

The Scottish Trip Part 1

By Dave Fenton

Oh weeee went up tae the heelans o' Scotland

The land of the loch and the glen

And we all brought our wives back a present

So we could go next time again...

Poetic introduction provided by 1970's Welsh folk hero Max Boyce's infamous rugby outing song: timeless words and proof, if it were needed, that some things never change.

This trip came about a little bit out of the blue. My normal routine of 'house dad' looking after my then three year old daughter, Bronny, while her mum, my better half Christina works, had been interrupted by me actually doing some of my more traditional graft and I had for the last month or so been building an extension for my mate Joe in Manchester. As the job drew to an end and my excitement of earning a lump of money intensified I began exploring on the computer several possible motorcycle trips I could take before the school holidays got underway, when I would be tied up with kids for the summer. One of these routes I had printed off was a near 2000 mile trip around much of the coast of Scotland. While I was out one day Chris had evidently discovered my *Google Maps* route plan of this trip and upon my return she suggested I take the trip sooner rather than later as the school holidays were indeed looming.

To cut a long story short, I did. In fact I jumped at the chance.

In reality it was the perfect time to be heading north. The days of early July in the far north of Scotland provide 18 to 20 hours of daylight, the temperatures are generally lovely and warm and there is less chance at this time of year than perhaps any other of being deluged by a solid week of grey Scottish rain. (Although it must be said, atrocious weather is still a distinct possibility!) The snap decision to go however did present me with a minor dilemma over the bike I wanted to take on this expedition. Since Christmas I had been scurrying away to the garage most nights re-vamping a 1998 Honda CB500 which had previously been cruelly abused and neglected by my son Jake while he was at university. I had another bike to fall back on, my faultless, tried and tested 2005 Aprilia SL1000 Falco, which I had used on a similar trip to Wales the previous autumn but I was keen to test out my newly acquired mechanical prowess and the modifications I had made on the considerably more modest Honda. Many of my initial doubts I had over the reliability of the little bike had been dispelled by me using it for the daily commute between Preston and Manchester while building Joe's extension. I had covered in the region of 1200 miles and felt reasonably safe in the knowledge that I had ironed out most of the problems. The CBeebie, as it had become affectionately known (clearly influenced by the amount of children's TV I had been forced to watch over the last 3 years) was heading north: I was just hoping, on a Honda wing and a prayer it would, a week or so later, be returning south under its own steam.

Although I had never been to the far north, much of the rest of Scotland is not virgin territory to me. For 20 years I have made a couple of trips a year to Ibrox to watch my adopted Scottish team: the famous

Glasgow Rangers. In addition to my numerous Glasgow outings I have also visited Edinburgh on several occasions for sporting events: rugby internationals at Murrayfield and, somewhat surprisingly, cricket when I once watched my native Lancashire playing (and beating) Scotland at 'The Grange' cricket ground in the capital. Further afield there was a time in my life around a decade ago when my regular long weekend jaunt was Inverness. This had been pre-empted by the wedding of two good friends in Dalkeith to which I had been invited and I took the opportunity of being north of the border to follow their celebrations with a week of car touring around Scotland. On that first venture to the Highlands I travelled from Dalkeith up the A9 to Inverness, then after a few days at a hotel on Loch Ness across to Portree on the Isle of Skye and then down the west coast back into England. The weather, views and roads had been magnificent and the hospitality I received warmer than any I had previously encountered anywhere. Subsequently I fell in love with Scotland and returned to the Inverness and Black Isle regions maybe a dozen times over the next few years.

Yet despite my fascination with the area further north of Inverness I never managed to fully explore the final 100 miles or so up to the north coast. The somewhat shameful and shabby truth is in those days I more often than not fell for the terrible temptation almost always on offer and seemingly perfectly acceptable in Scotland: drinking far too much. I would arrive at my destination, head to the bar and spent the remainder of my visit either too drunk or too hung over to drive any further. In the words of Scotland's national anthem, 'Those days are passed now, and in the past they must remain.' This time, although I still love to have a 'wee blether' with the locals in the bar, my priority would be the landscape and not the monster more commonly known as Tennants lager.

My original plan which Chris had discovered saw me travelling all the way up the A9 to John O' Groats, west across the top of Scotland and then down the west coast. I had decided to give the east coast cities of Aberdeen and Dundee a miss as my somewhat vague memory of driving along that road was a little dull but since I had made the decision to stay in Youth Hostels the availability of hostels would play a part in my planning. The hostel at Oban being full on my projected arrival day forced me to reverse my route. No problem with that so the revised schedule was:

Day 1 – Preston Lancashire to New Lanark.

Day 2 – New Lanark to Oban via Glasgow and the Trossachs.

Day 3 – Oban to Torridon.

Day 4 – Torridon to Durness via Ullapool.

Day 5 – Durness to Helmsdale via John O' Groats.

Day 6 – Helmsdale to Pitlochery via Cromarty and Inverness.

Day 7 – Pitlochery to Berwick-upon-Tweed via Edinburgh.

Day 8 – Berwick to Preston via Scottish Borders or Northumberland and North Yorkshire.
(Undecided at time of leaving.)

Day 1 – Preston to New Lanark. 164 miles.

Wednesday 2nd July 2014 saw a bright sunny morning in Lancashire, a few high white clouds blowing gently across the otherwise clear blue sky. Chris had left the house early to undertake school drop-off duties for her elder two daughters while I was entrusted to take little Bronwyn to the nursery. By 9am my parental task was complete and I was transformed into lone biker mode. The CBeebie was rolled out of the garage leaving the grumpy looking Aprilia alone gathering cobwebs. My new soft panniers were slung across the back seat and my alarmingly extensive tool kit was shoe-horned into the top box along with my primus stove and brewing up equipment in case the bloody bike broke down and I needed them quick. I lashed my trusty Hein Gericke waterproof bag containing my clothes over the top of my panniers which had the added bonus of providing some surprisingly effective back support; fastened my little tank bag containing my mobile phone, sunglasses, wallet and a multitude of electrical wires into place; went back in the house to give Mayzy my lovely Lurcher a stoke, locked up, came back out, kicked the tyres and chain and set off.



CBeebie, ready to roll.

The first leg of my mission was to get to New Lanark youth Hostel, about 30 miles south of Glasgow and according to my sat-nav, 'TomTom the undeniable' 164 miles from my starting point at PR5. This mileage meant I was well within my preferred limit of 200 miles per day so plenty of stops and sight-seeing could be accommodated. I planned to ride un-interrupted the first 70 or so miles up to the town of Penrith where I would acquaint myself with a large late breakfast from the excellent 'Rooster' transport cafe. From there I would cross the border and call in at Gretna to be a tourist for a short while before pressing on up to Moffat for a cup of tea and a visit to the butchers for my promised (to myself) nice T-bone steak to cook later at the hostel. I would then see how the time and traffic were getting on before deciding which way to find New Lanark and maybe try a little pint out once I got there.

When I first set off the normally light and frisky feeling CBeebie felt a little top-heavy and cumbersome with all its extra luggage, but by the time I had entered Britain's first section of motorway, the M6 bypassing Preston and was buzzing northwards over the River Ribble, I had become accustomed to the change and the bike felt just fine. The eager little 500cc parallel twin motor easily propelled me along at the brisk motorway pace.

Just a few minutes later I was approaching a section of road works around the Blackpool M55 junction, complete with their 50mph speed restriction. Pleasingly, I knew this section to have speed cameras configured to read the front number plates of vehicles so while all the cars, vans and trucks were forced to hit the brakes and slow down, myself and one or two other bikers were able to merrily continue at 65-70 mph: celebrating inside our helmets the fact that bikes don't have front plates. Hurrah! A small and maybe meaningless victory over the money-grabbing, camera-dependent parasites at the Department of Transport, but a victory none-the-less!

