



LEJOG – Reflections from the Road

Day 0 – A Gentle Beginning

Every great journey has a beginning. Ours started a day earlier than expected.

Rather than beginning our ride at Land's End on Sunday morning, we travelled down on Saturday, checked into Penzance, loaded the bikes into the support van and drove to the famous signpost. We wanted the obligatory photographs without the pressure of a long day ahead. More importantly, we wanted to remove those first nervous miles from the challenge itself. Also fitting 7 people and 7 bikes and all of my luggage in a van would have been impossible. 😊

After the photos, the social media updates and the excitement of finally standing at the start of Britain's most iconic cycle route, we rode the short 11 miles back to Penzance.

It wasn't physically demanding, but it served an important purpose. Our legs were gently awakened, our bikes checked one final time and, perhaps most importantly, our minds finally accepted that tomorrow our adventure would begin.



The Team Behind the Ride

Before continuing with the story, I need to introduce two people who played an enormous part in getting us from Land's End to John o' Groats.

Our ride was organised and supported by Services 2 Cycling (<https://www.services2cycling.co.uk>), with Roy Pearson and Darrel Glover looking after us throughout the journey.

Calling them our support team doesn't really capture everything they did.

Roy cycled every single mile of the route alongside us. He wasn't following comfortably in a van or waiting for us at the next hotel, he was out on the road, facing the same climbs, heat, headwinds and long days that we were.

The difference was that while the rest of us only had to worry about keeping ourselves and our own bikes moving, Roy was also watching over the entire group.

Whenever somebody had a mechanical problem, needed an adjustment or simply required a little help, Roy was there. He carried tools and spares, dealt with repairs at the roadside and constantly monitored both the riders and their bikes.

If a chain dropped, a saddle slipped, a gear stopped behaving or something started making a worrying noise, Roy somehow appeared beside us.

He wasn't simply our mechanic. He was our mechanic while completing LEJOG himself.

Darrel provided the support that made everything else possible. He drove the support vehicle, transported our luggage, helped coordinate each day and made sure food, water, equipment and supplies were where they needed to be. This included ferrying one of the team to a bicycle shop for new wheels when one of his hubs failed.

While we were concentrating on the road ahead, Darrel was already thinking about what we would need at the next stop.

Much of the work involved in supporting a challenge like this happens quietly in the background. Riders see the drinks appearing, the bags arriving and the arrangements falling into place, but rarely see all the effort required to make that happen.

Roy and Darrel gave us the freedom to concentrate on riding.

Over the following ten days, their experience, patience and good humour would become every bit as important as the strength in our legs.

They repaired our bikes, corrected our mistakes, encouraged us when we were struggling and helped keep the entire group moving north.

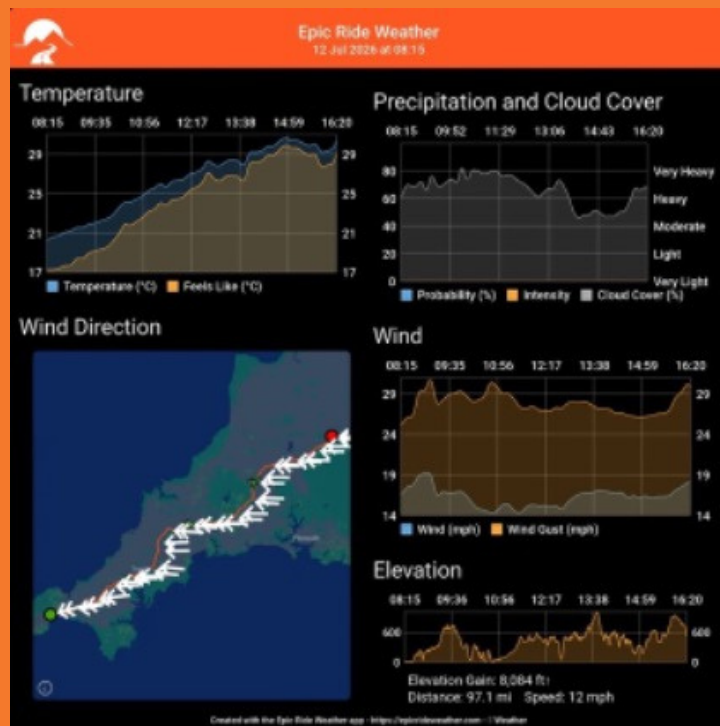
This story may be my reflection of our ride from Land's End to John o' Groats, but Roy, Darrel and Service 2 Cycling are woven into every part of the story.



