

Day 1: Dover to Brentwood

We begin our epic journey within a stones throw, or perhaps javelins throw, from the iconic White Cliffs of **Dover**. The cliffs reach up to 350 feet and are made of chalk, accentuated by streaks of black flint. The English Channel is at it's narrowest here and the cliffs have been an historical, symbolic guard against invaders from the Continent.

As we set off cycling you will see in the background The Port of Dover, which provides a great deal of the town's employment. The government recently tried to privatise this port but when they received a bid from Calais across the water this met with fierce opposition from the locals. The government withdrew the proposal, and the locals clubbed together to propose buying it for the community. More than 12,000 people bought a £10 share in the People's Port Trust to try to launch their own bid for the world's busiest passenger port.

A lovely start to the tour through country lanes will see us on our way to **Canterbury** and if you see anyone with full walking gear and rucksacks on, as we did on our maiden tour of the Dover to Cape, they may well be, as these people were, on a pilgrimage to Rome:

The Via Francigena is an almighty 1900km pilgrim trail from Canterbury to Rome. It leads down through relatively flat sections in north-eastern France, then reaches the mountainous Jura, continues through Switzerland and crosses the strenuous Great St Bernard Pass over the Alps, before heading through Italy to arrive at Rome. It takes on average three months to complete and people have been doing it since the 8th century.

Ok, so we may be scrambling round for superlatives for the section of route through the Medway Towns and on to Gravesend but did you know that **Faversham** was the cradle of the UK's explosives industry, the first gunpowder plant dating back to the 16th century. And Town Pier in **Gravesend**, where we catch the ferry to Tilbury, is the world's oldest surviving cast iron pier, built in 1834. It is a unique structure with the first known iron cylinders used for its foundation.

After the ferry we push on to our evenings destination, **Brentwood**, for a well earned rest. As we arrive on a Saturday you may want to put your glad rags on and hit the town, as, knowing our night clubbing customers as we do, we brought you to the home of "The Only Way is Essex" or "TOWIE" to those in the know. To the uninitiated this is a reality show that, if watched, will have you questioning your own reality and is Brentwood's claim to fame, so on your way to dinner with the gang you may see scantily clad girls and boys frolicking hither and thither, just ignore them and go about your business in an orderly manner

Day 2: Brentwood to St Ives

We begin the days cycling much as yesterday, utilising quiet country roads wherever possible. About 15 miles in, at the tiny hamlet of **High Laver** you will notice a church and, against the side of the church, a rail enclosed tomb. This is the resting place of the famous British philosopher and physician John Locke, regarded as one of the most influential thinkers of the "Enlightenment" which was a cultural movement of intellectuals beginning in the late 17th- and 18th-century Europe emphasizing reason and individualism rather than tradition and faith.

A little further on is the equally tiny hamlet of **Matching Tye** which is the birthplace of comedian Rik Mayall. If you are beginning to suspect that the quiet country roads and small villages and hamlets are proving a challenge to provide informative, entertaining snippets about, then think again, as we dust off this gem of a fact about sleepy **Bishops Stortford**:

In March and April 1825, a number of buildings in Bishop's Stortford were set alight and caused great alarm in the town. A committee was formed and a £500 reward offered for information on the arsonist. Soon a number of threatening letters were received, warning in part that "Stortford shall be laid in ashes". Thomas Rees was arrested and found guilty on the charge of sending the letters, but not of arson. He was transported to Australia as a convict.

After lunch we crack on to a city that is positively oozing with history; home of world class education; scientific innovation; a cycling haven, but, perhaps more importantly, the city that sparked to life the mighty Pink Floyd: **Cambridge**.

The city's fortunes have been directed and dominated down the centuries by the famous university, consistently ranked one of the top five universities in the world.

