

The Scottish Trip. Part 2.

By Dave Fenton

Day 4 Torridon to Durness via Ullapool. 134 miles

After yet another solid and uninterrupted nights sleep I awoke bright and early, keen to see what Saturday's weather had in store for me: It was a beautiful summer's day. By 7am I had retrieved my by now bone-dry riding gear from the sweaty sock stinking but impressively effective drying room and I went back through the hostel to see if anyone in my dorm was awake so I could bid them farewell, only to be met by a resounding chorus of snoring so once again, like a thief in the night, I sloped off out without a word being uttered.

Upon leaving the hostel I rejoined the A896 heading roughly in a north-easterly direction. If this road had been wonderful heading in the night before, it was truly magnificent heading out through the glen on this most agreeable morning. A few miles along from the hostel I noticed a small family tent pitched a few hundred yards off the road with an old blue LDV Sherpa type van parked up alongside. A couple of kids no older than Bronny were playing by the crystal clear stream while a youngish bloke, probably their dad, sat watching and enjoying a morning cigarette and brew. As I passed they all turned and waved, I was quite possibly the first person they had seen since they arrived in their idyllic spot. I admired, and slightly envied the wild campers adventurism and thought myself a bit of a mard-ass for staying in the hostel.



The A896 east from Torridon.

Unfortunately, the single tracked A896 road and the mesmerising valley along which it travels only lasted 10 miles or so before joining the more conventional twin carriageway of the A832 heading further east towards Dingwall, but my memory of travelling along it on this simply gorgeous Saturday morning and the numerous photos I was forced to stop the bike and take will ensure this moment in time is permanently etched into my mind. It was becoming clear to me the further north I travelled the more

magnificent the surroundings. With the CBeebie purring like the cat that got the cream and the weather set fair I couldn't wait to press further into the unknown: or to the Western Isles ferry departure port of Ullapool at least.



The A896 near Torrison. Magnificent country.

After joining the A832 I followed the road for just under 25 miles before taking a left onto the A835 heading northwest for the remaining 30 miles or so up to Ullapool. By Scottish highlands standards these two roads are fairly busy and run-of-the-mill, yet compared to most British A roads they would in their own right be considered remarkable for their surrounding beauty. Both rise from lush green valley bottoms, through densely wooded and steep sided glens and continue high up to more barren and distinctly hostile and weather beaten stretches of highland emptiness. Here the roads assume a similarity in both surroundings and road surface to the Trans-Pennine routes I know so well between my native north Manchester, across Saddleworth Moor to West Yorkshire. The big difference between the elevated sections of northwest England and those of northwest Scotland is the sheer scale of the Scottish wilderness, which seems infinite in comparison to the comparatively tiny sections of unspoilt English countryside. This similarity ceases however on the outskirts of Ullapool where the road descends back down to sea level and runs along the side of the beautiful Loch Broom into the town.

My approach into Ullapool coincided with a long line of traffic coming the other way. I had no idea at the time where the scores of vehicles were coming from but found when I entered the village a large Caledonian MacBrayne ferry had just docked and deposited its human and vehicular cargo from Stromness on the Isle of Lewis, and they evidently were the cause of the large volume of traffic. After filling up the CBeebie at the petrol station I progressed further down to the ferry terminal to see what there was to see. The road was blocked as the cars and caravans were all lining up to be loaded on their trip across to Lewis so I decided to get off the bike for a bit and have a mooch around the busy village. On the pretty Shore Street I noticed Ullapool Youth Hostel and regretted not having booked to stay the night here but at only 60 or so miles from Torrison it simply wasn't far enough mileage wise to work into

my time scale for this trip. Maybe I'll come and stay here for a few days with the family in the future. It certainly looks like a place to stay for a few days at least or maybe use as a springboard for some island hopping. The main shopping street, also hosting numerous market stalls, ran parallel to Shore Street, on a slightly higher elevation. I'm not sure if the lower road floods with winter high tides or the shopping idea just came after all available building plots along the front road were already taken up by the cottages of long dead highland fishermen. Either way, the shops not being located on the sea front allows Ullapool to beautifully maintain two faces to the village: one of a sleepy fishing village of old, albeit with a ferry dock stuck on the end; and a second face of a bustling little market town, it's commercial shop-fronts neatly tucked out of the way of the holiday makers vista searching camera lenses. I must admit I really liked the look of the place.



Shore Street, Ullapool. I like it!