Days 1 & 2 – Respect the Heat

I'd completed difficult rides before. Long sportives. Consecutive endurance rides. Thousands of training miles.

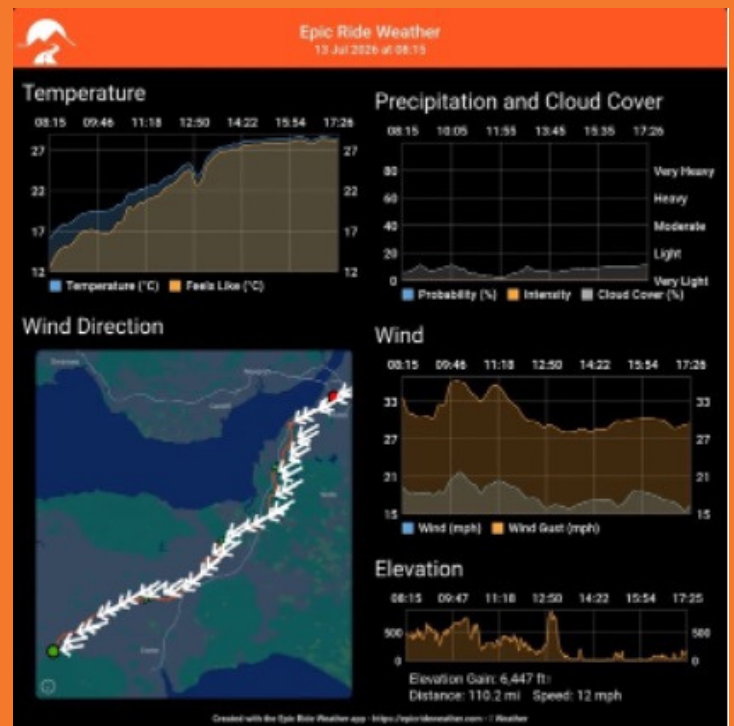
Nothing prepared me for those first two days leaving Cornwall.



The climbs were relentless, but it wasn't the gradients that broke us. It was the heat and the headwinds.

Southern England was gripped by one of the most intense July heatwaves on record. Temperatures across the South West climbed into the high 20s and low 30s, while the exposed roads offered little protection from either the sun or the wind. On the first day, sustained winds were generally around 14–19 mph, with gusts approaching 30 mph.

The following day was even windier, with sustained speeds reaching around 22 mph and gusts climbing into the mid-30s. Rather than cooling us, the strong crosswinds and headwinds added another layer of effort, forcing us to fight the bike while climbing through relentless heat and more than 14,000 feet of elevation over the two days.



Cycling in those temperatures is unlike almost any other endurance challenge. Every climb feels longer. Every bottle of water empties faster than expected. Your jersey never dries because the sweat never stops. Even the wind offered no comfort, it simply felt like somebody was pointing a hairdryer, set to hot air, directly into your face. I had no idea where this person came from and how they kept in front of me the entire day.

By the time we rolled into Bristol at the end of Day Two, I was physically and mentally exhausted. People often assume that after riding 112 miles all you'll want is food.

Not this time.

I didn't want dinner.

I didn't want conversation.

I simply wanted to lie down and sleep.

My son Matthew had other ideas.

He knocked on my door.

Matthew - *"Dad are you coming to dinner?"*

Me - *"NO!"*

Matthew - *"Dad you need food, come down to dinner"*

Me - *"NO!!!!"*

Knowing that recovery would depend on replacing the calories I'd burned, he practically dragged me downstairs to dinner. Every mouthful hurt, but without it I probably wouldn't have been able to get back on the bike the following morning.