Today, Cambridge is at the heart of the high-technology centre known as Silicon Fen – a play on Silicon Valley and the fens surrounding the city. Its economic strengths lie in industries such as software and bioscience, many start-up companies having been spun out of the university. Over 40% of the workforce have a higher education qualification, more than twice the national average (although the way some of them cycle you do start to wonder!)

The good folk of Cambridge don't only engage in high brow activities as the green space of Parker's Piece hosted the first ever game of association football.

After Cambridge we continue to our destinations end at **St Ives**. The next village, Hemingford Grey, was the birthplace of the dynamic, the irrepressible, the colourful, British treasure, former Prime Minister John Major! (Sorry, struggling for facts)

The Oliver Cromwell statue outside the Golden Lion in St Ives is the only statue of Cromwell in the whole country raised by public subscription. The statue was briefly exhibited at the Royal Academy in London to reportedly considerable acclaim before being installed in St Ives in 1901. Although most of the town and its officials turned out for the occasion there were still, 340 years after the death of Oliver Cromwell, those that could not bring themselves to attend.

Day 3: St Ives to Castle Donington

After breakfast, brief and bicycle checks, the first place we head for today is the market town of **Huntingdon**. As we approach the town we cycle over the river Great Ouse; it is called Great because it is the largest and longest of several rivers with the same name.

Huntingdon was the birthplace of Oliver Cromwell and his grandfather owned a famous pub there called The George Hotel. Charles I made The George Hotel his headquarters during his quarrels with parliament over his belief in the divine right of Kings over an elected government which is ironic as the ex landlords grandson was trying to separate his head from his body!

Heading north west out of town we pass through a few small villages and close by to the much maligned Huntingdon Life Sciences building.

This unassuming building is criticised by animal rights and animal welfare groups for using animals in research, for instances of animal abuse and for the wide range of substances it tests on animals, particularly non-medical products. It is claimed by SHAC that 500 animals died every day at HLS (182,500 a year), a figure at odds with HLS' published numbers.

Huntingdon's labs were infiltrated by undercover animal rights activists in 1997 and in a film secretly recorded inside HLS in the UK by BUAV (British Union for the Abolition of

Vivisection) and subsequently broadcast on Channel 4 television as "It's a Dog's Life", footage showed serious breaches of animal-protection laws, including a beagle puppy being held up by the scruff of the neck and repeatedly punched in the face, and animals being taunted.

As we enter the tiny county of Rutland we are greeted by an impressive feat of engineering called the Welland Viaduct, here are some facts about it:

Welland Viaduct, also known as Harringworth Viaduct and Seaton Viaduct, is a railway viaduct which crosses the valley of the River Welland between Harringworth in Northamptonshire and Seaton in Rutland. It is 1,275 yards (1.166 km) long and has 82 arches, each of which has a 40 feet (12 m) span. It was completed in around 1878 and is the longest masonry viaduct across a valley in Britain.

Rutland is England's smallest county, or at least it is assumed to be. Stephen Fry on the television show "QI" suggested that it was only the smallest county in England when the tide was out on the Isle of Wight!!

The compiler of this next list of facts hotly disagreed with Stephen Fry's assertion, no prizes for guessing where he is from!

Rutland's area is 151 square miles; North to South is 16.3 miles and East to West is 16.53 miles.

Rutland was reinstated as a county in 1997 after being absorbed into Leicestershire in 1974.

Rutland Water is the UK's largest man made lake, similar size to Lake Windermere in the Lake District

Rutland is the only county not to have a 'McDonalds' fast food chain (or Burger King or KFC!)

Rutland is the only county not to have a static speed camera on its roads

Rutland residents are known as 'Raddlemen'

So leaving Rutland and pushing on into the Leicestershire countryside armed with more facts about Rutland than is probably necessary we push on to our evening's accommodation at The Priest House near Castle Donington on the river Trent which is a Celtic word which means "strongly flooding" so fingers crossed for the night then!!

