

Ramblings of a lone cyclist

Hi all. I've just returned from a week of cycling, from Guildford to Falmouth no less, around Cornwall and Devon, and finishing in Bath. Something to do, you know how it is. Here are some of my thoughts along the way, as the 100-miles-a-day schedule begins to take its toll.

Day One

Guildford - Poole (98.1 miles)

Solitude.

All day every day I yearn for it, for the freedom to do what I want, think what I want to think, without the pressure of acting in the manner that others will accept.

Yet, yet the first moment I am stripped of my social cloak my mind instantly longs for its return. The familiar route from Guildford to Aldershot - I am cold, I am tired, I am not in the right frame of mind to do this. Six days! Where is the fun to be had in six days of this?

I create a mental link to my social way of living to try and normalise this slightly, so it's not too much of a shock to the system, so the panic is appeased somewhat. I take picture of each significant place, and then of my facial reactions to each, 'hilarious' anecdotes to be shared upon my return. If you can't cope with something - make a joke out of it; as the old adage goes. I have created a meaning to my journey, grounded in yesterday's reality, not a crazy late night idea. There is some method to my madness. I can impress my friends, make them laugh, and add some colour to my social cloak.

The first proper hill - Upper Hale - and I climb it with ease. The need for social justification begins to dissipate. I'm confident. This isn't all just for a laugh. I'm better than that. I go for a piss in the woods. I can do that. I can do whatever I want.

Reading, Basingstoke. Confusion of the urban sprawl. It doesn't make any sense - nothing in cities ever does. This is the price you pay when man tries to improve on the natural order of things, with its clever flyovers, efficient by-passes and logical road networks. It doesn't work. Not to me anyway.

The Countryside commeth. Basingstoke to Winchester. The first troublesome hill - drop into a very low gear and you'll survive. Feel proud at my humbleness, but inadequate at my level of stamina. I should be able to push through this, not pussy foot around cycling like an old woman. I take another photo. Ha ha! Rest, then recover. Pain is cyclical. It will never stay forever. It's not always a question of pushing and fighting, its acceptance, relaxation, then understanding. The Dharma method of riding you might say Buddha.

Village, village, then another village, each more beautiful than the last. This is why I ride, this is why I'm doing this. You feel close enough to be a part of it, as you pass through. You can see the

times of the church service, the upcoming fete, the special family pub quiz night. For a while you are one of them. The urban sprawl seems like a surreal nightmare.

A brief sleep, a brief respite in the grounds of Winchester Cathedral. Relaxation - enjoy relaxation. It's like Guildford but not so irksome. I am merely a visitor, I am not trapped amongst who these people are. This is the pleasure of solitude. Solitude where you are not judged by others, where you in turn do not judge them. You are at one with yourself, no-one else. This is a very rare experience.

I feel good again, feel good for rest. The city approaches once more, yet I don't feel fazed. I can beat it. Time is good, legs are good.

It goes on and on.

The miles build up.

31 miles to Bournemouth.

It's still so far away.

I feel good, but it's too far. The road to Lyndhurst becomes long straight constant miles. Toil. Nothing else. Monotony. I stop again. There's no hurry, no pressure. This is endurance (def: the act of enduring). There is nothing fun here. No ha ha! Just the long road ahead. Pedal. Pedal. Pedal again.

It gets easier again. I have a point of reference from the past, and you can never be like you were then. Last time I was here was a year ago, I was in terrible pain - pain drawn out of stubbornness, weakness and bad technique. I'm older now, older and stronger. I have to always improve, each day. You start at the bottom and work your way back up. That's how it has to be. It's easier because I'm just fatigued. I'm in isolation this time. I can deal with it rationally, not just make it hurt more. Lots of short breaks. Keep going. You're getting better, getting nearer with each pedal.

Lost in Bournemouth. It's not like pain or fatigue. By definition of the word, you don't know if there is a way out, if there's a way to make it go away. I can't deal with not knowing. 'It will eventually work out' is just not a good enough explanation. Here's the problem, what's the solution? I need to be working out. I need to know! It still feels better to be lost alone.

