

## **October Outing 2009**

Having done LEJOG in June our little group of touring converts felt keen to get in another trek before the winter. By about August we were looking for a further challenge

We considered a variety of rides and eventually chose the Coast to Coast ride a mere 136 miles from Workington on the West Coast of Cumbria to Sunderland on the East coast. The logistics of getting 3 cyclists and their kit 350 plus miles north and back from another location 2 days later proved both expensive and awkward. This caused the return option to be born using the new Hadrian's cycle way route from Tynemouth back to Workington via Carlisle and generally following the path of Hadrian's very famous wall. We could therefore drive up leave the car, cycle about and return to the car and come back to Dorset. This was both cheaper and logistically easier to sort out.

Mark Dobbs accommodation and entertainment manager set about booking the Bed and Breakfast as there was little chance of camping on this trip due to the possible weather and fact that most sites close late September.

I sourced the C2C and Hadrian's cycle way route maps and info from <http://www.rannerdale.webeden.co.uk> and gradually pieced the basics of a 4 day trip, 2 days C2C and 2 days back across the country. The main topic of conversation as ever was what the weather would be throwing at us as we ventured through the Lake District and the Northern Pennines and Scottish borders in mid October.

We only held one brief planning meeting to agree the plan. This trip would just be an add on to LEJOG giving us the 4 compass points and the very centre of GB at Haltwhistle.

Both of the routes are "Sustrans". Having never ridden any of these types of routes I remained skeptical about whether we would find this type of route to our liking.

One week out and Mark began walking around with a very bad back. The weather wasn't looking too good either and never being a man to get in the way, he decided that he better stay at home. So that left Mick and I, no chance we would change our minds, we were just hoping the conditions would be kind..

### **Day One Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> October 12, 2009**

Mick and I met at 7am and drove the 7 hours to Workington. The roads were fairly quiet and the whole trip was uneventful. We parked the car up and assembled all of our kit ready to be mobile for another 5 days.

The original plan was to ride 10 miles to Cockermouth and book into a BnB ready to start proper on the Thursday. However it was 2.30pm a nice day and the wheels were rolling.

We made our way to the start point at the pier, via a café for a brief refueling... We took the odd photograph, mainly of the huge wind farms which now dominate the coastline and began to follow the Sustrans signs... Only half a mile and we were being directed

across a girder bridge on a footway that was only the width of a bike. No way to ride it or push it and with 2 ortlieb panniers it was all out the question. Plan B was, as ever, follow the road signs. This proved to be better as we agreed to ride to Whitehaven the other C2C start to see what it looked like.

Eventually we found ourselves back on the Sustrans route on the old railway track route. This was actually a joy, very well laid out and interesting as you had no need to play dodge the traffic. The route took us along the scenic coastline and deposited us into the new marina at Whitehaven. All of this was quite new, I had been to the town 10 years ago and it was very different then.

Mick then suggested that we should ride the southern C2C route and find somewhere to cross to Cockermouth as the weather may not be sunny and dry tomorrow.



What became very clear at this stage was that the organized route is all about keeping bikes off the road and into the areas you would never see in a car. It's all a bit like visiting a big house by arriving in the rear yard and going in through the kitchen every time. This was a recurring sensation which you either get used to or made a decision to find your own way, in with the traffic. We made our own way a couple of times on the trip but tried in general to keep to the intended routes.

We went through some interesting estates in Whitehaven and eventually found ourselves on a very good tarmac railway route which went on for miles leading gently up towards the Lake District. There were a number of gate obstacles requiring the cyclocross dismount and dash.. Gradually the route turned into tracks on loose surfaces. We worked out that we could go as far as Lorton Vale because a B road there would enable a dash across to Cockermouth and the BnB.

The last section was on a minor road which dramatically dropped all the height we had gained down to the side of a minor mountain. Mick had his brakes steaming by the bottom as he isn't the keenest descender. We rode along the bank of Loweswater enjoying the scenery. Now starting to get dark and with several million midges for company I realized that I had neglected to eat much since breakfast and was hoping the B road would be round the corner. A mouthful of "Haribo" solved the hunger for now.

