



• Land's End to John O'Groats cycle challenge

A memoir

23rd July to 5th August 2017

A tale by Daniel Darkens, with help from Minna Hayman

and Richard Bull



Day 0, Saturday 22nd July – Essex to Penzance

evening meal in St Just - the first night's lodgings at Kelynack - meeting Minna for the first time, and the rest of the company



The bikes are ready, the intrepid duo are ready, and the car is just arriving to take us to Paddington. I think I may have packed too much stuff.

Nice comfortable car ride, reasonable weather forecast, first class seats booked on the train, what could possibly go wrong? Ray the driver turns out to have an interesting type of equality – he hates everyone – based on colour, gender, mode of transport employed, religion, you name it. At Paddington, there is a first-class lounge, but we are not allowed to keep our bikes there even though they are causing no issues whatsoever. First class seats are booked on coach L, now it appears there is no coach L, so no first-class seats for us. Listening to bawling kids for five and a half hours puts the lid on a disappointing trip down. I've seen the Teignmouth to Dawlish section before, but it still feels like a treat travelling so close to the water's edge. Met at Penzance station by Peak Tours, the first two other cyclists we meet are the two Peters. Transported to the middle of nowhere for our first night's accommodation, a campsite called Kelynack. No bar and apparently miles from the nearest pub. Although we are in a chalet, things don't look as great as we'd hoped, but every cloud has a silver lining. The next cyclist we meet is also staying in the chalets – the delightful Minna Hayman. Things are looking up, and to be fair, with the fine weather and the solitude of the setting in the extreme end of Cornwall, we can't complain.

I am riding a Mekk Poggio 2.8, a nice carbon framed bike with a Shimano 105 11 speed groupset and 50mm carbon Saturae wheel rims. My concession to the hills to come was to swap the compact cassette to one with 30 teeth on the lowest gear. Mekk is not a well-known make (a Bristol company I believe, although the frames are produced in the far east), and I must admit I was attracted as much by the looks as by the specification. Richard is riding a Cannondale Evo with sRam 22 speed groupset and 55mm carbon rims. A lovely bike, which tries to sneak into all the photos he takes.



Dinner was at the Cape Cornwall Golf Club. A number of riders were staying here, and in hindsight, it's probably as well that we weren't, it would have got very messy. Copious beer and good company, meeting all the other riders. According to my e-mail history, I ordered breaded brie to start, chicken in Parma ham for main and Baileys cheesecake for pudding. Just in case you're interested.

Deciding early on it would be impossible to remember everyone's names. Richard appeared to decide that 'if in doubt, they are probably called Steve'. There was only one Steve on the trip (who Richard called 'Pete').

Peak Tours approach became apparent at this early stage – permanently on the verge of chaos, but with enthusiasm and commitment to being helpful at all times. Taxi took us back to the campsite earlier than we would have chosen, but hey, we had a 1,000 mile journey to start tomorrow.

Day 1, Sunday 23rd July – St Just to Land’s End, Land’s End to Fowey

meeting Gill at lunchtime - cycling at too hard a pace - finding the digs at Fowey wasn't at the end of the world - storing bikes at the barbers



We cycled with Minna to a relatively nearby hotel for breakfast, where some of the others were staying – Northern Irish Robert and Dave Godfrey to name but two. Given the rule is that lycra more than a few metres from a bicycle makes you look like a dick, what does it mean if you are wearing a Star Trek cycle jersey to breakfast? Turns out Dave was a really nice guy. In fact, we were spoilt by how many nice people there were on the trip. It felt really strange that the first cycling undertaken was exactly the opposite direction to where Land’s End was.



Richard showing off his Flat Friends t shirt, Minna striking a sexy pose!





We cycled from breakfast down to Land's End to get together with everyone for group and individual photos. Set off at a rate of knots with Richard and Minna, at this pace we'd be in Scotland in no time. At my age, I really ought to have more maturity and be able to judge my pace better. The first mid-morning brew stop of the tour was at Marazion in the shadow of St Michael's Mount.



We had already managed to take a few wrong turnings even though all of us had Garmin cycle GPS computers, including finding ourselves having to cross a dual carriageway to get back on track. Not sure the trip will include any stranger named places than Praze An Beeble. There was a point relatively close to Redruth where I was convinced

we'd be able to see both the north and south Cornwall coasts but even clambering up onto a bank you couldn't quite, but at least the others believed me that you nearly could...

Lunch was at the Royal Oak in Perranwell, where it was lovely to meet Gill Herbert, an old friend who now lives in nearby Falmouth. Lunch was only sandwiches and pasta, not as inspiring as I'd hoped, and probably the worst of the lunches we got – there would be some really good ones to come.



After lunch we got the King Harry Ferry across the River Fal, a pleasant experience (on one of only five chain ferries in Britain), curtailed by the steep tough hill straight after. Cornwall has a lot of steep testing hills which would have been easier had I not been trying to keep up with Richard. Not for the last time, Minna shows just what a strong cyclist she is.

Once we were on the outskirts of Fowey, we split up – Minna having a different route into the town for her accommodation.



Minna and Ali's accommodation at the Safe Harbour looks comfy enough.

Richard and my route took us down a narrowing country lane that appeared to be a dead end that would end in the middle of nowhere. However, when we got there, although the cycle

accommodation was in an adjoining barber's shop, the B&B was comfortable, we were dead opposite where the morning briefing would take place, and just a short walk from the Galleon where we had fish and chips (which were good, but maybe I'd oversold how good they would be to the other two).



Several drinks there, then on to the Ship where Matt the barman very kindly made a £10 donation to both our charities. The next day would start like many others, with too much beer and too little rest the night before. Richard's 100 pint challenge had started well. We agreed at dinner that our first day's pace had been too hot, but I don't think Richard was listening.



I forget where in the first two days it was mainly happening, but Richard and Tom took a few wrong turnings, whizzing up hills, including at one point climbing a 20+% gradient unnecessarily (I was cycling with a few others and we also went up this wrong hill, although for me it was on foot – the hill was a really sharp one and not the best surface). Richard reports that he sat in the saddle and Tom was standing on the pedals – the hill was so steep that Tom's back wheel was spinning on the road surface and Richard was pulling so hard on the handlebars that he was lifting the front wheel off the ground! Minna reported seeing them whizz past at high speed several times zooming past in one direction, then a few minutes later zooming past in the other. Richard's Strava stopped recording mileages, but I don't think anyone cycled further than him during the fortnight. I racked up 1,002 miles, it would surprise me if Richard clocked up an extra 20 or so from the wrong turnings. We all came up with differences in the mileage totals, but I think it is pretty safe to say that the route we took totalled all of 1,000 miles in distance and 10 miles of total elevation.

Day 2, Monday 24th July – Fowey to Moretonhampstead

A tale of two ferries - lunch at Plymouth - climbing and seeing ponies - missing a turning



This day had been described as the toughest of the tour, and with some justification. My legs had taken a bit more pain than I'd intended the previous day, but Richard seemed fine. It came to light very quickly that he is in far better shape than I am and was strong enough to take whatever the trip would throw at him. We started with the Bodinnick ferry trip across the river, followed by a nice steep hill to start the day – the day had plenty of hills to deal with before lunch: it was as early as the second morning that we came to realise what nonsense the Peak Tours guides were talking when they referred to ‘undulations’. Their vocabulary relating to hills is slightly different to that of sensible people.



Lunch was at Plymouth, a nice carvery meal at the Edgcumbe Arms by the edge of the river Tamar which separated us from leaving the hills of Cornwall and starting off the hills of Devon.



Devon was entered via the Cremyll ferry (three ferries in two days – how many would we take by the end? Well, three actually, this was the last of them), then we had the impenetrable Plymouth to negotiate – we had already lost our printed notes and hadn't got to grips with the Garmins, so were very grateful to tour guide Sam leading us through and out of the town.



What seemed like a gentle climb out of Plymouth on a lovely Sustrans cycle route ended up leading us onto the very edge of Dartmoor (including negotiating a very dark tunnel – I thought ‘this is why Peak Tours reminded us to bring lights on our bikes’; I remembered to fit the lights but not to turn them on in the tunnel, there is no helping some people). Without really realising it, we had been climbing consistently and had gained a lot of elevation. Minna and I found ourselves cycling alone onto Dartmoor and went slightly wrong for a while, but it was a beautiful day in a beautiful setting with a beautiful companion – I’ve been lost in worse situations. When we worked out where we had gone wrong we found Sam with his camera.



A review I’d read before the tour had said that on a clear day, the views over Dartmoor were spectacular, but don’t worry, it’s never a clear day! Well we were extremely fortunate, the day was clear, and yes, the views were spectacular.



We are both smiling for the picture – if I'd known what hills were left to cope with, I wouldn't have been smiling. The climbs before and after the final brew stop were bloody hard work and the descent into Moretonhampstead did nothing more than prove to us we'd also start the next day with a long hard climb. Only day two of riding and I was already finding Minna to be excellent company, and I was really enjoying cycling with her.

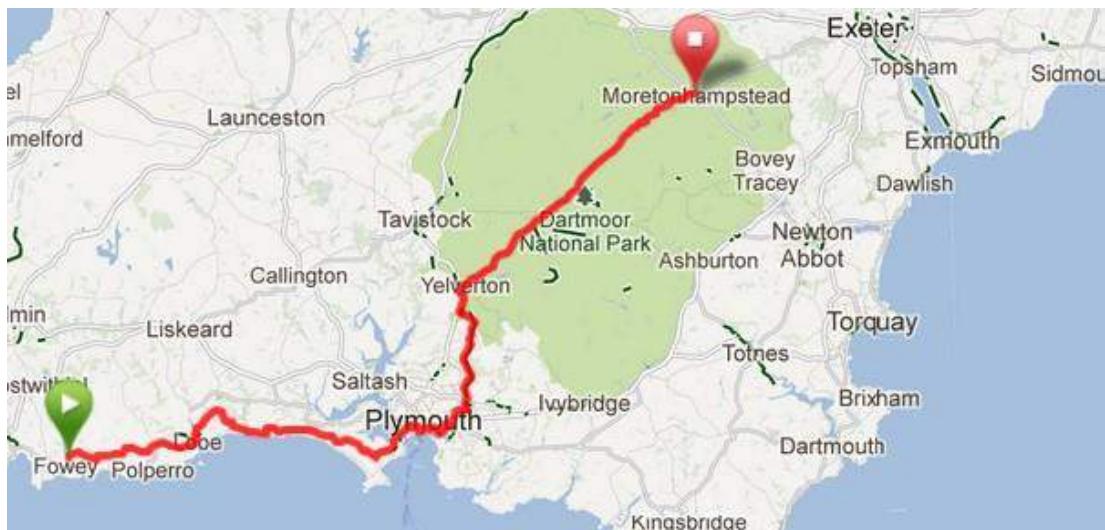


Richard and I were lodged at the White Hart Hotel but dinner was scheduled for the Union Inn. The beer was a lot better at the White Hart and the food was taking forever to be served, so Richard and I nipped back for a pint at the White Hart while waiting for our food to be cooked, by which time Minna and Ali had eaten. Two high points to the evening – firstly Northern Irish Robert showing us pictures of him dressed as a 7' Amy Winehouse, and secondly tour leader Dave being impressed that some of the punters were outstaying the guides: they were off to bed before we'd finished. Oh, and in Devon they don't believe in queueing beers up – Robert had to finish his pint before getting another when we thought the barman had forgotten. It must have been a tiring day as I didn't remember any of this, but Minna reminded me. We had spent the first two days with virtually no phone signal, and Moretonhampstead left us feeling more remote than anywhere in England – how do people cope down here? How did we used to cope?