At the western end of the village a large, busy and seemingly well equipped family campsite lay on a perfectly flat grassy area alongside the crystal clear loch, showing I'm clearly not the only one who likes the look of Ullapool. I took a little look around the shops and market and decided to buy my evening feast for the night which I would cook at the hostel in Durness. A traditional butchers shop caught my attention and I decided after admiring and pondering over the delicious looking displays of every cut of every sort of meat imaginable to see if the T-bones up in the highlands were of the same quality as the one I had bought in Lanark. A little unfortunately, it seemed the steaks available in this butchers were already cut to size and none of those available were anywhere near the size of my earlier dinosaur sized T-bone from 'Damn Delicious.' However, I did manage to find a nice looking 20oz specimen and resigned myself to having to eat some vegetables with it. But by now I'd had enough of shopping in Ullapool so decided I would pick these up in Durness later.

Soon all the tourist's cars and caravans blocking Shore Street were cleared and loaded onto the ferry and as the large vessel steamed away from the dock and out into the crystal clear sea loch the village returned to what I imagine is its far more usual tranquil self. TomTom informed me it was a further 68 miles and 2

hours travelling time up to Durness on the far north-western corner of Scotland and I was itching to resume my scenic journey along the North and West Highlands Tourist Route.



The ferry steams out of Ullapool on its way to the Isle of Lewis.

After weaving my way through the few streets of houses surrounding the village I again picked up the A835 heading north. Somewhat to my surprise the scenery north of Ullapool, and for that matter for the entire remaining 60-odd northernmost miles of mainland Britain, all of a sudden stopped reminding me of anywhere else I had encountered on our sceptred isle. It seemed I had been transported magically to medieval Scandinavia. If I was a geologist, or maybe a climatologist, I would be better equipped to explain this transformation, but since I'm not I can only assume the isolated rocky peaks sitting on an otherwise fairly flat landscape are the result of many millions of years wild Atlantic winds and rain producing foul Scottish winter weather which in turn eroded the softer rocks and left the more dense peaks sticking out like a sparse forest of sore thumbs. However this amazing landscape was formed there is no doubting this is an area well worth the tremendous effort and distance involved in getting there. There is quite simply nothing like it anywhere else in Britain. Its appearance, and no doubt the similar climate, makes some sense of why the ancient Viking invaders and colonisers of this area named the northernmost area of Britain, Southerland; as the rock formations and overall vista of the region clearly reminded the invaders of their own native lands not so far across the stormy northern sea.

In his guidebook *The Northern Highlands*, writer Tom Atkinson aptly subtitles the book *The Empty lands*, and besides the spectacular and slightly bazaar landscape the sheer emptiness really is remarkable: considerably more-so than the by comparison, cultivated land between Eilean Donan and Torridon through which I rode the night before. Atkinson describes the region as: '...that great area of northern Scotland between Ullapool and Cape Wrath, and between Bonar Bridge and John o' Groats. It is truly the

land of the mountain and the flood, where land and sea mingle in unsurpassed glory.’ So it seemed by my location on the map I was now only just entering the best bit. It certainly felt that way. I had decided several hundred miles south to ignore any further cities and large towns and this area was proving to be the polar opposite of the traffic chaos and hustle and bustle of Glasgow. The magnificence of the scenery, the open road and the glorious weather of this beautiful summer Saturday was lifting my soul like no ride ever had before. As I followed the winding and utterly deserted road, stopping every few minutes for yet another spectacular photo opportunity I seriously began to ponder the possibilities of moving to the area. But how on Earth do you make a living up here? I’m sure if there was an easy way everyone would do it.



‘The Empty Lands’, somewhere between Ullapool and Durness.

After clearing my dreamy head of probably totally unrealistic plans of re-location I continued on the road to Durness. A brief stop at the magnificent spectacle of Kylesku Bridge quickly turned into a prolonged conversation with a number of motorhome tourists; first in pigeon German and embarrassingly perfect English with a very pleasant couple from Frankfurt; and then, accompanied by a very welcome cup of tea prepared with effortless ease inside the super quipped four-wheeled holiday house, another conversation, this time in pigeon Welsh and embarrassingly perfect English, with an equally pleasant couple from somewhere near Swansea. At least my ability to correctly pronounce the famous village name of Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoch, (fortunately for my linguistic posing located only about 3 miles from my house in Anglesey,) may or may not have improved their opinion of the English attempting to speak in any tongue other than our own. I imagine it didn’t but they were very nice and made me a damn good panad. (Brew, in Welsh – see, I have been paying attention!)



Kylesku Bridge, complete with motorhomes and a little old red Honda.

I wished all my new multi-lingual fellow travellers bon voyage and continued on my way up the winding road only to find the CBeebie spluttering to a halt once again after only a few miles. I was confused, the day had been bone-dry and the bike had been running great since I left Oban. I feverishly fiddled with the wires leading to the clutch lever and sprayed WD40 on all the connections whereupon the bike fired up good as new.

