

From Land's End to John o'Groats: A fundraising challenge

In August 2010, to raise money for the British Academy, its President, Sir Adam Roberts, undertook a cycle ride from Land's End to John o'Groats (LE JoG) – aiming to complete the journey on his 70th birthday. His companion along the way was his daughter Hannah. Here are edited extracts from the daily blog that Sir Adam posted on the British Academy website to chart their progress.

Tuesday 10 August

Hannah and I were met today at Land's End by Nick Round FBA and his wife Ann. It was great to have such a surprise and such a warm send-off on our journey.



Nicholas Round and Adam Roberts at Land's End

Balliol is supposed to be a college of 'effortless superiority', but all I'm feeling after the first punishing stage of the journey is laborious inferiority: the hills on Cornish roads are remorseless! We have now arrived in St Agnes, a delightful village on the N coast of Cornwall where we will stay for the night.

Thursday 12 August

Today we made it out of Cornwall, in cool weather that made the pannier-laden hill climbing easier. Two people spontaneously gave us cash donations for the British Academy, both totally unasked-for and unexpected. I am becoming suspicious of Hannah's preference for detours on minor roads (with endless more hills). But who said that the straight line is more interesting than the circuitous detour?

Chepstow Bridge

Friday 13 August

Members of the Académie Française are sometimes referred to as 'les immortels'. No such luck for Fellows of the British Academy. The nearest I can get to immortality is my oxymoronic life membership of the Youth Hostels Association. Last night, as we will often be doing on this journey, we stayed in a youth hostel. The one in Okehampton is wonderfully idiosyncratic – it's the old railway station, and an excellent stopover in a long journey. Today, Friday 13th, apart from the N wind we had good fortune all the way: an exceptionally varied run through Devon with many hills and some lovely rural by-roads, arriving at the tiny village of Churchinford just as it started raining. We stayed at a pub that is so brilliant that it had better be kept secret.

Sunday 15 August

The two cliffs that we see today are the Avon Gorge, in Bristol, and Wintour's Leap, above Chepstow. Both are magnificent climbing areas – the two best within a shortish drive from Oxford – where I've spent many days on great routes. It's a nostalgic treat to revisit them and show Hannah the scenes of past crimes.

We weave our way out of Bristol on a brilliant route that is a rural idyll until delivering the traveller to the 'old' (1966) Severn Bridge. In the separate bike and pedestrian lane you can stop and enjoy the bridge and the views from it. Soon after, another treat in the form of the Chepstow Bridge (1816), a lovely gem best enjoyed when you are not in a car.



Monday 16 August

At Welsh Bicknor we meet a man cycling from John o'Groats to Land's End. He has done 770 miles to get here, and therefore deduces that Land's End must be only 230 miles away. But we have over 300 on the clock already. I do the maths, and slowly it dawns on me that this is a problem not just for him, but for us: it seems we are talking well over 1000 miles here. Maybe I should get back to kind sponsors and, like *Oliver Twist*, ask for more.

Tuesday 17 August

The weather forecast for today was dire, but the weather itself (apart from some unconvincing showers that never really got started) was excellent. I prefer this arrangement to the alternative. The one snag was that the strong northerlies, which have been getting at us for days, got even stronger. Indeed, we can't use the word 'headwind' without prefacing it with an expletive.

We battle on to Chester, wondering whether there is any cycling equivalent of nautical tacking. What we do find in Chester, not for the first time on this journey, is the warmth and generosity of strangers. We go to a bike shop in Chester, for a minor repair to a gear cable on my bike and new brake blocks on Hannah's, plus a check-over. We are given cups of tea while we wait, and then they refuse any payment except for the cost of the brake blocks – and even then at trade rates. It's oddly heart-warming, and they will get a card from John o'Groats.

