

Day 15: 72 miles (1101.13 miles all out!)

I slept heavily and felt good going into my last day. The sun was out and I enjoyed a long, drawn-out breakfast with my landlady. She chatted about travelling in Scotland and what it was like for an Essex girl to live way up in the northeast of Scotland. I tickled her little Jack Russell under the chin and marvelled at how very different Helmsdale was from East London. By the time I was finished my last rasher of bacon, I was very happy to have stayed there.

The day on the bike began a little less relaxed, going up and down the coastal hills that led in and out of Helmsdale. I knew that it flattened out near Wick, close to the north coast, so I wondered as I peaked each summit whether it would be the last hill of the journey. The road hugged the coast like a tight jumper and, as I saw the waves crash below me, I figured a heavy wool jumper provided by one of the sheep that dotted the landscape would be in order during a stormy night here on the naked cliffs. The scenery was spectacular; in spots I could see for miles and miles up the coast, craggy rocks and crags fading into the distance. Small cottages appeared sporadically along the road, basking in the bright August sunshine today, but unbelievably exposed to whatever weather peeled in off the North Sea.

For some reason I had boundless energy on this, my final day. The strong wind behind me was certainly a big help, but I think the knowledge that I was almost done was the real spark. Even though, probably for the first time, I knew that nothing could stop me from finishing - heck, I could walk the rest if I was desperate - I still kept my habit of wolfing down my lunch quickly by the side of the road, looking off towards Norway. I had taken off my jacket and it snapped and whipped in the wind, unfortunately, getting smeared with black bike grease as it buffeted my chain. I cursed at the time - it was a brand new jacket and had cost a fair chunk of change - but whenever I put it on now and spot the black staining the bright orange, I remember that it dates from the final lunch of my LEJoG. Some people get tattoos to remember; I get my clothes stained with grease.

Before I knew it I was in Wick, and less than twenty miles away from JoG. The coastal hills had given way to marshy, scrubby ground. Wick looked interesting, with markets bustling and kids smiling and laughing on a Saturday - an oasis in a sea of gorse and bracken, but I was way too close to stop. The road turned to the northwest and, for the first time in a long time, I was cycling a little bit into the wind. I ploughed through it and the low cloud that suddenly appeared to hover over the yellow fields. Precipitation began to coat my glasses and I wondered if my celebration in John o Groats would be a damp squib, so to speak. I wiped them with gloves that had begun disintegrating

and saw a sign pointing to a road leading to the right and to the north - it was the last sign to John o' Groats. The sun, all of the sudden, seemed to burn away the low cloud and I felt its warm rays on my black shirt as I turned right and completed my final mile and a half.

John o' Groats is an odd spot. First of all, it isn't actually the most northerly point in mainland Britain, that would be Dunnet Head, about ten miles to the west, and a little north, of course. There is also a lighthouse to the east and north, which would also seem to be further north. So, when you first get there, or see it on the map, you do wonder whether or not you've really arrived where you've supposed to. It is, however, the most northerly inhabited place, with about 300 inhabitants scattered nearby, and that is why it is considered the end of the land. Plus LEDH doesn't have the same ring to it as LEJoG. Also strange is that it apparently owes its name not to a Scotsman, but a Dutchman, Jan de Groote, who made money ferrying people from the mainland to Orkney. My first impression was that the place was somewhat less tacky than Land's End, owing partly to the fact that it boasted a working ferry terminal, but also because it looked rather impressively onto the Isle of Stroma and the Orkneys. Almost as soon as I saw Stroma, I began to regret that I hadn't planned more time to see the Orkneys and maybe further. There was a lot of cheesy tourist stuff, but it seemed just a wee bit less desperate than Land's End for some reason. It also occurred to me that, despite all the miles of stunning cliff top scenery in Britain, both Land's End and John o' Groats had similar topography, pretty flat, scrubby, and plain - nothing to shout out that you had come to the end of your journey, and certainly nothing to inform you about what you'd see along the way.