Hmmmmmm.

A few miles later as I reached the northern coastline I saw the sign for the Cape Wrath ferry crossing and took a little detour to check it out. Unfortunately, the ferry is a foot crossing only operation with a minibus taking passengers across to the lighthouse and café some miles away on the other side of the peninsular. Evidently, since the boat was moored up on the other side and there was no bus visible across the water, I had arrived mid-trip. The bike spluttering to a halt had un-nerved me somewhat and I decided not to bother waiting for the next one but rather to press on to the Durness hostel where I could do some exploratory spanner wielding. Incidentally, at the car park for the Cape Wrath ferry another Honda Deauville was parked up, at first I thought it was Les's from last night as it was exactly the same colour but upon closer inspection discovered it not to be. I rode un-troubled the last few miles into the tiny village of Durness, dazzled by the spectacular cliffs, bright blue sea and white sands of the beaches. What a beautiful place.

The shops I had anticipated finding in Durness when I hurriedly left Ullapool this morning turned out to be singular rather than plural. There was one shop, a Spar, fortunately fairly well stocked but sadly lacking in the vast array of fresh vegetables I was planning on complimenting my moderately large steak with. I decided on a tin of new potatoes and a tin of mixed vedge which I would fry-up together in butter a bit like German style bratkartoffeln. It wasn't the worst option available.

Across the road from the Spar was a wooden hut with a petrol pump in front, reminding me of something you'd see from the 1930's. As I was sitting there having a can of coke and just watching the world go by I heard the roar of multiple high powered bikes approaching from the east. Soon enough, a group of about 10 superbikes appeared carrying multi-coloured, heavily branded leather clad road warriors with wide bloodshot eyes. As they were tanking up their Ducati's, R1's, Fireblades and whatever other types of space-ship bikes they were on I detected their accents as central belt Scots. A couple of them wondered across the road to where me and the CBeebie were sat and asked me about my trip on my (to them) bewildering little old bike. We exchanged pleasantries before they roared off towards Ullapool and I decided to go and find Durness Hostel.



Durness Hostel

Just half a mile or so along the coast road I spotted the hostel: it was brilliant! Two second world war former radar station huts, one converted to the kitchen and common room, the other split in two for male and female dorms. I was checked in quickly enough by the warden, a late 20's Scottish lad who flitted between hostels working for the Scottish Youth Hostel Association. Nice work if you can get it! After this I went out and had a mess with the bike, trying to find out why it had cut out again. Durness isn't big so far as population goes but the place is quite spread out. I suppose most holiday makers on arrival in such a place, on a beautiful day would happily spend a few hours walking around taking in the sights, but since I had the superb excuse of not having any walking boots with me and of needing to road test a temperamental motorcycle, the dye was cast and I was riding around on a little voyage of discovery. Purely in the interest of fixing the bike you understand.

The beaches of Durness, on this beautiful afternoon were like something from the Caribbean. White sand lapped by a clear blue sea, it was absolutely amazing to see. If the water had been 4000 miles south I would have been well tempted to go for a dip. Just to the east of the village is the geological wonder of Smoo Cave, admittedly a strange name and unfortunately well beyond my knowledge to explain how it is what it is. But well worth visiting nonetheless for those so inclined. Heading back into the village I was intrigued by a sign for the John Lennon Memorial Garden. The garden, although not exactly one to rival the Chelsea flower show, or even rival your average flower garden in your average northern English town's municipal park, is dedicated to the sadly assassinated, most influential song-writer of the Beatles

because he used to come here to stay with family for his school summer holidays. Apparently, his lovely song *In My Life*, was wrote to recall these youthful times in Durness. A fairly large visitor centre takes up the prime spot before the headland is dominated by a campsite which, although perfect on a day such as today may, I suspect, see yer kilt flapping in the breeze like Marilyn Monroe when the north wind blows.



One of the beaches at Durness. Bring on the global warming I say!

Upon my return to the hostel I found the Honda Deauville I had seen earlier at the Cape Wrath ferry parked up with the rider evidently having booked himself in the hostel. I discovered him to be a retired bloke in his late 60's originally from Yorkshire but now living in Aberystwyth, embarking on a solo trip around Scotland much the same as myself. Strangely, he told me he was planning on moving back from the lovely Cardigan Bay university town to the South Yorkshire dump that is Rotherham to retire. A bewildering choice in my opinion but one he's free to make.