Walking on the beach, couples holding hands, sitting on benches hugging, coming back from a swim or a fuck. A quiet Sunday. If you're not with someone then there is nothing here for you. I feel lonely. The beach will always mean love to me. But yet, I'm not jealous of these people, I think I just like to long. Would I be satisfied now, if I was sat by the beach, or would I be longing, longing for something else?

Solitude is fine as long as you keep on moving. Can you always keep doing that? Do I enjoy it because I'm not entirely satisfied with my current life? Am I trying to find an answer?

I want love, but nothing that goes with it. Love and solitude. The world of the romantic idealist.

Day Two

Poole - Exeter (95.7 miles)

Osmington into Weymouth. A vista born out of nature and its divine beauty. It's the most wonderful thing I have seen so far. I'll try and describe it as well as I can.

In the foreground a field of large, graceful, lethargic bulls, laze in the early afternoon with an air of regal importance and satisfaction.

Behind them two vast hills of fields cross each other. Two sloping curves, joining the middle like two dancing lovers, crossing each other for the first time. In between there lies a brief glimpse of the sea, of the infinite the lies beneath these beautiful contours, mother nature offering a brief, furtive glimpse of the divine.

A flock of white seagulls fly by, the wind blows, the bulls shuffle, the whole vista is moving as one living organism. This is not just a landscape, this alive. It makes it all the more beautiful. Men have worked these fields, but have not corrupted them. This is not like the city. It has not been transformed by inferior eyes. The power of nature has been respected, harnessed, not displaced. Harmony still remains.

The seaside resort. The great anachronism of contemporary Britain, each town a shrine to a bygone age, born out of simple-minded amusement and Victorian myths of health and convalescence. Rides lie empty, monotonous in this multi-media age. Grownups who should know better buy ice creams, chips, hot dogs, lapping them enthusiastically over exuberant children. Couples argue. Pensioners reminisce sentimentally. The frustration builds up as minds realise the futility of it all - revisiting past enjoyments that will never be the same, that are limited and arcane to more demanding minds.

For all the Victorian promise it is, for me, a picture of unhealthiness. The old come here to die. The disabled in vain belief of the sea's healing process. The fat man eating a cake. The longingness for innocence and cheap thrills, is now just a by phrase for stupidity, gluttony and self indulgence. Move on I say. The seaside still has the sea - an infinite world of possibilities. Perhaps we should respect it as such.

Pain. Is the prevention of pain the highest of all human needs? Not just one quick burst of pain, like an injection, but constant, constant, ever-increasing, unrelenting pain. Is this not what our social rules are based on? Does that not give a reason for wrong and right? But I am voluntarily bringing pain upon myself, transcending these social rules. Trying to be great? Is this how we judge greatness as a human being? Athletes, scholars, labourers. Those that achieve greatness are those who choose to suffer. Suffering is a good thing if we can work through it. Are we a sadistic society? Is this is Christian thing?

Surely the virtuous man would advocate a lack of suffering? Is an ability to cope with suffering a part of maturing from a child into an adult?

Our social hierarchy causes the majority to suffer in order for the minority to not. I have to ride up a hill to get me to the top. We all have to believe that we can get to the top.

South Dorset Coast. The most beautiful part of England I have had the mind to appreciate. How the workers of the land create beauty infinitely better than the city-dwellers. They live nature,

they understand, they work with it every day. Rolling hills, powerful and sublime dominate the landscape, untied by a shimmering coast; men build small settlements in between, bowing to the heights of nature. Not the noble savage, but the respectful tenant of a land we are but a small part of.

Day 3

Exeter - Falmouth (107.9 miles)

It already is becoming difficult to think of this in a reliable way. Memories, of course, are entirely relative, we pick and choose, we take what we need, the truths we want and create the memory from there. So when I look back on this most demanding and extreme of days I think of:

The sublime vista of Dartmoor. The vast desolate panorama of emptiness, where the rolling hills peppered by gorse and rock, meet the blue infinity of the sky, with nothing in between. You feel tiny, insignificant, a pathetic little human figure trespassing in a whole, different, bigger world. Even the sheep look at you indignantly as you first enter the moor, as they passively guard the entrance, like sentries guarding their castle against meaningful intruders, not like you. The wind blew behind me, benevolently. The sun came out from behind the clouds. The roads were empty, welcoming, just one path cutting through the landscape submissively. No getting lost here.