Day 4: Castle Donington to Thornsett

As we wave good bye to Castle Donington we start out up a short rise and then skirt round Derby heading towards our beloved Peak District, spiritual and physical home of Peak Tours.

On our way round Derby we pass through the small, unassuming village of Little Eaton but this place was put on the map as a wealth of good local gritstone. Minerals and coal in the area, trade routes were extended to this little place and in the early 20th century, Little Eaton was a popular resort for many working people with a train trip or canal ride to local woods quarries and tearooms being a popular Sunday and bank holiday outing.

A well known and popular character was Alice Grace, the 'Little Eaton Hermit' born in 1867 who on being evicted from her cottage lived in sheds, barns and disused buildings, until finally residing in her famous box home (a box that used to hold bacon that was donated by the local butcher) at the pinfold on 'Th Back o' the Winns' in Coxbench Wood. She spent 20

years as a hermit until forcibly taken to the Union workhouse at Shardlow in 1907. She died aged 60 in 1927. Her story is told in a song "Alice in the Bacon Box" by Derbyshire singer-songwriter Lucy Ward.

As we venture further into the Peak District you will see Carsington Water on your right:

Carsington Water is a man made reservoir opened by the Queen in 1992. The reservoir is owned and operated by Severn Trent Water and is part of a 'water compensation' scheme. This means that water is pumped here from the River Derwent at times of high rainfall, stored in the reservoir and returned to the Derwent when the river level would otherwise be too low to allow water extraction for treatment (and drinking) further downstream. No water is actually extracted from Carsington Water itself.

Further on we use some fantastic limestone gorge roads near Hartington and then just before we reach Earl Sterndale over the brow of the hill a fantastic view is revealed – the unusual peaks of Parkhouse & Chrome hills. Formed over 350 million years ago during the Carboniferous Period, when the Peak District lay under warm tropical seas, near to the equator, it is widely accepted that these 'Peaks' are the remains of coral reefs, lying on the ancient sea bed.

A probable afternoon brew stop - Earl Sterndale is a small village which lies at 1,100 feet above sea level. The parish church of St. Michael is the only church in Derbyshire to take a direct hit during the 2nd World War. Opposite the church you will see a small pub with an interesting name 'The Quiet Woman'. The pub got its name from the wife of a previous landlord who was nicknamed 'Chattering Charteris', her constant nagging drove her husband to cut her head off!

Hartington, close by, is a popular tourist spot; it is one of the three original sources of Stilton Cheese and also a jumping off point for the NCN routes along the Tissington and High Peak Trails.

A little later, we reach Buxton, the highest market town in England (although Alston might have something to say about that!). Developed as a spa town to rival Bath in the late 18th Century by the Dukes of Devonshire, Buxton's 'Great Stables' was once the largest unsupported dome in the world – bigger than the Pantheon, St Peter's in Rome and St Pauls Cathedral.

In the summer, keep an eye out for the pretty and very skilful 'well dressing' displays as you pass through Peak District villages.

Our journey today has taken us from the limestone dales and gorges of the 'White Peak' into the more rugged gritstone scenery of the 'Dark Peak'. Places like Whaley Bridge and New Mills were sleepy hamlets until the Industrial Revolution, when plentiful water supplies (both from the rivers and the skies!) made them cotton and wool spinning powerhouses. Today, little remains – the mills were demolished or put to other uses. Next time you open a packet of 'Love Hearts', remember they are made in New Mills!

The day ends in Thornsett on the edge of the gritstone moors of the High Peak.

Day 5: Thornsett to Gargrave

More country lanes and undulations to start the day, through villages that were once very busy, but now only with the 'rat-run' traffic! You will soon reach Charlesworth, birthplace of our glorious leader, Steve Coackley, and then on to Mottram, home of L S Lowry (you will see him sat on a bench at the lights). Signs of industry are all around as you cycle towards

Saddleworth. Historically part of the West Riding of Yorkshire, the district was brought into the Metropolitan County of Manchester, much to the annoyance of the 'locals'. Boundaries round here change quite often (to suit the government of the time, maybe?), so they may have a right to be grumpy Yorkshire folk! Depending on the season, you could find yourself in the middle of a brass band contest, the Whit Walks or another well dressing.