Other guests in the hostel that night were a young and very shy French family touring the highlands in an old Peugeot, (or planning an invasion – never trust the French!) and a noisy, boisterous and thoroughly outgoing family of Yanks from Minneapolis. I enjoyed their conversation until perhaps 9pm before deciding on another early night and early start. I retired to bed with something of a feeling of dread: I was as far from home as I possibly could be within the British mainland and I was sure the CBeebie was going to break down tomorrow.

Day 5 Durness to Inverness via John O Groats. 231 miles.

I woke up with the lark on Sunday morning to discover there had been quite heavy rain overnight but fortunately I had had the good sense to put the cover over the bike and the weather appeared to have blown over now. I followed my by now usual practice of sneaking out without disturbing any ones snoring rhythm and was on the road heading east along the magnificent A838 by 7am. My eastward course was quickly changed to a southerly course as the road followed the western shore of Loch Eriboll all the way to the bottom before heading north up its eastern shore and then resuming the easterly course across the top of Scotland. If a bridge were built it would probably cut out about 20 miles but in all honesty I wouldn't have missed the ride around the magical loch shore on this magical morning even if a bridge saved 100 miles. The scenery, the weather now clear and fresh, the single track road, the tranquillity and the time of year all contributed to make this possibly the most magnificent couple of hours on a motorcycle that I can ever remember. It doesn't seem enough to describe the ride as awesome, but that is exactly what the north coast road of Scotland is. And to think I was having the ride of my life on a clapped out old 500cc bike worth less than your average household TV.

As I was approaching the surprisingly large and reasonably grand town of Thurso I realised I'd put no juice in the CBeebie since Ullapool, some 140 miles ago. Much of the ride to Durness yesterday and across the north coast this morning had been in low gears as I was rounding the twisting and turning road so I became a little worried I was likely to run out. On the outskirts of the town I saw in the distance a petrol station only to find it permanently closed down when I got closer. I went into the town centre and found a petrol station which opened at 9am (it was now 8.20) so sat down beside the bike and waited until a friendly coach driver told me of one open on the road out of town. When I got there the bike only took eleven litres of fuel. Despite its other issues there was no doubting this bike was bloody good on juice.

The chatty bloke in the petrol station, clearly quite interested to see a little old bike with a Welsh flag on the front and a big old Mancunian riding it, asked if I was on my way to John O Groats. I told him I was which permitted him to give me his well-practiced speech about Dunnet Head being what he called the true north point and not, as most people thought, the more famous John O Groats. I actually knew this but cracked on I didn't to make him feel good about educating the dopey southerner I probably appeared to be to him. I somewhat disingenuously told him I'd have to amend my plan and call in for a picture at Dunnet Head and left him well satisfied with his early morning geography lesson.

Just outside Thurso, heading east, I passed the little dock where cars were being loaded onto the Sea-cat ferry over to Orkney. I was seriously tempted to take the trip over to the islands where I would have loved to have visited Scapa Flow, the WWI Grand Fleet naval base, and Skara Brae, the Neolithic settlement only relatively recently discovered. I even called into the ferry office to see how much it all would cost. I think a day trip with the bike would have been about 50-odd quid, which was fair enough but again the nagging feeling about the bikes reliability was telling me to get to somewhere resembling civilization. I grumpily pulled away from the ferry dock and pressed on towards Dunnet Head.

After about 10 miles a small brown tourist sign took me left off the main road to a minor lane out to the head. When there I found a fairly spectacular lighthouse situated on the headland and a large granite slab proclaiming Dunnet Head's claim to fame. It was no big deal really but it would be a shame to ride past it only for some smart-arse to tell you that you haven't been to the true northernmost point.



Early Sunday morning visit to Dunnet Head, the northernmost point of the British Mainland with Orkney looking inviting in the distance.

After another 15 minutes or so I was approaching the famous landmark of John O Groats. It was still probably only around 9.30 or so when I arrived at the much photographed mileage and direction indicator yet there was already a coachload of tourists milling around the shop and café and taking photos of each other. Somewhat to my surprise when I pulled up one of the tourists beckoned me and the bike up to the famous post to take my picture. Maybe I look like someone famous. Anyway, I asked them to take one on my camera which she kindly did.



Compulsory tourist picture at John O Groats. Well it'd be rude not to!

John O Groats is an odd place. Its not really spectacular, its not even particularly beautiful. There's not much in the way of shops other than a souvenir shop selling the usual Scottish tat yet I wanted to stay there. True enough the view over to Orkney is very enticing especially on such a lovely morning but I think I wanted to hang around because the place is so famous and familiar to us all. And it is a long way from home which makes getting there, particularly on a clapped-out old bike something of an achievement. Anyway, my stay was prolonged by an hour or so by 3 bikes pulling up as I was having a brew, and their riders, 3 Glasgow lads, Rangers supporters too who were only too keen to sit themselves down and have a long yap with me about bikes and travels. I found out they were taking their bikes, A GS1200, a sports bike of some sort and maybe a Versys, Island Hopping on some special offer ticket with the ferry company. They in-turn gave the CBeebie a thorough looking over and left vowing to get themselves a project bike to do-up when they got home. Good lads they were.