Surging down hills, using all of the road, pushing the momentum down the dip, then back up again, then on the power in the legs, staying in the high gears as long as possible, knowing all the time that the wind behind is pushing as well. Then back again. Then a rare section of straight road, high up the plateau of England, the air fresh, the land a bare as it can be, then diving, down towards Tavistock, 35, 40, 45, 50! No fear now, the vastness of the landscape, the awesomeness of it all, have rendered such fears as meaningless trivialities. This is as exhilarating as cycling gets I think.

But I haven't mentioned:

The false promises of flatness once I left Exeter. Approaching the moor brought an endless procession of small villages, down into the forest, then up and out again, then down again, then up. The scenery beautiful, I remember a bridge over a stream right in the bowels of Devon, cutting in between two large mounds of dense forest; but then the pain comes again, sitting latent in my mind before cutting like a knife when I am brave enough to reminisce. Endless hills, endless hills for which I was sure each one would be the last. The longest day I would face and I was sapping all the energy I'd built up. No one day had ever started this hard, not since cross country running day in the freezing winter at school. I began to despise it all, another fucking village and its little shitty cider sale, meant just another fucking hill to follow. I think maybe that was why Dartmoor felt so fantastic. For about two miles, it was flat.

Another hill out of Tavistock, but this was it. Devon-done. Only flat-as-a-pancake Cornwall to come.

Downhill, downhill for ages into this beautiful valley, through the trees and into Cornwall. A huge divide between two rock faces, like being squeezed inside two deciduous mountains. The hot sun of the early afternoon glinted through the sharp rock face and onto the road ahead of me. The last peaks of Devon. Fast, flat fun from now on. But...but no.

An old lady crying. The hot sun beating down. Gear 1/1. It was still too much.

A girl in jodhpurs. Stunning blond, beautiful figure, blond hair like an angel. She turns briefly, wonderful fair complexion, a smiling ethereal face. Am I hallucinating?

I'm struggling. This is the worst hill yet. She keeps walking in front of me, keeps me going. The endorphins are driving me mad. She's the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. I'm in love with her. I want her. We can go off. We can go somewhere now. Now. Now, lets... I couldn't carry on. I had to get off the bike. I'd look stupid, I told my crying legs. I was too tired. The hill was never-ending. So steep. I'm turned on. Can't put effort into anything. She turns onto a side road and is gone. No look. She just ignored me. Nothing more to do. Forget. Back on the bike. Annoyed. Frustrated. Energy back. Inbred kid, shouts at me at the top of the hill. I don't care. The road ahead is flat. Welcome to Cornwall.

Now I can't remember. Nothing to remember. Just repetitions of pain and anguish and fatigue. More villages, more hills - I think. I really cannot remember. At this point I had no solution, no reference, no nothing. It was just meaningless riding. No goal, no landscape and seemingly going nowhere. Didn't know how far to go. There was nothing. This is the hard but, the real endurance bit, when you're miles up the hill, can't go on, but still can't see the end. You want to panic, you want to do something, but you don't. You just turn your brain off and keep going.

That was how I learned. Subconsciously this had taught me something. I was halfway up a monstrous A road hill. It was really hot now. I still didn't know how far I had to go. But it came to me. For the first time I felt good, I felt good riding up a hill. I figured it out. And it's pretty simple:

- Get in the right gear
- Build up a rhythm
- Toil

Don't think about getting over the pain. Don't think about how hard it is. Don't think about how the whole world is against you. Just focus on the effort of the toil. It won't be easy. You won't race up. Just work and try and work at a constant level. Think about nothing but the toil - not the pain - the toil. Not the end. Not a happy song. Not how long left. Nothing. Because there is nothing but the toil. If you're more tired, this works even better. Your brain goes a bit odd. It focuses on the only thing that matters because it's too lethargic to be distracted. It accepts the pain and it doesn't try to overcome it.

At this point I felt the Buddhism kick into gear. But the next moment was more Christian in its themes. Recreation and divine intervention. Angelic rays of sun were coming down from behind

the clouds, beginning to mask the soon-to-be-setting sun. I had no time left. Maybe an hour of riding time? Was I going to make it? Could I make it? A downhill came, after the toil. The rays of light were shining direct on me as my speed increased. A sign. An actual sign. A sign to Falmouth. 17 miles. 17 miles! 17 miles, that was it!

