

I Did It My Way

Geoff Bell



Geoff Bell on the Ben. Photo Mike Cudahy

'Are you wearing those?' my dawn breakfast provider said as she let me out of the Sennan Hotel yard. She was referring to my 'Jesus' sandals, which did not look right to her experienced eye. Experienced it was, because most End to Enders, including Andy Wilkinson who had just added the mixed tandem record to his individual record, stayed with her. I assured her that they were very comfortable and had served me well cycle camping in the Pyrenees and Iceland as well as keeping my feet cool on the Paris-Brest-Paris last year. My only concern was that they might drop to bits.

The trip had been 45 years in gestation. It was conceived in my teenage years as a keen club cyclist who followed the exploits of the post war 'greats', Ray Booty, Beryl Burton, Eileen Sheridan and many more, documented in 'Cycling'. It continued during my

attempts to orienteer and fell run. Later, I found that I could walk a long way, especially when in the company of John Richardson, Mike Cudahy, Don Talbot, and Ted Dance.

Towards the end of '99 I had rediscovered cycling again, and long distance walking was getting hard thanks to Inken Blunk and anno domini. I persuaded Mary that we should have a holiday in Cornwall – ostensibly for wild cliff walks, but really to get a feel for the start of the End to End, for this was to be my major exertion for the millennium. My ulterior motive was soon confessed. Thereafter I received nothing but support, especially when I made it clear that I did not intend being accompanied by a white van driven by her.

I had previously harboured dreams of a cycle/run of the 3 Peaks as JR had done, but my dreams were punctured by a very fast effort by Dave Sleath. The unpaced End to End has been done in well under two days. For your average cyclist, anything under one week is quite good, but a lot of people do that.

To be different, and for no other reason, I planned to combine the two. I chose to have as little support as possible, go as fast as I could, and for good measure stay in our three club huts.

I had become an enthusiastic member of Audax UK - a long distance cycling organisation - and sought to schedule this trip and have it accredited by them. They have a series of do-it-yourself routes called Sea-Summit, in which the rider must at some time visit the seaside and a road control near one of the three big peaks. This was the key to a formal schedule for the entire route. The journey would be split into four Sea-Summit rides with sojourns at the club huts and walks up the hills between. Simple. Under Audax rules, the official distance is the shortest computed distance between controls using the Autoroute computer programme, controls must be a minimum of 80km apart, and the speed for each ride must be 14.3km/hour minimum.

There followed a lot of receiving, scheduling, and working on logistics. This was essential but removed much of the spontaneity from the ride. Six months later, in the early morning of Wednesday the 17th of May 2000, it was a relief to be battling into a headwind to the Lands End Hotel with a tight schedule waiting to be kept.

Lands End - Llanberis

The night porter at the Sennan Hotel, who had seen off many such aspirants, deftly stamped my card and signed me out for 5 minutes hence. A couple of photos, several circuits of the empty windswept forecourt with its big sea views, and I was off. 'I'm on my

way' I chuckled to myself as the wind pushed me strongly from the rear – long may it continue to do so. Soon there was a friendly 'peep' as my erstwhile card stamper passed on his way home.

Beyond Penzance the A30 is not recommended for cyclists and I was soon on quiet lanes which, although a straight line on the map, seemed to take forever to reach Camborne. I had looked at a sporting line over Dartmoor and through Exeter, but it was hard and Exeter was a nightmare, so the easier line though Okehampton and Crediton was taken. With the strong following wind and a modest schedule of 15km/hour it was good to reach the 24-hour Service Station in Clevedon nearly two hours ahead of schedule. The contortions of the cycle path approaching the Motorway Bridge over the Avon were soon dispatched. I continued through a quiet Avonmouth to the Severn Road Bridge cycle way. I was well over half way to Llanberis with the S.W. peninsula behind me.

Any euphoria soon disappeared, as the need for sleep impressed itself on me. This had been anticipated, and my secret weapon, a large plastic covered space blanket, was unfurled. The hard narrow seat rails of the bus shelter kept me from sleeping - I would have been better off in a hedge bottom. At least I didn't oversleep. An hour was all that I could stand. I appreciated the quiet road beside the meandering misty Wye to Monmouth. Still up on schedule, everywhere was closed except the post sorting office – so I got my card stamped like a letter.

At the planning stage I had looked at several lines through Wales. Some had the merits of directness and attractiveness, but sense prevailed and I chose a route up the borders to Chirk and then West on the A5. This change of direction gave me a headwind for the first time, not exactly what I needed at this stage in the ride.

A tap on the window at Beudy for Rod Mann – who really did look pleased to see me, and down to the Royal Victoria Hotel in Llanberis for the end of this stage. Yes, they would leave a note for the night porter to say that I would be in again at 3am the day after next to start the next cycle stage. Back to Beudy and bed.

Snowdon

Rod had kindly volunteered to bring my sleeping bag etc. to Beudy and to minister to my earthly needs. Around lunchtime we wandered up Cwm Beudy Mawr and up to the misty top. No chance of a warming cuppa - the café was closed. Back down, we stuffed ourselves at the Vaynol Arms then back to bed while Rod kept a noble vigil till he awoke me at 2 am.

