

## **End to End May 2006**

This is an account the Land's End to John O'Groats trip undertaken by myself, Stan Wright and Colin de la Saux.

### **Day 0 - Penzance**

Got off to a great start - fast drive to Penzance arriving mid-afternoon. Got changed and nipped to Land's End and back so we could get a flyer from the YH in the morning. First taste of the Cornish hills! Disappointingly the Land's End Hotel (official start point) had run out of log sheets for us to record our start, so we got our postcards marked with the official stamp and hoped for the best. As we rode away we heard earsplitting shrieks as the husband of an American we'd met arrived after riding down from John O'Groats. Think she was pleased to see him, but it sounded as if there was being murder done!

### **Day 1 - Penzance YH to Golant YH**

Lovely weather and a lovely route past St Michaels Mount and through South Cornwall. The lanes were full of wildflowers and the fields were full of lambs and rather wholesome looking cattle. The hills weren't as bad as I expected, but they keep on coming so by lunchtime my legs were a bit weary and I was a bit put out to find that the ferry from Trelissick across the estuary wasn't working. This meant a main road detour through Truro and St Austell. Still, after a feed and a rest things didn't look so bad - after all, the sun was shining and it was a Sunday so wouldn't be too busy.

Arrived at Golant utterly knackered. Like a lot of YHA properties it's in a superb spot. and has a Fabulous view of the Fowey Estuary. After dark the local badgers come round to feast on leftovers outside the dining room. They were quite happy to entertain an audience of gawpers and just carried on as if we weren't there.

### **Day 2 - Golant YH to Exeter YH**

Long day today and legs very stiff. Still, once we got off the main road we were in lovely tranquil scenery again. The locals like to toy with the hungry tourist around here. In response to enquiries about local cafes they'll tease your taste buds with stories of the epicurean nirvana you can experience "about a mile away". In reality they're nearer 10 miles away and probably closed! Thus we ended up in the second best cafe in Minions, where Stan posted half his luggage home, it proving far too onerous to carry. The weather turned in the afternoon, but it wasn't too bad and the drizzle cooled us down while we slogged up hill after hill again. The descents were great though. Colin found a great railway path that took us directly into Okehampton old station where there's an excellent cafe run by an angel in human form who cooks the best pasty and chips in the world. (And it's only about a mile away).

We were pretty weary again, but the uplifting power of a good meal should not be

underestimated and we decided to continue the last 20-odd miles into Exeter. Rather glad we did as it was downhill and easy riding nearly all the way into town - payback for all the hard slog! Too tired even to walk to the pub.

### **Day 3 - Exeter to Cheddar**

My bike maintenance team (Colin and Stan) replaced my broken gear cable this morning, saving us much time and a trip to a bike shop. Much easier day today, gently rolling countryside and the Somerset Levels with a bit of a sting in the tail in the form of the Polden hills around Cheddar. Found the most excellent Kings Cycles shop in Taunton where we called in for some more spare cables and I (being a woman after all) bought some shoes. Lovely weather again, almost like a day off. Got in early and had plenty of time to organise the following days digs and go to the pub with a fellow End to Ender. Luxury!

### **Day 4 - Cheddar to Redbrook (near Monmouth)**

Dead beat this morning. Not looking forward to the slog up the hill out of Cheddar. Procrastinated for as long as possible, but had to get going eventually, and it wasn't that bad really. Little did I know that there was one much worse to get us up to the top of the Avon Gorge and the Clifton Suspension Bridge! (Thank God Colin never let on). This is a marvellous structure, especially when you consider how long ago it was built. There are great views from it, and Bristol is a lovely city. From there we crossed the Severn on the modern bridge. Not a patch on the Humber Bridge though - it rattles in a rather cheap fashion every time a lorry goes past!

It was really hot today, so we struggled to motivate ourselves out of the pub near Chepstow and down the A466, but this was an absolutely glorious part of the trip. This road follows the Wye valley and passes through (not over) some of my favourite green and rolling hills, and we hardly needed to pedal at all!