The White Hart was nice, but Minna described her accommodation as follows:

'the lady of the house was very kind and welcoming but a somewhat formidable grande dame - but a great talker and she would have kept us there until noon if we didn't sort of trickle away from the breakfast table one by one to make it to the morning briefing in time.' (Apparently Peak Tours book her well in advance as she is a 'character').



Spectacular Dartmoor, and those pesky hills that are complained of far and wide.



Day 3, Tuesday 25th – July Moretonhampstead to Street

Meeting Sue and Pete Foster before afternoon brew - seeing Burrow Mump - dinner with the Fosters and the Garrings – I agree to update Paul Gerring on Richard's 100 pint challenge



As with nearly every day of the trip, we started the day with a climb. One of those climbs with lots of curves and corners so that just when you think you'd finished it was still upwards. We took in Exeter, and went relatively close to both Taunton and Exeter racecourses without actually seeing either.



Richard had a spill on the way out of Exeter, crashing into a suddenly and inexplicably stationary Robert on a roundabout. This caused a ruined tyre and puncture, but no harm to bike or rider. Once the luggage van had turned up we could access my spare tyre and track pump allowing a speedy replacement to be fitted. The morning brew stop was only about half a mile down the road, and a stop for a wee allowed Richard to find a directional arrow sign in the undergrowth which he left in the brew van.

The climb at around 30 miles was into the Blackdown Hills. Lunch was just before this at the Drewe Arms in Broadhembury. I recall a third day of sunshine, but this wouldn't last, we would see our fair share of rain. However, the wind had been kind to us so far, with reasonable tail winds all the way so far. There was method in doing the ride this way round rather than start at John O'Groats.



Having negotiated the Blackdown Hills, we descended to the Somerset Plains with some more lovely countryside riding. Peak Tours have clearly put a lot of thought into their route planning as we seemed able to avoid major roads for almost the entire trip. Avoiding major roads has its own drawbacks – at one point we were held up by a herd of cows, who were un-moved by Richard's charms with the ladies and no amount of 'come on girls' was working.

At the afternoon brew stop, we met with Pete and Sue Foster for a drink – I say at the brew stop, it was actually in a nearby pub (the Bird in Hand in North Curry) and we almost missed the brew stop – I recognised the recently discovered directional sign and was able to alert Richard and Minna. Sue Foster is a star, and Richard was wearing his Flat Friends t shirt with pride – she is an inspiration and the charity a very deserving one.



We stayed at the Mullions Hotel – there were a few options for dining, but we opted for the place next door, the Bear (where Minna was staying), and Richard, Minna and I dined with Sue and Pete Foster along with Paul Gerring and his wife. Paul offered to increase his donation to Flat Friends if Richard hit his 100 pints target, and asked me to be the independent verifier. Like I am independent. A very enjoyable end to a good day's riding.



We saw Burrow Mump, which has been called King Arthur's Fort, although it seems to have nothing much to do with King Arthur. I even read somewhere that this was where he burnt the cakes, but that seems complete fiction.



Three days of glorious weather, slightly sunburnt calves. How long could the good weather last? How many consecutive days of sunshine would we have? None more was the answer, there was at least some rain every remaining day of the tour, eleven straight wet days. It is a testament to how great the tour was that the weather didn't dampen or diminish the trip in any way. If anything it added to the humour, leaving wet bum marks on most of the furniture we sat on from now onwards.

Day 4, Wednesday 26th July - Street to Monmouth

Seen off by Sue and Pete - meeting Gav Hartley in the evening - crossing the windy Severn Bridge - getting wet in Wells - glimpsing Glastonbury Tor



We were seen off from the Mullions Hotel by Sue and Pete, a relatively quiet start to the day, with glimpses of Glastonbury Tor through the mist. The first day of damp weather, with the rain starting to really come down while we were cycling along a disused railway line into Wells. Minna's saddle seemed to accumulate half of Somerset's mud and the pristine white saddle has been the colour of piss ever since.



(This is one of Minna's pictures, most of the good ones in this are hers, but is that the world's biggest swan to the right of the picture?)



I gained a certain amount of kudos from some of the others for riding in short sleeves when the rain was really chucking it down, but in reality, I had not been able to find my bloody waterproof despite carrying it all the previous day when it was dry. It turned out to be in my bag where I'd put it, but no worries, there'd be plenty of opportunities to wear it in the coming days. This was the first outing for Richard's million pound jacket (has he told you about the jacket?)

Our route took us past the front door of Wells cathedral (yep, Britain's smallest cathedral city), and then up a steep hill. I'm not sure whether more thought goes into making the route scenic or hilly, probably both, but this hill was a long a tough one. Days two and three had started with a hill, this time we had to wait more than five miles for the first steep hill, but it was worth the wait, a challenging climb of about 700 feet (200 metres) elevation.



We made our way to and then through Bristol before stopping for lunch at the Fox in Easter Compton, just the other side of Bristol. We took in the Severn Bridge and before that, the Clifton Suspension Bridge. Just prior to that, the route took us on a climb through a park (the Long Ashton Estate). That was a nice surprise – the sat nav sent us through a gate into the park which didn't look right, but was exactly what we were supposed to do. I was still getting used to the Garmin at this point, and was temporarily confused when it sent me into the park. I would spend a fair amount of time looking at the Garmin and being temporarily confused!

Morning brew was taken at Chew Valley Lake, apparently the fifth largest artificial lake in the UK (no, I don't know the top four!). Some photo opportunities, and Richard could have had a couple taken as he punctured about 100 metres after leaving the brew stop – apart from one issue with his headstock on the way to Conder Green, this was the last issue any of the three of us suffered (if you don't count Garmins needing taping on every morning). Not bad.





The Severn Bridge was no real fun – I'd been looking forward to cycling across what was the longest suspension bridge in the world when it was opened in 1964, but the heavy cross wind made it hard work and I was glad to reach the other side. We were now in Wales for a while, and headed to Monmouth, taking in Chepstow racecourse and an afternoon brew stop at Tintern Abbey. And for Richard's benefit, to all brummies out there, yes it is an abbey. Unfortunately, it isn't an abbey big enough to see as you ride by eh Richard?

Dinner was taken at the Pizza Express in Monmouth after I'd met with Gavin Hartley of hsl, where he'd made a special detour from a meeting to catch up with me. The hotel we were staying in (the Mayhill Hotel) was a lovely hotel run by an utterly useless bloke. We were out quite late returning, so missed the fight outside the front of the hotel. The sourcing notes in the menu for the breakfast gave assurances of how local the bacon, sausages and eggs were, as well as the good news that the baked beans were Heinz from the local Lidl. That'll keep the food miles down then. Minna was stationed at the Premier Inn just on the other side of town.



Chew Valley Lake



Chew Valley brew stop



Minna's entry into the LEJOG Miss Lovely Legs competition. This season, mud is very much in.



Soggy notes, don't you just love the rain?

Day 5, Thursday 27th July – Monmouth to Clun

A banner of support from the hsl people - Richard and Minna miss lunch - we admire a lovely hedge - Ali falls off really badly



Although it didn't feel like it, yesterday we had been heading almost exactly north, and the same followed today – we were making real progress. That word undulations cropped up again, so it was obviously going to be another day with a few hills. Lunch was due to be taken at a pub called the New Inn – Richard and Minna were at this stage the quickest of the group, but riding with their heads down, they missed the pub completely (Richard was in a hurry to get to Clun). A shame as the soup was brilliant and most welcome in the rain that we'd experienced during the morning. It was a bit chilly too, so the food was taken indoors where we'd eaten outside on the first couple of days. I was really chuffed that the guys at hsl had put up a banner of support for me close to Hereford – seen by a number of the riders in the group, it was a real tonic, and well done to Sam for getting a photo.



The afternoon brew was taken by what is said to be the loveliest hedge in England (the ride through the Wye Valley had involved swapping between England and Wales, but we were now back in England). Apart from the hedge there was a bookshop that was also a secret café discovered by Richard and Minna for a late lunch.





There were no arguments from us with regard to the loveliness of the hedge – I've not seen a lovelier one to my knowledge. Sadly, Alison took a really nasty fall, suffering concussion and a badly smashed up face. It meant she wouldn't be able to ride for a few days, but she was able to start riding again once we got to Scotland and completed the ride to John O'Groats when any sensible person would have been nursing their wounds for weeks. Lots of respect to Ali, she's made of pretty stern stuff.



We were a bit spread out here, Richard and I were in the Sun in the middle of Clun, Minna a bit further out in the sticks, sharing with Chanticleer and other assorted farmyard wildlife.

