

## Midlife crisis? What crisis?

Lands End to John O'Groats is one of the classic challenges. Most cyclists take 12 or 14 days to do the trip, especially for the more scenic route we took. None of us would describe ourselves as cyclists and most of the 19 who took up the challenge are over 50, yet we decided we could do the trip in just 9½ days. I still find the statistics almost unbelievable - 995 miles (I got lost a few times!), 53,000 feet total ascent, 73,500 calories used, under half a pound weight loss. It looks like we will raise well over £100,000 for a range of good causes.

The following is an account of the journey which I hope will give you an idea of what it was like.

Thursday September 24<sup>th</sup>

Norwich – Lands End

### **T minus 1**

8.30 a.m. I arrive at Norwich Station with a mammoth holdall, a backpack and a cup of coffee all balanced precariously on my bike as I make my way through the barrier to the train – the adventure has started!



Arrive in London two hours later and manage to persuade a cabbie to take me and my bike across London to Paddington – nodding in agreement with his interesting perspective on society's approach to mental illness seems a small price to pay given that I'd spent most of the previous two hours worrying whether anyone would take my steed. Bike safely stowed on the

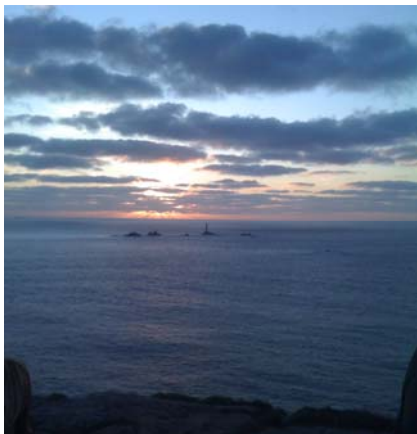
Penzance train I see a tall, slightly gangly figure approaching wearing lycra tights and pushing a bike – I'm guessing this is Jeremy, which proves correct – my second guess, that he's a Max Wall tribute act, proves less accurate – he's an executive at Visa who happens to enjoy travelling in lycra tights. Jeremy is travelling first class so we say a brief hello/goodbye before I take my seat in the cattle truck. The carriage is crowded and two seats away are a couple who insist on talking loudly which is generally annoying but occasionally amusing, as when we cross the bridge over the Tamar from Devon into Cornwall:

She: oh look – this must be Bristol

He: yes – and see there? That's Wales

Jeremy joins me in steerage for the last hour or so. I discover he's a really nice chap and feel bad about the Max Wall thoughts.

We arrive at Penzance and bump into a fellow Moneyspinner – Gary, who works for the post office, counting rubber bands or something equally important. Gary kindly offers to take our bags to the hotel and Jeremy and I set off on our bikes. I manage to keep up with him until we leave the car park, then he's off like a greyhound out of the trap and I'm left a coughing spluttering wreck wishing I'd actually done half the preparation I'd promised myself. Eventually, Lands End hoves into sight and there is Jeremy, waiting for me just before we get to the hotel so we can ride in together – there, I said he was a nice chap.



The hotel reception is manned by a Tubs clone exhumed from the cellar of Royston Vasey's local shop. I'm given a key and lug my half-ton holdall the long climb up to my attic room where I find two 2'6" beds – spoilt for choice again. Some pictures of the impressive sunset, a dodgy supper, a couple of pints with the other spinners, a short briefing and I'm off for an earlyish night to prepare for tomorrow's start.

Friday September 25<sup>th</sup>  
Lands End – Tavistock  
97.4 miles

### The Phoney War Ends



This is it – no more preparation, no more time for excuses. Kitted out with free Santander tee-shirts and red caps we troop down to the iconic Lands End sign for the traditional photo only to find said sign is actually a private enterprise and doesn't open until 9.00. So we stand in the morning sun by the upright post upon which the sign would have sat.

Photos completed we head off to our first stop – opposite St Michaels Mount just through Penzance. Chris and I speed off and are pretty pleased when we can see we're so far ahead of the pack they're nowhere in sight. This elation is short-lived as we realise we've missed a turn and finally end up at the first rendezvous five minutes after everyone else.



