

John o' Groats to Lands End May 2009

This is not a tale of epic daring against the clock, rather a diary of a fairly leisurely jaunt from John o' Groats (abbreviated to JoG from here on) to Lands End (L-E) in company with a group of like minded souls mostly riding fairly old motorcycles.

The idea for this particular run came from Bob Fisher who has organised several previous end-end trips plus a variety of similar events to raise money for charity. This time the beneficiary was to be the Parkinson Society. Bob started planning the event over 12 months in advance of the May 2009 run date. The end date was set in stone as 30th May 09 as this was the only Saturday in May when it was possible to book all the rooms in the Lands End Hotel. At that time Bob had no idea how many people would enter but his philosophy was that its easier to give up un-needed rooms than get extra rooms at the last minute. However, his confidence was justified as virtually all the rooms were occupied. Having fixed the end date, and that the run would be spread over 7 days (6 riding and one rest day), the start date became Sunday 24th May. In practise everyone assembled at Mackay's Hotel in Wick on Saturday 23rd May; this being the nearest hotel to JoG with sufficient rooms to accommodate the 45 or so riders, passengers and backup van drivers. The itinerary was as follows:

- 24th May, ride from JoG to Inverness 171 miles
- 25th May Inverness to Helensboro' – 149 miles
- 26th May Helenboro' to Windermere – 190 miles
- 27th May – rest day
- 28th May Windermere to Stafford 175 miles
- 29th May Stafford to Taunton 175 miles
- 30th May Taunton to Lands End 160 miles

Our route totalled of 1020 miles. As the official mileage from JoG to L-E is 874 you can see that we were not taking the quickest route and only 2 very short stretches of motorway were included, in both cases to gain access to bridges (Erskine and Severn Crossing). The routes used a mixture of A & B roads as befitted the age of bikes and riders. My apologies to those who do not get a mention in this narrative but I can only record what I personally saw and for much of the time we were well dispersed on the road. Only getting together each evening for the overnight stays.



My riding buddy Mike and I had offered to share the driving of the backup van when original driver had to pull out. The idea being we would ride and drive on alternate days. Our involvement therefore started on the preceding Wednesday (21st May) when we went to Swindon to collect the van. We then picked up various bikes, which we took to the transport company at Kemble

before heading back home to load our bikes tools etc. We set out on Thursday morning and did 420 miles to Stirling that day each driving 100 mile stints. Not a huge distance but both of us are pensioners and it is intended to be a holiday after all. On the Friday we stopped just after Inverness on the A9 and unloaded my bike which I then rode to Wick. Total distance so far just over 700 miles. It had rained during the morning but was dry by the time we got to Wick so we unloaded Mike's bike and rode together the 18 miles to JoG. Mike had done the end-end several times before but this was the first time the visibility had been good enough to see the Orkney Islands – we hoped this was an omen for the weather over the coming week.

Bob had arranged a lorry to transport the bikes and a bus to transport the riders to Wick for the start and many people took advantage of this option. The bus arrived at Wick around 9am on Saturday morning, the bikes having arrived by lorry the previous evening. Mike and I spent Saturday helping unload the bikes and sorting out one or two problems, including a slipping clutch on a Greaves 325 twin. By Saturday afternoon everyone had arrived and we numbered 34 bikes and 46 bodies. This included Peter Taylor and Peter Barrenger who had driven the baggage van up from Wiltshire. At dinner that evening Bob outlined the itinerary for the week and gave us the first days route down to Inverness plus our special bibs advertising the event. These bibs are a traditional part of Bob's



events and help to identify fellow members of the group, especially useful for the backup wagon. Some of the riders were old friends but there were many new faces for this event. The majority of the bikes were Post War Classics but included a 98cc Excelsior, a 1928 BSA 500cc Sloper, a 1936 Y13 BSA 750cc V-twin and 3 Vincent's. There were also several modern H-Ds, a Hinckley Bonneville and the inevitable BMW Boxer. Mike was using his BSA B40 and I was riding my MZ ETZ250, both chosen because they were light and easy to load/unload from the van.



