

# **Ernie's End to End**

**Land's End to John O'Groats Cycle Ride**

**August 2009**

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Reading this account will be enhanced if done so in conjunction with a road atlas

## **Ernie's End to End – Land's End to John O'Groats**

It's time to hit the road again.

Since returning from the 'big ride' - over two years ago now - I've been clocking up quite large mileages. What with 4-5 days a week of cycle training with schools during term time, occasional rides up to Scotland to visit a Buddhist Centre and trips to visit friends and family, I've been covering about 8,000 miles a year. All very well for maintaining cycle fitness and my green credentials as a cycling commuter but it's not exactly touring.

I've been passing myself off as a 'seasoned' tourer since finishing the circumnavigation but have not yet completed the classic, must do tour in the UK, namely the Land's End to John O'Groats, or vice versa, ride. So, the long summer holidays of 2009 are approaching; the last School courses will be finished by the end of July; it's time to "knock the bastard off" as Sir Edmund Hillary said in 1953 on his return from the summit of Mt Everest.

Having talked to all and sundry about doing the ride (I always find this the best way to motivate myself into getting started; it sort of 'locks' one into it with so many people informed) the choice of route crossed my mind. Should I do a north-south or a south-north? I chose the latter based on the rationale that the prevailing wind would be behind me. Although just as many people seem to do the ride the other way and don't report it being any more difficult. Since it's such a well travelled journey, and not wishing to reinvent the wheel, I decided to download the CTC's recommended route and use that as a basis for my ride. My map preference since army days has always been 1:50,000 OS sheets. These are ideal in terms of detail for both walking and cycling, although on a bike, the distances covered mean carrying lots of maps. On walking trips in days gone by, eg Pennine Way, I've often cut up strips of OS sheets showing just a few miles either side of my route in order to keep the weight down. This can become rather wasteful, not mention expensive, though. CTC recommend purchasing a Philip's road atlas with loose leaves and one of those plastic spiral ring binders. These give ample detail for road cycling and, 22 of the appropriate pages taken out and carried in a plastic folder, doesn't add significantly to ones load. Apart from minimal shading and the occasional 'crow's foot' arrow on the roads, there is of course no contour detail, so some of the hills come as a bit of a surprise.

Train was the obvious mode of travel down to Penzance, the nearest station to Land's End, so on the 13th July off I went to Piccadilly Station in Manchester to book my ticket for the end of the month. Although friends keep telling me that it's cheaper to book in advance on line, I like to do these things face to face across a counter. However, I might just take their advice in future; it cost me £83.80 for a single journey, this included a discount for my old codger's rail card. And the journey can't be done directly these days; three different legs; two changes. What a palaver! Bring back British Rail.

Hitherto, I've always toured for my own selfish pleasure or sense of achievement. However, a couple of days before the off, people where I now live suggested that I should try and raise some money for a worthy cause; put my efforts to good use so to speak. They suggested the Harley Slack Fund. Harley is three years old, suffers from Meningitis B and has had all four limbs removed. His full heart-breaking story can be seen on <http://harleyslackfund.giving.officelive.com>. It transpired that two cyclists from Stockport, Mike Hulbert and William Watkins, had set off from John O'groats on the 25th July heading for Land's End in order to raise money for the fund. What better than for me to add my efforts to the cause. I hastily designed a simple sponsorship form and distributed it around various people and organisations I thought likely to contribute. All done in a bit of a last minute rush but we might just raise a few bob.

On Thursday 30th July, out came tent and sleeping bag from under my bed, camping stove and cooking equipment from the cupboard under the kitchen sink and an assortment of clothes from out of the wardrobe and four panniers were filled - with too much kit as usual. The alarm was set to allow me enough time to eat my now customary bowl of porridge, load up the bike and pedal down to Piccadilly in time for the 7.26 train to Birmingham New Street, the first leg of my journey to Penzance.

I fell asleep wondering how long the ride would take.

### **Journey Down 31 July 2009**

The three-leg train journey down to Penzance wasn't quite as bad as I'd expected; despite my disappointment when booking at not being able to repeat the trip my son and I made years ago. At that time, we travelled Leeds to Penzance direct so had eight hours to sit back and enjoy the journey.

Manchester to Birmingham New Street on 'Cross Country' trains turned out to be the most problematic. I arrived at Piccadilly Station in plenty of time for the 7.26 departure. The train pulled in and I hurried along the platform looking for the 'cycle' logo adjacent to the appropriate door in which to board what looked like a state of the art piece of rolling stock. It was a steep haul up into the carriage where I was confronted by what I can only describe as a small wardrobe-sized compartment with a hook in the ceiling; and this was supposed to accommodate two bikes? On the other side of the corridor was an even smaller compartment for one bike. This is a classic case of designers not consulting the appropriate people at the right stage. Cyclists are constantly provided with facilities that non-cyclists think we should have. How often do Tour de France racers with stripped down bikes travel by train? It's more often than not commuters with at least one pannier, or tourers like me with fully laden bikes. I did eventually manage to dangle my bike by its front wheel from the ceiling hook, but not until detaching my four panniers and sundry other bits of luggage and storing them elsewhere. Thankfully, no other cyclists boarded the train. I vacated my seat after Wolverhampton and spent the rest of the journey reloading the bike ready for a quick dash at New Street.

When I alighted the train in Birmingham the platform staff seemed to know what they were doing. I was quickly directed to the lifts and along the walkway down to my departure platform. I had about six minutes between arrival and departure but, luckily, the trains seem to be running to time. It was 'Cross Country' again for this leg to Exeter but older rolling stock this time. Here the platform staff proved to be not so knowledgeable. The uniformed young lass with the table tennis bat ushered me along the train to a 'wheelchair' logo and bid me board through the wide door. The train manager promptly but politely ordered me off again and down to the end of the train where there was a good old-fashioned guards van with lots of room. My bike was soon secured fully loaded against one wall for the journey south. It was three carriages back to my allotted seat at a table across from a couple from Liverpool who were on their way to Plymouth to a relative's wedding.

As with people of a certain age on a long train journey, and especially northerners, life stories were exchanged. Once they discovered that I was attempting to raise money for a good cause, they promised to log onto the Harley Slack fund web site and make a donation.

Exeter St David's to Penzance was a painless leg of the journey. A different operating company but the train boasted a full-sized guard's van too, this time at the front. Lots of cheerful willing staff to open doors and help load bikes made the switch-over effortless. My bike was soon secured along with the half dozen others in the spacious compartment. I'm told that some 4000 cyclists a year do the Land's End to John O'Groats ride so it was inevitable that other cyclists would be on this last part of the journey.

The sun had been shining through the carriage window for most of the journey down but, as soon as I pushed my bike out onto the station forecourt at Penzance, it started to rain. By the time I'd cleared the town and got out onto the A30, it was pouring down, with a strong blustery wind from the west making the going hard. Perhaps this was a bit of much needed exertion after spending the day sat on trains. I didn't quite see it that way at the time though!

I rode into the complex and round past the rather odd collection of stalls and shops which seem to 'litter' the point itself to the rather grand Land's End Hotel which graces the very tip. The rain was as heavy as ever, being blown in horizontally by the wind off the sea. I'd passed the caravan and camping park on the left back down the road and decided that there was no way I was going to pitch my tent in this weather, especially for the first night; old-age showing already! My inquiry elicited the information that the Land's End Hotel was full. I think this was genuine and not the 'anti cyclist' rejection that some such places apply. The young woman behind the reception desk helpfully phoned another hotel in nearby Sennen Cove and confirmed that they had room for me. I quickly made a note of my odometer reading and zeroed my bike computer – this was genuinely part of the ride now – and headed back to the turn off for the Cove.

After taking the left turn at the signpost for Sennen Cove and riding for about a hundred yards, I could see that the road dipped down, what looked almost vertically, towards the shore. The bike was gathering speed. I had an immediate mental picture of trying to grind my way with fully laden bike back up there straight after breakfast in the morning and, although it might well be a taste of what's to come, didn't fancy the prospect. A quick decision was called for and I made a U turn before it got too steep and headed back to the A30. Not far back along the road – in fact only a mile and half from LE – was the Sunny Bank Hotel. I bagged the last room, just in front of a group of German riders. The Sunny Bank was really a B & B so no evening meal was available. However, there was a restaurant a few yards along the road but, when my host phoned to book me a table, it was full. He very kindly offered to drive me down to the hotel in Sennen Cove – the very place where I was supposed to be staying that night – and his wife collected me after dinner. So I had first hand experience of the hill I'd eschewed early, but in a modern car, which had to labour back up in first gear.

Not exactly as planned but I fell asleep on the night of 31<sup>st</sup> July have reached Land's End and completed a mile and a half of the ride. The journey proper starts tomorrow.

### **Day 1 – 1st August – 55.65 miles**

It was still raining when I pedalled away from the Sandy Bank Hotel at just after 8 am. The wind was still blowing too, not so strongly as the night before but luckily still from the same direction, this time blowing me along the A30 towards Penzance. Although I had the CTC route highlighted

on my map, as I was making good time on the main road and feel reasonably comfortable in traffic, I decided to bypass Penzance and stayed on the A30 till just before Camborne. Then I thought that I ought to at least try and follow the Club's suggestions, so dived down through Camborne and on to Redruth, where I got hopelessly lost trying to pick up the route. I eventually found the right road after asking for directions and riding up a long, steep pedestrianised street from the town centre.

I stopped at a MacDonald's for some tea just before Truro and had a brief chat with two more E2Eers – youngsters on slick sporty road bikes. They said they were camping en route, which didn't ring true with the tiny backpack each one was carrying and no cycle luggage, until they added that the support team was behind them in the van. They were predicting a ride of eight days; “a bit too ambitious” I thought; neither of them looked fit enough to put in that sort of daily mileage; ten days possibly.

I carried on up the A390 and through **St Austell**, intending to stop at one of the camp sites shown on the map on the other side of town. Before reaching the marked ones, a sign advertising a Caravan site pointed to the left up a hill from the main road. I asked in the corner shop if they took campers; the woman behind the counter said she thought they did. A quarter of a mile up the hill and I came to a pleasant little site with a beautiful view over St Austell Bay. £7 secured a tent pitch and a lovely hot shower.

Dinner was simple. It consisted of a can of fish and some boiled fresh vegetables, bought from the aforementioned corner shop, washed down with rooibos tea. I sat outside my tent in the late evening sunshine watching the boats bobbing about in the bay and thinking to myself “this is what cycle touring is all about”. I deemed day one to have been a success as I crawled into my sleeping bag for my first nights camping this summer.

### **Day 2 - 2<sup>nd</sup> August – 37.8 miles**

Although it hadn't rained during the night the outside of the tent was soaking wet with dew, and the inside of the flysheet dripping with condensation. Because I hadn't camped for some time this quite surprised me at first; it shouldn't have done. It's actually quite rare to be able to pack a dry tent first thing in the morning in this country, whatever the weather or time of year. The sun came up and showed the Bay off beautifully, as I sat and ate my porridge and drank my tea.

I was packed up and on the road for just before eight o'clock, heading east on the A390 towards Liskeard and Tavistock. It wasn't long before the sky darkened and a misty, mizzly rain descended. It wasn't enough to warrant donning water proofs; the going on the hills would've made it just too hot for that anyway. The only way to describe the hills now was horrendous; steep grinding climbs necessitating the lowest gears and sometimes no more speed than 4 mph, followed by headlong downward dashes of 35 and sometimes 40 mph. The most spectacular of these was the dive down to the Tamar Valley a few miles before Tavistock. However, once across the river the climb back out was soul-destroying; it seemed never-ending.

I'd been following the CTC recommended route all day and, once through Tavistock, had little choice other than to stay on it. This meant taking the B3357 out towards Dartmoor but after the day's hills so far, I wasn't about to attempt going over the Moor till the next day. There were two choices of camp site on the edge of the Moor after **Tavistock**. I chose the first one I came to, which was really rather silly as it meant nearly a mile's ride away from the main road. I didn't

know it till the next day, but the other one was right beside the route and only a short distance from the turn off for the chosen site. However, **Langstone Manor** proved to be a very pleasant place to camp; if I'd have had the time, I'd have lingered longer and enjoyed some of its many facilities. The site fee was £15, which I thought rather steep for a cyclist and a single tent, but the proprietor asked if I was doing the ride sponsored and when I explained the Harley Slack situation, she gave me a tenner back. That'll go into the pot.

The site boasted an excellent restaurant but I'd already bought ingredients for a simple camp meal back in Tavistock so passed up the opportunity. Saved me a bit of money too. To my dismay, as I got ready for any early night, I found that my little blow-up camping pillow had sprung a leak and went flat within minutes of being inflated. A rolled up bundle of clothes would have served as a replacement for at least one night but I'd noticed that the site shop had some camping equipment in stock; alas, not a camping pillow though. The proprietor came to my rescue and loaned me a full-sized conventional feather pillow for the night – luxury indeed!

