

LEL is an adventure, with an uncertain outcome

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I'd successfully completed the Kernow & SW 600 build-up ride on 1 June. I didn't have any more long rides planned before LEL2013, now 8 weeks away. What I did have planned for 15 June was a 82km Brevet Populaire on a tandem (with my blind stoker Sean), plus a two-week high French alpine walking tour at the beginning of July. Then I'd a weekend free, and then London-Edinburgh-London would arrive...

I came to the LEL weekend refreshed. My legs had a good workout from the alpine walking and smaller ligaments, tendons, muscles would have been strengthened and brought into balance by the differing combinations and wider range of movements and stretches involved.

Registration on Saturday 27 July. I drove down in the late morning; living in Hertfordshire, it is only a 35-40 minute drive to the start at Loughton. The LEL banners were out, there was a marquee for bag drops, it was sunny, and a number of the riders and volunteers were around.

I was quickly directed into the school to the registration desks. I was expecting queues, but was pleasantly surprised. The desks were divided by starting letter of the rider's surname. My surname fell into S-X, with no queue. If your surname starts with a letter A-D you probably had the longest queue, but even that was not that long. I provided my LEL2013 rider details and my driving licence as proof of ID. In return I got my brevet card and waterproof lanyard pouch to carry it in, a couple of tags for my bag drops, my rider number on a laminated card to be zip tied to the bike and two sets of ear plugs, plus a goody bag which included an LEL water bottle.

Back outside I found the bag drop tent and got my drop bags. I'd chosen Market Rasen and Barnard Castle as my drops. Market Rasen: principally to finish in relatively fresh kit; Barnard Castle: I'd appreciate dry kit if the northern stages and crossing Yad Moss involved poor weather. The bags were gym style bags you'll remember from school days, with a draw-cord



closure. Each was coloured according to control, and then your tags would be attached; a simple but effective system. The limit was 2.5kg per bag, but my bags were so light, they didn't even check the weight. Complete changes of cycling kit for both ways, plus two spare tubes each didn't add up to much.

Standing next to the bag drop setup was Idai "EGO-Maniac" Makaya and the other members of his team. I'd corresponded with Idai via the LEL2013 Facebook group, as we posted details and photos of our build up rides and posted or answered questions. They were riding ElliptiGOs, which use the motion of a cross trainer, driving 20" wheels through a long chain, as the rider stays upright and moves in a running-type motion. There are telescopic handlebars at the front. They are heavier than most bikes, but the weight is low down, and they are stable. We had a good chat, and spirits were high. There was a lot of interest in the ElliptiGOs.

I'd brought my laptop to help out Andy Sorenson. His GPS SD card had failed and he'd lost the GPX tracks. He'd posted on the LEL Facebook group and I'd offered to help as it would be no challenge for me to bring it, living so close. As I wandered round, many riders called out, "Hey Phil," and introduced themselves. I'd been very active on the Facebook group during the build-up, had posted photos on test rides of the LEL route in winter, and answered questions. I'd also produced part of the rider guide for the route explanations, produced a control calculator, and helped out in other ways. The social build-up was important for me, and without making those connections I wonder if the excitement would have built in the way it did. It was great to finally meet and find out people were just as friendly face-to-face as online.

I'd failed to spot Andy, but a volunteer recognised me and ask if I was looking for him. He knew about the problem, and that I'd offered to help. We found Andy outside with his wife, after introductions we came inside and set up the laptop. The tracks were soon on his GPS and we could see them come up properly. Andy and

his wife now wanted to get back to his hotel, so I rang the taxi firm on my mobile, and off they went. He had his bike to assemble.

A number of other riders recognised me, saw the laptop, and had seen the message about GPS tracks. A queue formed, but was never long, as loading the tracks is probably 2-3 minutes' work at most. I think I sorted out around 10-12 devices in the end.

I saw Susan Otcenas, whom I'd also spoken to on Facebook and her friend Lesli. We spoke for a short time, but she didn't have time for the pub. I didn't see Ron Walker who'd also said he'd come to the pub. I wandered back outside and saw another marquee. On investigating I saw it was Force GB. I'd completely forgotten about my orders, but popped in and got my large gilet and jersey, after quoting my rider number. I tried them on quickly in case they didn't fit (they did). I wouldn't wear them during the ride.

After a while I went to the pub for a pint and a pie with a few other riders. I then returned to my car and drove home around 3pm. I'd spent 4 hours down there, longer than intended, but nice to soak up the atmosphere and speak with the other riders and volunteers.

Back home I zip-tied my rider number to the back of the saddlebag. Other riders would then see it easily as I passed them, or more likely, they passed me. A final saddlebag contents check and everything was ready. I put the bike rack on the back of the car and the rest of the afternoon was spent relaxing and reading a book.

Sunday dawned, and after a leisurely breakfast, the bike was loaded onto the rack, water bottles filled, and we set off for Loughton. Traffic was good and before long we were stopped in Colebrook Lane, Loughton, not more than ½ mile from the start, and free of traffic. After unloading the bike, loading up the bottles, attaching GPS, putting on cycling shoes, it was time to say goodbye to my wife. She said there was no need to keep in touch; she'd follow me through the rider tracker. The phone went into "flight" mode.

I'd opted for a 9:45am start as it allowed me that leisurely start, after a good night's sleep,



at home in my own bed. Probably my last good night's sleep till I got back. The rider prefix "T" corresponded to a 9:45am starting group. The groups were of roughly 80 riders each and would depart at 15 minute intervals, starting at 6:00am and finishing at 10:30am (the "X" group).

After wandering in, a smiling volunteer looked at my rider number and I was directed to the bike park. No need to come back till about

"No pumping music, no loud horn, just an instruction to start."

15 minutes before my start time I was told. I thus had 45 minutes to soak up the start. The park was made of scaffolding to lean bikes against, and there was plenty of space. I loved wandering round looking at the variety of different bike models and hearing the mix of languages being spoken; truly international.

