

## Day 1, Part 3

After a quick picture of both of us, without either the distances to Edmonton or Torquay tacked to the sign, we got on our bikes and started the trip for real. Our 180 gave us a wind boost as well as an adrenalin boost and we soon turned off the main road and onto county lanes, which we hoped would be quiet and scenic. For the first mile, we saw nary a vehicle. Even the fields seemed bereft of tractors. Then, before you could say combine harvester, we were in the midst of a traffic jam. A double-decker bus was trying to pass a tractor down the single track lane, causing rural road mayhem. The driver of the bus took the initiative to negotiate the two inches that separated his mirror, bent into the side of the vehicle, from the wheel well of the tractor. I got the feeling, watching the driver, beads of sweat forming on his forehead and tongue poking out the side of his mouth, that this was the highlight of his day. I couldn't blame him. Once you get the hang of country lanes and squeezing past vehicles with millimetres to spare, it is kind of a kick to be challenged by a tight fit. What did bewilder me was why a double-decker was doing there in the first place. Not only was this a tiny lane on the outer crust of Britain, connecting naught with nothing, there was an A road running parallel only a couple of miles away. I wondered what the bus planners was smoking and what my dad, who used to plan school bus routes back in the 1970s, would think of it. If you know anything about where I grew up in rural Alberta, it was a little like having a regular bus service between Uncas and North Cooking Lake, two places you wouldn't be in a big hurry to get to. It was strange, but I supposed it helped the guy who took the touristy photos at Land's End to his shift on time.

I had decided to take some of the National Cycle Path routes for this our first day. This was partly because I thought that they were intended to be excellent to cycle on, but also because the British charity I was supporting during my trip was Sustrans, which helps to build and maintain them. In some places, the cycle paths are a dream, taking you along luxurious canal paths or unused country lanes; in others it is a bit of a puzzle. One would think that the National Cycle Path would typically be easy cycling, flat and on smooth surfaces, but this is not always the case. When you're cycling for miles on end, eager to distance yourself from traffic, you are pulled by the gravitational attraction of the little green dashes on the map that indicate the National Cycle Routes. You relax, thinking that this will be simple, hassle-free riding, but what appears facile at first can degenerate in to something confusing and difficult. Some sections are steep, while others are surfaced with gravel or even sand, rather than tarmac. Most annoyingly are the places where the signage is lacking or convoluted. In other words, not the best way after all to lower your cycling heart rate. It was also difficult to determine at times why one route was chosen over another; why the route in Cornwall, for example, didn't go as the crow flies, but dippy-doodled around as if the crow was an alcoholic with a bad sense of direction.

Sometimes the meandering makes sense. Mousehole, pronounced 'Mow-zall', rather than 'mouse hole', rather disappointingly, was on the route and fully deserved its distinction as a 'picturesque village'. Not only was it pretty, boasting lovely views of Penzance and Mounts bay, its toilets overlooked the sea in one direction and a sheltered harbour in the other. I'm impressed by these sorts of things. A great way to take a leak (my apologies to female readers, but please take my word for it). We took advantage of the facilities and feasted on the apricot flapjacks I had bought from the Exeter Farmers Market. As I munched contentedly, I looked over to a shack that was manned by a fellow whose job it was to show motorists where the available parking stalls, if any, were located. Accompanied by his son, his wife, her mother and a border collie with light brown fur, he seemed to enjoy informing pensioners driving bulky Peugeots that there was absolutely, positively, conclusively nothing available in a parking spot for a car their size. 'Now if you were driving one of them Smart cars', he confided to a particularly irate German, 'I could let you park down over in that corner, but not in this here vehicle, I'm afraid.' After suggesting that they try finding a spot up the road and walk the half-mile into town, he turned back to his family with the

look of a man satisfied with a job well done and rejoined them in a conversation about a reality television show which would be televised that evening.