Having set myself a target of at least 50 miles a day, I was rather demoralized by the meagre distance covered so early on in the ride. However, being a lone cyclist, over the years I've become rather adept at self motivation; self delusion or playing psychological games some might say. So as I fell asleep, I resolved to modify my ambitions for day 3 to simply getting over Dartmoor and not worrying too much about distance covered.

### **E2E - Day 3 - 3<sup>rd</sup> August – 32.74 miles**

I didn't sleep very well that night in spite of my mental gymnastics whilst trying to doze off. Getting over Dartmoor had filled me with foreboding. However, I was still up bright and early, bowel of porridge consumed, tea drunk and a nearly dry tent packed away by 7.30.

In spite of the steepness of the hills the day before, not one of them was marked with those little gradient arrows, not even those before and after the River Tamar. By contrast, today's route over Dartmoor was littered with them. I was climbing almost immediately, up and up and ever steeper, slowly grinding away in my small chain ring and alternating between the largest two cogs; again down to 3 and 4 miles per hour in some places. It would have been almost as quick to walk. I was regretting lugging camping gear by this time. “Why the hell hadn't I decided to travel light and rely on B & Bs” I kept saying to myself. “Too late now!” I was bathed in sweat, it was getting in my eyes. Later, the dampening mist turned into proper rain and washed some of the saltiness away.

By ten o'clock I'd made it to Moretonhampstead; the worst was over. Although still on the Moor, the village was over the other side of highest part and, with one or two exceptions, most of the route from here on was predominantly downwards. Only two of those little gradient arrows left, and one of those was pointing in the right direction for me. I'd only covered 19 miles though. By this time I really should have at least 25 done. But at least I'd achieved my main aim – to get over Dartmoor. The day before I'd passed over from Cornwall into Devon when crossing the Tamar; another little milestone to console myself with.

My breakfast porridge normally keeps hunger at bay for the first 30 or 40 miles of the day, and I'm not even thinking about bananas, my other mainstay, until well after that. Today was different. I

dived into a café in main-street Moretonhampstead initially for a cup of tea but ended up the other side of a full English breakfast. Very nice it was too.

The rest of the ride off the Moor was far from easy but I was turning the pedals with renewed vigour and soon on the outskirts of Exeter wondering what I should do next. It'd been raining heavily since leaving Moretonhampstead and showed no signs of relenting. I really needed to replace my camping pillow if I was to be comfortable at night from here on and, with a few inquiries, I soon found a branch of Millets and managed to purchase one of those very nice velvety ones. The rain was still coming down heavily. I hadn't bothered to dress up in waterproofs, just too hot, so was wet through. I had an abysmally low mileage on the clock for day 3 of the ride but, I'm ashamed to say, slothfulness got the better of me. Just a short distance down the road from Millets was the Jury's Inn and I soon found myself dripping all over the reception desk and asking if they had a room for one night. I'd used Jury's Inns before overseas and don't remember them being too expensive. That was a good while ago and with little notice taken of exchange rates. This one wasn't cheap!

With the bike secured outside, but undercover and within sight of the reception, and my luggage scattered around my fourth floor room, I settled in for an undeserved night of luxury; and half an afternoon come to that. Once I'd wrung out and hung up my cycling clothes to dry off for the morning, I decided to carry out a kit appraisal. Do I really need more than two sets of cycling clothes? Will I need all these layers for Scotland? Surely it can't be that cold in August, even right at the top? The consequence of these deliberations, and with the help of some packaging and sticky tape supplied by the porter, was a parcel ready to send back to Manchester. With my little telescopic umbrella unfurled, a two minute walk to the post office completed the deed. The panniers would be just that little bit lighter in the morning.

I got to thinking about the ride so far. I suspect the main reason that the CTC's recommended route avoids the A30 is the speed and density of the traffic; it intimidates many cyclists. I'm used to riding in traffic; I've been doing it for years. With hindsight, I wish now that I'd stayed on the A30 all the way to Exeter. The scenery wouldn't have been so nice but I'd have probably saved myself at least half a day.

An evening meal followed by some rather pointless television viewing and my bed beckoned. "Must stop this self indulgence and get on with the ride tomorrow" was my final thought as my head hit pillow.

### **E2E - Day 4 - 4<sup>th</sup> August – 63.7 miles**

I came down for breakfast promptly at 7 o'clock at the Jury's Inn in Exeter, expecting to be first in the queue. Not so. I ended up joining a long line of slightly portly, middle-aged Germans; a coach party that must have arrived late evening. Stereotypes of towels reserving sun loungers at six in the morning all over the southern resorts of Europe sprang to mind and I had a little smile to myself. The Germans are certainly early risers; we should learn from them.

It didn't take long though for me to make my way to the self service buffet breakfast bar and fill my plate with the usual fare and find a small table in the restaurant area. The queue at the beverage dispenser was a different matter. The line was moving very slowly as those at the front tried to work out which spout delivered tea or coffee and which button operated the choices. I found it complicated so many of the Germans must have been bewildered. Having already had an

early morning cup of tea in my room, I decided to eat my main meal and then go back for more tea later. This done, but with my toast still to consume, my cycling jacket on the back of the chair and a serviette on the seat, off I went to wrestle with the tea dispenser. To my astonishment, when I got back to my table, some over-diligent hotel worker had cleared the remains of my breakfast. My rather loud complaint somewhat embarrassed the Germans but elicited profuse apologies from the restaurant manager. I had to start all over again with the toast.

In spite of the above shenanigans, I was on the road by 8 am. The CTC route, at least initially, looked like the best bet. It consisted of a series of B roads that ran along side and criss-crossed the M5. The hills were easy and I made good time, passing from Devon into Somerset by 9.45. I stopped in Bridgewater for a pub lunch and to buy some provisions for a camp dinner. Although the rain, which had eased somewhat after Exeter, was again persistent by now, I still intended to camp that night. I pushed on, still following the CTC route and soon reached Cheddar with 60 miles on the clock. I was aiming for one of two camp sites marked on the map just on the other side of town. Neither materialised. The route now took me onto a minor road up and over the Mendip Hills towards Shipham. Having expected to stop by now, it came as a bit of shock to hit Dartmoor type hills again, and these were definitely in that category; maybe not so long but equally steep. I wasn't expecting to be grinding along in granny gears again at this stage of the day. However, it didn't take me long to reach the summit and coast down into **Shipham**.

It was raining hard so I was beginning to think that the absence of camp sites back in Cheddar may have been a blessing in disguise. A pub with a B & B sign came up on the left. "That'll do for me" I thought and pulled into the car park. After five minutes knocking, try as I may, the only reaction I got was an incessantly barking dog. I didn't search hard but the pub looked like the only accommodation opportunity in the village.

It was only a short hop further on down hill to rejoin the A38, which I'd been very close to both near Taunton and Bridgewater. With that wonderful thing called hindsight, I should've got onto it then and saved myself the flog up over the Mendip slopes. Within a few hundred yards of joining the A38, a B & B came up on the left. Again, no reply. Then I spotted a smaller B & B establishment on the other side of the road. Success. It was touch and go though. When confronted with a dripping wet cyclist, the woman of the house initially said that "I wasn't going to take anyone tonight, but since your here ....." I think she must have taken pity on me.

It was a comfortable stay, and my umbrella again got me down to a local pub in the dry for an evening meal. I'd been carrying my vegetables bungied on the back of the bike so they'd probably be fresh enough for the next evening's dinner. In spite of the weather, I was somewhat disappointed at not camping again, but at least I had a semi respectable number of miles done that day. I slept contentedly.

### **E2E - Day 5 -5<sup>th</sup> August – 54.27 miles**

After a conventional English breakfast at the B & B on the A38 I was back on the road by 8 am and pushed in a very quick first 20 or so miles. This time the CTC route was spot on. Short of using the M5, it was probably the most direct way to get to the inner of the two bridges across the mouth of the River Seven, my first target for the day. I left the A38 within a few hundred yards of setting off and headed down a B road towards Clevedon on the banks of the Seven Estuary. The route then took to a minor road through the very picturesque Gordano Valley, however, after all

the rain of the night before the road was very muddy. My chain and rear cassette got quite badly gritted up and it took a few minutes with WD40 and a rag to get the worst of it off.

All was well until I encountered the Avon Gorge. Signs taking a cycle track up to the bridge were totally confusing; obviously designed and erected by locals, who mostly know where they're going anyway, and completely useless for an out-of-towner passing through. I've encountered this phenomenon so many times. A couple of quick enquiries for directions got me up and over in the end. To be positive, the planners did have the foresight to include a very nice cycle track sharing the bridge with the M5 over the Gorge – so they're not all bad.

Once on the outskirts of Avonmouth, it was a fast A road ride up to Aust at the eastern end of the inner Seven Bridge – the one taking the M48 over the River. The ride across to Chepstow was spectacular; another excellent, well designed cycle path suspended along side and just below the motorway itself, with the main carriage way at about shoulder height as one rode across. There was only a light wind blowing for me but I could imagine that it might well be difficult in blustery weather; although the smooth tarmac path was wide enough to compensate for some buffeting about.

Once through Chepstow, I stopped for some tea at a van in a lay-by adjacent to the race course. The two young lasses behind the counter were used to long-distance cyclists as it was right on the main route. They regaled with the story of two E2Eers who'd taken two weeks to get this far. That made me feel a lot better!

I was now heading for Monmouth. Judging by the way the road twisted and turned on the map I was prepared for some climbing but the ride was easier than expected; a few steep hills but mercifully short. The road straddled the border between England and Wales; half the time, I didn't know which country I was in. I stopped for ten minutes for a chat with a touring cyclist in Monmouth who was coming the other way. It was one of those serendipitous occasions where we both nodded at one another and decided to cross the road and talk. At first I thought he was an E2Eer doing a north-south but not so. He was a 56 year-old German who'd recently retired from the navy and decided to spend four months touring around Britain. A few days and he'd be back in Germany. We exchanged stories as one does with these brief encounters and went our separate ways.

By this time I'd clocked up 49 miles so I wasn't inclined to put in too many more, perhaps another ten at the most. The next major point on the route was Hereford but, apart from a camp site almost in Monmouth, there didn't seem to be any others marked on the map before there. But the weather was fine so I headed out of town anyway to see what transpired. This was easier said than done. It was a long, steep climb for the first part of the route out of Monmouth which strengthened my resolve to find somewhere to stay. After about a further 4 miles, and during a fast descent, I almost missed a small caravan/camping sign on the left pointing up a gravel track into a field. "This'll do nicely" I thought. I braked hard and doubled back to investigate. Around a bend in the track and at the side of the hayfield I discovered one large family-sized tent and a little wooden hut.

Not wanting to pitch without permission, I went back to the sign at the entrance to the field and read in small print "Enquires at Meridith Farm" but with no indication of where that might be. I pedalled back up the hill towards **Llancloudy**, the little settlement I'd just passed through, and was directed up a lane to said farm. A knock on the door drew no response; the house looked deserted. However, there was a small notice to one side with a mobile telephone number and inviting

enquiries. One quick call and I'd obtained permission to pitch my tent from a very pleasant and chatty man who informed me that the hut I'd seen contained the toilets and a shower, hot would you believe, and with a drinking water point on the outside. What more could a basic camper want. He said he'd be back soon and catch up with me later.

It wasn't long before the tent was up, I'd made myself a brew and, clutching my wash bag, I was heading to see what delights this little square hut would contain. There were no windows so when I opened the door I was staring into darkness. I inched inside and suddenly a bright light clicked on, operated, I could now see, by a PIR (passive infra red) switch just inside the door. It was very basic. A rough concrete square with a number of posts, obviously sunk into the mix before it set, which formed the supports for the chipboard walls, bare on the inside and painted green on the outside, the whole structure topped of with a corrugated iron roof. It had been divided up into three compartments; one large one containing a sink, a drainer and a shelf, with a boxed off section in the corner which I later discovered/surmised housed a copper cylinder, and two smaller ones, the shower and the loo.

Once in the shower and stripped off I opened my wash bag only to discover that I'd left shampoo and shower soap back at the last B & B. I really needed something other than just water to wash the salty streaks of sweat off. Cursing didn't help. Neither did remembering that there were no shops for miles. "These places normally have some sort of detergent lying about" I thought to myself as I went back out to where the sink was to have a scout round. I'd left my glasses in the tent but beside the sink was one of those square-shaped containers with a spout and plunger on the top. "Ah, some hand soap" I assumed. "That'll do OK" I thought as I stepped back into the shower compartment. I knew something was wrong as soon as I applied a handful of the contents of the container to my wetted scalp – it started to sting. As I quickly washed the stuff off, it began to sting other parts of my body, parts that one really doesn't want to sting! By a stroke of real luck, I managed to avoid getting it into my eyes. Once dried off, dressed and back out in the light, I got to read the label on my makeshift 'shower gel'. It was in fact a special anti bacterial agent for getting the dirt off gloves and boots after handling sewerage and the like; not designed to be used with water. I deemed myself to have had a lucky escape.