Inside the canteen I spoke with a few I knew, had some tea and a baguette, and then heading outside to watch the earlier groups departing. There were two "pens", and riders would enter them about 15 minutes before they were due to start. The atmosphere was relaxed; at least that's my perception. I'm sure a few nerves were out there, but I still felt strangely relaxed. Audax, even big events, are understated.

As I watched "R" group set off; Marcus Jackson-Baker went past, heading for the "S" pen rider pen and we shook hands and said hello. We wished each other a good ride. Soon enough "S" group were off and it was time for my "T" group to enter the pen. It was all still very relaxed, no crowding or trying to get to the front. Being at the front now would make no difference over 100km, let alone 1420km. As further riders moved into the pen, I did however find myself in the front.

It was time to get going on one of the biggest cycling adventures in my life. No pumping music, no loud horn, just an instruction to start. We were off with a few photographers ahead of us. The start was a bit of cyclocross with a small section of mud to ride across, before turning left out the school gates and straight down Chester Street.

I found myself riding away from the 'T' group, turning right and onto the road into Theydon Bois. Left at the green then off in the direction of Epping. Still no one was with me. Was I riding too fast, and was this pace wrong? Well it felt alright to me. I need not have worried, as on the second or third rolling hill I had company. A tandem bike, piloted by Cathy and Ashley, and a following group. I joined the group and we soon had a nice pace going. A few miles down the road before the Roydon level crossing we came across the London to Cambridge charity ride. This introduced a lot of inexperienced or infrequent riders into the mix, who were subsequently much slower. Safely overtaking many, the routes split just before Stansted Abbots. Before Ware I slowed a little and the group pulled away. In Ware a work colleague spotted me, and took a photo as I rode past. Not by chance completely, as I'd told him LEL went through his home town and the anticipated arrival time.

Beyond Puckeridge the route turned right and

headed in a fairly direct line for the A505 to Flint Cross. Now I was on local roads to me, and I turned off my GPS. I'd also test ridden this section in the winter, as a 200km LEL DIY, so had a fair recall of it. Cathy and Ashley caught me near Barkway and we'd ride together, on and off, all the way to St Ives.

The B1368 is a gentle rolling and fast road that gradually climbs. At night you can see the Barkway transmitter at the top for miles, and it can be dispiriting (as on my winter test ride of this section). No such worries in summer daylight on fresh legs. The A505 at Flint Cross is a busy road, but is quickly crossed and the journey continues north. It is just before this crossing that you enter Cambridgeshire. You can tell, only by the flat landscape stretching to the horizon before you, as drop off the higher north Hertfordshire hills.

Along here you'll pass through many a lovely village, surrounded by golden wheat fields. The villages almost always have a few thatched houses, a pond and a green. Any other ride and I'd be enjoying a pint in the sun right now. Barrington has a little hill, with a 10% drop on the other side. After that it is undulating with no hills to speak off, the lanes are hedge-lined, with little gravel. At Bourn a young boy and girl on the right were offering lemonade and blackcurrant, lovely.

With the nice southerly tailwind we were making good progress. As we overtook the tail end of earlier start groups it gave a moral boost. Whether they felt the opposite I'm not sure, but I can guess. Not something I'd considered when choosing a start time. As we progressed north the roads flattened, and big ring steady cadence was order of the day. Many a greeting was called out as we read each other's numbers or name plates attached in various places on the bikes. Before long the St Ives control turned up, and black arrows on a white background directed that last kilometre. Bike in bike park; water bottles off to be filled; go to control desk to be checked in and have brevet card stamped; get some food. Repeat at each control.

Heading north after a few small undulations the road flattened and straightened. A tailwind pushed everyone north, the road surface was good, and it was sunny. Life was good. Again I teamed up with Cathy and Ashley for a while.

We found ourselves in the Fens. The Fens are flat, very flat, the vistas are wide open, where the earth meets the sky, hedges are non-existent, and the wind can gather speed without restriction. Fortunately for all the LEL riders the wind continued to push us north. I passed through Whittsey Fen, beyond which you enter Lincolnshire.

I barely recognised the scene of floods so wide I could not see where they ended back on my winter test ride of this section. Beyond Crowland, and its mediaeval bridge on the right, we followed a narrow road on a raised dyke, next to the River Welland. It was as tranquil a spot as you could find, and a brilliant route choice. This took us north for many kilometres, before entering Spalding.

Kirton was 20km or so beyond Spalding on a road with a good surface. Kirton control was busy, with a queue for food. The winds had certainly enabled me to maintain a faster average than expected and for many I think the same. Here I met Idai (ElliptiGO hero) and we shook hands and chatted before he headed off. I checked in then joined the food queue. In retrospect queuing for food and then checking in would have saved time, as there was no queue for checking in. I lost several places as others had the latter idea. At Kirton I felt dehydrated from the heat. I drank some blackcurrant whilst waiting for food. On leaving I filled both water bottles full of the blackcurrant mix from the hydration station outside. This was to be a mistake that would lead me into some dark moments later. The second mistake was not applying the sun cream I carried on the bike.

Heading north to Market Rasen, the sun continued to beat down. I took a sip of the blackcurrant mix, and instantly didn't like it. It was too strong and sickly sweet for my taste. However, the weather was hot, and I needed to drink. I continued to sip it regularly.

The route here ran on straight roads often near broads. I observed that many of the fen roads turned in right angles, 90 degrees right, then 90 degrees left and continue in same direction. I guess with no hills of note, the need to curve roads round contours just wasn't necessary. Digging the channels and broads of the fens was also easier to do in a straight line, and the road allowed access and follows these channels or fens, unless you wanted to try building a road across a marsh.

I really enjoyed it along here, kept up a good pace, and soon made Market Rasen. I'd managed to finish the blackcurrant from both bottles but my stomach was complaining. Cathy and Ashley on the blue tandem were eating here and we briefly said hello. They had their clean LEL jerseys on; I wondered how long they would remain clean.

