed me down the street to a curry takeaway run by a compatriot. I should tell him that Hassan had sent me and the meal was on the house. Or on the pub. And he stood me a pint when I got back with a large bag of steaming curry. What a hero!

In the small village of Mousewald in Galloway a resident working in his front garden filled my waterbottle. I ate my lunch on a seat opposite, then rode off. I'd been cycling for about an hour when there was a hooting behind me and the said resident waved my food bag and waterbottle which I'd left behind on the seat. He said he'd had difficulty in finding me, driving down several alternative routes along a maze of small lanes. Another hero.

And last but not least, my fanclub, that small band of devoted supporters who text encouragement along the way. Good for morale, with the knowledge that people back home were interested in my saga.

PLACES (lots of them, do.)

Hayle was one of the many little seaside towns along the north coast of Cornwall, but it was in sunshine when I whizzed down the hill towards it - unusual, as most of the previous places were being rained on. The first part of the tour was wet, so this one was memorable. Cornwall is an unfortunate county to start a long tour in. Many have given up, the combination, of short, sharp steep hills and, if unlucky, bad weather, has eroded morale and removed motivation to carry on, vital for the cyclist. When I was asked how I could carry on, by campers from the luxury of their palatial caravans who saw me putting up my tent in the rain I would answer "Shear bloody-mindedness!" ,

Threading my way down the winding little roads from Dornoch, Sutherland, the countryside opened up to reveal Loch Fleet, a small patch of water off the North Sea, The tide was out, the mud was glistening in the morning sunshine and the hills of Highland loomed on the horizon. Despite the prospect of yet more climbing I was entranced by the beautiful sight. There was nobody else about, the birds sang and all was well with my world. Sutherland is a lovely county. None of the grandeur of the mountains, smaller scale and gentle. More akin to the home counties that I'm used to.

I packed up my tent in the rain, with the prospect of putting it up in the rain at my penultimate campsite at Wick. Ugh! But as I cycled into a headwind, the elements determined to make the last stretch memorable, the rain stopped and breasting the final rise there was the beautiful sight of John O' Groats. I'd made it! Despite the dreariness of the Caithness landscape, my spirit was uplifted and my fettle was fine as I battled against the wind for the last mile or so.

WRITING

Did a lot of it. Sent many view-cards and homemade record cards from Lands End, from the halfway point in the Lake District and from John O'Groats. Wrote my journal every evening and occasionally in pubs and cafes enroute. If something significant has happened, I've met someone interesting or seen something noteworthy, I cannot relax until it's written down. If something exciting happens in the morning, I hope that the afternoon will be uneventful so that I needn't record it. Early on I discovered that my pens weren't indelible when condensation ruined a couple of pages. Thereafter I used waterproof pens and posted pages home every week or so.

I admire the talent and stamina of professional authors who write travel books, particularly cycling travel books Josie Dew, Anne Musto, Dervla Murphy. They put my very amateur efforts in the shade.

HEALTH

I lost half a stone during those six weeks, which surprised me as I'd lost similar amounts on much shorter tours. Perhaps weight loss stabilises after a while. It seems impossible to compensate sufficiently for sustained hard exercise. I'm a bit skinny and my girlfriend threatened separation if I lost any more weight. It was a close run thing!

The start was nearly postponed because of the removal of an excrescence from my scalp and the substitution of skin from my neck. It was because I'm mean, reluctant to forfeit my train booking that I set off prematurely, as some saw it. But kind nurses at clinics in Cornwall and Devon renewed my dressings en-route and I wasn't inconvenienced too much

I was inconvenienced however by having to take a total of eight pills on the way, mostly for high blood pressure, at various times of the day. What a bore, but they keep me alive.

One of my most precious items of clothing was my beret. "Keep your head covered at all times" I was instructed.