I let a hand off the wheel and looked up to the sky, to the divine rays looking down upon me. I'm there! I'm going to do it! Yes! Thank you God!

Is divinity the last bastion of a desperate man? Or is it only in our desperate moments that we really realise what matters and what doesn't?

I think we must always find a reason for carrying on. Personal fitness, health, isolation, love, and finally, finally even that isn't enough, spirituality. It underlies all of us, if we struggle hard enough. It can take many different forms of course, but fundamentally, when rationality can no longer help us, it can keep us carrying on, provide us with a reason to keep on living.

This is why God exists. Through pain, torture, He can still provide an answer. Most of our lives are too easy to give a shit - it cannot be placed in the rational (easy) manner of thinking after all - but I'm sure, in times of desperation, everyone needs something. What it is, is not important, but spirituality has to exist somewhere.

Pain makes you understand yourself a bit better. Maybe that's the point of this trip. To see how far I can stretch it, to uphold the delusion that I am capable of anything if i try hard enough. Let's see what the rest of the week brings.

Day 4

Falmouth - Bodmin (53.2 miles)

A rest day. There's no pressure. Yet I feel the need to leave Falmouth asap. I quickly checked the quay again, where I had sat peacefully last night with an exquisite Fish and Chips, and smiled to myself. It was a small secluded quay, that in Weymouth would have been full of tramps and in Brighton couples with their hand in each other's pants, but in Falmouth, at ten o'clock at night, there was just a lone man studying the boats and a knackered cyclist with a slightly repellent musk. How had this town created this atmosphere - cheap, civil, uplifting, fresh - how did it maintain this air of relaxation and healthiness?

The answer came quickly as I rode on, out onto the front. A queue of kids holding surf boards. PE one suspects. It's the sea, the sea used for good. Fun. Activity. Games. The beach is a natural playing field. You don't want a playing field littered with tramps and perverts like a sordid city hovel. It should be there for all of us, and particularly the young, to use and enjoy for their benefit.

Falmouth has understood what the sea is there for. Not a mysterious purveyor of health and cures. Not an archaic shopping arcade. It's about the sea. Not the sea side. Not the horrible, anachronistic idea of what the sea represents. Good sea food, a cool city centre, not tacky, not contrived, not with horrible rip offs. A playing field. This is the future.

It's a slog, a really hard slog this morning. I'm not under pressure, I don't have to rush, I don't have adrenalin. There's no stress. I need stress. Truro is pleasant, relaxing, purveyors of good pasties. It feels too upper-class to be proper Cornwall. I have no motivation to leave, it feels too much like home. I've lost focus. But I'm still too tense to rest.

Hills, back up some of the hills I remember from yesterday, that I went up and down powered by energy drinks and madness and the divine. Then they represented mere final hurdles, yet another final push, a figure of fun in my impossibly tired state. But today there are back being fucking hills again, fucking hills that I already know, that make my legs weaken even before I start climbing them. It's just pain. Pain with no goal. To use a rather heretic metaphor, would Jesus have accepted crucifixion as just something to do on a Friday afternoon? I don't think so. I don't have a creed today. Buddhism has left me. Suffering is just suffering. I don't like it. 'A' roads. Main 'A' roads. I'm trying to kid myself it's getting flatter, It's not, it's just the hills are more gradual and I have room, room to stop without fear of being run down by a truck. I never will stop of course, but I relax slightly knowing I can. Yesterday's moment, finding the zone near Liskeard, has given me a reference point. I try to find that again, in the same surroundings. It works. A long constant hill. I repeat my pedaling steadily, over and over. A constant level of mild suffering.

I suddenly feel guilty. I am the straight laced guy all of a sudden, the guy with the semi-detached house, two kids, works in insurance, goes to the same pub every night, votes Conservative. Nothing different, nothing over-exciting, nothing 'incorrect.' He fucks his wife every other night in the same position then goes to sleep. It's okay. It works for him. He's content, so he's happy. I'm cycling up this averagely sized hill. Its quire a long hill, not too steep. I can do it in gear 3:3. About 8 mph. The endurance is passable. I'm tired but I can control my breathing. Nothing hurts too much. I'll probably hit about 27 mph on the way down the other side. I'm scared. I'm becoming insular. It was too much pain. I'm wussing out. That's what an adventure is all about.

