

Land's End to Muckle Flugga

12 April to 23 June 1999

73 days

1918 miles

Every journey starts with one pedal push

Day 1 12th April 1999

It had been a stormy night but it was quieter when the alarm went at 5am. As it became light we had blue skies over a still windy Portland harbour. Most of the packing had been done last night and it just remained to have breakfast, make some sandwiches and double check the house before locking up.

We made good speed down the hill into Weymouth station and had plenty of time to unload the luggage and take the front off the tandem for loading onto the Sprinter type diesel train. We settled in and waved Weymouth goodbye, and enjoyed the slow trip through the Dorset and Somerset countryside to Bristol.

We were lucky with the change at Bristol. I just had time to put the front back onto the tandem before the Penzance train arrived slightly early. No problems for once with GWR staff and the tandem went into the rack and was held reasonably firmly by velcro straps. The train journey to Penzance is very enjoyable, particularly pleasant and interesting. The coastal scenery is wonderful and the railway engineering, presumably by Brunel, is worth looking at. We both read and Anne nodded for a little while. We had a picnic lunch and arrived in Penzance early at 1.20. After taking photographs of the station and St Michael's Mount we made our way along the coast to Newlyn and then climbed our first long one in five hill and followed lanes to Land's End, stopping for supplies on the way at a local shop.

The Land's End site is rather tacky with the one advantage that cyclists and walkers avoid the £3 charge which motorists have to make to park. It was very windy and cold and, having taken the obligatory photographs, we started our trip proper with 911 miles on the computer. By this time the wind, which had always been very strong, reached gale force and it was difficult to keep the tandem on the road for the last six miles to the St Just YH. We got the last two beds and soon made a cup of tea and warmed up. The YH is situated in a long V shaped valley which runs down to the sea and we walked down and looked at the very rough conditions in the evening sunshine. We returned for our supper of soup, vegi stew and hot cross buns. Usual range of interesting weird and even stupid conversations with other hostellers. We then turned into our separate beds.

Day 2 St Just to Perranporth

Even Anne got up early and we had our grapefruit and muesli breakfast and were on the road for our first full day of cycling by 9.15 - not bad. The sky was still a washed out blue and the wind was blowing gale force. After back tracking to the main road at St Just we had a side wind and all during the day it was coming more and more behind us. The very SW of England around

Land's End is mainly heathland and we had the extremely rough sea on our left with the rocky hills on our right for the first fifteen miles. The yellow gorse was in flower and it felt far more like the Lakes or Peak District than Cornwall farming country. After some stiff climbs and rapid descents we reached St Ives, pretty but full of tourists, just before lunch. We then had five miles of main road, which was mainly downhill, before lunch beside the harbour at Hayle. We had no trouble finding a Spar shop for basic food and an excellent cake shop but more difficulty finding somewhere out of the wind to eat it. It was difficult getting the Trangia to light due maybe to over watered meths but we eventually got tea going.

After lunch we carried on NW via huge sand dunes and empty holiday parks. The weather was deteriorating and by the time we got to Portreath the clouds were quite heavy. We had a quick look at the sea and then went inland half a mile to brew. We could only find an inferior modern church doorway with no shelter but made do. After tea we went more inland and then followed an old tramway back to the coast at Porthtowan. (I think towan means sand or sand dune in Cornish.) We then had a major climb out but were rewarded by excellent views back to the village. We were now on the last leg but had to put up with what the weather god had been threatening all day. We had hail stones which stung my legs and arms and then pouring rain which soaked us. We arrived in Perranporth, a truly beautiful place with crashing surf, rocky cliffs and white sand, with only one thought in mind. We wanted to find a cheap comfortable warm B&B and this we did in double quick time. For £18 each we had a room overlooking the beach with a shower and we were the only people staying. Having had a soak in the bath Anne did two days washing before we walked into the village for an evening meal - £20 including a bottle of wine. All in all a hard but very enjoyable first day and 41 miles further on. As we go to sleep we have the sound of booming surf in our ears.

day 3 Perranporth to Boscastle

On a cycle tour in my view it is inevitable that one will have a bad day. These are actually the days you remember and tell all your friends about. I don't know yet whether today qualifies as very bad but it was certainly quite difficult. In view of the weather forecast, NE gales with snow, we planned a route inland rather than along the coast. We started heading north against the wind out of the village with the inevitable Cornish climbs. We then turned NE in the general direction of Bodmin. Most of the journey was on country lanes and we needed waterproofs right from the start. The weather forecast proved to be accurate and all the morning we were steadily gaining height. We had frequent, heavy and very cold showers of hail, sleet and snow. We passed through some pretty, rural villages, quite different from the rugged coastal places of yesterday. We stopped at 12noon at a village called St Columb Major and, while a major hail storm was raging, we bought our lunch in a convenient (and warm) supermarket.

We continued on lanes requiring complex navigation in appalling weather. On a fastish descent the rear tyre punctured with a loud bang. The sidewall on our super expensive kevlar tyres had blown out for no apparent reason and it was hailing. We put the spare tyre and tube on and at the same time tried to make a brew, but the cigarette lighter was so covered in hailstones it would not light the Trangia. We had Twix instead and continued on in increasingly bad weather until we reached the B3266 which was to take us the 15 or so miles via Camelford to Boscastle. It was one of those bad roads. It had either recently been "upgraded" or downgraded from an A road. It was quite busy, we had a head wind and those kind ecologically friendly farmers had cut all the hedges down. It didn't even pass through any villages. We eventually stopped for lunch in a rather draughty and badly maintained bus shelter at 3pm.

At about 5pm we made Camelford and bought our supplies for the evening meal, continuing despondently on until the sea appeared on the horizon and all around us. We then had a long and

major descent into the village of Boscastle. We went even further down to the YH which is a converted stable on the very edge of the harbour. The warden was very welcoming and we were lucky to get the family room to ourselves. Having showered, warmed up and cooked and eaten our three course meal with wine we felt a lot better. As usual in hostels there were interesting people to talk to and so we put off exploring the harbour area until tomorrow.

Day 4 Boscastle to Okehampton

The weather threw all it could at us last night and Ken slept through but Anne didn't. The YH is very exposed to the gale force wind blowing up the narrow valley from the sea and it brought hail and rain together with thunder and lightening. I made the mistake of listening to the awful weather forecast on the radio when we woke. It was not encouraging and we put off leaving until 10am. We also changed the route, missing out the camping barn at Lynford on the grounds that it had no heating. We had a look at the sea before leaving and Anne tried to take a picture but it was too windy for her to hold the camera still. Waterproofs and warm wear on we made our way up the two mile climb out of Boscastle in bottom gear all the way. At the top the clouds parted and the rain stopped and we were in quiet country lanes. The navigation was difficult and we lost count of the number of hills steeper than one in five, but it was peaceful after the touristy areas of the coast. We hardly saw a car but on different occasions herded a flock of apparently lost sheep and stood our ground as a herd of cows bore down on us on the way to milking. We made lunch at 18 miles exactly on 1pm and found the ideal spot - the church for, but not at, the village of Werrington. The porch with its own door was, as usual, south facing and the strong wind was from the north west i.e. a perfect shelter. The porch and the church were unlocked and we found two chairs and sat in the sun. The Trangia lit and we had an excellent picnic. Even during a hail storm we only retreated into the church porch.

After lunch we went on down the hill and soon crossed the young river Tamar into Devon. The hills did not get any easier and whenever we took our waterproofs off it hailed. By now we were up to 200 metres (except when we were in a river valley) and the snow covered Tors of Dartmoor came closer and closer. At about 30 miles we reached the village of Bratton Clovelly where I thought we might stay but the pub was firmly shut and there was no sign that they did food let alone B&B. We stopped by the old village pump and had a brew. The only sign of life was a local cat marking out its territory and hunting for a snack before dinner. We made our weary way on into Okehampton via four miles of mercifully quiet A roads. After shopping in the town for dinner we made our way up the obligatory hill to the YH. It is a huge hostel in a converted engine shed attached to the local steam railway. We had a room of our own with a key and after a warm shower made the usual three course meal before collapsing exhausted into bed.

Day 5 Okehampton to Coplestone

As it is a short day to Kate's, only 20 miles, we slept in a little and left the hostel on foot for the town at 10am. It was cold but quite sunny and only a few clouds. Okehampton is a pleasant little town and we walked beside the river before looking at a water wheel in a back street. We then found the local bike shop in a garden centre. The very helpful owner did not have a suitable folding tyre so I decided to risk getting to Crediton without a spare. We walked back up the mountain to the YH via a coffee shop for teacakes. We were ready to leave by 1pm, and guess what, it was raining. Nevertheless we left back down the mountain to the town and out to the east to Sticklepath and then we shadowed the roaring spray soaked A30 for a while before branching off to Spreyton. By now it was 2.30pm and we were starving. We managed to find a village hall with a good porch and soon had a brew going. After lunch the sky cleared and it was an easy

mainly downhill run to Kate's. It was nice to see Kate and Dave and after a warm bath we had an excellent meal and long sleep.

Day 6 Copplestone (Kate's)

It was pleasant to sleep in and after breakfast Kate went to her Saturday job in Exeter. Anne got on with the washing and I washed down the tandem and checked it over. It was extremely dirty and one or two bolts seriously needed tightening. The brakes had worn quite a lot but were not yet ready for the blocks to be replaced. I took up the play on the cable adjusters. Tomorrow's route was then planned, Autoroute sent us on 28 miles of local roads NE - not enough help and we put the used maps in their envelope ready to be sent home. After lunch we went into Crediton to help with a food shop and buy a new tyre, tube and meths. Chris returned Jessica and it was nice to see her again. Again we had a lovely evening meal with lots of chat.

Day 7 Copplestone to Crowcombe

We felt quite guilty getting Dave, Kate and Jessica up at 8am on a Sunday but we had to leave soon after 10am so it was essential. Dave brought us tea and made an excellent breakfast which included porage, just what we needed for another day in the Devon hills. After much taking of photographs and kissing goodbye we left at 10.20am. Not bad really. We were immediately plunged into the country lanes. It was rather cold but sunny and quite peaceful. Fortunately the moribund grey haired pensioners who seem to drive incompetently round the touristy parts of the west country in their rather old but beautifully clean cars have not found these parts yet. We emerged from the lanes direct into Tiverton town centre. Anne went to shop and I put the tea on. It was fun watching the people from the vantage point of our seat. First there was a cash machine at the Halifax which was out of money. Attitudes to this varied from one person who quietly sneaked away to another who threatened to get a JCB and see to its failings and almost every other reaction in between. Next was the trolley park. People, including Anne, needed a pound coin to get a trolley. What's more they needed the special skill required to insert it to get the trolley out and even more skill to get the coin back. This provoked violence in some people, which in view of the universally crappy system designed by the supermarkets seemed to work better than patience or gentleness. I reckon that the directors of the banks and the supermarkets could gain quite a lot by spending an hour on that seat on a sunny Sunday.

We went straight back into the lanes and made our slow and gentle way to Wiveliscombe and had another brew before arriving at Crowcombe YH. It is a huge Victorian country house at the edge of the Quantock hills and again we managed to get a room on our own. We soon had the three course dinner going and settled down for the evening in front of a coal fire. We have now done 199 miles since leaving home and I was quite tempted to do the other mile round the block. Today has been noted as the first so far when it didn't rain and at least one of us didn't wear an anorak all day.

Day 8 Crowcombe to Cheddar

It is hard to believe that it is now a week since we left home and that we have been as near to home as 50 miles. Again it started as a lovely day with sun streaming into the large windows of the member's kitchen. Breakfast didn't take too long but we got into conversation with the warden and the only other residents. Crowcombe YH specialises in self catering groups, and the Farnham CTC lot should note that it is very popular for rent a hostel in the winter. We eventually got underway at about 10.15am and were soon climbing over the Quantock hills. Even though it looked bad on the map it was a doddle after the last few days. We sped down the other side

reaching speeds of up to 45mph. The stoker, although completely outside of her rights and after much negotiation, extracted an agreement from the management that such speeds would not be reached on future occasions.

We were soon running into Bridgwater, our first largish town since St Ives and it came as something of a shock. We would have avoided it but wanted to visit St John Street Cycles who made and supplied the tandem. We bought a new tyre to replace the one which split in the hail storm and had our photo taken with Robin Thorn, the proprietor. After tea cakes in the "Cycling Pub" and a read of Cycling Weekly we went on across the Somerset levels to Cheddar. It was rather amazing to do a bum numbing 12 to 15 mph mile after mile compared with the 2.5mph grinds up the Devon hills. And why do all the names here sound Dutch (with apologies to Marlies) - Polders, Zoyland etc? We were at the Cheddar YH by 3pm having done 34 miles and, nothing being open, took over the garden and made a brew and had lunch. We then walked up through Cheddar Gorge - impressive but overrun by tourists and cars. We walked back along the top of the Gorge on a rough path with magnificent views towards Cheddar, its village and round reservoir and the Bristol Channel (not much different really from the views from the top of the Quantock Hills). We bought supplies at the local Spar and went back to the YH for food and sleep. Not really up to last night's standards but pleasant with our own room.

Day 9 Cheddar to Magor

We were up early for what was planned as our longest day yet, 52 miles. The carrot at the end was the comfort of staying with our friends Pam and John in Magor and, at the planning stage, two 26 mile rides seemed too short. It was a grey day and raining when we left at about 9.15. At least it was warm rain and the system of wearing sandals and no socks so that the water could wash in and out worked to perfection. We climbed up over the Mendips to Shipham at 175 metres. Although this is an unclassified road restricted to vehicles less than 7.5 tons it was used as a cut through for heavy vehicles and also served a quarry. We were pleased to be off it and back into the flat country bordering the Bristol Channel. After 12 miles, just outside Clevedon, we joined the Avon Cycleway and stayed on the western section for 24 miles. It is mainly on minor roads and has very few hills, those being where it crosses the motorway or river bridges. I cannot speak too highly of this route. It is so well signed that I did not even look at the OS map for the whole 24 miles. There was only one piece on track and that was temporary while a proper route was being devised. The only non cyclable barrier was on this part of the route presumably to protect the land owners rights.

