

## AN END TO END TO AN END

An account of a 1000+ mile cycle ride in support of Remap – Keith Hunter

**5<sup>th</sup> Sept** I saw off my wife at Penzance station having had a week's holiday before starting the ride and went in search of my companions who were doing the ride as a Cyclists' Touring Club 'holiday'. They arrived in twos and threes and we loaded our luggage onto the support van and set off for Land's End to assemble for the duty photograph in front of the famous signpost. Foolishly I had said that I was familiar with the route and so several of them followed me- bad mistake! Within half an hour it was obvious that these people were PROPER cyclists and despite months of preparation, I was not in the same league. By the time that we had been to Land's End and back to the youth hostel at Penzance my heart rate monitor warning buzzer had gone berserk on several occasions.



Distance 29.7 miles Ascent 2272 ft Kcals 1700

**6<sup>th</sup> Sept Penzance to Lostwithiel** The ride has started in earnest! The pattern for the rest of the journey is set when having left a minute or two ahead of Bill on what I thought was the planned route, I pedalled in isolated splendour along the seaside path that led past St Michael's Mount. Soon I was headed inland and had to cross the many valleys that cut Cornwall into a series of slices. These valleys are held apart by some ferocious hills and soon I was paying the penalty for my foolishness the day before. Claw your way up one and hang on to the brakes as the road plunges into the next defile - no gentle freewheeling, just the big dipper at Blackpool transferred to the West Country. Oh my legs! Later I fell into company with Andrew, a retired police inspector, and we rode together for the rest of the day.



Whenever there was a navigation decision to be made, we found that the correct route always went skywards. I was getting a bit ragged round the edges by the time we reached the hotel in Lostwithiel and having previously decided to be really disciplined during the overnight stops, abandoned such ideas, showered, changed and drank Guinness until dinner time.

Distance 58 miles Ascent 5175 ft Kcals 4000

**7<sup>th</sup> Sept Lostwithiel to Exeter** We feared that this was going to be a bit of a killer and so it proved to be. It had rained overnight and the morning traffic was heavy so it was a relief to get off the main roads and climb over Bodmin Moor (a warm-up for Dartmoor after lunch). Again my progress coincided with that of Andrew's and we joined forces. Stopping in Tavistock for lunch, he shot into Boots to buy industrial quantities of cream in a vain attempt to assuage the damage to his perineum. As often happens, it was difficult to hit the right route coming out of the town and we were forced to expend precious energy on a savage little hill before the long drag up on to Dartmoor. Sad to say Dartmoor is not just one big lump but a number separated by deep valleys and so for every glorious swooping descent there was a price to pay. Eventually we reached Exeter and the youth hostel. Youth hostels were obviously designed for young people with no thought given to, shall we say, mature males' propensity to need nocturnal plumbing checks. No matter how carefully one would creep down the corridor the floorboards would creak and wake everyone else.



Distance 68.6 miles Ascent 6800 ft Kcals 4500

### **8<sup>th</sup> Sept Exeter to Cheddar**



The organiser was very keen on GPS navigation. He said that it would confer an advantage to those using it. I had been unable to get my computer to recognise the format in which he emailed it to all the riders and in any case other writers on the subject in the cycling mags had recommended carrying maps as a back-up and so I did just that. I left the hostel in the company of a GPS equipped group and at the first squeak from it they said that we were to go up the road a little and turn left. I looked at my map which showed the way out Exeter off to the right and so we parted company and I headed for Talaton where live friends of mine from my days in the RAF. After a cuppa and a chat I set off towards the Blackdown hills. On the way I came upon this bizarre sight - tin cows. I

suppose they produce tinned milk!

The climb through the forest clad Blackdown hills was like a scene from 'The Lord of the Rings'. Mist dripping from the trees. Mordor or what?

