

Off-road End to End

Last autumn **Ralph Hughes** mountain biked the length of Britain: 1,267 miles through England, Wales and Scotland – with his camping gear on his back



Ralph at the finish at John O'Groats. He lost 10kg during the ride

My preparation could have been better. The day before my off-road End to End began I was frantically searching the outdoor shops of Plymouth for a suitable backpack. The plan had been to use a secondhand Bob trailer I'd won on eBay (location: Plymouth, pick up only), but it lacked a suitable spindle and the one on my bike was incompatible.

Saturday 7th September saw me riding around the car park at Land's End, getting used to a new climber's backpack. Stuffed with camping gear, it weighed 10kg. Other End to Enders were in excited groups, getting ready for the off. I felt alone and unprepared.

West country riding

Cornwall isn't noted for its off-road riding. The first section, after three miles on the A30, bore this out. I fought through thick brambles, gorse and nettles. The one consolation was the fact that I wasn't trying to haul a trailer through it. But the backpack wasn't all good news. Three days later its weight and my lack of cycle fitness were beginning to tell. My legs and back ached and I was developing saddle sores.

By the time I reached Devon, on a mix of bridleways and lanes, I was starting to develop a routine. I'd rise early, pack my tent (making sure there was no trace of my stay – essential when 'wild camping'), ride for a couple of hours until I found a shop to buy breakfast and other provisions for the day – there was very little room in my pack to carry food – then ride as far as I could through the rest of the day until I either ran out of energy or found a place to pitch my tent. Occasionally I would treat myself to a campsite, a shower and a take-away.

The riding between Land's End and Barnstaple was relatively easy. Then I turned east into Somerset across Exmoor and the Quantocks. Still short of cycling fitness, I struggled up the muddy bridleway climbs onto Exmoor. At least the long climb up Dunkery Beacon was followed by a great downhill on the other side. It was fast, technical and fun, and without trailer or panniers I could enjoy it to the full. By evening I'd left Minehead behind and climbed

up onto the Quantocks. The setting sun warmed me as I lay in the soft grass overlooking over the Somerset levels. Rainbows appeared and disappeared as distant rain showers passed through to the north.

Breakdown on the Welsh border

In Bristol, following a 50-mile ride across the Mendips, I had a few days' rest. I departed with my mate Chris, who was accompanying me for the next 100 miles through Wales. I'd wanted to take in the Black Mountains and Radnor Forest because the contours on the map indicated some exciting riding. We weren't disappointed. The Sugar Loaf near Abergavenny provided a thrilling descent across bracken slopes, and a tough climb to the Grwyne Fawr Reservoir provided a great place to wild camp.

Next day began with a steep, rocky descent with large drop-offs. We were buzzing before breakfast. The day's climbs and descents were blessed with good weather, and we pitched up at another magical halt near the Mawn Pools. Cushioned in a deep heather mattress, high above the misty valleys below, we watched a huge red harvest moon rise over the distant hills as owls ghosted by.

My last day with Chris didn't go to plan. We navigated our way off the trackless hill by compass, then joined a RUPP which led us through knee-deep puddles before disappearing from view and leaving us lost in a featureless landscape. By the time we made a blisteringly hot climb up to the Radnor Forest, the day had lost its charm. And it got worse. Coming down through the forest I suffered seven punctures. The bottom bracket failed and I bent my front mech. The wheel bearings were sounding rough too... At Knighton, we collapsed. Chris took the train back to Bristol while I took stock. I found a campsite but no bike shop. Time to consider my options...

The Pennine Bridleway

A week later I was back in Knighton with my dad's Santa Cruz. It was a lovely day as I headed off over Wenlock Edge, taking in the Shropshire scenery. Shropshire rolled into Staffordshire, the miles passing easily. Entering Derbyshire

Riding with a rucksack allowed unfettered mountain biking en route. While this isn't Ralph, Delamere Forest could be part of your End to End





on the Pennine Bridleway gave me a surge of excitement: the Pennines would lead me all the way to Scotland. The weather had turned autumnal, and the next day was one of the wettest and coldest I endured all trip. At least a warm dry bed awaited me in Sheffield. I took a break there, staying at my sister's. Half way at last!