Now at this point I will digress slightly to the delicate matter of relieving oneself. I am in good company, Josie Dew deals with the matter at length and regular cyclists and outdoor people will find reading her books a liberating experience. One of us takes Patrick's view that if they can see what you are doing but not the details that is no problem. The other needs a super loo. On this occasion this person had spotted with delight a portaloos on a rain drenched deserted building site. You've guessed - while the loo was being used the builder returned and it was most amusing to watch one's partner successfully sneaking off a building site without being spotted while doing up her anorak. The constant rain was wearing and it was a shame not to get views from the crossing of the River Avon. The cycle route joins the motorway here and the access looked complicated to say the least, but as usual the signing was excellent. Unfortunately, building work was taking place on the bridge which had put debris onto the cycle path and we acquired a puncture. I did a rapid change under a road bridge and put on the new tyre bought at St John St Cycles.

At exactly 1 o'clock we fell almost literally into a pub at a little village called Easter Compton. It was one of the rare occasions when the stoker decided to dismount from one side and the

management from the other. Anyway, it was an easy if rather inelegant way for two very wet people to make friends with the locals. We were refreshed with food, beer and good conversation. One elderly local had run 52 marathons for charity and now at 70ish was waiting for a hip replacement. We encouraged him in true CAB style to make it clear to the doctor that he needed to be able to run again and deserved a first class job. At Olveston we followed the cycle signs to Chepstow and were sad to leave the Avon Cycleway. The cycle path over the Severn Bridge was well signed and on a good day would offer wonderful views. We were only too pleased to have a following wind and no builders' debris to contend with. As we came off the bridge we were overtaken by a cyclist commuter who cycled 15 miles each way from Chepstow to his work in Avonmouth. He said it kept him fit for Audax rides. Unfortunately we then had to lift the tandem round a completely unnecessary barrier on the cycle path. It is getting to the stage where the only way that cyclists can combat incompetent local authority designers is with a portable angle grinder.

By now Anne felt completely at home. She used to live in this area and was very happy here. We steamed into Magor early at 4.30pm having done 52 miles, all in the rain. John was at home to welcome us and Pam came back from work at 5.30. Anne went off to her friend Lynne's for a girls night out with ten of her old friends and John and I went down to the local pub. We eventually collapsed exhausted into bed at 11.30.

Day 10 Magor (Pam and John's)

It was nice to sleep in until Pam had gone off to work in Newport. After breakfast Anne got on with the washing and I checked over the tandem and mended yesterday's puncture. Tomorrow's route was then planned and we put the used maps in their envelope ready to be sent home. After lunch we went on the bus the four miles to visit Anne's old neighbours. Somewhere along the line we relaxed, and wrote the diary, emails etc. Pam cooked us a lovely evening meal with lots of wine and chat.

Day 11 Magor to Brecon

Up early for us as Pam had to go to work and John was off to build houses for others. Apparently in the consumer society they no longer build their own but expect it to be done for them. Anyhow we needed to be away quite early for a longish day. We cycled west for four miles before starting upstream along the Usk valley. As regular cyclists will know the skill in this is to find the minor road on the other side of the valley from the main road. We had local knowledge with the stoker acting outside her job description and directing us on minor roads to Usk town centre, where she used to work in a former existence. Anne went to the shops and Ken to the WI. No chance of finding nubile 50 year old calendar persons at this branch but, even better, homemade walnut and cherry cake for £1.50.

We continued on along the fast flowing river with the distant mountains getting closer and the hills on either side closer still. We approached Abergavenny from country lanes and, with 24 miles on the computer, found a church porch in Llanfoist for a picnic lunch in the sun. Judging by the notices in the church doorway the Church in Wales seems to exercise a degree of authority which I had previously only attributed to Roman Catholic clerics. I'm sure if God exists she is unlikely to give this much authority to any human. Anyway we were very grateful for the church porch and went on up the valley. We soon found we were sharing the route with the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal. As it was getting on towards tea time we overtook a narrow boat and it did occur to us that a brew on the boat going at 4mph would be more economical than stopping. As it was we found this enormous deserted modern village hall (looks to me as if it was built with EU money) and set the stove up in the doorway. During the afternoon it had come on

to rain but of course it stopped while we had tea and started again as soon as we finished. We shopped at an expensive and poorly stocked tourist store at Talybont and made the YH at Brecon to find it fully booked with school kids. The Warden directed us to a local B&B in a working smelly black and white cow farm and agreed we could come back and cook our evening meal. Having showered and changed we walked the mile back to the YH in the evening sunshine for our evening meal. It was pleasant to chat with the four adults working with 20 disaffected kids from Newport. The children seemed harmless enough playing championship Connect Four but I was glad we were staying at the B&B rather than the YH.

Day 12 Brecon to Presteigne

The weather forecast had been bad and when we woke high on our hill overlooking Brecon and the mountains it was raining. Not only that but the mountains were shrouded in mist and the forecast was rain all day. We had planned to cycle north across the moors to Rhayader, then the following day to Ludlow followed by a rest day at Ironbridge. There seemed little point in going to Rhayader in such poor visibility so we did some rapid route planning. We had also found that the YH at Ludlow had permanently closed. With no set objective we left the B&B and headed towards Hay on Wye. We were on country lanes and found ourselves following "National Cycle Route 6" whatever that is and soon found some detours which improved it quite a lot. We arrived at Hay on Wye which is a centre for book sales at 12.15 and, having found a cash machine, had an early lunch of thick vegi soup and a roll. We then chatted to the owner of a Trice recumbent trike with lots of add ons. He suffered from a balance problem but was still not allowed to take it on trains.

We went on down the valley to a toll bridge to cross the Wye and climbed into the next valley to Kington. The toll was 5p which was amusing considering we had done major crossings of the Avon and Severn for free. The Wye crossing was made of railway sleepers and took one vehicle at a time. We stopped at Kington church and in deference to its smartly kept appearance brewed the tea outside the porch and only brought it in to drink. We had done 28 hilly miles and began to think that if we went on a little further we could with luck make Ironbridge tomorrow and have two days to look at the museums instead of one. So we pressed on to Presteigne and in the tiny quiet town just inside Wales we booked B&B in a pub and also had a pleasant dinner there. We phoned Ken's daughter Hannah who had been interviewed for a first teaching post at Newham today. She had got the job, congratulations were given but Ken was a little concerned at what she may have taken on. We had phoned the old fashioned way as this seems to be the last town in the west with no mobile signal of any kind. So we had no emails to read tonight.

Day 13 Presteigne to Ironbridge

It was sunny in the dining room of the rather scruffy pub optimistically called the Bull Hotel as we ate our breakfast. We got away about 9.30 after explaining to the Polish landlady who had moved here from Spain that we enjoyed travelling. She still didn't seem to understand as she got into her car to go to Leominster for the shopping. It was the best day so far and the undulating quiet roads and warm sunshine had us at Craven Arms by 11.45. We managed to get a phone signal and picked up the emails. A nice newsy one from Ken's daughter Elisabeth and lots of interesting and amusing comments from others. We did another eight miles along Wenlock Edge before stopping for lunch at the church at Shipton. No need of the porch today, we spread a groundsheet on the ground and relaxed in the sun. Another six miles saw us in Much Wenlock where we stopped at the tourist office for an Ironbridge accommodation guide. We met a couple of cyclists out from Birmingham for the weekend. It was quite a contrast to hear the broad Brummy accents after the sing song (and sometimes incomprehensible - to Ken) Welsh of the last

few days. It was also nice to hear them say that their day's run would be 50 miles when we would do 40 with all our camping gear.

One final climb and then a steep descent requiring brave navigation as the road was unsigned brought us to the foot of the beautifully rounded and arched iron bridge. We had expected to find cheap accommodation easily here out of season. No such luck. The youth hostel was full, and after establishing that self catering accommodation was in short supply Anne entered into heavy negotiation with an unfortunate looking butcher's boy from the local pie shop. We finally opted for an expensive but comfortable self catering flat in the centre. It gave us the chance to eat some decent food and room to service the tandem. By bed time it was raining but it had been the kind of day we had expected when we planned the trip. For those planning a cycle trip on road the Hereford area offers some of the best cycling in the country.

Days 14 and 15 at Ironbridge

We declared this a holiday with two days to sleep in and let our legs recover. Leisurely breakfasts were the order of the day and then a ride to one or other of the nine museums. We started at the visitor's centre and bought a Passport, a ticket which covers all of the museums. We then cycled the two miles up to the Museum of Iron. This is a fairly conventional museum explaining why iron production started the Industrial Revolution in the early 1700's. While we were making the inevitable brew we fell into conversation with a guide call Steve who was interested in the tandem. He was the local CTC rep and a member of Friends of the Earth. He agreed that cycling and buses would be the ideal way around the valley and was pressing locally for something to be done. In the meantime the only place to lock the tandem was to a seat. We then had a guided tour of the Darby blast furnace and went on to look at the two houses in which the family lived. They were Quakers but even so seemed to have a fairly opulent life style.

The second day we went down the valley to the Tar Tunnel, a horizontal tunnel designed to bring coal out of the mines to the banks of the Severn. It struck bitumen which was mined for some years. We then went on to the China museum with its beehive shaped kilns. Anne was presented with an unglazed hedgehog which required great care to get back to the flat. We then did the reconstructed Victorian Town at Blists Hill. In between we managed to write emails and postcards for snailmailers, service the tandem (new brake blocks and tightened front chain) and wash the clothes. We enjoyed our stay and in particular all the museums were uncrowded and the staff friendly and helpful.

Day 16 Ironbridge to Cheadle

Last night Anne phoned the YH at Oakmore and found they were fully booked for today so we looked at changing the route. There didn't seem much point as the original plan avoided all the urban areas of the Black Country and got us into the Peak District. We checked out of the flat at Ironbridge at 9.30 and cycled along beside the fast flowing Severn for a couple of miles. We then had a tough climb out of the Gorge to cross the M54 at Shifnal. After that we were on minor roads in flattish agricultural country. Motorways sometimes have their uses and we stopped near the Cellnet aerial near the M54 to send a couple of emails.

About five miles further on, in the middle of nowhere, the stoker's right pedal broke. The cage came off the axle and it was not repairable and neither did we have a spare. Even though modern non-clipless pedals are rubbish one (i.e the management) has to investigate the cause. As a matter of principle stokers are not considered to have any facilities other than legs and their only responsibility is to pedal as instructed for the contracted mileage. A broken pedal could have a natural cause. However, could the stoker be trying to indicate that she has pedalled so hard that

she has broken the pedal? Alternatively, could this be a way of avoiding pedalling? If neither of these apply why should a pedal just break? So we have a mystery but I have my suspicions. So with the stoker more or less useless we went on under half(?) power to Gnosall which was about five miles. We stopped a cycling postwoman who directed us to the hardware shop. Much to our amazement they had a set of very poor quality mountain bike pedals. These were soon fitted and after a picnic lunch we pedalled on, again mainly on quiet lanes, to Stone. Here we found an excellent bike shop which found us a new set of old stock Campag pedals, straps and toe clips all for twenty quid. After tea and tea cakes we went on to Cheadle and found B&B USA style in an annexe room with four beds and its own front door opening onto a pleasant garden. Another good day and it is good to be back on the road. We also had some warm sunshine only slightly offset by a brisk NW wind.

Day 17 Cheadle to Buxton

Wonderful warm sunshine and a short day. Good breakfast at the B&B and loaded and off by 9.30. Being in shorts and a shirt has its packing problem. Every available space needed to be used for the clothes that up until today have been essential. All we needed extra for lunch was bread and bananas but while Anne went to get these I got into conversation with an elderly man who had been an active cyclist in the 1930's but now in old age had given up. Now the tandem attracts attention and I quite often lock it up and wait on the other side of the road rather than deal with all the questions. But I was sociable today and I enjoyed chatting to this chap but it put us back a bit before we started. The first three or four miles was on A roads but it was not busy and almost as soon as we turned off we came to Froghall Wharf at the end of the Caldon Canal. It was very interesting reading the information and trying to piece together the industrial archaeology. We moved on steeply upwards into the Staffordshire Dales. Views were wonderful and the hills long but generally manageable. We came across a closed road but the detour was just not worth considering (down along back and up) and it was not much trouble going past the digger.

Just before lunch we came across a cycle track on the Manifold Way. Had we found it earlier it would have cut out several climbs. We cycled a couple of miles along the properly tarmacked old railway track to the end of the line at Hulme. The railway itself had been reluctant to open and early to close, the locals said it started from nowhere and ended at a similar place. We enjoyed it and our long, one and a half hour lunch at a picnic table in the sun. We even had ice cream - the first of many, hopefully. We were reluctantly on our way again and entered the Derbyshire Peak District with a steep climb through deep cuts between crags. Quite different scenery again. We made the YH at 5ish and got our own room. We went into Buxton for an exploration of the spa town and shopped for our evening meal. We found the public spring of Buxton water and got talking to a local who gave us a two litre bottle. It tastes good here but is probably like Guinness in Ireland.

Day 18 Buxton to Blackley (North Manchester)

Up early and away by 9.15. The party staying at the YH from Chesterfield College were mainly suffering from hangovers, and were waiting at the front door for the bus to take them sailing and mountain biking. The penalty for yesterday's fine weather was cold fog. We had only gone a mile or so before the stoker, who was optimistically in shorts, was putting on layers of warm clothes. Today is a navigator's nightmare. The first twenty miles were spent avoiding the roaring A6(T) road and the last 15 finding our way through the busy roads of Greater Manchester. Actually the first part of the route, while not being quite as rural as previous days, was still very beautiful. Mind you, there was a pay back. It was extremely hilly, enough to provoke early morning phone calls if Reuben had been along. We went through Dove Holes and New Mills before climbing a

one in five to reach Werneth Low Park with its commanding views over Manchester. Not unlike Richmond Hill in London except that there is no Thames. We descended into constant city traffic and reverted to city cycling techniques learned in 25 years of daily cycling in London. In principle go like hell in the right direction and hope the stoker keeps her elbows in and hangs on (she sometimes closes her eyes). It was not until we were three miles from Blackley with only one minor navigation error that the stoker began to recognise her old haunts. Much appears to have changed but we did look at the place of her birth, the site of her old house, now demolished, and her primary school. Apparently even stokers need the same kind of facilities, at least in early life, as the rest of us. We arrived early at Anne's mum's at 4.30.