After riding for about half an hour I decided I'd better check all the straps, bungees, Velcro and whatever other items of bondage were securing my recently purchased panniers. I pulled into Lancaster services and parked up next to a couple stood by the side of their very nice, very shiny and very expensive BMW motorway munching tour bike. They were friendly pair from Cheshire, obviously quite excited about their little outing on their bike and they proceeded to tell me they were going to spend a 4 or 5 days in the lakes, at some spa hotel I think, and their bike had cost twelve grand. I couldn't help feeling a glow of self satisfaction as I looked down at my scruffy little CBeebie and contemplated the ride I was undertaking. My bike stood me at £400, a few short weeks before it had been several rusty piles of parts spread over my garage floor and I was undertaking a journey over ten times the distance of theirs. That said, if he'd have wanted to swap bikes I think I might have allowed my arm to be twisted. We exchanged wishes for a safe trip and I let them set off up the M6 before me as they would no doubt be cruising at least 20mph faster than my more usual 70-80mph. Rejoining the M6 I steadily progressed northwards into the cooling air and increasingly dramatic northern mountain scenery. Soon I had passed through the southern Lake District and saw over to my right the familiar sight of the Cumbrian town of Penrith where of course I had a pre-planned meeting with my breakfast.



Less than half a mile off the motorway the 'Rooster' cafe and petrol station sits on a roundabout just before Penrith town centre. I pulled into the car park and followed a beefy trucker inside the familiar cafe. He ordered the large Rooster breakfast which I had been contemplating as I rode up the motorway but

upon seeing the mountain of food he was presented with and the prospect of riding another 100 miles without falling asleep I took the more modest medium option. I was still too much but it was bloody good; in-fact it was superb. I can't think of a better breakfast in the entire UK.

After my highly satisfying late breakfast I filled the bike up before heading the 30 miles or thereabouts to Gretna. As I rode up the motorway I was feeling a little confused by the mental arithmetic calculations I was trying to undertake, working out the mpg of the bike since my last fill up, 160-odd miles ago and a couple of days before. I kept coming up with the number of 68mpg but was sure I'd miscalculated as I didn't think this was possible for a 16 year old 500cc bike carrying a total weight of about 20 stones and travelling between 70 and 80 mph. I was so engrossed in my mental arithmetic that I almost missed the turn off for Gretna's so called 'tourist attractions.' I wish I had missed it! What a load of tartan tom-foolery, absolute rubbish, nothing more than overpriced mock-high-quality junk. To be fair there was a piper belting out a grand old tune in the square in front of the Old Smithy Restaurant and associated exorbitant shops, clearly intended to fleece stupid foreigners with no grasp of the exchange rate, but despite his rousing pipe-blowing I lasted no more than five minutes in that pretend homely money-making factory before being overcome with a healthy amount of Mancunian cynicism and bugging off back to my bike to work out my fuel consumption. When I got back to the bike I got out my pen and paper and did the calculations: 68.4mpg! This was great news for my trip budget but even better for my ego as my mental arithmetic skills were evidently still intact despite years of alcohol and punk rock.

Thanks mum for all those hours making us chant times-tables in the back of the car.

NB. To be fair to Gretna I must point out that I visited the place again in January 2015 to attend my niece, Luci's wedding, and honestly had a tremendous time. I arrived for the ceremony full of foreboding following my brief stop in summer yet attending a real wedding in the old blacksmiths smithy reassured my faith somewhat. The shops and the hotel bar were still a complete rip-off though.

The feel-good effects of excellent mpg and mathematical skills quickly eliminated the foul taste in my mouth left by Gretna's money grabbing introduction to Scotland and after only another half hour or so I was taking another familiar junction off the motorway, now changed to the A74(M), to Moffat. I'd always liked Moffat: it is a little bit touristy but still a proper little market town. One place I had always made a point of visiting was the butchers on the town square 'Wallace Bros' where I would usually buy half a dozen haggis (haggises?) on my way home. Much to my disappointment however, on this occasion I found the shop closed. Not open on Wednesdays at all. Dammit! I went over to the bakers and bought a couple of Scotch pies and a bunch of bananas from the green grocer but since I didn't want to eat or drink yet there was no real point in hanging around. I stuffed my 'emergency' pies and bananas in the panniers and a little grumpily set off looking for the road to New Lanark.

After another short stint on the motorway I picked up the brown tourist signs for the 'World Heritage Site of New Lanark' no less! It took me on the A702 Clyde Valley Tourist Route. This road cheered me right up. All of a sudden the CBeebie felt transformed from the underpowered little runt that it is on the motorway to a nippy, perfectly balanced, great handling barrel of fun along the fast and winding A road, even with a big lump of me and a load of luggage on. The Clyde Valley Tourist Route is a 42mile long picturesque road following (obviously) the lesser sections of the River Clyde as the river begins its transformation from the modest and shallow stream in the south of Scotland to the mighty waterway which flows through Glasgow and enabled the city to obtain much of its wealth and reputation during the Industrial Revolution. The road really is well worth pulling off the motorway to ride. (Or even drive in your boring and silly little tin box if you still do what your mummy tells you!)

As the winding road cut its way through the lush deep green grasslands I began to approach the town of Lanark. To my left a large farm with a prominent and memorable 'Damn Delicious' sign, clearly

attempting to entice passing motorists into their farm shop was visible. TomTom was informing me the hostel was only a few miles further so I thought I'd get booked in and return to buy my steak. As it was I didn't but only because when I passed through the town of Lanark only a mile or two further there was a 'Damn Delicious' shop on the high street. I quickly pulled the bike over and went into the shop. 'T-bone please' I purposefully requested of the girl behind the counter. 'Who beg a one d'yr warn't?' Came the refreshingly blunt answer which of course loosely translates as 'what size steak would you prefer sir?'

Hurrah! After the piss-poor introduction to Scotland I had inflicted upon me at Gretna and the disappointment of my favourite shop in Moffat being closed, here in Lanark I was finally in real Scotland.

However, this steak situation was potentially a dangerous one. If I allowed my roughty-toughty, leather-clad, long-haired lone biker ego to take over I could end up with half a cow. I modestly decided therefore on a reasonably huge 32oz slab of the finest Aberdeen Angus T-bone and after listening to the surprisingly appetising sound of sawing and chopping from the back room of the butchers shop for a minute or two I was presented with the most perfectly cut and beautifully matured steak imaginable. It was about 2" thick with rich deep red flesh and yellow fat. Despite me still being full from the Rooster breakfast it looked good enough to sink my teeth into there and then. This fine steak would have no need of accompanying vegetables or any other sort of rabbit food. While I was in the butchers I also decided to sort out tomorrow's breakfast: I bought 6 award winning Aberdeen Angus Lorne sausages and a box of eggs. The plan was to have the steak tonight in the hostel and then stop on the shore of some remote loch side en-route to Oban tomorrow morning to cook my sausage and eggs on my primus stove. It had all the ingredients of being a great plan.

The town centre of Lanark, displaying the fairly typical Scottish traits of elegant high culture and alcoholism intertwined, and emitting the exotic yet greasy smell of far-too-many to be good for you take-aways held no further interest to me once I had filled my top box with premium meat. I followed TomTom the remaining mile and a half out of town to the curious destination of New Lanark. Strangely TomTom misdirected me to the village, unless of course it assumed I was some sort of off-road nutcase or a mountain goat. It took me down a rough footpath which ended with a long set of steep stone steps down to a muddy river bank. I realised at the top of the steps I was going to have to hump the heavy, unwieldy bike around on the footpath and get back to the road where there were brown tourist signs leading the proper way into the World Heritage site. Evidently TomTom isn't quite as sure of itself in Scotland as it was in Wales last year where its accuracy was astounding.

New Lanark was a model industrial village founded in 1786 comprising of purpose built housing and amenities for the workers and their families who were to work in the new cotton mills built specifically on this site to draw power from the waterfalls on the River Clyde. If you are particularly interested in industrial history and architecture you would find the place fascinating. Unfortunately I have little more than a passing interest in such areas and subsequently found the place a very strange place to sleep for the night. The long empty streets lined by tall empty houses and huge mills gave the impression of being on a movie set for a disaster film set in the mid 19th Century. It was odd.



