

The home stretch – Plymouth to Bristol

written by Marcus | 23 December, 2016



How many times have you heard that well used cliché “Live for the moment”? Well we’ve lived through some very unexpected moments during this trip. For instance the moment the front tyre went pop at a very bad moment in Turkey. The moment when Kirsty woke up to find an Uzbek taxi driver was massaging her feet. The moment I popped my head in the tent and told Kirsty the bike was gone. But for all the unexpected moments there was always going to be one that was guaranteed, the moment when the journey would come to an end.

11th December to 13th December 2016

After a night being rocked to sleep at the back of the onboard cinema

we step off the ferry in Plymouth surrounded by thick fog and a colourless, grey scene that could only be British. Things soon brighten up when we spot some Marmite sandwich vendors excitedly trying to get our attention. Is this how things work in this country now? Returning citizens are immediately welcomed home with cheers, hugs, Marmite and a fry up? Actually this is a special treat laid on by our good friends the Biscos but I think it's something that the government should consider. Another special moment.



Back in Blighty



Stop me and buy one!

After mopping up the remains of what can only be described as the best full English breakfast we've had for over two years we're ready to get going again. More familiar faces arrive in the car park in the form of the Whitley family then we swerve from the right to the left side of the road before heading out into the town.



The culinary feast that is a full English Breakfast



The Whitley family welcoming party

British roads are terrifying. There are queues of cars everywhere and the ones that aren't queuing are driving at 100 miles an hour down roads that are barely wide enough to fit a mini. Ok it's Christmas time and we've just come from Brittany where traffic only builds up when a farmer leaves a gate open and a few cows get out, but I don't remember it being quite as bad as this before we left. A fellow cyclist comes alongside us and asks "Going far?", Kirsty replies: "Bristol" , "Really! Thats a long way!", "We've been further...".

We survive Plymouth and emerge onto a lane that begins to skirt round the edge of Dartmoor following the Dartmoor Way, part of the National Cycle Network. Our tyres crunch over wet, gritty tarmac, gaps in the high hedges on either side of us offer a glimpse to church steeples in the valley below, sheep munch away in the steep, rolling green fields. A scene and a road that could only be found in Devon and its simple beauty

brings a smile to my face. Perhaps riding on this island isn't so bad after all.



You don't see these kind of lanes anywhere else



Looking over Dartmoor (spot the photographer)



Devonshire village church

We pass through the villages of Didworthy and Badworthy then past Buckfast abbey whose Benedictine monks have been blamed for many a Scottish brawl fuelled by their fortified tonic wine. We refrain from stopping for a sample, partly to avoid the risk of any violent tendencies but also because we have any another roadside rendezvous to get to in Ashburton. It's a sign of how long we've been away that we left Kat with an imminent baby under her maternity dress and now she's in a similar state with her second one. We haven't even met the first! She and Stu have had an exciting couple of years that have probably been as exhausting as ours. As we're chatting away and munching on mince pie Danishes someone calls out my name from a car in the street. James and Jess have driven out to meet us too and join in the reunion. James advises that the last obstacle on the road ahead to Exeter is Halden Hill which he warns "...is a bit cheeky in places".



Stopping for Marmite sandwiches



With Kat, Stu and The Bump



With Jess, James and Jacob

Only in Britain can you see village names like Bovey Tracey and pedal up through a town called Chudleigh Knighton. Unfortunately we won't be passing through my personal favourite, Nempnett Thrubwell. But the smiles soon turn to grimaces as we hit Halden hill. We realise that "a bit cheeky" needs to be interpreted as "near vertical" as the chain dances over the chainrings into the lowest possible gear and we get to work winching up through the forest. The malfunctioning rear hub isn't enjoying the strain and neither are we but somehow we get to the top in time to see the sun disappearing into the horizon.



Trago Mills, a genuine English castle



Riding into the sunset before Exeter

I went to university in Exeter so there's a strange feeling of familiarity as we dash down into the suburbs and circle around the city. We pass the university rowing club, scene of many a cold morning outing on the canal, and then continue on down now pitch black cycle paths to the home of Digz and Lisa. Our first night back in England couldn't be better, staying with good friends, reminiscing, telling stories and enjoying a home cooked curry, our national dish.