The Camel Trail - I decide to take this from Wadebridge to Bodmin. It's something a bit different. I can't just do 38 miles, or whatever it is, and then go to bed. I'll be disgusted in myself, like every time I don't talk to that beautiful girl in the corner, or sleep in on a Saturday morning. I'll regret it instantly if I don't do it, even if I'm not sure if it's a good idea. It's good. The river. Off road. Flat. Relaxing. I made the right choice. I pass 50 miles. Not enough rest now, my mind starts to tell me. I need more rest. Why didn't I just stay on that A road?

Finally for today, some thoughts on the Cornish. After another two pasties for lunch today, I think maybe I've gained some insight as to why they are who they are. It's their diet, or at least my blinkered view of it. Let's dissect the pastie. It's a relatively simple, unpretentious, no-nonsense dish. Local meat and veg packed into a pastry. That's it. Nothing fancy, nothing overcomplicated, no needless flourishes. Much like talking to a Cornish person in a bar. They'll be polite. They'll be interested in you, they might even buy you a drink. But that's it. It won't go any further. Simple chat about simple things. That's how it is and that's how it should be. It won't be the usual 'who's the cleverest,'

'who's the wittiest,' 'who's got the best anecdote,' 'when's it my turn to speak,' of the Surrey dinner party. It's who you are, where you're from, what you're doing today and, if you're lucky, what are you doing tomorrow.

You can eat a Cornish pastie anywhere, with just your hands. That's what they are designed for - the pasties, not your hands, obviously.

All Cornish are dumb labourers then right? In each village I've been to, you get a sense of a place being built from scratch. People come to work the land, build houses, a school, a church, a shop and some roads, and then go about living their lives. It all makes sense. Its practical, uncomplicated, but it serves its purpose perfectly.

A Cornish pastie is very moorish (as such it is a very stupid thing to be eating on a cycling trip). No-one seems to be in a particular hurry, for anything. Lunch takes an hour, or it takes longer. People drive along the roads as quickly as they need to. Conversations amble on listlessly. No-one seems to be using a mobile phone. On Sundays everything is closed, apart from the pub, which is open for lunch, whenever that is.

Cornish pasties do not look particularly appetizing.

Here the comparison ends. There's something about the accent. I always think of Tess of the D'Urbervilles.

Day 5

Bodmin - Ilfracombe (110.7 miles)

Bodmin.

'Watch out for them there,' said my mother. They're all a bit weird.'

Maybe it was the seeds that were sown into my brain before I got here, but this was a strange place. Everyone looked...looked...well in Surrey we would suggest 'like a bunch of freaks.'

Women with no teeth. Men talking like babies. Large groups of families, grown up families, all walking together holding hands. A hunch back shuffling passed me on the street. A smelly, dirty, blond male, limping, carrying a slightly battered bike.

I should feel uncomfortable, out of my sheltered, superficial life of suburban perfection. But I don't. If anything I feel more relaxed, in the same way I tend to feel relaxed when I'm in a foreign country. Because it doesn't matter, you don't feel under pressure to behave a certain way all the time. These people look and act in an alien way to you, therefore they won't notice when you say something stupid, or tell a rubbish joke, or lose interest in a conversation. It doesn't matter. You can behave just like the freak that you are and no-one will notice. It's liberating stuff. That's the wonderful thing about travelling. You are encouraged to fit in, but your differences are also celebrated, rather than frowned upon.

After yesterday's flirtation with A-road conventionality, I have taken inspiration from Bodmin's display of difference and decided to spend the whole of today 'off road.' So far this has paid off hugely.

If Falmouth had been the perfect way to spend a post-cycle evening, this was the perfect way to get back on the bike in the morning.

I was out early, hoping to get away as early as possible from my previous night's hostess, a woman who seemed to treat her guests like they were her missing recalcitrant children - 'shoes off,' 'not too much noise,' 'this is my house as well remember' - and thus it was with a fresh, early morning chill that I left early and began to embark on my day of off-roading, beginning with the Camel Trail.