We move on to and through Milnrow, once industrialised but now better known (?) as the home of Lancashire dialect. Oh yes – did we mention we were now in Lancashire (well, for the time being). Onwards to Hollingworth Lake, built originally as a water source for the Rochdale Canal but developed into a tourist resort for the workers in the mid-19th Century. When the workers returned to work, Captain Matthew Webb trained in the lake for his Cross Channel swim.

The canals are seeing a revival in popularity. Allowed to fall into disuse in the early 20th Century, they are now seen as a vital part of the economy of the area and restoration works continue. You will cycle by and along many of these waterways (probably a little faster than the narrowboats)!

Todmorden, back in Yorkshire, was another busy Town, with 6 railway stations operating in its heyday. These days, it has a reputation of a bit of a 'hippie' place, and you may well see the tepees alongside the canal.

The route takes us through Colne (Lancashire), not to be confused with Colne Valley (Yorkshire!), and close to the Aire Gap, the lowest crossing point of the Pennine Watershed. Cotton has given way to aerospace these days, with Rolls Royce being a major employer in the area.

As we head towards Gargrave, our destination today on the edge of the Yorkshire Dales, spare a thought for the industrial heritage of the region and imagine Hellifield, for instance, when it was a thriving railway junction, where the Settle-Carlisle and Lancs & Yorks crossed, and where merchants and farmers made their deals.

Day 6 – Gargrave to Penrith

Leaving Gargrave after a hearty Yorkshire breakfast, we head into Yorkshire Dale country, with contrasts in scenery, from the dramatic amphitheatre of Malham Cove to the rolling limestone countryside further north. The Cove itself was formed by a waterfall carrying glacial melt water around 12000 years ago. The stream from Malham Tarn (1.5 miles upstream) becomes subterranean a mile or so before the Cove and was, for many years, believed to resurface at the base of the Cove. Not so – this is a different stream. Not many people know that. In December 2015, the Cove became a waterfall again for the first time since records began, when the cave systems could not cope with the rain from Storm Desmond.

That's enough about Malham. Our route takes us through Settle, one end of the eponymous railway, which is now a popular destination for trainspotters the world over, keen to take a steam train to Carlisle, passing over the famous Ribbleshead Viaduct on the way.

Lovely country lanes see us to Clapham, now a busy tourist destination and, in April each year, the start and finish of the world famous 'Yorkshire 3 Peaks Race', a gruelling fell race of 23 miles or so, over Ingleborough, Pen-y-Ghent and Wharfedale. In 2016, the fastest man took 2hrs 48min, the fastest lady 3hrs 26min. That's fast!

Our route now takes through Dent, home of a highly recommended Music and Beer Festival. The boundary question is back with us – Dent was Yorkshire but is now Cumbria, so don't be confused if you still see the old county signs as you ride by.

Sedbergh, in Cumbria at the moment, developed as a woollen spinning town, whose main markets were the mining towns of the North East. These days it has established itself as the 'book' town of England, akin to Hay on Wye. Look out for Sedbergh School, dating from the 15th Century – the motto is 'Dura Virum Nutrix' ('Stern Nurse of Men'), but subject to review after girls were admitted in 2001!

Enough facts and figures – stop, look up and enjoy the superb scenery of the Howgills, not as well-known as their bigger brothers on the other side of the M6, but just as pleasing to the eye.

As you wend your way toward Penrith, your goal for today, think about the rich history you are passing through. In the 12th Century, Henry II granted lands in this area to Sir Hugh Morville and his sister Maud de Vetripont. Sir Hugh displeased the King (easy to do in those days!) and had his lands taken back; Maud retained hers, hence the districts of Kings Meaburn and Maulds Meaburn.