Looking back, that meal probably saved my ride.

Sometimes Humanity Appears When You Need It Most

One memory from those first two days will stay with me forever.

Somewhere in the middle of another furnace-like afternoon we stopped in a lay-by at the bottom of a house driveway.

The van was there and we were replenishing our water supplies. Which I was mostly tipping over my head.

A gentleman came down from the house to check that we were alright. After hearing we were cycling from Land's End to John o' Groats for Dementia UK, he called back to his wife.

Moments later she appeared.

"Do you need water?"

"Would you like to use the toilet?"

Before we could properly answer, she had disappeared again and returned carrying ice creams and cones for all of us.

Standing there in temperatures of around 33°C, those ice creams tasted better than any meal could have.

We'd never met them before. We'll probably never meet them again. Yet for fifteen minutes they became part of our story. People often say the world has become less kind. Our experience suggested otherwise.

Sometimes complete strangers remind you exactly how wonderful people can be.



Day 3 – The Mistake That Lasted a Week

By the time we reached Ludlow another problem had quietly arrived.

Saddle sores.

At first they were only small hot areas of discomfort.

Then they became raw patches of skin.

Finally, every time we sat on the saddle they reminded us they weren't going away.

Looking back, the mistake was obvious.

We'd prepared for distance. We'd prepared for climbing. We hadn't prepared for prolonged riding in extreme heat. The additional sweat and constant moisture dramatically increased friction. We should have been applying far more chamois cream than we normally would.

It's amazing how such a small oversight can become something that dominates your thoughts for the next seven days.

From that point onwards every morning began with treating damaged skin, carefully applying dressings, adding extra chamois cream and hoping that today's ride wouldn't make things any worse.

Some injuries stop you from riding. Others simply insist that you suffer while you continue.

This definitely fell into the second category.



Day 4 - Frozen Peas and Hairless Bottoms

By Day Four, on the ride to Bolton, a new problem appeared.

My left knee started to hurt.

Thankfully, the guys supporting the event spotted something I'd completely missed. My saddle had gradually slipped down over the previous few days. It wasn't much, just enough to alter my pedalling position and put extra strain through my knee.

They raised the saddle slightly and a little higher than I had originally had it and the difference was immediate. As soon as I started pedalling again, I could feel the strain lessen.

The damage, however, had already been done. Whilst the cause had been fixed, the knee itself still needed time to recover.

That resulted in my rather unusual recovery routine over the next four evenings.

Five bags of frozen peas.

Several ice baths.

A lot of stretching.

And one very sincere apology to the housekeeping staff of various hotels across England and Scotland.



If you're reading this and happened to empty my room bin, yes... those multiple bags of defrosted peas were entirely medicinal.

I promise!

Now, let's return to the subject of saddle sores...

Before leaving, I'd packed a selection of Compeed blister plasters in case my feet decided they'd had enough.

At some point, in what I believed to be a stroke of genius, I decided to apply them to my saddle sores instead.

In fairness, it was both one of the best ideas I had... and one of the worst.

Whilst cycling, they worked brilliantly. The Compeed patches created a protective cushion over the damaged skin and, for hours at a time, almost completely removed the pain.

Unfortunately, there was one small problem.

Cycling and sweating for six to nine hours every day gradually caused the edges of the plasters to peel away, meaning they had to be replaced every evening.

That introduced two entirely new problems.



Firstly...

Compeed patches are not designed to be removed after a few hours. They are designed to stay on the wound until the adhesive naturally breaks down.

The adhesive is the most powerful substance on planet earth. Making removing a patch almost impossible.

When you remove one early...

...it really doesn't want to yield.

Secondly...

My bottom is ever so slightly hairier than my ankle.

Sorry, Dad, for that picture.

The result was four consecutive evenings of carefully peeling industrial-strength adhesive from places that really weren't designed for industrial-strength adhesive.

