

## Lands End to John O'Groats May/June 2021. (Phil Lawson)

Having cycled from Vancouver to San Francisco in 2019, I had been planning an East Coast USA extravaganza from Florida to Boston this year. Covid put paid to that and I was to say the least very put out, ready to sit at home, eat pizza, pile on the pounds and regret wasting my winter of training. My America trip had been cancelled with just 7 days to go, as the long awaited announcement did not put USA on or anywhere near any green lists.

After a good couple of days in a monumental sulk, I started thinking marginally more positively and after a friend had kindly sent me GPX data for Lands End to John O'Groats, I had added it to a google mymaps and to my astonishment found there was only 21,000 feet of climbing in the whole ride. I don't know which key I pressed because on my computer keyboard there is no "add things up wrong" button. That'll be easy, I thought, and booked a train ticket to Penzance. Like an idiot I watched the flight I had intended to take to Georgia



on FlightRadar and saw it's avatar land at Atlanta airport whilst on the amazingly long train journey to Penzance.

Arriving at 20.30 and planning to be at St Just Youth Hostel by 22.00 had not been a big ask, and wouldn't have been I'm sure, if I hadn't punctured after half a mile.

Fortunately, being so far west, and mid May, it was still light-ish, and I mended that and got to the youth hostel with 15 minutes to spare. No food, so I heated up baked beans and sausages on my stove outside, and went to bed with the journey ahead of me.



A good tailwind and a sunny day, but hills like nothing in Rye, I arrived about 7.30 in St Austell and could not find a hotel to stay in. B+B's were closed "due to Covid" and their phones implored me to leave a voicemail and they would ring me back. To this day I have not had a callback from a single one. I had the tent, but what was I expected to do, and would I be allowed to pitch up in a park in St Austell? I ended up staying in a luxury hotel at £130 for the night and lamented not being in a \$50 motel in America, my mind crowded with thoughts of giving up. A call to my wife persuaded me to carry on for another day (she likes the extra few feet in the bed).

The following morning, 60 mile an hour winds and lashing rain accompanied me across Bodmin Moor and it took me until 8pm to get to Oakhampton. The hills were brutal, and it began to strike me as odd that I had climbed nearly 9,000 feet of my expected 21,000 in the first two days. The following day a further 4,500 feet of climbing and a trip through an unexpected town which I later identified as Taunton finally took me to the corner in England where I could turn North.

There followed Chepstow, to where my son drove over from Uni in Cardiff to meet me for a meal (obviously I was paying), and in and out of the Welsh Border to Ludlow where I had my first rest day. So far 20,500 feet of my expected 21,000 so I had to conclude either Scotland was very flat or my estimate was very, very badly wrong!

From Ludlow, I went through Wales again to Chester, Lancaster, Kirkoswald, Hawick and Rosyth to my next rest day. The top highlight was cycling with the Lake District mountains on my left and the Pennines on the right passing through Kirkby Lonsdale on day three. I remembered on my first ever tour from my home in Yorkshire when I was in my twenties riding up to the Lake District, all around there and back towards home having to buy a new tyre in Kendal, and it failing by Kirkby Lonsdale. I had then locked the bike in the war memorial in KL and hitchhiked back with the wheel to Kendal to take the tyre back. I was a true Yorkshireman in those days.

Another highlight was a visit from my sister who lives in Northumberland when I was at Hawick, and sampling the fare of their Wetherspoons.

The low point was sleeping in a "camping pod" on a hard wooden floor near Kirkoswald.

The Severn Bridge had been amazing, the Forth Bridge not so as there was a thick fog as I crossed, called the Haar by the locals. But a day off in a sunny Edinburgh and a trip to Decathlon for a replacement for my helmet which was literally falling apart was just what the doctor ordered.

And this is where the trip became really special. Scotland north of Edinburgh was absolutely beautiful, with day after day of unbroken sunshine, and much easier hills than Cornwall. I saw red deer. I saw a golden eagle. Many, many buzzards, oystercatchers (which seem to have replaced gulls in Scotland), thousands and thousands of swallows and housemartins, which you don't see many of in Kent. I arrived at the signpost at John O'Groats having completed 969 miles and 57,500 feet of climbing. I also arrived no longer regretting I had not been able to go on my American trip. The absolute focus being from Lancaster northwards, I had seen half of Britain in the most amazing weather which I could never have even hoped for, the trip had been strenuous and challenging and I had prevailed. I had completed it in a not too bad 14 and a half riding days, (apparently the record is under two days though) carrying everything including a tent and cooker, a total bike weight of about 32 kg. Although I



had had to mend gears near Lancaster, I hadn't had a single puncture since Penzance, I'd had some problems with electronics, but had managed to measure distances and routes.