Since early times, Penrith (Roman 'Voreda'), has been an important strategic and trading centre, straddling routes between England and Scotland and the Pennines. Richard III lived there for a while (and judging by what happened to him, he might have been better off staying there!). Enjoy your evening and if you like beer, at least one of the five breweries in the town might have something to your taste.

Day 7 – Penrith to Thornhill

Picking up the C2C route just after leaving Penrith, you would not think that all around was the Royal Hunting Ground of Inglewood Forest, used by the privileged few in Norman times. Newton Reigny and Skelton can trace their history back to 1185 and Rose Castle, near Dalston, was the home of the Bishops of Carlisle from 1230 to 2009. Rose Castle is currently (March 2016) on the market (with vacant possession) – offers over £3M only, please. As you get into Dalston, have a look around - The Square is patently not a square but why is called that?

For those of you interested in toponymy, Cargo, on the Solway Plain, is intriguing. Hours have been spent by experts arguing that the name comes either from the Celtic word 'carreg' ('rock') or the Old Norse 'haugr' ('hill'). And what's more, you might think Rockcliffe derives from 'cliff of rock' but you would be wrong! Interestingly, it comes from Old Norse 'vauor', meaning 'red' and the Old English word for cliff, which is 'cliff'. Now you know.

Passing by Gretna Green, our route reaches Annan for lunch. Full of history, Annan is the home of the de Brus family (those Normans got everywhere), which became known as Bruce. Robert the Bruce stayed at Annan and it is recorded that Bonnie Prince Charlie stayed at the L'Auberge on the High Street on his way back from defeat at Derby. Well, maybe it wasn't called that in 1745.

Annan was once a thriving port but little remains today. The first ever train turntable was designed and developed in Annan – you can still see it in York Railway Museum.

Dumfries is another of those places that has seen better days but is trying to reinvent itself for the needs of the 21st century resident and traveller. Once a busy market town and port, its importance has declined over the last 100 years or so. The home of Robert Burns, it had

a good start in the tourist sector and it seeks to capitalise on that today. Kirsty Wark, David Coulthard and Calvin Harris were all born in Dumfries (but do not live there now!).

Now for one of the highlights of the tour – a chance to pay homage to the man who made it all possible – Kirkpatrick MacMillan, the inventor of the first pedal driven bicycle. Respect is due. He is buried in the village churchyard at Keir Mill.

After that, what else to do but toast the great man's achievement in Thornhill, your destination for today.

Given all the history around here, it may surprise you that Thornhill is a comparatively new town. It was built from scratch in 1717 on the Buccleuch and Queensberry Estate as a stopping place on the road between Dumfries and Glasgow.

Day 8 – Thornhill to Brodick

Impressive sights almost from the off today and the scenery as the day progresses just gets better. Soon after leaving Thornhill you will cycle past Drumlanrig Castle, family home of the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry. Known as the 'Pink Palace' from its sandstone construction, the house is open to the public and hosts events throughout the year.

Soon after, have a look at the Post Office in Sanquar, which is the oldest working Post Office in the world, having first opened its doors in 1712. Furthermore, not many people know that in the 1924/25 season, the local football team, Nithsdale Wanderers, won the Scottish Division 3 league title.

Natural resources near Auchinleck aided its rapid growth as a quarrying and mining area in the early 19th Century. Substantial reserves of coal led to one of the biggest coal fired power stations in Scotland being commissioned in 1957. Thirty years later, the pits and the station were closed, victims of government policy, and now the whole region is still recovering from the post-industrial recession. At Cumnock, just a few miles back down the road, Keir Hardie, the 'father of the Labour Party', must be turning in his grave.

On to Kilmarnock, once a centre of heavy engineering and now reliant on the fortunes of Johnny Walker whiskey and government subsidies.

At least the scenery makes up for the gloomy economic outlook, with views out to Arran and the Firth of Clyde to the west, and the Ayrshire Hills to the east.