It was about now that the 'peleton\*\*' started to make its appearance. This was a group of 3 friends from Surrey usually accompanied by the deputy leader (in an earlier life, the man who wrote scripts for Dennis the Menace) and sundry others who were very good cyclists but whose route finding was, shall we say, less than perfect. They would power past me several times a day and this would give rise to the QKS (Quotient of Keith's Smugness) when, every time that I was passed I would notch up another point and I would report it as part of the daily stats.

\*Peleton – French term for the main group in a cycling race –see Tour de France



Distance 71 miles Ascent 4163 ft Kcals 4010 QKS 2

### **9<sup>th</sup> Sept Cheddar to Hereford**

The previous evening, the organiser offered a spare GPS unit to Andrew and we agreed to ride together to see how we got on with it. 'Not well' was my reaction as it wasn't long before I was feeling uneasy because the decision-making was being made by the machine and I had lost my grip on where I was on the map. After an hour or so, Andrew called me as I was in the lead, I turned my head to see him stick out his right arm and so I turned my bike around but he had disappeared. I went looking for him but without success and went back to my map. It wasn't long before I was passed by the peleton.

We had all been a bit daunted by the prospect of navigating through the Avonmouth and Bristol suburbs and so when I arrived at the end of the Avonmouth bridge I decided to take my chances with the lorries on the main road to Aust and the Severn bridge. Onwards through Chepstow where I caught up with the others at lunch and then northwards parallel to the Wye towards Ross. Then a strange thing happened.....

That morning I had noticed that one of my spokes had broken and so I was on the lookout for a bike shop whenever I entered a town. I was in Coleford when a slender young woman clad in skin-tight racing yellow lycra cycled alongside me on her matching yellow racing bike. 'OK?' 'I'm looking for a bike shop' I replied. We stopped and she told me where I could find one. In dragging my bike off the road to avoid the traffic I inadvertently displaced my chain and it wedged just where it is difficult to retrieve. As I struggled to replace it, she said 'Let me' and reaching down, had it on in a trice, wiped her hands on the proffered scrap of rag, mounted her bike and sped off up the road before I could thank her. A dream?? I rode the rest of the way to Hereford in a kind of reverie.



Distance 83 miles Ascent 5026 ft Kcals 4300 QKS 3 (minus 1 for the chain incident)

**10 Sept Hereford to Shifnal (Telford)** I began today's ride in company but very soon the map/GPS conflict arose and so I rode most of the rest of the day alone and enjoyed the sunshine, birdsong and just the feeling of freedom. It was lovely! Every once in a while one of the other groups would pass and we would exchange a word or two and then they would pull ahead and I would be left to myself. I met the others in Ludlow but rather than lunch there I opted for going a little further. But first there was the problem of getting out of the place, never easy, but solved by the simple expedient of going down all the one-way streets the wrong way. It worked a treat and soon I was clear of the town and enjoying a shandy and a sandwich in one Shropshire's best pubs. The barman, a student about to go up to Oxford to study law, was very agreeable company.

Later I came upon some of the others at the side of the road. Ken (from Nottingham) had lost part of the rim of his front wheel, very scary, and the more so when 200 yards later, the road plunged into Much Wenlock at a gradient of about one in seven. I had my own problem with steep gradients later when descending an impossibly steep hill into Coalbrookdale. It was a narrow lane and there was a car parked on my side. As I prepared to ride past it, another came up alongside it and slowed to a crawl thus leaving me nowhere to go. Unable to stop on such a slope I put my face against his and urged him to 'Get on with it'.

Distance 60 miles Ascent 3754 ft Kcals 3117 QKS 2 (a quiet day)

**11<sup>th</sup> Sept Shifnal to Hartington** We were switched to Hartington because the boiler in the hostel in Youlgreave had burst. I was very pleased about the change of destination. Hartington youth hostel is a beautiful Jacobean building, recently renovated, where I had stayed on a walking tour of the Peak after leaving school in 1954. It is rumoured that Bonnie Prince Charlie stopped off there in 1745 the day before his followers fell upon the market town of Ashbourne for a bit of rape and pillage. It must have sapped their strength because the day after, at Derby, they gave up the idea of marching on London and marched back to Culloden where they were slaughtered by the Duke of Cumberland's force and the rebellion ended.