This pretty much establishes my pattern for the rest of the week.

The route climbs steadily from Marazion towards Truro. Soon we're into a seemingly never-ending series of steep down hills followed by a sharp left hand bend, a bridge and a tall granite wall. On closer examination the granite wall turns out to be the road out of the valley which is fair enough as it only appears to be vertical and actually leans backwards very slightly. About 50 miles in, at Indian Queens, I hit a wall of my own. Every hill seems impossible, my shoulders go into a painful spasm and my legs turn to lead. I dig deep and plough on the next 20 miles to Lostwithiel and the lunch break. The last mile or so is a long downhill, which by now is more than welcome.

At the pub we have taken over one of the bars transforming it into a field hospital with physio benches and semi-naked men either being massaged or wolfing down their pasty and chips. It must be a distressing sight to anyone popping in for a quiet pint.

After lunch – and five minutes with the physio to release my locked shoulders - we climb out of Lostwithiel and it's more up and down until we hit the Cornish/Devon border at Gunnislake. The exhilaration of flying down the valley side to the Tamar is soon replaced by the realisation that Devon welcomes you with an 11% hill – and it's a long, long one. If I'm going up a tough hill I count – breath in 1, breath out, breath in 2, breath out..... in Norfolk by the time I reach 100 I've made sufficient progress to see the end of the hill. This was not Norfolk and it turned out to be an 1100 hill. Finally make it to the top and it's an easy coast for four or five miles to the hotel in Tavistock. Massage, shower, supper and bed by 9.30. Lay on the bed – clothes strewn around the room with the abandon of new lovers – and I can feel my heart still pounding, the blood pulsing through my ears. I close my eyes and in seconds I'm asleep.

I'm shocked from my sleep by my phone – please, please it can't be 5.45 yet?! It isn't. Mikey and Jamesie have decided it would be really funny to call me at 11.30. My, how I laughed. I reject the call and fall back into bed and spend the next hour trying to get back to sleep.

Saturday September 26<sup>th</sup>

Tavistock – Bristol

109.5 miles

**Moor, moor, moor**



The day starts early with a long six or seven mile climb of 1500 feet onto the very top of Dartmoor. For what will not be the last time this week I am reminded of Sargent's 'Gassed' – the painting of gas-blinded troops playing a macabre game of follow-my-leader back from the front - as we crawl up the slope – push by push..... inch by inch..... foot by foot..... yard by yard..... slowly, slowly we edge our way forwards. A snail appears beside me and starts to race up the hill – I think it may win. Someone shouts they've seen a telecom mast. This is important, because, as every schoolboy knows, masts are put on the highest points. And what every schoolboy also knows is what goes up also comes down. And the bigger the up the bigger and faster the down – I get up to a new max of 42.5 mph down a gravelly section of road with potentially kamikaze sheep on either side, a boy racer in a pimped blue Peugeot up my backside and a bend that would be scary at 30 mph approaching fast – too fast. I take a deep breath and lean the bike through the bend, waiting for the crunch and pain. Somehow the bike doesn't let me down and I make the bend – phew!

A few miles short of the first stop I suddenly feel very unwell – cold sweats, shakey, very weak. I push on to the stop where I can't stop eating – two banana and jam sandwiches, Eccles cakes, malt loaf, chocolates all disappear in a matter of minutes and pretty soon I'm feeling fine again. Panic over we start the climb towards the Somerset Levels and the promise of 20 miles or so of easy pedalling – this is more like it, but I can't help but notice the signs are pointing towards Cheddar..... At around the 100 mile mark we find ourselves in Cheddar Gorge and a very long, steep hill stands between us and our hotel just outside Bristol. Meet Otto half way up the hill and join team Aegon for the final run in the dark to the hotel. Quick shower, a bite to eat and collapse on the bed totally exhausted. Fall asleep in minutes.

The phone goes off and I leap out of bed – it can't be morning already? It isn't. Its 11.30 and Mikey has called again. I'm sure I've heard this joke before and it really wasn't that funny the first time. I reject the call but lay awake for an hour or so trying to rationalise my feelings of Mikeycide. Finally drop off but sleep fitfully.