EMBARRASSING MOMENT

When I boarded the sleeper at Inverness I was told to put my bike at the end of the train "in the last door". It went in nicely, panniers and all and I was glad that I hadn't to remove them -I could quickly wheel the bike off at Euston. At Edinburgh however, after we'd just about dozed off, a loud voice boomed through the train "would the cyclist rejoin his bike immediately and report to the conductor". In a befuddled state I stumbled to do as I was told to find that more carriages had been hitched on and my bike was blocking the communicating corridor. I was told to remove the panniers and hang "the machine" in the guards van. Shamefacedly I returned to my seat, avoiding the unsympathetic glances of my fellow passengers. They'd probably forgotten all about the disturbance by the time we reached Euston, but I hadn't!

DANGEROUS MOMENTS

- 1 On a miserable drizzly day on the lonely moors above Dumfries I encountered a logging truck coming at me fast round a bend. It passed in a cloud of spray and I'd just breathed a sigh of relief, wobbling in the backdraught, when I swerved after a blow on my helmet and came to a shaky stop. A small log from the truck had hit me. If it had been much bigger or there had been any other traffic about or I hadn't been wearing a helmet you might not be reading this enthralling account. I recalled Josie Dew's description of logging trucks in New Zealand, a law unto themselves she wrote. When she heard one coming she would get off her bike. I had no further encounters on the trip, but if I do so in future I'll follow her example.
- 2 Dodging through eight lanes of heavy traffic pushing my loaded bike on the Runcorn bridge across the Mersey, looking for a lost Diana, fearing that I'd never see her again on this trip. I couldn't hear myself speak when I tried to 'phone her above the din of those thundering juggernauts. That risk could have been avoided if there had been signs directing us to the other side of the bridge to the cycle path. Or we'd taken that "ferry 'cross the Mersey".

CAMPING

"Altho' four walls and a bath are nice, camping is better. I like the fresh and free feeling of roving around with a home in my bag - a home that I unravel from a compact package the size and weight of a bag of flour. A home I can set up wherever I choose: on a mountain ledge, a sunset beach, beside a racing river in a grassy nook or a sheltered glade. I love the simplicity, the versatility, the practicability, the portable and flexible freedom". From "The Sun in my Eyes" by that same intrepid Josie Dew.

Well, that's a rather romantic view, but I do go for that "portable and flexible freedom" I stayed mostly at campsites, good, bad and indifferent. One was so bad that the local authority refused to renew it's licence on Health and Safety grounds; when I saw the toilet block I realised why. I promised not to snitch on the owner if confronted by an inspector - I'd wandered in without permission I should say. He declined to take any money when I left.

But there are no campsites on some stretches of the route - no tourists. I resorted to two small pubs and camped 'wild' on three occasions. I ate out four times. My own meals were: breakfast meusli (porridge oats with sultanas and nuts) and a banana, lunch - rolls with cheese and pate and fruit, dinner - Uncle Ben's Three Minute Rice or noodles with various additions, sardines, eggs etc., soup and rolls. And another banana. Thank goodness for bananas, easily unzipped and chockfull of energy.

Slept in my clothes during the cold first week or so, and occasionally thereafter.

I was regarded with interest on sites. When I rode in, caravanners would look for a companion and were surprised that I was travelling alone. They would regard my very small tent and offer a drink, often after I'd lit my Camping Gaz stove. Well built chaps would confide that they'd thought of cycling from Land's End to John O'Groat themselves, but couldn't really spare the time. I was asked

advice about a possible trip and, in retrospect, probably erred too much on the side of caution, in view of their their generous physiques, I suggested that they should get a bike first and see how they got on(!)

A last word on campsites. My route passed close to Shoscombe Vale near Bath, the home of Ann, another very experienced cycle camper that Lucy and I have toured with. Lucy and I were invited to call in en-route and we pitched our tents in her garden for two nights. Very hospitable. We reminisced about the expeditions we'd cycled together - a pleasant interlude. Ann accompanied us for the first day when we left, along the Kennett and Avon canal to Bath; tricky on loaded bikes on the narrow bits down and under bridges, where the water looks uncomfortably close.