Llanberis – Seathwaite

A group of lads and lasses were also staying at Beudy and kindly were very restrained on their return from the pub. Sometime during the struggle that was breakfast I became aware that on the notice board was chalked 'Hi Geoff. We are well impressed by your journey so far. All the best for the rest. Penistone W.A.S.P.S. Andy, Helen, Judy, Joy, Stan, Sarah xxx. Clare, Grum and Fart'. It cheered me up immensely.

Just before 3am I reported to the night porter. I was not expected. It transpired that he had indeed been left a note in the logbook – but it was in Welsh, a language that he did not know. Eventually I set off only two minutes late.

It was a very quiet ascent of the Llanberis pass until the tranquility was shattered as I was pursued by a demented dog. I shouted in fear. It retreated. This incident loosened my bowels, so I was pleased to reach Cerrigydrudion, an outpost of civilisation. Once more in good fettle, the road over to Ruthin was sheer delight with big rolling views in the early morning sunshine. All too soon I was in the midst of heavy traffic across Queensferry and north through Warrington and Preston, but it was not a bad route thanks to the motorway taking the heavy traffic. By Garstang the weather was deteriorating. Mistrusting the cycle ways through Lancaster I hurled myself into the one-way system, and just survived.

Greenodd was the seaside on this leg. I might as well have been in the sea, so cold and wet was I. Soon after, things looked up. Rob Ferguson and Dave Woolley, on their way home early from the climbing meet, had done an about turn on seeing me and waited at the top of the hill to wish me well and press a Mars bar on me. The Newfield was my final control, but I had no time or inclination for a pint.

I must have been spotted coming up the track to High Moss, for President Cec, and meet leader Tom Matthew greeted me on the steps. However, I was ill prepared for the good natured mayhem that is a climbing meet, and I'm sorry to say that I did not avail myself of the offers of a rub down by the ladies.

Bill Bardsley had brought my gear to the hut and saved me a bunk. Unfortunately he had arrived late, and the bunk was a top one over the Club's number three snorer. However, food and drink went down very well, my pit was attained, and I slept long and deep.

Scafell Pike

Many more calories were replaced at breakfast. I had planned to take a large heavy pannier over to Brackenclose in Wasdale where I

was to meet the Cockshotts. Fortunately they were at High Moss, so Pete rode over Ulpha with me while Chris brought the gear in the van.

The breakfast lasted me till the top of Scafell was reached at 3.30 pm. 'Just what I want, a photographer' I said, accosting the young man posing his girlfriend. He readily signed a card and then snapped me with my disposable camera. More good food with the Cockshotts at Brakenclose and to bed for an early night.

Wasdale Head - South Ballachulish

Signed out from the hotel at the civilised time of 8.15 am. Farewell and thanks to Chris and Pete and down the valley. Past the finish of Joss's Challenge at Greendale bridge and on to an early control at Egremont. This was put in to avoid the slightly shorter, but much harder, route over the fell road.

Mary was to meet me at Craigallan but, armed with my schedule, she intercepted me near Longtown on her way up. She was pleased to see me in good shape, and I her. The old A74, which parallels the M74, is ideal for cyclists heading north, and I made good progress to my next control, the Marlindale truckstop in Crawford, where I was to fill up for the night. Mary was waiting nearby with a big stew that did the business nicely.

After this, I was on my own again on a fiendish, but quite direct, route to Falkirk, where the guy in the filling station insisted that I had two hot chocolates from the machine - on the house. A pre-arranged call to Callander police station to give my ETA.

Callander, when I arrived at around quarter to three, was very quiet. Up and down the main street I cycled. Not a soul to ask where the police station was. Eventually I recognised the side street. As I did so my right foot felt funny. It was not moving in that smooth orbit that is usually described by a cyclist's foot. 'Sod it, my sandal has come apart' was my first thought. By the time I reached the police station, the problem was evident. The crank had finally broken where the pedal screws in, just as an earlier one had done on Don Talbot's ride from Beudy to High Moss. That one had dumped me and my elbow on the road at about 30 mph. This was equally serious. 'I'm in the shit. What can I do?' I kept repeating uselessly to the officer until he arrested me for bad language.

No, I jest. A straw to clutch slowly came into focus. In the police station was a poster with a picture of Bobbies on bicycles with the message 'Callander Cycle Patrols - sponsored by Wheels Cycle Hire'. I must possess some powers of persuasion, or more likely he thought

it was the only way to rid himself of the lunatic, for soon PC 202 was emptying his small van of traffic cones etc to accommodate me and my broken bicycle.

We arrived at the splendid Trossachs Backpackers hostel not far out of town. PC Stuart Baxter gained us entry by gently pushing the main door. Still no response to our muted knockings and *Hello's*, so my officer ascended the stairs. The scene was a mixture of dream and theatrical farce, especially when a short time later an oriental looking gentleman, clad immaculately in a white dressing gown, slowly descended the stairs followed by the policeman in his black uniform.