Days 19 and 20 Blackley (North Manchester)

We are staying in the guest room of the sheltered accommodation where Anne's mum lives. It has lots of plus points but the level of heat is overwhelming. We have turned off the radiator in our room and thrown open the windows but the heat hits you as you go into the corridor. It is especially bad if one has been mainly outside for three weeks. Anne managed to get the washing done by machine, a great bonus. Our division of duties on this trip are similar to at home. That is, Ken is responsible for cooking, shopping and general maintenance and Anne does everything else. It seems to work OK. We went into Manchester by bus which was something of a cultural shock after three weeks in the countryside. CAB colleagues will be interested by an advertisement on the bus placed by the Corporation Housing Services. It read "properties for rent available immediately, all types, all areas, no deposit required, immediate occupation". Perhaps Magna executives should remove their noses from the trough and do something about Weymouth.

Before moving on we had a lunch in the coffee shop at the Piccadilly Hotel in Manchester for seven of us including Anne's son Stuart, who is studying at the university, and Ken's daughter Hannah and her boyfriend Phil who came across the Pennines from Scarborough by train. We had itchy feet to get going again and booked the next four nights at YHs. It was nice to see that Anne's mum finds living in sheltered accommodation is safe, comfortable and very very warm.

Day 21 Blackley to Mankinholes

We were out of the furnace by 11 am and normal relations between the stoker and the management were resumed as soon as possible, the major cause of possible stress having been left behind. This is not a long day, only about 25 miles, but it started on urban roads and navigation was again quite difficult. It was five or so miles before we were again into farming country although it was a bit urban. Ken has taken to wearing a baseball cap, not to emulate William Hague with whom he thinks he has little in common (though the stoker might think that he has some views on person management that are similar), but to protect his nose from the elements. Our new doctor in Weymouth says his already quite substantial nose will grow to emulate that sported by W G Fields unless he looks after it. Anyway, the problem is to keep the nose protector on while descending at speeds agreed by the stoker. Suggestions on how to do this would be welcome. Turning it round, peak backwards seems to create an aerodynamic effect which throws it into the air. Elastic is OK but uncomfortable and to pull it down over the chin while negotiating tight curves and setting the drag brake could lead to stoker protest and, more importantly, loss of expensive glasses.

We had lunch on the edge of Hollingworth Lake looking towards the Pennines and watched the sailing. It is quite a lot bigger than Frensham Pond and I seem to remember from my youth that they did quite well in national events. Maybe the National Team racing championships or the Southport 24 hour race. They were sailing mainly GP14s and Merlin Rockets and it all seemed on a pretty small scale after Portland Harbour. I don't think RS600s and asymmetries would work well here. You may gather from this that the sailor gave the non-sailor a running commentary on

the boats, races, and differences between lake and sea sailing. However the non-sailor, being able to do more than one thing at once, listened, understood, made the tea, ate lunch, and took photographs of the lake with the Pennines in the background.

We moved on and after a couple of miles went onto the tow path of the Rochdale Canal which was the first canal crossing of the Pennines, and, incidentally, the parallel railway line was the first rail crossing. After about six miles by the canal we had passed so many locks that the stoker lost count. The canal rose to a summit and then we had about a mile on the level before it descended to Todmorden. Some of the time it was in quite a narrow gorge and most of the time the hills were close by. The engineering and associated industrial developments are fascinating. At Todmorden we left the relative flatness of the tow path to buy food and head into the hills to the Mankinholes YH. This is high in the moors in an old manor house with breathtaking scenery from the dorms. Unfortunately it is the older style with large rooms so a separate room is out. We went for a short walk around the village on the old packhorse trails before returning to cook and talk to the hard peat bog walker of the Pennine Way.

Day 22 Mankinholes to Haworth

We are going to be positive about today though it would be easy to be negative. We awoke to hazy sunshine and by the time we were ready for breakfast it was warm enough to sit outside which we did. As I mentioned yesterday, the location would be hard to better so it was a magnificent start to the day. We were soon packed and speeding down the one in five hill back to the Rochdale Canal tow path. Once on it we had a quiet two mile ride to Hebden Bridge. The stoker complained at the lowness of several bridges and the nearness of the water and we did agree to walk one ford cum weir kind of thing. We shopped for lunch and cycled round the busy and pleasant little town. We eventually found the right route out but only after the management had reluctantly turned back from going off road on an almost vertical cliff with steps. We now had a significant pull up to the moors via Heptonstall. Ken had been this way once before, at Easter in about 1973 or 1974. It was snowing then and he had a damaged bike and insufficient warm clothing. On reaching the top he came across an ice cream van on the side of which, in bold writing, was written "often licked never beaten". This time we could have done with an ice cream but the van had gone.

The rest of the morning was on narrow country lanes with Herriot type views but it was spoilt by the constant flow of Bank Holiday cars. I don't think either Yorkshire or Lancashire have taken on the idea that car tourism is not politically correct. In fact I believe that the directors must be members of the Jeremy Clarkson Club for fat motorists. We had a longish relaxing lunch in a field with high stone walls in the sunshine. After lunch we had the first chain off in almost 600 miles. Anne blames Ken for this. He wanted to save a couple of miles by going on a dubious off road route and avoid a one in seven hill. It was on this hill that the chain came off by riding over the gear cluster of the rear wheel and jamming between Shimano's up market ring retaining bolt and the spokes. It was gently eased out by screwdriver and pliers and no damage was done. The alternatives of removing the cluster or splitting the chain was fortunately avoided. One result of this incident was that for a while the management informed the stoker of imminent gear changes. That didn't last long.

We went on to Haworth and all the Brontë hype. It is unbelievably tacky and one wonders whether most of the visitors had something in common with the Muslims who put the Fatwah on Salman Rushdie, that is they either had not read the book or perhaps had never learned to read at all. We went on via the Keighley and Worth Valley Steam Railway. Pretty but challenged by a lack of track, about five miles. Onwards and upwards to the YH, coming to the realisation that most hostels are up. This one is a Victorian mansion with a hundred beds - an outstanding

building in a very nice situation. Tonight there are only six people in. I guess they may have trouble making ends meet, although last night there were eighty 12 year old Irish rugby players staying. Doesn't bear thinking about. We have our own room and lots of facilities, including, joy of joys, use of a washing machine - such simple things.... The lesson from today is not to move on on bank holidays unless we are well away from tourist areas, and we shall try to remember this at the end of May.

Day 23 Haworth to Malham

No rush today which is very short but hilly at only 24 miles. Met some Aussies at breakfast doing a typical American's tour of the UK. What a waste of an air fare. We were away by 9.45am and soon out of tourist range and into Yorkshire Dales scenery. The management made a rare navigational error. Though it did not involve any extra mileage he did try to prove that black was white rather than admit he was wrong. It is pretty much the same with management the world over. After about eight miles we came across a superb view point. a square towered folly with 39 steps at the very top of Earl's Edge with 360 degree views. It was silent, unlike yesterday, with nobody else there and, no doubt in contravention of every health and safety rule, not a danger notice or disclaimer in sight. How refreshing. We continued on to a rather lazy lunch taken at a lock beside the Leeds and Liverpool Canal. We always find it a pleasure to watch other people working and on this occasion we could also chat to them as they wound paddles up and down and heaved on lock gates to work their boats along the canal. We were at Malham YH in our own ensuite room at 3.45pm and soon left for a walk up to Malham Cove. For those who have not been there it is a semicircle of 80 metre cliffs below Malham Tarn. We spent some time watching climbers using safety ropes attached to an assortment of ironmongery on the rock face go up and down. We then walked up to the top ourselves on the footpath before going back to the YH and cooking dinner. Unlike Haworth there were lots of people about to chat to. Much to our amazement Cellnet have a weak signal here and, by going outside, we managed to send and receive our email which was nice.

Day 24 Malham to Kendal

Our first longish day for a while and we were up early, showered, fed, and ready to leave by 9 o'clock. But the cycle computer had gone missing. For the uninitiated this records trip and total distance, average, actual and top speed. Not only does it have the record of this journey on it but it is critical for a satisfactory relationship between the management and the stoker. We found it by 9.30 down the side of a bed and repacked quickly before starting out of Malham. This was a solid one in seven climb and it took 40 minutes to reach the top less than two miles away. In doing this we climbed way over the cliffs of Malham Cove and reached a height of 446 metres. We then had several miles of really wild cycling in the lonely moors often between stone walls. We reluctantly descended into the fertile valley of Ribblesdale through which the Settle to Carlisle railway runs. We then crossed over a lower range of hills and descended down to Ingleton, perhaps a place best avoided unless one is a car tourist, caver or American doing the great little UK. For the next six miles we were reduced to using the A65 trunk road but it was not busy, mainly down hill and we did not hang about so it was not too bad. We stopped at Kirkby Lonsdale, a pretty little town, for lunch and then wandered cross country to Kendal with the lanes to ourselves. The navigator managed a few hundred yards off road. No, he was not using contour lines this time but could not see a change of colour on the map. All too soon we were in urban Kendal and at the YH. Again it is not busy and we get our own room but we are sad to be out of the hills.

Day 25 Kendal to Ambleside

OK, so both the start and the finish today are in the southern lakes and not very far apart so you probably think it is not really a serious cycling day. Well, you would not be taking into account our road planners if you thought this. Despite lots of comments to the contrary, in my view cycling in the lakes and especially on the main roads is urban cycling and undesirable unless one is going to work. Our route ended up as 27 miles having started with a long climb out of Kendal followed by a descent down to 25 metres before climbing again to 225 metres to get over the hills to Newby Bridge at the south of Lake Windermere. We then meandered along roads parallel to the eastern lake shore to reach Ambleside. Here there was another outbreak of the elderly moribund in their cars but traffic was generally light and we arrived at our friends Gill and Paul's about 4pm for a fine welcome bath and excellent evening meal.

Day 26 Ambleside - Gill and Paul's

Gill and Paul live in a lovely dry stone walled house in an acre of land just under Loughrigg Fell, within ten minutes walk of Ambleside. They have had the house a couple of years and run a successful, tourist board highly commended B&B in a convenient and lovely spot. We sometimes feel a bit guilty staying with friends who look after people for a living but they always make us very welcome. We had late breakfast and the four of us went for a walk over Loughrigg Fell to a pub in Rydal Water. We also walked into Ambleside to buy a map which we had not put in the pack which we sent here. With all the comfort and looking after here we will be sorry to leave in the morning. If anyone wants to enquire about B&B at Gill and Paul's they should phone 01539 434528.

Day 27 Ambleside to Hesketh Newmarket

We left late. Despite wanting to be on the road again we were reluctant to leave the hospitality and comfort of Gill and Paul's. It began to rain just in time for the photo call as we left, and most of the morning was wet off and on. The first few miles were on the busy Lakeland main roads. Even in heavy traffic and on main roads the lakes are amazingly beautiful and, even though the hills are low, they match in grandeur many Alpine regions. It is, however, pretty obvious that there is no political will to do much about the traffic problem in the Lakes. There are few cycle facilities, no blanket speed limits as in the New Forest and not many buses in evidence. What a shame.

After a steady but fairly easy climb up Dunmail Raise we turned left and took a minor road along the eastern shore of Thirlmere. This is a reservoir providing water for Manchester which provoked Anne into taking pictures of the coat of arms of her home town. Ken was pretty sceptical about this as the outflow from the dam is to the north and he had managed to glean from the maps over the past week that Manchester was well to the south. He also has a deep distrust of the privatised utilities including Northwest Water, though he has not the slightest idea why they would want to misappropriate water to the north. It still being a bit wet lunch was taken at the church of Threlkeld and it was a leisurely affair. Time was taken to write and send emails. We have now received 46 since we started. Keep them coming.

After lunch we moved on north in the shadow of Blencathra on deserted gated roads. This is more like the Lakes I remember from the early 1970's. Gates do, however, present several problems of tradition and etiquette with regard to the duties of the steers person and stoker on a tandem. Readers with experience in or views on this subject are welcome to put these forward. Firstly, is the stoker required to get off and open the gate and, if so, is the steerer required to pedal the machine through alone or should the stoker remount? If not what should the correct procedure

be? How far should the tandem be allowed to continue without the stoker past the gate, especially if the road is down hill? Does the distance travelled by the tandem while the stoker is, shall we say, unseated count towards her contracted distance? Many more questions come to mind but these will do for now. However, without significant dispute we went onto Heskett Newmarket for supplies and then circled back to the YH at Carrock Fell. This is a simple hostel recently renovated but in the old style. It was a stone farmhouse and is in a tiny hamlet. It is silent here and there is no chance of a room of our own. This is however entirely acceptable in such a place and maintains the traditions of the YHA.

Day 28 Heskett Newmarket to Catlowdy

It is Ken's birthday today and, in the absence of any YH and on Paul's advice, we have booked into a rather upmarket B&B tonight but first we have to get there. As Adrian, the friendly warden at the hostel, said goodbye he commented on Ken's shorts and short sleeved shirt. It was rather overcast and threatening and Ken still had an anorak to put on. We left north on lanes and finally left the hills of the lakes behind us. A last one in seven up and then a gradual descent towards Carlisle. We were soon doing its circumnavigation which we found much superior to the circumnavigation of Basingstoke, an adventure oft remembered by some long standing Farnham cyclists. Just before lunch we came across some fellow travellers and both waved. They were camped in horse drawn caravans beside the road and did not look like the touristy types. We stopped for lunch at the church in Irthington almost on Hadrian's Wall. Unfortunately, even with all that stone about, the builders had failed to provide a proper porch and had even locked the door, presumably against long dead reivers. The stoker, in an idle moment, happened to notice on a gravestone that an unfortunate fellow stoker had been killed in 1856 in a boiler explosion on a nearby railway. This raised all kinds of more modern questions. Was she in danger of being exploded? Our only boiler was our cooker the Trangia. If this were to explode, regardless of damage to life and limb, it would be an immediate end to this journey caused by lack of a brew. Furthermore, she wondered whether she should have a boiler to help with forward propulsion and, if so, why it was not provided by the management.