TECHNICAL

Bicycle: Dawes Vogue, about twenty years old, heavy by modern standards but reliable. My faithful tourer. ("Get Your Pleasure Out of Dawes!" - ouch! - a manufacturer's motto from way back before my cycling time) Very low bottom gear - rear sprocket 34, small chain ring 22. I thought that was the lowest available but I believe that there's a 20 chainring around. Wow! I carry far too much weight, hence the gears - very necessary. I rode up all of the hills, but stopped on the steepest from time to time for breathing and pulse to recover.

Tyres : Armadillos! had no punctures.

Tent: Hilleberg "Akto". The best, although no tent is perfect.

Mattress: Thermarest, Self Inflating (but I do add a puff or two), light, compact. Maps ; Philips "Navigator" motoring atlas, ring bound A4, relevant pages easily copied. All cycleable roads included but no contours. 1:100,000

Route : from "Bike Britain". 21 sections each with a terrain profile which, compensated for the lack of contours on the maps. Considered four possible routes - much of a muchness. The differences were at Carlisle where half went east about via Edinburgh, the others (including mine) west about via the Great Glen which I wanted to see.

Radio : Sony Walkman. Wouldn't travel alone without it.

Phone : basic Nokia, for texting, to keep family and fans informed and to arrange rendezvous with Lucy and Diana. The one with Lucy was fraught. That with Diana, textbook (ouch!) Therein lies a tale that I won't bore you with. My phone was charged occasionally by campsite managers, quite willingly. The learning curve to master texting before I left was very steep.

GPS (satellite navigation). Small versions are made for walkers and cyclists. Very useful, but I don't have one. I have 'screen phobia'. I'm hopeless with anything that has a screen, computer, printer, mobile and my car, But I do have a

Compass. Silva HiGear. Have been saved from going off in the wrong direction many times by that small, light device.

Bell, to warn pedestrians. Those wearing earphones require extra loud ones!

Mirror, fixed since my neck became too stiff to look behind me properly.

HISTORY (mine, not the E2E's)

I am unusual in my club, that I started cycling only after I retired, about ten years ago. Most of my colleagues rode in their teens, often stopped during their early married life and got back in the saddle later. But I didn't have the advantage of that early induction into the cycling culture. And it shows.

In a relatively few years I've toured in many European countries, principally France, America and, most exotically, Cuba. The E2E is the first major tour I've done in the UK because I prefer the feeling of being abroad, the different language and culture. Vive le difference!

LOGO

I'm a graphics nut (as well as a cycle camping nut and a tune nut - campaign melody was Harry Lauder's "Keep right on to the end of the road" in a broad Scottish accent; corny but clean) so a logo for the trip was a top priority. My design combines the CTC cycle logo with The Snail pub sign at Stone Street, from a photo by Diana. I chose the snail because of the time the journey took - 1,205 miles in 42 days. That's an average of 28.7 miles a day, although I didn't cycle every day, taking time to stop and look around at anything which caught my interest. Or when the weather was particularly bad, which thankfully wasn't often. I was blessed with better weather than text messages reported from home. Another obvious reason for the snail image is that it too carries its home with it - I also carried cooking gear. All a bit heavier than a shell.

CONCLUSION

Would I do it again? Not Pygmalion likely! When I started I entertained the heroic idea that, having reached John O'Groats I would turn around and carry on, cycling home down the east coast. As I got closer to my goal however the idea faded and common sense, which had been suspended before I started, reasserted itself, "A joke's a joke, but spare me a pantomime!"

A week and a bit after I got home I accompanied my club on a cycle tour in the south of France during which I rode my bike up Mont Ventou, the Giant of Provence, featured in several Tour de France epic climbs. I left my heavy gear at base camp, I hasten to add. But whizzing back down I glowed with a sense of euphoria that I've never previously experienced - finishing the E2E and climbing Mont Ventou within a couple of months. Not bad for a Boring Old Fart.

What's on the agenda for next year I wondered, the Good Lord and arthritis permitting ... on the way back from Provence on the Bike Express I spoke to a couple who had cycled from St Malo to Roses, The Bike Express terminal in S.E. Spain, and back on the bus. Sounded interesting. I'd do it the other way round, starting at Roses, to avoid having to be at a certain place at a certain time. Wadja think?

Peter Hawker



"Accidental in parts!"

