

END TO END AT 40

It all started last October as Alistair Ferns and I sat one night recalling our teenage years and trying to convince ourselves that we were still young and fit. Back then we were keen cyclists, racing around Ayrshire and covering hundreds of miles each month at great speeds. Nowadays our cycling is more sedate and less frequent. As we reflected on the intervening years and our impending fortieth birthdays we agreed, with a little help from a few beers, to set a challenge to cycle from Lands End to John O'Groats.

Clearly a trip of this length would require time away from our families so it was agreed to disguise the trip as a charity fund raiser. The good cause element of the trip secured our absence from family life for the two weeks. Alistair who now lives on the Black Isle and was originally from Prestwick, chose Chest, Heart & Stroke Scotland as his nominated charity and I chose Diabetes UK.

To prepare for two weeks cycling the length of Britain detailed and meticulous planning was avoided. The simple plan was to avoid the cold and flu in the winter, and build up the miles cycled between Easter and mid June. At times I appeared to spend more time sitting at the computer trying to secure sponsors and arrange accommodation than I spent sitting in the saddle.

Chest, Heart & Stroke Scotland gave us the use of their van as a support vehicle and we left for Lands End on 5 July. The following day we lifted the bikes out the van and head off into the Cornish hills in a sort of northerly direction. Route planning was not too detailed. I had bought two £2 road atlases and a highlighter pen out of Bargain Books the week before. Each morning we highlighted or route on both atlases, gave one to the support driver tore the page out the other and put it in our back pockets. The days soon developed into a game of cat and mouse. Alistair and I would cycle in the general direction of our daily destination with making as little reference to the map as possible, and our support driver tried to find us. The first day was easy to loose the driver. We just took of into the maze of narrow lanes and high hedges in Cornwall. Within 5 miles we had shaken off our following van and were left in peace to enjoy the continual views of miles and miles of high hedges! Eventually we did hit the coastline. In fact we hit both of them, one at Penzance and the north coastline at St Ives. From St Ives we kept the Atlantic on our left and headed up and down hills all afternoon to arrive at Tintagel at he end of the first day. 82 miles covered. The Atlantic View Hotel in Tintagel generously provided superb accommodation. An excellent place to relax.

Day two was 72 miles over the Devon "Downs" (why do they put the downs at the top of hills?). The countryside became more like Ayrshire with open views of hill farms. We stopped at Tiverton on the second day at enjoyed the good hospitality of my Aunt and Uncle who live nearby. Here we learned that too much good hospitality, particularly red wine and malt is not necessarily good for cycling. The Tuesday's ride started slowly but by the time we reached Bristol and climbed through the city centre we began to feel fit again. That day we were very successful in loosing the support van and despite the driver cheating by using motorways we reached our destination in Pilning, just south of the Severn Crossing first after 80 miles. We crossed the Severn into Wales at the start of day 4. That morning something unusual was noticed in the weather. For the forth consecutive day we were cycling in sunshine and with a slight tail wind. This helped maintain both our spirit's and our speed at we travelled through the Wye Valley and Herefordshire and completed our 69 miles at Ludlow. By then both Alistair and I became accustom to this idea of not having to cycle in the wind and rain and were beginning to feel fitter and stronger each day. As we dressed each morning the difficult decision was not how many layers to wear by do we need sun-screen or not. Central England was covered at a comfortable speed of 17 mph during the next two days (79 and 74 miles respectively) with overnight stops at Northwich and Clitheroe. At this speed it was easy to drop our van and loose it in long slow queues of commuter traffic as we effortlessly cycled by.

Once through the midlands the quieter and more challenging roads of Lancashire and the North Yorkshire Moors presented us with brilliant climbs, terrific scenery and fast descents. Quiet rural roads along valleys and over moorlands was a favourite for cyclists and motorcyclists like. Weaving our way through 91 miles river valleys and over dales via Slaidburn, Bentham, Kirby Lonsdale and Sedburgh provided the most scenic and quietest roads of the trip. We ended the first weeks cycling at Brampton, near Carlisle.