Draw bridge over the canal at Exeter

Britain really does have world class weather. There's nowhere else that can match it for drizzle, mist and what weathermen refer to as 'overcast'. This soggy atmosphere accompanies us the next morning as we approach the Blackdown Hills. Since we left in 2014 we've crossed the Carpathians, the Lesser Caucasus, the Pamirs, the Himalayas, the Japanese Alps, the Cascades, the Rockies and the Appalachians and this is the final major geographical obstacle that we have to negotiate before home. The lane narrows, the leg cadence drops and we slowly begin ascending. The bike isn't happy, Kirsty's knee isn't happy but eventually we summit at Dunkerswell, some 256m above sea level and survey the views all around us. At least we would have if it wasn't for the freezing fog that covers the whole village. As we park the bike outside the local shop someone asks "Going far?", I reply "Bristol", "Really!..."



An 'organic' cottage



Climbing through the mist to Dunkerswell

As well as the weather, Britain is also a world leader in savoury snacks. I didn't realise how much I'd missed sausage

rolls, pork pies, pasties and scotch eggs until I saw the greasy display in the heated cabinet in the Dunkerswell Co-op. There's nothing better than a steak slice to keep a cold hungry cyclist fuelled up.



If you've never had black pudding before, don't look at the ingredients...

It's going to take more than some overcooked pies to get us home though. As we push down on the pedals they begin slipping

forward without moving the bike. Every other pedal stroke it works then it begins slipping again. The Blackdown Hills seem to be the final straw for the hub. With only 100km left of the trip it looks like this could be as far as the bike can go and in frustration I'm ready to chuck it into the nearest ditch. But no, we can't be beaten by a mere technicality like this. There was that moment when the front fork cracked in Tajikistan but we managed to get it welded (it still holds to this day). The moment when the old rear hub fell apart in Laos and we managed to find another wheel to get us up to Hanoi. There has to be a solution. Digging into the rear pannier I pull out the finest invention known to man: a bundle of zip ties.

For a long time I've been an advocate of the theory that there's nothing that zip ties, gaffer tape and pipe clips can't fix and once again this proves true. After some fiddling around and with the sprockets firmly secured to the spokes we manage to get the bike moving again. It's not strong enough to cope with any hard pressure but with care on the flatter sections we can pedal along quite happily. Unfortunately we're still in Devon so there's no avoiding some lengthy pushes over the last of the hills. We make for a sorry sight as I struggle with the bike while Kirsty limps behind, her knee getting more and more inflamed with every step.