Sunday September 27<sup>th</sup>

Bristol – Bewdley

101.8 miles

### **It's Not Over 'Til The Fat Man Sings**



Sunday dawns all too soon. I drag myself down to breakfast feeling like I need another four or five hours in bed. I'm not alone in this and it's a pretty subdued group that stumbles into the dining room. We've all been using sports drinks and energy bars which are probably fine for an event lasting a couple of hours but over a longer period tend to do strange things to your constitution – you become very flatulent and this morning everyone is sporting a neat five-months-pregnant tummy. It makes us all look cuddly, which is nice if misleading. I notice my legs are aching – a lot.

At 7.30 we set off in a slow single file up a hill towards Bristol proper. I slip past a day-tripper (we had several people join us for just one day) on a mountain bike and can't suppress less than positive thoughts about his lack of condition and silly hat. We cross the Avonmouth Bridge and then the Severn Bridge on a perfect sunny morning – it feels special. We have a break after 30 miles in Chepstow – which I discover is in Wales. I'm last to arrive again as I stopped to take photos on the bridge and got lost on the Chepstow bypass (another 4 miles to my total). The mountain bike chap is sitting alone and I feel I should make an effort to include him.

'Hiya! I tried that carbo-loading myself' says I, rubbing my tummy, 'but I think you may have overdone it!' pointing to his ample belly.

'Yeah' says he a little sadly 'it's the steroids for my cancer. Don't understand how body builders can use them to build muscle and I end up like this.'

At this point I am considering feigning a heart attack simply to get out of the situation. Instead I plough on, and discover his name is Mark, he's doing well with his treatment for non-hodgkins lymphoma. He's doing the ride to inspire his daughter who is going through her second (or was it third?) bout of leukaemia and is shortly to go into hospital to have her hips replaced as the originals have been ravaged by the chemotherapy. It was impossible not to be moved. I spend much of the day teamed up with him near the back of the pack – encouraging him up the long hills through the Forest of Dean and appropriating a marginally more suitable bike from the spares in the van. The final half hour of the day is spent whizzing at high speed through gloomy country lanes with Nick in a race against time as he can't see anything in the dark. Arriving in Bewdley I am surprised by how pleasant the town is. We pass riverside pubs with people laughing and talking and I make a mental note to walk down from the hotel – except the hotel is about two miles further out so that's another good idea blown.

It's been a good day – staying with Mark gave me the chance to recover. My shoulders seem to seize up after 20 miles but otherwise my legs and, more importantly, my rear end seem to be coping well. I've read enough about the perils of saddle sores to appreciate they are best avoided at all costs so I've been using copious quantities of chamois cream. It's working in that I have no sores but it feels a bit like walking around in a soiled nappy.

I get to my room and call Mikey in a sort of peace and reconciliation forgiveness moment that does me more good than him.

Monday September 28<sup>th</sup>

Bewdley – Oldham

100.5 miles

**I Told 'Em..... Oldham!**



Mornings are always a rush – up at 5.45, breakfast at 6.30, get cases packed and on the van, fill your water bottles, check your bike and be ready for the off at 7.30. Not for the first or last time I miss this deadline and leave ten minutes after the rest of the pack with Paul who is finding the assault on his constitution is having a negative effect. Pretty soon we catch up with the rest for a run through the Potteries towards the Peak District. The riders have split themselves into three distinct groups – the young fit ones at the front, led by Jeremy (who turns out to be a bit of a star) who call themselves the faffers (but are known elsewhere in the group as the fitshits); Team Aegon who are resplendent in matching Aegon kit, consist of CEO Otto, Partnership Director Peter and their personal trainer – a hulk of a man called Brian - and take it all a little seriously; and the also-rans.