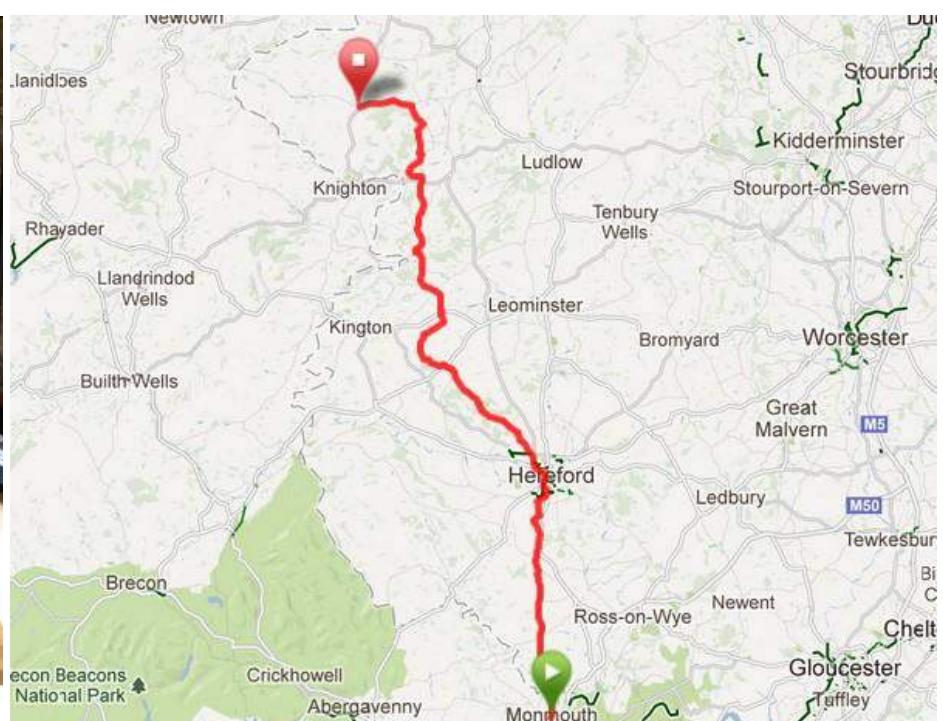
It was at the Sun that we heard that there had been complaints about the hills of Dartmoor, as if the landlord of a pub in Shropshire could do much about that. Fatigue may have been taking over as the notion of complaints about Dartmoor hills to a barman 200 miles away reduced Minna to a

helpless state for about ten minutes (Minna: *By the time we reached Clun I was completely losing it and dissolving into fits of laughter I couldn't stop, as things were simply too funny and bizarre. You do remember the bar man commenting about having received complaints about them naughty Dartmoor hills that simply won't behave like proper hills should*)

I believe it was in Clun that Richard managed to leave a bottle of expensive aftershave behind – the hotel tried to post it on, but were informed that you aren't allowed to send such items through the post (!), so Peak Tours offered to pick it up the next time a tour passes through Clun. It was also in Clun that Richard lost his first pair of pants. A green emergency light indicator in the light over the bed was pretty annoying, but was able to be completely masked by Richard wrapping that day's pants round the light fitting. We could have guessed that we would forget all about them, I have a feeling they are still there, although probably smelling like a dead body by now.

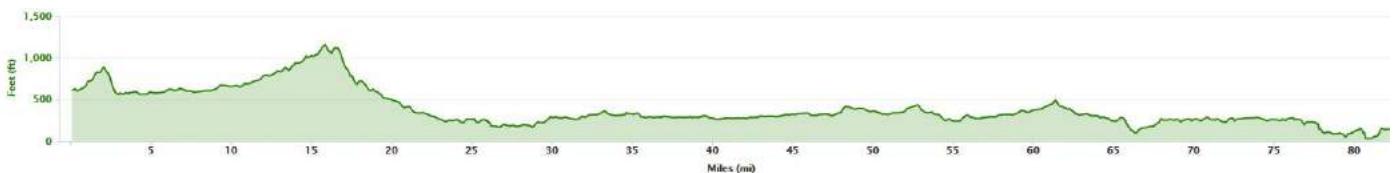


Some of the wildlife Minna was sharing Shropshire with



Day 6, Friday 28th July – Clun to Northwich

A nice trip through Shrewsbury – a visit to Bickerton – more rain and wrong turnings – rubbed up the wrong way



Just for a change, we started the day by going uphill. This was to be the longest day of the trip so far at 82 miles, but after the first 15 or so miles, it was to have been relatively easy going. More rain, but the wind was still blowing in the right direction. We were staying lucky with the wind, and bar a couple of short occasions, the wind was pretty much at our backs for the entire trip.

Lunch was taken on the outside of Shrewsbury, after a pleasant ride through the town, including a cycle path alongside the river. I deliberately parked my bike to obscure Richard's in the picture below – he was trying to get his lovely Cannondale into every picture he took.



A little after the afternoon brew stop, I came across the small town of Bickerton, with the pub the Bickerton Poacher, which put me very much in mind of Nina Bickerton who inspired the choice of CALM as my preferred charity. I stopped to take pictures of the pub which meant I didn't miss the left turning that others did...

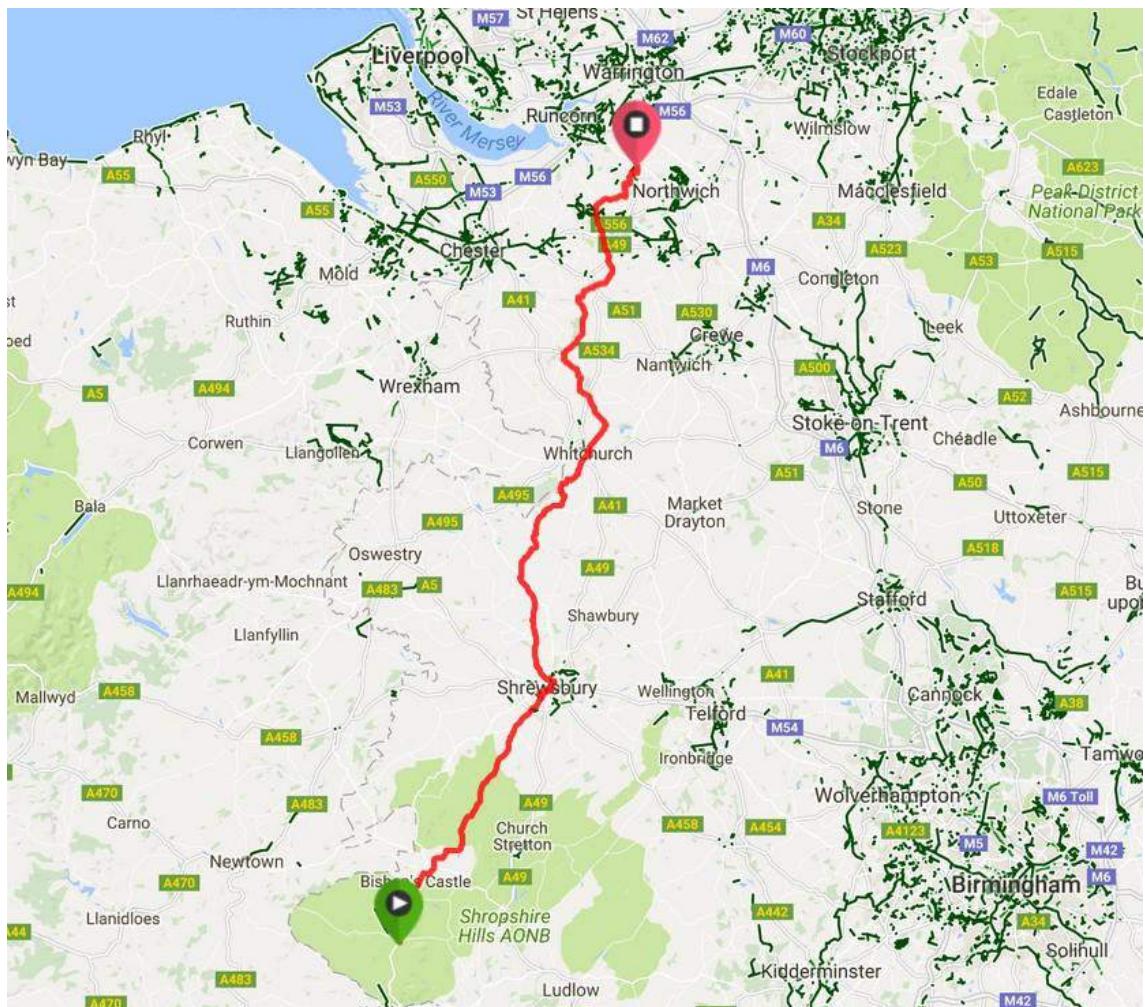


Richard and I spent the night in the Hollybush Inn, which contained some tiny rooms in a purpose-built accommodation area at the back. Possibly the smallest room we stayed in, but not too bad. Minna remembers the ride to Northwich and the stay: *The ride from Clun to Northwich proved a bit tiring for me because I had booked my massage for 6pm with the premonition that I would be feeling tired by that time (in terms of consecutive days of riding) and was looking*

forward to a stately progress *a la vitesse grand-mère* - all shot to shit by Jim asking very kindly in the morning to swap my appointment to 4:30 because Mary or Elisabeth were not going to make it in time. So ended up riding hell for leather with Richard, my notes dissolved in the biblical downpour in the last 30 minutes and made it to the accommodation at Ash House Farm just by sheer luck as couldn't see any text in the soggy mess. There we were treated on the ascending scale of dour hospitality by our land lady who would have given the Scots as good as she got. "Was it you who wanted poached egg on toast? Well, there you go - but you can put it on your toast yourself!" Who wants coffee? (accompanied with such a glare one barely dared to squeak 'yes please') She had said to previous guests, who on arrival saw her catching a bat flapping about in the living room that she wouldn't charge extra for that. Milly the little mix breed dog was as sweet as her mistress was sour, and would have happily trotted along with us if we let her.



Waiting for the canal barge to pass to allow the crossing of the Shropshire Union canal, Richard had good-naturedly shouted at them to get a move on, but they were already doing their top speed of 3 mph. Didn't they realise we had Scotland to get to?



Day 7, Saturday 29th July – Northwich to Conder Green

Bully meets Petch at lunch - and overshoots end of ride by several miles - we make friends with Yvonne



Day seven would start as an interesting one and end slightly bizarrely, though not as bizarrely as day eight. We had to negotiate the gap between Liverpool and Manchester, taking in the edge of Warrington, Leigh and the outskirts of Bolton, as well as Preston (for Minna's benefit – according to Wikipedia, Preston's is only 'claimed' to be Western Europe's second largest bus station). It was strange to see so little countryside, but not a bad way to get from one side of the densely populated area to the other. Oh, and it rained. Again. We lunched at the Red Lion in Chorley, where Richard met up with his skiing buddy Petch – Minna and I left him to a couple more pints and made our way onwards.