New Lanark Youth Hostel (Open door on the right)

Inside the hostel normality was resumed. The warden, whose name I've forgotten was a tall balding bloke in his 50's who I immediately thought was an Aussie. It turned out he was a New Zealander and fortunately for me I spotted the familiar silver fern on the breast of his semi-concealed All-Blacks shirt before I asked him what part of Australia he came from: thereby avoiding any Antipodean wrath. I was shown to my £18 per night dormitory and informed in all likelihood I would be the only guest tonight. After my brief introductory ride around New Lanark I silently thought it to be more likely I would be the only guest this year. However, that was not to be the case and shortly after my arrival a large Irish registered Skoda estate car pulled up on the red gravel roadway sporting a huge roof box. A tall couple in their fifties emerged from the car followed by their early teenage son. We exchanged nods of greeting before they disappeared inside the hostel where I presume they had arranged a family room.

Since there was nothing of interest to me in the hostel or within the historical or architectural curiosities of the site I decided I might as well try a pint out and set off walking down through the village to the bar. It turned out to be an annoyingly long walk down the seemingly never ending hill to the hotel, situated in a converted stone cotton mill at the bottom of the village. I sampled an expensive pint of Amstel but failed to draw any form of conversation from the grumpy looking business clientele. It was a waste of time in there so I trudged back up the damn hill to get to work on my steak. I still wasn't really hungry after the Rooster late breakfast but there was nothing else to do and if I ate my steak I would in all likelihood fall asleep early so then I would wake up early and get the hell out of this odd place.

I got my beast of a steak out of the top box and went into the excellent and deserted catering kitchen available for the use of guests at the hostel. I fired up one of the gas rings and seasoned the T-bone with some salt and black pepper. Within a couple of minutes of the steak going into the frying pan, just as the first delicious whiff's of it's wonderful aroma started to spread throughout the dining area the Irish family came into the kitchen with the mum efficiently marshalling their evening meal: healthy looking bags of supermarket bought fresh salad, pasta and roasted chicken fillets. The tall grey haired dad of the family came into the kitchen, his eyes, under the direct control of his nostrils, drawn towards my magnificent steak sizzling away merrily in the pan. 'Jees dats a fine lookin steak ya have dere!' he said. A minute or

two later two youngish Chinese women also appeared in the kitchen from God knows where, their eyes also only responding to the sensory signals being received in their brains from their nostrils stood open mouthed gawping with murderous and envious eyes at my steak. After they yammered something in their own totally bewildering language to each other one of them turned to me and sinisterly said 'Dat look really nice!'

I was under siege! Marooned in a deserted 19th Century zombie apocalypse village surrounded by starving murderous foreigners and they were all after my T-bone!

Fortunately for all concerned I wasn't forced to fight off the potentially murderous hordes to maintain control of the steak and as I sat down, strategically and menacingly armed with my steak knife, and began to devour the lightly seasoned and perfectly cooked medium rare example of bovine perfection I realised what all the fuss was about. It was, without any shadow of a doubt, the most delicious steak I've ever tasted. And believe me, I've tasted a few in my time. < www.damndelicious.co.uk >

After I'd skilfully reduced the 32oz T-bone to nothing more than a bone, I sloped, or perhaps more accurately staggered outside to sit and slowly digest the cornucopia of steak I had just wolfed-down. I sat in front of the hostel on a rickety old plastic chair contentedly looking around at the silent, deserted disaster movie set blowing vapour rings from my electronic cigarette. A while passed as I peacefully watched the towering trees gently sway in the refreshingly cool summer evening breeze. It was all very pleasant really despite the odd surroundings.

The mother of the Irish family interrupted my contemplation of the wind and the trees when she purposefully came marching past and asked if I had seen the rest of her brood. I playfully answered that they'd probably gone down the pub but in the brief conversation I noticed something odd about her accent: it was strange, yet also vaguely familiar. She set off at pace in the direction of the pub and, as one might expect, two minutes later the father and son emerged from the opposite direction. I told them of their pursuer but they seemed fairly indifferent to her hopeless plight and instead got a football out of their car and started knocking it about on the gravel. Even this, a father and son knocking a ball around seemed strange. They were doing some of the usual stuff with the ball, flicking it up and passing it to one-another, but they kept catching the ball and sort of punch passing it between themselves. It wasn't the sort of thing you would see going on between an English father and son. I made the uneducated and patronising deduction that they simply weren't much good at football but it didn't seem to fit. What they were doing did have an obvious level of skill and technique to it. I watched them for a few more minutes before curiosity eventually got the better of me and I asked them what the hell they were doing with that damn ball?

The amusing answer at least cleared up one of the days areas of oddness for me. The son, Jack was practicing his Gaelic football. Apparently he is something of a teenage talent in this mysterious (to me) game.

As light rain and darkness began to fall we all ended up going back into the common room of the hostel where a tremendous night's intelligent and informative conversation ensued, mainly with the dad, Joe. He is a recently retired Gaelic language teacher from a small village in West Cork. His wife Karin is actually German and hails from a town called Norderstedt, near Hamburg where I worked as an 'Auf Wiedersehen Pet' type bricklayer 18years ago. It's a small old world isn't it? Anyway, the revelation of Karin's nationality cleared up another of the day's oddities: her accent. A north German woman, speaking very formal and correct English with a fair dose of the gentle West Cork accent: well how the hell was I supposed to work that out?

After being engrossed in interesting conversation late into the night I finally bade my farewells and retired upstairs to the six bed dorm where I had dumped my stuff earlier. Somewhat surprisingly while we

had been downstairs yapping someone else had sneaked in the dorm and was zonked out in one of the other beds. I never did find out anything about him.

Day 2 – New Lanark to Oban via Glasgow and the Trossachs. 125 miles.

After sleeping like the proverbial log I awoke around 8am to find no signs of life from anyone else. Instead of waiting around I just decided to get my stuff strapped back on the CBeebie and to head up to Glasgow. My big plan for the day was to visit all three of the major football stadiums in the great city: Ibrox obviously; Hampden Park, the Scottish National Stadium and Parkhead, or as it seems to be becoming more commonly known, Celtic Park, the home of Britain's first and Scotland's only European Cup winners, Glasgow Celtic. After visiting the stadiums I would cross the River Clyde on the Erskine Bridge to the west of the city from where I would head for Loch Lomond and tour through the Trossachs region en-route to my bed for the night at the west coast town of Oban. Some people like to visit art galleries and cathedrals when in unfamiliar cities but I prefer the temples of the common folk and in Glasgow especially, the football stadiums are certainly that. Anyway, life would be ever so dull if we all liked and did the same stuff.

My first destination for the day was geographically determined as Parkhead, since New Lanark was located to the south-east of the east Glasgow home of Celtic and I would essentially be travelling in a north-westerly direction to reach Oban. As I rode the fairly unremarkable 24 miles into the city I thought almost constantly of my old and sadly departed buddy, Tommy Keeler. I worked with Tommy for over 20 years before he died two years ago of lung cancer and it was he who got me into supporting Rangers. As a long time Rangers fan he obviously hated Celtic with a passion. Tommy was also famous in our circles for his highly creative and totally obscene turn of phrase when insults were being dished-out and several times during my ride into Glasgow that morning I was forced to laugh out loud thinking of the names he would be calling me because I was visiting his sworn green and white enemy, Celtic.



What would Tommy think? Never mind that, what would he call me?

With me arriving in Glasgow three weeks before the start of the 2014 Commonwealth Games, the roads around Parkhead, where the opening and closing ceremonies of the games were to be staged, were in absolute turmoil. I eventually negotiated my way through the lunatic designed corridor of traffic cones to find the entrance to the car park but upon entering I was almost immediately stopped by site security.