I can honestly say that removing those plasters was, at times, more painful than cycling another hundred miles. I'm also fairly certain there are now several unusually hairless patches that may take quite some time to return to normal.

You will notice there are no pictures in this section. I believe that is for the best.

Some sacrifices simply are not mentioned in the official LEJOG guidebooks.



Day 5 – Finding My Rhythm

I couldn't believe we'd reached Bolton so quickly.

Just a few days earlier, every morning had felt like another mountain to climb before we'd even turned a pedal. Yet somehow, almost without noticing, the routine had become... normal.

Wake up.

Breakfast.

Load the bikes.

Ride.

Recover.

Sleep.

Repeat.

The days in the saddle no longer felt like an ordeal. My body had started to accept that this was simply what we were doing. The aches were still there, my saddle sores certainly hadn't disappeared, and my left knee still needed careful management, but mentally everything had changed.

From Bolton we headed north to Kendal, and for the first time I found myself reflecting on how I was performing on the bike.



This was my second LEJOG. The first had been completed over a longer period, making each individual day more manageable. This time the distances were longer, the recovery shorter and the challenge significantly harder.

So I expected my performance to be worse. Instead, the opposite was happening.

When I reviewed the rides on Strava, I was genuinely surprised to discover that despite nursing saddle sores and a troublesome knee, I was still setting Personal Records on many of the segments.

I hadn't expected that.

Even more surprising was my heart rate. From Day Four onwards my average heart rate never exceeded 112 beats per minute.

For prolonged endurance rides of this length, that's remarkably low.

Was it because months of training had built the aerobic engine I'd hoped for?

Or had my body simply become so fatigued that it could no longer produce the effort required to push my heart rate higher?

The honest answer is...

I don't know.

Perhaps it was a combination of both.

Once I've fully recovered, I intend to find out, by doing a number of my training rides to see how my performance compares.

If nothing else my riding improved during this ride. Climbs were no longer affecting me as they had previously.



Days 6 & 7 – Riding Home

Crossing the border into Scotland was a real turning point.

Up until then, I had been riding LEJOG.

The moment we crossed into Scotland, I realised something had changed.

I wasn't just riding to John o' Groats anymore...

I was riding home.

Living in the Highlands gave every mile a different meaning. Every pedal stroke north wasn't simply taking me closer to the finish, it was taking me closer to home. That thought gave me a huge psychological lift and a level of motivation I hadn't expected.

Our overnight stop was at The Black Bull Hotel in Moffat. Full of character, with fantastic food and wonderfully comfortable rooms, it was exactly what tired cyclists needed after another long day in the saddle.



It also had a bath.

A week earlier, I would have viewed that as a nice bonus.

By now, it had become an essential piece of recovery equipment.

Every evening followed the same routine. Fill the bath with freezing cold water, lower myself into water that, after another long day in temperatures nudging 30°C, felt less like punishment and more like blissful relief. It washed away the heat that had built up over hours in the saddle, eased the aches in my legs and, I hoped, gave my muscles the best possible chance of recovering for the following day's ride. By the end of the week, those ice baths weren't something to endure, they had become an essential part of getting ready to do it all again.

There was just one problem.

Finding frozen peas every evening, for the second stage of recovery, which involved packing both my legs with the frozen peas wrapped in a towel.

Thankfully, Deliveroo became my unexpected support crew.

I developed what was probably one of the most unusual recurring orders in Deliveroo history...

Six bags of frozen peas.

Nothing else.

No pizza. No drink.

Just six bags of frozen peas delivered to whatever hotel we happened to be staying in.

I often wondered what the delivery drivers thought as they handed over bag after bag of frozen vegetables to a slightly broken-looking cyclist standing in the reception of a Premier Inn.



I'm sure they had questions. Fortunately, they were polite enough not to ask.

The ride out of Moffat rewarded us with some of the most breathtaking scenery of the entire journey. The rolling hills of the Southern Uplands stretched as far as the eye could see and every climb revealed another spectacular view. It was one of those days where you found yourself stopping, not because you needed a rest, but because you simply had to take another photograph.