I left Sheffield on a cold afternoon three days later. Toiling up a steep climb, my back aching, it felt like a penance. But this was home territory and I decided to try to make it over the Cut Gate Pass before nightfall. I knew the route well, although negotiating the steep, technical descent with a heavy backpack made it an unnerving experience. It was a relief to arrive at the Langsett Reservoir in one piece.

Soon I was back in the groove again. The pack was forgotten as I picked my way through rock steps and sped through twisty fast singletrack on my way into Marsden. Army Chinook helicopters droned in the sky. I spent the night out on the moors and next day enjoyed more of the same technical riding through Littleborough and then Hebden Bridge on the way to Colne.

At Colne I stocked up. Up to this point I had mostly eaten on the hoof, fuelling my ride with fish and chips, sandwiches and pies at shops, cafes and pubs that I passed. Now that the distances between refuelling stops were getting longer I needed to carry more food. The choices were limited by the space in my already full pack. Three days' supply of Supernoodles or flavoured cous-cous was as much as I could store, my one meal a day supplemented by a couple of Snickers. It wasn't enough – I lost 10kg by John O'Groats.

Northern exposure

As I worked my way up the Pennines the scenery changed from dark gritstone to white limestone and the weather finally grew brighter, until at the Ribbleshead Viaduct I was cycling under blue skies with no wind to impede me and



Fact file Off-road End to End

DISTANCE: 1267 miles, 34 days riding.

ROUTE: I tried to include as much mountain biking as possible. Notable points en route: Land's End, Bodmin Moor, the edge of Dartmoor, Exmoor, the Quantocks, Bristol, the Severn Bridge, the Black Mountains, Radnor Forest, Wenlock Edge. I then went east to ride the White Peak, Sheffield, the Pennines (mostly on the western side), north from Carlisle to Biggar through the Scottish Borders, north west through Kilsyth, on to the Trossachs, west to pick up the West Highland Way, Fort William, the Great Glen Way almost to the Moray Firth, north west and inland to Lairg, then through Sutherland to John O'Groats.

NAVIGATION: Map and compass. I planned the route on my PC using Anquet mapping, then printed off a series of 90 or so 1:50k A4 sheets, filed three to a plastic wallet for each day's riding. I wrote notes on the back of the maps. The mapping was accurate enough but I did have a few disputes with landowners on the way. Some were my mistake, in which case I apologised and either turned round or was allowed to continue, but others were very clearly marked on the map – discretion and tact sorted these out.

TERRAIN: The off-road riding covered the extremes of easy disused railways to technical rocky mountain paths that required a high level of skill and judgement. Bike carrying was necessary on the steeper terrain and across trackless bogs.

TRANSPORT: Car drop-off and pick-up. An extra day's road riding at either end would get you to the railway stations at Penzance and Thurso or Wick.

ACCOMMODATION: I spent most nights in my tent, either on a paying campsite, permissively on private land, or discretely wild camping. The route could be done staying in hostels or B&Bs but unpredictable terrain or weather could easily destroy a prepared schedule.

BIKE USED: Until Knighton I was riding a 2004 Specialised Stumpjumper. Then I switched to a Santa Cruz Chameleon. Panniers or a trailer would have made many sections impossible to ride.

MORE INFORMATION: download an earlier off-road E2E route (not camping) at www.ctc-maps.org.uk, or request information sheet XUK100 from CTC National Office



“I set up camp in a little hollow in the middle of Bodmin Moor. It was an idyllic evening as I sat on the grass. This was what I’d come for”

with dry trails under my wheels. I chanced a high camp up on Cam Fell to take in the views. The cloud was down the next day, making the singletrack ride over to Hawes all the more challenging. I took a careless tumble over the handlebars when I hit a rut. I wasn’t hurt but it shook me up: I could not afford to injure myself in remote places, where it was rare to see other people and mobile phone coverage was patchy.