None the worse for wear, I got the stove going, cooked my rations from the day before and sat outside the tent eating an early dinner in the late afternoon sunshine. The view was stunning. Laid out in front of the tent was a patchwork of rolling fields, separated by hawthorn hedgerows, with an occasional stand of trees dotting the landscape; a stereotypical 'chocolate box' scene of bucolic England (Or was it Wales – I'm not sure). I heard a cuckoo; the first and only this year. The tranquillity was soon disturbed. The sound of machinery being moved and a tractor starting up came from near the farmhouse some distance away. The farmer had hitched a grass cutting machine up to his old Massey-Ferguson and was heading down to our field to do some evening mowing. Actually 'hobby farmer' would best describe him. He stopped the tractor beside the tent and came over to introduce himself and collect my site fee.

We shared some history. His day job was as a management academic, teaching on an MBA course at a nearby university. He remembered the MCI (Management Charter Initiative) an organisation that I worked for back in the mid nineties and the launch of the national management standards. We spent a pleasant half hour comparing the MBA degrees offered by various universities and the merits or otherwise of different management development programmes. I didn't relate the 'no soap' episode.

Off he went to do some mowing while I sat and scribbled my notes for this log and sorted out my maps for the next day. By the time I was ready for bed, the tractor and mowing machine were safely and silently back beside the farmhouse. I fell asleep thinking that this was a nice site but a mixed experience for me. Little did I know – there was more to come.

### **E2E - Day 6 - 6<sup>th</sup> August – 54.27 miles**

As usual, I awoke early at the camp site on Meridith Farm near Llancloudy and went about my morning routine; cycling clothes on then other clothes and bedding packed away so as to clear the inside of the tent, then light the stove and get the porridge on the go. Before packing the tent, I made a last visit to the little green hut to use the loo and clean my teeth. As soon as I turned on the hot tap at the sink there was one almighty loud bang. It frightened the life out of me. It sounded just like a rock had hit the roof.

I rushed outside; no one was about; there was nothing on the roof. As I went back in, I noticed that water was now flowing freely across the concrete floor, emanating from under the boxed off compartment that I'd noticed the day before. It couldn't have been an electrical blow out, it was far too loud and, anyway, the light was still working. I began to trace the wiring and noticed the large switch with a red neon just above the compartment. It was obvious to me now that this must feed an immersion heater in a copper cylinder behind the boarding, and that the bang must have been the cylinder exploding, with the resultant water flowing away from beneath.

From my knowledge of plumbing other things began to occur. Firstly, the immersion still seemed to be working, which meant that it was trying to heat constantly flowing water. Secondly, the leaking water was a terrible waste, tantamount to a constantly running, fully turned on tap. Both the electrical and plumbing installation were crude and amateurish. The wiring was simply cleated to the boarding in a haphazard way and the pipework was badly installed push-fit plastic. I turned the electricity off and traced the cold water input back to the blue plastic field pipe which had been connected with a washing machine type stop cock and duly turned that off too. At least no more harm could be done. Of course it must have been me turning the hot tap on that triggered the event but, with an installation like that, it was a disaster waiting to happen.

It was now about 6.45 and my neighbours from the other tent were up and about. I'd briefly met the man of the family the night before, now the woman was passing me on her way to the hut as I packed my tent. I related what had happened and told her I'd switched off both power and water. I don't think she really appreciated why I'd done that though. I considered going up to the farm house to explain what had happened but there were no signs of life. In the end I finished packing, loaded the bike and decided to do it by phone – coward's way out! The answer service was on, so I left a brief explanation by way of a message and pedalled guiltily off towards Hereford.

“Such a pity” I thought. “What a wonderful site – but my karma and that place just didn't seem to go together.” Now back to the cycle ride.

The road to Hereford was mostly downhill but, for some inexplicable reason, I didn't seem to be making the speed I would've expected. It felt a bit like riding with half inflated tyres. I checked them – good and hard. After flogging up a rather long and steep hill on the other side of Hereford, cresting the top and starting to go *slowly* down the other side, I could smell rubber. First I thought it must be a passing truck or car, then I realised it was me.

My front carrier is a rather peculiar affair. I bought it in Singapore to replace the broken aluminium low-rider carriers that I'd nursed with their makeshift repairs all the way through Asia. It still carries the front panniers low down but it also has a sort of platform which sits above the front wheel. The brackets and bolts that secure the thing to the forks aren't as effective as they should be and have sometimes slipped to allow the platform to push the plastic mudguard onto the tyre. With 700cc wheels, there's not a lot of spare room. Just before this journey, I'd replaced my broken front mudguard with a new shorter one with the consequence that when the platform slipped, as it had again done, this time it was rubbing on the tyre. No wonder the last few miles had been such hard going.

Two attempts to tighten the securing mechanism failed. The second time I even tried packing out the clips that go round the forks with puncture repair patches to make them tighter, but both times, within a few miles, the rack was back down on the tyre. I'd not been very happy with this front carrier system for some time but since I don't use front panniers during day-to-day cycling, had just put up with it. It was time to replace them with some proper low-riders.

I limped into Ludlow, the next sizeable town en route. A couple of inquiries elicited directions to a pet shop that also sold cycle accessories. It was obvious as I walked through the door that I wasn't going to be coming back out with a new front rack system, but I thought that they may at least have something with which I could better secure my present one. No such luck, and they were the only act in town. However, they did mention Pearce Cycles, one and a half miles outside town. I had a little conference with myself in the back of the pet shop. "I didn't really want to go traipsing round the Shropshire Hills on a wild goose chase." "On the other hand, it was pointless continuing with my bike in its present condition." "I couldn't dispense with the rack as I had no other way of carrying my front panniers." The pet shop owner looked up Pearce's telephone number for me and a quick call ascertained that they didn't stock front carriers either. However, they invited me to "come along and we'll see what we can do". I noted that the telephone call had been answered with "Pearce Engineering", so they may not stock the item I want but it sounded a little more promising than a pet shop (no disrespect to pet shop owners implied).

The directions I'd been given were somewhat confusing but the way-points mentioned by various people gradually materialised and confirmed that I was going the right way. At least it was in a northerly direction out of town, the way I eventually needed to go. Soon a large sign appeared announcing Peace Engineering on the right hand side. I turned into a short drive way and pulled up along side a large modern industrial building containing ground floor workshops and upstairs offices and stores. The establishment looked like a thriving general light engineering company which had branched out into cycle sales and repairs. Judging by the number of new bikes – mostly off-road machines – and bike workshop facilities, it looked as if the cycle trade was beginning to eclipse the original business.

I was very well received. As I showed the problem to one of the young mechanics, a much appreciated cup of tea appeared. He slowly surveyed the way the front rack was fitted. He squatted in front of the bike, pulled the rack forward against the forks into its correct position and soon realised that the existing fasteners were never going to keep it there. Then he came up with a simple but ideal solution – plastic zip ties. Not the small ones that I carry for emergency repairs, but much stronger and larger industrial versions. One of these either side secured tightly with the aid of a pair of pliers held the rack in exactly the position the mechanic had pulled it to. No amount of jolts on uneven roads was going to shift it now. Job done. I finished my tea, asked how much I owed them, only to be told "no charge", thanked them profusely and followed their

directions back out to the main road to continue my journey; now on a smoothly running bike with a secure front rack.

My bad karma of the last 24 hours seemed to have now been replaced with some better stuff. What good fortune to have come across Peace Cycles. If anyone is reading this in Shropshire and is in need of cycle repairs or maybe even a new bike, please consider giving your patronage to them.

I was now back on the A49. I'd been on it since just before Hereford and, although the CTC route recommended adjacent A and B roads, I'd decided to stay on it all the way up to Chorley in Lancashire, where it joined the A6, a part of the route that I was quite familiar with. I was heading towards Shrewsbury and going well, even though I'd lost much time due to the bike problem. The map showed two camp sites near Church Stretton, the next settlement en route. The A49 bypassed the village, which is probably why I didn't see signs for either of these. However, a couple of miles further on, an unexpected sign appeared showing a site to the right. It was about a quarter of a mile up a winding lane. The farmhouse was on one side of the lane with a field containing half a dozen caravans and some outbuildings on the other. There were no tents to be seen so I thought I'd better check before pitching. Again, no reply at the farmhouse. However, one of the caravanners assured me that they did take campers and suggested that I get set up and worry about the formalities later, which is what I did.

There was a shower in one of the outbuildings and I'd managed to purchase a few dinner provisions before the bike problem materialised, so I was all set for a comfortable night. Later that evening, I went across and knocked on the farmhouse door to pay my dues. The farmer asked for £5, a very reasonable price for such a picturesque location. He guessed I was doing the 'big' ride and asked if I was sponsored. When I told him about Harley Slack he promptly handed my fiver back and wished me well. Who said farmers were all tight and grasping? There's a lot of generous people about. That's another little bit for the fund.

It'd been a very mixed day; disaster in the morning, bike problems half way, but good fortune in the end. I was confident that Pearce's repair would see me safely to John O'Groats. A rather short day's ride though; only just over my daily target. But I fell asleep contentedly.

### **E2E - Day 7 - 7<sup>th</sup> August – 53.77 miles**

I was up and away early from the little camp site just north of Church Stretton. With a good bowl of porridge topped of with dried blueberries and walnuts in my stomach I made the first 20 or so miles up through Shrewsbury and onto Whitchurch in a very fast time, for me that is anyway. After that, I had a bit of a dilemma. Apart from one site marked on the map just north of Weaverham, there looked to be no camping opportunities anywhere near my route until way up past the heavily populated conurbation between Manchester and Liverpool. Do I stop at Weaverham or push in a longer day and find hotel or B & B accommodation further on? I pondered as I rode, not wanting to make a decision too early.

I reached Weaverham by early lunchtime. Still not quite decided on what to do, I pulled off the A49 and into the little town – more of a built-up village really – looking for somewhere to get a cup of tea and a snack. A pub seemed to be the only option. Landlords are generally much more enlightened these days and probably serve just as much tea and coffee as alcohol during the day. I ordered my beverage and perused the lunchtime sandwich menu. My host informed me that there was indeed a caravan site, which he was sure also took tents, just north of the village, right on

the main road. A decision had to be made. I'd only ridden just over 50 miles, barely respectable, but the weather was set fine for a few days only and I didn't want to miss the camping opportunities. I ordered a large meal instead of a sandwich and resolved to camp in Weaverham. "If I push in a longer day tomorrow, I could easily be up in Lancashire in familiar territory where I knew there were plenty of sites" I thought to myself.

A further dilemma – well, more of a temptation really – presented itself just before reaching Weaverham when I crossed the A556, a road I know well. If I'd have taken a right turn there I would have soon ended up in Altrincham and could then have simply continued through Manchester up to New Moston and spent the night at home; picking up the A6 out of the City and back onto the route the next day. On a number of occasions during my circumnavigation, friends and family e mailed suggesting that I stash my bike somewhere and jump on a plane home for a few days break. I didn't do it. It just didn't seem the correct thing to do; I was on a journey not to be interrupted. Although on a completely different scale, the same feelings of 'not being quite right' were evoked by the thought of going home this time. I resisted the diversion.

The very tasty pub lunch, consumed in brilliant sunshine out in the beer garden, ensured that I'd only need to snack later that evening. I pedalled off back towards the A49 to find the camp site promised by both map and landlord. Sure enough, it came up right on cue just outside the village. It was a pleasant, well established site sandwiched between the main road and the Weaver Navigation, part of the River of that name. So apart from the many caravans, a number of boaters also seemed to be using the facilities. There were no other campers though. I don't think they knew quite what to do with me when I road up to the reception office in the entranceway to the main house. However, they soon found me a delightful little spot in a small, well manicured garden alongside one of the permanent caravans whose owner was away. There was only just enough room to erect the tent, and I had to be careful not to trample on the shrubs whilst getting in and out.

The site boasted laundry facilities so I whiled away the afternoon doing some much needed washing, wrote up my log and perused the maps as it was drying. As usual, I turned in early but, with the site so close to the main road, traffic noise proved to be a problem. It seemed to take an age to fall asleep. It must be a popular route for everyone; the trucks pounded by all night long.

### **E2E - Day 8 - 8<sup>th</sup> August – 67.39 miles**

It was a somewhat bleary-eyed camper who cooked his porridge and packed up his tent that morning. However, the weather was fine and the therapeutic action of pedalling along in the early morning sunshine with only light Saturday traffic soon worked its wonders. I was going well. The A49 continued north through many places with names that were vaguely familiar to me; places I must have ridden or driven through in years gone by. Even when living in Yorkshire, I used to visit the area frequently, whilst working for one of the Cheshire Training & Enterprise Councils. Things were decidedly more familiar once I reached Warrington. I'd ridden to and through there four of five times in the last couple of years, going to meetings and conferences and on my way to Liverpool. Further up the road I thought I knew Wigan fairly well too, but I'd never approached it from the south before, and managed to get briefly lost in the centre before finding my way out the other side. Another case of a sign system designed by locals unable to see things from an outsider's point of view.