The bike this morning had covered nearly 100 miles and been running perfectly, but I was still fearful of another bout of breakdowns, especially as I was so far from any major towns. My pre-booked hostel for the night was at Helmsdale, only another 50 miles or so south of John O Groats. It was also still early in the day, maybe 11 o'clock as I left my Glasgow biker buddies and headed south. 20 minutes or so later I reached another surprisingly large and grand town, this time Wick. From there the A99 widened and became a fairly fast and busy main road, soon changing into the main A9 heading pretty much all the way south to Sterling. Needless to say, I was at Helmsdale before noon and called in at the hostel to cancel my reservation as I wanted to get myself further south. My mind by now was telling me to get to Inverness, still probably 90 miles away as from there I would almost certainly be able to get any parts or even a proper mechanic to have another look at the bike.

As I headed further south the CBeebie, as I had feared, began to play-up. For no apparent reason as there was no rain at all, it cut out three or four times over a few miles. I came off the main road and pulled into a car park in the town of Brora planning to pull the tank off again and have a good look if there was something loose. After pulling off I went and bought myself some breakfast/diner sandwiches from a co-op shop in the town and was surprised to see several people in the shop wearing Rangers shirts and buying Buckfast and cans of Tennants Extra. When I came out I noticed several more Rangers fans milling around the pubs and the car park I was parked up in. I asked someone if they were going to a match thinking it was a pick-up point for a coach going to an away match. It turned out, much to my surprise, Rangers were playing in Brora in 2 hours and I was parked round the corner from the ground. Of course, if I'd have known beforehand I would have gone to the match but the bike had by now got me in a state of fairly high tension and I convinced myself I needed to get to Inverness.

To get away from lots of pissed up football fans watching me pull the bike to bits and offering their advice as I did it, I decided to pull out of town before taking the tank off. It cut out once while I was riding out of the town then all of a sudden seemed to click back into life and begin running perfectly again.

Bastard thing!

Since the CBeebie was again running right I decided to take a detour off the A9 and head across to Nigg, where I would catch the little ferry across to one of my favourite places in Scotland Cromarty, and then take the familiar road to Inverness. I reached the Nigg- Cromarty ferry without issue and had a good yap with the fare collector who was also a biker and very impressed, possibly amazed the CBeebie had come so far. I sailed across the Cromarty firth feeling better and even quite admiring my little old bike looking all adventurous on a boat so far from home before landing on the beach in my old haunt of Cromarty to have a good look round.

I very much doubt anything has changed much in Cromarty in the last 100 years so looking for anything different to have occurred in the 8 years or so since I was last there was probably something of a long-

shot. Still, it was nice to see the old place and it's still a beautiful little village which deserves much more fame than that brought about by the shipping forecast.



When the boat comes in. The CBeebie looking adventurous waiting for the Nigg – Cromarty ferry.



Cromarty Harbour.

As I rode out of Cromarty I felt the warm glow of familiarity so absent over the last 500 miles. Since leaving Eilean Donan Castle on Friday night I had been riding on roads I had never previously travelled despite my many earlier sorties into Scotland. Together with this feeling of actually knowing where I was, the bike appeared finally to be running properly and the weather was beautiful and clear.

Yet despite all these advantages I was enjoying I was just minutes away from the closest near miss of my life.

Approaching a left hand corner at the end of a long straight, on a perfect surface with perfect conditions and with absolutely no traffic around I utterly misjudged the corner. Maybe I was daydreaming a little? Strangely I remember thinking about something in Wales just before the corner but there's nothing particularly odd about that: I and everyone else will often be thinking absentmindedly while riding. I remember seeing 2 chevrons on the sign warning me of the corner, I even remember glancing down to the sat-nav to check how sharp the corner was. My jacket was half open and my visor was fully up so I couldn't possibly have been doing more than about 60 mph because the wind irritates my eyes when travelling faster than that with the visor open. The corner was just one among literally thousands I had negotiated over the last week and one which I could comfortably have taken considerably faster than I was doing if I was concentrating and composed. I entered the corner on the left side of my lane keeping to the smooth left tyre track and leaned into the bend as usual before all of a sudden losing my flow, my nerve and my concentration and hitting the back brake feeling I was going too fast. The bike immediately stood up and went wide, upon going wide the wheels hit the loose gravel in the middle of the two smooth tyre contact areas of the lane. Upon hitting the loose gravel, the back brake which I was still lightly pressing locked up the back wheel which forced me to get off the brake and swing further wide. I crossed the white line and skimmed the kerb on the right hand side before getting the bike back on track. If I had not regained control of the bike I would have gone off the road down into a steep woodland and probably have been killed. If a car, or something bigger had been coming the other way I would certainly be dead. If a cyclist or another motorcyclist had been coming the other way we'd probably both be dead. I immediately regained composure and rode the bike another half a mile or so before pulling over and getting off.