Once we'd cleared the urban area, it started to get hilly and the countryside got to be glorious again. I'd not heard of Conder Green before the tour, and now I know why – it is a tiny, tiny place in the middle of nowhere. How it can sustain two hotels I have no idea. And obviously, no mobile signal. Some of the climbing was tough – we turned left at Sheep House Lane (which I think is on the 100 Great British Hills list), but we weren't getting away with anything, there were some proper steep hills to climb. Minna continues to protest how much she hates hills, before destroying them like a pro, leaving me and most of the others in her wake.



before the climb and after



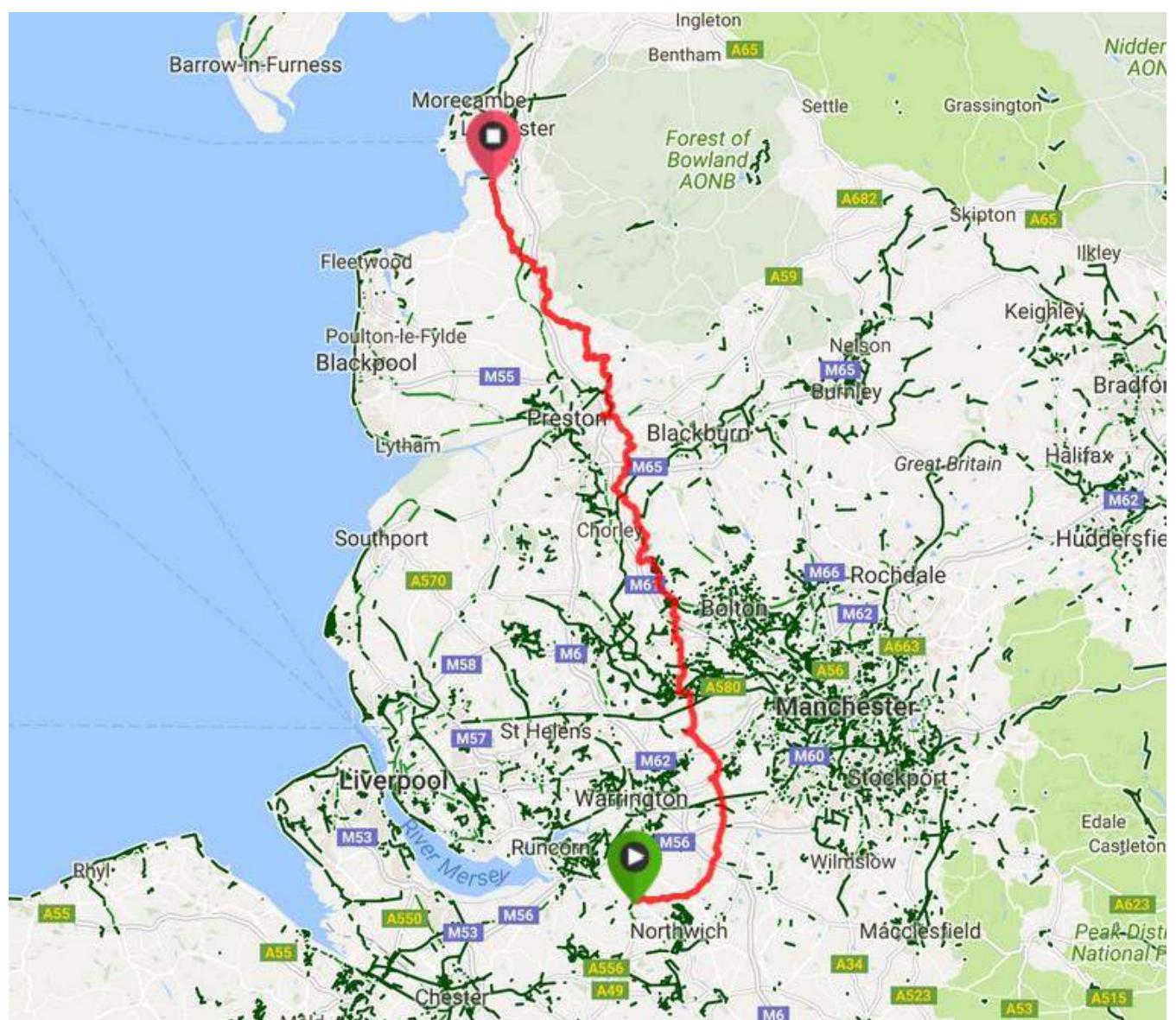
Richard and I were staying at the Mill, but dinner and drinks were taken at the hotel where Minna was staying, the Stork Inn. All was fairly quiet until a woman called for her husband Richard. After Richard kept saying 'yes?' every time she called her hubby, Yvonne eventually was encouraged (with the now found husband) to join our table and was plied with red wine. She is now facebook friends with Helen who was also in our group at this stage. The Mill was the first hotel room to contain a bath as well as a shower – I opted not

to take a bath as I thought Richard might be just behind me and would be keen for a shower himself, so I didn't want to keep him waiting. As it turns out, he had suffered a bit of a problem with the bike (head stock coming loose I think), and had been so keen to make up ground that he overshot Conder Green by about three miles. By the time I was wondering about whether to luxuriate in the bath or not, he had turned round and was drinking his third pint in the pub!

We were already halfway through the time and nearly halfway through the distance. Oh yes, and we'd already completed our first 'Everest' – climbing more than 8,800 metres aggregate during the first seven days.

This was the place where Richard discovered the delights of Rhubarb Gin mixed with Ginger Ale – a punter at the bar had ordered one and gave him a try of it. It's probably not officially called a G&G but that became our name for it.

I think it was on this day that the entire riding group managed to gatecrash a wedding in Moor Park (Preston's oldest and largest park) – not every day that 30-odd cyclists turn up uninvited to a wedding I guess.



Day 8, Sunday 30th July – Conder Green to Penrith

Dealing with some hilly bits – a night out at Costas Tapas bar – everything else becomes ‘was that before Penrith or after?’



Just for once, we started the day without any climbs, and of course Richard was familiar with the first few miles as he'd already cycled them once the day before. There was some consistent climbing on the outskirts of the Lake District, and some stunning scenery again. Oh yes, and it rained. Mustn't forget the rain. We started the day with a choice between road and track, and due to the previous night's rain, we opted like most for the road route.

The ride took in the Howgills, including one particularly steep climb. At least the climbs were rewarded with some brilliant views. It was strange that even after all the miles that were now under our belt, we were still in good shape – either Jim at the brew stops was putting something in the jelly babies or a diet of lots of beer was proving an under-recognised way of staying fuelled.



Lunch was taken in Tebay at a place called the Cross Keys – nice enough, and a real welcome break from the rain that had got extremely heavy in the late morning. Robert (who had been involved in the incident with Richard in Exeter) took a nasty tumble at the bottom of a descent, and myself and Phil the magistrate were the first on the scene. He was clearly suffering from shock, but did not appear badly injured, and the bike could be made rideable again after a bit of ‘adjustment’. It wasn’t a place that would have been easy to get a van to so we suggested that Rob ride on with us following. He seemed OK by later on, but a subsequent hospital visit confirmed he was unable to continue so he went home – 32 became 31. The incident may have been down to slipping on a cattle grid – there were a lot of cattle grids in this section, we’d not really seen many since Dartmoor.



Minna spots the rain coming, and sure enough...

Penrith seemed quiet and peaceful, other than for the fact that even on a Sunday afternoon, every vehicle for miles around appeared to be driving round Penrith – Minna and I theorising that it was a mayor instigated initiative to make it look like a busy town.

According to the route notes, Penrith was a ‘free evening – there are plenty of places in Penrith’. We were unconvinced, but I had spotted a tapas place that looked reasonable. The others were unconvinced but there didn’t seem anywhere else worth visiting. The three of us entered – I went to look for the hostess to see if we could take a table but was asked to wait as she had to deal with some people that had already sat down (which was us...)

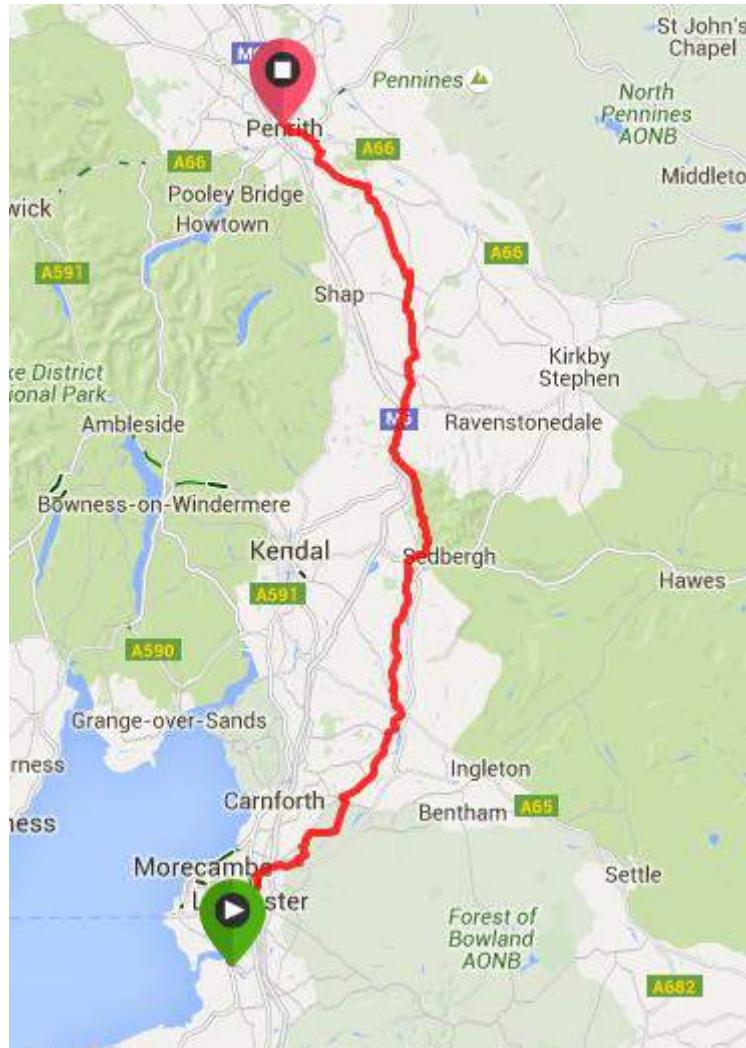
We were hungry and ordered a lot of food – Helen had joined us by this stage and we were advised against ordering so much. Margarita Pracatan obviously wasn’t used to hungry cyclists – we devoured everything bar one rib (the spare one!).

