

LEJOG 2011 – Celebrating The Royal British Legion's 90th Anniversary

ride report by Paul Harding

Day 1; Land's End - Okehampton; 101 miles
Alf, Rachael and others from TRBL St Just Branch saw us off on an overcast, breezy day (thankfully, a south westerly) with two £50 cheques and 'The Exhortation'.



Though it turned to drizzle later, we arrived at Redruth Tesco's and were escorted to their staff canteen, where refreshments were provided. Later, their store manager, Paul came to see us off with a photo beside our sweepervan.



Stuart & Jackie were slick in setting up their refreshment stops for us, which meant we could by-pass Bodmin to save time.

Later, we took an unscheduled stop in a holiday park and despite the wet weather, enjoyed a Cornish pasty – though I could only manage half. And in Launceston, we were treated to tea and biscuits by Bill and Sandra! Arriving at The Fairway Lodge about an hour later than planned, we decided to

take Stuart up on his offer to go and get some fish and chips rather than drag our weary bodies into Okehampton. Plus, the pub had lost my booking anyway.

Day 2; Okehampton to Bristol; 104 miles
Weather pretty much the same as yesterday, though it brightened in the afternoon. Once again, we by-passed a scheduled stop (Tiverton) as Stuart & Jackie's table stops for refreshments were so good.

On the way past Wellington, Kate (in the support van) stopped to pick up Sarah, her navigator - is that her waving in this picture?

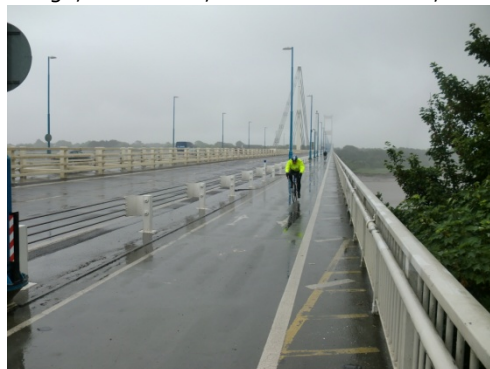


That's a snap from our way through the Cornish back roads... and somewhere along the way, we met up with Darren's mum.



At our afternoon stop at TRBL Pawlett, Sally paid for our drinks and our collection bucket rattled again. Simon and Mark joined us for most of the rest of the day, advising us to avoid the hill at Bristol, by staying on the 'A' road another mile or so; this was good advice, as the road in question was closed.

Day 3; Bristol to Wrexham; 129 miles
Weather forecast looked the worst yet, with heavy rain for most of the day. And so it proved; few people cycle over the Severn Bridge, but we did; in the wet and wind, too.



I asked John if I could use his spare bike, an MTB; he advised taking his road bike and he'd take the MTB as its seat stem was a little too short for me. Our route again suggested taking a 'B' road as we crossed into Wales, but after losing traction climbing the first hill, we took a sanity check and dived back onto the A38 – staying on it for the rest of the day. At Hereford, we were met by Rob's cousin, who is in the army. He had some choice words on the merits of our officer class; but best not repeated.

As I was now on a class 1 road bike, I was able to keep pace with most of them, drafting behind John for many miles; unlike when on my recumbent, which does not do hills very well. Or, indeed, at all. We met Annie, Nick, Emily and Iona at Church Stretton; Annie is my wife's cousin, and had been very busy baking rock cakes and chocolate flapjacks for us. Lovely! Sadly though, I discovered the wet had gotten into my camera and it took a while to realise I could use my mobile instead (though even it was a bit damp and so out of action for some time). While we were restocking the energy tanks, Emily and Iona set too with some crayons and made us a pair of 'Good Luck!' signs which we put on the van dashboard, where they stayed for the rest of the ride.

Arriving at our hotel in Wrexham (actually, Gresford, a little further on), we were met by the local TRBL Gresford – and a cheque for £50 from the Branch, and a £50 voucher for The Beeches bar, organised by their club! Marvelous!

Day 4: Wrexham to Kendal; 101 miles
Rob's bike had developed a serious fault in the nearside crank arm, which meant he used Stuart A's bike while Stuart W and Jackie took his into Tweaks in Wrexham for repair (Stuart A was still recovering from an illness so spent the morning in the car).



Dave, Rob's brother-in-law, escorted us all the way to the Mersey ferry at Birkenhead on his Honda Pan European, which was nice. Being only a little later than planned getting to the ferry, put us behind time again and so we eventually caught up with Steve S (Rob's nephew) who had been waiting for us on the Liverpool side, en route to Ormskirk where Rob was reunited with his blue streak. Joining us here was Paul R, thanks to our facebook blog; he not only showed us a neat way out of the car park, but guided us through Preston and rode with us the rest of the day, meeting his wife at our hotel to travel home. Well done, Paul! The weather was much better than previous, with slight cloud and little wind; almost perfect – but John wanted his road bike back and, as there were still a few too many hills to return to my recumbent, he and I swapped bikes. Ouch.