I find I don't really fit into any of the groups (nothing new there then!) I'm not fast enough to be with the young fit ones but I'm probably a tad quicker than the ones bringing up the rear. My pace also seems to have a greater range than most – I'm one of the fastest on the flat and downhill but one of the slowest uphill where I have around 50% more bulk to heave along. As a result I flit between all three which makes for a more sociable day but as the ride progresses I find myself migrating towards a like-minded bunch who are prepared to take a bit more time. Keith at 63 is the oldest in the group but very fit, Tony is a similar build to me and is involved in clever tax planning, Nick is a gentle man with a fear of almost everything and an encyclopaedic knowledge of fine wine while David is kitted out for a walk in the hills, valiantly rejecting any suggestion of lycra. We call ourselves the Casuals.

We arrive in Buxton at around 5 – just in time for rush hour. The ride up the long hill out of the town towards Glossop is punctuated by a series of close encounters with heavy good vehicles and buses. I recognise the area around Hayfield as where Yvonne and I had walked only weeks earlier.

The run into Glossop is brilliant – a long, long downhill, payback for the haul out of Buxton – but, as attentive readers will recall, what goes up comes down and the reverse is also true. The climb out of Glossop is long and fairly steep but it sets us up for an excellent downhill charge into Oldham where I get lost again – twice. Finally finish up at the hotel at around 8 – tired but not exhausted. Earlier in the day PT Brian pointed out that I was pedalling with my left leg sticking out. I corrected this and magically the stiff shoulders that have been nearly crippling me for three days instantly eased.

Can't really believe how far we've come in just four days.

Tuesday September 29<sup>th</sup>

Oldham – Appleby-in-Westmoreland

103.9 miles

### **Mr Grumpy Makes an Appearance**



The day dawns cold and drizzly but I'm in good spirits and up with the front runners for the first section. Its surprising how your senses become heightened. In a crowded room I can hardly hear



what the person in front of me is saying but this morning, riding through Greater Manchester during rush hour, I can hear the click of a car door about to open from 50 feet away. We're soon out of the urban sprawl and I relax as we head into Calderdale. 20 miles in at Hebden Bridge we climb sharply onto the fell, the mist comes down and the wind rises. Life becomes hard work – is the wind ever behind you? I see a car parked on top of the moor with a bloke getting something from the boot. I sidle up,

ostensibly to be friendly but in truth looking to use the car for shelter from the wind. After a few minutes respite I move on with another fiver in sponsorship – result! Sheep appear spookily out of the gloom and I round a corner to find Team Aegon in disarray. Peter has come off his bike – no major injuries though so we all press on. Off the fell we have a break in a pub with an open fire – bliss. About 45 miles in I decide to go to Skipton, which is closed but, more importantly, also in the wrong direction. Vivienne, one of the wives who has been with us all trip, saw me pedalling the wrong way but said I looked so happy she didn't like to stop me. I was grinning because it

was the first time all week I'd had a tail wind, which, of course, meant the return route was all into a headwind – ho hum. The six mile detour and fiddling about trying to find the right route mean I am last in for lunch by a fairly wide margin and last to get started again after.

The afternoon brings more climbing as we head towards the Lake District via the western fringes of the Yorkshire Dales. What started off a good day starts to become increasingly challenging as the terrain and the darkness both conspire to hold us up. At about the 100 mile mark I have a complete sense of humour failure. When we finally arrive at our hotel in Appleby at around 8.45 I am very, very grumpy! I bark at the receptionist for having the temerity to suggest I dine before 9.00 and rant during my massage but by the end I am spent and apologising all round for my bad mood.

Wednesday September 30<sup>th</sup>  
Appleby-in-Westmoreland – Peebles  
108 miles  
**Border Control**



Breakfast has progressed during the week from a timid bowl of porridge to a full-blown feast of fruit salad, cereal, porridge and full English as my confidence in my bowels grows. This has the added advantage of reducing my dependence on energy bars and drinks with a resulting reduction in flatulence. Generally, I feel my body is getting accustomed to processing 7000+ calories a day.

The morning is bright but very cold – I hadn't realised how cold and I'm still in shorts. By the time we get to the first stop at 20 miles I have had to stop three times to rub some life back into my legs. Fortunately I've some tights in my day-bag and soon I'm dancing around in them like Lily Savage. The run towards Scotland is uneventful and the sign at the border comes as a bit of a surprise. We stop for photos and I find myself struggling to hold back tears, which isn't a reaction I usually have to road signs. I guess I've been suppressing more than I'd realised.