Dreghorn, just along the route, lays claim to be Britain's oldest continuously inhabited village, with remains of a Neolithic settlement from 3500 years BC. Perhaps of more significance to us, John Dunlop, the patentee of the pneumatic tyre, was born in Dreghorn.

If you have the time (and the inclination) at Ardrossan (from the Gaelic 'headland of the deer'), you could search out the remains of the Castle, built in the 12th Century and then dismantled by Cromwell's troops in 1648. The town became an important port, exporting coal and pig iron to Europe and the USA. The ferry to Arran began to run regularly from 1834 and the island became a popular tourist destination. These days, there is not much besides the ferry and Ardrossan promotes itself as 'the Gateway to Arran'.

Enjoy the ferry journey to Brodick; in the hour or so it takes, the trip takes on another dimension – you will truly be in the land of 'The Islands and The Highlands'.

Day 9 – Brodick to Oban

Arran has been described as Scotland in miniature – the lowlands in the south giving way to the (relatively) mountains in the north. Fought over by the Vikings and the Kings of Scotland for centuries, it finally became part of Scotland around 700 years ago. Cycling on Arran is superb – the scenery varies from woodlands to the open coast with stunning views all round, north towards Bute, east to the mainland, south to Ireland and west to the Mull of Kintyre, part of which you will cycle later in the day.

Brodick (from the Old Norse, meaning ‘broad bay’) provides a good base for walkers, climbers and cyclists. Brodick Castle (owned by the NT for Scotland) is worth a visit.

Your time on Arran ends at the northern ferry point at Lochranza, from where a short hop takes onto the Mull of Kintyre.

Scenic riding by West Loch Tarbet, with views over to Islay and Jura, lead you back along side Loch Caolisport. Look out for the Kilberry Sculptured Stones, a collection of carved grave slabs from late medieval times.

The route takes you past the eastern end of the Crinan canal, a short cut between the Firth of Clyde and the Western Isles. The canal, opened in 1801, was originally designed for the Clyde ‘puffers’ (merchant vessels) to get to the islands far more quickly than having to sail around the Mull of Kintyre. These days, the canal is predominantly used by leisurecraft.

The riding just gets better as you head north to Oban, with great views out to sea on your left and to the mountains to your right. Hill walkers will have noticed Beinn Dearg (484m) and Beinn Ghlas (512m) on the last few miles into Oban.

People have settled in and around Oban for thousands of years, recognising its natural advantages as a sheltered port. The town originally grew up around the distillery but with the arrival of the railway in the 19th Century, Oban became popular as a tourist centre. During the Second World War, it was an important naval base. Nearby, the first Transatlantic Telephone Cable (TAT-1) came ashore – this formed part of the (in)famous ‘Hot Line’ between the USA and the USSR in the days of the Cold War.

Day 10 – Oban to Mallaig

Catch the ferry from Oban for the second sea trip of the day, over to Craignure, on the island of Mull. Once back on dry land (and if you have time), Torosay and Duart castles, sat at the head of the Sound of Mull, just south of Craignure, are worth a visit.

Our time on Mull is regrettably short – we recommend you return for a longer stay to enjoy the island’s many attractions, from the picture postcard harbour of Tobermory, the scenic road along the Ross of Mull with perhaps a to visit the Abbey on the island of Iona, and not forgetting the tour around the distillery!

From the ferry at Fishnish, just along from Craignure, we return to the mainland at Lochaline, the route now heads north. There are only so many times we can say how stunning the views are. As you pass Strontian at the head of Loch Sunart, consider that lead mining was the main activity for centuries – a form of lead, strontianite, was first found here, which led to the discovery of the element Strontium. Lead from Strontian was used in bullets during the Napoleonic Wars and ironically (!) French POWs from those times were employed in the mines.

