

“MAYBE WE SHOULD JUST TAKE THE TRAIN”

A SHORT PHOTOGRAPHIC STORY

By Kieren Eyles

Day 1 – London to Cambridge (64 miles)

5.30am is not really an hour I am massively used to seeing, and if I do, I generally can't remember having seen it. I awoke to the following text from my other sister, Marelka:

This is the last time I shall speak to you without your bottoms aching like Romeo's heart after the news of Juliet's death. Many speeds, greatest luck and remember this, at least your wheels are round, imagine if they were square, hmmmmm!?! X

So, there I was, covering my bum in chamois cream (see photo below). A little digression on the topic of chamois cream: when Kassia told me she was buying us some I really was a little sceptical. I've rubbed nappy cream on my nieces on a couple of occasions and I figured this would be similar, only more embarrassing as I'm 32 years old - not 18 months. But I thought "what the heck, it can't do any harm..." As it turns out, it's pretty weird stuff. Which is to say, that I haven't actually ever rubbed myself in a mixture of fizzing sherbet and duck fat, but I think the sensation would be the similar: it's supposed to be "cooling", but I just found it excruciatingly tingly.



Cream applied and breakfast eaten we ventured forth from the house at 6.15am and onto the streets of London, passing by Hyde Park corner for a quick photo opportunity.



The morning's cycling passed by relatively uneventfully; compliments on his coordination to the man I saw riding a bike in front of me, whilst simultaneously getting a cigarette out, lighting it, and proceeding on his puffing way: a dawn embodiment of ying/yang.

We stopped in Bishops Stortford for lunch where I saw this flyer:



Please note in the top right hand corner that this is “Hertfordshire’s Biggest Thursday Night” – now there’s an accolade.

Onward to Cambridge passing through the village of Ugley, yes, Ugley.



At Cambridge we checked into our Premier Inn, had extremely welcome showers, ate three courses and went to sleep.

Day 2 – Cambridge to Lincoln (121 miles)

5am actually felt alright for some reason, perhaps because of the knowledge that the earlier we arose the earlier we would be in Lincoln – cycling in the dark was quite simply not on our agenda.



5.45am – didn't look too bad really.

Because of the early start we didn't get breakfast at the hotel, so stopped at the first open shop and bought a chicken and bacon baguette. We shared our breakfast on the roadside – one of the many salubrious locations you get used to spending time when doing a trip like this. Continuing on we stopped at truckers' caf for food and a cup-o-tea.

One thing we'd realised the day before was that we hadn't eaten enough. Looking it up on Google we'd worked out we were using something in the region of 600 calories an hour, probably more considering the head wind we had and the packs we were carrying. So today we ate a good deal more, in fact by the end of the day I'd eaten: the afore-mentioned baguette; a bacon and egg sarnie; deep fried mozzarella; a pizza; Caesar salad; fish cakes; chilli con carne; garlic bread; 7 cereal bars; a twix; and four energy gels.



A word about energy gels, pictured above. As you can see the department at Mule Bar in charge of flavour naming decided to call this flavour “Apple Strudel”. They were having a bit of a giggle. I’ve eaten a fair bit of apple strudel in my time and never has it tasted like a mixture of cough medicine, snot and salt. However, fair play to the department at Mule Bar who’s in charge of ingredients, because clearly they’ve created a bit of a wonder. Although I didn’t read it in the ingredients, I’m pretty sure they have stuck some amphetamine and MDMA into these little beauties. I make this assertion as 5 minutes after dropping a Mule Bar you feel pretty magical: fatigue is a distant memory; the world a better place, and you often feel inclined to laugh and sing. In fact, five minutes after one mule “bomb” Kassia broke into an excellent rendition of “Hero” by Enrique Iglesias, using a water bottle as a “microphone”. Magical.

On our route we travelled down all sorts of different roads, some were really quite enjoyable:



Others, not so much:



The above was actually the most unpleasant stretch of road we travelled, although there was a strawberry stall on it where we stopped and devoured an entire punnet of strawberries in about 2 minutes. The strawberries had just been picked and were delicious, and the strawberry lady donated £5. Happy days.

The term “hitting a wall” I think I would dichotomise after this ride; on the one hand there is a physical “wall” and on the other a mental one. Physical walls came and went – usually with the consumption of food. Mental walls are a little harder to surmount and are a bit like

arguing with a racist: you're angry with their bigotry, frustrated by their "logic", know that their justifications are simpler than Forrest Gump, and you get to a point where you realise that you may as well concede now because you can't win and have simply lost the will to do so. I only hit one mental wall; and that was about 10 miles outside Lincoln. It was 6.30pm, we'd been on the road for nearly 13 hours, my derriere was hurting – in fact shredded – my feet were reaching the end of the road, and the wind and gradient were both picking up. Luckily a little synapse of hope fired somewhere in my brain, and I realised that part of the point of this kind of thing is to test your limits and see if you break. I was determined not to let that happen and pushed on.