As we travelled north of Carlisle we climbed into rural and more remote farming country. It was pleasant after some careful navigation to arrive at our B&B in a tiny hamlet. It offered everything normally provided by a good hotel with the excellent addition of a self service trust the customer bar. By chance the evening meal was a gadabout supper in aid of local church funds. We took the starter and main course at our B&B and then moved on a mile up the road to a specialist pudding provider - very pleasant. We did not discover the state of the church porch.

Day 29 Catlowdy to Hawick

Again a rain and showers day and we pushed on up hill to the border. Last summer we crept into Scotland via a cunningly designed off road route and got in without incident or welcome. Now that they have their own parliament we thought things may have changed so we risked a minor B road. It was just the same as last year without any sign that we had crossed the border. After about eight miles we joined a major highway at Newcastleton, our first Scottish village, and, with a twenty pence piece in her hand, the stoker made for the public loo. It was free so some things have changed in Scotland. The next twenty or so miles were on roads most modern cyclists only dream of. When old timers say they did a hundred miles every Sunday it must have been on roads like this. The surface was excellent and, although the road climbed to 250 metres, we were never out of our middle gear ratios. The only reason to use the brakes on the descents was to admire the view. Navigation was unnecessary because there were no turnoffs. To crown it all we hardly saw another vehicle all the way. It is almost worth you car owners paying your road fund licences.

At lunch we made a minor detour to visit a fine ruined castle at Hermitage. It had been built to control this part of the border and also to attempt to police the unruly locals and reivers. Mary Queen of Scots had visited the castle to have a few naughty nights with the Earl of Bothwell. Whether she succeeded or not is not clear but she was certainly blamed so let this be a lesson to all those who find themselves in a similar situation. We were soon steaming into Hawick and were going so well that we went right past the Tourist Information Office without even seeing it. However, we found a very pleasant B&B and, properly showered, went out for our first pizza in more than a month. For aficionados of Scottish cuisine I should mention that on this occasion it was not deep fried as we went to a proper Italian restaurant.

Day 30 Hawick to Walkerburn - Rita and Phil's

Keen to get underway we left the B&B and turned right leading out of town. We had failed to obey the second rule for cyclists on tour. The first is that if lost go up hill, this is almost infallible. The second is never pass a food shop unless your supply panniers are full. At this stage ours were nearly empty and all we had to do to fill them was to cross the road to go to Safeways. We now know that villages in this part of the border may have two pubs, a church and a substantial community but no shop. I can only assume that the average Scot would rather drive ten miles to a supermarket than spend an extra 5p on a loaf of bread. More fool them.

It only took a glance at the map to see that, unlike yesterday, today's ride would cross the grain of the land. In the first twenty miles where we bypassed Selkirk to the south we crossed numerous rivers and streams with alternate climbs and descents. To compensate there was hardly any traffic and it was very pleasant among the farms and fields. The roads were good and well graded. Neither did we go completely hungry. We found a Post Office open and Anne managed to acquire six frozen bread rolls kept for the staff by making a small donation. We crossed into the Tweed valley and had lunch in a bus shelter, the weather being rather damp (again) and churches here seem to be unsuitable. The shelter required some minor improvisation to make it quite cosy and we soon had a brew going, finding some ginger marmalade for the rolls with Twixes to follow. A veritable feast. We went on up the quiet side of the valley to Walkerburn where Anne's brother-in-law Phil was waiting. Phil soon went off to work, he drives for the Borders bus company and was on the back shift. Rita came back from the bank in Edinburgh where she works and cooked us a really nice meal which we ate with more red wine than I think our doctor would recommend. At 9.30pm the three of us went down to the bus stop and Ken was put on the bus with Phil driving to be taken into Edinburgh, some 35 miles away, to catch the sleeper train to London for a YWCA Board meeting tomorrow.

Days 31 and 32 Walkerburn - Rita and Phil's and London

Ken had a passable night on the sleeper and fortunately had the compartment to himself. The train arrived at Euston at 7am and coffee and croissant (singular) were served in bed. After leaving the train he spent an hour or so reading his meeting papers before walking to Bike Fix to get some chain cleaner and also some meths for the cooker. Scots apparently only sell it in chemists after you sign an oath not to drink it. The meeting, well worth attending but details not for this diary, ended at 3.30pm and Ken caught the 4pm train back to Edinburgh where he was collected by Rita and Anne at 8.30 and taken out for dinner.

Meanwhile, Anne, as usual, did the chores - washing and shopping, but for postcards and stamps this time while Rita zoomed round Somerfields. She tried to communicate with Glasgow City Council about cycle routes in Glasgow, which we know they produce, in preparation for the challenge of crossing the city in a couple of days time. The Council's phone is permanently on answer phone, and so far they have not returned the call. Then, postcards written for those either

on snail mail or desperate for pictures of Scottish hills, into the car for the 35 miles to Edinburgh - a culture shock for those who prefer to travel at 8mph.

The management was exhausted by the trip to London and slept in late the next day. Following a very late breakfast he started servicing the tandem. This was the serious one, with a change of chains as well as a wash and oil. We are trying to swap chains every 800 miles with a view to making the expensive Shimano bits last longer. We actually use Sachs chains because the Shimano equivalent apparently only work where it never rains and then only for a short time. For the technical we are also using the new joining link from Sachs. Let's hope it continues to work. After a late lunch Ken and Phil went to Peebles for supplies and enjoyed a couple of pints of Bass. Anne wandered into Walkerburn and was allegedly talking fluent Scots to the locals. But we mustn't forget that Anne's father was a Glaswegian, so she has had lots of practice. Rita stayed in nursing a cold. Dinner came and went together with an abundance of food and wine and so to bed. Tomorrow we leave this lovely place in the borders which I think with the hills behind and the shining Tweed in the valley is one of the most beautiful places so far on this trip. It is sad that so many of the locals are so poor and under privileged. And, because of Dr Beecham, there are no railways in the Borders. On a more positive note, the weather forecast is good. We shall see.

Day 33 Walkerburn to New Lanark

Not a very good start to the day. Ken awoke at 7am with a high temperature and was promptly sick and went back to sleep. He finally surfaced at 10am feeling somewhat better, and, after much consideration and a light breakfast, Phil saw us down the brae at midday. The weather was also partially recovered and it was warm but slightly overcast. We had decided to follow the Tweed Cycle Route (2) for the first 20 odd miles but needed the OS map as well as it is mainly on road but unreliably signed. The route is mainly very good, following the Tweed on the opposite side from the main road. There were two places where this involved an extra couple of miles but these were well worth the effort. One involved cycling away from the river behind high hills in a wide deserted valley, wonderful. Not so good was getting back to the Tweed. This involved a short section of off road and a crossing of the river on a narrow footbridge ending in a couple of steps. The good news was that we managed it without taking the luggage off and the bad news that we had to walk most of it. Just a little bit of money would sort this kind of thing out..... Our late picnic lunch was taken sitting in the sun on a bank beside a seldom used minor road with views over the valley to the high hills beyond.

It was quite a shock to have to do the last part of today's journey on A roads but unavoidable. They were not all that busy. We shopped for dinner before descending the hill to the SYH in the renovated model village of New Lanark at about 6.30pm. There was hardly anyone in this large hostel which is divided into four bedded rooms with en-suite shower and toilet. We got one of these to ourselves and it has to be the most comfortable hostel so far. It is situated in the Clyde valley in a converted row of mill workers' houses. We have a view over the fast flowing river which is bubbling gently in the background as I write this. After dinner we walked around the village and upstream to look at the rapids on the river. It is now light until gone 9.30pm. The village was built in about 1720 to provide model accommodation for mill workers. By 1968 it had fallen into disrepair. It has now been renovated and is very impressive if rather antiseptic. It is not on the scale of Ironbridge but similarly situated in a deep valley which we will have to climb out of in the morning.

Day 34 New Lanark to Bishopbriggs (North Glasgow)

Sometimes what looks like being the most difficult part of a journey can turn out to be OK, even interesting and enjoyable. We left latish after a long conversation with the SYH Manager.

Neither of us were keen to start and it was nice to compliment him on his excellent if underused hostel. We made our way slowly up the hill and through the little town and found our minor road out to the north. It involved a steep descent and even steeper climb which levelled out and went on for several miles. It was not the direct route but kept us out of the heavily trafficked industrial area of the Clyde valley and was very pleasant. At this point the stoker had clearly lost it. The weather had become overcast and a herd of cows in a nearby field were seen to be lying down and thereby were likely to cause it to rain. With loud cries of hup hup from the back of the tandem she managed to raise them all. This prevented, in her view, nothing more than a few moments light drizzle all day. Well, if it keeps her happy and stops the rain the management has no problem with this.

For the next few miles we descended into urban squalor. This is easily detectable. The shops, even if open, have shutters up and lights out. Any glass is covered. Kids laugh and point at a bicycle for two people, being insufficiently literate to know about tandems. Youths hang around in the street drinking lager or drive by in old wrecks occasionally shouting out of the window. Still, much to our surprise, we emerged from the badlands quite quickly and found a path beside a field on the edge of the suburban jungle to have our lunch. We spent ages relaxing in the sun phoning the family and catching up on email correspondence.

We still had fifteen or so miles to go after lunch and having travelled north all morning were now going west, mainly on country lanes. On our right were the Kilsyth Hills, misty and interesting in the afternoon sun, and to our left and in front the high rise of Glasgow looking not unlike Basingstoke from a distance. With the help of Rita's A to Z we found Anne's cousin Paul and Teri's house in a pleasant and quiet suburban street. Yet again we had a warm welcome from Teri and her son Peter when we arrived and Paul and younger son Adam when they came back from the Celtic match for which they are season ticket holders. Despite the pressures of both having full time jobs and kids (those were the days) they still had an excellent meal for us and fine Scottish hospitality.

Day 35 Paul and Teri's and Bishopbriggs (North Glasgow)

Another lazy day off, I'm not sure we deserve one yet but on the other hand it is our last scheduled one on this trip. Just for once Ken was up last, not fully emerging until 9.30am and it was one of the rare (or possibly the only) occasion when Anne brought him morning tea in bed. The long breakfast and chatting then went on till midday. In the afternoon we were taken by car to visit Anne's elderly Uncle Francis and Aunt Cathie and on the way we did a recce of tomorrow's route through the centre of Glasgow to the South. Marlies and Farnham riders please note that on one or two occasions some group rides were actually reccied beforehand even if this was not readily apparent.

It was nice to see Anne's extended family again and to be welcomed as the only southerner albeit a whisky drinking one. Still no success in pinning down what happened to Anne's dad Joe's pre-war hand made touring bike. We think that Francis or one of the other brothers had a hand in losing it sometime in the 1950's but they clam up when we try to find the answer. It looks as if the secret will go with him. So what with lunch with Francis and more hospitality from Paul and Teri we went to bed very full and contented. Before we left Adam gave us 10p because he said that as Cellnet could not provide a signal in his house a pay phone was always reliable.

Day 36 Bishopbriggs to Brodick (Isle of Arran)

We stayed in bed until Teri and Paul were leaving for work, getting up just in time to say thanks and bye. We were off by about 9.45am to the Forth and Clyde Canal towpath on a route discussed

and agreed with Paul. We followed the plan, four miles on the towpath south west, then two miles on roads south east to Bells Bridge for a pedestrian crossing of the Clyde. From the south side of the bridge we followed a Sustrans route to Paisley and then onwards to Ardrossan. The plan worked and were it not for the way the schemes have been implemented we would probably have stayed on cycle routes all the way. The first problem was barriers, too numerous to mention, then the signing was bad, the surface slow and the cyclist dismount signs frequent. On two occasions we left the route because we were just fed up with lifting the loaded tandem over the barriers. On one other occasion Ken unfortunately took matters into his own hands and cut his way out with wire cutters. It is illegal and not recommended but much quicker than unloading the tandem and lifting it across barriers. It is also easier for the next person.

Just before lunch the rear tyre, which had felt funny for a couple of days, became worse and on inspection it was discovered that the sidewall had failed. Maybe it can't stand the heat from the rear brake. So we stopped to change it and also swapped the front tyre to the back. On for another ten miles for lunch and by now we were getting really bored with old railway track which sucked at the wheels. At the first reasonable opportunity we got back onto the road and with great enjoyment arrived at Ardrossan to get the ferry to Arran. Ardrossan is rather rundown but has the advantage over Weymouth that it is legal to cycle along the whole promenade. The stoker went to buy the ferry tickets to Arran and managed to negotiate some mega deal which gave the tandem free use of the ferries for the foreseeable future and us several trips and all for the cost of eighteen pints of bitter. That is if you can get it in Scotland. We got onto the Roro ferry without handing in our tickets so if we sink we are as good as lost. They collected them on the way out. We got off the ferry at Arran ahead of the other traffic, much to the disgust of the deck hands, but experience gained on cross channel ferries indicates that if one is last off one stands a fair chance of asphyxiation so sod the deckhands.

It being a fine clear evening by now we had decided to camp. We had talked to a young Dutch couple on the boat, cyclists who had come in via Newcastle, and they showed us where the nearest camp site was. We made for the supermarket and stocked up with supplies, including the essential red wine, and made for the hills. At this point I should say that Arran is not like its Irish namesake, which is a wonderful rock without trees angled into the Atlantic, neither is it run down like some parts of the mainland that we have seen recently. On first impressions this is a green and blue place. Blue sea, not met on this trip for over four weeks, and misty mountains rising to 840 metres. It is very beautiful.

Off to the campsite we went and, unable to raise the owner, went down to the field beside a stream in a sunny valley with views of the hills. The next tent is 200 yards away and we don't have a shower but the toilets and basins are fine. On the way in we met the Dutch couple moving out, it was "too primitive" for them. We soon had dinner going and ate it as the sun set over the hills. We are now off to bed with the new crescent moon rising where the sun had set.

Day 37 Brodick to Lochranza (Isle of Arran)

Ken has been accused of being bad tempered today, something which he would try to deny, but anyway let's start at the beginning. We were woken in Glen Rosa quite early by a very noisy duck probably trying to get at our food. From the tent door we had a wonderful view of the Goat Fell hills in the sunshine with a few wisps of cloud on top. Even better, the weather reports from London were misty, dark and misery. We had a slowish breakfast and packed most of the stuff before walking a short way up the stream. It was tempting to stay but we didn't. At about 10.15am we went the two miles into Brodick to post back maps and things and send and receive emails. It was really nice to hear from people but we did not get away for a longish ride until 11.30am. Now the management, while it enjoys the pleasures of life like most managements, has

an aversion to late starts and hard roads. The first half of the ride involved the climbs and descents usual on coast roads. Wonderful, with long beaches and views towards Holy Island and the mainland but hard work. The stoker said her bum hurt and the management, quite unjustifiably, thought the problem was in her legs.