Sunday of our second week was always going to be a good day as we travelled into Scotland to meet up with my family in Peebles. I was familiar with many of the roads ahead that morning and as I put on my yellow jersey Alistair got a hint that I was on good form. A flat gentle start through Longtown and Langholm was enough to loosen off our legs before the hills of the Eskdale and Ettrick Valleys . A slight breeze kept us cool in the brilliant sunshine as we climbed in Tour de France style from the Tushielaw Inn to the Gordon Arms (without stopping for a drink) and descended at great speed to Traquair House and Peebles. Our 72 miles that day ended with a dook in the Tweed at Peebles .

By now we had covered a total of 620 miles in eight days. Day nine took us through the central belt of Scotland past Carnwarth, Whitburn, Polmont and Grangemouth by lunchtime and Stirling and Callander by late afternoon. A fairly congested and uneventful 84 miles in comparison to the previous two days.

Admittedly things were beginning to get a wee bit sore by now. In the morning, our legs were stiff and took longer each day to loosen off and our backsides became more painful earlier in each afternoon. Callander to Fort William was another dry day. 85 miles along busier roads but the drop down into Glencoe made up for the increased traffic. On day eleven I adopted the "two pair of cycling shorts strategy" this led to a far more comfortable days cycling although there was little opportunity to sit down on the saddle. The climb from Drumadrochit to Beaulieu kept us both out the saddle for a good while. This was Alistair's day. At the end of 71 miles he rode into his home village on the Black Isle to be welcomed by cheering neighbours and family.

The penultimate day took us through Bonar Bridge, Lairg, Altnaharra and along the Naver Valley to Bettyhill. I clearly got a sense of increasing remoteness the further north we travelled and the reassurance that our support van was on hand to feed and water us was a big help. After cycling another 91 miles somewhere in northern Scotland we turned eastwards at Bettyhill, What a headwind ! Our last day was meant to be a short sprint to the line at John O'Groats. It was short at 43 miles but the easterly headwind knocked our speed down to 14 miles an hour. The last 20 miles from Thurso through Castletown and past the Castle of Mey appeared to drag on for most of the morning and it was a relief to see the welcoming party of family and friends standing at the finishing post.

Blair said "It was a superb trip with brilliant cycling weather. The roads in the first few days were hilly but as we went through England they became flatter and we became fitter. By the time we reached the Highlands the hills began to take their toll on our legs but the good weather and scenery helped make each days cycling enjoyable. I've always said cycling is one of the gentle sports that most folk can do sitting down, but after 13 consecutive days in the saddle I'm not so sure about the gentle bits! Alistair and I are both grateful for the support from Harry Fairbairn(Irvine) and many other local businesses to enable a back up team of David Lodge, Steve Hitchcock and Bryce Wilson to assist us. They soon became expert in handing up food, water and sun cream to us."

Blair raised monies for Diabetes UK by organising a competition to guess the total distance cycled. Each £1 guess gave sponsors the chance to win a £200 prize for the correct distance guessed. Three people correctly guessed the actual distance of 994 miles. The winners are; J McConnachie, A Easton and J McCulloch. In excess of £3000 has been raised for Diabetes UK. Alistair's chosen charity was Chest Heart and Stoke Scotland who provided a support van for the trip and he hopes to have raised in excess of £2000 from sponsorship.

Both riders are indebted to the invaluable support from many sponsors principally; Harry Fairbairn (Irvine), William Gray Construction (Inverness), Balcombe Group PLC, 3M, and Tu-Max Haulage

More details of the trip can be found at <http://members.lycos.co.uk/e2eat40>

Blair Wyllie

Tele; 01292 282928 or 07974 143 925

Blair@bwyllie.freeserve.co.uk

01 August 2003