I had a bag drop at Market Rasen, and so went for a shower and change of kit. I also had a razor



Devil's Beef tub, heading north from Moffat, Scottish Borders

and some shaving oil on the bike, and had a shave. This would be done at least every 24 hours, and it really boosted my mood, making me feel clean and fresh again. After eating it was decision time. Danial Webb was advising that Pocklington could be packed out with no free beds. Decision made, I decided to sleep at Market Rasen for a few hours. Food first though.

Sleeping at Market Rasen was the right choice. It was quiet, with many free beds. I awoke, and left in the early hours. I'd filled one bottle with water and one using my hydration tablets. It was dark now, but still warm, no extra layers were required. Very soon there was a hill climb that steepened then eased then steepened but still climbed. However it seemed to pass quickly and I found myself on a fast and long descent. I then found myself on moderately undulating terrain, and could see the lights of the Humber Bridge in the distance. I passed a few other riders in the lanes, their lights the only clue to their presence ahead or behind. All was quiet.

The lights of the Humber Bridge taunted me for some time in the darkness, but eventually I did reach them as I entered the urban landscape of Barton on the southern bank. A volunteer was there to direct us onto the east cycle track of the bridge, with a half dozen of us crossing at that time. As we crossed the first light of the day arrived, sunrise not far behind. I loved crossing the suspension bridge; you got a real sense of how long it was and how far below the water was in the milky darkness. The other side felt like an overnight parking area and I bunny-hopped a kerb to find the right way out. After negotiating further urban roads, we were soon out in the peaceful countryside, and gently rolled on to Pocklington.

During the ride I'd tried my hydration solution, but had just gagged. From then on, I had only drunk from one bottle, the one with plain water. From now on, only plain water would be in my bottles. I took the opportunity for my rest, and took a bed for 2 hours in the now mostly empty sleeping area.

Leaving Pocklington we soon joined minor lanes in gently undulating terrain. A few hills here and there, but never long, and often you could use downhill speed to carry you up most of the other side. I rode with a few of our Indian friends here, side by side, and we discussed many things as the kilometres rolled by. Riding side by side up a hill Damon was filming from the right on the crest. I said to the others to smile as we went past, probably too close—I'm sure the camera will have picked it up.

The lanes rolled on, and after a level crossing and the A64 a gap opened. I couldn't drink too much, else it made me gag, and so regular sipping it had to be. A short steep hill and as I negotiated the hairpin to the right I heard a ping. I continued to the top. A spoke on the rear wheel had snapped at the hub. I carried no spare spokes. I'd never had one break in tens of thousands of km, so had taken the risk. Would this be my downfall? Stopping, I spent 10 mins readjusting the spoke tension and let the rear brake out a little.

I moved on, stressing about whether I'd make Thirsk before the wheel failed beyond repair. I worried for the first 25km, but when nothing had

deteriorated I relaxed a little, still wary about hitting a pothole on descents.

The short sharp hill had marked the start of the Howardian Hills which consisted of a series of steep up and downs, nothing as steep as the first hill (in ascent anyway). The road rose and fell between arches built for the ego of the owner of Castle Howard in a bygone era. I got out of the saddle and turned a slow rhythmic big ring cadence up the hills. The downhill I took with caution, worried about the rear wheel. As I climbed up one hill, Damon was filming from the top, he could probably see the tonsils at the back of my open mouth from that angle.

Further on I caught up with Idai and the ElliptiGO team again. One member had a mechanical issue, and I mentioned my broken spoke. We wished each other well and I moved ahead of them. I enjoyed the rises and falls of the Howardian Hills, even though they hadn't been on my radar.

Exiting the hills, I passed Cargo bike man and mentioned he'd forgotten his dog. Like the ElliptiGOs the Cargo bikes were attempting more impressive feats than I, on my upright geared bike. I rolled on, exiting the hills on a fast descent, and onto Thirsk.

Following the signs I found the section at the control for getting my card stamped. In the Control room were Lynn Hedley, Thirsk Controller, and Danial Webb, LEL2013 Supremo. As I handed my card over I mentioned I needed a bike shop to fix my wheel. Lynn said we can do better than that and pointed at a truing stand at the far end of the hall. Just bring your bike in she said. So I did.

I've never fitted a spoke in my life. I've adjusted spoke tension, but usually only to correct minor wobbles. So, let us say, I was a little nervous of trying myself. A man in a blue top was working on a wheel, putting spokes in, so I told him my wheel needed a new spoke. He laughed; he was just fixing his own wheel, not every rider's. He was another rider. There was a big sign for a bike shop near the truing stand and tools, so I'd mistakenly assumed he was a tame mechanic from a local bike shop.

A volunteer in a grey top was the assigned mechanic. He was rather busy, and needed to get some beds ready for transport to another control. When he was finally free, he said he was somewhat tired and needed to sleep, but said he was sure I could learn myself 'on the job'.

So here goes my experience. I took the rear wheel off. I deflated the inner tube, removed tyre and tube, then removed the rim tape.

The tape took a while to remove as it was cloth and stuck down. I then needed to wait as the previous rider was still working on his, as he had 2 spokes to replace and there were a few challenges. I went to choose some spokes from behind him, when he asked what I was doing. "Getting a new spoke," I said, innocently, believing these had been provided at Thirsk for rider use. "No, these are mine," he responded. I then replied that I was an idiot and a numpty who hadn't brought any spare spokes. He then

softened and took pity on me and said, "Look, once I've sorted out my wheel I'll help you, but till then...". Rider in blue top you saved my LEL ride, thank you.

I then waited for him to finish his wheel and tried to see what he was doing without being too intrusive. I was worried about losing a place in the queue, as a few mechanicals seemed to be coming in, a broken derailleur hangar for instance. Eventually he had finished and selected a suitable length spoke for me to use, by comparing them to the broken one which I'd released from the rim.