We finally found the B road and rode into Cockermouth having now stolen an unplanned 40+ miles on the first day. The Croft House BnB was very welcoming, bikes straight into the lounge and a spare room. All mod cons and a better base for the northern lakes

you would struggle to find. Eddy the owner offered advice on eating and drinking and after a shower we found a pub 50 yards away for the usual carbo load for the next day. By 9.30pm we were asleep.

### **Day Two Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> October 2009**

An 8 am breakfast, Mick opted for “the special” on top of fruit cereal, home made bread, and anything that wasn’t secured to the table. The special was fresh Haddock fillet with 2 poached eggs. We briefly chatted to 2 ladies in their 50’s who were heading in the same direction but in more days and also planning LEJOG next year.

Out on the road we headed back to where we left Lorton Vale and went up the Whinlatter pass which we hardly noticed at only 350 meters elevation. It delivered us on forest trails to the visitor centre in the middle of a mountain bike area which looked fun. It was sunny but cold at times, but fantastic for October. What we didn’t anticipate was a steep descent on an unmade mountain bike trail into Braithwaite. A final check of the views and Mick was back on the brakes. I actually waited at one point and watched him testing the Dawes Super Galaxy off road and brakes ability. He remained upright and laughing.

In the village, a quick “Haribo” purchase and we rode the short distance to Keswick by the Sustrans long way round route. Again pretty and different, but we could have been there 30 minutes earlier on the real road. In Keswick we left the route and went to the Derwent lakeside to admire the view and a cup of tea in the café.

After sitting down a white piano in the corner started playing all by itself, keys moving and all that. Mick informed me that it was playing a Carpenters repertoire. Well it must have been good, because we were there ages. The piano was actually very amusing. We were now warm and the thought of the cold was not pleasant, but the day was quickly escaping from us.

The ride out of Keswick was along a railway track by the river and was very flat and easy going. We eventually popped out on the main A66 between Penrith and Keswick. The rest of the morning was spent on and off this road and loops into the adjacent villages and hills. To be fair it was all very nice but it began to get a bit tedious as my stomach began to rumble towards 2pm.....



We agreed an A66 dash of 10 miles wouldn’t hurt anyone and by 2.30 pm we were in a nice bike shop (a cyclist can never have enough bikes) A quick look round and off to a coffee shop for a light lunch. Mick of course doesn’t do light lunches so he ate everything that was left on the shelves.

Out of Penrith and straight up a very steep long climb and out to the foothills of the North Pennines. My light lunch felt like a football up my jersey and Mick wasn't saying much.

The terrain was undulating and the sun was now very warm. At Renwick a big red sign warned the dangers of the Hartside fell which rises to almost 2000 feet. We elected to strip down to shorts and short sleeves and began the slog. Now 4pm and bright sunshine climbing a very long gradual climb with the snow poles either side of the road. It took a good 40 minutes if not a hour to reach the Hartside café which was now closed. A quick picture at the summit and get redressed. It was noticeably colder at the top and the light slowly fading. I believed we only had a short couple of bumps to go over before Nenthead and the BnB.

We left Hartside and descended much further than I expected, by now I was shivering and not hanging around for Mick. Up another climb, and down a descent to Garrigill. Back together we prepared for the last 4 miles, a quick romp over the hill. To be fair we were cold and fairly tired and only 66 miles into the day which was now turning to night. The mileage doesn't reflect the effort especially all the Sustrans "Long way round" on and off the bike all morning, and opening and closing gates. We would usually cover such a distance before lunch and still feel quite spritely.



The final climb of the day was a horror. OK we walked the first quarter of a mile as it was that steep, and I have a 30/32 lowest gear setup. We continued to ride slowly as the sun faded behind the hills. Each summit was a false crest which was repeated 4/5 times. I put a brave face on it and ploughed on. At the very top I waited for Mick who arrived on foot pushing again.

We dropped into Nenthead and found the BnB (bunkhouse) not quite what we expected but hey... cold tired and hungry I was pleased to be climbing off the bike.

Mark during the planning had booked a table at the only pub for miles for 7.30pm we duly arrived to find we were the only diners .... But they knew where we were staying and all the details... a very close community. Great meal and another early night.