Sunday dawned fine but windy as we rode up to JoG in procession (or drove in my case as I was duty driver today). At JoG we all posed for a group photo then people departed in small groups. Stewart on the Excelsior had sensibly made an early start, as he did all week leaving around 8:30, the rest departing between

9:30 and 10. I doubled up van driving with official photographer so was last away. The drive along the North Coast Road was spectacular and travelling slowly I could enjoy the view and even stop for photos, I even saw a couple of Ravens but for nearly 2 hours no sign of bikes until Bettyhill where a small group had stopped for lunch at the hotel. I waited with them until to my surprise, 3 more bikes arrived, quite where I had passed them was a mystery as I had faithfully followed the route. However, it was a surprise that would be repeated throughout the week as every time I thought I was following the last riders, more would suddenly appear from behind. Regrettably my first customer of the day was buddy Mike whose B40 clutch was slipping badly. We stripped it down in the hotel car park and tightened up the springs and they set off again. Within 10 miles Mike had ground to a halt so we loaded up the B40 and carried on. Finally catching up John on the Greeves and Jim on the BSA Y13 as we reached the A9. The wind was quite strong by now and the Greeves kept nipping up if worked hard. Sensibly John eased the pace and stopped every so often to allow the engine to cool down, This technique worked and we arrived in convoy at our Hotel in Inverness around 5:30pm everyone else having made the journey without serious mishap.

On the Monday morning we had a photo call with the local Parkinson's team before setting off through Loch Ness to Helensboro'. It was my turn to ride today so the MZ was unloaded and checked over. By the time this was done, everyone else had left so I bumbled along happily for a few miles until I spied Jim and the Y13 at a garage. His tail pipe kept coming loose and he was blagging some wire to fix it more securely. Repair completed we set off in convoy, Jim leading fortunately as within a couple of miles I noticed something bouncing in the road in front of me. I stopped to investigate and

found it was Jim's tail pipe, luckily having been missed by the fairly heavy traffic. Jim had carried on oblivious so I resumed my bumbling progress and about 10 minutes later saw Jim coming like a rocket towards me. Frantic signals were exchanged and we pulled into a convenient lay-by to effect further repairs,



being joined by Mike in the backup van in the interim. A handy coke can provided some shimming and finally we had a repair which lasted most of the week. By this time it was late morning, it was raining and we were well behind schedule so we pressed on a little more speedily. By the time we reached the end of Loch Ness it was more cloud than rain so a stop for soup and rolls was made before tackling Glencoe. I am told that this was very picturesque, all I saw was a wet tarmac ribbon which seemed forever going upwards. Jim was

just completing the running in of the Y13 so keeping up had been pretty easy to start with but a tad more difficult as the day wore on. Top speed was probably about the same but the way the V-twin accelerated up hill and out of



corners left me for dead initially and boy did it go round corners. However, we stayed pretty much in contact all the way to Helensboro' where we were amongst the first arrivals all equally wet. Having checked-in I realised a serious error of judgement. My luggage was on the back up van which was still on the road somewhere and likely to be the last to arrive.

Common sense should have told me to put my case on the baggage van which always went direct from hotel-hotel to ensure it was awaiting the first riders; and indeed was already here. This error cost me a 3 hour wait in soggy leather riding gear. Mike finally turned up at near 7pm having provided a range of services during the day, including petrol for our intrepid leader in the middle of Glencoe. On the van was our first casualty; a Triumph Thunderbird that seemed to be short of sparks. Subsequent investigation next morning established that it was more than ignition trouble so into the van it went and out came both of the back-up Morini's. The second days riding had clearly taken its toll on the other bikes as there was a good deal of tinkering next morning. However, Thunderbird and B40 apart, everyone else made it to the start line. Special mention for the Excelsior which had gone badly of route on day 2 and clocked around 40 extra miles yet was still not the last to finish.

I was duty back-up van driver for the third day so did not get away until well after 10am. After a brief diversion down the wrong leg of the M8 I got back on route and ambled along until I noticed a cluster of bikes in a garage just North of Irvine. Turned out to be the Oxford group with a Triumph 21 which was misfiring. Various causes were investigated but nothing seemed to be an obvious fix so eventually they continued letting the Twentyone set the pace. Believing them to be the back markers, I followed them at a discreet distance until they pulled into a roadside café near Kirkconnel for a late lunch. As I had a packed lunch I parked up in lay-by and watched the world go by for a while. The weather incidentally was now a mixture of sun and showers, much better than yesterday. Imagine my surprise when a whole bevy of riders went by within a few minutes. Subsequent investigation revealed that they had gone of-route to find petrol and a café. Amongst the riders was my buddy Mike on the Brown Morini. As he had left in company with Jim on the Y13 I expected to see him as well but there was no sign. Eventually the Oxford group also went by so once again thinking they were the back markers I set off again. Just outside Gretna Green, I found then stopped in lay-by, or rather 4 of them, the 5th having gone AWOL some way back. This was puzzling as I had them

