

One man and his tree-clad iron horse A Land's End to John O'Groats Bike Britain adventure

On the eve of the Ride4Research End2End ride day (8th September) I found myself at the Lands End sign-post feeling nervy and very unsure. Firstly, would my knee strain picked-up in training stand-up to the 1,000 mile plus ride and secondly, how could I know what awaited on this infamous of bike trails? The latter was brought into focus the following morning seeing the pairs/groups of riders some with support teams: mine was to be a solo unsupported ride. But then time to crack on with tree (bird cherry) laden bike and the first school just around the corner. I'd had some earlier cheer, however, at the B&B with my first John O'Groats direction: "go down to the duck pond and turn left". The St Levan School pupils were very attentive during the outdoor classroom on tree benefits and with loud clapping to send me on my way I set off on day one.



In End2End circles Cornwall and Devon are revered as a challenging hilly bike ride. I wasn't to be disappointed. Sap-draining gear-grinding miles were cranked out mitigated, however, by beautiful rugged (though tree-less) coastal landscapes. Arriving in Camelford I was relieved that the legs felt good and the knee was fine. The Camelford school turn-out was impressive and the pupils were intrigued by my iron horse. The route through these counties was a mix of country lanes punctuated with busy stretches of the A30 and lorries bombing past some far too close for comfort. Once up on Bodmin Moor the road thankfully flatten out though a headwind persisted all the way to Exeter where I met up with Kenton Roger (I-tree fame). After a few beers in Kenton's local pub and a fine home cooked spag. bol. it was an early night for the next tree planting at South Brook School. The pace of the classroom session was geared down in this special needs school and I was touched that one pupil thought spuds grew on trees.

The next leg led to Glastonbury then up the Mendip Hills: a slow but pleasant pedal-pump with great views of the iconic Glastonbury Tere. A pattern of 8-10 hours in the saddle with breaks and a sustainable pace of between 12-15 miles per hour was emerging. At destination Exeter I met with David Evans (QTRA fame) for a well-earned beer. Over the two night stop-over David cooked up some gastronomic Indian dishes. Of all the schools in Bath I'd chosen one on the high ridge that surrounds the city: involving a steep sharp climb. On arrival at Combedown School I was ushered into a pupil packed assembly feeling a bit of a sweaty mess. After an engaging full-on tree benefits assembly it was outside to plant the tree with the eco-club. The Tour of Britain was in town so a break was had to stand on a tight hillside bend to see proper cyclist in action: alas with Sir Bradley Wiggins in last place! With three days complete it was time to catch the train from Bath to Egham to lead the one-day Ride4Research event (at the AA conference) through Cobham Common and Windsor Great

Park (WGP). This time John Deakin (Crown Estates Chief Forester for WGP) kindly put me up in his fine family forest lodge. The ride was a fun social event as ever - punctuated with stops to plug into John Deakin's infinitive (royal) knowledge of WGP - topped with a tasty AA hog-roast and an ancient tree management field trip hosted by Bill Cathcart and Ted Green. The riders had a great time especially with the post-ride beers at the Monkeys Forehead.

On Mon. 15th September it was the train back to Bath to recommence the ride: making my way along the busy A46 to Cheltenham. Yet another stop-over with Chris Chavasse (Senior Tree Officer: Cheltenham Council). A fine homemade curry and a few beers in a skittle playing pub saw off the end of the day. The newly built amphitheatre at Warden Hill School provided a perfect setting for a full assembly tree talk. With all the *en route* schools I had been impressed with the green knowledge of the pupils and at least one pupils in every case knew the autotrophic 'P' process: photosynthesis! A collective choral shout of grow-little-tree-grow saw the cherry duly planted. Cutting across country took me through the picturesque town of Ledbury and on to Bromyard: then destination Shrewsbury. Still feeling good on arrival I landed at the Whitehorse pub for a double-everything grill and was pleased to hear that many End2Enders appear a little jaded when stopping at this pub. Not me. Next day (16th Sept.) The switched-on Coleham Primary School pupils were on form and a group photo-call with the iron horse proved a favourite. One pupil noted that the bike was 'v. cool'. Back on the A49 I headed for Warrington, Wigan and then Preston (550 miles in). Must confess I had a brief body-aching this-is-tough moment but I figured such feelings had no room on the ride and rallied round to head ever northwards. Although a tarmac clad school a raised planter was found for the tree at Eldon Primary soaked in with the cutest plastic watering can ever! The tree will planted out at a later date on a nearby school field. Day ten of the ride was excellent: a wind assisted cycle from Preston to Penrith flying up the A6. A welcome stopover break again with fine food was had with Rob Sim (Capita) and we planted two trees (another cherry kindly supplied by Capita) at Stramongate Primary School (Kendall) with site prep from Graham Nicholson (Capita). There was brief shock horror moment with the pupils galloping from one tree to another that denigrated into a 420 pupil stampede! No worries only some slight bruising! At 660 miles it was destination Gretna Green having made the Scottish border (knock-out). It's was now over halfway and I felt strong and mental focused on getting to the finish. However, 450 miles remained until the John O'Groats tikka-tape. Reflecting back at this stage the schools had been great and the pupils even better.