I then asked him how to thread the spoke and he said just follow the spoke pattern. After bending the spoke and getting stuck I asked him if you need to take the cassette off first before putting the spoke in. "Yes", he said. So cassette off I tried again. I got the spoke hooked in the hub, and turned it and brought it up to the hole in the rim. I started tightening the spoke nipple using a screwdriver. After a while the spoke came through the slot for the screwdriver and I could no longer tighten. I was all set to try and shorten the spoke (by some means), when the bloke in the blue top mentioned that I had the spoke coming out of the valve hole. The broken spoke was only two away from the valve. Yes, I'm definitely an idiot and a numpty.

Spoke in the right hole, I tightened it up, and then used the truing stand to find the lateral wobbles in the rim, and adjusted the spoke tension using my spoke key. Eventually I had the wheel reasonably true, or good enough anyway. I re-stuck the rim tape, put the cassette back on, added tube and tyre and re-inflated. Wheel then back in frame. During all of this Lynn had been talking to Danial and she remarked in an amused tone, "Do you know what you're doing?" and I'd replied good-humouredly, "No, but I'm learning on the job, and getting there." (The wheel lasted the rest of my ride.)

I then went to lunch, but found I had little appetite, and couldn't drink that much. Stomach cramps were starting. Returning to get my bike, they were surprised I was still there. So was I. I'd arrived late morning, but was only just departing mid-afternoon. Several hours had passed. As I left Danial said he'd forgotten I was riding—he just considered me part of the team due to my help in the build-up to LEL2013. It was a nice comment.

I headed off, and very shortly after the Richmond diversion my average speed began to drop. My stomach was cramping, I felt nauseous, drinking was hard, and food near impossible. I kept stopping, feeling that I was going to retch. Many riders passed me at this point but I didn't have the energy to get on the back of any passing groups. Even the slightest rise saw me scrabbling for the most ridiculously low gear. I was in trouble. I told myself to just keep pedalling, with the lower 12km/h speed I should at least be able to keep above that and not lose any time.

At Middleton Tyas I missed my GPS screaming at me that I was going the wrong way,

following Barnard Castle signs instead. At a large roundabout, and with army vehicles behind me, I saw the A1 plus some other major A-road and realised I'd gone wrong. I was over a kilometre off route. I rolled down the hill that had cost me so much energy, and re-joined the route.

I struggled on, eventually reaching Barnard Castle and climbed (what seemed like) a steep hill to reach the control. I got my card stamped. This was one of my bag drops, so I went for a shower and shave and change of kit. I went to try and eat but barely managed some sausage and tomato or beans for liquid. I really can't remember what I had with the sausage, but I didn't finish it anyway. I managed to keep some milk and water down.

I felt like death, and seriously wondered if it was time to quit. I'd looked forward to this for so long and built up to it all year, but there was

"My stomach was cramping, I felt nauseous, drinking was hard, and food near impossible."

no point in damaging my health. I worked out where I would go to get the train home, what I'd tell my wife and friends tracking me. I made a decision. I would book a bed for 3 hours, and if I didn't feel better when I woke up, I'd quit.

I woke up after 3 hours, and hadn't recovered. I did however feel as though it had done me some good. I decided to start pedalling and see what happened. A little down the road was a garage, I got a coke and some salted crisps. I stopped for another 20 mins whilst I drank and ate. It seemed my stomach could tolerate these items.

I headed up the hill in the darkness, and caught a guy dressed as a Frenchman (Drew, I've since learned) who'd overtaken me before. I didn't say much really, other than bonjour or some such. I continued to spin away up the hill eventually cresting it and making the rolling descent into Middleton in Teesdale. I saw a shop open here, and I made the mistake of not stopping, thinking I'd get a coke in Alston at the 24hr garage.

The road climbed up through High Force, a Korean overtook with music coming out of loudspeakers, we rode together for a while before he stopped at the pub in Langdon Beck for a coke. I continued to spin up the road; the shallow gradient enabled me to maintain a reasonable pace. I saw numerous barns, and kept thinking the top was only 400m away, but it took a long winding climb before I crested Yadd Moss and started to descend. All the time on the climb I'd been dodging rabbits, blinded in my lights.

It was late, and I put my jacket on for the descent, having climbed in my shorts and jersey. I was desperate to get to the 24-hour garage at Alston. I've ridden the road many times, both day and night, and knew its curves and the surface intimately. I also have good focused front lights. I decided to plummet in a free-fall and didn't apply the brakes once, until shortly before the cobbles of Alston. I passed many a more cautious rider. I rattled down the cobbles only to find the garage closed. I'd made a misjudgement for drinking and eating; I thought

it was 24-hour.

Turning the GPS back on (no need to be on for Yad Moss ascent/descent) I started the rolling climb up to Brampton. Another rider caught me and we decided to ride together. We then came across an Indian chap lying down next to his bike at the side of the road. I asked if he was OK. Not getting a positive response I turned back round. The rest of his team had stopped at Barnard Castle and he was on his own. The temperature was falling, mist was forming, and it was no time to sleep out that night. We got him to join us and we cycled on.

In the next village I had to stop and started retching, bringing up bile. It went on for a while and I was sweating. My riding buddies waited for me, thank you. I got back on the bike and continued more slowly with the others. I had to reach the control.

The lights of Brampton lit the clouds above long before we got there, but eventually we did. Card stamped in the warm reception, I went to get some something to eat.

Again I could not manage much but found I could have a small amount of beans, sausage and buttered bread. I managed to drink a little more, and forced it down. I almost gagged but nothing came up.

I now felt worse than Barnard Castle. There was a train station at Brampton. I could get that to Newcastle, then a fast train home. I was worried about my health; I was worried about continuing into the more remote terrain of Scotland. A volunteer said I didn't look good. I was in a bad place. I made a decision to try and let my stomach recover and the only way to do that, I could see, was to rest as much as possible. I decided to book a bed using all but one hour of the time buffer I had built up. If when I woke up nothing had changed, then I would stop there and then. I fell into a deep and needed sleep, full of doubt and silent tears washing down my cheeks in the darkness. I was in my dark place once more.