Finally we arrive in Lincoln Premier Inn at 7.15 and went straight to dinner. I think we both felt a little incongruous walking into a restaurant packed with well-dressed, Friday night diners wearing sweaty, muddy, cycling gear. Any feeling of unease was quickly assuaged by a mountain of food followed by a slightly disturbed night sleep – Kassia awoken by my "massive snoring" and myself by her sleep-giggling.

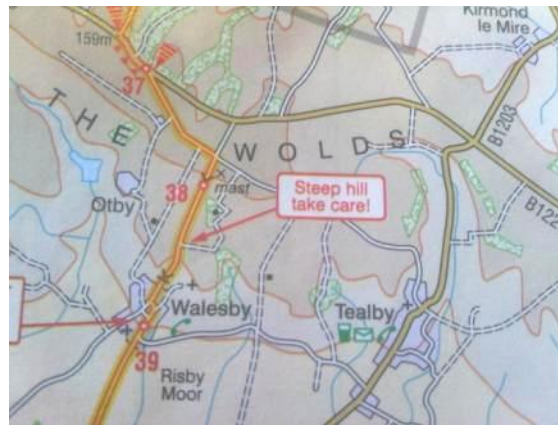
Day 3 – Lincoln to York, 84 miles.

5am, again. Booooooooooooooooooooo. Ah well, as the early Nineties rapper would say: "It's Hammertime". The short walk to a massive breakfast revealed that the weather was not on our side today – a steady rain was falling. The weather had quite literally been against us most of the way, with the wind between 10 and 16mph in our faces. On day one we'd had some intermittent drizzle but this much rain at 6am was plain depressing. After breakfast we descended into Lincoln proper and then began the steep ascent out the other side. I can honestly say I remember nothing of Lincoln, except the massive rainy hill snaking out of the town centre, and the train station where I turned to Kassia and said, only half in jest, "maybe we should just take the train?" The first hour and half proceeded in the dismal rain and wind, and was not a good start to the day; especially considering the increasingly hilly terrain – I didn't know Lincolnshire had "Wolds", it does. And they are big.

We stopped for a cup of tea at JJ's, another greasy spoon managed – in the loosest sense of that term – by a man who could barely conceal his horror at his establishment being frequented by cyclists. Still, it was an excellent vantage point to spot the local Lawnmower racing team.



Shortly after our break we hit the following:



Kassia and I decided that we'd sing our way up this hill – and so broke into a pretty good rendition of Vanilla Ices' "Ice Ice Baby". I think this incident illustrates something of the psychology of a challenge like this, that is the little bubble world you get into. Across the three days Kassia and I had completely separated ourselves from any external reality – we hadn't watched the news, read a paper, or spoken to anyone else. Such social isolation mixed with a tough physical/mental challenge leads to such incidents as singing Vanilla Ice at the top of your voice whilst cycling up a sheer incline, or discussing the relative merits of northern bugs flying into your face versus southern ones. Just for the record, northern bugs are larger and more prevalent – making them more painful in the eye, and more difficult to swallow when this is necessitated by breathing one right to back of your throat. Other oddities of our conversation consisted of me threatening to "beat to death with their own shoes" anyone who even vaguely annoyed me, and Kassia's musings on the sign below.



As we passed this sign Kassia said "if you had a timber yard in great limber, you could call it Great Limber Lumber". We both laughed for a while after that one, and I'm not proud of it.

By now the weather was better, but the hills were increasingly killer – but I'm sure this had more to do with fatigue than gradient. We both agreed that whilst day two's 121 miles had been rubbish, day three's hills were actually just as bad, if not worse. One of the problems was the head wind, which often meant you had to cycle downhill rather than getting your freewheeling respite; however, there were some excellent exceptions to this. On one such downhill I managed to get up a huge lick of speed, only to come into a shaded – and very wet patch entering a village. Instantly I was covered in spray, and could barely see for all the muddy water on my glasses. It was only much later in the day when Kassia asked "is my face

red?” I replied “if I had to describe your face I would say it was slightly pink”; she responded with “well, if I had to describe *your* face it would be pretty goddamned muddy”.

Having reached Barton-On-Humber we stopped for fish and chips for lunch and Kassia threw a strop. Throughout the course of the ride we had stopped at various locations and bought food etc and asked for our water bottles to be filled – always being kindly obliged by staff. Not at this chippie. Kassia came out with fish, chips, and the following statement: “she wouldn’t fill our bottles, I’ve got half a mind to go back in and punch that hatchet-faced old crone”, yeah, the last day was getting to us. The Humber Bridge meant only 36 miles to go, a semi-welcome sight.



I say semi welcome because 36 miles is still a long way when you’ve been cycling pretty hard for 7 hours with few breaks – we were of a mind to get to York as soon as we possibly could by this stage and so were breaking less and less frequently. We also got lost as a road shown on Google Maps didn’t actually exist. The “road” was a pile of rubble, and I vowed – more accurate to say shouted in a petty rage - to stab the entire Google staff to death with plastic spoons.

Having decided that we would push on to York as quickly as possible we were doing a pretty good job, at one stage covering 11 miles in 30 minutes. Unfortunately, the wind really picked up for our final furlong and in the next 20 minutes we managed only 3.5 miles.

We arrived in York at 5.30 and it was done!



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