Lunch was taken in a quiet field overlooking the sea and the Mull of Kintyre. Naps were taken in the warm sunshine giving renewed strength to go on. The second part of the day was mainly on flat roads beside a deserted beach and the bright blue sea. The sea water here is clean and clear and Ken stopped to put a toe in but soon removed it due to the extreme cold. We got to the hostel at 6pm to find a school party in. They were, however, quite civilised and we were lucky again to get our own room. Tonight we took dinner at the local pub with much chatting to other hostel residents, including an elderly cyclist from Newcastle and two helpers from the school group who claimed that they were in the pub to keep the kids out. Then some planning and emailing took place before bedtime. And, yes, Ken was short tempered but we are all friends again now.

Day 38 Lochranza (Isle of Arran) to Campbeltown (Kintyre)

We planned to have breakfast at 8.30 after Ken changed the rear tyre again. It would seem that while Avocet Cross tyres are almost puncture proof the rim tape is not up to tandem use. The spare Michelin folder was fitted together with new brake blocks in case the worn ones were generating too much heat. We then phoned Ken's daughter to get her to send a new spare to Islay. We had breakfast courtesy of the Doncaster school party and were packed and ready to go by 10am. The ferry across to Claonaig on Kintyre left at 10.45am so we had time to get supplies and look at the local castle. It was again very pleasant in the warm sunshine surrounded by the azure blue sea. The ferry took about 30 minutes and then we had to make the one navigational decision of the day, i.e. to turn left to go to Campbeltown. From here we were on a switchback with rapid descents to sea level and steep climbs out. The first half of the day was on single track roads with passing places and another vehicle was an event. Nevertheless we had Sustrans to keep us company. They seem unable to build a decently signed barrier free cycle track on the old railway from Glasgow. But they have money to put up a sign every two or three miles on a single track road with no turnings off it. Maybe I will join one day and have my say.

We stopped for lunch at a silent beach at the head of a deep inlet. One yacht was moored near to the cliff sheltering from the strong easterly wind and we saw a couple of dog walkers in the distance. That was the sum of humanity but it was full of wildlife which we saw before we nodded off. In the afternoon the road became a bit wider and busier and the gradients no easier but the sea views made it worthwhile. We freewheeled into Campbeltown to look for a B&B which took a while because a golf tournament had taken many of the places. Oddly there is not very much holiday accommodation in these parts and we had not seen a shop all day and yet it seems to have lots to offer. After settling in and chatting to Bob the proprietor we had dinner at the Argyle Hotel, one of only four places open in this quite large town.

Day 39 Campbeltown to The Mull of Kintyre (nearly) and back

It was a soft day, the bright blue skies of the last few days had given way to high clouds and light winds from the west. We were treating this as a holiday and did our first day ride of the trip without luggage. We knew three things about the Mull of Kintyre. One that Paul McCartney has a house here. Two that, according to travel writer Eric Newby, in the eighteenth century the last family of British cannibals had feasted on unwary travellers. Three it was around forty miles there and back and we were not interested in going that far on a day off. We wandered slowly along the coast road. It was again silent with spectacular views over the sea. We rolled into Southend and found by chance Sid, the elderly lone cyclist whom we met at Lochranza YH, asleep on the beach.

After a chat he moved on and we took his place to watch the cows on the beach and the sea birds dive to get fish, sometimes from quite a height and always with a good splash. We then did the touristy thing here and looked at the local cemetery and ruined chapel before putting our feet into the stone “foot prints” of St Columba in the rocks. Legend has it that he first set foot on Scottish soil here after coming from Ireland. I have no idea what he did here after that but he seems to take size 8 shoes. We then made our way gently back to Campbeltown for tea and cakes and then, after a short break, dinner in the Royal Hotel. Today we clocked over 1000 miles since we left Weymouth and we have averaged our intended 35 miles per cycling day.

Day 40 Campbeltown to Ballygrant (Islay)

It was quite a shock after the last few fine days to wake up to the sound of rain hitting the windows and wind trying to remove the roof. We were fed, watered, packed and ready to move on by 9.30. Leaving was quite another matter and it took another half an hour to leave Bob and Hazel who ran the B&B. After a brief pit stop at the Co-op to take on supplies we were on the A83 to Glasgow, only Glasgow is 140 miles away, with very little traffic. We had a slightly adverse wind against us for the first five miles and after that it was at least on our side for which we were very grateful because it was blowing very hard. We followed the coast along beside the beach for another 20 or so miles. The waves were crashing and the sea birds crying etc and, except for a brief stop to put on some extra clothes, we went straight to the Islay ferry port at Kennacraig. I forgot to mention, though it was important at the time, that about every seven miles a violent squall came off the sea, usually equipped with leg and face stinging hail stones.

We arrived at the ferry port at 2pm for a 6pm ferry. It was amazingly pleasant just to sit behind the plate glass windows of the waiting room in the warm sunshine eating lunch. We did however have one minor setback. Several soldiers were also waiting and one volunteered to get us chips from the village six miles away. I should explain that this was quite a big ferry terminal by Scottish Island standards. It had about 30 seats, a drinks machine, a sweets machine and a phone. Some have no shelter at all. Anyway, the chippy was shut and the British army were very upset as were we. I think they should have used their weapons. Then, just as we were about to write up the diary, Sid turned up with a broken carrier and no brakes on his bike. By the time this was fixed the ferry had arrived. Ken is well known by some of his “friends” to be a bad sailor and unfortunately is also aware of the wind and sea conditions. It was blowing about 40 mph so he spent most of the trip on deck and felt fine. The boat itself did not do so well and was diverted from Port Ellen to Port Askaig because the berthing there is easier. Mind you, it messed us up because we had booked B&B and had to cancel and rebook. On leaving the ferry we had a steep climb followed by a leg stinging hail storm. At this point we overtook Sid who had managed to leave the boat before us but had not booked anywhere to stay. On we went to Ballygrant and then three quarters of a mile off to the left to our B&B in an isolated house near to a loch. We were grateful for the warm welcome with tea and cakes and were soon off to bed.

Day 41 Ballygrant to Port Charlotte (Islay)

It was still blowing a gale when we left the B&B having eaten the home produced eggs and home made bread as well as everything else put in front of us. With a view to getting the serious business of cycling out of the way first we decided on the pretty way and, instead of going back to the main road, headed onwards into the moors. The ride was daunting against the wind but the wild high country well worth the effort. Our only regret so far is that we have not seen a red deer. We finally came down into Bridgend (no, not that one), a small village by the sea. It had an amazingly well stocked shop and we bought our provisions for tonight. We then went on against the gale force wind beside the beach, another seven miles to the YH arriving about 2pm. Port

Charlotte is a lovely village beside the sea loch where our combined children, led by Elisabeth, had tried to book us into a fine hotel for our joint birthdays. Unfortunately the hotel was fully booked so we settled for the hostel. As I write this in the dusk at 10pm I am looking, through the window, at the waves breaking on the shore only a few yards away. We have our own room and have just enjoyed a good meal and, even more importantly, we still have the birthday hotel to look forward to later in the journey. Anyway, going back to our arrival, we were relieved to see Sid's distinctive bike parked outside. By chance he had found a B&B quite quickly last night and not suffered from hypothermia. In the afternoon it came on to rain and we lazed the time away in the village and at the local heritage centre. Much route planning also went on but it will probably be changed another dozen times. For a bad weather day we have had a really pleasant time in a beautiful place.

Day 42 Port Charlotte to Tarbert

Today started as a rather confused day because we wanted to get back to the mainland at Kennacraig. We did not know where the ferry would leave from on Islay and the ports were ten miles in different directions. In bad weather it goes from Port Askaig, otherwise from Port Ellen. Phone calls achieved nothing so we went for a ride out from the hostel. We climbed over to the sea to the north west of Port Charlotte and found a ruined church with a fascinating stone font. Assuming it was as old as it looked one wonders how many generations were baptised in it. We then passed a deserted rocky inlet with crashing waves and visited an even older focal point. The stone circle on a commanding site had a feeling of power and strength which I have only felt at similar places. Suitably awe inspired we then walked the wrong way back to the tandem across the peat bog which felt very odd for those of us with a good sense of direction. Back to the YH we went to load up and wizz downwind seven or eight miles to the decision point on which port to go for. Here we found Sid waiting and we managed at last to get through to Caledonian MacBrayne Ferries (clearly a relative of SW trains and Stagecoach) who deigned to tell us that they were departing from Port Ellen. Off we went with the intrepid Sid in tow to the port and a pleasant crossing to Kennacraig. We found a comfortable B&B just outside the village of Tarbert and then went for dinner by the pretty harbour side.

Next week the village is to run the "Tarbert Scottish Series" of yacht races for 400 boats. According to locals it is the next biggest thing after Cowes week. Apparently the village earns 30% of its annual income in one week and boats are rafted all over the harbour. We met Sid in the village and partook on the advice (by email) from Patrick of a couple of pints of 80 Shilling bitter, very satisfactory and wasted on Scots lager drinkers. We finished with a dram of Laphroaig Islay malt. On the way to the digs we came across a passenger carrying steam puffer (of Para Handy fame). Not only do passengers pay for a trip on one of these ships which used to supply the islands but they also stoke the boiler. The tandem management found this concept difficult to understand while the stoker had no difficulty at all with the concept.

Day 43 Tarbert to Oban

We are now so blasé about the scenery that we are treating today as a traverse. We are only doing it because it was not possible to get a ferry from Islay to Colonsay and then to Oban. However, the route follows the shore of Loch Fyne for 12 miles and crosses the interesting Crinan Canal. Thomas Telford built the canal which could be compared to the Panama canal but without the malaria problem. It saved puffers having to go round the Mull of Kintyre when going from Loch Fyne to the islands. Our route rose several times into the hills and followed the shores of Lochs Gilp and Awe. Furthermore we stopped at Kilmartin Church to look at ancient crosses and gravestones. What more could we want? Even the road was smooth. But firstly the stoker said

her legs were “tired” so someone should write her some new legs (see Puckoon by Spike Milligan). Then we want fine weather with good sunshine and single track roads. Maybe we are forgetting that most people are at work not enjoying this journey. Anyway, we made Oban in good time and got our own room in the Annexe of the YH with its own shower and kitchen. We enjoyed a short walk to the harbour, where the tall ship Sir Winston Churchill was in for a change of crew. The last time we saw her was in April, leaving Weymouth after a refit. We spent the rest of the evening planning, eating, and drinking red wine.

Day 44 Oban to Mull, Staffa and Iona (off the tandem)

The stoker made a decision, something which is entirely outside her job description. Almost as soon as her first cup of tea, delivered by the management, had passed her lips she pronounced. “Today we are doing the round trip via Mull to Staffa and Iona.” There had been a degree of indecision last night but sleeping on it had worked for once. After breakfast we walked down to the booking office and bought tickets which provided us with the ferry to Mull, a coach for 39 miles to a boat which took us to Staffa and then back to Iona and then another ferry back to Mull for the return. To do this trip by tandem would have been wonderful but have taken three days. Also serious head winds would have been encountered. As you know we do not usually opt out of difficult things but this time the trip seemed like a good idea and it was.

Staffa was wonderful. We have had gales for five days and we were one of the first boat loads to be able to land. The basalt rock formations on the island are variously referred to as “the giant’s causeway” and “organ pipes”. They curve sensuously along the west side of the island and include the famous Fingal’s Cave. We saw this from the sea first but it was much too rough to take the boat in. We were then landed quickly onto a stone jetty and the boat stood off for an hour before picking us up. We traversed along a track to Fingal’s Cave walking on the hexagonal tops of rocks. The inside of the cave was amazing. The columns of rocks were immensely impressive and the booming waves inside the cave like a percussion section in full swing. After this we climbed the steps to the top of the small island and walked along to the southern end. Here the puffins were nesting and seemed to have no fear of us. We sat quietly on the cliff top and they came within a metre or two of us and were just as impressive with their brightly coloured bills in real life as they are in photos.

We enjoyed the visit to Iona, the place where Christianity in the form of St Columba landed in Scotland and where many kings are buried. We had been told it was a magic place but for those who go in for this kind of thing it has a long way to go to catch up with Glastonbury. Nevertheless it was a very pleasant place, made better by the refusal of the ferry company to take tourist cars. We visited John Smith’s grave and pondered on what might have been had he lived. Perhaps more social and moral standards from an honest Scot? On the return trip on the bus we saw our first red deer. It was nice to see but a shame it was not while we were cycling along.

Day 45 Oban to Castlebay (Barra)

Something of a lazy day even if a rather exciting one, it being another change in direction. After much planning we decided to omit Skye. There are two ways to get there from Oban. The interesting way is via Mull and Tobermory and back to the mainland. The more boring way is to continue along the main road. The interesting way would take about three days and much of Skye looks to be very busy by NW Scottish standards for cycling. So we decided to take the ferry directly to the Island of Barra at the southern end of the Outer Hebrides.

The morning was spent in the town doing necessities like haircuts and beard trims and buying food. We also decided it was time to buy each other our mutual birthday present and we bought

a shared pair of mini binoculars. Pleased to be out of urban or should I say Oban civilisation we boarded the ferry soon after 2pm. I should just mention about Oban that the road system and town planning seem to have been designed by the same people who ruined Farnham, Woking and Guildford. The one way system is awful and the provision of pedestrian facilities poor including even pavements. Cycling facilities are non-existent. To get to the only large supermarket in the town by foot requires a trek across an urban wasteland of a car park. To get from there to Argos involves walking past or through a petrol station and climbing over a fence. I can only assume that the failed Surrey traffic engineers and planners rather than being sacked all got good references and a sinecure in Oban. Let's hope they stay away from Weymouth.