Mark Shimidzu soon assessed the situation – ‘the only way to rid himself of this lunatic’. When I returned from the toilet (one usually turns up when needed), Mark had changed into his Shimano logoed bike repair gear, and Stuart had organised a brew. The world was all right again. Mark knew his stuff. In no time at all he had cannibalised one of his hire bikes for a compatible chainset, fitted it, and made the meticulous adjustments necessary to my front changer. Within an hour of that first wobble in Church Street Callander, I was on the road again. PC 202 flashed his lights in farewell when confident that I was on the right road, then sped off back to the station to write his report. I wonder what he wrote?

Mike and Inken, with their ethos of ‘support the contender as much as possible’, were unsure how they could blend this with my minimalist approach, but as very old friends they were keen to help now that I was in their adopted homeland. So it was that, soon after my trauma, I was following a newly erected fingerpost pointing down a minor road in Glen Dochart to one of their regular lairs. I was hauled aboard. I didn’t complain.

Mike then accompanied me on an increasingly wild, wet and cold ride to Tyndrum, over Rannoch Moor, and down Glencoe. He stopped to put on more gear while I pedalled as hard as I could to keep warm. I was flying.

In the reception of the South Ballachulish Hotel I dripped and warmed up a little, while they stamped my card and exchanged pleasantries about the weather. A few minutes outside convinced me not to wait for Mike, and I was soon warming myself by the stove at Craigallan.

The Ben

I had planned to ride out from Craigallan on the morrow to Glen Nevis, do the Ben, and then set off on the last leg at 3pm. This would

have necessitated an early start and would be totally knackered, so I compromised my principles of a continuous bicycle ride by riding out in the afternoon with Mike and returning in the van before crashing out.

Next morning, considerably refreshed, we drove to Glen Nevis, and Mike, Inken and myself set off at a steady plod up from the Youth Hostel. The higher we got, the worse the weather. If I'd been by myself I might have turned back. I'm just glad that I didn't have to take that decision.

The summit soon appeared. Jubilation all round, photos, and a rendition of 'Happy Birthday to me', by me, to a surprised Mike and Inken. They shouldn't have been, for two years earlier I had celebrated my 60th somewhere on Inken's extended 4000's walk.

A very careful descent on bearings was made, until we were sure that we were on the track. Among the varied groups and individuals that we passed on the way down, were two fit looking guys almost running, and wearing cycle shorts, yellow tops and slightly worried expressions. Banana men had been reported in the Lake District by someone on the climbing meet. I wonder what they were doing and how they got on?

Glen Nevis - John O'Groats

Mike was keen to visit J.O.G. for the first time – it had not featured in any of his epics. Inken had some mountains in the North East to visit, we had two vans, and I had a schedule. They worked out a cunning plan. This ensured that Mary, Inken and Mike had some sleep. I was met very infrequently - which was what I wanted, and Mike had some very sweaty cycling keeping up with me on his mountain bike.

Through the Great Glen to Fort Augustus, where my control, The Gondolier Restaurant, was how I remembered it from a JR cycling meet. I promised to return for a meal when I had more time – I meant it. Over the Aird, which I walked, to the police station in Dingwall. The Police were there, but Inken, Mike and the van weren't. My reservations about support, which I have had for years, resurfaced. On my way out of town the familiar high white roof was spotted behind a row of houses. There had been insufficient room to park at the police station, so they had found a car park for a quiet kip. Sensible, but I was not on the same wavelength.

There followed with Mike a magical, almost hallucinatory, ride through the short northern night, along the Firths of Cromarty and Dornoch with their ribbons of alien lights. Then the moon rose over

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the sea, a strange unlunar shape at first. The moonbeams danced on the waves towards us and then followed us as we pedalled like hell to keep warm.

A Scottish £10 note from the cash machine in Brora provided that precious verification of place and time, and then on to Helmsdale where Mary had been awaiting us for a couple of hours. From there on it was quite hilly and Mike sensibly took to the van, joining me again for the run in from Wick.

Although it was 10.15 in the morning, John O'Groats was closed; at least the hotel with its start/ finish line was – for refurbishment. I eventually found the Last House in Scotland, the custodians of the official log book, and signed off.

A good do. Thanks to all.

Postscript

On our way back down, we called on my saviours in Callander bearing suitable liquid gifts. Splitting the journey into bite-size chunks, with our comfortable huts and good friends interspersed, was one of my better ideas. My sandals are still going strong!

Times

Lands End to Beudy Mawr: 611km, 39 hr 25 mins, 15.50km/ hr.

Llanberis to High Moss: 292km, 18hr 20mins, 15.93km/ hr.

High Moss to Craigallan: 409km, 26hr 20mins, 15.53km/ hr.

Craigallan to John O'Groats: 290km, 18hr55mins, 15.33km/ hr.

Total cycling distance: 1657km (1029 miles).

Total time: 8 Days 3 Hours 55 Mins.

Average speed: 8.46 km/ hr (5.25 mph).

Footnote

Geoff's schedule is available in full from Geoff.