The heavens open and we arrive for lunch at a Buddhist centre wet and bedraggled but otherwise in good spirits. The afternoon brings with it the most stunning scenery of the trip as we ride through the Borders – so much so that at one point we simply stop and marvel as the clouds lift and the sun catches the side of a mountain.



In Peebles I pass on the offer of a night out at a curry house – my new-found confidence in my bowels doesn't yet extend that far - and instead join Roger in the hotel restaurant. After protracted negotiations with the chef and waiter he has managed to secure an off-menu thick juicy Aberdeen Angus steak. I ask for the same and the waiter doesn't even put up a token resistance. Speaking to the others the following day this turns out to have been a good call.

Thursday October 1<sup>st</sup>

Peebles – Kinross

78.7 miles

### ***Lazy Thursday Afternoon***



We're all in a sort of rhythm now. Our bodies are fully adapted and even my timekeeping has improved now I've got the hang of only unpacking what I actually need. Today is a short hop of just 80 miles from Peebles to Kinross. The scenery deteriorates quickly as we head towards Grangemouth but the going is flat and easy so everyone arrives for a fish and chips pub lunch in good time. I decide to risk a pint which proves unwise as half an hour after lunch all I want to do is fall asleep. We arrive at the hotel in Kinross in daylight, despite the efforts of the local youths who have turned all our signs around. The extra couple of hours make all the difference. I have a massage, a hot bath and go down to supper feeling refreshed and relaxed.

Friday October 2<sup>nd</sup>

Kinross – Aviemore

110.3 miles

### ***Sublime to Ridiculous***



This is our longest day (although my detour to Skipton made Tuesday *my* longest) and Otto is concerned. Otto is always concerned. It is Otto's job to be concerned. If there were more like Otto there wouldn't have been a credit crisis. Otto is concerned at this juncture by the possibility of someone dying of exposure in the Cairngorms. Despite his name, Otto is Scots and feels a certain pride in having the worst weather of the trip in his country. I call him 'our little ray of sunshine', which he doesn't altogether appreciate. We head off. It's cold and wet but not really that bad. Otto's disappointment is palpable – at this rate no-one will die.

The day has been arranged so we have two lunch stops. The first is at Aberfeldy where Caz, one of the Athlete's Angels whose massages have been keeping us in something approximating to working order, has agreed to let us use her house. What a star! What a poor misguided star, but nonetheless what a star! I arrive at the house to find a kitchen full of wet kit hurriedly being assigned to radiators around the house. In the front room sit ten or twelve people tucking into jacket potatoes. The room is sauna hot and steam is rising from people's backs as they hunch over their plates. The scene is almost Neanderthal.

Keith: 'I've had a splendid morning, some really interesting conversations'

AT: 'Really? Was anyone with you?'

Lunch over, we head into the Cairngorms, leaving Caz to mourn the destruction of her beautiful home. The mountains rise either side of us and disappear into the low cloud ceiling maybe fifty feet above us. The mist closes off our retreat and forms a barrier 100 yards ahead of us. It is strangely silent and this seemingly enclosed world feels eerily like a huge film studio. The mist lifts slowly to reveal wooded mountainsides and long, long up-hills which sap every ounce of strength from your legs and every drop of spirit from your soul. I realise I didn't truly know what 'digging deep' meant until this trip. But, just at the point of giving up, the long, long down hills appear and suddenly you are rejuvenated. The downhill runs are brilliant – tucked-in tight to the bike, weaving after one another at speeds close to 50 miles an hour along winding roads is the closest thing to skiing without snow. The only threats are the slippery pine needles and the manic drivers of the logging trucks which fly along the roads at terrifying speeds, leaving no option other than to jump into the ditch to let them pass.