I was late setting off and only Ken (with a new wheel) and Carole left after me. I set off quite carefully knowing the pitfalls of cycling onto fast roads like the A5. After several minutes I spotted Ken and Carole ahead of me at a road junction. 'Funny' I thought and rode up to them to check my map. Before I could do so Ken said in a confident tone 'It's left here' and he and Carole shot off down Watling Street in the general direction of Wales. It was a particularly pleasant morning and I happily sang songs from the 1950s' stage shows as I made my way through the Staffordshire lanes to the Manifold Valley.

It was somewhere around here that Carole hit a loose drain cover, fell badly and ended up in hospital in Newcastle under Lyme. She was unable to ride again for over a week and so spent the rest of the trip in a support vehicle.

As I cruised down the River Hamps cycle track I was hailed by Michael, another former policeman from the north-east from the tea rooms adjacent to the track. I joined them for tea and 'stickies'. This was becoming a mobile tea party but on such a lovely afternoon and not too far to go 'why not?' There was another tea room a few miles further on so we caught up with the rest of the group there and joined them for another cup. Pat, my wife, was driving over from home to join us for the evening so I left them to it and pressed on to Hartington to record my first 'stage' which was duly recorded.



Distance 53.2 miles Ascent 3335 ft Kcals 3347 QKS 7

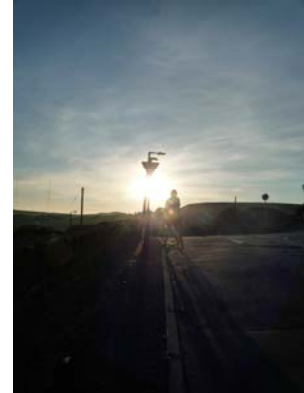
### **12th Sept Hartington to Huddersfield**



Having not gone to Youlgreave as planned, the GPS users were at a bit of a loss because the route would now change to avoid Bakewell and go instead more directly to Monsall Head. As the 'local' I was appointed to lead the whole group until we rejoined the planned route. It wasn't long before my careful briefing was forgotten and I impotently watched as the faster riders turned right, where I had said 'turn left' and headed for Bakewell. No matter, it was a nice day and providing I didn't have to cycle further than strictly necessary, I wasn't fussed.

One of the things that had

concerned me before the ride was that I had never cycled for more than 7 days continuously and I had no idea how it would feel. Well, I picked a good day to find out because this day's route took in some of the most savage hills we were to encounter on the whole trip. Over the White Peak into the Hope valley, up over Strines Moor to Langsett where the last hill was graded 1 in 4! The descent into Holmfirth was so complex that my companion at the time Bill, a man of my age, and I discussed giving up the ride and auditioning for parts in 'Last of the Summer Wine' instead. After Holmfirth was the climb over to Slaithwaite and then the final climb up the well named Scapegoat Hill which felt more like the north face of the Eiger. The sun had set before we reached the hotel on one of the highest points of the M62 motorway.



Distance 61 miles Ascent 4910 ft Kcals 3487

### **13<sup>th</sup> Sept Huddersfield to Hawes**

The previous evening Ian, born in Dar es Salaam, educated in Bute and now living in Bradford and my mate Bill discovered that, in their younger days, they had played rugby on the same ground and that this morning we would stop by for a photo shoot. We all set off together but I had to stop to adjust a bit of kit and lost them. In my hot pursuit I missed a turn and ended up in the wrong place. I was still suffering from the effects of yesterday's 'beasting' and rather than go looking for them, opted for a bit of low cunning instead. I headed for Halifax and Airedale, side-stepped Haworth (this was no time for admiring Victorian novelists) and, got my head down and 'time trialled' it up to Skipton. I knew from a holiday some 40 years ago that the hill separating Wharfedale from Wensleydale was a bit of a brute so I paused only briefly in Skipton for refreshment and pressed on.