We sailed to Barra on Caledonian MacBrayne's biggest and newest ferry, the Clansman, initially through the sheltered waters between Mull and the mainland. We passed the most westerly point on the Scottish mainland at Point Ardnamurchan before coming out into the open sea, arriving at Barra just before 8pm. There being no YH on Barra we booked into a comfortable B&B a short distance from the ferry terminal at Castlebay.

Day 46 Castlebay (Barra) to Howmore (South Uist)

It was raining when we awoke and the clouds were low. We lingered over breakfast, which included excellent porridge. The only other resident, John, had been in the Western Isles for nearly three weeks and had some useful information about places to see and stay. He had been travelling by car but had left the car on the other side of the passenger ferry which runs from Eoligarry on Barra to Ludag on South Uist and walked the eleven miles to Castlebay. This was the ferry we were planning to catch at 3pm so we had a fair bit of time to kill. Even in the rain and poor visibility the western side of Barra was worth a wet cycle ride. This is the kind of tourism one can enjoy, with white beaches and rocky headlands and no one else about. Most of the tourist attractions on the map were too obscure to find but who cares. We made one or two diversions and passed the airport on the beach and Compton MacKenzie's old house and then his grave. We had lunch in the ferry terminal waiting room. This also doubled as a telephone box and was smaller than a small bus shelter. It was, however, dry and anyway while we were having lunch the rain stopped. John turned up having walked nearly as far as we cycled and we lifted the tandem onto the ferry which was a thirty foot work boat. The 40 minute crossing was a boat trip in itself and passed close to Eriskay where the SS Politician sunk with its full complement of whisky. By the time we reached the other side the clouds had lowered and the visibility, while fine for cycling, obscured all distant views.

We continued on mainly single track roads, one of which was designated an A road, through a flattish rocky landscape frequently passing lakes, some of which are tiny but at least one which was very large. After a couple of hours of cycling which Ken found oddly confusing in the mist we arrived at the Crofters Hostel where we were staying. This consisted of two small crofts, one mainly for cooking and sitting and the other for sleeping with room for about 14 people in all. We were alone when we arrived but there was evidence of occupation and soon two women turned up. We soon had a meal going, although sadly we had failed to buy wine, and we were soon all happily chatting. Ken managed to light the hostel stove but not without some difficulty and, even though he filled the whole place with smoke, everyone was eventually grateful for the warmth. Ken reckons that the smoky atmosphere is authentic for a croft and should be enjoyed, or was it endured? After dinner the non-resident warden came in to collect fees. She offered advice on the fire and the shower and improved the latter but not the former. After eating we went out for a walk to the sandy beach made of machair shell sand and Ken got his feet wet by walking in deep red sea weed. On returning to the hostel two more people had arrived so now we have four in one building and the two original residents in the other.

Day 47 Howmore (South Uist) to Lochmaddy (North Uist)

During the night the wind was whistling and the rain rattling on the croft roof. We were warm and dry and looking forward to a fast ride with the wind behind us. Not so. Despite all our planning when we came round to reality the wind was from the north and blowing a gale. Breakfast was taken and goodbyes said. These small hostels are friendly.

In this diary I don't usually refer to our mileages etc but today it is the easiest way to describe the journey. The road was more or less flat and the countryside open. We had direct headwinds of around 30mph and driving rain. We did 30 miles at an average speed of 6.7mph and the maximum speed was only 18mph. For those not conversant with such technicalities this is exceedingly slow and in fact we had very similar readings climbing up to a ski village in France a couple of years ago and it was much preferable to today. We arrived cold and Ken, who wears shorts, was also quite wet. I think today qualifies as the wettest and coldest day so far. We had planned to go further north but decided to stop at Lochmaddy and, on entering the village, saw a sign to a backpackers hostel and outdoor centre. We followed the sign and found a modern centre overlooking a small loch which had plenty of space. They had a group leaving today and another coming in tomorrow so we were lucky. We warmed up, Ken in the shower and, once the instructors had cleared the centre, we had it to ourselves for our evening meal.

Day 48 Lochmaddy (North Uist) to Tarbert (Harris)

When we awoke the wind was still whistling around the building but it was not raining and... there was the odd blue patch in the sky. We eventually left at 10.30, there being no hurry to get the ferry to Harris at 12 noon. Ken spent the time chatting to the instructors from the outdoor centre who were off for an abseiling session. The ride to the ferry was pleasant after yesterday and we saw some of the scenery we missed. We cycled over the new causeway onto the Island of Berneray recently opened by the Prince of Wales. Another fine isolated island ruined at enormous cost to the tax payer. We crossed back to North Uist and caught the ferry to Harris. The ferry was one of those which takes about 15 cars and has a front ramp which lifts up. The 1 hour 15 minute crossing was spent weaving between small islands and navigation marks. One wonders how it is done in poor visibility.

In the afternoon we did about 20 miles on the Golden Road which was perhaps the most spectacular ride so far. Grey mountains formed the background glistening with streams and waterfalls. To the right we had the blue sea covered in white horses. The whole middle ground was full of lochs at many levels and of different sizes and cut across at intervals by sea lochs. The road itself, like the ferry, wound in all directions but on the whole the gradients were reasonable. Apparently it is called the Golden Road not because of its scenic qualities, but because its recent "improvements" had cost far more than was anticipated. We stayed at an independent hostel which we found clean, friendly and functional. The facilities at these hostels suit us better than B&B and are a lot cheaper. Perhaps camp sites could be developed in this way in many parts of Britain.

Day 49 Tarbert (Harris) to Kershader (Lewis)

Today is Sunday and the last day of our seventh week. Here in the Western Isles the Sabbath is still observed and everything is closed. It is even more tranquil than usual. Both of us feel that we have had our full quota for life of religious observance and, so as not to be denominational, one in the C of E and the other RC. Even with our bias it was still extremely pleasant not to have any commercial activity going on. The down side is that we had to buy enough supplies last night

to last till Monday morning, which means we have quite a lot extra to carry. We planned a rather obscure route today choosing a hostel five miles off the direct route with the intention of exploring the coast around the hostel. We started with a long climb into the mountains and when we reached the top shared chocolate with a German cyclist, who had been staying at the hostel.

We had now crossed the rugged mountain barrier that separates the rocky terrain of Harris from the peaty moors of Lewis. Again we had a pleasant picnic lunch in the sun and while the stoker decided to try to get some sun on her normally covered legs the management nodded off in the sunshine. Because of this laziness the hostel was not reached until 5pm and there was little enthusiasm for further exploring. It would seem that the hostel was set up as a local community co-operative to provide accommodation and a field study centre. However, with four people staying and no sign of anyone in charge, its success must be in doubt. The situation is again wonderful, only a few yards from a sea loch and with sea and mountain views from the public rooms and our bedroom. The down side is that across the loch, only about half a mile away, is the road we will be on tomorrow but it will be ten hilly miles to get there.

Day 50 Kershader (Lewis) to Garenin (Lewis)

This Bank Holiday Monday is quite different from the last one spent on the busy way to Howarth. Soon after leaving the hostel after a very comfortable night we came across road making in progress and a local child going to school. We called into the post office for lunch supplies and asked the wrong question. "Is it a Bank Holiday here?" "Yes" came the answer. "But you are open and people are working." "We are not a bank" came the reply. So it is more or less a normal day and we are pleased. After five miles across the strong SW wind we were back to the main road and then had a pleasant ride with the wind and beside the loch before again turning across the wind. We then had a long ride to the other side of the island across peat moors to see the stone circle at Calanais. They, there are three circles, are impressive but not very large compared to Stonehenge. They are in a fine position and the stones are a very attractive shape. By now there was rain in the wind and after the ride we were feeling cold. We went into the visitor centre and bought lunch with chips which seems to have become a luxury.

Onwards we went to visit the remains of a broch, a large round house some 2000 years old. It was a very impressive double skinned round tower made with dry stone walls and 70 feet high. We then went off to the hostel, another one in a traditional croft house, this time called a blackhouse. There are countless numbers of these in ruins on the islands and the Gatliff Trust is rebuilding a village of five of them here for the public to see. Unlike the hostel at Howmore this one has draught free walls and underfloor electric heating. Here we are part of a tourist attraction but it is nothing like as ethnic as Howmore.

Following some discussions we established that the local shop might open between 4.30pm and 6pm when the owner returned from his mobile rounds. He had seen us on the tandem and had difficulty comprehending our journey. He seemed to have a similar problem with shop keeping. His stock was extremely low and, apparently, his reorder policy was to order when the last item was sold. Consequently much of what we wanted was out of stock so he sold us what he had and, like a true Scot, made a solid profit. Anne entered into a technical conversation with him regarding tyres. This is of course totally outside a stoker's job description. She says, that is if one can believe either of them, that the local dogs bite the tyres of his van causing it to fail its MOT. She said we had not had similar problems. Large dogs are threatened with physical violence and small dogs with being squashed. Our main problem with tyres, related to high velocity hail stones, had not apparently troubled him. Ken was not present during this conversation and wondered whether there was a problem of a Gaelic speaking islander understanding a Mancunian accent or vice versa.

Day 51 Garenin (Lewis) to Galson (Lewis)

We did a lot today and are having trouble keeping our eyes open as we do the diary. In terms of roadside scenery and weather it was a bad day. Peat bogs and rain. In terms of meeting people and places to see it rates high in our days of experiences. We left the blackhouse hostel and continued north and soon we came across a tourist sign to a Norse Mill. A quarter of a mile walk brought us to what looked like a couple of round bothies beside a stream. One was a mill where the water drove a horizontal water wheel which directly drove the bottom grinding stone. The barley was fed into a hole in the top stone and came out ground into a hopper. All very simple and apparently they had them in most communes as a free common user facility. There was also a kiln inside a thatched bothy presumably to toast the barley at a low temperature. I don't doubt that some people reading this diary will have some ideas of what they should do with the barley.

We moved on a few miles and deviated to see the Blackhouse Museum. It seemed absolutely stupid to pay £2 each to see a blackhouse when we only paid £5 each to stay in one last night. The exhibition was good but what made it really interesting was the woman who showed us round. Her grandfather had built the house and it had been lived in until 1964. She also had a real feel for community history, and a serious black eye which neither of us felt we could ask her about.

On the lonely road again we came across what we thought was a rare thing in this area, a post office with a few supplies. We bought a tin of soup and had a long chat with the friendly woman who ran the shop. No, she did not have any fresh vegetables but she went into her own kitchen and gave us some carrots, turnips and onions for which she refused to accept payment. We finally got away and after another few miles came across a mobile shop. Here again after a lengthy passing of the time of day with yet another friendly Hebridean we bought a tin of peas. We now had the makings of a vegi dinner and went on in the rain to our evening stop. This was an independent hostel attached to a very up market B&B. We were welcomed with a cup of tea and a warm in front of the Aga. We had lunch here and then continued north to the Butt of Lewis, the very northern end of the Western Isles. It was not a very sensible thing to do as it involved a round trip of 20 miles but we just had to do it to complete the whole length of these islands. The Butt was wonderful. It was wild and rugged with a huge variety of sea birds to watch (with our new binoculars) and photograph. The nearby harbour was also very pleasant, the tidal harbour being attached to a white sandy bay and the water clear and clean. Quite a day, and it was finished off by the opportune purchase of a bottle of wine and a cauliflower at a village shop to complete the dinner ingredients.

Day 52 Galson (Lewis) to Ullapool

Having become used to bad weather, and looking out and seeing some mist and an overcast sky, we put our winter woollies on again. Ten miles down the road we had them off and into the panniers. It was a long but easy climb over the island towards Stornaway. We were accompanied by that special smell of peat bog warming in the sun after a few days rain and it is always pleasant to smell peat fires burning as we pass through the villages. As we descended into Stornaway we saw the two older women bus travellers Grace and Maggie. We had previously met them on the Leverburgh ferry and it was nice to hear how their travels had gone. At the ferry port we met John and Simon from Edinburgh on their way home from spending a few days at the Kershader hostel where we had stayed. Then on the ferry we met Marti from San Francisco, a student spending a year back packing in Europe, whom we had met at the Garenin Hostel. It seemed a small world for travellers. The ferry for Ullapool left at 2pm and it was a very pleasant trip lasting nearly three hours. The sky and the sea were blue and as we neared the mainland the mountains rose to meet

us. Ullapool was something of a shock. It is a small town, smaller than a Surrey “village”, and seems to be made over to tourists at this time of the year. The hostels were busy and the weather warm. We came across a good looking campsite on the water’s edge with lots of facilities and decided to camp. We came across our first midges as the evening went on but otherwise it made a pleasant change from hostels and B&B.

We have left the Outer Hebrides with many regrets but look forward to moving on north. The islands are lovely and the islanders very friendly. The weather can be bracing to say the least and parts are still wild and remote. Unfortunately this seems to be rapidly changing, mainly due to what appears to be a huge amount of inappropriate EC funding. These tourists will not be interested in putting up with bad weather to ride on wide EC roads and visit naff tourist attractions after crossing to what were remote and lovely islands by ugly causeways. If you want to see them as they were go soon.

Day 53 Ullapool to Achmelvich

It rained during the night and the pitter pattering of rain on the tent roof is really pleasant. Our tent is very small but also very waterproof and stormproof, it felt really cosy. It was still raining in the morning and cooking through the tent door was no problem. So long as the Trangia cooker will light it will cook in any weather. We had tea in bed followed by fruit, porage and more tea. The problem was the midges. Without these I think we would have been reluctant to move on. The stoker was so fed up with them that she was seen sitting up in the middle of the tent where she just had headroom, staring at the back wall. It reminded me of a sheep we had once seen staring at a field wall in the rain and entirely appropriate to the average stoker, although some would only stare at the wall after several pints of decent beer. We left quite quickly as midges don’t seem to be able to keep up with a moving tandem. We left to the north again on a wide main road where the traffic was quite light. After ten miles we turned off towards the coast onto a single track road with passing places. For the rest of the day we were into a mountainous area near the coast. It will never photograph well in this weather but being here on such a day is superb and difficult to describe.

For once we had lunch in the rain as there was no shelter, no café or pub. We arrived at the YH at around 5pm. This is a simple cheap hostel with few facilities. It is silent here beside the beach, a silence not often found in the UK and very much enjoyed. After dinner Marti turned up for a chat. He had managed to get here by two lifts from Ullapool yesterday evening and was moving on towards Shetland tomorrow. Most people we have met on the road have been like ships which pass in the night. It is nice to see how others get on with their travels even if it is only for a few days.