We also consumed several bottles of wine and a few G&Gs. There was a hen party for fat former netball players going on in an adjoining area, which of course we joined as we got drunker. The dancing including a Conga line out into the street, and the dancing went on long after the hen party girls had left. We moved onto Tequila shots, then toffee vodka when the lemon for Tequila ran out. A crazy night, ending at about 1.30 (a bit of a guess, it was late but I wasn’t looking at my watch).

Walked the delightful Minna back to her digs – I am so chivalrous I had already cycled with her to her digs before seeking out mine. Didn’t seem so chivalrous when it turned out to be next door but one!

Sunday night in Penrith was such fun, and feels like a pivot point in the whole trip. Crazy dancing, wearing plastic garlands, choosing our own music (I particularly remember ‘Riding Along On My Pushbike Honey’), and dancing while Margarita Pracatan cleared up around us. Strong northern accent and a traditional Spanish dress seemed out of place, and calling the toilets ‘servicios’ seemed an unnecessary extra touch! I’ll remember Penrith after I’ve forgotten everything else. Some time after the tour, Richard realised that it was in Penrith that Withnail ordered ‘the finest wines’ in the classic film *Withnail and I* – we hadn’t ordered the finest, but we did ask for the best Rioja available (or at least better than the house wine), which is close enough for me!





England has some stunningly beautiful scenery – it is the rain that makes it so green, so I guess we shouldn't grumble about the amount we were experiencing.

Day 9, Monday 31st July – Penrith to Moffat

crossing the border into Scotland at Gretna - Moffat with little to offer - eating at the thinnest hotel in Britain



After we had all been out late and not had much sleep (Richard less than the rest of us, though it was Minna that missed the briefing, naughty Minna!), all we needed to freshen us up was a nice climb at the start of the day. We were in luck. More rain today, I think that makes six days in a row.

We took lunch at the Scottish border at Gretna, a nice hotel lunch with lots of photo opportunities.



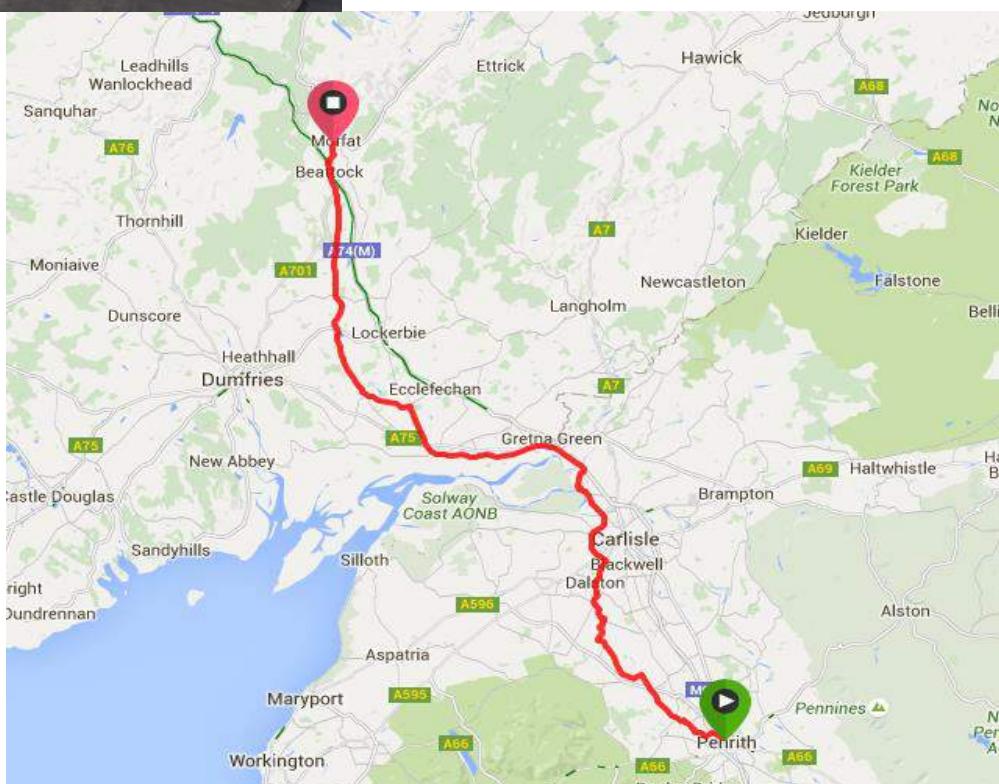
After a fortifying lunch and a while spent taking photos, we headed off into the Scottish Lowlands. Although they're called lowlands, there are still some hills around, and Dumfries and Galloway contains some nice scenery again.



We made our way into Moffatt where we had a combined meal for all 31 remaining riders and the guides at the Star – apparently the narrowest hotel in the world.

Unfortunately, the meal was uninspiring, so we made our way into Moffat to see what it had to offer. What it had to offer was not a great deal, so probably one of the earlier nights was had.

Still managed a few drinks, and of course the evening was spent in excellent company, this really was the best of holidays and we still had several hundred miles to travel.



Day 10, Tuesday 1st August – Moffat to Kinross

A climb to start the day - another dull place to dine out - crossing Edinburgh in a convoluted route - crossing the Forth bridge with views of rail bridge and new suspension bridge



A long climb from the overnight stay – 6 miles of around 3-5% with a fair bit more in places totalling more than 1,000 feet. Peak Tours like starting the day with a climb, out of fourteen days, this was one of eight with an uphill start, and probably the hardest start to a day, not a big gradient but six miles of consistent uphill with no run in to it.



I spent a large part of the initial climb chatting to a guy from Middlesbrough cycling from London – Edinburgh – London in one go, sleeping in bus shelters. It was the first time I feel others have a bigger challenge than me. The climb is manageable at the right pace, and a taste of what is to come now we're in Scotland. Lunch was at the Leadburn Inn After 38 miles, a strange affair – nice soup, nice sandwiches and nice scone, just wasn't expecting them all on the same plate.

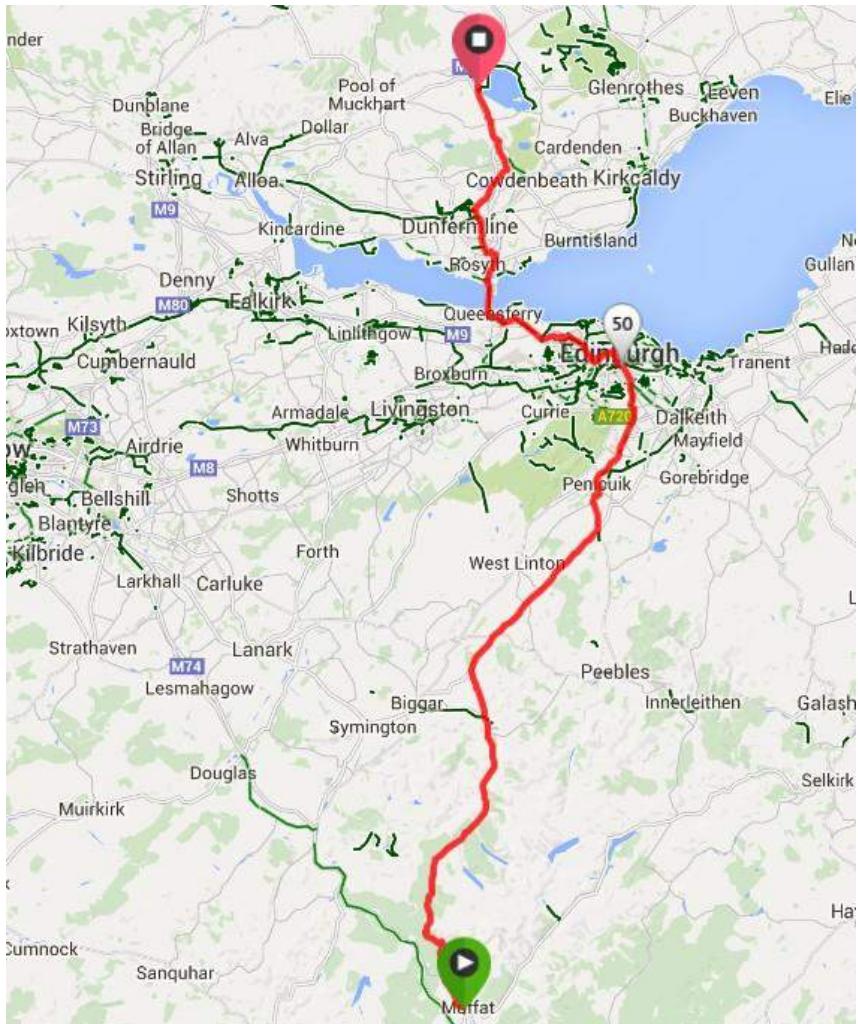


A nice long descent afterwards and eventually hit Edinburgh. A strange place to cross, we got split up, I was cycling with Dave, Pete and Robert and we managed to follow the Garmin directions but seemed to weave all over the city, having to walk down a couple of bits that were being set up for the start of the Edinburgh Fringe. A climb out of the city took us to the Forth Road Bridge which was a much nicer bridge to cross than the Severn, and we were making our way toward the highlands. Good views of the currently under construction new road bridge and the iconic rail bridge. No-one painting it today. It was while cycling through central Edinburgh on a cycle path through a park that an errant youngster attempted to run into Minna's path, which unleashed a volley of Finnish cursing from Minna.





We stayed at a nice hotel, the Green Hotel, and stored our bikes in the games room. We were told to take our bikes into the hotel, Steve took this a step further and rode up to the reception desk to check in! We turned right when we went out seeking refreshment and victuals, but the first pub we came to had no beer. The barman there was very helpful, when we asked where the best place in town was, rather than lie and suggest his own place, he sent us up the road to where we could eat and drink – the tour guides were also there planning out who would stay where on day 13, which had been marked as 'tba' on all our accommodation lists. I think it was here that Northern Irish Rob made us all laugh by suggesting that the place seemed nice, but he'd love to come and see it when it was summer! (It was now 1st August). Another late finish after a few more beers back at the hotel, an enjoyable evening.