Once I'd made it to Chorely and joined the A6 I knew the route well, having ridden that way to the Lake District and, latterly, up to Scotland a couple of times. I was still making good progress so stopped in Preston for lunch. Knowing of plenty of camping facilities further north, I stopped again at Sainsbury's in Lancaster to buy some bananas and provisions for an evening meal. By this time I'd set my sights on **Bolton-le-Sands** for my over night stop. The site I'd chosen was off the A6 to the left, over the main west coast railway line and on towards Morecambe Bay. A sign at the entrance announced that the place was full. I assumed that this meant 'full' for caravans and confidently rode up to the reception – only to be told that 'full' really did mean full. “Surely you can squeeze in one more small tent?” I asked, but nothing doing. At first I thought she was being anti cyclist, it does happen, but I think it was probably genuine. The place was bursting at the seams. I was directed to another site about three-quarters of a mile away, right on the sands. Same again; packed to the hedgerows. I was beginning to get a bit concerned by now. Hotel and B & B accommodation can get a bit iffy at the height of the season but I'd never know camp sites to be so full that they couldn't fit in a lone cyclist.

There was nothing else for it but to head back up to the A6 and try the last of the three sites near Bolton-le-Sands. I was getting tired by now and it was a bit of a flog up and over some short but steep hills and back across the railway lines to the main road. I know that camp and caravan sites have to be licensed by the local authority and got to wondering if this stipulated a maximum number of individual pitches or people. The sign for site number three came up on the left and, once back over the railway line, my spirits lifted. This was a vast enterprise; caravans and tents for as far as the eye could see; and expanding by the looks of it too. It must have been half a mile to the farmhouse reception – or more properly described as the control centre of a slick operation. People were queuing to register. I began to wonder again. But I was early enough and managed to get a pitch. Because of the size of the place, once signed in and money paid, I was asked to follow a site worker in a landrover who took me back along the way I'd come and showed me to my allotted space in a vast field but close to a hawthorn hedge. The landrover driver, plus one of his colleagues with a tractor, continued guiding people back and forth for the rest of the afternoon and early evening until the site really was full.

The hawthorn hedge proved very useful. A piece of string tied between one of its branches and the tent allowed me to peg up my cycling clothes to dry out some of the sweat, and my towel after showering. It sheltered my little Optimus petrol stove from the wind as I brewed tea and cooked my dinner and, later, provided a welcome bird watching opportunity with all the various types of finches which used it as their purlieu. Swifts and/or swallows (I can never tell the two apart) continuously darted about overhead right into the dusk, no doubt stocking up on much needed insect protein in preparation for their forthcoming long haul flights back to Southern Europe, Africa and beyond. This was a very pleasant location, with views out over Morecambe Bay and a warm sea breeze blowing off the water. In spite of being full, the size of the place enable campers to be spaced well apart. It was surprisingly peaceful.

With a respectable day's mileage done and an agreeable place to lay my weary head, I fell sound asleep.

### **E2E - Day 9 - 9<sup>th</sup> August – 61.8 miles**

I'm always awake early when camping but it normally takes me the best part of a couple of hours to pack up, cook and eat breakfast, do my ablutions and be on the road. In spite of such a well-

populated site, I didn't see any of my fellow campers in all that time. It was Sunday morning and, viewing the empty wine and beer bottles alongside the BBQs outside some of the tents, I wasn't surprised. I pedalled back across the railway line and onto the A6 at 7.40.

It was a familiar and relatively easy ride up through Carnforth and onto Kendal. The traffic is never heavy on this stretch of road simply because it runs alongside the M6, so most through drivers use the motorway, especially truckers. Once passed Kendal, I knew exactly what was coming next – Shap Fell. It can only be described as a 'bugger' of a ride. This was my third time of riding over it but the first fully-laden with camping equipment.

It's about a six mile climb up from just north of Kendal. Not overly steep, no slopes on a par with Dartmoor, but long and twisting with many false summits when one initially encounters it. I remember a short sharp sweep downwards on my first traverse, and thinking that the climb was over and I'd started the long descent which must surely be coming, rounded a bend only to see the real summit stretching out above me. Nothing for it but head down, low gear, gritted teeth and spin the pedals.

This ascent was as hard as ever. The same 'psychology' involved to summon the determination to get up and over it. Once again, I vowed half way up that this would be the last time. I wonder if it will be? The descent down to Shap Village and on to Penrith is spectacular though; long and, with all the weight I was carry this time, fast and furious. It makes the effort of the climb worthwhile.

I stopped for lunch in Penrith with 40 miles on the clock. It was time to transfer the next map sheet from the pannier to the map case fastened to my bar bag. The café was a convenient place to do this in the dry. The by now usual accommodation dilemma was apparent. If I went much further than Penrith, the map showed a dearth of camp sites until after Carlisle, and then only one before Longtown.

The rain was steady and continuous by now but, in spite of the Shap Fell experience, I wasn't going to finish the day's ride with so few miles on the clock. I headed on up the A6 towards Carlisle. I first visited the City years ago showing the place off to a visiting American friend. We caught the train from Leeds and travelled up on the famous Settle to Carlisle line, crossing the imposing Ribbleshead Viaduct and taking in some of the stunning scenery of the Yorkshire Dales and Cumbria. This was my third time riding through the place and each time I've gone a different way. If driving, it's normally more convenient to use a bypass or ring road to get round a town or city. However on a bike it's often shorter just going straight through but, as I've reported before, road sign systems are so often designed by locals without the ability to view their streets from a visitor's point of view. Carlisle is no exception. I've had to ask for directions every time. And locals often aren't familiar with route numbers, in this case the A7, so one has to name a town in the direction one wants to go.

It didn't take me long to get onto the A7 going north. I knew that my next way-point was a large roundabout where the M6 ends and the newly upgraded A74(M) begins. I still hadn't decided where I was going to stay that night but, by this time, I'd covered a respectable mileage for the day and really ought to start giving it some serious thought. My mind was soon made up for me. A Premier Inn came up on the right hand side of the road. Along with Travel Lodges, I'd stayed in Premiers before and generally found them welcoming as a cyclist. There was a gap in the oncoming traffic. A quick signal and I was in the hotel car park.

Having ascertained that a room is available, my second question when booking into these places is “where can I secure my bike?” Without any hesitation, the very helpful receptionist replied “I’ve put you on the ground floor, just take it to your room”. Music to my ears - I didn't even have to off load the panniers. On the downside, the restaurant menu tended to cater for 'large eaters' – in every sense of the phrase. As soon as I walked in for my evening meal, I could see that the portions were enormous but the staff proved flexible and I managed to order a mixed grill but with only one of the meat items and a side salad; a reasonably healthy option.

“Scotland tomorrow” I thought to myself as I fell asleep.

### **E2E - Day 10 - 10<sup>th</sup> August – 60.8 miles**

Breakfast at the Premier Inn just north of Carlisle that morning was a conventional English affair; no porridge available though. I was definitely going to cross into Scotland today so, the night before I'd borrowed a UK road atlas from the hotel reception in order to confirm that I'd made the right route decision when planning things back home. Going out to the west coast of Scotland, which is where the CTC route was taking me, when ones eventual destination was the north-eastern most tip of the country, on the face of it, seemed rather silly. However, a quick perusal of the full atlas showed that, given the shape of the country and the location of its mountains, it was the sensible thing to do. I wasn't wedded to the CTC's plan but in this case, at least in terms of general direction, for me they'd got it right.

I pedalled away from the hotel at 7.45 and was very soon at the large roundabout where the M6 and A74(M) join the A7. This was a frustrating point. I now needed to head north east towards Dumfries. My map sheet, taken from a brand new 2009 edition, still showed the A74 - going in my direction - as non motorway. To my knowledge it had been up graded for at least the last two and half years, so I obviously couldn't use it. The only option was to follow the CTC suggestion, carry on up the A7 to Longtown, double back to Gretna to cross the border, then pick up the A75. “No use grumbling about it” I said to myself, “head down and get on with it.”

The ride north to Longtown was easy, but once I'd turned left heading for Gretna, an annoying westerly was blowing the rain straight into my face. It didn't take long to cross over into Scotland though and pick up the A75. I made it to Dumfries with 32 miles on the clock and stopped for an early lunch-time snack of pancakes and tea at a Little Chef on the outskirts of town. Thus replenished, I picked up the A76 and headed north-west up alongside the River Nith on the road to Kilmarnock. Considering I was climbing up a water course, it was relatively easy going, save for a few short steep sections. Nonetheless it was a beautiful dale to be travelling through.

The only camping opportunity marked on the map within reach was at Sanquhar, so I made that my destination for the day. The first thing I saw as I approached the outskirts of town was a young policeman stood, for no apparent reason, on the side of the road. I remarked “you look lonely” as I rode by. He just smiled. Almost immediately passed him came the camp site sign, or rather 'caravan' site; no tent symbol was included. This didn't bother me too much, it was often the case but camping was still permitted. I pulled into a small lane leading up to a farm complex. Before reaching the farmhouse, I came upon about half a dozen horses and riders, some mounted and some working on their tack. It looked as if they'd either just finish or were just preparing for a ride. There were a number of caravans to one side of the complex and soon after I pulled up, a man appeared from one of them and said that he was looking after the site for the owner. In answer to my question he informed that there was no camping facilities and never had been.

Another example of the map being wrong. He added though that the farmhouse did B & B but wasn't sure if there was any room. He went off to find the boss, returning shortly to say that he couldn't find her but because it was carnival week, she was probably in town. He was helpful but in a methodical sort of way and eventually got round to telephoning her and discovering that there was indeed space for me for £25 and that he was to show me to my room and get me settled in. The farmer's wife, I assumed, would be back later.

It was a large room with a big old-fashioned bed and furniture. It had a rather musty smell about it, commensurate with an old rural stone-built property; not unpleasant but slightly chilly. There was a partitioned room in one corner containing a loo, wash basin and shower. The shower had a large tray, capable of taking a wheelchair I surmised, with a sort waist-high gate assembly at one end. I thought it unusual to find disabled facilities in such an out of the way establishment but applauded the idea nevertheless.

It was late afternoon by this time. I availed myself of the room's tea facilities and considered showering but decided to simply drop my panniers and head off into town for something to eat. My acquaintance from the caravan directed me to a suitable café at the other side of town but suggested that I wait awhile to avoid getting caught up in the 'riding of the Marches'. He went on to explain this tradition, saying that riders bring their horses from far and wide to take part in Sanquhar Carnival Week. They were probably riding down main street as we speak and the traffic would be stopped at either end of town. That explained the equestrian scene that greeted me as I turned into the farm and the solitary policeman at the edge of town.

The only sign of horses, as I rode through town to find the café, was what a rose grower might be interested in. That part of Carnival Week must have finished for the day. However, I couldn't help noticing three teenage girls sat at an adjacent table to me as I ate my meal. They were all dressed in best party frock type outfits and the one in the middle was topped off with a wide sash with 'Sanquhar Queen' emblazoned on it in gold lettering. This must be quite a week. On my way back I passed what was reputedly the oldest working post office in the world, dating from the 1700s if I remember correctly.

Back at Newark Farm – circa 1800 - I was greeted by the lady of the house; a distinguished-looking woman perhaps a little older than me. We had one thing in common. She could talk the proverbial hind leg off a donkey! But I didn't mind as she was very interesting. As she showed me round my room and explained about the shower, she told me about her mother. Apparently blinded by some sort of gradually developing congenital condition at the age of twelve, she had nevertheless lead a very fulfilling life, ending it in her nineties peacefully in that very room. At the time of her death, all the light bulbs in the room had blown at the same time but the rest of the house was untouched. She went on to briefly explain some of the things going on at the farm and pointed out a box on top of the wardrobe, suggesting I read what was inside.

After a shower, a cup of my own rooibos tea and sorting out my maps for the next day, I did delve into the box to find out a little more about the place I'd fetched up in. The farm was run on sustainable lines from an environmental point of view and offered a myriad of opportunities for visitors, especially children. They could watch the various farm activities, lambs and calves being born etc., go on nature walks, identify birds and other wildlife and generally immerse themselves in the countryside. There were worksheets on which to record what they had seen and quizzes on flora and fauna that they could take part in. All in all, a very worthwhile facility; much much more than your average caravan site or B & B.

Some might think my accommodation slightly ghoulish. However, I deemed myself fortunate to be occupying the bed where someone who had lead such a fulfilled life had ended her days contentedly. My first night in Scotland – not quite what I'd expected. I slept soundly.

### **E2E - Day 11 - 11<sup>th</sup> August – 57.71 miles**

The dining room at Newark Farm in Sanquhar was olde-worlde too; silver cutlery, a pewter teapot and what looked like truly antique serving dishes. The landlady and I continued our wide and varied conversation in the morning and we got round to discussing food and diet. Like me she was a great believer in the benefits of porridge for breakfast. Unfortunately, that part of our discussion didn't come about until after she'd cooked and served me an enormous traditional English breakfast. The table was laid for a number of other guests but I never did see any of them. I was packed up, on the road with a full stomach and continuing up the A76 by just after 8 o'clock.