The following day took us to Perth and included one of the highlights of the whole ride, crossing the magnificent Queensferry Crossing over the Firth of Forth. After hundreds of miles, riding across one of Scotland's most iconic landmarks felt like a real milestone.

That evening we stayed at the Premier Inn in Perth before enjoying dinner at a wonderful Italian restaurant opposite the hotel. Good food, good company and another evening of laughter made it one of the most enjoyable nights of the trip.

Looking back, Scotland didn't just provide better scenery. It lifted our spirits.

My knee was improving, my legs were recovering surprisingly well, and although the saddle sores were still making themselves known every time I sat down, mentally I felt stronger than I had at any point during the ride.



Home was getting closer.

And somehow, so was the finish line.



Day 8 – Home Roads, Family and an Unfortunate Mix-up

The ride to Aviemore was, without question, my favourite day of the entire journey.

Not because it was the easiest.

Not because it was the shortest.

But because, for the first time, I truly felt like I was riding home.

I've ridden these roads many times before. On several occasions my wife has driven me to Pitlochry, wished me luck, and then quite literally kicked me out of the car to ride home. I knew every climb, every descent, every sweeping bend and many of the spectacular viewpoints along the route.

There is something comforting about riding roads you know. Instead of wondering what was around the next corner, I found myself looking forward to it. I also knew that, for the first time in over a week, I'd be seeing my wife that evening.

That gave me an extra spring in my step, or perhaps more accurately, an extra push on the pedals. I rode a little faster.

The scenery through the Highlands was simply breathtaking. As we approached the Cairngorms the landscape became even more dramatic, and despite wanting to keep up the pace, I found myself stopping time and again just to take it all in.



Sometimes photographs tell the story for you. My bike does not like being laid down for photos very much though.

Sometimes you simply have to stand there for a minute and appreciate where you are.

It was one of those days where everything clicked. My legs felt strong, my knee was behaving itself and, despite everything my backside had endured over the previous week, I genuinely felt fantastic.

Then the evening arrived...

Earlier in the ride I'd explained to my wife just how excruciating it had become removing my daily Compeed patches. She listened patiently before offering a wonderfully sensible solution.

“If you carefully cut through the adhesive with a pair of scissors,” she suggested, “you won’t have to peel the whole thing off.”

It sounded like absolute genius.

So, after arriving at the hotel, I carefully removed my bib shorts...

Only to discover that during the day’s ride the Compeed had peeled back further than usual, the exposed adhesive had bonded itself firmly to the inside of my shorts and simply getting changed had become an endurance event.

By the time I’d finally escaped my cycling kit I decided I wasn’t putting any more clothes on until my wife arrived to perform what could only be described as minor outpatient surgery.



So there I was...

Lying on the hotel bed.

Completely naked.

Waiting for my wife.

With a pair of scissors.

Unfortunately, unknown to me, there had been a mix-up at reception.

I'd accidentally been given my son Matthew's room.

When my wife arrived she had met Matthew downstairs first, as he'd arrived a little earlier so he could visit home and both see his dog and enjoy the luxury of a proper bath. She rang me from reception, I confidently gave her my room number and prepared for the upcoming operation.

A few moments later I heard the door open.

I jumped up, scissors in hand...

...only to find it wasn't my wife.

It was the gentleman from reception.

He stopped in his tracks.

I stopped in my tracks.

A rather long face off took place, where the only thinking going through this man's mind must have been "Why is there a naked man holding a pair of scissors standing in front of me?"

He looked at the completely naked man standing in front of him holding a pair of scissors.

Then he politely asked,

“Are you Matthew?”

Without thinking, I replied,

“No... I’m his dad.”

Looking back, retrospectively, I’m not entirely convinced that this improved the situation.

To his enormous credit, he barely reacted.

“Oh... not a problem Sir.” came his reply. He quietly backed out of the room with a level of professionalism that deserves recognition.