We arrive in Aviemore late in the evening, tired but happy. It's been a good day, which must disappoint Otto. Aviemore itself is bizarre. We are greeted by the festive lights of a Mexican

restaurant and our hotel is hosting what appears to be a Phoenix Nights experience. Children are running wild while their parents get slowly drunk to the dulcet tones of an aging rocker who is part karaoke / part self-accompanied on an acoustic guitar. I go to bed to the sounds of a drum machine thudding in the background.

Saturday October 2<sup>nd</sup>

Aviemore – Brora

102.5 miles

### ***Every Dog Has His Day***



Otto is smiling! No, Otto is grinning from ear to ear! Have I seen the forecast? 80 mph winds, rain, fire, brimstone. Otto feels vindication is just around the corner – with conditions like this it can only be a matter of time before someone dies.



The morning isn't too bad – windy and rainy with plenty of challenging hills but we're used to that now. As we go through Inverness we realise we are getting closer and closer to the Kessock Bridge – a long, high suspension bridge over the Beaulieu Firth. Nick has a fear of bridges and, seeing this, I know he must be having kittens. Sure enough, when I arrive at the bridge Nick is around a

quarter of the way across, inching along the inside of the footpath. I catch up with him and together we made our way across – me fighting the wind, he fighting his demons.

At lunchtime in Evanton, Gideon (one of the organisers) announces that conditions on the moor are worsening and if anyone would like to go in the van they can. No-one takes up the offer and we all head out into the brewing gale. Conditions on the moor are really very bad – we learn later that the wind had indeed reached speeds of 80 mph. After being almost blown into passing cars a couple of times Nick and I decide we'll walk with our bikes over the most exposed mile or so. We are passed by Ramon and Sam(antha) who are struggling valiantly but with decreasing success. Eventually Sam can do no more and we call the van forward to pick her up. She's totally exhausted. A short while later a camper van stops and a young lady runs back to Nick and I. 'The answer's 'yes'' says Nick as she nears us. 'Bloody isn't!' I hear myself retorting. She offers us a lift off the moor but I explain that we're on a sponsored ride and so have to finish – and much to Nick's chagrin she drives off. Ramon catches us up and suggests we join Sam in the van. I disagree and reluctantly they both follow me. 50 yards later the road turns and with the wind now behind us calm returns. We're pleased we didn't give up. The hill down from the moor is 12% but I have to pedal to make any progress. If I stop pedalling I move very slowly downhill – the wind almost stops me completely. As the road becomes more wooded and sheltered from the gale we can pick up speed and soon arrive in Bonar Bridge after the hairiest part of the whole trip.

Soon we're climbing again but the wind has dropped and is behind us making the four mile climb to the top of the moor relatively easy. From the top of the moor it's a fast five mile downhill run to the A9 and a fairly flat run from there to the hotel at Brora – where Yvonne is waiting for me.

Sunday October 3<sup>rd</sup>

Brora – John O’Groats

65 miles

***At the End of the Rainbow***



We awake to a calm day. The rising sun casts a silver ribbon on the sea and the world is monochrome – shades of grey and black accentuating the dramatic beauty of this part of the world. As we set off, other colours start to emerge from their slumber, firstly khakis but then brighter greens and yellows until after an hour or so we are surrounded by colour.



We’ve only 60-odd miles to do today but it includes two of the worst hills. The first is at Helmsdale. As we leave the village the hill doesn’t seem too bad, but as we round the corner we see it goes on and on and on. We’re used to this now though and fairly quickly make it to the top. The second

hill comes 8 miles further on, is long, sweeping and seems to go on forever as it clings to the mountainside. Halfway up it turns sharply and the wind is now behind us – pushing us up the remaining hill.

A rainbow appears – seemingly ending in Wick where we’re stopping for a pie and a pint before the final 16 miles to John O’Groats. After lunch the rainbow is still there – disappearing over the horizon at John O’Groats. From the hilltop above John O’Groats I mistake the Orkneys for another headland (it’s surprising how close they are to the mainland) and so am pleasantly surprised to get to the village sign. We assemble in a pub conservatory before making our haphazard group descent to the finish line. We’ve done it! Hugs, backslapping and champagne all round!