A brisk, cold northerly wind was blowing. This and the undulating nature of the road made for hard going up to Kilmarnock. The headwind was alleviated somewhat as I picked up the A71, turning due west towards Irvine, which I reached with 38 miles on the clock. I needed some cash so headed into town to search out a bank with a hole in the wall. It had been raining for some time by now, sort of constant drizzle interspersed with short periods of proper rain, but not enough to justify getting dressed up in waterproofs. Once I'd replenished my wallet, I decided to stop for an early lunch-time snack. For want of somewhere better, I ended up sitting at a window seat in a branch of Subway eating a muffin and drinking tea.

There was a knock on the window. I looked up to see two vaguely familiar faces; a young man and woman who I knew I'd met recently but couldn't immediately recall where. They'd obviously seen my bike outside and came in for a chat. Our brief encounter came back to me as we started to talk. I'd pulled up at a junction back in Cheshire and two pairs of cyclists were at the roadside, one was mending a puncture. My acquaintances had pulled up to see if assistance was required – which it wasn't – and I'd done likewise a minute or two later. Three redundant riders who should've minded their own business one might say. We exchanged stories. They were also E2Eers, travelling light with all their accommodation pre booked before they started. They even had a flight from Wick Airport arranged to take them back to the West Country, from whence they came, at the end of the ride. I can fully understand why a busy young couple, tied to jobs and short holiday periods, would need such a tightly buttoned-down itinerary, but it wasn't my idea of touring.

This was their scheduled day off. We compared notes on the ride so far and discussed the merits of our respective proposed routes further on. They'd selected theirs from a book about the ride and it seemed sensible. At that time I was still intending to follow the CTC recommendations but, in the end, did go a similar way to them for the last couple of days. We wished each other luck and they went off to continue sampling the delights of Irvine. This was typical of many such encounters I had along the way. It would take another log the size of this one to recount them all. I finished the last few crumbs of muffin, downed the dregs of my mug of tea and headed out to find the A78 going north out of town.

My next way-points were Ardrossan, West Kilbride and Fairlie, all more or less right on the coast. By this time the weather had worsened. It was raining properly now and the wind had got decidedly colder. I still hadn't donned waterproofs. I don't like wearing them at the best of times and the continuous rain just sort of crept up on me. "It'll only be a shower" I'd been saying to

myself. I was wet through, but all the while I was riding reasonably vigorously this wasn't too much of a problem. As soon as I stopped though, it was a different matter; I started shivering. A quick perusal of the map showed that **Largs** was probably the best target for the day. It looked like a sizeable settlement and should have plenty of accommodation opportunities. No camp sites were shown anywhere near there but with the cold rain was still pouring down, I wasn't intending to use the tent that night anyway.

There were literally dozens and dozens of B & Bs as I made my way through the outskirts of town, but every single one had a 'no vacancies' sign up outside. I tried the first hotel I came to – full. I could see that Largs must be a big sailing centre by the number of expensive yachts and boating facilities along the shore. The hotel proprietor informed me that they were in the middle of an international regatta, a sort of Scottish equivalent of Cowes Week, which is why everywhere was full.

Although by now I'd put my waterproof jacket on to keep some of the wind out, it was too late. I was soaked through, shivering continuously and cold to the core. I needed to get out of the weather quickly. As any outdoor person knows, man-made fibres don't retain warmth when wet, one needs wool to do that. Further south in warmer climes, I could get away with antics like this, but up here with such weather, I should've known better. It was a bad mistake; one I resolved not to make again.

I carried on into the centre of town and found the information office. Through chattering teeth, I inquired about accommodation, thinking that they may well keep a sort of bed count as some European towns do. No such luck. All they could do was suggest trying hotels further north on the way out of town. No offer to phone and check was forthcoming. “What are these places for?” I wondered to myself. They're good at smiling sweetly, handing out leaflets and telling you what you can easily find out for yourself.

North of the town centre Largs boasted a conventional seaside frontage small arcades, candy-floss & hot-dog stands and the like. My temperature was now getting seriously low and I needed to do something about it quickly while I was still thinking rationally. I found a tea stall, ordered a hot mug of the stuff and sheltered behind it out of the wind as I consumed it as quickly as I could. It helped. Still shivering, I carried on down the coast looking for somewhere to stay. First up was a very posh looking modern establishment called the Brisbane House Hotel; not mentioned by the Information Office, probably thinking that a cyclist wouldn't be interested in anywhere expensive. Right now, this one would've taken a room at the Park Lane had it been available! It was full anyway. Next up was the Queens; obviously once very grand but now looking rather run down. This was mentioned back in the town centre. A very helpful and chirpy young lass behind the reception desk informed me that they'd been putting up a European sailing team who'd completed their event and booked out that morning. Bingo! I was in luck. I had a room and was at last out of the weather.

Quick as a flash four panniers were making damp patches on the hall carpet, my bike was secured to a drainpipe outside and I was completing the formalities and collecting my key. Once safely ensconced in my third floor room, more hot tea continued the thawing-out process. A warm shower completed it and, as I hung my cycling clothes around the room to dry, I was beginning to feel normal again. I could even appreciate the splendid sea view from my window, out across the Firth of Clyde. The by now normal routine followed. Downstairs to the dining room for an early dinner, back to the room to scribble a few notes by way of a log, peruse tomorrow's maps, a little television then bed. I mused on the next day's ride as I was falling asleep. Carry on up the coast, a

short ferry journey across to Bute then a long meander around the lochs. Oh! and some hills by the look of it too.

### **E2E - Day 12 - 12<sup>th</sup> August – 49.56 miles**

8.15 saw me away from the Queens Hotel in Largs, on up the A78 heading for Gourock and the ferry. A cold breeze was blowing off the sea and a leaden sky threatened rain but none was presently falling. I didn't wish to repeat the clothing mistake of yesterday. On the other hand, I had to guard against the temptation to stop and don waterproofs at the very first spot of rain. One could end up spending the day dressing and undressing instead of getting on with the bike ride.

I pushed in eight or nine dry miles then the rain started falling gently. The A78 soon veered inland to the east towards Greenock. I took the coast road heading for Gourock. A few miles further and I came across the first sign for the ferry to Dunoon; 2 miles ahead it said. Confusingly, within a hundred yards of this sign was another, also advertising Dunoon and pointing down a short drive to a small ferry docking jetty. I rode down to where a few cars and vans were lined up waiting. Although the rain didn't yet warrant it, the breeze made it cold enough for a jacket while waiting around anyway; better safe than sorry.

The ferry boat could be seen making its way steadily across the Firth towards us. I fell into conversation with a foot passenger as we waited for it to dock and disgorge its dozen or so vehicles. He cleared up my confusion regarding the two ferry terminal signs. Apparently there is another ferry service a couple of miles further on, leaving from Gourock itself, and going to the centre of Dunoon, whereas the one we were waiting for was a smaller vessel bound for Hunter's Quay. A quick look at the map showed that this suited my purposes admirably. Hunter's Quay was north of Dunoon and out on the road I needed to take. Things were looking good.

I wheeled my bike down the gangway as the few cars and vans were driving on. A crew member indicated that I should secure it in the bow, which was easily done and I headed for the covered saloon. This was a cosy, workman-like little boat; "Toytown Ferries" I rather childishly thought to myself as we scuttled across the Firth. During the 20 minute crossing we experienced the whole seasonal gambit that the elements had to offer; rain and sunshine together, and a vivid rainbow, with its end disappearing into the forested hillside beyond. Typical Scottish weather I suppose. I said goodbye to my local passenger friend who was being collected by car at Hunter's Quay and pedalled off northwards along the shore of Holy Loch. After a while, it occurred to me that I hadn't paid my ferry fare; nobody had asked for it. Perhaps pedestrians and cyclists travel free; although I didn't see any drivers paying either? Perhaps it's a completely free service? Surely not. I was a mile or two up the road by now and wasn't about to turn around and satisfy my curiosity. Thank you Toytown Ferries!

On leaving Holy Loch, the A815 took me up through forested hillsides to the shores of a long narrow stretch of fresh water, Loch Eck. This was indeed spectacular scenery, and not quite as arduous a ride as I'd expected. Then it was another up and over section through yet more forest and down to the shores of the much larger Loch Fyne; a sea loch this time with its southern extremity in the Sound of Bute. Northwards around the shore I reached the tiny settlement of St Catherine's, with a long-derelict jetty sticking out into the water. "That must have been used by a ferry in times gone by" I thought to myself, as I looked westwards across the Loch to see where it might have sailed to. On the other side, a few miles away, was a sizeable town which the map showed could only be Inveraray, my destination for the day. I had many twists & turns and

double-backs to ride around before I reached there though. The A815 eventually joined the A82, a much busier main road, which took me round the northern end of Loch Fyne and back south-west to Inveraray.

It was a pretty little town, jam-packed with tourists of every nationality; many of them spilling out of the Information Office which I spied almost immediately. I wondered if the staff would be a bit more helpful than their colleagues back in Largs. I waited patiently in the queue and was rewarded with the news that the youth hostel, a few hundred yards out of town on the A819, my route for the next day, occasionally allowed campers in their grounds. This would be ideal; whatever happened I would be able to cook in the dry. I rode out to the small hostel which was deserted save for two young foreigners sat in the lounge reading. This is quite normal in such establishments. In my youth, everyone was booted out by nine o'clock and no one else could book in till five.

A sign on the main entrance door had already informed me that the place was full for that night and a further notice on the office window indicated that it was closed till five o'clock. The staff obviously need time off, however, I did have a scout round to see if I could locate the manager's quarters and found a small self-contained unit at the end of the building which could only be it. No response; it was deserted. Another by now all too familiar dilemma. The town was bursting at the seams. From what I'd briefly seen on my way in 'no vacancy' signs were everywhere. If I hung around at the hostel till five and couldn't then get permission to camp, there'd be no chance of a room in town. On the way to the hostel I'd notice the road ahead. It seemed almost vertical as it snaked its way up into the trees. I'd covered almost fifty miles already and didn't fancy tackling that at this juncture, especially with little chance of accommodation close by on the road ahead. A wild camp crossed my mind – it's legal in Scotland – but anywhere near these roads between the lochs just didn't seem 'wild' enough. It all looked 'owned' and well tended. I headed back to town.

Working my way up main street, I stumbled on a small door between the shops in a long terrace with B & B on it. I knocked. Positive karma was ripening for me. "Yes" the landlady said, "I have a twin room". A bit more expensive but still cheaper than a hotel, which were all full anyway. She immediately put up the 'no vacancies' sign.

As I struggled up the stairs to my room with my two large panniers, I rounded a corner and on the first floor landing was greeted by a sight I never expected to see in this part of West Scotland; a thirty-something obviously middle-eastern couple; he was dressed in western clothes, she from head to toe in typical Arab garb with a veil covering nose and mouth. I summoned up a passable Islamic greeting, which surprised both them and the landlady. I think it pleased them too, they probably hadn't heard their mother tongue from a westerner for some time. They'd booked in an hour or so before me and were just off to explore Inveraray and find somewhere to eat. It transpired that they were Saudi Arabian and knew the parts of Riyadh where I lived and worked back in the mid eighties. Luckily, the woman spoke a little English (women are invariably the better communicators); my Arabic doesn't really run to a proper conversation. Hitherto, the landlady – a regular local Scottish woman - had been struggling slightly to meet their needs, especially with regards to menus. Almost certainly nowhere in Inveraray would've been able to come up with halal food, but at least I was able to intercede and make suggestions for breakfast so that they could avoid any haraam products. They'd already sussed out that fish would be the best bet for dinner.

After a shower and a quick look round the town, I had a very tasty fish dinner too in a pleasant mid range restaurant overlooking Loch Fyne. Then back to the B & B and into the usual evening routine of log update and map perusal. I calculated that, out of the nearly fifty miles covered that

day, less than thirty of them had actually taken me nearer my destination. Given the topography of this part of Scotland, more such meanderings were yet to come. I wasn't looking forward to that first hill in the morning. I fell asleep with the rain gently pattering on the roof window.

### **E2E - Day 13 - 13<sup>th</sup> August – 51.57 miles**

I rode out of Inveraray at just after 8 am. The hill that I'd been dreading from the day before turned out to be a bit of an optical illusion. It did indeed look near vertical when it first came into view, as it had done the afternoon before but, once closer, its true gradient became apparent. The mountains towering above on either side added to the impression of steepness but it wasn't half as bad as I'd expected. In fact within a short distance the road made quite a sharp right hand bend and levelled off somewhat before continuing up Glen Aray. Having said that, the eight or so miles over to Loch Awe weren't an easy ride; undulating would be a generous way to describe them.