Day 11, Wednesday 2nd August – Kinross to Ballater

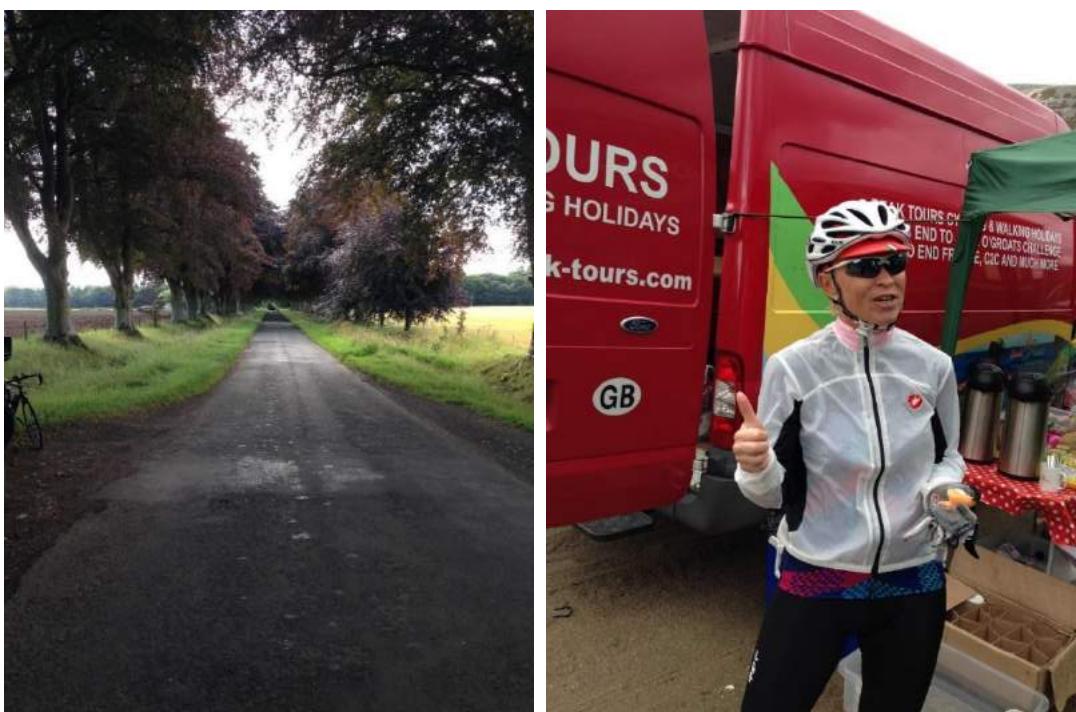
Tackling the Cairngorms - cycling up to Glenshee - taking on the highest paved road in Britain – passing the northernmost horse racing track in Britain – hairy neighbours



The run out of Kinross was fairly comfortable, we passed Perth which looks like a nice city, and also hosts the most northerly horseracing track in Britain. We also passed Scone Palace, home of the Stone of Scone, used historically when throning Kings of Scotland, but sitting in London and used at coronations in England (sitting under the coronation throne) until returned to Scotland just recently (and let's face it, throning the King/Queen of England is also crowning the monarch of Scotland).



Picturesque Perth and the entrance to Perth Racecourse



A nice row of copper beeches leading up to the brew stop, and Minna approves of something

Lunch was taken at the Bridge of Cally Hotel, which had the following very helpful health and safety notice – see, I am never off duty!



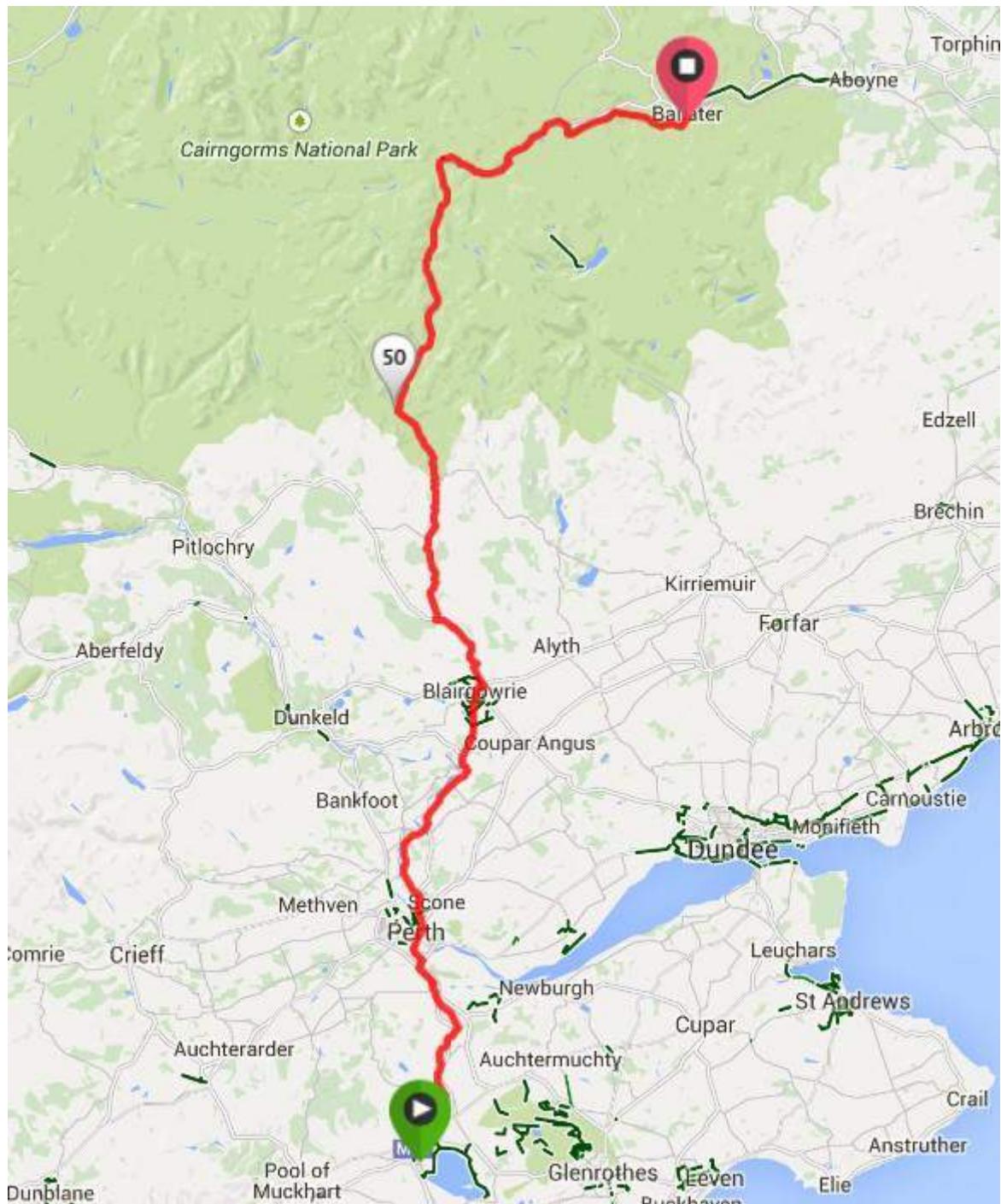
There was a long gradual uphill run after lunch, which culminated in a really challenging climb up to the ski centre of Glenshee, which is apparently the highest paved road in the whole of Great Britain. The brew stop at the top was very welcome, and we all found the climb hard work.



Ballater was lovely, with some long-horned cows just round the corner. Apologies to Richard for not getting the whole Land Rover into the picture on the right!



Richard was unimpressed with the pistes, don't think he'll be coming skiing here. But hey, whatever the skiing is like in the winter ,we'd just cycled up to a ski resort!



Day 12, Thursday 3rd August – Ballater to Inverness

learning how much Scottish drivers hate cyclists – sniggering at Cock Bridge - cycling up the Lecht, hardest hill experienced – finding the cheapest pint in Britain (and only having one)



Oh boy what a hard climb the road up to the Lecht was. Early on (at around ten miles), we had a long climb ending in a 20 % kick that was plenty hard enough, but did not prepare me for what was to come.

Truly beautiful scenery, awesome, breath-taking views but the climbing was so hard.



I'm not grinning, I am still trying to get some semblance of my breath back. These pictures don't do the landscape justice, and nor does my vocabulary, I've already used stunning and spectacular haven't I?





Maybe my favourite photo of the tour, credit to Graham for taking this. There was a sinking feeling when, after so much climbing already, the road just disappeared into the distance, going up and up and up. This was what the training had been for. In fact, we were only a couple of thousand feet above sea level, but look – we are above the tree line, not a tree in sight!



The sniggering that took place at Cock Bridge soon gave way to groans as we faced climbs hitting 20% early on and the brew stop at the top was very welcome. We lunched at the Nethy Bridge hotel, a nice lunch, though I can't remember what they served us. Maybe it wasn't nice at all, but at least we weren't going uphill.