The road you are riding on was designed and built by Thomas Telford, as was the Shiel Bridge, just after Acharacle, where you take lunch. If you were to detour to the west, you would reach Ardnamurchan Point, the most easterly place in mainland Great Britain.

Look out for the roadside 'Seven Men of Moidart' monument at Kinlochmoidart, which commemorates Bonnie Prince Charlie's seven companions who left France for Scotland for the doomed 1745 Uprising. Originally, seven beech trees were planted in their memory but storm damage and disease have reduced their number.

Just before Arisaig ('the safe place' in Gaelic), at Loch Nan Uamh bay, look out for The Prince Cairn, marking the spot where Bonnie Prince Charlie left for France in 1745.

In WWII the whole of the Ardnamurchan peninsula was commandeered for use by the Special Operations Executive, who used the area to train agents for missions in Europe.

More views as we head to Mallaig, passing by the pretty bays of Morar, Back of Keppoch and Glasnacardoch, described in a 2005 book titled 'Bare Britain' as the most beautiful places to get your kit off in Europe! The beaches around here featured in 'Local Hero' and the Harry Potter films.

Mallaig really only came into being in the mid-19th century, when Lord Lovat 'encouraged' some of his tenants to move west and take up fishing. The arrival of the railway at the end of that century led to rapid growth, so much so that Mallaig had developed into the busiest herring port in Europe by the 1960s. Little remains of all that industry and Mallaig nowadays is a popular tourist destination – in 2009, the rail journey from Dumbarton to Mallaig was voted the best in the world!

During your stay, why not try Mallaig's famous kippers from Jiffy and Sons, the only remaining smokehouse in the town.

Day 11 – Mallaig to Kinlochewe

Another day, another set of amazing views, mainly on good roads. The ferry from Mallaig takes us to Armadale on the Isle of Skye. Sadly, a brief visit and you should return to do the island full justice. Look west to the Cuillin Hills and home of the famous Skye Ridge, a traverse of which (according to some) ranks with any in the Alps.

As you ride towards Kyle of Lochalsh, look eastwards, across the Sound of Sleat, over to Knoydart, one of the very few true wilderness areas in the country. Leaving Skye via the bridge at Kyle of Lochalsh, which replaced the ferry in 1995, head north east up the glorious Glen Carron, with mountain views on either side.

Turning east at Achnasheen, you are rewarded with a view of one of the iconic mountain areas of Scotland – the Torridon Hills, with Beinn Eighe taking pride of place. To the north, the Fannich Hills, another favourite haunt of the Munro 'bagger'. Named after Sir Hugh Munro, who first compiled the list of Scottish hills over 3000 feet (914m), completing the 'Munros' is a challenge attempted by many. At the last count, there were 282 and as you would expect, there is a record for the time taken to complete them. Stephen Pyke made a continuous non-motorised round (using bicycle and kayak to link different ranges) in 2010 in just under 40 days – not bad, when you consider the walking distance is around 1800 miles with 575000 feet of ascent!

Time to get your breath back and head down Glen Docherty towards our destination at Kinlochewe, at the top of Loch Maree. Not a bad place to spend the evening.

Day 12 – Kinlochewe to Ullapool

Get ready for another day of bliss in the saddle! OK – there will be some climbing in the latter part of the day but your mind will have been distracted by the splendid vistas at every turn.

From Kinlochewe, carry on down Loch mare to Gairloch, on the coast. Cycling by lovely Loch Ewe, stop to think about this place some 70 years ago, when it was being used as a collecting point for Arctic convoys to Russia during WWII. Further round the bay is the remote crofting village of Mellon Charles (no idea where that name comes from!) where, if you have the time, you could call in at The Perfume Studio and Aroma Café.