The day now developed into a repeat of the previous one. A long beat northwards, bringing me nearer my final destination, followed by an equally long push against the wind westwards around the next expanse of water, then north again and so on. Frustrating. One couldn't fault the scenery though, it was stunning. Although overcast, surprisingly, it was dry. The TV weather forecast that morning was for two days of rain, the second being more certain. Finger's crossed.

Once rounding the top end of Loch Awe, I was on the A85, a cross-country trunk road heading for Oban, which is a main ferry port for the Western Isles. Consequently, truck traffic was heavier than I'd been used to for the last few days. Nowhere near as dense as a similar road further south in England, but enough to disturb the relative peace that I'd grown accustomed to. From the shores of Loch Awe, the road ran along side a river of the same name and down towards Loch Etive, then on to Connel, my next way-point, where I'd decided to stop for tea and a snack.

Looking out for a suitable place for refreshments as I entered Connel, I noticed the word café at the bottom of a large sign at the entrance to a doctor's surgery on the opposite side of the road and pulled into the car park. The building appeared to be typical of such places housing a modern multi practice GPs' surgery with integral pharmacy, but no indication that it also housed a cafeteria. I left the car park and investigated the large house next door. Nothing there – just an ordinary private dwelling. I went back to the car park entrance and checked the sign again. My eyes hadn't deceived me, it plainly included the word 'café' at the bottom. I asked someone leaving the building. “Yes, there is a café in the surgery” and “yes, it is open for non patients”. Once inside it was obvious; half a dozen small tables with chairs in the corner of the waiting area with a small counter behind them. The WRVS staff were helpful and friendly and the home-made scones and tea delicious. “I've see this set-up in hospitals but never in a GP surgery” I remarked. They admitted that it was unusual but that it worked very well, although mostly patronised by patients and other locals. Passing trade was unusual. I'm not surprised as the car park was full. What a brilliant idea – we should be doing it in England.

At Connel the road took a wide sweep round and doubled back to take me northwards again, up onto a bridge over the entrance to Loch Etive. Now on the A828, I'd lost most of the truckers, only to be replaced by caravanners, who I often find more of a problem. Towner drivers, who aren't much good at the best of times, certainly unused to winding Scottish roads, and pulling their prized chunks of aluminium behind them probably for the first time since Easter, simply don't know what they're doing. Car owners who tow trailers and caravans should be subjected to a supplementary

driving test, with their licenses suitably annotated on passing. They're one of the drawbacks of doing such a ride at the height of the season.

As I made my way around Ardmucknish Bay, Loch Creran, the Lynn of Lorn and Loch Linnhe heading towards Fort William, another height of season problem again became apparent – 'no vacancy' signs everywhere. I hadn't passed a single B & B without one. I probably could've made Fort William but surmised that accommodation there would be harder to find than back in Largs, if at all, so it would be better to do my fifty or so miles and find somewhere in a less populated area. One camp site was marked on the map in about the right place but it never materialised. Although still no rain, the sky was dark and foreboding, so I wanted to be under a roof for the night.

An impressive looking sign came up in the middle of nowhere indicating the Stewart Hotel a mile distant. "Looks promising" I thought and kept an eye out for further indications. Sure enough, about a mile up the road, a further sign showed that the hotel was along a badly maintained drive, across a rusty broken-down cattle grid and disappearing up into the trees. I pushed my bike across the grid, mounted again and continued through the conifers on the broken tarmac. A few hundred yards and round a bend I came to a large country house with an equally large modern annex built onto one end, both looking decidedly the worse for wear. There was an old car parked in front of the house but no other signs of life.

A knock at the door and a push on the bell were followed by silence. The door was unlocked so I went inside, entering what must have once been a rather grand hallway, with the dining room off to one side and the lounge and bar area to the other. Shouts of "hello" simply echoed through the building; it was like the Marie Celeste. The tables in the rather seedy lounge were still covered with empty glasses and food crumbs from the night before, and this was the middle of the afternoon. Eventually I was able to hear noises of someone working coming from a corridor leading off to the annex. Soon afterwards a youngish be-suited Indian man (I later discovered to be Bangladeshi) entered the lounge. He'd evidently been carrying out chambermaid duties in the bedrooms and was startled to see someone else in the building.

He quickly regained his composure and, in answer to my query regarding a room for the night, went into an, oh so familiar to me, Indian Sub-continent routine. It consisted of consulting the hotel ledger with a self-important flourish, telling me about the coach party due in that evening, and that, should one be available, my room wouldn't be ready till five o'clock. He went on to say that the room would cost me £80 but that this entitled me to a 25% discount on my evening meal. This pseudo-bureaucratic behaviour is just so typical. The Indians learned it from us Brits back in the days of the Raj, but they've really perfected the art and far surpassed their teachers. The price was way over the top. I would've expected such an amount when the place was a 'proper' country house hotel, but not in its present state. Nevertheless, accommodation was difficult to come by, so I accepted.

I offloaded the bike putting the panniers in the corner of the lounge, unpacked my mini laptop and sat down to see if I could get a signal and check my e mails. "No problem, we have wifi" said my Asian host, on one of his infrequent flits through the lounge. After a while, a middle-aged woman accompanied by her elderly mother turned up and, like me, found their way to the lounge. I suggested they wait and that 'management' would appear soon. Sure enough he did and subjected them to the same charade. Pretty soon the three of us were seated on some of the lounge's ample easy-chairs and, as we discussed the strangeness of our situation, the 'Faulty Towers' comparison arose almost simultaneously, along with rather incredulous chuckles at the goings on.

A while later, 'management' entered the lounge and, rather grandly, announced that my room was ready and gave me the key. To be fair to him, he did help carry my panniers down the adjoining corridor into the annex and up to my first floor room. 'Dilapidated' would best describe it. The wardrobe door was hanging off; the television looked to be designed by John Logie Baird; the shower delivered a lukewarm dribble; the plastic guttering had parted company with its downpipe outside the window. I subsequently found it hard to avoid the tops of the springs which could be felt through the large double mattress. The list is endless. I made myself as comfortable as possible then headed back to the main building to hunt up some grub.

Mein Host was behind the bar. At first he wouldn't hear of dinner being served before eight o'clock but, with a bit of persuasion, relented and agreed to "as soon as possible". For want of something better to do, I ordered half a pint of Guinness and perched on a bar stool. The manager, receptionist, chambermaid and now barman had a moment to spare as he served my drink and seemed to soften his tone a little. He related that, along with his Bangladeshi business partner, who appeared in the bar moments later, had purchased the place a couple of seasons ago and, according to him, business was good. As if on queue, the coach load of Germans arrived and he scuttled off to continue his reception duties. However, it was a large mini bus - if that's not a contradiction in terms - with about fourteen passengers in all, and most of them couples. Not exactly enough to fill the annex to capacity. I ordered poached salmon off the over-priced menu and waited.

One manager ushered me through to the dining room at just after seven and the other served the mediocre dish of tasteless salmon and over-cooked vegetables. The Bangladeshi two, plus a rather vacant-looking Scottish cook who I spied at breakfast in the morning, were the only members of the hotel staff that I saw. I have a sneaking suspicion that that is all there was! I dined and went to bed.

### **E2E - Day 14 - 14<sup>th</sup> August – 55.5 miles**

As soon as I awoke I looked out of the window and was astonished to find that it was still dry. The weather forecasts aren't normally this inaccurate. "Will it be possible to squeeze a few rain free hours out of the day?" I mused as I packed my panniers and made a cup of tea. Management had decreed the night before that breakfast wouldn't be available till 8.45 but, with a bit of badgering, had grudgingly relented to "possibly a little earlier." The present lack of rain made me even more determined to bring the hour forward.

The dining room was empty at 7.30 but I could hear noises coming from the kitchen. The rather gormless cook was making ready with pots and pans. I asked if I could have an early breakfast; "anything will do" I added. He smiled broadly and nodded vigorously, but I got the impression that he didn't exactly comprehend what he was agreeing to. I retired to the dining room to await events. Almost immediately a group of six men dressed in working clothes came bustling in, like me, intent on securing an early breakfast. We sat together. They all had North-eastern English accents and were part of an off-shore team trying to locate the break in an underwater telephone cable laying on the bed of one of the lochs. Short of anywhere else to stay, they'd booked in the night before, arriving after I'd retired. Without prompting from me, Faulty Towers came up in the conversation again. Hot on the heels of the workers, the Germans arrived in the dining room. True to form, they're not given to laying in bed in the mornings.

Management had no choice but to 'pull their collective fingers out' and very soon, two Bangladeshis and the Scottish cook were trying to take orders and ferry plates of bacon and eggs out to the hungry guests. Pragmatism set in on our table. We all chorused "over here" whatever combination of bacon, egg, sausage and toast was called out. Consequently, we were all fed and soon out of the way, leaving the Germans to argue about who had ordered what.

I paid the £80 for my room and breakfast by credit card the afternoon before and no one had sought payment for the evening meal. With chaos reigning in the kitchen, nobody was staffing the hotel reception as I lugged my panniers out to load up the bike. Had I been asked for further money, I'm sure I'd have refused. They'd had enough out of me; it just wasn't worth it.

Some might view the above description of the goings on at Hotel Stewart as somewhat prejudiced, even racist maybe. I've cycled right round the Bay of Bengal from the Indian border to Chittagong and found, with one exception, the Bangladeshis to be wonderful people. They live in a beautiful country and, although very poor, extend typical Islamic hospitality to foreigners. I had a great time. I've met many Bangladeshis in UK too, having lived in Bradford and, latterly, Manchester. All have been enterprising, hard-working and, above all, honest. It is easy to see what is going on at the Stewart. My surmise is that they've bought for a song what was once a high class country house hotel but fallen on hard times, and are trying to restore it to its former glory. In the meantime, they're running it on a shoestring but charging top end prices. I'm typing this log back home post ride and I've checked out their web site. Double rooms are listed at £50 for the high season. The operation they are currently running is 'enterprising', they are demonstrably 'hard-working' but 'honest' I'm not so sure about. In fact the operation is a total rip-off!

Large wet spots were occasionally falling from the sky as I loaded up the bike and by 8.15, as I pedalled down the hill away from the hotel, the long-awaited rain was falling properly. Within half an hour I'd reached a point where Loch Leven joins Loch Linnhe. Here the road made a long sweeping double back, went up over a bridge and put me on the A82 heading directly to Fort William. I was tempted to linger in the town but it's a place I'd visited a number of times before and, with only 18 miles on the clock, the urge to carry on was much stronger. I was at the western end of the Great Glen which continues north-easterly in an almost straight line to Inverness on the Eastern seaboard of Scotland. I had a real sense that I was getting nearer my final destination. Save for twists and turns in the road, from now on, I was heading in the right direction; no more meandering around going towards all points of the compass.

From Fort William the road veers up hill a little away from the water heading for Spean Bridge, on the river of that name. With 27 miles done, and nothing much in the way of settlements for miles after that, I decided to stop for some refreshments. I was pleasantly surprised to see a Little Chef sign on the way into town. I hadn't realised that they operated in Scotland, this being the first I'd come across. The food is nothing special but, save for a short period back in the early nineties when they had a policy of turning away cyclists, I've always found them to be welcoming. It was before eleven o'clock and they were still serving from the breakfast menu which had porridge on it; something I'd never sampled in a Little Chef. Very nice it was too; thick and stodgy with lashings of honey melting in from the top. I knew I wouldn't need to stop for the rest of the day's ride. The meet 'n greet/check out area in these establishments normally has a small stock of gifts, trinkets and sundry other items, among which was baseball cap with a large peak and 'Scotland' plus a thistle emblazoned on it. I'd left mine back in the B & B at Sanquhar and the relentless cold rain was giving me a slight headache. I added this to the bill for the porridge and tea and got back on the road.

I'd been wearing my top-of-the-range, rather expensive Endura cycling jacket all morning and it was certainly doing its job; keeping my inner core warm and, apart from the unavoidable condensation from sweating, my trunk dry. A few miles after Spean Bridge the weather did cause a minor bike problem though. I was riding at a steady 12-13 mph but, on glancing down at the bike computer, noticed a big fat zero where the speed readout should be. I knew instantly what the problem was. It'd happened in times gone by, with either rain like this or in very fine mist/clouds when riding at high altitudes. Moisture gets in between the computer and its handlebar mount, shorting out the contacts bringing the signal up from the sensor on the forks. Fortunately, I was carrying a small can of WD40, a very efficient water repellent. It was difficult to do a proper job in the rain but, by leaning over the handlebars, I was able slide the computer away from its mount, wipe of the excess water with my handkerchief, apply a quick spray and replace it sufficiently quickly to cure the problem. I'm not very diligent when it comes to routine maintenance but, with winter just around the corner, I must remember to do this every few weeks and prevent the problem in the first place. It could just be that this ride is a couple of miles longer than I actually recorded.