### **Day 5 - Redbrook to Clun**

Another great day. We followed the Monnow Valley and the Golden Valley for miles and miles, and they're as nice as they sound. Lovely cycling turf this, mostly easy as well. Millions of sheep and lambs in the fields. Beautiful wooded hills all around, most of which you don't have to go up! Stopped at a lovely tea-garden, where I could happily have lazed the day away, listening to the birdsong and looking at the view. Dearly wish I had Stan's capacity for a "power nap". It seems to do him the world of good, and I'm starting to suffer from sleep deprivation - can never seem to get a full night's kip. The Herefordshire apple orchards were just coming into bloom which rather made me fancy a glass of cider, but it was far too hot to actually drink any. Nasty 1:4 hill to wake us up (seemed like 1:1 to me), but at least there was an excellent scran van on the other side. The heat was getting quite intense by now and we were absolutely cooked on the way to Kington, but fortunately it eased off after a while.

Clun YH is lovely. It's only a basic hostel, but it's in an old mill in a lovely spot in a

lovely village in a lovely part of the world. Go there. Soon. It's wonderful. You WILL enjoy it!

### **Day 6 - Clun YH to Chester YH**

Didn't want to leave Clun, best kip I'd had in ages! Followed a recommendation to Harry Tuffin's at Church Stoke for a slap up breakfast (bargain). Rode into the Cheshire Plain and the flat stuff again, saw about half a dozen buzzards circling on the thermals at one point. They're really common in the west. After a few hills around Wrexham we hit some nasty main road traffic into Chester - think it was race day or something, but managed to find a not too bad way into the city just before it started raining. YH was like an oven.

### **Day 7 - Chester YH to Leigh**

Instead of a rest day we opted for a short ride into Leigh instead, although it seems to be a digs desert and we had to stay in a hotel that night. Lovely ride through the Delamere forest in gentle rain, and the bit that looks horribly built up on the map wasn't actually too bad at all. Today we had the most expensive food on our whole trip. Stopped for coffee and cake near Leigh at some garden centre version of Harrods and it cost FIVE QUID! Nearly gave it back when they told me how much it was. It wasn't even that nice. Still, our hotel was very comfy and had a great carvery. Our bikes slept in the function suite.

### **Day 8 - Leigh to Garstang**

Had to go through the middle of Preston today which wasn't much fun, even though it was Sunday. However, for a good chunk of the A6 on the North side there's a cycle lane. Had arguably the best digs of our entire trip here. Our hosts Margaret and Norman made us very welcome in their immaculate house and drove us to the pub for a nice meal, seeing as it was raining! We had a guided tour around Garstang afterwards. Breakfast was superb too. Five star.

### **Day 9 - Garstang to Penrith**

Started raining today, and just got worse and worse. Found a good cyclepath alongside the Lune estuary into Lancaster - lots of nice birdlife and a great view of Heysham Nuclear power station! (Stopped for refreshment at Lancaster Bus Station - a lovely fight, clean, modern place. Why can't they all be like that instead of the depressing dumps they usually are)? From Lancaster we headed out on the A6 again.

Readers, if you manage to avoid one thing in your lives make it the A6 through Lancaster and Carnforth. You have to cross three lanes of heavy lorries to get where you want to go and the lanes are too narrow half the time to get wagon and cyclist side by side. Particularly horrible in pouring rain. Everybody seemed to be in a bad temper although it wasn't them getting wet. Had a puncture before Carnforth and lost Colin till we caught him up in Kendal.

Rain continued over Shap fell; and down the other side. (Not necessarily a bad thing as the heavy cloud meant I couldn't see the climb before me). It seemed to take forever to get to Shap, I was expecting it to be on top of the fell, but it's miles away on the other side. By the time we got there we were drenched and the only place open was the chip shop. Bless them for allowing us in to drip all over the place. Anyway the last miles were downhill into Penrith, still in the deluge, and to our digs with the very understanding Doreen. Good to see John who had already arrived after riding over from Hawes. I had major guilt about us all descending on her filthy and wet, but she took it all in her stride.