mostly in sight for 20-30 miles albeit a good way back and had not seen anyone drop out. While we were debating the missing rider went past like a rocket clearly on a mission and oblivious despite our waves. So the journey was resumed but immediately halted again for fuel. Whilst waiting another clutch of riders went by approaching from a totally different direction! This was



rapidly becoming a Brian Rix farce. On the outskirts of Carlisle. I elected to use the M6 as a bypass whilst the riders decided to brave the rush hour traffic. Waiting on the A6 at the other end of Carlisle, I saw no less than 10 other riders before the Oxford Group finally appeared. In my naivety, once we reached Penrith I

thought we were nearly done. Little did I know that the road to Windermere was 25 miles long, extremely narrow and for several miles very steep. The scenery over the Kirkstone Pass was magnificent and the sky now almost cloudless so I just had to stop for pictures. The net result was that I did not arrive at the Hotel on the shores of lake Windermere until 7pm. Even then riders were still arriving from all points of the compass. It seemed that many had missed the Windermere turning outside Penrith and come via Keswick; thus making our longest days riding even longer for some.

Day 4 was rest day and Bob could not have picked a nicer hotel or location. Both were magnificent and likely to figure in future holidays. The original plan had been to follow a local member on a leisurely 50-60 mile run through the lake District. Sadly Tom's efforts were wasted, the weather on day 4 was appalling and no one wanted to ride for fear of not being able to dry the kit. However, the rest day did give time for some rather more serious tinkering with the bikes. At least one was fitted with a new tyre, Bob's BSA clutch



was stripped and rebuilt for the second time, The B40 clutch was stripped and pronounced beyond local repair and numerous other jobs were done. Dare I say it but even one of the Vincent's spent time in the luggage van which had become a repair garage for the day. My trusty MZ was unloaded as the next day was my turn to ride again.



Day 5 dawned cloudy but dry and in fact the weather improved steadily from this point onwards. Our Route took us Eastwards into Derbyshire and the Dales. Magnificent riding territory with lovely views, something I had been looking forward to since the beginning of the run. I rode in company with Jim on the V-Twin BSA and we made good progress

with just the odd photo shoot and for petrol. After Hawes we turned South on the B6160 and with 70 or so miles done we decided to stop in a small village called Kettlewell. While waiting for coffee we noticed some British bikes parked outside the village garage opposite. Imagine our surprise when we found that it was in fact the premise of the Wilkinson family of trials riding fame. Inside the garage was host of period British trials bikes many in immaculate condition. It was hard to tear ourselves away.

Our route continued through the Skipton where we picked up the A629 through increasing built up areas via Halifax to Bradford; I doubt I will ever see such a high volume or speed cameras, every village had at least 4 and they



seemed to be on every lamp post through the towns. In Bradford we had to resort to the map as our intended road was closed. However, we were soon on our way to the next target Holmfirth where we wanted to soak up the 'Last of the Summer Wine' atmosphere. We had lunch in Sid's Café and took pictures of Nora Batty's house (now a café and museum). The ride out of Holmfirth was tough on the bikes but the views from the top were spectacular. Soon we were in Glossop where we took the A624, stopping at Hayforth for a



cream tea in the village hall; kindly arranged by one of the riders through a mutual friend. The last leg through Buxton, Leek, and Stone to Stafford seemed to fly by and we arrived at the Hotel by 4:30pm amongst the front runners having clocked 180 miles. This time I had remembered to put my luggage on the baggage van so I was able to shower and change. During the day both bikes had been