When I got off the bike I felt a dull pain running down both upper arms. I have since been told this is similar to angina. I'm not a nervous or a panicky person, my heart wasn't beating particularly fast after the incident yet the stress of the near miss had caused in me an actual physical pain. Obviously my mistake or absentmindedness had really frightened me.

I had a smoke before going back to re-trace the corner. There was nothing to it besides a moderate drop on a smooth left hander. There should never have been any problem. Maybe the drop startled something in my senses causing me to hit the brake when I probably needn't have touched them. In truth I don't really know but I vowed to myself that I would never do that again. I am a proud father of 3 children, one of them very young, and a proud grandfather of 3, I have a loving partner and large close family and I have no right to loose concentration while riding a motorbike.

It's as simple as that.

I realised there was no point in analysing what had happened any further, no point beating myself up. I had somehow lost concentration and it was up to me to ensure this never happened again. So self bollocking complete I jumped back on the CBeebie and set off looking for more petrol before entering the comparative metropolis of Inverness. When I stopped for gas I checked out the SYHA leaflet to find out about the hostels in Inverness. The main one was in the city centre and I didn't much like the look of it so I phoned one of the associate hostels located in the suburbs, made the booking and re-set Tom-Tom. The hostel, located to the east of the city centre in a mature and reasonably elegant suburb was a large dorma bungalow set in its own walled gardens with a large gravel parking area. After I had been shown around

by the very nice owner lady and dumped all my junk in the upstairs 4 bed dorm, I refreshed myself with a scalding hot shower and decided to go and sit myself outside and have a smoke and a good think about the day.



My shelter for the night in Inverness.

No sooner had I sat myself under a tree and begun blowing smoke (vapour) rings into the clear air than I heard a car approaching up the road and turning into the gravel driveway. It was a large Irish registered Skoda estate car sporting a huge roof box and the beaming smiles visible through the front windscreen told me it was my buddies from the first night in New Lanark, Joe, Karin and Jack from West Cork.

Obviously I was delighted to meet them again after we had enjoyed our evenings conversation so much in Lanark and tonight was no different; in-fact it was better. We all yapped like old long lost friends late into the night, discussing a great many political, historical and more immediate travel related events with humour and a very interesting yet thoroughly understanding view of our different perspectives. Other guests in the hostel, an interesting couple from Slovenia and a pair of Jewish New York trainee doctors, were intermittently drawn into the conversations as our subject matter aroused their particular interests. It was the kind of great night that restores your faith in humanity; so typical of nights on the road far from home surrounded by interesting and educated folk.

Day 6. Inverness to Sterling via Pitlochry and Perth. 150 miles.

So late was our nocturnal chin-wagging that it was around 9.30am before I emerged in the kitchen to say my farewells and resume my journey. Hands were firmly shaken and email addresses exchanged before I strapped on my bags, buckled up my helmet, fired up the old CBeebie and set course for the A9 southbound. My scheduled stop over for the night was the hostel at Pitlochry in Perthshire but since I was about 100 miles ahead of schedule I decided at my first pee break near Aviemore to phone up and cancel this and head further south to Sterling. Fair play to the SYHA, they accomplished this change without any drama over the phone. Unfortunately, the drama would unfold as I was riding down the A9 and the bike began to test my patience almost to breaking point.

As I entered the Cairngorms National Park area the weather took a turn for the worse and an hour into my ride south the heavens opened: in proper Scottish Highland fashion. Quickly afterwards the bike started to play-up again. It seemed whenever I increased speed to overtake, perhaps going from my cruising speed of 70 up to 80mph, it would start coughing and spluttering and more often than not cut out shortly after. Making me look like a right tosser to anyone I had just overtaken and then quickly pulled over to the side of the road - not to mention being bloody dangerous. Whenever this happened the bike, after a few minutes sat at the roadside, would start up on the choke and run fine for a while longer before repeating the process. This must have happened 10 or 12 times and I was approaching my own boiling point, both at the bike for being such an utter bastard and at myself for having no idea how make it right.



Breakdown number 10 I think. The CBeebie having another little protest on the A9.