More capricious decisions here I'm happy to say. A brief perusal of a cycle map in Bodmin Tourist Office, confirmed that it is possible to 'trail it' from Bodmin to Ilfracombe. I wasn't really sure how, where, how long, but I knew it was possible and that was all I needed.

Eight miles out and I was as happy as I had been for this whole trip. The moist, cold morning air leant itself well to the consistent, medium level of flat cycling. The paths were empty. The river ran gently below me, with a relaxed energy, holding back its true power while it meandered carefully, trying to find exactly where it's true direction lay. I breathed in mouthfuls of fresh air and kept up a good, consistent speed while the path led me steadily upwards, through North Cornwall and onto Bodmin Moor.

Nine am. It was me and the bike, and no-one else for what felt like hundreds of miles. The centre of the moor rose up to the side of me, barren, desolate, empty of even a road, of a hut, or any of man's most rudimentary creations to manipulate the land for their own intentions. I stopped for a moment to enjoy the spectacle of it all. It was me. Only me. I was the only man walking this planet. It was the world and me. Nature and me. The ultimate goal of self-imposed isolation. It felt fantastic. I could have taken all my clothes off and jumped around like a madman if I'd wanted. I could do anything. But I didn't. I got back on the bike and kept on riding.

Slowly man's influence began to display itself - a road sign here, an occasional car there - until I reached an actual building. It looked like an old, abandoned nuclear power station. I rode up a long straight road, surrounded by wire fencing, towards some torn down gates. Huge rusting chimneys, gargantuan metal cylinders, aggressively manicured signs urging me to 'keep out,' of this 'Private' area that spelt 'Danger.'

More long straight roads, gusting cross winds, a dilapidated runway, with small stone side-buildings housing nothing but dust and bundles and wires. No life. Life had gone. My mind began to form post-apocalyptic fantasies, that I was the last man on earth. It was even better than mere isolation. I was the last member of the human race. I was a God.

I stopped to pump my tyres up, praying to not get a puncture. What's the point of being the last man on earth if you get stuck and die of thirst on a moor? No benevolent morning river up here, that was for sure.

Midday and I had done 30 miles. I stopped in a small village for a Kitkat. An old, seventies-style van stopped.

'You on a trip?' asked a voice, sounding like a British-sitcom rural cliché. A proper 'Yokel' with a beard and an odour of slurry was talking to me.

My instant, suburban reaction was to shy away. We don't talk to other people in Guildford. Too busy. Too important. What was the point? I might be able to squeeze you in this evening. Not today though. We had a lengthy chat. He lived at the house with the cream walls up the road. I was welcome for a cup of tea. He had to go before he forgot what he came in here for. It was me who wouldn't stop talking. What was Ilfracombe like? How did he recommend getting there? Did he meet many people doing trips like this? Where was a good place to get lunch?

I had things to say that were worth talking about. We don't spend enough time on our own for that to happen usually. We talk about crap. Our lives are pretty boring, enlivened by football, a funny video on YouTube, the weather. Perhaps isolation leads to creativity, ideas and difference, and therefore something to talk about, rather than the obvious. Or maybe a period of conversational abstinence just makes you want to talk to people. We're never away from a phone, or email, or text message, we engage in conversational pleasures far too often. Whatever, I was interesting, I was engaging and he was probably nuts and a pervert. It was a perfect way to end a perfect morning's cycling.

Three hours later and 'm in hell. Country roads, what seems like the same country roads over and over again. Up down, up down, passed the church, the river and up again. Four miles from Holsworthy. Half an hour later and five miles from Holsworthy. Its 3.30 in the afternoon. I have the least energy I will have all day. I'm lost, I'm going round in circles. I'm going to have to walk up the next hill. I stink. This is bad.

My mind craves variety. For me this was what was great about growing up. You had the whole world out there, in which you could eventually do whatever you want. But then you get told that the world doesn't work like that. You have to have a job, a home, save your money, develop a routine. I convinced myself this was how it had to be. I did law, to try and regulate my mind and my life.

But as any good Freudian will tell you, repression like this doesn't work. It tries to find other ways of escaping, usually through neurosis or psychosis. I've learnt not to accept staidness, that maybe some people are able to live in this static fashion, but I never will. Hence the wonderful transience of this cycling trip, up until now.