The volunteer came at the appointed time and woke a group of 4 of us. No-one moved. I lay

there a few minutes, and almost turned over and went back to sleep. No-one else was moving; maybe we could give up together. Were they giving up? I didn't know. Something stirred in me, and I got up. From somewhere in my head a voice said, ride, just ride, turn the pedals, move forward and see, you can always turn round. So it was with that I found my bike and started riding into the pre-dawn light. I didn't eat anything on getting up, I couldn't face it.

The roads were wet from what must have been heavy rain, but I rode in the dry. The weather had at least blessed me; I hadn't been rained on yet. The road to Moffat was thankfully flat, if a little rough. I found that just to the right of the white line, cars had worn the tarmac smooth, and so I stayed there. I stayed on the drops to get what little extra speed I could. I saw a shop on the right in Springfield with benches. I stopped and had two cokes and a large bag of salted crisps. I found a garage on the left in the next place, and had another coke and another large bag of salted crisps. A woman in an MX-5 asked if a 24 hr race was going on. When I explained that it was a little bit longer than that, and what we were doing, she was really excited and impressed. She left saying she must tell her friends. At the next village I found a garage on the right for yet another coke and crisps. A couple of woman riders stopped here for ice creams plus a couple of other riders turned up as I was leaving.

The rest had done me good and the cokes and salted crisps were restoring my energy and hydration levels. I also wondered if the acid in coke was helping my stomach acid. My stomach was making noises anyway, when it had been silent and cramped for too long.

Card stamped in Moffat, I went to eat. I found a pasta dish, drank some milk, and got some sugared tea. Some of the Indian riders were here. Steve Abraham was here, as was Chuffy. Outside I asked a volunteer if they'd take my picture. They saw my bar tape had unravelled on one side, and offered to fix it, and so they did. Thank you.

Almost immediately after Moffat you start North Essex Hills, above Chrishall Grange, returning south



the climb of the Devil's Beef tub. It's a lovely climb, alpine in feel, with the views across the border hills stretching out to the right. It was a shallow gradient and a good road surface. Taking many hours of rest at Barnard Castle and Brampton was beginning to pay off. I was starting to climb well, not my best, but not bad, and I was overtaking others. I loved the opening vistas as I climbed and kept thinking about photos. I waited till the top and a couple were parked up so I asked if they could take my photo. They were German tourists and loving Scotland. *MiddleAgeCyclist* came past at this point and we said hello, he seemed to be moving well.

The descent started, I engaged the big ring and took advantage of the free speed. At last, I was feeling in the mood for some big ring fun, for the first time in many hours. I watched the GPS count down the kilometres, it was 21km of descent, and every one a joy.

As I closed on Edinburgh I came across Jan's Juicy Baps on the right, with some cyclists out front. My appetite was back with a vengeance. I pulled over and ordered a flat sausage and egg bap with a Fanta. Jan was lovely and said if she had known she'd have been willing to discuss extra things she might have stocked for cyclists. My food went down well, as did the Fanta. It rained quite heavily, as I sheltered under the flap of the van as I talked to a Dutch man. He was having an extra smoke to avoid the rain. By the time I'd eaten, the rain had stopped.

Edinburgh approached and with it the traffic volume and speed increased. Before long I was riding down a long hill, excellent thought I, only to find there was another long hill up to the control. Edinburgh, of course, is built on hills. I'd arrived at the Edinburgh control, mid-afternoon, in the sun. I felt good mentally, I'd been through my darkest moments, I'd worked through it, recovered mostly, and felt much better, and I was turning south for home. Card stamped I had some Macaroni, a banana, plus sugared tea and water. On leaving I pumped my tyres up which had dropped to 75psi.

The road to Traquair climbed into a remote valley. A car passed as I rode side by side with another rider. The driver said is that legal, riding side by side? What a strange comment on an empty road with easy overtaking. We let it go, it is often the best, and I was determined nothing would spoil my improving feel good mood. The road was quiet, the surface was new, and you could big ring your way up it, out of the saddle. It felt great, I felt great. I believe this happens when you are not feeling well; in the immediate period after recovery you are often above your normal level, before dropping you down to normal. It started raining and I put my rain jacket, then a little further on, my arm warmers.

The rain got heavier, but nothing could dampen my high spirits at this point. I didn't care about the rain, I was feeling high after my darkest hours, and I flew up and down those remote valleys to Innerleithin (a famous mountain bike centre) and Traquair. I felt I could conquer the world, and that I would now finish. A foolish thought with over 600km still to go, but I felt with absolute conviction for it to be true. I truly had turned the corner, physically,

mentally, and direction-wise.

Traquair had porridge, tea, cake, and Glenlivet whisky. I had it all. They also kindly gave me a blanket as you can rapidly cool when a bit damp and not moving. They were a cheerful bunch and lifted the spirits of all, despite the rain. Thank you again volunteers.

Duly fed we headed onto Eskdalemuir. The scenery remains magnificent, the roads quiet,

"Traquair had porridge, tea, cake, and Glenlivet whisky. I had it all."

and the setting remote. The battle between rain and sun was gradually being won by the sun and the light contrast brought out the hills in sharp relief. I was riding in a small group of 4 for a while, and I'd ride ahead and take a few photos as we ascended. In places a river ran alongside, the clearest and freshest you will ever see. Midges and flies bounced off me as I bundled along, and bats could be seen flying alongside and across my path. On a descent I looked left and saw a Golden Buddha, and a White Gumpa. I stopped and took some photos, I wasn't imagining it. I'd reached the Eskdalemuir Tibetan monastery. A little further on was the control on the right; volunteers in the road ensuring tired riders did not miss it.