Hundreds of workers were busy carting great crates of something or other into the stadium. I was allowed to park up my bike next to the security cabin and take a little walk across the front of the ground to the club shop where I refrained from buying anything green for fear of provoking a vengeful reaction from the ever watching spirit of Tommy: instead I wandered back to the site cabin and had a yap with some of the workers milling around. The lads on the site told me my next port of call, Hampden, was even less accessible but undeterred I set off riding through the bowels of the Glasgow sub-terrain on the much travelled three mile trek to National Stadium. The lads were right! Hampden was to be utilised during the games as the main athletics stadium so all around the surrounding area 'Games Lanes' had been superimposed onto the normal road network creating absolute traffic madness for me and thousands of resident Glaswegians trying desperately to go about their daily business. The stadium itself was surrounded by a two meter high steel mesh fence, at its closest point maybe 100 meters from the stadium. I even went to try and have a look at Queens Park FC's club shop but no-one was around, it was a complete waste of time. I considered for a moment that since the stadiums were fenced off in preparation for the games I might as well not bother going to Ibrox but as the home of Rangers was only being used for the Rugby 7's tournament, which essentially would not be much different to a football match, I hoped there would be less disruption in the area. (Another reason for continuing to Ibrox was the fear of provoking an appearance of the ghost of Tommy condemning me a traitor for bypassing Rangers after I'd visited Celtic.) I reset the TomTom and began the equally well worn four mile path between Hampden and Ibrox, only to find on arrival a similar ring of steel totally surrounding the elegant red brick facade of Rangers FC. At Ibrox I couldn't even get close to the club shop without leaving my bike hundreds of meters away and with all my stuff strapped on the bike and no real security around there was no-way that was going to happen in the notoriously dodgy area of Govan. My football grounds plan had well and truly fell on its arse. I should have gone to the art gallery instead.



Thou shall not pass! The category 'B' listed main stand at Ibrox looking as elegant as ever behind the 'Friendly Games' security fence.

The good thing about being in Govan was all of a sudden I knew my way around. I had a little ride around all the places I've frequented many times on my Rangers outings: bars mainly like the Lauden Tavern and The Wee Rangers Club and I found it amazing how different these places look when not overflowing with heavily intoxicated 'blue-noses.' I then rode away from the stadium area to the Govan Asda supermarket to fill up the CBeebie and decided that since there was no point in hanging around Glasgow I might as well jump on the M8 and head west. In-fact, the morning spent negotiating traffic in Glasgow made me decide I wasn't going to bother with any other cities on this trip. Twenty minutes later I had passed Glasgow airport and was crossing the Erskine Bridge, from there I picked up the A82, whizzed past Dumbarton and entered the considerably more pleasing to the eyes Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park.

As I was pottering up the A82, savouring the views of Loch Lomond and the surrounding hills, I spotted a likely looking picnic spot by the loch side. I hardly ever eat breakfast early and after my 'faffing' around in Glasgow it was now approaching noon: that in my mind was Lorne sausage o'clock. I pulled into the car park and found a robust picnic table close to the waterside where I set my primus stove up ready to get to work on my award winning sausages. Soon enough the hefty squares of meat were sizzling away in the pan while some bemused American tourists, no doubt getting to grips with their mythical yet much prized highland heritage, twitched their noses at the prospect of fried meat.



Prize winning Aberdeen Angus Lorne sausages, fresh fried eggs and... midges!

The flaw in my otherwise wonderful plan of breakfast by the scenic loch side was one I really should have foreseen: the notorious Scottish midge. It seems the little bastards are also quite fond of award winning Lorne sausages. Within a few moments of the savoury delight beginning to sizzle in the pan I was descended upon by millions of microscopic Caledonian insects. Instead of a pleasant and relaxing experience sitting by the loch savouring my much anticipated sausages, I was forced to scoff my premium quality breakfast straight out of the pan while walking around at a fair pace trying to get away from the little bastards, and even then I'm sure I ate a good few dozen of them. After bolting down my food I quickly packed away my stuff and got the hell out of there, leaving the by now frenzied and ravenous midges, who's sense of smell had evidently been intensified by the aroma of my award winning Lorne sausages to satisfy their appetite for flesh, cooked or uncooked, on the hapless and soon to be itching and scratching coach-load of Yanks.

I rode at full speed up the loch side with my jacket and visor wide open to blow away any malingering midges trying to nest in my hair and clothing before arriving at the Tarbet Hotel, perhaps 5 miles further up the loch. The only previous time I had been here was around three years ago when I visited with Chris and Bronny and I was on crutches because of... yes you guessed it... a bike accident. Despite my painful memories of hobbling around on my last visit I decided to stop to have a nosey and to make sure I'd got all the midges out of my jacket and hair. Tarbet is a very pleasant spot on the loch side with a jetty serving as a landing post for numerous boat trips. The Tarbet Hotel across the road is a grand old building which appears totally deserted during the daytime but comes to life at night when the place is packed to the rafters with hundreds of senior citizens who arrive from traipsing all over the country on their £100 a week all inclusive coach holidays. I was just weighing-up the possibility of going finding myself a nice ice cream to finish off my rushed breakfast of sausage egg and midge when my attention was caught by the ludicrous noise of three Czech registered Harley Davidson's, ridden by patch wearing greasers and thundering down the road in the direction I would be heading. I gave them a few minutes start while I put my riding gear back on then set off in pursuit of their by now distant but still clearly audible stupid exhausts.



Admiring the view at Tarbet by 'the bonny bonny banks of Loch Lomond.'

Somewhat disappointingly I caught the trio of Harley's up in no time and then proceeded to follow them at little more than a dawdle for the next twenty one miles. As I followed them I wondered with increasing bewilderment why anyone would tolerate such a ridiculous amount of noise for so little actual performance. I watched their riders struggle as their heavy-weight, multi-thousand dollar; overly-chromed monstrosities wallowed round the corners with all the poise of a floundering oil tanker and their deafening acceleration out of the corners and down the straights was easily surpassed by my bargain basement Honda with less than one-third of their engine capacity. I'm not some race-bike nut-case who wants to throw my bike into a corner like Valentino Rossi - I'm too heavy, too old and simply not good enough to ride like that - but these bikes on these roads looked all but unmanageable. I don't like criticising other people's choices, we are all bikers after all, but to my mind these bikes, which admittedly look fantastic when you see them under stylish lighting at the bike shows, are just not cut out for winding British roads. Put them on a 2000 mile, straight as an arrow desert highway with a 50 mph speed limit and I'm sure they're the business. Clearly the Harley brigade are much more motivated by trying to re-create

and re-enact some mythical romantic image than by any more practical considerations. I personally don't get it but as I stated earlier life would be a dull thing if we all liked the same stuff.

After half an hour or so of Harley induced ear-ache I was only too keen to pull off at the seemingly famous biker pit stop: The Green Welly cafe and petrol station at Tyndrum. To be fair it wasn't just the pointless racket being generated by the trio of Harleys that prompted my withdrawing to the Green Welly car park but also the multitude of bikes parked up outside and the huge ice cream sign standing at the roadside: I love ice cream. The bikes parked up were in the majority the BMW GS and KTM adventure types, mostly fully kitted out with huge and almost criminally expensive aluminium panniers. (...and from what I saw mostly empty panniers although I'm sure their owners would tell you they were just trying them out in preparation for their trip to Mars.) There were also a couple of small groups of fully leather clad sports bike riders loitering alongside their Fireblades, R1's and Mille's. I realised how out of place I must have looked both by being alone and by riding the cheap and cheerful little old CBeebie. But the thing is I wouldn't really want it any other way: I have never wanted to be part of anyone's gang and even if I could afford a fifteen grand bike I wouldn't buy one.

It was quite evident by the hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of two-wheeled machinery in the Green Welly car park that the ominous and depressing warnings in the mainstream bike magazines of biking in Britain becoming a middle aged, middle class pursuit appear to have at least some basis in truth. Most of the other riders here, none of whom incidentally even let on to me when I pulled up, were wearing helmets, and in some cases boots, worth more than my bike. Poor little old me! On the bright side of the Green Welly I did manage to obtain a huge and extremely satisfying blackcurrant and cream cornet and as I sat alone slurping and generally getting it all over my face like some greedy kid I slowly began to realise they were probably right not to let on to me. Once I'd fulfilled my childish appetite and got all (well, most) of the ice cream off my face I consulted TomTom as to how far it was to Oban: it was only 36 miles so I had plenty of time to mooch about once I got there.