### **Day Three Friday 9<sup>th</sup> October 2009**

We had an interesting 8am breakfast with a mixed ability group going the other way on the route. One member of this group was preparing the wording for the ebay advert for

his bike. Having done the C2C in 2001 he had since neglected to continue the training plan and had experienced a very hard day on the relatively easy bit to Nenthead from the Sunderland end. We didn't mention how lumpy our previous day had been and wished them good luck as we left (via the pub, to collect the maps I had left on the table)

The climb continued and within 15 minutes we were at the Northumberland border sign which is the highest point on the route. It was a very cold morning and I had 4 layers of clothing on top. We were climbing slowly to avoid getting too sweaty only to subsequently freeze. The views were brilliant and the remote nature of the area became more obvious with every pedal stroke. Plenty of up's and now some downs. We cycled for the next 4 hours hardly seeing another person or vehicle. Gradually we dropped down from the Pennines into rolling farmland, it felt a bit warmer and the area became quite green and pleasant.

The sting in the tail came at Stanhope where I knew there was a hill....We rode the first section and as we went round the bend by the emergency escape lane, the hill got even more steep and rather than turn ourselves inside out and drippy sweaty we walked the few hundred yards to the point where we could ride again. Another set of snow poles and up a hill similar to Hartside, we arrived at Parkhead. This is a café / BnB on the start of a railway route which would lead us all the way into the backdoor of Sunderland without even realizing we had arrived. Cake, coffee and some postcards we started the very gentle drop all the way to the end. The railway route was a rough track to start and improved gradually.



The Sustrans problem was back with us now we were back in civilization. With not a lot of choice we just kept with it. After Parkhead there were no obvious late lunch stops and we eventually resorted to a roll from a newsagent at Fatfields Village. We ploughed on and passed the marina at Sunderland and went to the finish point on the seafront where there is a massive slab on marble with a round hole for framing the lighthouse. This was the end of C2C

However, our accommodation was booked up at Whitley Bay the other side of the Tyne and still some miles away. We rode north along the coast with a big tail wind looking for a café as we were now quite peckish.... No joy, lots of them, but all closed to Poole Wheelers on a Friday afternoon. The ride was a breeze and we made our way to the pedestrian ferry to cross the Tyne for £1.20 .... The journey, all 4 minutes was

uneventful. Off the other side and rejoin the C2C northern route. We followed this to the finish overlooking the Tyne entrance. Two C2C finishes in one day, so rode on to Whitley Bay where we found our Hotel overlooking the sea.

A typical Shearings bus tour hotel, but all up together, they even agreed to do a considerable pile of washing for which we were very pleased to pay £10. Whitley Bay is going through hard times, a walk round before dinner revealed strip joints and hen and stag party pubs. The local Police were also out in considerable force waiting for their first customers.

We found a genuine Italian restaurant and settled down to watch the procession of fancy dress clad teenagers out for a great night out. Mick had his second Pasta Carbonara of the trip and a side order of a vegetarian Pizza and chips and the rest of my Carbonara. The 75 cold miles had obviously given him an appetite. Now raining we decided on a dash back to see Basil at the Towers and collect our dried bag of washing.

#### **Day Four Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> October 2009**

An 8am breakfast was slightly delayed by the staff not having turned up, but we were soon on the road into a Sunny and warm looking bay back towards the C2C finish which is also the Hadrian's Cycleway start. This route is actually about 175 miles in total finishing in Ravensglass on the west coast, south of Whitehaven. We agreed to do the first day and improvise the second ending back at Workington for the drive home.



The other decision we had made was to use normal roads if the Sustrans malarkey got too much. We also knew the 1<sup>st</sup> 35 miles would be flat and any eventually any hills would be less than half the height of those on the C2C. We rode past the start and back past the ferry and along the River Tyne. We were joined by 3 guys on Mountain bikes who were off to Penrith via the C2C route. They confirmed it would be at least 90 miles of riding, we checked if they had lights and they confirmed they would be finishing in the dark. We rode chatting with them into the Gatehead meets Newcastle part of the Tyne where we did the tourist tricks on the camera and then continued only to meet them again, as they had got geographically embarrassed. We privately doubted the wisdom of trying to cover that route on mountain bikes; we just hope they had a good day.