Day 5; Kendal to East Kilbride; 136 miles

This was by some way the longest ride and, with the infamous Shap Hill just outside Kendal (with the weather returning to type as well) I decided to get back on the 'bent – but set off earlier than everyone else, so at least I could get the worst over with. Little did I realise that, as I approached the top of Shap Hill, Chris was just behind. We will never know if he would have beaten me then, but since he started 20 minutes after I did, it's really a 'no brainer'. I stopped and got off to get in the car, but when Chris slowed down and asked if this was the top, Stuart told him that Shap (meaning the village) was another 5 miles on – so Chris plugged on.

At Carlisle, the traffic was so bad that both our support vehicles were later than we were arriving at Morrison's, so some of us used their initiative (and plastic) to acquire hot BBQ chicken, doughnuts, crisps and drink. When we pressed on, we saw that the traffic chaos was caused by a small stretch of road being resurfaced – though that could have been the final touches to a water main repair. Our route took us past the famous 'Old Blacksmith's Shop' in Gretna, so we pulled in and to our surprise, found ourselves in the middle of a wedding. Darren and Rob stepped up as our temporary bride and bridegroom while the others assembled as a guard of honour for the photo.

We re-grouped just before Lockerbie, and I reminded everyone that, in 2010, a group of cyclists rode from London to Berlin and their motto was 'In Remembrance of all Victims of War and Terror'. Some of those who took part were here present and the next village had seen more than most in the UK and, although we had no wreath to lay, nor are those words yet incorporated within TRBL Royal Charter, I have every intention of making them so at next year's National Conference, if I can. We pressed on and skirted our scheduled stop at Moffat (hill avoidance again) only for the leaders to miss

the turning just before our hotel – a situation recovered thanks to Kate and the van.

Day 6; East Kilbride to Fort William; 110 m

In an effort to avoid the Glaswegian rush hour traffic, we left the bikes in the van and used it and the car to take us across to the Brookfield Construction site (I work for Brookfield) on the west side of Glasgow for a cup of tea and a photo to start the day. Due to a mix up at site security, we made do without the tea and pressed on through the Clyde Tunnel, having been assured there was a cycle path (which I think we missed). Threading our way through the suburbs of Glasgow, we came across a cycle path that would take us to Loch Lomond, so we sped off, finding the way smooth, scenic, quite, traffic-free and slow. Way too slow. It wasn't long before we found our way back to the A812 and from there to the A82, which is mostly dual carriageway. Ah, well. At Achallader, we had another of those table stops (they were far more frequent than I have indicated here) at the bottom of a quite imposing hill, where another 'End-to-Ender', Richard, met up with us and stopped for a welcome tea and cake. He was travelling alone and unassisted – and hardly any of us had the strength to lift his bike. This was after a terrific run down, over several miles – but even so, I switched back to my 'bent. Meanwhile, here's the view;



On the way to Fort William, I was overtaken by several Morgans, a Caterham and a Ferrari; well, it was a fine day for topless

motoring – despite the crosswind. They all roared past me going the other way about an hour later, as well.



Day 7; Fort William to Brora; 123 miles

The best day's weather so far today! Darren and I set off early today, soon followed by Chris (who managed to catch us up after only a few miles). A few miles out of Fort William, we overtook Richard again! Crossing over the scenic Caledonian Canal, the sights (or was it the cycling) took our breath... We



diverted once more from our planned route in an attempt to avoid some hills – only to find the steepest, twisty-est hill on the ride. Steep, rugged and tough though it was, the way down the other side was tremendous – I think I managed 50 mph, though I can't be sure. My bike computer does give average and top speeds – but any spell in the van (and I had a few) mucks them about. Morrison's in Alness had put on a cracking

spread for us, and on our way there we were 'escorted' by a pair of RAF Tornados in the Cromarty Firth. Just before crossing the Tain Bridge, some of us stopped off at the Glenmorangie Distillery, rewarded with a few drams and a boxed bottle of their magic brew!

Day 8; Brora to John O'Groats; 63 miles

Collecting everyone from their dispersed B&B's (our host had double booked us, so took on the logistics of ferrying everyone around both last night and this morning) we set off in good fettle for the last leg and arrived at Haldane's Store, Wick a little later due to the wind changing to our front. We were escorted to their staff room where, laid before us, was a table spread with enough food to feed a small army! The six ladies responsible had come in on their day off to prepare it all, too. The last spell from Wick is only 16.6 miles, and was over far too quickly – and not without one last hill to tease the last of our strength. Here's John, doing his thing – at where else but...?



Conclusion; Though we only raised £318.19 during the ride itself, many of us have raised over £1,000 which is intended to be our sponsorship to this year's "Pedal to Paris". Next up; Madrid?

The riders were; Paul Harding, Stuart Affleck, Rob Dennis, Darren Nichols, Chris Bird, John McDonald and Andrew Fowler. The crew were Kate Hetherington, Sarah Holt, Neil McDonald, Stuart & Jackie Withington. The van was by Johnny Vyse.