The ride pretty much due west from Tyndrum to Oban reminded me of a ride I took in the same direction last year out to Aberystwyth on the west coast of mid-Wales. It must be something to do with the position of the sun I suppose and seems to prove that a few hundred miles north doesn't really make much difference in the grand scheme of things. One big difference however was that the A85 to Oban follows the very beautiful shores of Loch Awe. Having never been on this road before and never even having heard of Loch Awe I was forced to stop and take in the magnificent views and take photographs on several occasions. Despite the frequent stops within an hour of me leaving the Green Welly I was entering the outskirts of the surprisingly large town of Oban. For no particular reason I had a vision in my mind of a small village yet I found it to be a fairly large and fairly busy town. I was also surprised to see large ferries docking in the harbour and crossing between Oban and the Isle of Mull. I simply didn't realise there was a demand for such a large service. As it was still only early afternoon when I arrived I decided to have a look around the town before going booking in at the hostel. I parked up the CBeebie on the High Street across the road from a shop being used as an election office for the 'Yes' campaign in the upcoming Scottish referendum.



The man from Del Monte... he say...

Strangely for me, I had no opinion over this matter so I felt comfortable going in to have a yap with the young fanatic manning the post. He was certainly enthusiastic, especially when I told him my actual address wasn't Northern England as my accent would have been telling him but Anglesey in North Wales. He was only too keen given this information to tell me (I already knew!) the majority of the Anglesey electorate support the Welsh nationalist party Plaid Cymru. I pointed out to him that if Scotland voted yes, England and Wales would be condemned to an eternity of Tory rule but his answer to that was we would be welcome to move to Scotland! This response made me momentarily wonder if Alex Salmond was a secret estate agent or owned shares in a major Scottish house building company and this whole thing was a plan to re-populate Scotland and drive house prices up. I dismissed this theory after a short while since it was too complicated to think about while I was on holiday but I still, even after the referendum has been done and dusted can't say I have a strong opinion on the matter. I suppose if I was pushed for an answer and I was Scottish I would rather stand or fall by my own decisions than those made in Westminster.

After leaving the 'Yes' fanatic to pounce on some other poor inquisitive fool who walked in from the street I went for a look round the rest of town. It was really as one might expect: big name shops the same as you would find on any high street in the land mixed in with other local enterprises. Oban isn't exactly a classy sort of town but it isn't tourist 'tacky' either. My better half Chris would have loved all the sea-food being constantly landed and prepared at a number of alfresco cafes on the quayside and there were plenty of other restaurants and pubs to cater for most tastes and budgets. It was nice but I wasn't here to visit towns.



I think the only way to get fresher sea-food is to be a fish. Shame I don't like the stuff!

After an hour or two looking at the shops I decided to go and find the hostel, it wasn't far away, just through the town centre on the shore-front road. The hostel in Oban was a big operation: a large and grand three story sea-front property; very busy and as I arrived full of teenage German school kids disembarking from an enormous coach. Fortunately school parties always seem to be kept well away from independent hostellers so that was the first and last time I saw the little 'Eric's.' Inside my top floor, eight bed dorm I was welcomed into the room by a short Scottish bloke called Steve from Denny near Falkirk. He was probably in his late 40's (although he looked a bit older due to drink I suspect) and was busy setting up his stuff in his chosen bed. Steve was a friendly enough chap and said he was a regular at the hostel where he knew all the staff by name. The trouble was he soon started waffling on about Falkirk Council and the Health and Safety Act and I quickly realised he was a pub bore. As I set my bed up I tried to look moderately interested in whatever it was he was going on about but he continued to drone on incessantly. Thankfully, after half an hour or so he decided it was time to top up his evidently depleted alcohol level and left to inform some other poor git about the deficiencies of Falkirk's political elite and the councils health and safety executives.



Oban Youth Hostel.

Two minutes after Steve had left me in peace the dorm door opened and someone else came in. This time an older skinny bloke, probably in his mid 60's who looked very fit and was obviously a walker came and introduced himself with a broad Lancashire accent as Dave from Preston and immediately identified my accent as being Mancunian. It turned out Dave was a retired aero-engineer and was interested to hear I spent most of my time in Preston and knew the area I stayed in well. However, during the opening exchanges of conversation and noticing his obvious walking attire I made the critical mistake of telling him my better half was a keen hill walker. He latched onto that like a Jack Russell to a cats arse. From then on the conversation was about nothing but walking and since I have no interest whatsoever in tramping up mountains pouring in sweat and wheezing like a set of knackered bagpipes I decided the only way of avoiding being told about every rock between Preston and Iceland was to bugger off to the pub: hopefully one where Steve wasn't waxing lyrical about his particular obsession.

I felt a little bit bad about my lack of interest in Steve or Dave's topics of conversation; they were both nice enough blokes but I just didn't share their passions. That said I did walk to a pub right over the other side of town to lessen the chances of them collaring me again so I couldn't have felt that guilty.

The pub I found over the other side of town was a great find: Aulay's Bar, a pub full of local fishermen and a hilariously sarcastic barman whose name I'm afraid I didn't ask. In there I had a few refreshing pints of Tennants Lager and was informed by the local fishermen, expertly as it turned out, of tomorrow's weather. The whole crowd of customers in the pub seemed to be roaring, shouting, laughing and generally having a great time and all the while the barman was keeping up the tempo with his stupendous sarcasm. I was enjoying myself so much in there I decided I'd better leave before I ended up bladdered and unable to ride in the morning. Proof indeed that I had grown up from the drunken fool I once was.



Aulay's Bar. Probably the best pub in Oban.

I wandered back through town calling in at 'Norries' fish and chips shop, which proudly boasts of 'three generations of frying excellence.' It wasn't bad but at over seven quid for fish and chips it was bloody expensive and, I'm sad to say as a proud Lancastrian, it was nowhere near the standard of the best Yorkshire fish and chip shops. Round the corner from Norries I spotted a sign for 'Foley's Irish Bar,' however, possibly due to the earlier Tennants I missed the bit on the sign that said 'upstairs' and went by accident into the 'Balmoral Inn' next door. Inside this dreadful pub a bored but fairly good looking young Lithuanian barmaid was pretending to watch Emmerdale on the huge TV while feverishly tapping away on her i-phone. All the while an equally young pretend bohemian Scottish lad was desperately trying to chat her up. It was painful to watch but Emmerdale was probably worse. I briefly considered telling the daft lad he was wasting his time as she was plainly an East European 'material girl' with absolutely no interest whatsoever in his claimed ability to play guitar or his deep understanding of the lyrics of Bob Dylan. (This is absolutely true... you couldn't make it up!) She in all likelihood had come to the UK under the impression that even in this remote outpost she would be able to ensnare a software millionaire with his own castle who would buy her a Porsche and move her entire extended family from Lithuania to his country estate. I quickly necked my pint so I could get away from his cringingly embarrassing advances and left them to work on their incompatibility.

Heading back towards the hostel I stopped for a last pint at Markie Dan's Bar on the roundabout between the town centre and the sea front road where the hostel was. I half expected Steve to be in here so was pleasantly surprised when I looked inside to see he wasn't. This gaff was an interesting looking cellar bar but once inside I discovered the customers all to be transfixed with another giant TV showing Sky Sports News: the boring bastards. I had a little conversation in pigeon German with two kraut women explaining the dark real ale they were interested in trying was similar to German Dunkel Bier and that Tennants Lager although popular was in no way comparable quality wise to their Pilsners.

All in all it had been an interesting night, the first pub, Aulay's was great but the other two were rubbish. I headed back to the hostel as darkness and rain began to fall. I stopped outside to cover the bike and Dave the walker came out announcing he was going to the chippy and would tell me all about tomorrow's

destination, Torridon, when he got back. I know it was a bit unkind but instead of going and reading my kindle for an hour or two as I intended and thereby being trapped and talked at by Dave, I went upstairs, got all my bags packed up ready for an early get-away and forced myself to sleep.

Day 3 – Oban to Torridon (via Oban!) 155 miles. (plus 60!)