Sunday (21st Sept) was a quiet flat route from Gretna on the A75/6 to Dumfries and Kilmarnock. It was good to have a rest from the constant throng of HGVs: many passing very close to my right shoulder! Pressing on with a 117 mile ride found me in Paisley. Near on rabid with hunger I stumbled into the local Ben & Jerrys (not much else around) but unfortunately with gas off in the kitchen all they could offer was a bowl of soup..... KFC happy meal then! Next day the first bike-ride-fright was mistakenly taking the Clyde tunnel in

Glasgow. The dimly lit descent into the tunnel's bowel was like entering Hades. There was no space to make mistakes in this claustrophobic tunnel but just to cycle like hell and get out alive at the other end. With blood pressure returned to normal I past Dumbarton on the A82 and along the side of Loch Lochmon. Beautiful. Had a result with the stay at Crianlarich: a free night at the Best Western as long as I had meal. Get in. At the next local school (Crianlarich Primary) tree planting, a seven year old pupil even knew the 'P' word! Just amazed at how informed these youngsters are. By now I was beginning to feel pumped with the finish line in my grasp. The challenge of the Highlands, however, still awaited. A thigh pumping 2.5mile ride up on to the windswept Rannoch Moor took me in sight of Glencoe. 'Twas a grey drizzly moody day and I felt like a mere spec in this isolated mountainous landscape. At Fort William alas Ben Nevis was heavily cloaked in low cloud. Cold and a little damp I arrived in Fort Augustus: at the southern tip of Loch Ness. Next day the tree planting at Kilchuimen School went well with a great group photo under their tree thought poster. Another tailwind along the Loch sped me to Inverness where a copper beech was planted with the head (Convener) of the Highland Council: Cllr Jimmy Gray. Many thanks to Robert Patton and team at Inverness Council for organising this planting. Just north of Inverness the A9 headed north into the Sutherlands, another beautiful landscape with rolling heather covered hills on one side and the expansive North Sea (with numerous oil-rigs) on the other. Second bike-ride-fright was free-wheeling at 40mph down into the fishing village of Brora. If falling off the bike and skidding along the bridge hadn't killed me then the 50ft drop off the bridge would have! Next day (26th Sept), even though Keiss Primary School was closed on an in-service day, an impressive number of pupils, parents and teachers showed to see the English man with tree-clad iron horse. With the final tree planted it was job done: all eleven schools from the toe to tip of Britain. Just the last 17 miles remained to the tikka tape of John O'Groats. A vicious westerly cross wind meant an angled, leaning cycle ride. However, steering north provided a tailwind that blew the iron horse clear into the Bike Britain finish line. Must confess I felt a little emotional having photo taken at the famous post and himbled that the couple who obliged with camera shot gave me a £6.00 donation.

Closing thoughts



What does it take to finish a solo unsupported 1,000 plus mile End2End cycle ride. Well, over 300,000 pedal strikes, dogged determination, a shed-load of grit and the desire to take every hill thrown at you on the chin! The eleven schools were great and the approx. 2,000 switched-on kids even better. Personally, after three months of planning, preparation and training I feel very relieved, emotionally tanked-up and just a tad proud!

Many thanks to those along the route who put me up, to Coles Nurseries for the trees and to Robert Patton and team for organising the Inverness planting.

..... What's next ? Abseiling off the Europa hotel in Belfast.... watch this space.

Russell Ball

Fund4Trees

<http://fund4trees.org.uk/>

Founder & Trustee

russell@fund4trees.org.uk

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