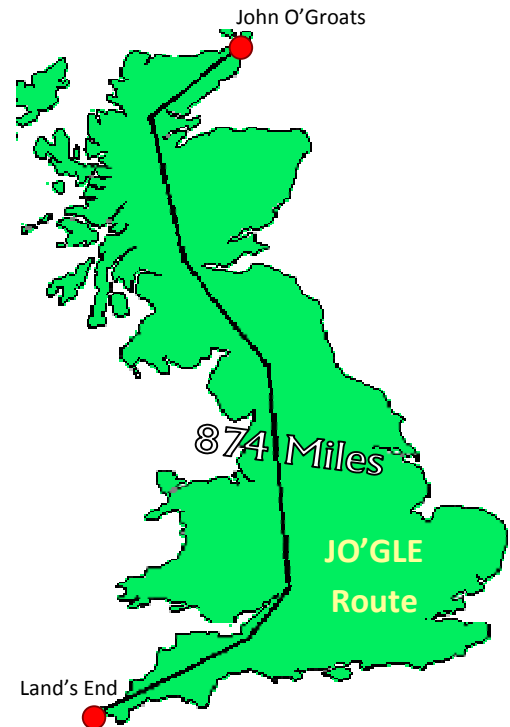


Wheels of fortune

How was I going to celebrate reaching the grand age of sixty? It was coming upon me far too quickly with only six months to go to my birthday in February, 2006. Windsurfing had been my main sport for many years, but I wanted to do something different. I'd been toying with the idea of cycling the end-to-end when a windsurfing friend rang to offer me a lift to John O'Groats. Biff, his friend whom he'd offered to drive there, was planning and succeeded in cycling to Land's End in seven days (I took fourteen!). He said it was for medical research; well, he is a psychiatrist! This offer was more important than you may think. Public transport to JO'G is difficult so this offer was manna from heaven,



Where to start? As I have said, my initial reason for undertaking this bike ride was to celebrate reaching sixty years of age but most people combine this type of project with raising money for a local or national charity. Charities are surprisingly sophisticated in raising finance and they offer advice to help you maximise the "take", but it wasn't until I realised just how ill my pal was [we buried him the day before I left] that I made contact with Weston

Hospicare and the project took on an additional significance. I asked my sponsors (mainly friends and family) to make donations to this very worthy Cancer Charity. I'm sure that, had I committed more time and effort, I would have raised more money [I raised £1,000] but much of my time was spent in preparation, especially the training schedule which involved upwards of 150 miles a week.

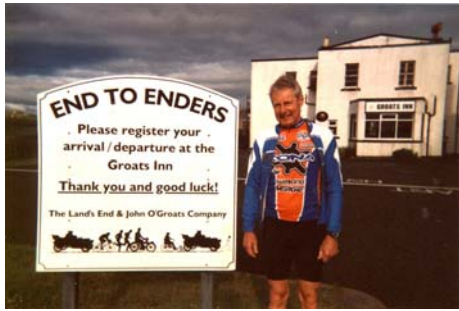
I didn't need a map, until I re-entered England on day eight, as there were such good route details for Scotland in the various books I had read. OS maps are bulky, so I removed the relevant pages from an AA road atlas and kept them in the map wallet on my handlebar bag until I needed them.

The winter of 2005/06 was almost windless [for windsurfing], so with the help and encouragement of various training partners I rode well over 2,000 miles during a period of about ten months from late summer 2005. I had always cycled a few miles but to achieve the necessary level of fitness for a reasonably hard day's ride carrying all my bits and pieces in panniers required more application. I was encouraged to find that I really enjoyed this training and it proved I had "the legs" for the trip.

Article from Michael Hodge (1959 to 1963) "A Sixty Year Treat"

'He who travels lightest travels fastest' - and hopefully avoids the urge to dump half his kit into a wheelie bin after the first decent hill! However I had opted to travel unaccompanied and therefore was carrying about fifteen kilos of luggage in two panniers. I found most landladies were really helpful when asked, in advance, to wash (or dry) my riding kit - and they always appreciated a bottle of wine! I pre-booked all my accommodation in B&B's and made sure with the landlady, that a meal was available within walking distance. The last thing I wanted was going to bed on an empty stomach. We didn't even do that at Brymore, did we? For an old chap like me, after 65 to 75 miles in the saddle I needed the reassurance of a warm, comfortable place to stay and I was never disappointed, thank goodness.

North to south; or south to north? The decision was made for me, by the offer of a lift up to John O'Groats. With the benefit of hindsight, my advice is: if you live in the north go north and vice versa; if you live in the middle, go south at least it gets warmer!



I'll try to summarise the actual trip with a few appropriate anecdotes and pictures.

There was no JO'GLE sign at the start! The famous signpost is removed at night so early starters like us can't blag the "official" 'photo. We utilised the JO'G Hotel as a backdrop instead.

The road from JO'G to Wick creates a false sense of security as it seems so quiet but, as soon as you're south of Wick, things begin to hot up. The A9 is the only road south along the east coast, so it's usually busy with lorries and general traffic. There was a considerable number of rabbits in the grass verges, a veritable moving carpet of fur. As I cycled past they dived through the fence only to re-appear seconds later. I noticed a sign advertising "Massages done here", discreetly situated down a long track with the added benefit of panoramic sea views! During the breakfast stop on the first day a fellow end-to-ender passed on his way north and his support driver stopped for a chat. They came from Ilminster; small world isn't it?