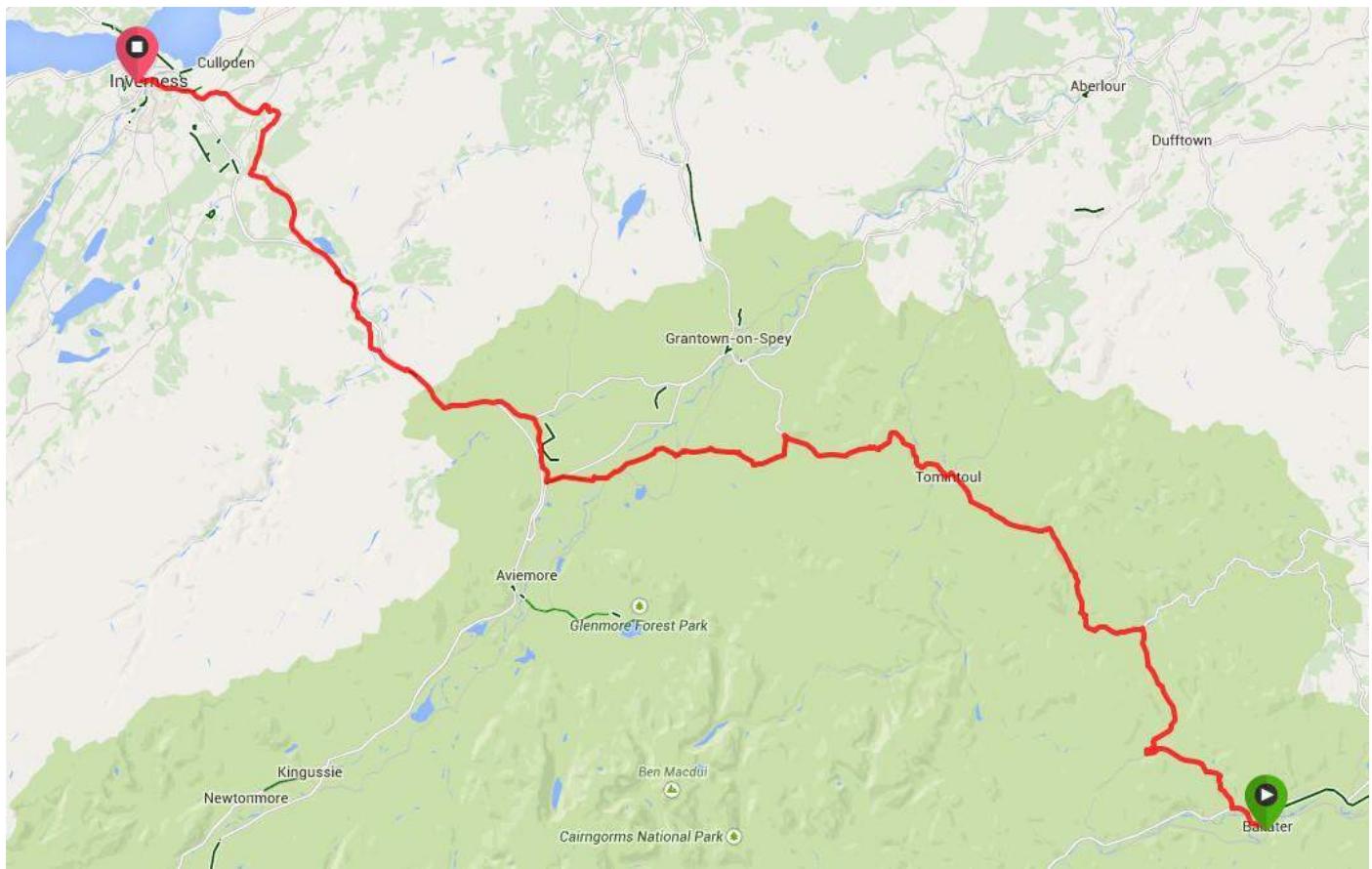


Talking of bridges, the route notes talk of a weak bridge at one point – I don't think they meant this one at Carrbridge.

The run down into Inverness wasn't too bad after the initial climbing, and we had a good meal and a few drinks in a nice restaurant in Inverness (The White House). Prior to that, we nipped into a branch of Wetherspoons while scouting out potential places. Richard ordered a couple of pints of Deuchars, and the price was an unbelievable £3.58 – 2p less than I had paid earlier for one pint of Coke!! Is this the cheapest pint of beer in the UK? It wasn't a bad pint either.

Entering Inverness had felt slightly intimidating, but the evening went well and we had a good time.

We had cycled through the heart of the Speyside whisky distilling area, but not a dram was imbibed that I recall. A couple of the bars we went in had little water taps facing the customer built into the bar: adding a little water is supposed to bring out the full complexity of the whisky's flavours. I knew about the water but had never actually seen taps specifically for the purpose.



Yes, that is me struggling up to Minna and Richard up another of the difficult hills.



Check out the view of that Cannondale!



Tom doesn't seem to mind waiting to pose for the pic while Richard looks to work out the camera on the phone. He seems to be struggling with his smartphone camera in a few shots in this document – it's just coincidence, he's a demon snapper – and I can't criticise, turn back to the shot of me trying to work out how to peel a banana at Chew Valley lakes (day 4) if you want a picture of confusion. I got the hang of it in the end, I reckon I had more than thirty bananas over the course of the trip. Where did I hear that a thousand bananas can be fatally poisonous – well that's thirty-odd closer to the killer one.



Now that is a pretty big bit of fish! Daniel and Minna in The White House in Inverness, a cocktail bar that provided us with a few rhubarb gin and ginger ales.

Day 13, Friday 4th August – Inverness to Altnaharra

Enduring tough day due to weather conditions - long slow climbs, rain and headwind - glad to get to the hotel which turns out to be staffed by dourest staff in the world – getting bonus miles under the belt and not appreciating it



More rain and some really long climbs – the climb to the Crask about twenty miles long into a headwind and with driving rain for most of it. Lunch was taken in a funny little café where we had to take turns to occupy one of the three tables.



Although the course was to the Crask, we were staying at Altnaharra, which was a further seven miles on. This was seven miles we wouldn't have to cycle the next day, but boy did they feel like hard miles given the conditions. A herd of red deer were occupying the field next to our hotel. Given that we didn't have to climb to a ski station today, this should have been an easier day, but it certainly wasn't. Along the way, we did stop at a place called the Falls of Shin, hoping to see some salmon leaping – the river was lively, the time of year was right...





The Altnaharra was hilarious – the only guests that weren't cyclists appeared to be a reticent seven-foot German in a wig and his wife. The staff were the most miserable and unhelpful I have ever encountered. Some examples:

Richard referring to one of the pints poured that was almost as much head as beer – 'Could you top that up', 'WHAT?!'

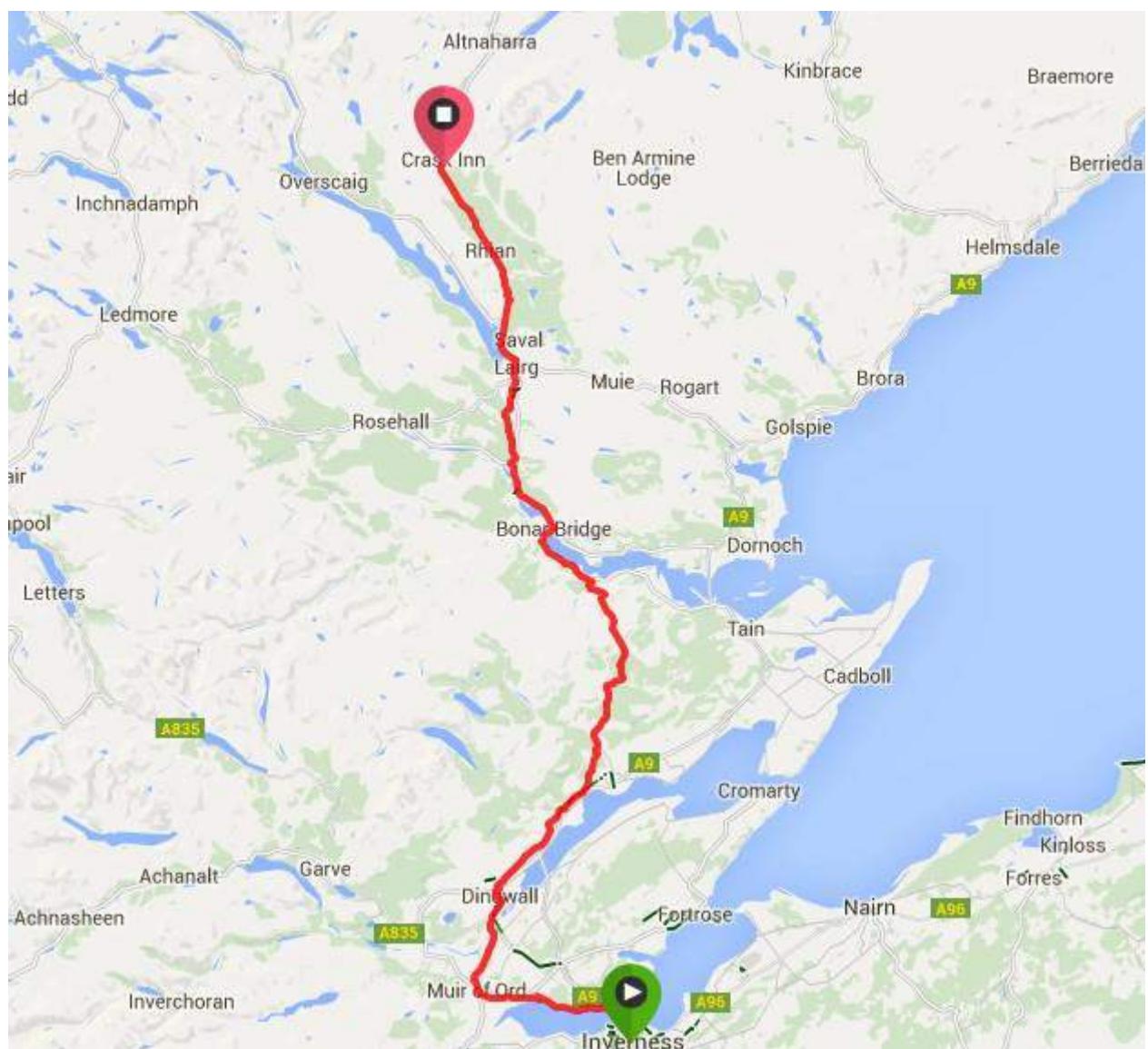
Can we have the A La Carte menu? 'The guide told me everyone would go for the bar menu', 'we want a la carte', 'here's the menu', Richard to Helen 'it seems you have to pick from the menu now', 'NO, that is yesterday's menu, we haven't typed today's yet'. We decide to sit with our friends eating from the bar menu 'you can't sit there, we have to get ready for breakfast' (it is about 6.30 pm and we are at the same table as about eight people eating their meals). The table for the a la carte is immediately adjacent... the menu still isn't ready.

At breakfast the next morning, Phil the magistrate pushes his empty cereal bowl with empty cereal packet away – 'you can put that in there' (indicating that Phil should dispose of his own packet in the waste basket).

Minna asks our gracious host how she is: 'tired, but you would be if you had to work seven days a week' – does she not realise we have just cycled 900 miles!

I am sure there were others, but I can't remember them now – you get the flavour. As with Scottish drivers, dour Scottish hotel staff do not diminish from a fantastic night. Sorry to Minna who returned downstairs from her room to find the ground floor empty, but amends were made. Minna also adds the following recollections of the Altnaharra hotel: *At Altnaharra we couldn't find our way anywhere on the ground floor - so everyone entered the bar through kitchen or pantry or whatever other rooms there were available. Ali and I got to the bar lounge from behind the bar! The bespectacled waitress was a perfect equivalent of a maid servant from older times when she was describing the 'chocolate box' dessert, leaving everyone wondering what kind of a box it would be...cardboard perhaps..? And the head waitress ... 'what kind of red wine do you have?'... 'I don't know, I don't touch alcohol!!!'*

Not everyone was lucky enough to stay at our hotel, some had to go back to where the last brew stop took place, I hope they weren't staying at the hotel on the island.