The control was a delight. I entered the fug of the dining area, my glasses steaming up, after my card was stamped. There was Lentil soup, a home made mushroom pie and beans, home made



bread, and pudding and custard. Coke was on offer. I managed everything except the pudding, and only because I was full. I lingered a while, enjoying the conversation and the warmth, before it was time to head on back to Brampton, my next planned sleep stop.

I headed out into the gloaming, LEDs blinking ahead. Mist was forming in the valley as the route twisted left and upwards. I overtook a few in the mist wreathed lanes, perhaps due to my willingness to descend quickly. The route climbed and fell, twisted left, then right. The mist got thicker and a couple of times I mistook gravel tracks for the road. The mystery tour continued, as the mist parted to reveal darkness, and darkness parted to reveal mist. Time was suspended. Eventually I came out onto the main road near Longtown and turned left and the route aimed direct to Brampton.

I'd ridden Yad Moss in the dark on the way north, I wanted to see it in the light, and I had regained enough buffer time to stop. I had one need at Brampton, and that was sleep. The beds

were all occupied, I explained I had my silk liner and anywhere would do. The volunteer asked if I wanted waking up and yes that was a consideration. He went out of his way, and inflated a new airbed and found me a corner of the gym amongst equipment, to sleep. I opted for 2½ hours sleep and was soon in the land of nod.

Waking, I headed out into the pre-dawn light, found my bike, and continued the journey south.

Initially climbing, you are soon on the moors at the boundary between Northumberland and Cumbria. This was Maiden Moor and the Pennine Way—a two-week long distance walk heads along this section. In September the moors are a blaze of purple. Sunrise came along here, a wondrous sight, which can but lift the spirits of the most jaded soul. A descent to Slaggyford, onwards to Alston.

The petrol station at Alston was like a magnet, minute after minute more LEL cyclists rolled in, and came to eat and drink. The shopping baskets when upside down made perfect seats, and the battered riders of LEL sat on them, avoiding eye contact and consuming food and drink.

Before long it was time to ascend the Alston cobbles. I selected my get-out-of-gaol-free gear but the chain dropped off the front and I had to stop to put it back on. The pavements enticed me, and ride up the pavement I did. A pedestrian coming down saw me riding up and, instead of admonishing me, stepped out of the way and wished me good luck. Others followed some tried the cobbles, some walked, yet more on the pavement. The cobbles were over all too soon and the slow climb to Yad Moss began.

I'd recovered pretty well by now, and I was in the big ring cranking my way up the gentle gradient. The views opened out to the right as a long string of cyclists migrated south. Soon enough I was on the summit and I stopped to take some pictures. The descent was fast and smooth and soon enough I reached Middleton in Teesdale. Here I found a shop, and bought an Orangina and a packet of crisps. When I sat outside the Orangina had turned into a shandy. I went back in to the shop, but there was no Orangina. How strange, must have imagined it, so I drank the shandy which was fine. I sat with a fellow rider whilst we watched the others pass by, some of them turning by mistake down the road with the shop on it, and then returning a few minutes later.

The road from here back to Barnard Castle was rolling with no major hills, and before long I found myself climbing back up the hill to the control. Here I was in bag drop 'heaven' and changed bib shorts, jersey, socks, buff, gloves; after a hot shower and a shave. I cannot state enough how moral boosting a shower, a shave and a change of kit was. I was renewed. Some food to eat and some milk to drink. Off to Thirsk.

Not far south of Barnard Castle I met a fellow rider who was lost. His GPS track wasn't showing up. I felt guilty as I'd helped him load those tracks on the Saturday, so I said we could ride together. We soon had a good pace going, taking turns on the front, we were flying, unlike on my way north. After about an hour he asked how much further to the next control. I said, oh, about fifty kilometres or so. He said, no that



Summit of Yadd Moss, Pennines

cannot be true, Barnard Castle cannot be that far. Oh dear, he'd missed the control at Barnard Castle, and being a much earlier starter, he was close to his time limit. With reluctance he had to turn back north after I explained where the control was. I wished him well, and we understood now why his track didn't appear on the map—he was not where he thought he was.

The rest of the ride was solo, with the odd rider encountered along the way. I was riding well now, and overtook a number of other riders. At Middleton Tyas I took the correct route this time. Beyond the lanes flattened and twisted and turned as I crossed the vale to Thirsk.

Lynn was still at Thirsk and gave me a hug before she headed off to sleep. I'd joked on Facebook that I'd bring an Aero bar, but had failed miserably. Next time I won't fail. No mechanicals at Thirsk this time. My appetite was making up for the first couple of days and so I ate like it was my last meal. Tynan meanwhile had turned up and we had a good chat about the ride so far and how things were going. They had a few niggles (due to an accidentally lowered saddle in Tynan's case) but otherwise were progressing well. I departed the control ahead of them.

Leaving Thirsk I soon found myself climbing the first slope that marked entry back into the Howardian Hills. Feeling good I tried climbing every hill out of the saddle and in my big ring, as I passed through a lovely village I got a cheer and a well done. Further into the hills I met Darksider (Rob) on his recumbent and we pedalled together for a while. One steep descent had gravel on a sharp corner and then another steep climb. All momentum lost I engaged my get-out-of-gaol-free gear. Rob commented on how low the gear was. It began to rain and I spotted some riders sheltering in the trees. I stopped to put my jacket on, and rode on. After a while my bike started making a new noise and initially puzzled I looked down to see the rear bottle cage swaying wildly. Just in time I stopped and tightened the bolts. If I'd lost the cage bolts, I'm not sure where I would have fitted the second water bottle other than my jersey pockets.

Exiting the Howardian hills, a level crossing and then some flat roads south to Pocklington. I saw some bikes outside a pub on the way in, nice stop I thought. Pocklington was to be just a food stop. I wanted to make Market Rasen by

Wednesday night and push on for the finish on Thursday. I was starting to think beyond the next control, a sure sign I was feeling confident about finishing in time. Market Rasen would leave me with less than 300km for the last day and was also a bag drop location for me.