The A82 gradually made its way back down to the water's edge and ran along side Loch Lochy (I've always thought this to be a rather unimaginative name – all the others are so poetic or evocative). It then crossed the water and swept northwards for a short distance to take in Invergarry, before heading back to the northern shore of Loch Oich (that's better!) and along to the Caledonian Canal. I toyed with the idea of taking the Canal path but in the end opted to stay on the road. The former would have been more picturesque but full of walkers, whilst the latter, probably longer, but much less muddy and no doubt smoother. In spite of the rain, Fort Augustus, at the other end of this stretch of the Canal, was jam packed with tourists. All I was aware of as I rode through was a sea of multi-coloured umbrellas and every imaginable type of rain wear. Some unprepared souls had improvised with plastic bin bags, heads and arms poking out through slits. It was far too crowded for me to consider stopping.

The road now continued along the northern shore of the most famous loch in Scotland, but the only monster in sight was the continuing weather. The miles were clocking up and my thoughts turned to where to stop for the night. A really long day could possibly take me on to Drumnadrochit, or even Inverness, but I'd had enough rain for one day and wanted to get out of it. 'No Vacancy' signs had been hanging outside every B & B establishment I'd seen that day. **Invermoriston** was the next sizeable settlement so I decided to try my luck there.

The most prominent building in the village was the Glen Moriston Hotel. "Let's not mess about" I thought "I'll try there". As expected – full. The English landlord suggested I try some B & Bs further up the road. A couple of hundred yards past the Hotel were two B & B signs next to each other, with steep steps leading up to the respective houses. One had the usual attachment, the other didn't. It was difficult to get my bike off the road but I left it half standing, half laying against the rocks in the hillside and quickly ascended the steps to see if there really was a room available. Yes, I was in luck. Hayley, the young landlady from East Yorkshire, had one twin room left. A bit more expensive but I didn't hesitate. "Nothing could be as bad as last night" I thought. With accommodation secured, I trod gingerly back down the slippery steps to the main road. It would have been very difficult to negotiate the way up with a bike, impossible with it loaded, so, as directed, I rode off to find the vehicular access to the house which was via a gravelled drive further on.

Hayley's B & B was well equipped for cyclists, with a covered area for bikes and a place to hang wet clothes. However, she didn't provide evening meals but by the time I'd showered, changed,

checked my e mails and come back downstairs, she'd booked me a table for the six o'clock sitting at the Glen Moriston Hotel. "I'd have dinner out of the way in time to listen to the Archers" I thought. Little did I know!

In the bar of the Glen Moriston before dinner, I met Neil, Hayley's husband, also from East Yorkshire but apparently with Scottish ancestry. He's now a local gas fitter. I later saw his blue British Gas van outside the house. He'd nipped down the hill to put up the 'no vacancies' sign just after my arrival, then onto the Hotel for a pint. "Out from under my feet" Hayley had said as I was leaving. There was only one person in the bar with a Scottish accent. Most of the customers were Italian, German or from other parts of Europe. The landlord was from Manchester and ideally suited to the job. He effortlessly kept all nationalities entertained with his banter whilst taking orders and dispensing beverages. Only a few locals were left in the Glen; nearly all the permanent residents were from south of the border.

Six o'clock arrived and those booked in were ushered through to the dining room. Seated at a small table adjacent to mine, was another lone diner, a rather handsome woman of a 'certain age'. As we scanned our menus, she leaned over and asked for my help with one of the items. How does one describe a 'parcel of lamb' to a non native English speaker?

To cut a very long story short, Mette Marie Hansen was from Denmark. A journalist and travel writer, she had been commissioned to walk the last section of the Great Glen Way and write about it for a Danish travel magazine, then move on to Edinburgh and do the same for the Tattoo. This was one of those rare serendipitous occasions when one meets someone with a similar take on just about everything; philosophy, politics, environmental issues, quality of life; we ran the whole gambit and put the world to rights to our mutual satisfaction. The conversation spilled over into the next sitting; I hadn't noticed. We retired to the bar and continued. It transpired that we were staying in the same B & B and it was late evening by the time we shared my umbrella back to our abode, struggled with the key in an unlocked door and said good night. A rare evening indeed. Luckily, Mette's English was good enough to facilitate such discussions. If it had been down to my Danish, we'd have nodded to one another and gone our separate ways. Without doubt, the best evening of the trip so far; it certainly made up for the night before.

### **E2E - Day 15 - 15<sup>th</sup> August – 63.32 miles**

Mette and I continued our conversation over breakfast the next morning. However, we both had a busy day ahead of us. This was the first day of her Great Glen walk and I still had many miles to ride to reach the northern-most extremity of mainland UK. We said our goodbyes in front of the house. Out came her camera and I waited while bike and rider were snapped. I sincerely hope it doesn't make it into any Danish magazines. It was 8.30 as I rode off down the gravel drive and back to the main road beside Loch Ness. I've since learned by e mail that Mette wasn't at all impressed by the Edinburgh Tattoo but that she's soon to go on another assignment trekking around Mount Blanc.

My next way-point was Drumnadrochit. For the last few days, I'd actually been sticking to the CTC recommended route but, at this point it parted company with the Loch and headed almost due north to wend its way on smaller A and B roads right up to the north coast then east through

Thurso and on to John O'Groats. This looked like a long and rather circuitous route, not to mention a hilly option. I'd been musing over this in the evenings for some time. The alternative was to carry on heading east to Inverness, pick up the A9 on the other side of the City, follow it, and the A99, up the coast to Wick and then finally on to John O'Groats. At least it looked simpler that way. However, in the CTC End to End pack, which I'd downloaded prior to leaving home, it talked about avoiding the A9 at all costs because of the traffic. Not that riding with the trucks and buses particularly bothers me, but it is nice to tootle along in the peace and quiet sometimes.

I still hadn't completely made my mind up when I reached the outskirts of Drmnadrochit. As I rode in, it occurred to me that this was the weekend; the freight traffic would no doubt be lighter. Mind made up, I continued eastwards along the Loch which gradually narrowed to become the River Ness and, in effect, the top part of the Caledonian Canal, allowing boat navigation from west to east coast, Fort William to Inverness. On the outskirts of Inverness, the traffic was unexpectedly backed up. As I rode up to the front of the queue I could see red lights flashing and guessed it was some sort of gates at a crossing. I reached the head of the line just in time to see the barriers come down closing the road and a large swing bridge being opened to the canal. We waited a few minutes while the mast of a medium-sized sailing boat passed sedately across in front of us, the bridge carrying the road gradually swung back into place, the sirens sounded and the barriers lifted allowing traffic to flow again.

Soon after this an opportunity to bypass the City came up on the left by way of a sign indicating 'A9 North', and a glance in that direction showed the high, wide span of a bridge way in the distance which, from the map, could only be the main road crossing the inner end of the Moray Firth. I needed some cash so carried on into the Centre and soon located a bank with a hole in the wall. As pleasant as Inverness is, apart from replenishing my wallet, I had no other reason to linger. As usual, there was a dearth of signs catering for through traffic but it's a relatively small place and, knowing that all I had to do was turn left, I soon found myself on a surprisingly busy dual carriageway heading north. Before long the gradient started to rise sharply, taking the A9 up to the bridge I'd seen earlier. Then followed the most frightening fifteen minutes of the whole journey.

A very strong westerly was gusting off the land and out to sea, being 'funnelled' up the Firth. The nearer one got to the bridge, the stronger the gusts. I'm a great believer in cyclists being integrated with the rest of the traffic and find most cycle lanes to be a hindrance rather than a help but, mercifully, in this case, the bridge boasted a completely segregated cycleway, fenced off from the main road, similar to what I'd encountered across the Avon Gorge and River Severn. It had a wire fence on the outside too so that there was no danger of falling into the water far below. A fully laden bicycle can, in many circumstances, be a stable machine to ride but, in a cross wind, it behaves a bit like a sail. Each bluster seemed more fierce than the last. The tarmac was perfectly wide enough for normal conditions but I was in constant danger of being blown into the fence on either side in the unpredictable eddies, or simply blown over. My heart was in my mouth all the way across. I really don't know how I stayed atop the bike. For some strange reason, it never did occur to me to get off and walk – simple soul that I am!

As the bridge gradually descended down to the southern end of Black Isle, the cycle lane lost its fencing on either side but remained segregated from the other traffic for another two or three miles. It then disappeared off into the trees. Thinking that it might continue parallel to the A9, I stayed on it, only for it to peter out into a muddy farm track after a few hundred yards. "Typical well thought out cycle facility" I mumbled to myself and headed back to the main road to join the rest of the traffic. Luckily, the fast dual carriageway only lasted for another three or four miles. At a

roundabout roughly half way across Black Isle, the road split, the A835 going north-westerly, while my route, the A9, continued north. The traffic was much lighter now and, in spite of the wind, it became a pleasant ride again.

A glance at the map made me apprehensive again though. Not far ahead, at the northern side of Black Isle, the A9 crosses the Cromarty Firth. I was dreading a repeat performance of a short time ago. As the expanse of the Firth came into view, I was much relieved to see that, instead of a bridge, the road crossed on a sort of built-up causeway. As I rode over, because of the lack of height, the wind was only marginally stronger than on the normal road.

As I carried on along the northern shore of Cromarty Firth, I gave some thought as to where to stay that night. A camp site was marked on the map on the southern side of **Dornoch Firth**, three or four miles north of **Tain**. That became my target for the day. I stopped at a café on the main road near Invergordon, ostensibly for tea and a snack but, as it was early afternoon by this time and the food looked tasty, I decided to go for a large meal. That way, with a few snacks, I needn't bother cooking in the evening.

A very heavy shower sprung up from nowhere as soon as I left the café. I stopped and put my jacket on but it didn't last long. It didn't bode well for a dry night's camp though. The road leaves the coast after Invergordon and turns inland with a consequent climb, but relatively gradual in this case. The constant west wind had veered round to a more northerly direction by now and made for slow going, even more so after Tain as the road also curved round to the north-west. More short sharp showers were blowing through on the wind too.

I'd just about had enough for the day as I approached the junction where the camp site should be. The A9 does an abrupt right turn at this point and heads due north across the **Dornoch Firth** on another low but built-up causeway. The little tent symbol on a sign pointing straight ahead confirmed the camp site's existence and, within a hundred yards or so, I was pulling off the road into a well manicured caravan park. The office was near the entrance with the rest of the site occupying a long narrow strip of land sandwiched between two very thick leylandii hedges. Static caravans were arranged neatly in rows on either side of a central driveway, followed by a few tourers, with the empty tent area beyond. The young lass in the office – with yet another English accent north of the border – took my money, explained where the shower and toilet block was situated and told me to pitch where I wanted but to give her let he know where I'd chosen.

Short, sharp showers were still blowing through every half hour or so but the strength of the wind meant that the ground was relatively dry. I selected a space on the opposite side to the road; “quieter there” I surmised. The hedges on either side of the site gave some protection, however, it was still somewhat difficult threading the one flexi tent pole into its sleeve in the flysheet and getting it pegged out. That done, the rest is easy. The inner compartment simply hangs inside the fly and is pegged out, which of course can now be done out of the weather. I was on my knees doing just that when I got the shock of my life. A tremendous noise, seemingly from the western end of the camp site, became apparent. It sounded like one of the gusts of wind had developed into a prairie-style tornado and was about to blow straight through. “This is Scotland” I thought. “It can't be.” Then the ground beneath my knees physically shook. “Earthquake – no, impossible.” This all happened in a few seconds. Then it dawned on me what had just gone on. The map confirmed that on the opposite side of the site to the road, was a railway line, literally a few yards from where I was kneeling, on the other side of the hedge. A train had just rattled by. I subsequently discovered that it was one of the four trains a day on the single track line between

Wick and Inverness. A mundane, everyday occurrence but, when you've no idea that a train is imminent, or indeed that you're anywhere near a railway, a rather traumatic experience.

The wind dried my towel in minutes after my shower as I got the stove going next to hedge and made a welcome brew. Soon I was safely ensconced in the tent and settling into the nightly camp site routine. Surprisingly, there was enough of a signal to allow e mail checking. This done, a quick scribble in my note pad by way of a log and out with the map to see what tomorrow would bring. I still had a long way to go but, depending on the hills, I might be able to make Wick. Maximum two more days and the ride would be over. The wind was still gusting strongly but the showers were by now less frequent. I was comforted by the knowledge that my little Saunders Spacepacker tent could withstand pretty substantial gales. With that thought, I fell asleep.

### **E2E - Day 16 - 16<sup>th</sup> August – 81.36 miles**

The showers died away during the night but, fortunately, the wind kept up till dawn. This had the effect of preventing both dew and condensation from forming and, after breakfast, I was able to pack away a virtually dry tent. One annoyance that I wasn't expecting at that time of the morning though was midges. Camping with the children at Glen Nevis and around Fort William in years gone by, I'd experienced them at their worst; great swarms of them, crawling up your nose, in your ears, mouth and eyes and generally driving you to distraction; but normally in the late afternoon and early evening. Perhaps the winds of the day before had prevented their meanderings but, now that it had died down somewhat, as it always seems to do just before and after dawn, they'd come out to forage. There weren't enough though to warrant donning the head net that I'd been carrying in expectation of such an eventuality. I managed to put up with them for the short time it took to breakfast and load up the bike.