Day 14, Saturday 5th August – Altnaharra to John O’Groats

best day's cycling of the whole fourteen days - good weather, fair wind, beautiful ride along the banks of the River Naver - seeing a salmon leaping – riding to the end together – exhausted finish



A lovely start to the day, with a nice easy start to the day – a slight cross wind for the first thirty miles, turning into a tail wind to blow us to John O’Groats. The ride alongside the River Naver was absolutely beautiful, and I even got to see a salmon leaping from the river, but couldn’t dwell in it as a car was coming the other way. More whingeing car drivers that hate cyclists – bad news motorists, your shitty attitude didn’t spoil the atmosphere one bit.

A nice last lunch at the Halladale Inn about 36 miles from the end of the journey. The last ever brew stop was appropriately accompanied by the sound of bagpipes, then on to a rendezvous at a pub ten miles from the end (the Northern Sands). In the left-hand picture, Minna is not practising her ninja moves but standing steady to take a photo!



A woman’s touch will improve any brew stop!



A view of Dounreay nuclear power station was not the most attractive view of the trip but the first glimpse of the North Atlantic might have been.



I had no idea the Orkneys were so close to the coast, but the closest islands were clearly visible.



Having all gathered for a slightly premature drink, we then set off for the last ten miles, and then gathered together close to the Seaview Hotel prior to rolling en masse to the sign at the very end of the trip.

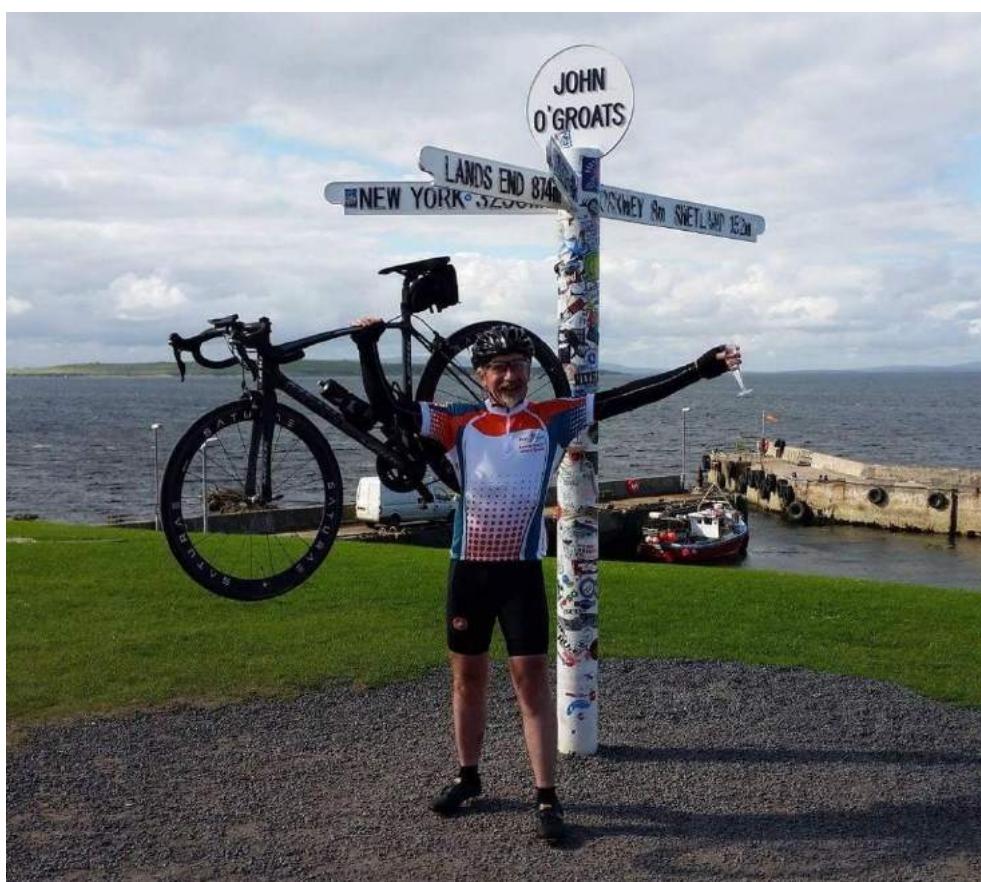


Magical to arrive to champagne corks popping, a kiss from Minna and a hug from Richard. We had achieved one of the great British adventures, and amongst friends we had only met a fortnight earlier. We leave the bikes at the Seaview for courier transport back home, then wait ages for the bus to Thurso for the entire group meal. The planned party didn't arise due to exhaustion, but a wonderful night regardless.

It is difficult to put the sense of achievement into perspective, we have just cycled from one extreme corner of the nation to the other, and journey of more than 1,000 miles and the height of two Mount Everests. Oh, and the 100 pints was comfortably achieved by Richard, along with lots of red wine, gin and ginger ales, tequila, toffee vodka some prosecco and a couple of glasses of champagne. I think that was all.



The whole team, Richard rocking his million-pound jacket!

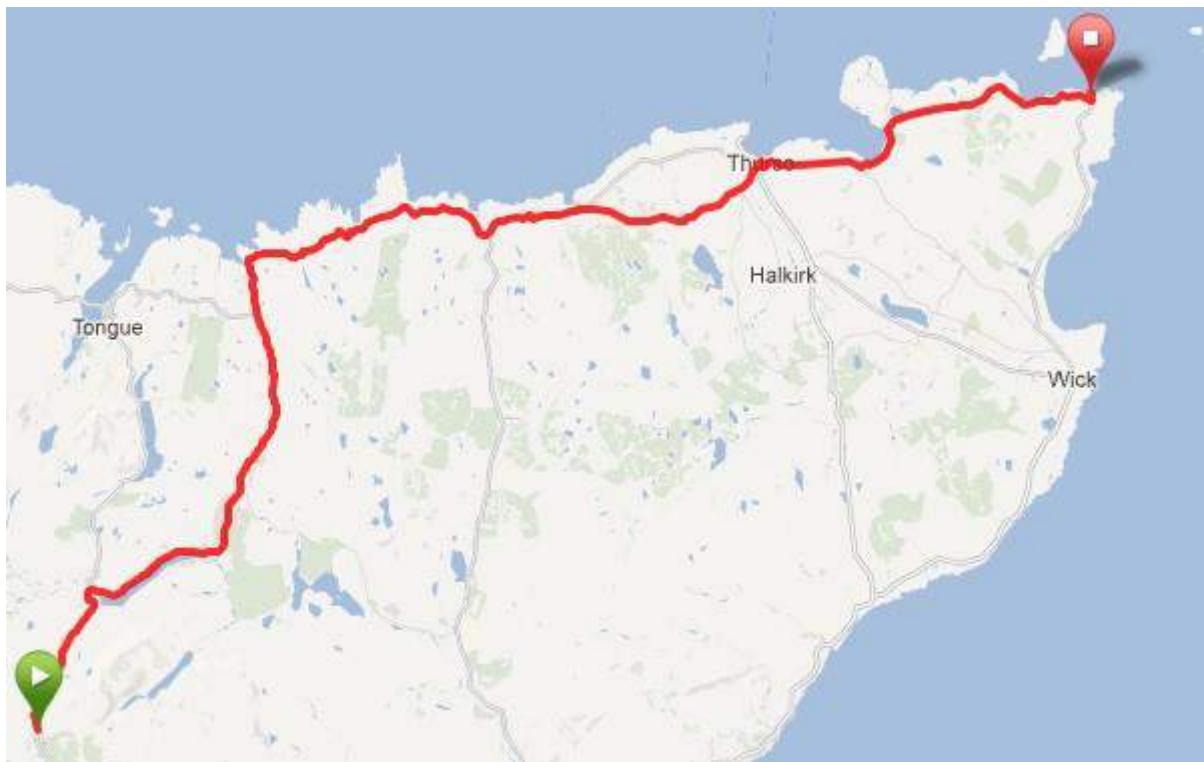


Setting the trend for raising the bike aloft!



We've come a long, long way together.....

I can't remember exactly where it was (I think it was in Scotland), but having chuckled at Minna being so prepared to take outdoor toilet breaks, when she asked me to accompany her to a nearby pub as we cycled away from a brew stop, I could only ask whether she needed a drink that badly! (She asked me to accompany her so that I could keep an eye on her bike while she went inside). There was another wedding reception going on, with cars and smartly dressed people around.



Day 15, Sunday 6th August – John O'Groats to Billericay

Best weather of the entire time in Scotland watched through bus window - airport delays and snoozing on the plane - a safe arrival home

Most of us rose at the usual time, Minna had a slight delay before being able to finish her packing, and a hearty breakfast was served at 7.30. The bus arrived for a prompt departure at 8.30, Richard opting to take a more relaxed journey by cab shortly after. The bus travelled down the A9 with some great views of the Moray Firth and the North Sea in beautiful weather. A breather at the Co-op in Brora. Minna finding the notion that Dunrobin Castle was built by a retired highwayman far funnier than most would, thank you Minna – you are the best audience one could hope for. We dropped off what felt like old friends at Inverness railway station, hard to believe we'd only known them a fortnight. On to the airport and a wait for the plane. All the planes our group was waiting for were delayed, but in the end, nothing too serious. Minna safely arrived at Gatwick ready for an early morning flight to Malta then straight to work. Richard and I arriving in Luton to be picked up by taxi then back to Ingatestone and a lift home to Billericay.

It feels as though everything has changed, the future looks more unknown than ever, but more interesting and exciting than ever. Life won't be the same again.

Bring on the next adventure, I have just enjoyed the best fortnight of my life. Any suggestions for what's next?



I am happy to report, dear reader, that Minna and I got closer and closer as the fortnight went on, and we are now together – or at least as together as can be when one lives in Malta and the other in England. Several visits to be together are already planned; don't buy a new hat just yet but watch this space.

Further pictures that were worth keeping but didn't find a place in the narrative:



Mike and Steve, both over 70 and completed the trip in fine form, real stars.



Tour leader Dave, guides Jim and Sam – these guys were brilliant.





Richard is such a shrinking violet! He'd be fine if he wasn't so lacking in self-confidence