But when I got off my bike, sat down on a picnic table, and felt 1100 miles sink into my legs, none of this mattered. I had overcome the rain, breakdowns, getting lost, the Highlands, and two weeks after I had started, I was at the top of mainland Britain. A drink was in order. I walked over to a little cafe and, lo and behold, they had some bottles of good beer in the cooler. I bought one and drank it with a stupid smile on my face, watching motorcycles, caravans, cars, and the odd bicycle roll by. A very fit looking young cyclist with a sparking road bike headed off in a southerly direction, his parents patting him on the back with a mixture of pride and concern. I silently wished him luck.

After phoning Michelle and letting her know the good news, I stopped inside the gift shop and bought about a dozen postcards. I thought about sitting out in the sun, having another beer, and writing them all out then and there, but, as was my habit, decided to keep going on, for John o' Groats was not really the end of my trip. Like Land's End, there wasn't too much going on at John

o' Groats, so I had to keep going on to Thurso, nearly twenty miles down the road and into the wind. So, with the wind in my face and lead in my legs, I headed off for the very last time.

I had cycled many, many twenty mile stretches during my trip, but none felt longer than the twenty from John o' Groats to Thurso. Although the scenery was beautiful, with plenty of beaches and vistas of the Orkneys, the wind was stiff, and sand began to floss my teeth. What made matters worse is that I didn't have a beautiful hotel or charming B&B to look forward to. While I should have booked a nice place, my parsimonious nature meant that I had booked yet another hostel, instead of a B&B, for my final stay. I dimly recalled that I had read some good reviews of Sandra's Backpackers; what I had forgotten was that it was above a chip shop, operated by the hostel's owners. In truth, it wasn't that bad - and I had booked a private room - but it wasn't the luxury I should have been enjoying. Plus, since the Sunday train didn't run early enough for me to get back to Exeter in one day, I'd be staying there for two days.

Thurso, on the other hand, was perfect. It seemed a place that was at ease with its very special place in the world. I had arrived in the midst of its summer festival and the town was outfitted for the occasion. As soon as I sat down on my hostel bed, I heard the peal of bagpipes. I went outside to see a band up and down the street outside the hostel. It had started raining quite hard, but, quite against my nature, I didn't care and got soaked. I went out and watched them play for a full hour. Afterward, I found a completely palatable Chinese restaurant, the most northerly in Britain no less, and stumbled across a fishing derby on the beach. I stayed there on the beach as the sun set, taking what would be my favourite photograph of the trip. Although the Spaniards and Quebecers at the hostel were noisier than I would have liked, I had no problem getting to sleep.

Epilogue (0 miles)

It is a strange thing finishing a long journey in a town that is famous for having a ferry terminal to somewhere else, somewhere even more exotic. During a Sunday spent aimlessly wandering around the northern tip of mainland Britain, I always seemed to be looking up to Orkney or boats heading in that direction. Since it was a Sunday, I was not able to get across to the Orkneys myself - there was a crossing, but not until 1pm - but that was okay. The marvellous thing about the tip of Britain is that it isn't really an end at all. Orkney leads to Shetland, which leads to the Faroes, which lead to Iceland, which, well, one could keep going all the way to Greenland, each place a little more mysterious and exciting than the last. That kind of thinking can get one very far away from home. And, although I had slowly come to embrace and even relish the gritty uncertainty of putting my

faith in two wheels and two legs, I was ready to go home and see Michelle, Alice the cat, and the little home we had made for ourselves in Devon.

And it was home. If my trek from one end of Britain to t'other taught me anything it was that I was deeply grateful to live in this sceptered isle, and to have had the opportunity to see a great deal of it firsthand, from over the handlebars of a bicycle. To be able to cycle the length of a country and struggle to find a stretch that wasn't either beautiful, captivating, astonishing, or at the very least, profoundly interesting says a great deal about a place. And that will be what Britain will always be to me: beautiful, captivating, astonishing, but most importantly, so very, very interesting in its landscape, its wildlife, its culture, its architecture, its people, and its history. And all best experienced on two wheels.