It was only 7.20 on a calm Sunday morning when I rode back out to the A9, turned north and headed onto the raised causeway taking the road across the Dornoch Firth. Much later, I got talking to a young cyclist who'd ridden the same route the day after me. He described crossing the Dornoch Firth as “hellish” but the bridge over the Moray Firth as a “cake-walk”. His ride was at a different time of day in both cases but it just goes to show what a drastic effect the wind has on cyclists; something that very few drivers appreciate.

I made good time for the first twenty or thirty miles. The westerly wind had got up again but, for now, I was heading predominantly north-east. Since Inverness, I'd been pleasantly surprised by the lack of hills. I suppose it helped that the road predominantly hugged the coast, making for a more undulating rather than hilly ride. “This last stretch isn't going to be too bad” I thought – then I got to Helmsdale. The long, steep dive down was a spectacular surprise. My speedo touched 40mph. Once through the little settlement, situated at a point where the river of the same name joins the sea, the inevitable equally long and equally steep ride up commenced. This came as a bit of shock to the system after the last few days. Nothing for it but granny gears, head down and slowly grind ever upwards. “Could be doing without too many more of them” I said to myself as the road levelled off and continued on its undulating way, but within eight or nine miles, there was Berriedale and an almost identical performance.

Once out of this second stupendous climb, and thinking that the terrain would be similar all the way to John O'Groats, I decided to grab some food as soon as possible and reappraise my situation.

I remembered it was Sunday and wondered how easy it would be to obtain refreshments. I'd heard that the Lord's Day observance lobby could be powerful in these parts. The next opportunity was Dunbeath where I arrived with around 50 miles on the clock; there was a camp site marked there too. A nice little pub overlooking the sea came up, and it was open. Obviously commerce had won out over religious considerations. I went in for some lunch. The landlord was yet another Englishman – I'm beginning to think that the 'Highland Clearances' have been secretly carried out again and the locals replaced with people from south of the border! Obviously used to a steady stream of E2Eers as customers, he asked about my ride. I told him I'd probably done about enough for the day but certainly wouldn't make it any further than Wick. "Why not finish it off?" he replied. I reminded him of Helmsdale and Berriedale and said that I wasn't getting any younger. "There's nothing else like that" he replied. "The worst of the hills are behind you. You'll easily do it by five o'clock".

He was a friendly man, but like most of his profession, rather rotund and patently not a cyclist. However, he spoke convincingly, and was no doubt saying what I wanted to hear. I'd done similar distances many times in the past, but not recently. I was confident that I could do it, even fully loaded. And a sixteen day End to End sounded better than a seventeen. I resolved to "stop being a self-indulgent old fart" and get on with it; "Knock the bastard off" to borrow again that famous phrase from Sir Edmund Hillary. I finished my lunch, downed my last dregs of tea and got back on the bike.

The ride to Wick wasn't too bad; the landlord's words were proving to be true. The persistent, sometimes gusty, westerly wind became stronger and was gradually veering round to blow from a more northerly direction. Although hell bent on completing the ride, I gave some thought to the return journey and made a quick enquiry as to the location of Wick Station. It turned out to be a fool's errand; no trains on a Sunday; booking office closed. Another brief diversion to find the public loo, and then through the town centre and onto the road north. 'John O'Groats 16' the sign read – almost there!

This was a great psychological fillip but, for the first two or three miles out of Wick, the road goes straight up a gradual incline in a north-westerly direction – straight into the teeth of the ever increasing wind; showers too by now. I couldn't be bothered to get dressed up; it just didn't matter how wet I got now. The wind seemed to sense my mood. As the impatience boiled up, it gusted. I was down to 5 mph at times; certainly not a speed warranted by such an insignificant gradient. After what seemed an age, I finally reached a point where the A99 made an abrupt right turn and levelled off for a few hundred yards, affording a brief respite from the headwind. It now undulated onwards, twisting and turning its way around the coastline. Through four or five more little settlements and a dozen or so miles and I'd be there. The wind was as strong as ever and the showers now merged together to form continuous rain.

On and on the road seem to go, until a sign reading 'John O'Groats 1 ½' came up. By this time, the rain had turned to a cross between drizzle and mist, restricting visibility ahead. I topped what was obviously the last rise and, although I couldn't see my destination, I sensed that it was now down hill all the way. I passed a B & B and noted the absence of a 'no vacancies' sign. Then came a massive advertising billboard - incongruous in this bleak setting – announcing the Seaview Hotel. It looked very grand. Within a minute or two, my bike was leaning against the outside wall, while I stood in bar of the not at all grand Seaview doing the business. There was nothing available in the main building, however, I could have a basic room in the annex across the road, plus breakfast for £35. Sorted. I glanced at my watch; it was 4.50. The landlord back in Dunbeath really did know his stuff.

As with any of these expeditions, the end always seems to be a bit of an anticlimax. “Oh well, that's it done” I said to myself. “Now lets think about getting home.” To that end, I off-loaded the bike, dumped everything in my room and headed down the few hundred yards or so to the centre of town, in search of the tourist information office, which I'd been informed would be open. I located the office very close to the road sign indicating Land's End 874 miles. So, my duty was done. I'd ridden from sign to sign. Though I don't know how the distance has been calculated. Perhaps it's by motorway. The advertised cycling routes mostly give distances between 1,000 and 1,200 miles; I'd done 900.

The tourist office proved to be partially useful. I managed to get a train timetable showing me the four trains a day from Wick to Inverness but, as usual, the staff could only tell me what I was able to read for myself. “What about bikes” I asked. “Is there any need for reservations?” “Don't know” was the entirely expected reply. You'd think an organisation like that would liaise with Scotrail and have the information at their fingertips. As I've said before, they're nice people but typical civil service/local authority types; the system has knocked all the initiative out of them. “I'll worry about it tomorrow” I said to myself and headed back to the hotel.

In spite of the miles that day, I didn't feel particularly tired. A shower, change of clothes and a passable meal back across the road in the main hotel and it was time to settle down. Scribble log, e mails, the TV news and it was time for bed. It was still raining I fell asleep.

### **E2E - 17<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> August – Journey Home. Facts and Figures**

It was still raining when I looked out of the window in the morning. In fact I never did see John O'Groats in the dry. But I didn't particularly care; I was probably still savouring the end of the ride and in no hurry to get going again. Sixteen consecutive days on the bike is unusual for me. At home I normally 'use' it every day but for short hops, visits, shopping trips etc., on days when I'm not working. Even during the RTW I would normally get a break after maximum eight or nine days. Impatience to get home set in later.

My copy of the Wick to Inverness timetable showed 6.20, 8.12, 12.36 and 1600 trains. In spite of the lack of information from the tourist office, I knew from my own research pre ride that bike booking was essential on Scotrail, especially for this leg. With hindsight, I wish I'd got my act together and gone for the 8.12; it's only 16 miles back to Wick and I may possibly have got a bike space. But I didn't. A lazy breakfast at an hour commensurate with conventional holiday-making was on the cards for that morning. Recent habits die hard. In spite of my attempt at a leisurely start, I was still packed up, breakfasted, on the road in the rain and at Wick railway station at just before ten.

I was aiming for the 12.36 train, hoping to be able to get the bike aboard. A sign that I'd missed the day before announced that the ticket office didn't open till 10.10 – a strange time to choose I thought – so I sat down out of the rain to wait. Very soon a large woman, almost wearing a railway worker's uniform, coughing profusely and smelling of cigarettes, came into the waiting area. She took one look at me and rather brusquely repeated what I'd read on the notice. “No problem” I replied and continued my wait. She waddled off into the bowels of the building. Once at the open ticket office window, I was told, reasonably politely, that there wasn't a bike place on the midday train but that she could book me on the 1600. She was sat beside a modern-looking computer connected, I assumed, to the normal rail network, but told me that her system only

allowed her to book me as far as Inverness. I bought my ticket for the late afternoon train and wandered off to see what a wet Monday in Wick had to offer.

Having done some off-shore sailing in the past, I'm always interested in looking at boats so I headed towards the harbour. However, the rain was harder than ever when I got there. I found a café overlooking the water, bought some tea and scones and settled down with my mini computer to do some e mailing. After an early lunch, the rain had stopped so I quit the café and took a leisurely turn around the harbour, chatting to a few of the locals about their boats. Then into town to have a look at the local shops and, armed with a copy of the Guardian, back to the station to wait for my train.

With bike safely stashed, comfortably seated and awaiting departure, I noticed another cyclist coming down the platform and loading his bike onto the train. He took a seat opposite me. About half my age, it transpired that he was from Oldham, so also heading for Manchester. He'd completed the ride that day, coming back down to Wick on the off chance of catching the train that day. He'd been fortunate. The last train of the day probably isn't popular with cyclists making their way home. We spent the journey comparing our experiences.

From Wick, the train heads back up in a north-westerly direction to Thurso, then south again, seemingly to meander all over the northern part of the Highlands, eventually arriving in Inverness some four hours later. It was a very picturesque journey. I had the timetable open in front of me and followed the stations as we went. I managed to recognise the exact spot where this very train had frightened the life out of me from behind a hedge on the camp site north of Tain. I noted how accurate the timetable was; we arrived at each station bang on time. Considering that it's a single track line, with the consequent need to coordinate up and down trains, not really surprising I suppose. If only we could be that accurate in England.

My travel companion and I parted company at Inverness. Despite the hour, he intended to try and carry on to Edinburgh. However, with the impending Festival and not wanting to spend the night on a station, I preferred to take my chances in Inverness. It was 8.20 pm. I'd been told that the ticket office closed at 8.30; I headed there post-haste. The very helpful woman behind the counter told me that the booking system normally closes down before that time but she hit the keyboard and managed to get me and bike onto a 7.55 am train to Edinburgh for the next day, with my ticket all the way through to Manchester. Apparently, bikes places should be booked at least three hours before the time of travel. She was unable to book mine further but suggested I come back at 6.30 in the morning to try and secure bike places for the journey on. She asked me why I hadn't booked the whole thing in Wick and when I gave her the answer, berated her colleague saying that "she's got the same facilities as I have and was just being lazy". I'm conscious of being somewhat prejudiced towards obese people, especially those who smoke, but do my best to curb it. Unfortunately, this little snippet of information only served to reinforce it.

In view of the early start, I didn't want to stray too far from the station to stay that night. Enquires had gleaned that there were no cheap accommodation opportunities near the centre of town so I tried a couple of the chain hotels not far from the station – both full. The receptionist in the second one suggest I try the hotel right next to the station. I hadn't realised there was one that close, having left the main entrance without glancing back, following directions I'd been given for other places. Once back at the station and stood in front of the Royal Highland Hotel, I could understand why my direction-giver hadn't mentioned it. She probably thought that a cyclist wouldn't be interested in somewhere quite so posh. Olde Worlde Grand it certainly was, and with prices to match, but with the advantage of almost sharing an entrance with the station. Only a twin left, but

the sympathetic receptionist managed to get it down to just under a hundred pounds. My bike was safely secured in the 'porter's lodge' too; in reality a room off the main lobby. I ordered an early continental breakfast so as to be in time to book my ticket in the morning.

I was at the door of the station booking office as the staff opened up on the morning of Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> August, only to be told that I'd been given the wrong information the night before. Only tickets could be sold at this time, bookings can't be made until 7.30. Patience was wearing a bit thin. We really do have a third world travel system in this country! So, back to the hotel for more tea, packing and to load up the bike. I did manage to secure a booking from Edinburgh to Preston before boarding my 7.55 train though.

It was a pleasant run down to the Capital; four more hours of some of the UK's most spectacular scenery. In Edinburgh I changed for Preston and, after a rather torturous ride down through the rest of Scotland and the eastern part of the Lake District, boarded a little local train heading for Buxton – no booking required – but which passed through Manchester. I finally arrived at Piccadilly Station just before five. Two days to travel from the north or Scotland to a principle city in the north of England. Not what one would expect from a country that gave the world railways!

### **Some Facts and Figures**

#### **Overall Distance - 900 miles**

Adding up the daily mileages recorded each evening, it came to 899.7 miles. However, when subtracting the odometer reading at the start from the reading at the finish, it came out at exactly 900 miles

#### **Shortest Day – 32.74 miles**

Over Dartmoor – the hills were a killer!

#### **Longest Day – 81.36 miles**

The last day – wanted to get it finished

#### **Average Daily Mileage – 56.25 miles**

#### **Bike Problems**

Front pannier rack slipping onto tyre. Solved with industrial-sized zip ties in Ludlow.

Damp in bike computer contacts in Scotland. Cured with WD40. May have missed recording a mile or two.

No Punctures

#### **Tips 'n Hints for would-be E2Eers**

Don't think about – just get out there and do it! But, if you do go, not in tourist high season.

**Happy Cycling!**