I eventually nursed the pain-in-the-arse bike the 80-odd miles down to Pitlochry where fortunately the weather had improved and allowed the bikes electrics to dry out. Infuriatingly, once I had pulled off the A9 and onto the 'b' road leading into the town, the bike once again began to run smoothly: all but eliminating any chance of finding a fault when I stopped to have a look.

Pitlochry was always one of those places I wanted to go to because it has an interesting sounding name. On this, my first visit, I was somewhat disappointed. A busy, not particularly pretty little town, full of tourists and shops selling the usual Scottish tourist tat: Charles Rennie Mackintosh Jewellery, Harris Tweed baseball caps, plastic or furry Nessies, walking boots, expensive scones and so called 'authentic' tartans. I wasn't much interested or impressed and it was too busy for me. To be fair to what is probably a very pleasant place if you want it to be, I was in a foul mood because of the bastard bike and didn't give it a fair crack of the whip.



Pitlochry's busy main street.

With my big grumpy face, I decided that since the bike was running ok and the weather was good to press on down to Perth where I was assured there was a Honda bike dealer. Maybe an experienced Honda mechanic would solve this damn intermittent problem with the waft of a screwdriver. Predictably, the next 25 miles or so on the A9 were a misery, the bike doing its little protest strike maybe half a dozen times before I pulled into the car park of St Johnstone football club on the outskirts of town to look up where the Honda garage was. Equally predictable was the incredibly frustrating fact that no sooner had I pulled off the A9 at Perth to fill up with fuel and find my bearings that the bike again started to run fine. I went to the Honda dealers anyway where a mechanic did come out and have a quick look at the bike and, like Ally in Oban, he found nothing wrong. My next plan therefor was to cover the remaining 43 miles to Sterling Hostel where I would pull the bike to pieces and find the damn problem myself.

When the bike cut out again about 10 miles out of Perth I assumed it would do its usual routine and start again a few minutes later: It didn't. I tried and tried all the by now familiar tweaks to get it going but it was having none of it. After an hour I'd had enough of it and decided to call the RAC again and abort the trip. I got a stropy cow on the other end of the line who was intent on sending out a patrol to get the bike started and wouldn't listen to me telling her what had been happening. All she wanted to do was get me back to their registered garage in Perth, which was probably the Honda dealership, and to let me make my own way from there. I told her to forget it and hung up. A few minutes later a local bloke, himself a biker but at this time in his car stopped to see if I needed him to go and get his trailer to get me off the main road where I could do some work. I thanked him but said I'd persevere and sure enough I got the

awkward little Honda going again and crawled it to the end of the A9, with a couple more cut-outs before entering Sterling and finding the hostel.



Front entrance of Sterling Hostel.

The hostel at Sterling was spectacularly located right next to the world famous castle, high up on the top of the old town. It was a huge operation taking in coach loads of kids but my dorm was a small one with maybe 6 beds. After booking in and checking out the room I bought a couple of bottles of Becks from the reception and went out to the bike, parked up appropriately next to the bins at the side of the hostel. I stripped off all the luggage again and removed the seat and the tank and searched for the source of my problems.



As on the previous occasions I found nothing on the wiring to suggest any problems, everything seemed to be in place and firmly connected to whatever it should be connected to. However, when delving deeper I found some dampness around one of the spark plugs and the distinct possibility the water was coming from one of the hoses coming from the thermostat housing. Sure enough there was a loose jubilee clip on the hose. This made some sense to me as when the problem had first started near Oban there had been a distinct smell of anti-freeze. The bike was only cutting out under hard acceleration when the engine was already hot. Did this mean the water was pumping out of the hose and down onto the spark plug when the thermostat opened causing the engine to splutter and cut out? Then when the heat of the engine had caused the water to evaporate the engine started again? It made some sense but didn't explain why it mainly seemed to happen when the bike was operating in the rain, although this had not been the case over the last two days when there had been no rain, but at least it was a possible reason and that was more than I or two proper mechanics previously had found.

I tightened all the hoses, taped up all the connections, re-fitted the tank, seat and all the luggage and gave it a whirl. It was running great. I took it on an early evening grand tour of the Stirling area, blasting the old CBeebie along, flat out to the Wallace monument, Bannockburn visitor centre, some little modern football stadium and then along the motorway and round to the very posh area of Dunblane where I stopped at the cathedral to give it a good course of looking at.



