

Tim Jack and Hannah's Scottish adventure

Hello! My name's Tim and I volunteer for DROSI in the workshop. I've been cycling for as long as I can remember. I have 2 grown-up Kids, Jack and Hannah and with my Wife Bridge, (who is now in the great Bike Shed in the Sky), we have always encouraged the Kids to adventure on their bikes. One of these adventures involved catching trains and cycling to the Western Isles, Scotland - as I recall Hannah was 3 and Jack 10 at the time and we wild camped next to the beautiful island beaches. Because pannier space was at a premium, the kids were allowed a micro-bucket and spade, a tiny fishing net and a mini cuddly-toy each! What cruel parents we were! Despite this, they still talk fondly of that holiday and remember seeing a White tailed Sea Eagle flying over us within minutes of disembarking at Barra, an amazing sight!

Jack and Hannah now lead their own, independent lives and have moved to that strange, foreign land, South Wales. Early experiences like the above adventure, could have put them off cycling for life, but believe it or not they have both grown up to become avid cyclists and adventurers, who can be found at weekends exploring the South Wales hills, coasts and valleys.

This year, 20 years later, the three of us decided to have another Scottish adventure and cycle the 'John Muir Way'. This is a Scottish 'Coast to Coast' from Helensburgh in the west, to Dunbar in the East, spanning the Scottish central belt. John Muir was a C.19 Environmentalist who was born in Dunbar and emigrated to America. He was instrumental in setting up the American National Parks.

Co-ordinating 3 people is difficult, but eventually we managed to organise 6 free days at the end of May 2024, 4 days cycling and 2 days travelling up and back, We'd naively decided that May is usually fair weather in Scotland and should be midge-free.

Come the departure day an amber warning for rain was forecast and lo and behold, the west-coast line was flooded between Preston and Carlisle!! All trains to Glasgow were cancelled. Undeterred, we caught various trains east to Edinburgh and back-tracked over to Helensburgh arriving at our destination at about 7pm, about two hours later than scheduled, and we were greeted with dark skies and rain.

The route is well waymarked and after a hasty pizza, we left Helensburgh on cycle tracks and diverted off, up a forest track to a lovely clearing on top of a hill with spectacular views over Loch Lomond. At least I think they were, as it was shrouded in dense mist and clouds of midges. But apparently, they are views to die for.



The access and wild camping laws are great in Scotland. All Public paths are open to both walkers and cyclists, and wild-camping is permitted providing it is away from houses and you leave early with no trace. It all operates on an understanding that you treat other users and landowners with respect and strictly follow the country code. We encountered some walkers whilst packing up our tents the following morning, who didn't bat an eyelid and commented on what a great pitch we'd had; and then promptly advised us of a potential blockage on the route which we may want to divert around...such an enlightened attitude! Why can't we have the same south of the border?



The first full day of cycling saw us crossing some wonderful rolling countryside along very quiet country roads and then along a section of the West Highland way, where we encountered more walkers than cyclists. Lunch was Macaroni cheese and chips, a popular Scottish



delicacy! Café's along the west Highland way kept us fuelled up. A well-surfaced canal towpath took us into Falkirk, via the amazing 'Falkirk wheel' boat lift.

The weather had been pretty good until our approach to Falkirk when we had rain-showers that Noah could only dream of! We reached our campsite, showered and dried off, ate and slept like babies.

Day 3 would see us heading east along the Forth and Clyde canal and then turning north along paths and minor roads until we reached the Firth of Forth...how exciting, the seaside! Proper, well-surfaced traffic free paths, interspersed with woodland tracks followed the sea, under the Forth Bridges, all the way into Edinburgh. By early



evening we were cycling through trendy Leith, aiming for a campsite a few miles further on. On arrival, we enquired about a pitch, only to be advised that the following day was the Edinburgh Marathon and all pitches had been booked for a year in advance! The warden was such a nice Guy. He took us aside and said, "If I was you I'd go down the road where there's a gap in the stone wall. You'll see some woodland

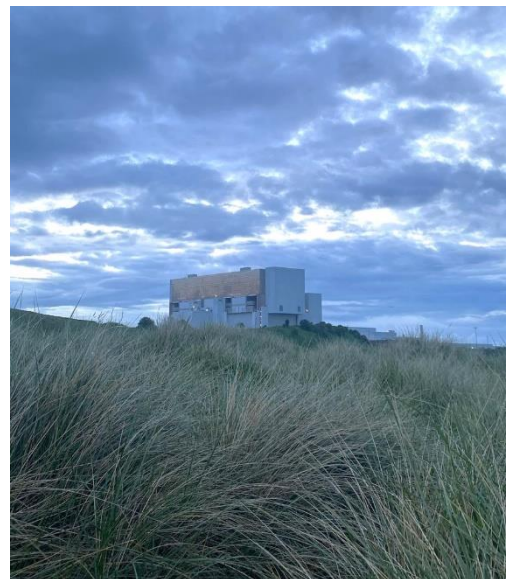
there where you won't bother anybody – just pitch up there for the night!". And that's what we did. Again, we were complimented on our wild-camping pitch the following morning by some passing walkers...amazing!