Wednesday 18 August

Chester to Chorley is easier said than done. Our CTC-recommended cycle route – cunningly avoiding the Scylla of Manchester, the Charybdis of Liverpool, and many other hazards too – weaves its improbable way through, up and down Delamere Forest and the jigsaw-pretty town of Lymm. It is extraordinary how urban sprawl and delightful countryside intermingle

hereabouts. We end up at an excellent B&B in a converted farm, where we meet four of Hannah's friends who have driven over from Yorkshire to share in her 40th birthday celebrations. Over a pub dinner we all reminisce on past disasters in the manner of old soldiers everywhere. At the end they generously insist on making a contribution to the Academy.



Punctures!

Thursday 19 August

Hannah's forties have begun badly, with a puncture on her birthday and two more today on the other wheel. It is time for new and superior outer tubes, but, oddly, the small towns through which we ride on the route from Chorley to Slaidburn are bereft of cycle shops. This is our punishment for avoiding Blackburn.

Friday 20 August

From Slaidburn, in rain showers that soon comply with the meteorologists' terminology of 'showers merging', we head up through lovely wild moorland. This is one of the many parts of Britain which has extraordinary beauty but is little visited by tourists, who rush up the M6 (miles to the west of us) to better-known destinations. Near Kirby Lonsdale, in wild winds bringing the rain in horizontally, we briefly resort to a main road – hateful in the conditions. Then blessed relief, back to tiny back roads over the hills to my birthplace, Penrith. To my surprise, after 66 years, I manage to find the house where our family (having been evacuated from Newcastle-on-Tyne) lived till

Lancashire

I was 4 years old. Wet and bedraggled, we nervously ring the bell. The gentleman who answers is kind and welcoming, and recalls that it was his father who, as our landlord, had tried to evict us from the house. In the intervening years, and on both sides, any bad feelings about this court case have evaporated. We go on to another great B&B and dinner in a Mexican restaurant – one thing I don't remember from my infancy.

Saturday 21 August

The tyres problem is sorted in a brilliant cycle shop, which also recommends a cunning route to Carlisle, only about 5 miles longer than the main road, and totally enjoyable. An equally cunning route out of Carlisle gets us to Gretna Green, that curious shotgun-weddings capital of the UK. After charging on to Annan in strong headwinds, we stay in a B&B next to the local school, the Annan Academy – a reminder that the word 'Academy' has a different meaning north of the border.

Sunday 22 August

From Annan, by the Solway Firth, through stunning valleys and cunning detours, to Wanlockhead, in the rolling Lowther Hills. At 1531 feet it is the highest village in Scotland. I eat haggis and tatties in the highest pub in Scotland. The village was built because of lead and gold mining, which had started here before the beginning of the 17th century – an activity that continues to this day with gold panning competitions. Wanlockhead also has a strong tradition of self-improvement: on 1 November 1756, 32 men from the village drew up a solemn foundation document to form a reading society 'for our mutual improvement'. So the miner's library beat the British Academy to it by a century and a half.



And Dorothy Wordsworth, in her *Tour Made in Scotland* (1803) tells how, when travelling here with Coleridge and her brother William, she met a group of boys 'all without shoes and stockings. They told us that they lived in Wanlockhead, went to school, and learned Latin (Virgil) and Greek (Homer).' If the school were still functioning I would be wondering whether a village could be elected to Honorary Fellowship of the British Academy, but since it has been replaced by a bus I don't think I'll pursue it.



Tower block demolition in Glasgow

Monday 23 August

Our ride from Wanlockhead to the shores of Loch Lomond runs inescapably through Glasgow, the largest conurbation of the whole trip and my mother's birthplace. There we see a symbolic sight: a huge 1960s tower block – its outer wall already torn off, and wallpaper and decorations of each flat



Glencoe

showing pathetically – being demolished by a gigantic machine resembling a prehistoric reptile in a horror film.

Tuesday 24 August

Any readers of this journal must be tired of the word 'tyre', so I will get this matter sorted quickly. In the morning we look at the tyre on Hannah's bike. It has a rip so big you could get your little finger into it. We face a ghastly dilemma: either (1) we go back 10 miles to the nearest bike shop and get a new outer tyre, or (2) we do the best repair we can with patches meant for inner tubes, not for outers, and hope that it will last until the next bike shop up the road, which is over 85 miles away. To have any chance of sticking to our schedule, we decide on the second – a big gamble as we risk being stuck 40 miles from the nearest bike shop. Amazingly, the patches, including one stuck heretically and with manic care onto the outside of the tyre, stay in place and do their job not just for today's 72-mile run, but also beyond.