Thankfully, my wife arrived at the correct room a few minutes later and her ingenious idea worked perfectly. For the first evening in almost a week, the dreaded Compeed removal was almost painless.

It was a small victory, but by Day Eight I’d learned that on LEJOG, you celebrate every win.

The day finished perfectly with dinner at La Taverna in Aviemore, where the rest of the group finally got to meet my wife and daughter. After so many days on the road, sharing an evening with family in one of my favourite places in Scotland was the perfect way to end what had become my favourite day of the ride.

Looking back, that day summed up LEJOG perfectly.

World-class scenery.

A body held together by determination, frozen peas and Compeed.

Wonderful family.

And a hotel receptionist who almost certainly has the strangest check-in story he’ll tell for years to come.





Day 9 - Almost Home

Before leaving Aviemore I made one final equipment change.

My faithful Trek had carried me from Land's End, but it had begun to develop a couple of worrying problems. The chain was occasionally dropping off the front derailleur, and the bottom bracket had developed a distinctly unhealthy clicking noise that seemed to get louder with every mile.

With only two days remaining, I decided not to take the risk.

Instead, I swapped onto my Giant climbing bike.

Looking back, it was absolutely the right decision.

The Giant is noticeably lighter than the Trek, and with the remaining Highland climbs ahead of us it made the final days feel just that little bit easier. Sometimes it's not about riding the perfect bike, it's about riding the right bike for the job.

Our destination that day was Dornoch.

In many ways, it was one of the finest days of the entire journey.

The weather was kind, the roads were beautifully smooth and, for what felt like the first time all week, everything simply flowed. There were no dramas, no mechanical worries, no painful climbs that seemed to go on forever.



We just rode.

The miles disappeared almost effortlessly and before long we were rolling into Dornoch feeling fresher than we had any right to after more than a week on the road.

Our reward was the magnificent Dornoch Castle Hotel.

Without doubt, it was my favourite hotel of the whole trip.

When I walked into my room I discovered two things waiting for me.

A complimentary miniature decanter of Highland whisky.

And a bath.



I had complimentary whisky in my room.

A complimentary whisky and a bath in my room and I fell asleep.

I fell asleep with a bath and a complimentary whisky.

I did not try the whisky nor take a bath.

I was in a hotel room with a bath and a complimentary whisky and simply fell asleep.

As someone who lives in the Highlands and who love whisky, I felt ashamed, and want to apologise whole heartedly for this outrage.

Dinner had been wonderful with the group, and the food at Dornoch Castle was every bit as impressive as the hotel itself. This may have influenced my falling asleep early.

With just one day remaining, the mood had changed.

There was excitement.

There was anticipation.

And, perhaps surprisingly, there was also a little sadness.

For nine days our lives had been reduced to a wonderfully simple routine: ride, eat, recover, laugh and sleep.

Tomorrow, that routine would come to an end.

There was just one final ride standing between us and John o' Groats.



Day 10 - The Finish Line

The final day.

After nine days of riding, there was just one more journey between us and John o' Groats.

The weather had one last surprise waiting.

Knowing the forecast, our ride leader Roy made the sensible decision to alter the planned route and keep us on the A9 for as long as possible. The road offered some protection from the prevailing wind and, for much of the morning, it worked beautifully.

The ride was relaxed.



The scenery was magnificent.

It almost felt as though the challenge was gently allowing us to finish.

Then we reached Latheron and turned left - Everything changed.

Instantly we were hit by a ferocious 35 mph headwind blowing directly from the north-west. It felt as though the gods of cycling had looked down and decided that we hadn't quite suffered enough. Every single mile had to be earned.

The wind wasn't simply slowing us down; it was trying to push us off the road. Gusts caught the bikes from the front and the left, forcing us sideways towards the traffic. Every few seconds I found myself correcting the handlebars just to stay upright.

I've ridden in strong winds before.

Nothing remotely compared to this.

The cruellest part was pedalling downhill. There's something profoundly demoralising about having to work flat out just to maintain 9 mph while going downhill.

That simply shouldn't happen.

With around twenty miles remaining, everything finally caught up with me.