I met Jack for the first time just outside Tain, on my second day. He was sitting on a bench at the side of the road munching his way through an entire Battenberg cake! Seems it's the food of real endurance athletes - and he should know because he's completed the London Marathon and also run in a relay from JO'G to LE. Fit fellow. We were following similar routes, so almost



certain to bump into each other again. Later, at my overnight stop in the village of Muir of Ord, I watched

Images of signposts from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land's_End_to_John_o'_Groats

Article form Michael Hodge (1959 to 1963) “A Sixty Year Treat”

Jack pedalling past, in now quite heavy rain, on his way to his second overnight stop at Beaulieu, a few miles down the road.

Day three took me along the picturesque shores of the formidable looking Loch Ness to the village of Fort Augustus, where I watched a pleasure boat going through the locks which link the Caledonian Canal and Loch Ness. I persuaded a fellow tourist to take my picture outside the “Bothy” pub. I wasn’t sure he understood my request - lots of grunting and hand signals – so, after he had disappeared into the crowd, I asked another tourist to retake it. He must have been watching, because he remarked “Didn’t I see another guy taking your photograph just a few minutes ago?”; “Yes”, I said, “but I’m fairly certain he only got my feet!”. “Ok, buddy”, he said, “I’m from Texas so it’ll be just fine this time”. I thought to myself, George Bush also comes from Texas!



Just before Spean Bridge, Jack caught me up. We took the opportunity to look at the Commando’s Memorial which I found very emotional – 1,700 brave souls killed in action and with many more seriously wounded. The monument stands in an elevated position looking west down the glen towards Fort William. It was soon hammering down with rain, so I stopped in a ‘bus shelter, ate a tin of rice pudding I’d been lugging around for the past two days and ‘phoned my next digs to let them know I was on my way. To my amazement, Willy McDonald, the landlord, offered to come and get me in his pick-up truck. What a gent’ and me a Sassenach too! I politely refused and pedalled on in the rain. Jack was going a bit further than me that night so he must have got very wet.



Day four was the nearest I came to giving up. The ride from Fort William up Glen Coe and over Rannoch Moor in driving rain and gale force winds tested my resolve. But out of the gloom and spray appeared another cyclist riding north. We had a brief chat and he said he had taken five days from Lands End which included a diversion home to check the milkman hadn’t moved in. What is it about milkmen?

I crossed the border into England on the eighth day and rode on towards Kirkby Stephen and Sedburgh - wonderful cycling country, big skies. The Cross Keys, just north of Sedburgh, is a temperance inn! Sunday lunch smelt wonderful but my schedule didn’t allow a stop. I met a chap there who regularly travels up from Dorset [near Corfe Castle] by motorbike just to walk Blue Boar Fell and the Howgills. That’s dedication, but I suspect it was also to do with riding his motorbike on the open roads! On to Sedburgh, a school town rather like Sherborne in



Dorset, with lovely old buildings, playing fields and masters in robes and mortar boards; very “Goodbye Mr Chips”.

On day nine I crossed through Manchester on my way south and stopped off at Ewood Park [the home of Blackburn Rovers]. That’s me standing in front of “our greatest fan” Jack



Article from Michael Hodge (1959 to 1963) "A Sixty Year Treat"

Walker. Ee Phil!

I met up with Jack (not Walker!) again at Ash Magna, south of Warrington where we had both booked in at a Victorian pile called Ash Hall, a sort of Fawlty Towers run by a dotty spinster. Great entertainment.

On through the beautiful border counties and towns like Ledbury and Shrewsbury just touching parts of eastern Wales, over the old Severn Bridge, weird how it sways and heaves all the time. Home for a days rest and a "pasta bash" for all the friends who had helped me train and prepare. I had a wonderful send off for the last stage to Lands End, even my Doctor came, as well as many windsurfing pals.



That day I was making for Mortonhampstead on Dartmoor and they accompanied me for part of the way, some leaving at Taunton others at Cullompton and Exeter. Dave Brockman had offered to keep me company all the way to Lands End. We'd arranged to



rendezvous at Marazion with MDLW, my younger son Max, his girlfriend Steph and Saffron (Max's Spaniel) and we cycled together for the last few miles to Lands End.

Would I do the trip again? 'YES' is the simple answer, but not on my own. Jack [the runner] and I both agreed that it was much more fun cycling with company, preferably with someone carrying the luggage. Raising some money for a worthy charity is a good incentive, of course; it's always a good talking point at parties. I'm still good for a few miles and if any of you old boys decide to have a go feel free to email me on:

Would I do the trip again? 'YES' is the simple answer, but not on my own. Jack [the runner] and I both agreed that it was much more fun cycling with company, preferably with someone carrying the luggage. Raising some money for a worthy charity is a good incentive, of course; it's always a



hodgey1946@btinternet.com

(subject: 'JOGLE' – so that it doesn't get 'binned').