On the climb after Kettlewell I paused to take a photograph of a pretty bridge sitting on the crossbar to take the shot. The bike broke free and I fell on top of it bending the gear changing mechanism into the spokes. I pulled it clear but it was badly out of alignment. I pressed on to the summit where I came upon the organiser and his assistants. 'I've damaged my rear mech' I explained. Finding it was just bent out a little I got the organiser to hold the bike, eyed it like Jonny Wilkinson sizing up a conversion kick and delivered a sharp kick with the toe of my cycling shoe. Guy, who had been

watching muttered something about qualified engineers. I looked at him as haughtily as I could, 'Chartered Engineer, if you don't mind'

I reached Hawes ages before the rest, showered, changed and rang my wife. My phone credit ran out and I walked into the village to see if I could top it up but no such luck. Not having the right coins for the phone box, I crossed the road to the pub, ordered a half-pint and asked for change for the phone box. The landlord insisted that I use the pub's phone and I rang Maurice, the Derby panel chairman, with my daily report. The landlord expressed an interest and so I told him about Remap and the ride. As I left he thrust a ten pound note into my hand. Such kindness!

Distance 61 miles Ascent 4910 ft Kcals 3487 QKS 10 (for cunning!)

**14<sup>th</sup> Sept Hawes to Carlisle** My birthday and not a day I shall remember fondly for the cycling. I had to pop into the shop to get my mobile card topped up so I was the last away. I had been unwell in the night and it was much colder than hitherto. It was overcast and the hills snuggled their heads into the duvets of the clouds. I wished that I could do something similar. The Eden valley, famed for its beauty, led eventually to Carlisle but I was in no mood to appreciate it. 'Get your head down Keith and keep the pedals turning' was the mantra for the day. The one bright spot was that Ken, who lived in Lazonby which lay on the route, said to call at his home where his partner was laying on tea for us all. When I reached there I was presented with a birthday cake and the usual 'Happy Birthday' chorus (Thank goodness that there weren't 72 candles!)

Our night stop was a less than salubrious truck stop. But it was clean and I was happy to see it. Here is the view from my window.



Distance 65.6 miles Ascent 4573 ft Kcals 3945

**15<sup>th</sup> Sept Carlisle to Wanlockhead** The immediate environs of the truck stop were daunting with container yards, warehouses, industrial outlets and NO signs that were of much use to cyclists. There was so much scope for getting lost (it has happened to me before) and so I said to myself 'head for Scotland!' and did and it worked. Before long I was photographing the marriage house at the border at Gretna Green. It was a gorgeous day and I pedalled on alone, past Dumfries towards Drumlanrig Castle. Here I was overtaken by almost all of the rest of the group and I followed them for a couple of hundred yards. And then, HORROR!!! Ahead of me like the Red Arrows doing a 'bomb burst' there were cycles heading in all directions. I turned around and fled and headed for Menzies on the main road where I turned onto the road climbing up to Wanlockhead. And what a climb.



About 15 minutes into it, I was overtaken by a Scottish racing cyclist on a training run. He said a couple of sentences to me but I didn't understand either of them and he powered his way on up the hill. A little further on I came upon a couple sitting, wader clad, in the stream, panning for gold. I stopped for a chat and learned that their efforts were being rewarded. It was whilst I was chatting that Duncan, of Dennis the Menace fame, came past. The rest came much later.

Wanlockhead, the highest village in Scotland, looks like something in the Yukon but has a really nice youth hostel and here Carole, who had given up at Hartington, and Wendy, an assistant, cooked a splendid meal of soup and pasta. Wanlockhead also has an amazingly well patronized pub and so we joined them as a gesture of solidarity in this out of the way place.

Distance 71 miles Ascent 3492 ft Kcals 4144 QKS 3 (could have been 10!)