I headed out into the dark. Initially there were some small frogs on a short climb and I zig zagged slowly to avoid squashing them. Again

the lights of the Humber Bridge were visible in the distance, and they took a time to arrive. It had been raining, the roads were wet, and I saw Roberto crash to the ground in Hessle, turning a corner on his recumbent. After checking he was alright I headed into the country park below the bridge. Taking a wrong turning I somehow ended up on a gravel track near the water's edge under the bridge. It was a spectacular view, but not the right way. Retracing my path I found my way onto the west side of the bridge. The bridge span really makes itself known riding across, and I appreciated the bridge I saw from a North Sea ferry during its construction in the late 70's.

After the surreal urban landscape of Hessle and Barton (either side of the bridge) I was soon in the dark lanes beyond. There was a hill here, not a steep hill, but a long one. My GPS indicated it went in a dead straight line, and it went up and went up and went up. Then I'd make a turn and then straight line and up up up. I seemed to be climbing that hill for ever. I got the sensation I'd died and was in purgatory my punishment to be riding up a hill without end. I would seamlessly find myself at the bottom of the hill and climbing again without respite.

At Market Rasen I changed into my final set of kit, after a shower. The shower was lukewarm, not cold this time, so things were improving. I

then had the roast pork dinner, and sought a bed. A bed wasn't available but would be in 45 minutes. I was too tired to continue safely, but had plenty of time in hand. So elected to eat and drink some more before grabbing sleep on an airbed.

I awoke to find no breakfasts were being served. As I left I met Lee Imrie and Kathy Dories who had just arrived, having slept at Pocklington. After a couple of slices of dry bread I headed out into the pre-dawn light. The rain had cleared through and a promising sky indicated a sunny day ahead.

Many had the idea of getting to Market Rasen the previous night, and subsequently there were many road trains heading south. Alas I couldn't take advantage of them. I was feeling depleted having not had a breakfast. There was also another problem. I had a pain in my right quads on the inner thigh. I'd strained it slightly when big ring cranking up a Howardian Hill that was a little too steep and a little too long to keep my momentum. Now I was paying the price. I solved the depletion a little by consuming a whole bag of jelly tots from my bonk rations. The right leg I couldn't do much about.

Slowly but surely I pedalled along, sat down all the time. If I tried standing on the pedals my right leg hurt too much. So it started to get uncomfortable in the saddle, with the inability to change the pressure and let the chamois pad get some air from time to time. Alan Parkinson—with whom I'd ridden for a while on the Kernow and SW 600—caught me up, and we rode together. Alan had an LEL arrow attached to the back of his saddlebag. A northbound arrow I hope. He offered me an energy bar, but I wanted real food!

The scenery was delightful. Later, as I pedalled alongside the broad, near Hedgehog Bridge, Roberto came past leading a group of twelve or so. He encouraged me to join them, which I did for a while, and the boost in speed, and the company as I drafted along, was wonderful. Alas I couldn't maintain it, and had to drop off.

Lee and Kathy passed me a few kilometres out from Kirton. Kirton did not come soon

Yadd Moss, returning south



enough. There was a queue for food, but there was no way I was bypassing it. I filled my tray with a cheese sandwich, chicken and ham pie, beans, pudding with custard, plus tea. I sat with Lee and Kathy, with Lee taking a ten-minute catnap. I ate greedily and felt energy returning to my system. A volunteer first aider took me to a private area, where she rubbed Ibuprofen into my right leg. Each time she'd ask if it felt better, and after rubbing in for the third time, I felt it was enough. The pain was less.

Kirton-St Ives-Great Easton-Loughton, like many others I thought of the finish now. But there was still 200km to ride. Funny how perspectives on distance change. A year ago, 200km was longest audax I'd ridden in a day. At Kirton I took my phone off flight mode, and was pleased to see the battery still on 75%. I texted my wife, to give her an estimated time of arrival for Loughton. I'd do this at each subsequent control.

At Pinchbeck I found a shop and bought some Ibuprofen tablets, a coke and some crisps. Sitting on a bench I took two tablets and consumed my purchases. I set off again, at a slower pace to save the right leg. I also tried putting more power in, when using the left leg to compensate. An American with a much earlier start time came past, and offered to give me a tow. Gratefully accepted, this took me south of Spalding till he stopped to eat his sandwiches. Thank you, fellow rider.

The pain killers started to kick in, and I found I could get out of the saddle. This was important for comfort, as it allowed me to use different muscle grouping, and also the fabric of the shorts shifted and relieved any pressure points. The chamois also had a chance to dry. Along here I met a Spaniard whose map for this section had blown away in the strong headwinds. It was quite funny as he used his hands to demonstrate what happened; he explained had the maps for the next section from St Ives.

We rode together to Crowland, where we found another shop. The heat by this point was relentless. It was like cycling in a furnace. The shop had an alleyway in the shade. I stayed a while, as did a number of other riders; bliss. I spoke with a local about the ride for a while.

Continuing on, the pain killers doing their job, I was out of the saddle, leaning forward and enjoying powering into the headwind. I caught Susan Otcenas and we rode together for a while after I offered to give her a tow. Beyond Whittersley where we'd entered Cambridgeshire, we parted company as Susan stopped for a rest and something to eat and drink.

Another shop, another coke and salted crisps. The furnace was turning the heat up and I found the need to stop at every village and eat and drink. Heat is my Achilles' heel. The road went straight south here and navigation was easy. On the drops I span the big ring and made good progress, apart from the stops.

Eventually a few turns and the first signs for St Ives and Huntingdon. It's a slight descent the last km to St Ives and I flew along to the Control. Some more food and a couple of jugs of water. I sat and chatted with the girl from Macclesfield Wheelers I'd seen a few times. The tandem team were also here but just leaving. I thanked the volunteers as I passed through that last time.