Heading north from Hawes up to Kirkby Stephen and on to Appleby brought tougher and tougher off-road sections. But each day I found myself getting fitter and I was settling into an enjoyable routine, making much better progress than I had anticipated. Occasionally the bridleways didn’t seem to exist on the ground, or else they had been blocked by farmers or axle deep mud. I’d swear to myself and find another way.

Only rarely was the weather against me. At a deserted campsite near Appleby, the rain was lashing down and the wind was picking up. An autumn storm was brewing. My plan that day was to cross over to Alston on the Maiden Way, one of the highest and most exposed legs of my route through the Pennines. But was it safe? I packed up my sodden tent and chanced my luck across the 10-mile stretch, taking compass bearings every 10 minutes.

As I pulled onto the plateau the wind and the rain escalated to a fury. I just stopped. I was lost, cold, wet through and had my whole world on my back. It felt

surreal. Somewhat confused, I began to film a video of myself. Then my head cleared and I realised that I could easily get hypothermia. I checked my location on an emergency GPS I’d been given in Sheffield: I was on the Maiden Way!

Alston was all downhill. Back on the bike I let gravity take over and picked my lines through deep bog and water splashes until with great relief I hit a farm track. Before I reached Alston, I had to wade a swollen river with the bike held above my head, and then struggled to mend a puncture just 100 yards after reaching the comfort of a tarmac road. Alston was devoid of launderettes. At Haltwhistle I found a campsite with showers and a launderette for just £4.00. The owner even gave me a beer whilst I washed my things.

Border roving

I’d never explored the Scottish Borders before and over the next few days I was delighted by the beautiful mellow scenery of wooded valleys, clear rivers and rolling mountains. There was plenty of forestry too. Early on I’d tested my maps and my navigation skills as I picked my way through 30 miles of complex forest rides and tracks. The rest of the Borders involved some huge climbs and confusing trackless terrain, which was invariably wet or boggy. Distances between settlements were much longer and when I did chance upon civilisation there was often no shop or pub. At least it was breaking me in for the Highlands.

The five-litre saddlebag I’d bought in Penzance fell apart in the Borders, the victim of persistent grit and wet. I was tipped over the handlebars as it lodged in the back wheel and I spent a while backtracking to find the various contents it had spilled.

Later on, I was spooked while I was camping. I’d pitched my tent in a field on a slight slope. I woke suddenly in the darkness to find the tent collapsed around me. I fumbled around trying to unzip the door to escape, not knowing

what had happened. As I poked my head out, I could see only sheep walking quietly past in pairs. Had one of them brought my tent down? Or was it sabotage? I ducked back in the tent and recorded a whispered 'Blair Witch' style monologue, going over different paranoid scenarios. Morning brought the truth: I'd slid down to the bottom of the tent, overtensioning the guylines and pulling out the pegs, causing the tent's single hoop to collapse.

Into the Highlands

Two days later I'd traversed the Edinburgh/Glasgow corridor and was starting to get a taste of Scotland. 'Bridies' and Irn Bru had supplanted pasties and Coke as my daytime snacks. The riding was straightforward and I was making good progress. As I caught my first sight of the Trossachs, however, my freewheel and rear hub fell apart. I walked the four miles to Aberfoyle desperately hoping that there would be a bike shop. There was – at the campsite. As the mechanic fitted a new wheel, I took advantage of the other facilities, watching TV and drinking beer.

Treats like this would make up for days of hardship and discomfort. I was in great spirits the next morning, taking in the stunning autumn scenery as I cycled alongside Loch Venachar and passed through Callander. In Crianlarich I got talking to a group of walkers who very kindly gave me donations for the Andy Fanshawe Memorial Trust, the charity set up in memory of my uncle that gives young people the opportunity to get out in the outdoors.

Being on my own for so long during the day, I relished the opportunity to talk to people. Most were genuinely interested in what I was doing, and many offered kindnesses that made my day – free camping for the night, a drink bought for me in a pub, anonymous ladies who paid for my fish and chips in a cafe, or just people who were genuinely enthusiastic and wished me well.