After a resounding nine hours sleep I woke with a mild Tennants induced headache at 6 o'clock. Including myself, Steve and Dave, there were five blokes in our dorm that night and I've no idea who the other two were. There was at this early hour no sign of life from Dave the walker, and Steve who was snoring like a drowning warthog and stinking of whisky was clearly several hours from regaining consciousness, so without bidding them a pleasant weekend I silently slipped out of the dorm with all my gear, checked out and began loading up the bike. Unfortunately for me the fishermen in Aulay's had been correct with their forecast and it was, as they predicted, pissing down. The fishermen had told me it would clear up later in the afternoon but since I had quite a long ride on the cards along roads I wrongly assumed to be totally new to me I decided to get my waterproofs on and press northwards.

I departed Oban on the A85 road which I had entered the town yesterday and topped up the CBeebie with 6 litres of petrol at the fuel station just outside the town, smugly congratulating myself on how little petrol the bike was using and how well it was running. Shortly after I took the right filter lane to loop left over the old railway bridge, now converted to a road bridge, crossing the bottleneck entrance to Loch Etive. The bridge signifies the beginning of the A828 heading north to Fort William. At this early stage in my days riding it appeared the waterproofing spray I had coated my Knox Outdry waterproof gloves with seemed to be working: the last time I had subjected these gloves to prolonged rain they had failed miserably. My other ad-hock waterproof items: an eight year old Manchester City Council Gortex rain jacket worn over my Buffalo adventure jacket and a ten year old pair of £2 ebay waterproof overpants worn over my Weise summer race leather pants was all performing admirably. However, just four miles after the petrol station the bike unexpectedly spluttered to a stop. I sat at the roadside for a couple of minutes before trying the starter button and the bike fired up immediately. Hmmm. That was odd. I rode for another four or five miles before the bike 'konked out' again. This time I was going slightly downhill at a fair speed and I could see a turn-off a few hundred meters ahead so I knocked the bike into neutral and allowed it to roll to the turn off. While I was rolling I pressed the starter and although the engine was turning over it was refusing to fire. I took the bike off the road, out of the way of the passing German tourist coaches and let it come to a stop under some trees to give me some shelter from the downpour as I had a mess with it.

The turn-off I had pulled onto ran alongside the shore of Loch Creran and was the entrance to a large farm or something similar but there were no passing high speed coaches to bother me while I tried to sort out whatever it was that was bothering the previously totally reliable CBeebie. Underneath the minimal shelter of the trees the driving rain was at least disrupted on its relentless quest to my skin. I took all the luggage off the bike to allow access and all the top layer of waterproofs off me to prevent me from overheating on the soaking wet but still fairly warm day. I felt by the way the bike had spluttered to a stop the problem was fuel starvation so I disconnected the fuel line between the carbs and the tank and sucked on the vacuum pipe: the fuel flowed merrily exactly how it should do. I put all that back together but the bike still wouldn't start so I took the tank off and had a fiddle around with the carbs and all the hoses and connectors hidden down there. There didn't appear to be anything wrong down there either but when I put it all back together the bike fired up immediately. Just like a good-un.



Since I'm not a mechanic and don't really understand the complex operational issues of carburetors and ignition, I had hoped that by wiggling some wires and hoses I would inadvertently fix the problem and, for a while at least, it seemed I had: the bike ran perfectly for the next ten miles or so before it packed up again on the hill dropping down to the village of Appin. I was losing my temper now. I had travelled 29 miles this morning and the bike had packed-up three times, there was obviously something really wrong. In truth, although my mechanical knowledge had been greatly enhanced since I got the CBeebie from Jake, I was being found wanting when faced with the eternal problematic combination of old bike, heavy rain and a long way from home. I was also seriously losing my confidence in my ability to fix the bastard and continue with my trip. I left the bike for a few minutes before trying the starter again: it fired but cut out when I tried to rev the engine, so with the engine running at low revs I nursed it through the still sleeping and utterly drenched village until I saw a small car park in front of a tiny part-time police station. I pulled in and went knocking on the door for help, hoping to be met by a merry 'Balamory' style PC Plum who would welcome me in, give me a nice cup of tea and a hot scone and fix my bike while I watched the breakfast news on the telly. No such luck: all I got was no answer from the locked door and even heavier rain! There's never a copper around when you want one.

With the engine still running I noticed when I increased the revs steam was coming up from the exhaust down-pipes. There was no great surprise in this as everything was soaked but what caught my attention was the fact that the steam smelled of anti-freeze, so it was obviously coming out of the cooling system. I tried to look for any escaping water but the exposed hoses and the radiator seemed fine and without rolling around on the floor in muddy puddles I couldn't really see anything else. Finally after revving the engine hard for a few minutes the bike cut out again and I decided a cup of tea and a good long stand was the only solution. I filled up my little whistling kettle from the overflowing rain swollen stream, (yes I know you're not supposed to draw water from a stream but I was beyond caring) and fired up my primus stove.

My black mood which had been building steadily since the bike first cut out slowly abated as I supped my brew and remembered a story told to me by my Mum about her and my recently departed Dad travelling all around the country in the early 1950's on a clapped out ex war department Triumph 500. My Mum

still bitterly remembers the electric shock she got from holding the plug lead while my Dad jumped on the kick start looking for a spark. Obviously Mum found the missing spark! With my mood and powers of reason slowly being lifted by hot tea and happy memories I decided to have another go at fixing the bike: I wasn't like I was the first person in the world to be stuck on a rainy roadside with a broken bike. There was however a major difference in what was otherwise a similar situation my Mum and Dad found themselves in 60 years earlier. My dear old Dad was an excellent and knowledgeable mechanic with more patience than Mother Teresa; whereas I am an excellent and knowledgeable bricklayer with all the patience of Vlad the Impaler. (Or perhaps more accurately the distinct lack of patience firmly associated with my Mum!) I realised with a situation like this I was more likely to find my biggest hammer and smash the bike into a million pieces out of pure frustration than fix it, so the best option was for me to get some advice. The only option I had available to me at this unearthly hour in this remote location was to call the RAC and see what they suggested.

To be fair to the RAC they were quick to answer my phone call and immediately set about arranging someone to get out to me. However this did take the best part of two hours to actually happen. In the meantime a mechanic from the recovery firm phoned me and we talked through the sequence of events and the bikes symptoms. He also jumped to the conclusion of fuel problems and suggested I might have been sold some dodgy stuff from the petrol station outside Oban this morning. I was beginning to doubt this since I had noticed the steam but he dismissed my theory both over the phone and to my face later on when he and the recovery driver finally got to me and I tried again to tell him about it. I just don't believe in coincidences when mechanical things are playing-up and in any event the steam was definitely being created by coolant out of the bike rather than rain water as he was suggesting. In addition to this, since I had parked the bike up at the cop station I had thrown the cover over it and in the next hour and a half while I was waiting it had totally dried itself out. When they arrived the bike fired up and was running perfectly. But, aware of my short-comings as a mechanic I agreed the bike should be taken back to Oban where a proper motorcycle mechanic could drain the tank and get it sorted.



The mechanic jumped in his little van and drove off leaving me with Les, a jovial Aussie recovery driver. During the drive back to Oban Les added to my strange statistic regarding Australians: never once in my 46 years have I met an Aussie I disliked; he was great company. As I mentioned earlier he was jovial, yet also entertaining and enthusiastic about everything he did. What a top chap. However, on one of the winding wooded sections I had already passed through earlier the light-hearted fun we were enjoying in the truck was abruptly ended as we came across a serious looking car crash with some poor sod getting

cut out of a crumpled car. 'There but for the grace of God' I believe is the appropriate phrase. I hope they were ok.