### **Day 10 - Penrith to Crocketford (near Dumfries)**

Disaster! Yards down the road from our digs this morning Stan was ambushed by a huge pothole and came off, badly gashing his fingers. Fortunately the ambulance arrived in no time and ferried him down the road to the minor injuries unit where they bandaged him up, but they had to send him for stitches in Carlisle. His bike was OK though, so he insisted on riding it there. Nothing was going to get between Stan and his tour, so after hanging around in A&E for hours he finally got sorted out (and cadged £10 sponsorship from the doctor) and on the road again. Not only that, but we had to get a real spurt on in order to make our digs that night. Excellent landlady again. We turned up late, but she put on a lovely dinner for us even so, and boy was I ready for it!

### **Day 11 - Dumfries to Ayr**

Lovely part of the world this. They have wonderful pasture and I've never seen so many good Aberdeen Angus cattle. I think they'd been brought down from the fells for calving, so most of the cows had calves at foot and they're absolutely gorgeous. As we climbed over the Southern Uplands I discovered my back wheel was disintegrating as I stopped for another puncture. There was a chunk of metal coming away from the rim where one of the spokes goes in. Still, we couldn't really do much else but keep going and it hung together until we got to Ayr, by which time my left pedal bearings were going as well!

### **Day 12 - Ayr to Lochranza YH**

Took bike into the shop first thing this morning for a new back wheel and pedals, which meant we didn't get on the road until nearly lunchtime. We went down the Sustrans path from Ayr to the ferry port at Ardrossan, looking for snakes in the gorse and dodging the endless broken glass on the way. The ferry lands at Brodick, which is half way up the East side of the island, and by the time we got there it was raining cats and dogs. However, (as we were to discover in Scotland), whatever the weather's doing now, it'll probably be doing something else in a short while, so we nipped in for a coffee and the sun came out.

Arran is a glorious place, and as we headed North up the coast we looked out for

seals. There's a tough climb in the way though, and even though it rained again the views are superb. Lochranza YH overlooks a beautiful estuary and there are a couple of tame deer that graze in the garden.

### **Day 13 - Lochranza YH to Oban YH**

The YH is almost next to the ferry terminal, so we caught the 09.15 ferry to Claonaig on Kintyre, This is just a little wharf with a single track road to it, and we rode on to Tarbert for elevenses, unfortunately arriving just after some tour buses so the place was packed. This is a beautiful part of Scotland and we were getting some lovely weather - hardly any wind and lots of nice sun between occasional showers and drizzle. The roads go for miles by the lochsides so it's often easy riding and it never seemed particularly busy. Further towards Oban the climbs kick in, but they weren't too awful and always rewarding. Still, was quite glad to get to Oban and shortly after the heavens opened again.

### **Day 14 - Oban YH to Loch Lochy YH**

Getting sleep deprivation again. Scottish youth hostels don't shut up shop until eleven thirty, so on the dot of closing a party of German students came into the dorm last night and rattled around for ages before settling down. Then somebody's alarm went off at 06.00!

Went into Tesco's for a fry up this morning and then headed North to the Great Glen. We stocked up with microwave curry in Fort William and continued up the climb from Spean Bridge to the viewpoint at the Commando Memorial, then onwards past Loch Lochy which was calm as a millpond, reflecting the hills all around.