The dog, who was really very cute, also made the most of what was perhaps not the best place for a dog in south Cornwall, given all the cars and their irritated drivers. This dog's favourite hobby, apparently, was made evident by a thick, smooth piece of wood about three inches thick, ten inches long and tapered nearly round on each end. What this pooch did was play fetch, seemingly all day long, sometimes with the help of his little family, sometimes with the assistance of gullible passersby, such as myself, but primarily all by his self. Before he realised that I enjoyed tossing his stick nearly as much as he revelled in fetching it, I noticed that, when his family was tired of tossing the stick up the steep drive that led away from the car park, he would simply walk up the slope with the stick in his mouth, drop it onto the pavement and, unless it started to roll down the hill of its own volition, give it a little nudge with his nose. After watching it roll chaotically down the slope for a few seconds, he would break abruptly out of his trance and tear after it and catch it just before it fell into the harbour. Other times he would lean the stick up on the wall and just look at it in admiration, impressed by his feat of engineering. It was quite the show. Not tempted by other dogs, and careful to watch for cars, little Mr. Fetch-it had a good thing going on. He cottoned on to me watching him after sending his stick down the hill a few times and brought it up to me, dropped it at my feet and turned to look in the direction where it should be thrown. Judging from the rounded, eroded ends of the stick, he'd been at this game for quite a while. You could take the dog from work but you couldn't take the work from the dog. I supposed that for a dog who didn't get taken on too many walks, from the look of his portly owners, it was a good way for him to earn the chips thrown his way.

Re-energised by the flapjack, some water and Mousehole itself, we headed towards Penzance. I noticed that there was a stretch of cycle path on the map and, not yet suspicious of the little blue signs, decided to give it a chance. It wasn't the best decision. My first clue should have been the first directional sign. It was positioned at the entrance to the Penzance rail station car park and just pointed diagonally across a sea of cars. Taking a wild stab at where the path might actually begin, Mark and I dodged Cornish holiday-makers in camper vans and began a fruitless tour of the car park. On my third or fourth circumnavigation of the lot, I spied another little blue directional sign near a grim-looking building that was fronted by some recycling bins, and angled towards it. Although the building resembled a concrete bunker, the sign insisted that road in front of it was part of the cycle path. I turned to Mark to make a sarcastic remark about the surprising influence of communist design principles in south Cornwall, and realised that he wasn't there. I waited for a few minutes, but no Mark. Surely, he couldn't have lost me. Had he been hit by a car? I sped back and scanned the vast car park. He was nowhere in sight. I perched on my pedals to get a better vantage, but only succeeded in nearly falling into a couple of pensioners walking a dog that looked like a dirty dish rag. Just as I was wondering about how I would break it to Claire, Mark's wife, about losing him exactly where we started our journey, I spotted him about to head in the wrong direction and hailed him over. 'I lost you waiting for a van to back up out of its spot', Mark said disgustedly, 'I've seen more mobility in an aircraft carrier'.

'Well, we found the path at least', I said with a look of encouragement, 'It looks like it leads along the beach for a while'. And so it did, but its gravel surface did not cheer up Mark all that much. While I was riding a hybrid Rocky Mountain, a bike geared up like a road bike, but with the sturdy frame and handlebars of a mountain bike, Mark was riding an unadulterated, and old, road bike. It, nor Mark, was a fan of bumpy, rough surfaces. 'It's got to be paved eventually', I suggested hopefully, 'And we won't be on it for that long'.

The distance we had to go on this cycle path wasn't all that long, but the time it took to get to the end, a mere mile or so, was quite another matter. For a cycle path, it was littered with pedestrians

of every shape, size and speed. Dodging toddlers, mobility scooters, joggers, dogs, perambulators, and a ferret on a lead in gravel was bad enough for me, but for Mark it was a tedious, yet also hazardous, aggravation. Getting around families on bikes was probably the most difficult task. Now I'm all for families cycling, but I really wish that parents would teach/force their kids to adopt a bit of common sense and courtesy when they start wheeling around. How hard is it, after all, to tell your kids to keep to one side? To refrain from weaving double helixes in the middle of a crowd? To stop on the side of the path, rather than in the middle? To understand that, when I ring my bell, I am not inviting a duet, but requesting that they get to one side and let me past? Now I know this makes me sound like an old, cranky fuddy-duddy, but I challenge you to cycle from the Exeter quay to the Double Locks pub along the Exeter canal - or any other well-used 'cycle path' in Britain and not feel pretty much the same way. Soon Mark's groans and exasperated sighs began to mingle with mumbled expletives. After nearly skidding into a wire fence, he finally got off his bike and jogged along with it for the last quarter mile of the path. I hoped that some of the money I raised for Sustrans would find its way to Penzance and a local paving company.