I become more and more frustrated, more and more stressed until, once again, a new answer is placed in front of me. The Tarka trail. It is located on the side of a completely arbitrary little road, that I had decided to follow for no reason in particular. And it lead directly to Barnstaple, which was where I needed to go. It was over 20 miles, it was approaching five in the afternoon, and I needed speed. And speed was what I got. The trail followed the river, downstream, all the way. It was the most exhilarating ride I have ever had on a bike. For really the first time on the trip it was proper unmitigated fun.

Downhill, through woods, over stones and mud, then it opens out as the river widens, and you pass over old viaducts, while water gushes beneath you far below, one way then the other. Tiredness was replaced by exhilaration. I kept going as quickly as I could, lasciviously lapping up each little jump, puddle, narrow bridge, like an over-stimulated child wanting his dinner.

It went on, on and on and on. Absolutely flat. I kept my speed up, but the motivation wained. Without hills, it became monotonous, something I never thought I'd ever believe I'd say. It's like not being in love, or having a really undemanding job. It's easy, its stress free, its fine, but it feels empty. Life's okay. Not enough.

We are sadistic creatures, I swear it. There is something in human nature that entails a need to suffer. Maybe it's Freudian again. We are all so nice too each other these days, so civil, so scared of confrontation, that our aggressive, caveman instincts have to find an outlet somewhere else. In the form of personal torture.

Maybe it's just me.

In retrospect, after 110 miles, I thank God for the flat bits.

Day 6

Ilfracombe - Glastonbury (89 miles)

Ideal morning preparation:

-Wake up, still tired enough so not to feel perfect. Anything less than 8 hours sleep should be okay for this. Shower.

-Much breakfast as possible. This morning - Bowl of Cornflakes, bowl of grapefruit, full English breakfast, 8 slices of toast, cup of coffee, cup of orange juice.

-This should sort out any gut issues

-Cool morning. Preferably by the beach.

-Big hills to start. Means no relaxation, no dread, you should feel like hills are good, because you have energy. Do them while you feel good.

-Get in the zone

Knowing how long you are going:

-We, as humans, have to operate a priori in time and space. These are the concepts that shape our understanding of the world.

Which in cycling terms reads:

-How far have I gone?

-How far do I have to go?

-How long have I been riding?

-How much longer is this going to take?

Yesterday, at my lowest ebb, I had no answer to any of these questions. I felt stressed, I felt uncomfortable, as humans do when they can't understand situation they are in - it means they can't cognize it on 'their terms.' This is why today, at no point, did I feel stressed or panicked. I didn't feel entirely in control - that's the whole point of an adventure, I didn't feel entirely physically confident - that's the whole point of endurance - but I did feel that I was operating the whole day on my own terms - space and time - the bare minimum for humans to comprehend the world.

Achievement?

So now I have almost finished and I know, tomorrow, I will feel a strong sense of achievement (touch wood). Why?

This has been difficult. It has hurt me physically. It has challenged me mentally. It has made me consider myself as a person. It has taken me to new lengths. I have overcome these difficulties and succeeded.

Achievements are subjective, sure. For some getting out of bed in the morning is an achievement. For me this is an achievement because it's given me a new skill, a new mindset, a new thing I can do. I can ride on my own, for a seemingly arbitrary purpose, for long periods, survive the pain and enjoy it. I can enjoy living independently, but also want the company of others at the same time. I'm not rejecting humanity or anything, this is a positive exercise. If anything, it has made me realise the benefit of others more, of not living in a bubble. Do something each day that's difficult, on your own. Maybe that is what this has taught me. Like climbing a hill, it will seem impossible, arduous, until you find that zone. It will always be there, somewhere.

Endorphins

I went up a 4 mile hill today. Long Lane, to Exmoor, and the more I kept going, the more I began to feel good, then great, then ecstatic. It was the first time I'd really noticed this transfer of emotion, it takes a hill this length to really show the development. This is why exercise like this is so good for you. It makes you happy. It takes you away from people. It gives you things to talk about. You are going away from the norm, it makes you interesting. Then again you could probably say the same thing about heroin addiction.