Rannoch Moor and Glencoe (the latter the scene of past climbs) are as atmospheric and dramatic as ever. Stunning views, and of

course a strong and bitingly cold NW headwind to remind us that these places just don't do Riviera-type weather.

Wednesday 25 August

At Fort William we get a new tyre for Hannah, but in a spirit of scientific curiosity she treats the new tyre as a spare, and carries on riding on our spatchcocked repair.

Thursday 26 August

From Loch Ness to Carbisdale, both overlooking magnificent patches of water, is a journey from a youth hostel in a converted half-way house to one in a magnificent castle-cum-stately home. The rain that has always seemed possible hits us only in the last hour,



and rewards us with a double rainbow over Dornoch.

Our destination for the night, Carbisdale Castle, is surreal: overlooking the majestic Kyle of Sutherland, this very stately home, full of statues (almost all of nude women) is not exactly everyone's image of a youth hostel. The library, the ballroom, the dining room – all trump the best clubs in Pall Mall. Enjoying all this grandeur are notably ungrand 21st century travellers (ourselves included), whose functional clothing is gloriously out of keeping with their temporary surroundings.

Friday 27 August

Today is almost entirely on the A836. However, this road has no road markings, is so narrow that it has to have passing places, and has more cattle grids than cars.

It's a delightful day, meandering up and down heather-covered hills and by unspoilt lochs. This is an area to which salmon swim upstream, overcoming incredible obstacles such as the Falls of Shin. We stop at a small

Rainbow over Dornoch

hostelry, the Crask Inn, the only building for miles, and a prime candidate for inclusion in any Lonely Pub Guide. Our destination for the day, Tongue, a magnificent place that affords great views of the Atlantic.



Nearly there!

Saturday 28 August

Tongue to Thurso is technically a short day at 46 miles, but is slow for the first half because of Cornwall-like hills. We cycle past Dounreay, the nuclear power station now being decommissioned, which is overlooked by a wind farm. It is tempting to see this sight as the past and future of power generation in

this country, but two days later, in Orkney, we will see a wind turbine that has been knocked over and destroyed by the wind – an awesome symbol of the power of nature.

Sunday 29 August – Final Day!

John o'Groats, reached on my 70th after 20 miles' struggle in a northerly gale and with 1090 miles showing on my milometer since Land's End, is perfectly situated and constructed to prove the proposition that it is the journey that matters, not the destination. It is no headland, just one place on a coast. It is a haphazard collection of ugly buildings, the largest of which is an abandoned and derelict hotel. It is a place for a few snaps, a quick hot drink in the cafe, a signature in the book which is full of bizarre records, and off.

It is the journey that has been wonderful. I have enjoyed it all. It reminds me of mountain holidays in the Alps and elsewhere: the daily travel to a new destination, the hugely varied character of the land through which we travel, the alternation of huts (or youth hostels) and hotels (or B&Bs), the camaraderie of meeting people engaged in the same mad endeavour.

For the privilege of doing this I have to thank many people. I thank colleagues at the British Academy who believed I could do this almost more than I did myself. I thank all those who gave me support, including some lovely messages on the Justgiving page. But above

all I thank Hannah. This is her fifth LE JoG, and I could not have had a better guide, philosopher and friend for this journey. She finished on the patched tyre repair that we had done at Loch Lomond, 315 miles back.



Hannah and Adam Roberts at John o'Groats

Sir Adam and his daughter Hannah raised over £3,700 en route from Land's End to John o'Groats. The British Academy is very grateful for their dedication, and for the support of all our donors, whose generosity over the years has greatly aided the Academy's ability to support scholars and research.

For further information on Sir Adam's fundraising challenge, and to find out how you can support the Academy, please go to www.britac.ac.uk/on_yer_bike.cfm