The heat of the first two days. The saddle sores. The aching knee. The countless hours in the saddle. The ice baths. The frozen peas. The Compeed patches. The early mornings. The fatigue.

It all arrived at once.

I had absolutely nothing left.

I genuinely wondered whether I could finish.

Part of me wanted to get off the bike, lie down in the nearest ditch to escape the wind and simply stay there for a while.

Then my son appeared alongside me.

There was no inspirational speech.

No quote from a famous cyclist.

No carefully chosen words.

Just one simple instruction.

“20 miles - Stop being a pussy.”

Oddly enough...

It worked.

Sometimes, that's exactly the motivation you need.

Eventually we made the right turn north.

Almost instantly, the wind that had spent twenty miles trying to stop us became our ally.

Finally a tailwind.

Seven miles to go.

We knew then that we were going to make it.



Five miles from John o' Groats we regrouped, waiting until everyone was together.

After ten days of riding, it only felt right that we should finish as one team.

Those final five miles passed in what felt like seconds.

Waiting at the finish were my wife and daughter.

My wife filmed our arrival while my daughter captured photographs as we rolled towards the famous signpost.

Crossing that finish line was one of the most emotional moments I've experienced on a bicycle.

The tears surprised me.

Perhaps they were caused by the emotional rollercoaster of the day.

Perhaps they were relief.

Perhaps they were simply the release of everything my mind and body had been holding onto for the previous ten days.

Whatever the reason, they were real.

A few hours earlier I'd genuinely questioned whether I could finish.

Now I was standing at John o' Groats having ridden the length of Great Britain alongside my son, raising money for Dementia UK.

Looking back, I don't think the final day was memorable because of the headwind.

It was memorable because it reminded me that endurance isn't about never wanting to give up. It's about finding a reason to keep going when every part of you wants to stop.

For me, that reason was family. It was the people who had supported us throughout the journey. It was everyone who had donated to Dementia UK.

And, on one particularly brutal stretch of road outside Latheron...

...it was my son's uniquely direct approach to motivation.

Somehow, against all odds, it got me to John o' Groats.

JOHN O'GROATS

*In every end,
a new beginning*







Acknowledgements

If you've ever considered taking on an endurance challenge or charity event, my advice is simple: choose a cause that genuinely means something to you and create a fundraising page before you begin.

For me, that cause was Dementia UK. Like so many families, ours has been touched by this cruel disease, and I also have close friends who are supporting loved ones living with dementia. Suddenly, the ride became about something far bigger than cycling from Land's End to John o' Groats.

The moment people start sponsoring you, something changes. Every donation, every message of encouragement and every person who believes in what you're trying to achieve creates an incredible sense of responsibility. On the cold mornings when you don't feel like training, you remember why you're doing it. On the difficult days when your body wants to stop, you remember that people have placed their faith in you and donated because they believe you'll finish.

That sense of purpose becomes one of the greatest sources of motivation you could ever ask for.



I'd also encourage anyone considering a multi-day challenge not to underestimate the value of a professional support team. Having experienced people looking after the logistics, carrying equipment, solving problems and keeping everyone safe allows you to concentrate on the one thing that really matters, putting one pedal stroke after another.

Our journey simply would not have been possible without Service 2 Cycling (<https://www.services2cycling.co.uk>), and in particular Roy Pearson and Darrel Glover.

Roy somehow managed to ride every mile of LEJOG while also acting as mechanic, mentor and troubleshooter for the entire group. Whenever a bike needed attention, a rider needed encouragement or something unexpected happened, Roy was there.

Behind the scenes, Darrel quietly kept everything running. From transporting luggage and organising the support vehicle to making sure we had what we needed at the right place and the right time, he removed countless worries that we never had to think about.

Together, they gave us the freedom to focus entirely on the challenge ahead.

Roy and Darrel, thank you. Your professionalism, patience, encouragement and friendship made this journey far more than a bike ride.

You didn't just support us, you helped make the impossible feel achievable, and I will always be grateful for everything you did.