Bannockburn

After covering about 60 miles at as high a speed as reasonable I was convinced I'd fixed the bastard. I went back to the hostel armed with a fish supper and set about necking several more bottles of Becks in celebration. However, my general feeling of well-being was soon put to the test. In the huge 'L' shaped common room, at least 30 yards away, sat 3 super annoying women teachers. They were all wretched but one of them was the most irritating American wench imaginable. It seemed that after dispatching their poor students to the dorms, this coven of witches were sat around getting pissed on bottles of cheap wine and evidently having a competition on who had had the worst life and who could say it the loudest. Good grief, no wonder I hated school so much with clowns like these entrusted with the minds of unsuspecting and trusting children!

Day 7. Stirling to Preston via Moffat. 211 miles.

For the first time in several days I awoke with a degree of confidence in the bike actually having the capability to get me home under its own steam. Last night's ride-out had restored my faith in both the old Honda and in my own ability to diagnose and solve problems which may arise. I left the cobbled old town of Sterling before picking up the Glasgow bound M9, before that road connects to the M80 and then the M73 skirting round the east side of Glasgow, eventually joining the southbound A74(M). The bike was flying along merrily on the quiet motorways after timing my departure to ensure the rush hour had finished before approaching the big city area and, after not much more than an hour, I had passed through the busy central belt motorways and was fast approaching Moffat where this time I was sure to get some of my haggis from Wallace Bros Butchers.

As I took the sliproad to Moffat the bike stalled as I was free-wheeling towards the white stop line, I thought nothing of it as it started again on the button before I'd even stopped. I rode into the town and parked up before buying my compulsory haggis and a load of Scottish tat souvenirs for the kids. While I was mooching around one of the shops a short, sharp and heavy rain shower blew over soaking the bike but undeterred I loaded up and pulled the CBeebie round to the petrol station to fill up. Back on the motorway all seemed well for a while, the bike flying along as it had been previously but 10 minutes in, while overtaking a truck it cut-out again. Fortunately I wasn't too far from a large service area so after I'd nursed the swine down to it I went inside and ordered myself some McDonalds without even trying to get the bike running properly. Obviously my super-star mechanics of last night wasn't the answer and now I was faced with about 140 miles of increasingly busy motorway with the bike playing-up again.

I left the bike for maybe half an hour while I munched my burgers and contemplated my up-coming miserable ride south but even after leaving it for that length of time it was sluggish to start and running rough when it did get going. Once back on the motorway the bike seemed to be cutting out every time I increased my revs above those required to go above 60mph. Finally after yet another cut-out and re-start I sat following a Polish truck at 50mph for about 20 miles. It was mind numbingly boring but after a while I could feel the engine beginning to smooth out and by the time I was at Carlisle all seemed well. Needless to say, the next time I put my feet down was when I pulled up outside the house, daring not to stop all the way through the Lake District and down into deepest Lancashire.

Home thoughts.

The very idea of touring Scotland on a 500cc (or smaller) bike is to many bikers out of the question, however, with the exception of the long motorway slogs required actually required to get there for most of us, the smaller bike is highly suitable for such a tour. The question of using an older bike is another matter altogether. The intermittent fault the CBeebie suffered from was never fully diagnosed. When I got the bike home I opened up every electrical connection on the bike and made sure they were all perfectly clean, secure and thoroughly taped-up. Obviously I never suffered from this problem again as to thoroughly test the situation I would have had to take the bike on an all day ride in the rain, and I don't care what anyone says, If you don't have to do that because you're at home, then you don't do it. I think it was fixed when I eventually passed the bike on.

Another issue on the tour was the wear of the chain and sprockets. Admittedly when I got the bike it was fitted with a set of newish but very cheap chain and sprockets and with me and all my gear loaded onto the bike it was carrying a significant load over long distances at frequently high speed. But the wear was alarming and these were changed for a heavy duty JT set within a week of me getting home.

The engine, steering and suspension were absolutely fine for this trip. There are few motorways in Scotland and my route comprised many miles of very narrow roads with fairly poor surfaces. Frankly, most of the time I would rather have been on the CBeebie during this trip than my other bike of the time, the excellent Aprilia SL1000 Falco, which would have been ludicrously over powered especially in the highlands.

Interestingly, soon after my return I got rid of both my bikes and bought a Honda Transalp 650. The CBeebie had appealed to me for touring at a more relaxed pace but its age along with its fairly small stature had convinced me I needed something similar in performance but bigger and more reliable. The Aprilia of course, although I do miss it on occasion, was too fast and frenzied for my preferred motorcycle pastime of long distance touring and, although it would have been nice to keep for a thrash every now-and-then, provided the funds to buy my most suitable Transalp.

I would do this trip again on an older bike such as the CBeebie but only after the bike had been completely re-wired by a proper motorcycle electrician. The old electrical connections are the bike's achilles heel as far as I'm concerned as the engine and cycle parts are superb even when 20-odd years old.