I think this is what I've been looking for, something to take me away from that norm. It used to be the incredibly fun-loving party guy that made me different. I used to have cool stories, a cool existence. It makes others like you, it makes you like you. But then I became boring. Boring jobs, boring nights out, boring people, boring stories. So I wrote - the most insular thing I could do. And then I became arrogant and self-obsessed. Because I thought everyone else was.

Because I was just like everyone else. But now I'm not like everyone else. I ride 500 miles around England. I had to get passed Aldershot to enjoy it, but then I realized it was fun. Keep that belief going. Next stop America.

Further thoughts on the seaside.

I have previously suggested that the seaside is living in the past and should concentrate on water and the enjoyment and fitness it can provide, which I still agree with. But I feel I may have neglected the elderly here somewhat. How do they fit into this? Can they be a part of this new coastal order? Surely there's an unavoidable clash between those trying to better their lives and those waiting to die? Is the latter not a good time for reminiscing, however false it may be?

Bude. Bude on the North Cornwall (or maybe Devon) coast. In a couple of years. Stay with me. Surf shops and tea houses. Bowls and half pipes. They can live together, it will work. Unlike Weymouth, Bude seems to have recognised its inherent problems and is trying to move on.

One place that appears to have no sense of its own preposterousness is my final stop on this leg, Glastonbury. It's the centre of commercial hippiedom. Okay, so right now I could be seen as some kind of hippie-traveller type, but I don't really want to open a shop about it. The place is exactly as you would imagine it. Don't get me wrong, the Tor itself is spectacular, but the rest of the town is about as spiritual as an office block. If I want to consider the world around me and

look to see if there might be something else out there, I don't need an incense stick and plate of falafel to help me along thanks, if I did maybe I'm on the wrong lines.

The 13th Century Brits knew what they were doing. After 100 villages passed into at speed, and arduously pedaled out of at walking pace, I am finally beginning to appreciate the difference between a rural and an urban community. It's in the church and the pub. In an era where over 60% of us meet our future partners at work, these retain a vital function in the generally relatively small scale employment of the rural economy. The font perhaps, is the rural equivalent of the photocopier. What would Dawkins think of a new family moving to a village and presenting itself on its first day at church, to be joined by the rest of the community, at a ritual that at its heart, aims to celebrate integration, equality and friendship? The believers aside, the church is the centre of the community and should consider itself thus. While the initial intention may have been strictly religious, a quick perusal of the events notice board indicates the church may be seeking to stretch its wings slightly in its role, now more as a church of the community rather than just an exclusive house of God. Would this community be upheld without it? I'm not so sure. Have I done anything as part of the Guildford community since I left school? No. Why? Because there is simply nothing here that bonds us as a community. No-one goes to church for a start - we're all far too busy and intelligent for that. I think the city could learn something from the rural population interact. At the end it's only a matter of scale, nothing else. Politeness, consideration of others and sociability are in no way limited by the size of a community after all. One would have hoped they are a given.

Day 7

Glastonbury - Bath (29.1 miles)

So that's it. All done. Adventure completed. No more worries. No more stress, endurance, pain. Nothing.

Instantly I revert back to my old self - annoyed at other people, wanting things for me, impatient at others stupidity. I forget, I forget so quickly. The journey has immediately felt like a dream/nightmare, a moment of madness, Am I too old, too stubborn, too set in ways, too scared to change? Do all journeys end like this?

I think that perhaps we all want to change too quickly. Change does happen, but only a little at a time. We are who we are for many reasons and we cannot change all of these overnight, however good or bad they are. I'd like to feel that I'm an adventurer, that I'm not held down by others, that I can just go where I want, when I want. But I'm not. I'm starting a job in 4 days. I'll only have weekends off. But...but I think it has given me some things to stand by:

Caprice - think of something and then do it. Don't listen to anyone else. Not doing is the worst thing you can do

Independence - As yourself you can achieve amazing things. Remember who you are and do things that suit that, and you can become who you want to be as well.

Goals - Set yourself big goals and don't stop until you can reach them. You'll hate it at first, you'll be scared, you'll regret it, but soon you'll grow into it and it may be the best thing in the world.

Open-mindedness - Don't accept your lot. Always leave the opportunity for change. You won't always be in control, always be able to do things, but it's always worth giving it a shot, not relying on the easy cop out of 'can't.'