### **Day 15 - Loch Lochy YH to Ainess**

Absolutely knackered this morning. Shared a dorm in Loch Lochy YH with two Danish girls doing the Great Glen Way, and we were all pretty weary. Much to my disgust yet more people turned up at nearly midnight, one of whom insisted on messing about trying to find her precious mobile phone for ages. Eventually, (after a couple of suggestions that she should do so) she agreed to turn in and look for it in the morning. I was thoroughly unsettled by now and couldn't sleep at all, and later in the night discovered said phone under the duvet at the bottom of my bed! Readers, I haven't struggled with my conscience so much in a long time, but managed to stop myself flushing it down the loo the next day.

Didn't see anything fishy going on in Loch Ness. Great weather and mainly easy riding. Got ripped off in Drumnadrochit when we stopped for lunch, but I suppose it goes with the territory. From here we tackled probably the steepest climb of the trip. My legs went to jelly and I had to walk half of it, but it brought us out into some beautiful countryside on the way to Beaulieu. John left us here to divert to Inverness for his train home. Mostly mild terrain to Dingwall and we followed another Sustrans route to Evanton that gave us an amazing view of the Cromarty Firth all

the way. Our digs also overlooked it - quite spectacular.

### **Day 16 - Ainess to Bettyhill**

The wind got up today and tried to blow us back where we came from. We climbed away from the Cromarty Firth to the Dornoch Firth, where there's a spectacular viewpoint. A coach arrived and some tourists got off to take photos of the scenery, but soon skipped back on again as the wind ripped through them. We were really glad to load up with calories at the pub in Bonar Bridge, knowing there wasn't going to be anything else for a long while, and the going got really tough after Lairgs as we crossed the exposed moors of the Flow Country. I'm sure this is a really great ride on a good day, but we struggled to make any headway at all and it seemed to take forever to get to the Crask Inn pub. I was beginning to think it was a cruel joke, and the scenery is about as unprepossessing as you can get - nothing for miles but brown, dead-looking grass and conifer plantations. I know it's supposed to be a valuable wildlife habitat, but it looked more like an ecological disaster that day!

The Crask Inn is an amazing place - a real travellers haven and it's really needed up there. It's so isolated you can look out of it and not see anything in any direction (except more brown grass). It's not very fancy but it's always open for the weary traveller in need of a bed and a feed, and while we were there another group of CTC cyclists came in on their way to Tongue and Cape Wrath.

Fortunately the going got easier from then on, and after Altnaharra we turned out of the wind and into the shelter of Strath Naver. This is an absolutely beautiful valley and we followed the Naver all the way to the Northern edge of Scotland, where it meets the Atlantic. This was probably the toughest day of all for me. I thought at one point we were never going to get there, but there wasn't anywhere else to stop so I had to keep going!

### **Day 17 - Bettyhill to John O'Groats**

The most bizarre thing happened today. I was just thinking that, although beautiful, this must be one hell of an isolated place to live, when who should I bump into but my old flatmate from 1985 who now does live there! I couldn't believe it. I was so knackered I thought I was hallucinating, but there she was, happily married with 2 kids and a load of animals. Of all the places you wouldn't expect to find your old mates!

Anyway, after a bit of catching up we pedalled off, taking it really easy as the day was so glorious and we only had about 50 miles to J O'G. This is an amazing bit of coastline - bleak moorland gives out onto high crags and cliffs, with the occasional tempting sandy beach. The sea was as blue as the sky, although I'm sure it was absolutely freezing really. However, this part of Scotland gave us weather in variety and as we made our way along we went from sun, to drizzle, to showers, to pouring rain, to hail, then fine again with more strong headwinds that were most unwelcome.

We stopped in Thurso for Stan's stitches to come out and in the cafe he worked his magic again on some total strangers and earned a bit more sponsor money! East of here it gets a bit flat, and the wind was unrelenting. My legs were suffering from the previous day and we just about crawled into the finish in J O'G, which was about as sad looking as I felt at that point. I was really glad to get there, but it just brought closer the return to work. We went to sign the book in the John O'Groats Inn and I had a pint whilst the blokes decided to celebrate our arrival with coffee! (No sense of occasion, some people).