We eventually arrived back in town and Les took me to North West Motorcycle Services, tucked away at the back end of an industrial estate near Oban town centre. The owner of the business, a local long haired and thoroughly biker looking chap called Ally welcomed us in and, most importantly, got the kettle on without any prompting while we were getting the bike off the back of the truck. The bike was running fine now making fault finding a near impossible task but Ally gave it a thorough going over: draining fuel from the carbs to check its quality (there was nothing wrong with it); looking inside the tank to see if any shite or debris had got it there to cause issues and going over all the pipes and connectors poking and prodding to see if anything was responsible. We let the bike run for a while to get hot but there was no steam even when we revved it hard. He and I couldn't find anything wrong. Eventually he suggested I take it back out for a test run so once again I put my by now soaked-through riding gear back on and headed off into the Oban rain. After about ten minutes blasting the bike up and down the sea-front road near the hostel the bike cut out again. I was actually happy it did because I now thought since the fault had re-surfaced it could be fixed. I left the bike a few minutes as that seemed to be the way to get it going again and while I was waiting I noticed two wires connected to the clutch lever seemed to be hanging loose. I firmly pushed them back on and the bike fired immediately and seemed to be running absolutely perfectly. It really seemed 100% right - Bloody odd Honda. I rode back round to Ally and told him all about it. He couldn't understand it as it made no sense at all. We even consulted the wiring diagram in the Haynes Manual to see if a bad earth somewhere on this circuit could cause the problem and it appeared not. He got the hose pipe out and soaked all the connections trying to simulate the problem, disconnected and reconnected the wires, poked prodded and pulled at everything we could and still the bike was running perfectly. We had another cup of tea, swore at the bike a bit, kicked the bastard and eventually admitted we didn't get it.



And the answer is... 'Fucked-if-I-know!'

Despite the problems of the day I realised I was still having a good time. A motorcycle holiday is for me generally about filling my mind up with visual images of places visited, but even more memorable than fantastic scenery is meeting interesting people who in day-to-day life at home you would never meet. Today I had met two such people: Les had been a laugh a minute and great company when he rescued me from the rain and then later Ally had kept me equally captivated with his wonderfully sarcastic observations, so often a trait of the Scots. During my time in his garage we had put the world to right,

discussing a wide range of topics. He was a firm and quite unrepentant 'Yes' supporter and I must say his commitment to that cause was based on a thoroughly decent social conscience, which I wholeheartedly agree is missing from the Tory led Westminster government. Admittedly the weather had been totally crap and the bike had been a considerable bastard today but I had money in my pocket so I could eat and find somewhere to sleep and if the bike was really broke I could walk away from it as it only stood me at a few quid. Or if I really lost my temper with it I could even sling a match in the petrol tank and watch the old heap burn. I wasn't that bothered. Anyway now it was running perfectly again, God knows how or why, it just was, so the trip was back on.

Much as I would have liked to spend the rest of the day in Ally's garage yapping it was now three o'clock and I still had to get to Torridon and that was 160 miles away. It had finally stopped raining, exactly as the fishermen predicted, and TomTom said it would take me at least four hours which I had no reason to doubt. I swapped numbers with Ally in case he's ever in Lancashire or North Wales and set off.

Within half a mile of leaving Ally's, while riding through Oban town centre some dumbass bloke in a people carrier recklessly and needlessly pulled out in front of me causing me to hit the brakes hard and skid dangerously on the still wet road: very nearly putting me on the deck. With my adrenalin pumped up ready to lessen the pain of me hitting the tarmac and my visor wide open and the street full of shoppers and tourists I angrily and aggressively shouted 'YOU FUCKIN IDIOT!' to the thoughtless driver. To be fair to him he sincerely apologised. His immediate apology allowed me to quickly calm down so I waved him through and set off re-riding the roads I'd started this morning. I felt a little bit bad about shouting out like that in front of a load of people in the town centre but from what I saw they were all giving him the glares not me, so they'd evidently seen he was in the wrong.

Once out of the town I was soon realising my delay was actually a positive thing. True enough I was now riding with a bit of pressure to get somewhere late in the day but at least I was riding in good conditions; and my headache had gone. The stretch I had covered this morning was, in good weather, a superb road along the side of several lochs and cutting through some beautiful woodland. Soon enough I was blasting past the useless police station at Appin and heading into the unknown, alongside Loch Linneh towards Fort William. Just up the road from the cop station I passed Les the jovial recovery bloke who was at the roadside yapping to some broken down motorist. I dropped the clutch, revved the arse off the CBeebie and bibbed the horn as I shot past him. In my mirror I saw him giving me the thumbs-up as I flew off on my way.

At Loch Leven the A828 road I had been riding since the old railway bridge merges into the A82 which follows the Great Glen all the way up to Inverness but I knew I would be taking a left long before reaching the Highland capital. I arrived at Fort William around 4.30 and needed to make a stop to relieve myself of all the tea I'd been supping at Ally's. Rather than mess around going into the town, which I had visited previously and was a dump, I stopped at an out-of-town retail park with a McDonalds. I was sort of hoping to get my first food of the day in there but the place being full of kids having a birthday party and all screaming at one-another forced me to use their facilities and get the hell out of there. Bladder relieved, I jumped back on the CBeebie and continued in a north-easterly direction. All of a sudden I began recognising places I had passed eleven years ago when I had driven home from the Isle of Skye and after riding along the side of Loch Lochy to Glengarry Castle I saw my left turn onto the A87 approaching. And what a fantastic motorcycle road that turned out to be!

Quite soon after joining the A87 brown tourist signs appear for the Commando monument at Spean Bridge. It's well worth a stop. When I got there a couple of cars were just leaving the car park meaning I had the place to myself. A fantastic larger than life statue of three resolute Commandos stands on a large stone plinth with the inscription, 'United We Conquer.' To add to the grandeur of the site, the monument is wonderfully situated looking out towards the majestic Ben Nevis and surrounding mountains which

tower moodily above the sparkling loch's far below. It is a brilliant tribute in awe-inspiring scenery to some incredibly brave men.



United We Conquer. The Commando monument at Spean Bridge.

After Spean Bridge the A87 really transforms into motorcycle heaven. Up and down and left and right the road cuts its way across the mountains and alongside the lochs: a fast and thoroughly engaging road. It occurred to me that if the bike hadn't been playing-up this morning I would have ridden along this road in a terrified state: soaked to the skin; intimidated by the giant tour busses which in the monsoon conditions would have been speeding past me and perhaps, most importantly for my agenda of memory collecting, totally oblivious to the truly amazing and seemingly infinite views I was now being utterly mesmerised by. In addition to the views the warm early evening sunlight which was now burning its way through the clouds was heating up both the newly washed tarmac and my Bridgestone BT45 tyres, and really allowing me to throw the bike around in what was already an exhilarating, exciting and wonderfully testing high speed ride. Yet to top off the unequalled feeling of exuberance I was now fully immersed in, the CBeebie, which had been such a pig this morning, was really singing now. And do you know what? So was I. What an utterly brilliant stretch of road.

It's amazing how things can change in the course of a day. Less than twelve hours earlier I had been staring down the barrel of an ignominious end to my trip, a long drive home in the passenger seat of a roadside rescue truck with a dead bike strapped on the back: my many hours of effort spent re-building the little Honda being exposed as little more than the futile and foolish tinkering of a clueless idiot with a cheap set of spanners. I had been sat there at the side of the side of the road, soaked to the skin with a clapped out old bike refusing to work and no idea how to fix it. Yet now it seemed I had not only fixed it but thrashed it over the best road I'd ever ridden. I had also come to realise that this was the way it was with long distance biking; most long distance bikers have been in exactly the same position, some many

times and the point is this is how we learn how to overcome the obstacles; for it is the overcoming of the failures and difficulties that makes these adventures so memorable.

Despite, or maybe because of my A87 induced natural high, I realised as I was cruising along the side of Loch Duich how hungry I now was. It was six pm and I'd eaten nothing all day. I was Hank Marvin; I could easily have eaten a horse between two bread vans. My salvation came in the form of a petrol station on the loch side where I pumped ten litres of juice into the CBeebie and then went into the fairly well stocked shop to see what I could pump into me. The answer was fairly comprehensive: nothing at these prices! The cheeky thieving bastards wanted four quid for a lousy looking egg sandwich with curled up corners. I must say there is a terrible tendency in Scotland (southern England as-well to be honest) for businesses selling food to rip-off the tourists anywhere near the main attractions. This petrol station, situated just a few miles from Eilean Donan Castle, on the main road to the Skye Bridge evidently fitted into this shabby profile so I made do with two packets of custard cream biscuits for a quid and two bottles of coke because they were on special offer too. I jumped back on the bike a little 'miffed' at the lack of food at a fair price and continued down the road to the car parks of the magnificent and world famous castle. There alone, as the castle was now closed and all the Yanks and Japs and Krauts had buggered off to their hotels in the case of the former two, or campsites in the case of the latter, I wolfed down one of my packs of nasty cheap custard creams while admiring the mock 13th century architecture and the breathtaking rugged beauty of the surroundings. Never mind your Cordon Bleu or Michelin Stars, the surroundings I was munching my biscuits in made this a fine dining experience to rival any.