I was using all-day P20 sun oil, but it was so hot (some bike computers registered 38°C that day), I applied some more. Through St Ives, across the Mediaeval Bridge, and on to Fenstanton. There was some respite from the wind here as once more the roads became hedge-lined. The hills also started to make a return. In Haslingfield I decided the next pub or shop I'd stop for a drink. The shop came first, The Country Kitchen. A few cyclists were outside, and whilst I was inside more arrived. I had a coke, a lemonade, and a freshly made ciabatta roll with freshly cut ham and cheese. As I sat outside more and more turned up, including Alan on the ElliptiGO. More and more languages were spoken. The village shop got stripped of its contents, a few weeks' sales in a few hours. The owner was delightfully patient with us all, and no doubt delighted at the trade.

Up the hill and down to Barrington, a number of cyclists on the green eating ice creams. Boy was it hot, I was being roasted alive. At Shepreth it all came to a halt. A train was coming and the level crossing barriers were down. A few of us congregated here, and we set off as one group. Susan was in the group. A car passed filming us along here. The group stayed together all the way to the Essex Hills just north of Audley End.

The sun was low in the sky as I rode the Essex Hills, the golden wheat lit up either side of the quiet lanes that rose and fell, rose and fell. It was here that the group had slowed and I pushed on ahead to Great Easton. The sun finally set and the final few km passed quickly in the rolling hills, flatter after Saffron Walden.

Turning right into Great Easton, once more volunteers ensured we did

not miss the control. I cannot emphasise enough how much the volunteers make this event. I'm volunteering for LEL2017, are you?

The Great Easton control felt like it was full of soldiers talking rest from the battle. Waiting in the trenches for the call to once again to go over the top. Weary cyclists occupied every table. I sat with Lee and Kath. This was the final control, only 55km to the finish. I ate sandwiches, Haribos, and crisps. I drank a lemon mix. The control sucked at my momentum, the volunteers making us feel so welcome, looking after us. Lee and Kathy departed, I continued to eat and drink. The heat had been brutal, it was still high twenties Celsius despite the sun setting. I needed to rest a little, have some respite.

Before all momentum was lost; I pushed myself out the door of a control one more time. The volunteers filled up my water bottles. So kind, so so kind. Thank you volunteers. I turned the GPS on and found out it was only 45km, my spirits lifted more, 10km less than I thought.

Initially on fast roads, I passed through Great Dunmow and along what felt like gently undulating hills. I was feeling good and moving well. The pain in my right leg had gone, despite it now being several hours since I last took some tablets. On past Debden, but not Debden campsite, not yet. The route turned onto quieter roads. A few lost riders coming from alternate directions in the dark. They turned and aligned behind me, the glow of the GPS indicating the way.

The lights of London could be seen lighting the clouds orange in the distance, a transmitter lit red ahead. The lanes twisted and turned in the darkness, the LEL arrows showed the way. Along here Rob Walker and I joined up. We'd talked to each other on YACF and Facebook in the many preceding months. Only now, within sight of the finish, did we meet.

We rode together, a big descent down to the M25, over the top we'd crossed the Rubicon. We were in the final straight. Not yet though. Another long climb in the lanes above Theydon Bois. A long one.

We entered Theydon Bois, I recognised the green where we'd turned

left a lifetime ago. We had about 2km to go, we were getting quite emotional, and we were going to finish. You never really quite believe it, not really till this point. We climbed the final rise, passed Dedden Campsite, left and left into Chester road. The final straight.

We almost crashed at this point, we were trying to shake hands whilst still riding. We'd decided to cross the line together. As we came toward the school gates my wife was walking towards them. We saw each other and I stopped for a hug and kiss. Rejoining Rob, we rode on to the finish. The volunteers clapped us and directed us to the finish. They asked if I needed help off the bike, but I felt good and climbed off under my own steam. A volunteer took care of us and showed us where to leave our bikes. He took us in, we handed over the Brevet cards (always a sad moment) and got our medals. I came back out and my wife gave me a bag of clothes to get changed into. Before that, she took my picture. Looking at the picture I can understand why the volunteers wanted to help me off my bike. Mind you, I had been baked in the sun for 14 hours that day.

The shower washed away the dirt and grime from the last day. I changed into shorts, t-shirt and sandals. Bliss. I retrieved my bag drops, and returned outside where Rob was talking with my wife. A little more soaking up the atmosphere and then time to head home. Bike rack on car, bikes on, and we took Rob the 3 miles back to his B&B. Good job we did, I'm not sure he'd have made it, and hills seemed steeper along the first section of the LEL route that we'd ridden 1420km before.

After dropping off Rob we headed for home in Hertfordshire. It was still

25°C, and we opened all the windows in the house. Stripping off the last of my clothes, I appreciated the bed, and cool sheets against my naked form. No bib shorts to keep on tonight. I fell into a deep and luxurious sleep, waking at 7:30am Friday morning, showering again, shaving then trundling downstairs to eat. The next few days I seemed to do nothing but eat. I'd lost 8lbs during the ride and the weight still hasn't come back.

The idea that I've successfully completely LEL2013, cycled 1420km at audax pace, hasn't fully sunk in. It was definitely an adventure, and the outcome was in doubt in a few places. I had my dark moments, and reading other accounts, so did others. But it was the best of adventures, despite these moments, and the organisation, the volunteers, and other riders made it what it is.

What of LEL2017? Well I've already decided I'm going to volunteer. I'm going to take on what I can, helping as a member of the central team. The volunteers make the ride, and I feel they have as rich an experience as the riders, if not richer. If you can't ride, then please please volunteer. Do you want to ride LEL, but wonder if it is beyond you? So did I, having only ridden a 200km audax and a 300km audax the year before. But if adventure is what you want, if a journey of uncertain outcomes is what you want, then pursue your dreams, but come prepared. Do your build up rides; it will be a worthwhile journey, as much mental as physical. See you in 2017, volunteer or rider. ●



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