John O'Groats is rather a strange place. There isn't much there but the tourist centre, a kiosk selling tat and the ferry to Orkney. The John O'Groats Hotel has closed and by the time we got there even the photographer had left, taking the famous sign with him!

## **Orkney**

The following morning was absolutely glorious as we rode to the Gills-Orkney Ferry. The sun was so bright the reflections off the sea hurt my eyes. Seals basked on the rocks and guillemots floated on the water. We sat on deck slurping tea from polystyrene cups and I couldn't have been happier if we'd been on board the QE2. We saw dolphins or porpoises on the crossing. Once on the other side we "cruised" through South Ronaldsay and over the Churchill Barriers, stopping to look at the Italian Chapel built by POWs in the war. On the outside it's a fairly ordinary Nissen hut, but inside it's covered in murals and decked out as a beautiful church.

Scapa Flow was clear and blue as the Mediterranean and we chatted to some divers. There are so many old wrecks out there that it's an ideal playground for them. Oystercatchers were as common as blackbirds and we often heard or saw curlews as well. A short-eared owl quartered the road in front of us in broad daylight and didn't appear to be remotely shy.

Of course, it was too good to last, and by the time we reached Kirkwall it was about 3 degrees and raining. Still, I was too tired to care really, so did a bit of souvenir shopping and stuffed my face in the Pomona Cafe all afternoon until they chucked us out. St Magnus Cathedral is an amazing place, and I'm still trying to find the significance of the skull and crossbones that are carved on the tombstones of all the ancient worthies buried there: if anybody knows give me a call. This evening was really weird. We weren't used to having time to kill, and the ferry didn't leave until eleven o'clock so it dragged, but I really didn't want to ride my bike any more!

The Orkney route is a really good way of getting back into civilisation from J O'G. It only cost us about £18 inc bike for the overnight Kirkwall-Aberdeen ferry (because all the cabins were taken, unfortunately), and it docks in Aberdeen about eight o'clock. From here you can get onto a decent train instead of the little local ones, or

hire a car. Just take your thermals if you end up in a recliner, it gets a bit nippy after the heating goes off! One way car hire worked out quite cost effectively for the three of us, even though it was more than twice as much to get home as get to Penzance. We had a great trip back again, with no hold ups at all, for which we were all extremely thankful as I was desperate for a good kip.

Although I felt as if I'd been away forever, when I arrived home nothing had changed. The building work had hardly progressed at all, and even at work they couldn't bring to mind a single bit of interesting news. I'll just have to go away for a bit longer next time.

Anyway, if you're contemplating doing this tour I would definitely recommend it. May is a great time to go as the weather should be decent, the days are long, the tourists aren't out in force and yet the countryside is at its most attractive. We had no trouble finding digs on our route, which was largely pinched, from the website [www.pewseys.eclipse.co.uk](http://www.pewseys.eclipse.co.uk), then adapted a bit by Colin, who kept us on the right track throughout. This is no mean feat as Devon and Cornwall bring to mind the war years when all the signposts were removed so if Nazis invaded they'd never be able to find their way anywhere!

I found most of the English youth hostels fine, if somewhat overheated, and so long as you pack earplugs you should be OK. I often woke really early, but not because of anything wrong with the accommodation, and it's great to be able to have a natter with other hostellers, especially as we met several others doing the End to End as well. Crucially they all have bike sheds and good laundry facilities.

However, I was less impressed by the SYHA. I don't mind the hostels being simple and having to cook - there's a basic shop so you won't starve even if you haven't brought supplies - but they seem to be used as a late night dosshouse by some inconsiderate motorised travellers who rather abuse the hostelling ethos, I thought.

The B&Bs we used were pretty good. Although a bike shed was often not available, the breakfasts were definitely superior! Apart from the north of Scotland we were never that far from some grub, and so long as you've always got some saddlebag rations and emergency Eccles cakes there shouldn't be a problem.

*Tracey Parker*