The fourth day started wet and our route was blocked by the route of the Marathon, so we diverted away from the John Muir Way only to rejoin it further out of Edinburgh. The road was very quiet. In fact there were no cars at all. Also there were a lot of people standing around who periodically cheered us and waved! We'd actually navigated ourselves onto the route of the Marathon however we were a few minutes ahead of the race leaders. Nobody told us to stop and get off the route, so we carried on with the cheers echoing in our ears! When we finally got to the turn-around point we gingerly threaded our way through the bollards and stopped to watch the runners coming through....at which point a red-faced official in a hi-viz jacket was overheard talking into his walkie-talkie..." who let these 3 bloody cyclists through?" After completing the Marathon, we continued south along

the East coast along a mixture of paths, tracks through fields, gravel tracks and minor roads, to the pretty fishing Villages of North Berwick and Dunbar. Dunbar is the end of the John Muir Way, officially outside his birth place, where we celebrated with cheesy chips sheltering from the rain. The official route is approximately 135 miles long and is really well waymarked, largely traffic-free or on very quiet roads, and is relatively easy cycling. I would highly recommend it!

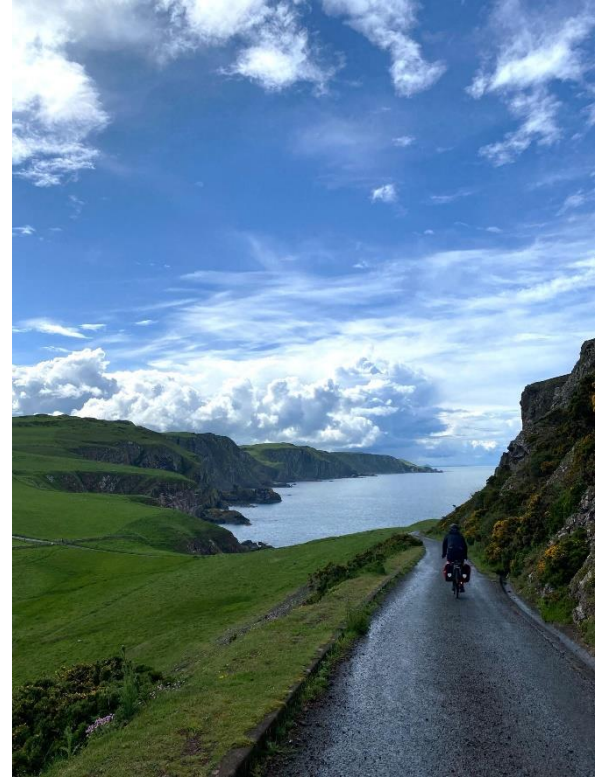


Wait!....that's only Day 4. From the outset we'd decided that we wanted to carry on from Dunbar south to Berwick upon Tweed, where we'd cross the border into England and catch the train home from there. After leaving Dunbar we headed to our campsite at Thornton loch...a lovely pitch, nice shower blocks, but all in the shadow of a decommissioned Stalin-esque nuclear power station! If you averted your gaze away from the concrete hulk, the bay and beach was beautiful. When booking by phone, Jack had given his Cardiff post code, only for the voice at the other end to shriek, "oh where you from then love?, I'm from Merthyr Tydfil!"....They'd settled there 30 years previous, favouring the Scottish nuclear power station over the Welsh coal tips.



Day 5, and we moved on the that morning, none of us having grown an extra head overnight, to one of the highlights of our adventure, St Abbs Head.

We'd left the waymarked trail behind and worked out a quiet route away from the busy coast road. 'Quiet route' translates to hilly route in these parts, but also great views of the sea and coastal farm land. St Abbs is a rocky outcrop with hugely high cliffs and huge colonies of Gannets, Guillemots and other coastal nesting birds. The noise was deafening, but spectacular. The ride out to the headland was seriously steep, but well worth the effort.



We arrived at our final campsite about 7 miles from Berwick upon Tweed...the best of the whole week, with a modern farm building which had been partitioned off to make a common room with dining tables and chairs, snacks, a kettle and even a basic bike workstand and e-bike charging points.

So as day 6 dawned, the weather finally picked up and we made the short journey to Berwick to catch the train home. From doorstep to doorstep we'd cycled just over 200 miles, a route full of different landscapes from wild countryside to chic city suburbs and everything inbetween. We'd laughed everyday and experienced Scottish culture and hospitality at its best.