Eilean Donan, resplendent in the early evening. The tranquillity of the moment somewhat disrupted by the feverish and frenzied crunching of custard creams.

After dusting some of the biscuit crumbs off my jacket and stashing the other pack in my top-box in case of emergency, I saddled up again and consulted TomTom for an update of my arrival time in Torridon.

Not for the first time on this trip TomTom was confusing me: it was telling me my destination was only 40-odd miles away yet estimating two hours travelling time. It's an old car model of TomTom 'Start' so there is no traffic or roadwork updates to effect the calculation and the road I had been riding for the last hour was fast and smooth. What the hell was it going on about? A few miles down the road I began to understand. A sharp right turn took me off the brilliant A87 road, which continues on its merry way to Skye, and put me on the A890: brown tourist signed as the 'Wester Ross Coastal Trail.' Riding up this road certainly changed my opinion of my estimated arrival time and made me once again bow down to TomTom 'the undeniable's' superior knowledge. Almost immediately the road narrowed to a single track with 'passing places' and set off over the mountains like a demented, out of control roller coaster. But what a road this was, not in the same way as the screaming tyre inducing blacktop as the A87, but as a road that either made you wake up and concentrate or dropped you off the side of a mountain and, assuming someone did eventually find your rotten carcass, gifted you with a half day out with the undertaker. It struck me as I wound my way over the mountain and dropped down the other side to the less intimidating shore-side road along Loch Carron, there was simply no-one around. I felt like I had just gone back 250 years in time, there were no people, no cars, no buildings, nothing. If you did anything stupid on the bike here you really were in trouble.



The Wester Ross Coastal Trail. Ain't nobody here but me and the CBeebie.

After crossing what was obviously the first of many mountain passes on the Wester Ross Coastal Trail I began to think TomTom's estimate of two hours was probably pushing it. This was officially an 'A' road with a 60 mph speed limit and the sat-nav's calculations were in all likelihood based on me travelling at this speed: who does it think I am – Guy Martin? Although the road did eventually calm down a little from the initial white-knuckle mountain section it remained a single track, literally no wider than your average suburban driveway. But surrounding this road was the most magnificent and beautiful, yet desolate landscape I had ever encountered in the British Isles. In places I was reminded of the Pennines close to where I grew up; at other times I was reminded of the magnificent and hostile mountain passes through Snowdonia, close to where I live now, but along the loch shores and through the glens there was

that peaceful gentle green pleasantness most of us can immediately identify as being the British countryside. It struck me this is actually how the British Isles were intended to be by nature before our species came along chopping down the trees and building cotton mills and steel works and gigantic sprawling cities along all the river banks of the country. Visiting countryside like this makes you realise that even the most depraved, polluted, over-populated shit-hole of an area in almost any UK city was probably once a beautiful place, before we ruined it.



The A890 'main' road to Torrison.

The country here is so empty it almost comes as a surprise when quite out of the blue a settlement or even an isolated farmhouse comes into view. I had been on this particular road for over an hour and had not seen a single vehicle or, now I come to think about it, even another person since I left the car park at Eilean Donan. An argument I heard regularly during the Scottish Referendum debate was Scotland needed to be independent because it was so different to England in many ways and one prime example, which was used when the various combatants were arguing over the eternal British problem of immigration, was population density. It seemed to be an accepted fact that the north of Scotland had the lowest population density in Europe whereas England had the highest. Travelling around this part of Scotland gave me no reason to doubt that fact and to be honest I found it to be a wonderful and refreshing contrast to the overcrowded country of my birth just a few hundred miles south.

I chugged along the narrow road savouring the tranquil landscape when all of a sudden, the wilderness was disrupted by the tiny village of Strathcarron, complete with its highly unexpected train station. The settlement comprising of no more than a handful of buildings straddles the road and then ends as quickly as it began. It must be a wonderful place to live and with a train station is obviously nowhere near as isolated as it appears, even in winter when I imagine the whole place is covered in six feet of snow. Just through the village TomTom ordered a left turn onto the A896 which winds its way up and around the remaining 26 breathtakingly beautiful and increasingly dramatic miles to Torrison Youth Hostel. I finally arrived around 9 pm, it was still bright and by now sunny, I was totally knackered, starving hungry and

gagging for a drink but my mind was buzzing like a big buzzy thing after the sights I'd seen and the roads I'd ridden. What a day! What a place! What a great trip this was turning out to be!



Torridon Youth Hostel.

Like Oban, the Torridon hostel was a big operation and quite busy. It felt a little strange to be among so many people congregated together in one remote place when I hadn't seen a living soul for several hours on the road. The modern purpose built hostel was situated half way up a valley, or glen if you prefer, with incredible dramatic mountains almost entirely surrounding it, it was clearly a major spot for the fairly mad mountain walking community which explained why Dave the walker from last night was so familiar with the place. The receptionist who booked me in was a bubbly and enthusiastic southern English girl; she showed me the hostels extensive facilities and various lounges before showing me to my ten-bed dorm and allowing me to get all my junk off the bike. As I had pulled up there were a few German registered BMW GS's parked up outside but when I'd finished my tour these had gone leaving only the CBeebie and a Honda Deauville among a dozen or so cars and vans. After getting all my bags in I took all my wet riding gear to the huge drying room and found space to hang up my boots, gloves, leather pants, jacket and outer waterproofs among the more familiar walker's smelly socks, boots and lightweight gear. When I was coming out of the drying room I met the owner of the Deauville, Les, (another one) in his mid 50's and I think originally from Edinburgh. He recommended I go back to the reception and buy a microwaveable meal which I could cook in the huge kitchen as he'd just had one and was satisfied by it. I ordered a chicken madras with rice and nan bread and a tub of ice cream. I was so hungry by then I ate the ice cream while I was waiting for the other stuff to go 'ping' in the microwave. I must have devoured my curry like a refugee as when I finished Les and the receptionist girl both asked if I even tasted it: actually no, I can't remember tasting it at all even though it was supposed to be very spicy.

With my appetite subdued I went outside to talk bikes with Les. He was a vastly experienced biker undertaking a tour of Scotland being promoted by 'Ride' magazine where anyone completing the tour and sending photos of them at several strategic spots would be given a set of Maxis tyres. However our yapping was disrupted by a swarm of midges, even worse than those at Loch Lomond, and I was forced to delve into my top box to get the Avon 'skin so soft' out and absolutely smother myself and my hair to get

rid of the bastards. It worked so our talking and minor bike maintenance resumed without the insect irritation. I noticed my chain had stretched quite considerably during the days riding which was not particularly a surprise as my son Jake had it put on when he had no money so it was the cheapest thing he could afford, but the amount it had stretched in a day was a little worrying. I tightened it up and oiled it as we talked and it was clear Les talked all things bike with tremendous authority and obvious technical knowledge, although he had no answers to the bike playing-up this morning other than the rain and recommended I buy some spray which I've forgotten the name of to keep all the electrics dry. Les and myself talked late into the night while watching the dramatic surrounding mountains dissolve into the darkness. We then found our way to the full dorm and I crashed-out like someone had hit me on the back of the neck with a lead pipe. It had been a long old day.

I had talked to quite a few of the other blokes in our dorm during the course of the night and they were all either hill walkers or mountain climbers, all English (although one of them lived like myself in North Wales,) and all very pleasant. The good thing about remote hostels, even large ones like Torricon, is that there is virtually no chance of there being any scum-bags there. People who walk hills and climb mountains are all (in my experience) good and hardy sorts, usually well educated and usually very sociable after their hours of solitude out in the wilds: rather like adventure motorcyclists without the helmets really.



The CBeebie and Les's Deauville parked up at Torricon as the mountains slowly dissolve into the darkness.