The next bay along is the home of Gruinard Island, the site of an experiment in biological warfare in 1942. At a critical time in the war, the UK Government considered attacking Germany with biological weapons and Gruinard was chosen as a test site, being remote (from London, at least!) and uninhabited. The island was requisitioned. Bombs containing a virulent strain of anthrax were dropped near a flock of sheep; not surprisingly, the sheep died quickly. The fortunes of the war changed and the experiment remained just that. The contaminated island was declared out of bounds and it was not until the 1970s that a campaign to decontaminate the area was started. After some failed attempts, the island was declared safe in 1990 and it was returned to the heirs of the original owner for £500, the price the Government had paid in 1942.

Tantalisingly close as the crow flies, our destination, Ullapool, lies over 35 miles away from the lunch spot at Dundonnell. At least you have the majestic An Teallach (1063m) and the Strathnasheallag Forest to look at on the way!

Near the road junction where you turn left towards Ullapool, you will see signs for the Falls of Measach (Gaelic – ‘waterfalls of the place of platters’), a 46m waterfall in the Gorge of Corrieshallach. Owned by the NT for Scotland, there is a small viewing platform and honesty box.

On to Ullapool; a pretty fishing port, Ullapool is also home to the tropical cabbage, often mistaken for palm trees. Palm trees in the north of Scotland? Well, yes, courtesy of the influence of the Gulf Stream or North Atlantic Drift. Popular with tourists, the village also hosts the annual Loopallu Music Festival and Guitar Festival, both of which take place in early October.

Day 13 – Ullapool to Durness

As the tour progresses northwards, there is less to say but a lot more to see. Words do not do the scenery justice – you have to look for yourself.

Today is about travelling among stunning scenery – the Assynt Hills with the shapely peaks of Cul Mor, Suilven and Canisp, the Inverpolly National Nature Reserve. Further north, the road snakes beneath and between the mountains of Quinag and Glas Bheinn before trending back to the coast, to Scourie, and then turning northeast again, for the last time, to Durness. The mountains on this last stretch have names familiar to many – Arkle and Foinaven. In the 1967 Grand National, the horse of the same name and a complete outsider was lucky enough to avoid a melee at the 22nd fence and went on to win at odds of 100/1! Little needs to be said of Arkle’s racing record.

However, our intrepid researchers have come up with some amazing facts about this part of the country. At Knockan, for instance, you would not think that this was the place where, in

the 19th Century, a long and bitter argument took place about rocks. The argument was resolved many years later when the fault line (the cause of the dispute) was identified as a 'thrust fault', the first to be discovered in the world. Both sides claimed they had been right.

Ardvreck Castle, situated on a rocky promontory into Loch Assynt was a stronghold of the Clan MacLeod until it was seized by the Clan Mackenzie. As you ride past, imagine what it must have been like in those days.

Kylescu is an important strategic point on the way north. A ferry operated there for centuries but the pressures of traffic in the 20th Century meant a bridge was needed and this was opened by the Queen in 1984. Note the monument to the XIIth Submarine Flotilla on the north side. This commemorates the men who trained in the waters nearby and went on to operate the 'X-Craft' and 'Chariot' midget submarines in WWII. Kylescu is also the centre of the UK's first Global Geopark.

For the botanist, at Loch a Mhuilinn can be found the most northern remnant of natural oak forest in the UK; battered by the winds, some trees have adapted to creeping along the ground.

Look out to sea and Handa Island, now a nature reserve but once an ancient burial place.

Laxford Bridge, built in 1834, was part of the 'destitution roads' building programme, designed to bring some financial relief to those affected by the Potato Famine. Like Kylescu, it has great strategic value and when, in 2009, it had to be closed after an Army vehicle crashed into it, the resulting diversion involved 100miles!

Durness, once a thriving fishing and farming community, suffered badly from the Highland Clearances in the early 19th Century and never really recovered. Today, it is a tourist destination and the base for people visiting Cape Wrath and also Smoo Cave, just up the road. Smoo (Norse 'smjugg' or 'smugo', meaning hole or hiding place). The Cave is unique in the UK, being partly sea and partly freshwater formed.