**16<sup>th</sup> Sept Wanlockhead to Stirling** I thought that the midge season was over but I was wrong



and we were encouraged to get on our way. It was a chilly descent on to the industrial lowlands, past Lanark and on to Cumbernauld where all the signposts point to the town centre (but don't tell you which town). I only found out later. God, I hate places like that!!

Tomorrow was to be the day off and I was feeling the need of it and it was with more than a little relief that I spotted some of the others outside a café in Kilsyth. I joined them for a drink but declined their invitation to ride with them over a substantial hill into Stirling. I had other plans! As soon as they had left, I headed east to Denny and then north to

Stirling. All would have been well but for the puncture and by the time that I had repaired it, reached Stirling and climbed the hill to the hostel alongside the castle, it was getting late. I declined the pudding at supper and hit the sack before 8pm.

Distance 81.5 miles Ascent 4573 ft Kcals 3945 Nothing to be smug about

**17thSept Rest Day** Bliss! I thought that a sports massage might restore some energy and so when Ian and Duncan said they were going to the swimming pool at the university I joined them and we took the bus to the campus which is very pleasant. I had a bit of a swim but the masseur was fully booked. But it was nice not to have to get on my bike for a whole day.

**18thSept Stirling to Pitlochry** 'You tak the high road and I'll tak the low road' I took the easier way out of town via the campus and made my way through the Bridge of Allan and Dunblane to Crieff.

Thereafter the terrain became extremely Scottish with many a hill and glen to be negotiated. Having climbed what I considered to be quite sufficient hills for one day I took a right at a place called Milton and followed the Strath Baan down to the Tay and the A9. After a few hundred yards I was back on to quiet roads and it was very pleasant riding up the Tay valley to Pitlochry. I rang my wife on my arrival at the hotel long before the support van and the rest of the party.



'Are you sure you've got the right place?' was her response. I was showered, changed and enjoying a well-earned pint when the others arrived. The hotel struck me as a cross between 'Fawlty Towers' and 'Keeping up Appearances' and there was some grumbling about the plumbing and hot water. I'm glad I got there first.

Distance 57.3 miles Ascent 3435 ft Kcals 3469 QKS 12 (max)

### **19<sup>th</sup> Sept Pitlochry to Aviemore**



I had been worrying about this day because the route crosses the Drumochter pass and I had been over it years before when in the RAF. In the event it turned out to be straightforward if one was selective about which surface one rode on. There is a cycle track, but not everywhere is it cyclist friendly. Where it wasn't, I would take to the main road and enjoy the smooth surface. The weather was beginning to threaten as I approached the summit but it didn't actually start to rain before I had dropped down into the Spey valley. Here I got a bit of a soaking but had dried out by the time I reached Aviemore. Aided by a fresh wind I was there by 2.30pm.

I had been briefed that the youth hostel sign was not visible

when approaching from the south and so when I spied a young couple staggering along under the weight of huge rucksacks, I pulled up and said 'Do you know exactly where the youth hostel is?' The young man started to answer and then panicked 'I'm Cherman! So I asked him the same question in German. Now he looked shocked. 'Hundert meter' he said waving his arm at the nearby trees. 'Danke' said I, and rode on. He called after me 'You speak good Cherman' 'Danke' I repeated as I pulled away.

I arrived at the hostel ahead of the others but was soon joined by Michael, the ex-police Chief Inspector and his brother Stuart, another retired policeman. They too had enjoyed the favourable wind and a high speed dash down the Spey valley. We wandered into the Aviemore centre for an early fish and chip supper. The 3 bottles of wine for £10 offer at Tesco may have something to do with the fact that my performance the next day was less than sparkling but we did enjoy a convivial evening and I slept very well (not a common occurrence on this trip) that night.

Distance 55.7 miles Ascent 2244 ft Kcals 2900 QKS 12

### **20<sup>th</sup> Sept Aviemore to Carbisdale Castle**

The morning was glorious as I left the hostel. Yesterday's clouds were clearing from the Cairngorm and the air could not have been fresher. I was soon passed by the others and so I settled down for what I knew would be a long demanding day. All went well until I was skirting the battlefield at Culloden when straining up a slope into a strong headwind, I missed a turning towards Inverness and wasted a lot of energy before I spotted my error. Thereafter I was always up against it. The crossing of the road bridge at Inverness was made quite scary by a fierce crosswind.