The Tyne went on forever, flat and far less of a torture than the “stop, start “C2C. There were still no good facilities en route. We watched a number of rowers from the Tyne rowing club and wondered if they would ever survive a dip into the silt ridden, filthy murky river. The further inland we went the better the river looked.

We moved away from the river after seeing it as a much cleaner fly fishing river with strange men in waders watching strange men in lycra riding along the bank. Saturday morning and suddenly there were loads of club cyclists out on their Saturday morning training rides. Nodding and acknowledging everyone like the Churchill Bulldog. We finally found a decent coffee house at Corbridge. Mick was consistent throughout the trip in never being able to pick a decent piece of cake, I had an Orange cake which was magnificent, Mick’s fig slab looked like a small squashed flapjack.

Onwards and upwards and the up started at Newbrough as indicated on the map. This proved to be nothing too difficult, enjoyable, despite the expected gentle headwind from the west all day. Some of the prettiest countryside yet and Hadrians Wall was visible 1.5 miles away along the ridges. 300 meters from the top of highest climb of the day and I suffered the 1<sup>st</sup> puncture in over 2500 miles on my Koga. A quick check revealed a big thorn through the tyre. All the usual checks and precautions and we were rolling on to Haltwhistle which has a signpost stating it is the middle of GB. So that was it for this year. LEJOG and C2C and now the centre of the nation. We had a late lunch in a quirky shop and pressed on.



The next section took us alongside the wall and through some Forts. [Hadrian's Wall](#) has never been anything I've ever thought about at length, but at 73 miles long and built nearly 2000 years ago I was surprised to find big bits of it still here. I am sure I saw a couple of Roman Soldiers hiding behind a wall as we rode past, but it had been a long day and it was now cooler and more breezy than earlier.

At Brampton, having not yet strayed from the great Sustrans route, we made a phone call to the BnB to say we would be late. We then made a dash for the BnB at Carlisle., using the A69. As we crossed the M6 Mick mentioned my phone had been ringing for the last 3 miles..... Getting dark and past 6pm with 90 miles on the clock, Jan was surprised

to hear we had not yet adjourned for the day. Mick was now taking a call from Mark Dobbs keen to see how wet we had got today.

Into Carlisle and we found the BnB and discovered it was a short walk from the sandwich shop stop we had used on LEJOG back in June. The BnB was fine and we went out after a shower to find another Italian eating place. Mick consumed a 3<sup>rd</sup> Carbonara in as many days and a variety of other great dishes as we discussed tactics for getting home the next day. We agreed on a cut off of 1 to 2 pm back at Workington giving us a home time of around 9pm traffic permitting. Looking at the route we decided to keep with the route and then cut down and onto A roads back to our end point.

### **Day Five 11<sup>th</sup> October 2009** .

A late start due to no breakfast served before 8.30am saw us on the road and into a stiff headwind. Nice, but take it or leave it scenery led us out towards Solway Firth where it was flatter and windier than ever.

At Glasson we began to carve our own route and zipped down to Angerton and eventually down to Wigton . To be fair we think the best part of this ride was the 90+ miles to other side of Carlisle. This area was very flat and exposed and not really that interesting unless you hold RSPB membership and have binoculars.

Onto the A596 we rode a decent pace to Aspatria for a mid morning Chapel break; it is amazing the places you find a coffee shop these days. Mick made an even worse cake choice with 2 slabs of light brown flapjack. Refueled, we ploughed into the breeze towards the coast at Maryport and south to Workington arriving at 1.05pm 48 miles on partially laden touring bikes over undulating terrain into the wind. I knew we had been “stamping on” a little as, at one point Mick had requested a 2 minute break en route, the only time in 5 days.

Into the shower and into the car and gone, we were back home by 8.30pm



A great few days away on the bike, Mick as ever was great company and a pleasure to be with. A year ago he was like millions of other recreational cyclists, out with his family, and the odd charity ride. He has now honed his cycling skills, and over distance is a capable and reliable rider with LEJOG, C2C and Hadrian's Wall under his belt. So what will we be doing next year ???.... .