worked hard and no serious problems occurred. However, the MZ had lost its tickover and seemed to have a rattle on the overrun. I checked the carb and changed the plug as a precaution but found nothing obviously wrong. In any event it was going back in the van, as I was duty backup driver the next day. I noticed that many riders were tinkering more than previously with their bikes so I guess they were all feeling the strain a little. Pride of place must go to the rider of the Sloper BSA which had been burning oil badly all day. He stripped it down to the crankcases, found absolutely nothing wrong and rebuilt it all before dinner. His confidence was justified as the bike did finish the run with no further oiling problems. The Triumph 21 which had been poorly since Helensboro' was pronounced cured after a new condenser was fitted. At Stafford the Triumph Thunderbird which we had been ferrying since Inverness was collected so we had a little more room in the van but it did leave a large puddle of very smelly oil as a reminder. More ominously, Mike Fisher spent some time fiddling with the backup Brown Morini which had reported as being very underpowered by its rider during day 5. All the usual things were checked and, apart from some dirt in the carbs, everything seemed fine and a test ride showed nothing unusual. It was declared fit for use the next day.

Day 6 produced cloudless skies that we were to enjoy for the rest of the week. Mike was riding the Brown Morini today. Over dinner, a cunning plan had been hatched

by some riders to divert via Kidderminster Motorcycles (in Kidderminster strangely enough). The idea was to buy new clutch parts for the B40, a new tyre for the Velocette which they promised to fit and Jim wanted to look at their stocks of early BSA parts in case he could find any Y13 bits. I followed the official route (Telford, Hereford, Ross on Wye and Chepstow to Taunton) in the backup van but arranged for them to call me when they were back on route so that I could make sure I was not in front of them. Great plan but badly affected by circumstances and in practise it was gone 2pm before they



got away from Kidderminster. In the interim I had a couple of minor problems with other riders and was by now beyond Ross on Wye heading for Chepstow. I decided to wait for a while, the Wye valley is very picturesque, and sure enough about 3:30pm the phone rang. Mike's Morini was making worrying noises and was lacking power up the hills (of which there were



plenty). They were in Hereford and decided that they would proceed slowly if I would wait for them so I got my book out and read a few more chapters. Around 5pm the intrepid group arrived. The other riders continued, as Taunton was still 60 miles away. Meanwhile Mike and I decided there was nothing we could do with the Morini so it was loaded on the van. Our route then took us to

Chepstow, Avonmouth, Bristol and the A38 down to Taunton where we arrived at 7:15. By the time we had sorted out the van, checked in and showered, everyone else was already eating. I was beginning to think that being backup driver was no sinecure.

Day 7 produced an even better day so far as weather was concerned, cloudless skies and a gentle breeze. We decided to leave the brown Morini and the B40 at the Holiday Inn to be collected on the way home. There

seemed little point in carry two dead bikes a further 350 miles to L-E and back. I unloaded the MZ so Mike actually had an empty van for the final day. Though it was only 9:15 or so most riders had already departed. Percy, an old friend from previous holidays who lived locally had turned up on his outfit and volunteered to lead us out of Taunton and came with us as far as South



Molton where he turned North and we continued West. We being Jim on the V-Twin BSA, Kevin on a Norton Commando and John on the 325 Greeves twin. Sadly my ETZ soon started making worrying clanking noises on the over-run and an equally nasty rattle if revved hard. I found that if I rode it on a very light throttle and kept the speed down to 40 or so everything seemed ok so that's how I continued. Somehow in the process of stopping to say goodbye to Percy and worrying about the bike, I lost touch with Kevin, Jim & John. Ever the optimist, I thought that I would eventually catch up with them either when they stopped for petrol or lunch. The miles rolled by and I found I was quite enjoying pootling along at 40 or so. A couple of times I was passed by other groups of riders but usually, I passed them again when they stopped

for fuel or food. No sign of Jim & Co so I assumed that they were cracking on to get to the finish. Wadebridge came and went and then Indian Queens and I suddenly realised that I only had 40 or so miles to go. The bike was running ok if I treated it gently, I still had plenty of fuel and I was neither hungry or saddle-sore so I decided I might as well keep going. Next thing I was running into Penzance with just 12 miles to go though these seemed like the longest part of the journey. Finally Lands End itself arrived and the bike was still running. To my surprise, I was the first to arrive just after 2pm. So I had managed the 170 or so miles in just over 4 hours on a bike that had not exceeded 45mph over the whole trip. It just goes to prove that the secret to maintaining a good average is not to ride fast but to avoid frequent stops. Now I understood why the Excelsior was putting up such a good show. When I got home I found a further benefit from pootling. The bike had actually done



110mpg on the Taunton-Lands End section, contrast this with the 75-80 it delivers when ridden 'normally'. About 15 minutes later the next group of riders turned up so we were able to get some mutual photo sessions going. Finally Jim and John turned up having gone slightly of route to try out a local café near Holsworthy.