Day 54 Achmelvich to Kylesku

Much to our surprise it was not raining when we left the YH and pushed the tandem through the pedestrian gate towards the beach. Not only is this one of only three YHs in Scotland with no showers but it also has no motor vehicle access. As we left at 9.30 we got a glimpse of the white sandy beach before starting the inevitable climb to the coast road. We now had 24 miles of scenery that is especially Scottish. Mountains, often cloud capped, one rising to over 900 metres, were all around us. These were deeply cut into by sea lochs with many rocky islands and an occasional white beach. The road switched and turned and rose and fell and our rate of climb was probably similar to that in Devon.

Near the bottom of one particularly steep descent from about 148 metres to 42 metres we had to slow down to cross a bridge. There was a huge explosion like a pistol shot. It echoed round the

silent mountains as the tandem was brought to a stop without mishap. The rear tyre had split at right angles to the rim and obviously come off. The tube had completely disintegrated. The blow out was presumably caused by the heat and the twisting of the tyre on the rim even though the hub brake was also being used. Being at the bottom of the hill we now had a serious midge problem. Stoker's duties have been revised to include keeping midges off the management while he undertakes repairs. We used our last spare tyre and tube and were off again just as quickly as possible. The annoyance and aggravation of midge bites cannot be overstated. If anyone knows of an acceptable repellent (which excludes any kind of tobacco or excrement) please let us know asap.

We made it to the backpackers hostel at 1pm without a spare tube or tyre. It is really comfortable here with six people in twin rooms in a development of six modern lodges. It overlooks the mountains and sea loch Glencoul but is hidden from the road. In the afternoon we walked down to the loch and went on a boat trip advertised as being to see the highest waterfall in Britain. This was a come on. The waterfall was very narrow and the view from the loch not very good. What the six of us on board received was an excellent and informed tour of the loch. We saw common seals up close and grey seals in the sea. We saw many types of sea birds and a heron's nest. (How do they survive without a nearby supply of goldfish in garden ponds?). We also saw some interesting geological features as well as flora and fauna on the steep cliffs of the loch. Not bad for what was now a wet Friday afternoon and all done with great Scottish humour from the boatman. At supper we were reduced to emergency rations because we hadn't seen a shop all day. We still managed a reasonable three course dinner and have porage and leftovers for breakfast. Starvation is still at least a day away.

Day 55 Kylesku to Durness

One thing is for certain - there are no midges today. In the morning they were kept away by the wind and in the afternoon they (hopefully) were beaten into the ground by the rain. Even if they were not we were. Actually it was not as bad as it could have been. The weather forecast was for 40mph winds from the north all day. When we left the hostel there was not much wind and neither was it raining. Even though we were on an A road I think we saw about three cars a mile and it was smooth and wide. We were still in the mountains until the time we should have taken lunch so the hills were big and the views fine. Just about the time it started to rain an amazing thing happened. We found a mobile phone signal. Hungry for news we stopped and accessed the email and got seven very welcome messages. The accessing looked really funny. To keep the Psion and the phone dry Ken, standing up, donned one of the cycle carrying bags and then wandered around with the bag on his head to get the best signal. An appropriate photo was taken.

The next 15 miles turned into a struggle against wind and rain over peat bog and beside lochs. There was no sense in stopping as there was no shelter. We arrived at Durness at 3pm cold, wet and hungry. We did the essential shopping for two days as again the shop is not open on Sunday, and went straight to the YH. We would have preferred a bit more comfort tonight but we needed to be warm quickly and to use the drying room. In the evening we planned the rest of the journey. Tomorrow we had planned to cycle out to Cape Wrath, an arduous round trip of 30 miles on a rough track. In view of the weather forecast, similar to today, we now plan to go on towards John o'Groats. We have no spare tyre or tube left and there is nowhere near here to buy one. We shall go to John o'Groats hoping we can get one soon and don't have a problem on the smooth roads.

Before bedtime we walked down to the Smoo Cave. This is well worth seeing and free. The sea has undercut the cliff making a cave and a river has found its way in through the roof of the cave making a very impressive underground waterfall which is very easy to see.

Day 56 Durness to Bettyhill

After a day like yesterday one tends to be apprehensive about what the weather may do the next day. As we left the first time we were. After we had returned to collect our forgotten YHA membership cards and started again we were less so. In fact the weather was much better. It was still blowing about 30mph but the rain had reduced to showers, and we missed most of them. To start with we cycled about 12 miles south down Loch Eriboll with the wind behind us. We then did eight miles north up the other side with the wind against us ending up about two miles from where we were 20 miles earlier. It occurs to us that EC money could well be spent building ferries for cycle tourists especially those on tandems. After all, everyone else up here seems to receive EC money.

As usual by lunch time we were in a totally unsuitable place for lunch. That is, 600 feet up a peat bog with driving rain setting up a serious wind chill factor. We went on for an hour or so and stopped at the YH at Tongue and had lunch in the common room. For some unknown reason they lock the kitchen during the day. Tongue YH is in a very beautiful and wild place. It is reached from the west by a causeway across a wide river estuary which exits via a shallow bar into the sea. The whole is in a sandy bay several miles wide and deep and consisting of white sand. We went on again after lunch another dozen miles and found a hotel for the night. The hotel is rather old fashioned which rather suits us. It was luxurious to soak in a large warm bath rather than have a shower squeezed into the corner of the room. It also made a pleasant change from the more economical places we have been using recently. Our room overlooks the bay and a wonderful if rather late sunset. It is also only a few yards from the A836 which we have been on all day. Fortunately traffic noise is only a nuisance in that any vehicle using the road is an event which we notice.

Day 57 Bettyhill to Thurso

It was a grey day when we left the hotel. The proprietor said it was like winter but we would not go so far as that. The wind had reduced to an acceptable level. That is, it was light enough not to inconvenience us and strong enough to inconvenience the midges. We started on single track road with some substantial hills but, as we went on, the road became wider and busier. The hills became flatter and the peat bogs became farmers' fields. Not very dramatic scenery but pleasant and interesting. We passed by the Dounreay nuclear pollution centre with trepidation. It was bad enough being aware of the damage it has done without risking ourselves further by going to the visitors' centre. We know this is narrow minded and that if it goes up tonight we will be too near to escape but it felt good to go by as quickly as possible. What idiots the previous generation of "scientists" were and why should the current generation be any better? Enough of this but we did meet a cyclist going in the other direction all clothed in fluorescent green and wondered whether she had gone a bit too close.

Being the hardened cyclists we now think we are we missed lunch and came straight to Thurso finding a double room at the Thurso College student hostel. We now had lots to do including eat. The list included buying a much needed new tyre for the tandem, food shopping, and getting postcards to send tomorrow from John o'Groats to friends not on email. We then set about buying boat tickets to the Orkneys and Shetland and train tickets from Aberdeen to Weymouth. We managed to do just about everything on the list before collapsing into bed late.

Day 58 Thurso to John o'Groats

It has come, the final day of this part of the journey. We cycled along the flat wide road, it was almost as if the country had given up challenging us with more hills. Unfortunately the weather had not completely given up being unpleasant and it was cold and grey. We detoured up to Dunnet Head which is the most northerly point on the British mainland. For the first time we had views of the Orkneys and other islands. They were surprisingly different from the Western Isles. They seemed less mountainous and more spread out. We also took the first of the many photographs which are required of the final day.

We went on towards the end having lunch in a British Legion hall porch. The coldness did little to take the edge off our mounting excitement. We went on to the village of John o'Groats and passed straight through to Duncansby Head. Unlike Land's End it is not clear where the Journey ends so we chose the furthest point. It is also a very lovely place and after taking photos we walked the coastal path for an hour or so. The Stacks were well worth seeing together with the rugged cliffs and wild inlets. It was teeming with wild life and we saw four Atlantic grey seals sleeping (basking is the wrong term today) on a small island near to the cliff path. We then went back to the village and ritually posted cards to friends who only have snail mail. Here the photo was taken by a walker who had left Land's End on 9th April and had done about 1100 miles. It seemed a great achievement to us. We also did the usual photo under the naff mile sign post which Ken almost hopes won't come out. We booked into a comfortable B&B and celebrated with a good dinner and a bottle of wine. Our last job before going to bed was to send the diary by email to our friends.

Day 59 John O'Groats to Kirkwall (Orkney)

It is funny the conversations you have on a journey. In B&Bs these seem to happen less often which, depending on how you feel, can sometimes be a good thing. At breakfast we fell into conversation with the couple at the next table. They had a camper vehicle but had been staying here for a couple of nights. They said that whilst camping at Inverary a mouse had got into the van and until they catch it with one of the four traps they have put down they are staying B&B. It takes all kinds. There are lots of camper vans in Scotland and they have a similar effect on us as the tourist cars do in England. We think that they drive around and around brewing tea without even stopping. We have named them all Winnibagos in the hope that the Blues Brothers will come along and sink some of them in a loch.

Having made it to the End we now plan to do more touring and less cycling. We caught the passenger ferry across to Burwick on Orkney and then cycled against the wind to Kirkwall. On the way we crossed the four Churchill Barriers. These were built during the 1939/45 war to partly enclose Scapa Flow, thereby reducing the risk of submarine attack. Prior to their construction block ships were sunk but this proved ineffective. They looked like the causeways on the Western Isles but slightly more weathered. The roads here are very wide and straight and the area is littered with old military buildings. The most interesting of these which we saw was the very beautiful chapel in two Nissen huts, built by the Italian prisoners of war who had been drafted in to build the barriers. It was renovated in 1960 by the original designer and builder and should not be missed.

At Kirkwall we found a pleasant backpackers hostel and now have our own large room for the next four days while we visit the Island sights. The town itself is small and pleasant with a 12th century cathedral and other ancient buildings to see. We are down on the quay side with a good view of the sea and of the frequent ferry movements. A kind of home from home.

Day 60 Kirkwall to Skara Brae and back

It feels pleasant to ride the tandem without the luggage. It would also be pleasant to ride without the wind and the cold but this was not to be today. We headed into town first to dump the washing for a service wash. This is usually a stoker's duty but now we are on holiday she gets a servant to do it for her. We then headed north against the wind and reached Skara Brae at lunchtime. Here there are the archaeological remains of a village built about 3000BC. It has often been on television and it was very interesting to see it for real. The houses were revealed about 150 years ago when a sand dune was blown away in a storm. The removal of the sand has now revealed several houses not dissimilar in some ways from one in which we stayed on the Western Isles. Apparently the climate was warmer here then and life was easy. We had lunch at the visitors' centre, which was, of course, built with EC funds.

We then moved on to look at two stone circles. We always enjoy these atmospheric places and the smaller Standing Stones of Stenness seemed in some ways more powerful than the larger Ring of Brodgar. We then visited Maes Howe, a fascinating burial mound with a square central chamber and long low narrow entrance. Neither of us have ever seen anything like it. On the walls were runes, graffiti really, left by Norse visitors some 1300 years ago. Absolutely fascinating, and in some ways what is even more interesting is that the archaeologists have no real consensus of what the stone circles or the chamber were for. We whizzed back with the wind behind us and soon had dinner going. It is quite like home watching the sailing dinghies racing from our window. Shame it is so cold and we have no extra clothes because we did not get back in time to collect the service wash.

Day 61 Kirkwall to the Island of Hoy and back

Another grey day but at least the wind had dropped a little. We cycled off to Houton to catch the ferry to Hoy. That is the island which has the famous Old Man (which would be too difficult to get to) and a population of 450. We went to see the Scapa Flow visitor centre, having been inspired by seeing the Churchill Barriers to try to learn some 20th century history. The museum, despite having received the usual EC grant, was mainly in the old style and it required a fair bit of investigation to find out very much. The importance of the area hinges around its control of the exit route from the East into the Atlantic and in this respect is similar to the English Channel. In the 1939/45 war a huge number of troops was located here to service and protect the equally large number of ships. In the 1914/18 war the most notable event was the scuttling of the whole German fleet. In November 1918 the fleet surrendered and it was agreed that final arrangements to end the war would be made within six months. Concerned that this had not happened the German Commander scuttled the fleet in June 1919 rather than let the ships fall into British hands if the war continued. It was an event which shocked everyone, the scuttling of a whole navy, and the armistice terms were agreed three days later. Many of the ships were subsequently salvaged and sold for scrap. Those which remain are now extensively used by divers and it was in a dive shop that I saw the T shirt with a German Admiral on it saying "I said a subtle retreat not scuttle the fleet".

On the way back we saw some very minor remains of a round church and Earl's hall fully supported by an EC funded visitor centre bigger than both and devoted to the Orkney Sagas. These are the traditional oral history of the islands and are both fascinating and important especially to the EC grant industry. I like them too but I would have thought Orkney received enough from the oil revenue not to need extra. We were comfortable again in the hostel for the night despite the strong winds on the windows.

Day 62 Kirkwall - Stoker's Birthday

The stoker requested and the management conceded a special holiday to mark the stoker's birthday. This meant that the tandem stayed locked to its post and we would do some walking and shopping in town. We had the details of a town walk. Kirkwall is well worth a look and many cruise liners stop here, two calling during our four day stay. Unfortunately it rained non stop all day and we did not manage all the town walk. We spent a bit of time in the shops and quite a long time in the excellent museum. After that we had a very lazy afternoon and a long pleasant dinner. At about 10.30pm the rain stopped and the sky brightened so we went for a walk. It never really gets dark here and this is very confusing but I think we are beginning to get used to it. The stoker considered herself to have had a very pleasant and satisfying birthday but with rather a lack of presents.

Day 63 Kirkwall - Lerwick (Shetland)

With a 15 mile ride to the boat, and an eight hour 130 mile crossing to Lerwick, we needed to get up early and so set the alarm for 7am. With this almost constant daylight even Ken who normally wakes early could not guarantee to do so. He has taken to sleeping with his watch on so as not to lose complete track of time. We were doing well, showered and almost fed without disturbing the other three residents, when Ken's toast set the smoke alarms off. After throwing the doors open and with much flapping of towels the alarms were stopped but not without everyone being fully awake. We were very apologetic but hurriedly finished breakfast and left. We hate people who set off fire alarms in the middle of the night and felt it best to be long gone when they re-emerged.