I would meet the others from time to time and at Dingwall we had a tea break together. They soon dropped me as we climbed out of Dingwall and I was alone for the crossing of Beinn Clac An Fheadain (a mountain). Dropping down into the Dornoch Firth it wasn't too long before I was climbing the hill to the youth hostel (Why is it that at the end of a very hard day the hostel is always at the top of a steep hill?). I checked in and slumped in a chair in the dormitory and tried to remember the encounter with the gorilla that seemed to have savaged my body.

The hostel at Carbisdale castle is truly amazing. It was built for the Countess of Sutherland from the proceeds of her husband's will after a long dispute with the family. The family insisted that she may not build on Sutherland land, so she built it on an eminence where everyone on Sutherland land could see it. It was bought by Christian Salvenson as a home for King Haakon during his exile from Norway in WW2 and later given to the Scottish Youth Hostels Association. This is the lower gallery.



Distance 81.6 miles Ascent 4467 ft Kcals 4223

**21<sup>st</sup> Sept Carbisdale Castle to Tongue** It was not a very encouraging start to the day. It had rained in the night and more was forecast but it wasn't raining when I left the castle. The wind was in my favour and the climb up to the watershed was not too demanding. We met up for lunch at the only habitation thereabouts, the Clask Inn, and got roped in to helping the landlady to serve it. After lunch we all enjoyed the descent into Tongue as the clouds gathered behind us.



The forecast for the morrow was not encouraging with a promise of storm-force winds. That evening the wind picked up and by the early hours the hostel was creaking and groaning like some clipper ship rounding the 'Horn'.

Distance 48 miles Ascent 2274 ft Kcals 2800 An easy day- for a change.

**22<sup>nd</sup> Sept Tongue to John o' Groats** Through the night the storm had battered our refuge and it showed no sign of easing as we had breakfast. One by one we steeled ourselves and went to collect our bikes. We were blown to the bike shed but the return journey was desperate. At one point I was holding my bike by the crossbar and it was flailing in the wind like a flag gone berserk. This was seriously worrying! After much sucking of teeth we fought our way to the end of the



road where we could mount and 'Wheee!!' we were away. Fortunately the wind higher up the hill was not as strong as that in the valley and with care we were able to make progress. At one point I noted that I was travelling at 34 mph on the flat and not pedalling. Later as I approached Castletown to the East of Thurso I took a decision that may have been guided by a more powerful hand. The sign showed left and I turned right and after a couple of miles came upon a 4x4 with trailer blocking the narrow road. As I came level with it I could see that the driver was trying to recover several sheets of insulation board which were being

blown to all corners of north-east Scotland. He looked as though he were taking up hang-gliding. I gave him a hand and went on my way. Shortly afterwards I came upon a sign that showed 'Greenland 2 miles'. I didn't realise that my navigation was that bad! However I soon corrected my error and before long, still wind-powered, I arrived at our hotel which is just up the road from John o' Groats. I had planned to carry on to Duncansby Head, which is the mirror image of Land's End but in this wind I was not too sure that I could make it back again. We hung around in the bar until everyone had arrived and we went down to John o' Groats for the obligatory photograph. It was cold and unpleasant and we didn't hang around for long. Back to the hotel for hot showers and supper. We had done it! But there is a surprising feeling of anti-climax and supper that evening was not especially memorable.

Distance 64.7 miles Ascent 5002 ft Kcals 3538

As for me, I had started it as a challenge, converted it into a charity ride and driven on by that imperative, had toughed it out to the end. I am starting to feel pleased with myself.

Some statistics:

Total distance cycled 1070.9 miles

Total ascent 70341ft

Total Kcals 60241 That's a lot of bananas!

Total time on bike 105 hrs 23mins