Steadily the other riders turned up and by 5pm everyone had

arrived. Sadly the Scott only made it as far as Wadebridge (about 60 miles short). It had shed the radiator cap at some point and boiled itself dry. Regrettably attempts to fix it for the ride home were unsuccessful, it seemed to be a terminal breakdown. This presented a problem, though there was plenty of space in the van for bikes (at least until Taunton) there was only seating for 3 people and the Scott had a pillion passenger. After much head scratching we decided either Mike or I would have to ride one of the spare bikes home as this would give space for 2 passengers. I declined to ride the ETZ a further 250 miles until I had a chance to sort out its problems. That left the red Morini as the only 'spare' bike known to be fully serviceable. Over the course of the evening's celebrations, I hear myself volunteer to ride though by breakfast time it seemed like a lousy idea,

Day 8 dawned and I duly received instruction on the 'features' of the red Morini. The good news was that it had an electric start, the bad news was that the gearchange was right foot (I long ago got rid of all my rh gearchange bikes due to



dyslexia of the feet) this was coupled with a gear lever that tended not to centralise when it got hot leaving changes a bit problematical. My MZ experience came into play over the latter point. MZs are prone to break gearbox change springs and it requires a full crankcase split to change a 50p spring. A common bodge is to rig up a bungee as an external spring. This was tried on the Morini and proved to be equally successful, at least for the 240 or so miles home.

Bike sorted, we (Jim & I) discussed the route home. In the end we opted for reversing the previous days route, though we would bypass Taunton and follow the A361 home. Mike and the van of course had to go to the Taunton Holiday Inn to pick up the B40 and the other Morini. All went well, I soon settled down on the Red Morini and found it would keep up with Jim's BSA quite happily. No idea how fast we were going as the speedo was not functioning but we cruised at 5200rpm. Later Jim told me we were doing around 60 most of the time. Along the way we passed a couple of small groups of fellow end-enders. We stopped for lunch at Kate's Kitchen near Holsworthy, where I had missed them the previous day. Whilst there Jim checked the BSA's oil and found it would need topping up to be sure we had enough to get home. High oil consumption had been a continuing problem with the V-twin since its resurrection. As the oil was on the backup van we rang Mike and asked him to wait at the Holiday Inn so we could top up. At this point Mike was somewhere behind us, but not



entirely sure where. Duly refreshed, we pressed on and arrived at the Holiday Inn at 2:30pm to find the others taking tea and the van already loaded. Seems that they had cheated and gone down the A30 then up the M5 whereas we had stuck to the B Roads. Interestingly it had taken us nearly 5 hours to do the 170 miles against my 4:5 hours the previous day. Riding at 60 instead of 40 non stop did not compensate for two stops for fuel and a 30 minute stop for lunch. Anyway with bikes and riders refreshed we set off for home. Just outside Shepton Mallet, we saw a familiar bike/rider stopped. It was our intrepid leader Bob who had run out of fuel for the second time on the trip. Whilst we were still laughing, another of our party turned up with petrol so we were able to see him safely on his way. I finally got home at 4:30pm totally worn out. The Morini had run superbly and handles like a dream but the high revs do make it tiring over such a long journey. I can see why they are so well liked but on balance I prefer my MZ's and BMW's.

Mike on the other hand had an even longer day. After leaving Taunton, he had to drive up to Cricklade, North of Swindon to drop off the Scott and its riders before driving home a total trip of nearly 300 miles. As far as the End-End trip was concerned, it was all over. However, Mike and I had a further days work to sort out and clean the van, deliver the Morini's to their owners and the van back to the rental company. In total we had clocked 2600 miles and spent 12 days on the road. Being the backup van driver is not the easiest way of doing an end-end. We both agreed that if we ever do another, we will stick to riding and let someone else do the backup.

At the time of writing, only the collection tin contents had been counted; these yielded £1010. The sponsorship monies are still being collected but a 5 figure total is confidently expected (now in excess of £16k).

Subsequently, the ETZ was partially stripped and no cause for the rattles could be established. Put back together it now functions fine again, one of life's mysteries.

Peter Fielding
June 2009