The weather was slightly improved with the odd patch of blue sky and the wind was light from the south. It felt much better compared to the past few days. We boarded the ship in good time and Anne's day was made when the captain announced that he was making a detour to see the Old Man of Hoy. It was certainly very impressive and she took many photographs. I expect some will come out OK. The crossing proved very comfortable and did not trouble Ken's delicate constitution. We found our booked B&B in Lerwick and were welcomed by Rita and Walter.

Day 64 Lerwick (Shetland) to Burravoe (Isle of Yell)

Rita and Walter's was one of those B&B's where we lived with them rather than as paying house guests. It was difficult to get away but very interesting to hear about Shetland life past and present, with and without the oil money. Every pensioner household is paid £200 at Christmas and the community facilities are first class. On the other hand crime has apparently increased and the pace of life has changed.

We left just as the rain began to fall and headed south as we had planned. Soon after we left the town we were confronted with head winds and the management made a decision to revise the plan and head north. He claims that this proves that he is not completely inflexible when it comes to changing plans. It should however be pointed out that the decision was not very radical. Shetland runs north to south and Lerwick is about a third of the way up. Whichever way we go we will return down the same road. Furthermore, in terms of miles travelled it does not make much difference which way out of town you go. So, as usual, management is making much out of very little. Anyway it was nice to have the wind blowing us along. The scenery here is different from Orkney. We like it better and the clouds over the bigger hills were very atmospheric. We stopped for an excellent lunch at a pub at a little harbour village called Voe. The locals seem very friendly everywhere and we established that Voe has a böd which is the Shetland equivalent of a camping

barn. We found the local guardian working in the fish farm and had a chat with him before looking around the böd. It is a bit basic but will do for one night on the way back south.

We bypassed the Sullom Voe oil terminal which is the biggest in Europe. It probably looks similar to Fawley (Southampton) and we have seen that often enough. Soon after a short and subsidised ferry ride to Yell we found our B&B. It is in a working but much modernised croft. Rita and George who run it have about 50 acres of land which is actually several crofts. (The croft is the land not the building.) Rita cooked us dinner, there being no pub or restaurant for several miles, and we spent the evening chatting in the sitting room, learning more of Shetland life.

Day 65 Burravoe (Isle of Yell) to Uyeasound (Isle of Unst)

After a huge breakfast we were soon on our way with the wind behind us. We turned left at the bottom of the drive onto single track road and there was very little traffic. After about five miles we heard a toot behind us and it was Rita and George from last night's B&B. Anne had left her waterproof shoe covers behind and they had taken the trouble to bring them to us. It was very kind of them and Ken found the whole affair very amusing. As Anne considers him to be both careless and unreliable she insists on checking for leavings after he has left every place in which we stay.

We went onto the ferry to Unst which also serves a small island called Fetlar. We were lucky to find the ferry waiting and went to Fetlar via Unst. We were very lucky to do this because not only is the service quite limited but recently the timetable has been published incorrectly. The boat trip took about 45 minutes and we landed at the deserted quay and had lunch in the waiting room. We cycled uphill along the single track road and arrived at the museum and heritage centre. We spent a very enjoyable afternoon looking at old films turned into videos and chatting to the local people. There is a population of only ninety and they are having a dispute about their life line, the subsidised ferry service.

We left the island and cycled the couple of miles from the ferry stage to the private hostel. The first person we met was from Emsworth. She was an (inaccurate) harbinger of doom and a pain in the backside. The problem was a school party who, when they turned up, were very pleasant as were their teachers. They were having a two day stay and came from Scalloway on the Shetland mainland. One of the teachers was a native of Unst and another of Orkney. They and the kids were full of information and questions and we had a very pleasant evening and a quiet night. We neglected to mention our Emsworth connection (Ken's brother lives there) and did not see the harbinger again.

Day 66 Uyeasound (Isle of Unst) nearly to Muckle Flugga and back

Today is another big day and we made the final push to the northernmost point of the British Isles. For this major round trip of 26 miles we left all non-essentials at the hostel. The management's main concern is that a major climb is involved from sea level to about 220 metres. With the benefit of email stokers have been conferring. A particularly militant stoker from Farnham seems to have developed a system for not pedalling at all and has passed this information to The Stoker. Having purchased our final supplies we progressed north and, ignoring MOD warnings, found a fine but windy position overlooking the lighthouse on Muckle Flugga. This was at the end of an unmade road so at least we did a bit of off road to end with. We also had cards stamped at the most northerly Post Office, bought a certificate and sat out a rain storm for two hours in a boat museum but still got wet in the end. Such is the life of the long distance tandem cycle tourist.

For yachties such as Ken the museum was an interesting history of double ended boats between about 15 and 30 foot. They race them as a local class which we would call restricted. They look really difficult to sail and carry about 200 square foot of sail on modern bermuda rigs but they

don't plane. We returned to the hostel via a bus shelter which we saw on the way out. It had been kitted out by local schoolboys with a small settee, table and a pot plant, very homely and it remained unvandalised. We, partly as a kind of thanks for the many places in which we had brewed up, added a visitor's book. It was a very quiet night at the hostel, the school group having left. Mileage to this most northerly point is just under 1700.

Day 67 Uyeasound (Isle of Unst) to Voe (Shetland mainland)

We were not up particularly early but the hostel was in silence. We cooked breakfast and left for a rapid couple of miles to catch the 10am ferry to Yell. It felt a bit like commuting and we made it with three minutes to spare. The weather, after yesterday's storm, was now passable. The wind was strong from the west but the sun was warm out of the wind. The sea was blue and the many small islands and sandy beaches really looked good but we were certainly not tempted to swim. The island of Yell was crossed in fine style and we had our usual picnic lunch in the sun at the ferry to the mainland. Soon after we crossed to the mainland a car with Rita and George, our B&B hosts the night before last, stopped to chat. They wanted to know about our comings and goings in the north and how we got on in the storm. People are really friendly here and we keep meeting the same people. I suppose the tandem must stand out.

Another ten miles and we arrived at the böd which is similar to a camping barn. This one was once a sail loft but has had several uses during its long life. It is owned by a trust and the main reason for its existence is to preserve the building. It is in a fine situation beside a pier at the end of a sea loch and overlooking the water. The facilities are basic and one needs everything required for camping except a tent. It has a toilet and shower, a kitchen with just a sink and two other rooms. One has a half a dozen bunk beds in it and in the other a pot bellied stove, two bunk beds and a kitchen table. We took up residence in the room with the stove and soon had it roaring away. Not only did it make the böd warm and comfortable but we soon found that it could be used for cooking. Basic vegi food is easy to cook and Ken, whose job it is, managed to produce a tasty meal which lasted much of the evening. Cutting the drift wood took some effort but apart from that it beats a barbecue hands down.

Day 68 Voe to Sandwick (Shetland mainland)

The wind had been howling around the chimney during the night but we were warm inside the böd. We had stoked the stove up well with coal and it was still alight when we left in the morning, but we needed to resort to the Trangia to cook our porage because the stove top was not warm enough. It was not until we climbed out of Voe to gain the main road that we realised just how bad the weather was. It was not a pleasant ride against rain and wind. We arrived mid afternoon to another homely B&B, this time overlooking the Island of Mousa with its famous Pictish Broch, easy to see across the sea. We had a very average in every respect except the price dinner in the Barclay Arms Hotel, best avoided if you come here.

During the last couple of days we have noticed that the behaviour of some of the birds has changed. Oyster catchers with their long red beaks and red legs have accompanied us off and on since the Hebrides. They seem to be able to live a long way from oysters. They have now taken to dive bombing us and then half flying half walking along the road in front of us looking as if they are injured. After they have done this for a hundred yards or so they fly off. After this had happened several times on separate occasions we spotted a large fluffy chick nearby. These birds were drawing us away from the chick by pretending to be injured and therefore easy prey. They also pick fights and chase away any gulls that get near. To our surprise we were dive bombed by a curlew today and wondered if it was for a similar reason. This has never happened before which is a good thing because curlews have very long and dangerous looking beaks. Just to cheer us up

in the rain we also saw a common seal playing in the waves in what might be a pleasant beach in better weather.

Day 69 Sandwick to Sumburgh and back

Another sightseeing day and we were pleased to see that the wind had dropped and it was not raining. We visited the Jarlshof archaeological site next to the beach not far from Sumburgh Head. This is the very southern tip of mainland Shetland so we have now been to both ends. The site is large and very interesting, particularly compared with Skara Brae on Orkney which we saw last week. It had been inhabited by various people from about 3000BC to the 1650s AD and excavations have revealed several different levels and types of building. The culture was over and it started to rain. We went into the Sumburgh Hotel for a beer and an excellent and rather long lunch. It directly contrasted with the Barclay Arms Hotel of last night and rendered a visit to that establishment redundant this evening. Perhaps the hotel is owned by the bank of a similar name with similar standards.

On the way back we went to a croft house museum. We sort of wondered why we were going but soon found out. The house itself was fine but the guardian was interesting, informative and friendly. We were her only visitors on this wet afternoon and among other things she demonstrated spinning sheep's fleece into knitting wool. We then meandered back along the west coast on minor roads. We passed St Ninian's Isle with its causeway, called an ayre or tombolo, of white sand and known for its treasure which is in the National Museum in Edinburgh. We returned to the B&B dampened but having had a good day. We would have liked to have finished it off by doing a midnight trip to the Island of Mousa but it was just not worth it in the now pouring rain.

Day 70 Sandwick to The Westings Hotel, Wormadale

No hurry this morning as the hotel is not far and the weather did not start off very well. It was a case of retracing our route towards Lerwick and then crossing the island. We made a small diversion to Scalloway on the west coast and were very pleased that we did. The town was quiet although there was a fair bit of industry around related to fishing. We went to look at the 17th century castle and found we needed the key. Anne went off to get it while Ken got the tea going. For once it was pleasant enough to eat outside so long as we were out of the wind. Anne only needed to go to the hotel to get the key but she disappeared for a very long time. Meanwhile some other people had turned up. She did eventually come back with the key and had been chatting to the hotel manager. Everything here takes ages and there is always time for a chat. She had a firm instruction not to give the key to anyone under 18. Apparently the teenagers in this town where nothing ever happens have an uncontrollable urge to run amok in the castle. We eventually returned the key and then cycled on to see the site of the old Norse parliament. Finally we had a very long climb up to the hotel and were rewarded at the top by the most magnificent view.

We arrived at the hotel which our combined four children, cajoled by Elisabeth, had organised for tonight. It was our joint birthday present on our last night in the Shetlands and nearly the end of the road. We were greeted with congratulations from the management, and told that we had three bottles of wine awaiting us.... Why three, and how would we cope? But then the next surprise - waiting in our room were dozens (nearly) of cards - birthday, father's day, and congratulation cards. We were overcome with surprise and pleasure. The view from our room was south westerly down the sound and out to sea via dozens of tiny islands. The sun had come out but as the clouds and rain squalls came across the colours changed again and again. We went up for our dinner where we had a window table with the same view. The food was provided by Max and was in the Turkish style and by far the best we have had in Scotland. We finally adjourned to the bar

and by the way we did manage the wine. One bottle before dinner, one with dinner and the third converted into malt whisky for after dinner.

Day 71 The Westings Hotel, Wornadale almost to Aberdeen

We have to admit that we had slightly fuzzy heads this morning and we did not emerge for breakfast until gone 9am. We were naturally reluctant to leave and eventually got going by about 11am for our epic ride of nearly eight miles into Lerwick. Lerwick is a pleasant small town and we parked the tandem and enjoyed a stroll around the town and harbour. For a couple of hours in the afternoon we set up camp in the YH café and caught up on our correspondence, emails etc. We boarded the ship and left Lerwick at 6pm. We followed the coast of Shetland southwards and finally watched Sumburgh Head disappear into the distance. We had supper, watched the film and then the sun set over the Fair Isles. It was very picturesque and Anne took lots of photos. It was however very difficult to decide if and when the sun did set. We went to our cabin in good “day” light at 11.30pm. The sun sets in London at about 9.30pm and we think about 11pm here and it only passes through about 15 degrees before it rises again.

Days 72 and 73 Aberdeen to Weymouth

We slept well in our cabin which as well as en-suite facilities even had its own window and the sea was smooth. We were awakened by a breakfast announcement and by the time we had showered etc the boat was already backing into Aberdeen harbour. By the time we had packed and got down to the car deck all the cars had gone. We cycled into the town centre and with the help of a local found a café for breakfast. We took a while over this and then went to the Tourist Information Office to work out the itinerary for the day.

By this time we were feeling the pressure, noise and bustle of a large town which came as quite a shock after the quiet of the islands. We cycled north towards Aberdeen old town and first went to the university visitors’ centre. Here we saw a rather boring display which for those with considerably more interest than us might have conveyed something of the university’s history. We then went on to the very pleasant Presbyterian cathedral founded by St Machar at the behest of St Columba. Much of what we saw was actually built in the 16th Century from granite and is very attractive, although slightly stunted because the altar end had fallen down when the tower fell through the roof during a storm in Cromwell’s time.

Following directions given to us at the cathedral we continued north to look at the single span bridge, originally built by Robert the Bruce, which used to take all the traffic over the River Don. It is now closed to motor traffic. It has an arch which spans 12 metres and a structure well worth seeing. We then followed the south bank of the river back towards the old town. We stopped for a long lazy two hour picnic in warm sunshine. This in itself was an event but it was even nicer to be surrounded by trees. Orkney and Shetland have hardly any and they are rather pleasant as long as they don’t spoil the view. We cycled back to the town centre along the esplanade in bright sunshine and then did a bit of shopping and took our time over a pizza.

We boarded the train about 9pm and settled into our sleeper compartment before leaving at 9.40pm. Surprisingly we enjoyed a good night’s sleep and were awakened by the attendant at 7.45am. Perhaps some 60 different beds in the last 10 weeks prepared us for proper sleep on a train. We whizzed across London, the only way to go is with the urban flow, and just caught the 9.30am train to Weymouth arriving home at 12.30pm. The final number of miles travelled was 1918.