I was now in the 'proper' Highlands and for a day-and-a-half between Tyndrum and Fort William, the riding on the West Highland Way was amazing, just the sort of thing I'd been hoping for. Exciting rocky singletrack to Bridge of Orchy, brutal cobbled paving across the Black Mount and then The Devil's Staircase: an hour of pushing and carrying the bike uphill. The reward was the 4.5 mile descent into Kinlochleven, one of the best I've ever ridden in the UK. The final stretch to Fort William was tough, with more carries and a large number of deer fences to negotiate, but the feeling of being alone amongst spectacular high mountains flecked with early autumn snow took my mind off the discomfort. This was real mountain biking!

The far north

I stayed in Fort William just long enough to restock on essential food and bike supplies before jumping back on the bike to head up the Great Glen Cycle Route. I felt at ease on the bike now and was making good progress. I was fitter than I'd ever been in my life and totally focussed on the goal of getting to John O'Groats. I flew along the Caledonian Canal to find a camping site hidden in the bracken beside Loch Oich.

A hard day along the Great Glen Way took me to the shores of Loch Ness. The wind was building behind me so I zipped along the road section past Drumnadrochit. By evening it was gusting to 60mph, so I found a sheltered pitch in the trees above the loch. That evening, as the tent

Carrying the load

35-LITRE OSPREY ALPINE BACKPACK – the largest and most comfortable pack I could find that did not restrict my movement on the bike.

VANGO FORCE 10 HELIUM 100 TENT – extremely light (1kg) and compact but stood up to some foul weather.

HALF SIZE THERMAREST – essential to keep warm at night

ALPKIT PIPEDREAM LIGHTWEIGHT SLEEPING BAG –

ultra-light but kept me warm when it snowed

MSR POCKET ROCKET CAMPING STOVE – tiny but

powerful

MSR CAMPING POT (SMALL) + SPORK – for basic, one-pot

cooking only

CLOTHES: My cycling kit consisted of a pair of padded

(baggy) shorts and a cycling jersey worn next to the skin.

Over this I would add a Rab VapourRise top if it was cold

and a medium weight Gore Tex jacket to keep out the rain. I

was only able to carry one spare set of shorts and a top,

which I religiously kept dry so that I could change into

them in the evenings. I would do my best to dry my wet gear

overnight.

FOOD: I lived off take-aways and cafe fare where available

because I could not carry a large amount of food. In remote

areas with no access to shops I carried noodles, cous-cous

and chocolate.

OTHER ITEMS: compass, phone (no charger, so for

emergency use only), compact digital camera, multi-tool,

spare inner tubes (x2).

shook, I calculated how much more riding I had to do and how many days it might take me. Four days? Five? I spoke to my dad on the phone and he said he'd be at John O'Groats in four days.

As I travelled further north, the autumn weather took on a wintry feel. Twice the next day I was hit by cold, squally rainstorms and I was beginning to wish I had warmer clothing. I passed through Beaulay and Muir of Ord on tarmac, then began an off-road section that I had been warned could be the most dangerous part of the ride. I soon understood why. I faced two river crossings, both swollen by the recent rain. The second was waist deep.

On the plus side, the wild, lonely expanses of Sutherland were beautiful. I felt like the only person alive in the world. The cycling varied between fast Land Rover tracks I could power along in the big ring to pathless bog that required pushing and carrying. Snow fell, first at night, then during the day. Deer were numerous and oblivious. At one point, cycling fast down a stalker's track, I saw a group of 40 of them matching my pace across the other side of the valley. They swung across in front of me, each taking a spectacular leap to clear the track, and raced up the valley side above me.

I spent one night at the Crask Inn, north of Lairg, then pushed on hard to leave myself a short final day, eager now for the finish. My last night in the tent was spent at Achhabreac Halt on the Wick-Thurso railway. The last leg to John O'Groats, along straight tarmac lanes between fields, was an anticlimax. Just a mile from the end I ground to a halt as my front wheel bearings fell apart. I limped into the near deserted car park at 11.00 on a cold, grey morning. My dad and the dog were waiting. As the rain started again, we shared a celebratory dram of whisky.