Bodger at work



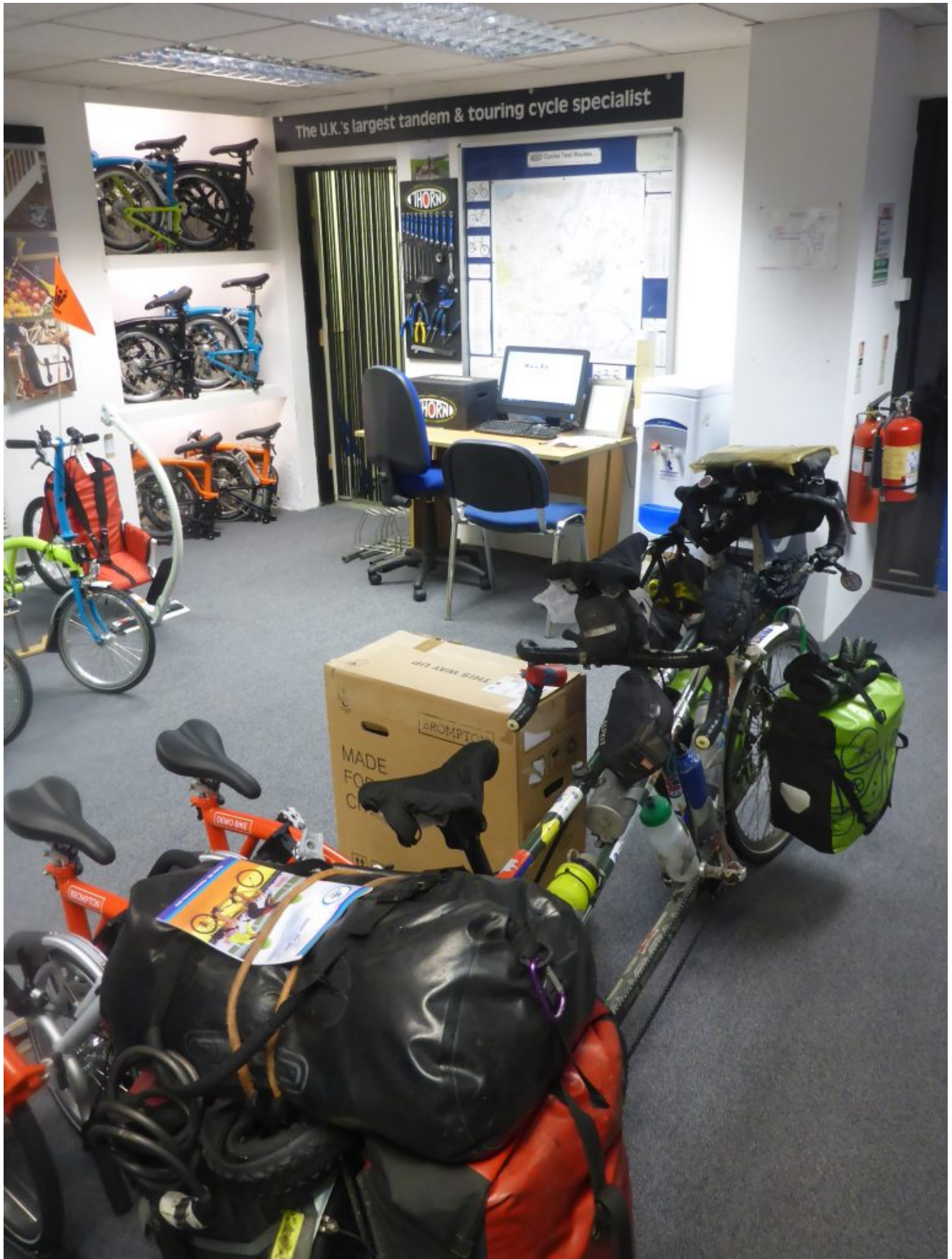
The old 'zip tie the cassette to the spokes' trick



Looking back down to Hemyock after a nice stroll up the hill. Finally the hills give way to the flatlands of the Somerset levels and we manage to get into Taunton, the next large town, only having to replace the zip ties once. Although the bike shop here would love to help, our requirements are just too specific to be able to fix it for us. Our 'bombproof' rear hub follows the rule that *"The major difference between a thing that might go wrong and a thing that cannot possibly go wrong is that when a thing that cannot possibly go wrong goes wrong it usually turns out to be impossible to get at or repair."* (from The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy). Just up the road is St. John Street Cycles which just happens to be home of Thorn Bikes and is the birthplace of our own not-so-trusty steed, surely if anyone can help it's them.

Begrudgingly we hop on a train for the 15km journey into Bridgwater and arrive shortly before the shop is due to shut. Our high hopes for a solution are quickly dashed when we're

told that they don't have any spare wheels available for us to borrow. It seems even the largest tandem specialist in the country can't help. "We can build a wheel up for you tomorrow if you like?". Now with 60km left this sounds like a very expensive option so instead we ask for a fresh supply of zip ties and decide to continue tentatively on with the bodged solution.



The tandem returns to its home at St John Street Cycles
Our last night on the road is spent in Burnham on Sea. A less
than auspicious location nestled on the banks of the Severn

Estuary but with some very appropriate hosts. Before we get to them however there's time for a pint of Somerset's famous Thatchers Cider with my brother Justin. We last saw him as he jumped into a taxi in Tbilisi after our week together cycling through Georgia and the moment of our reunion is full of emotion and laughs.



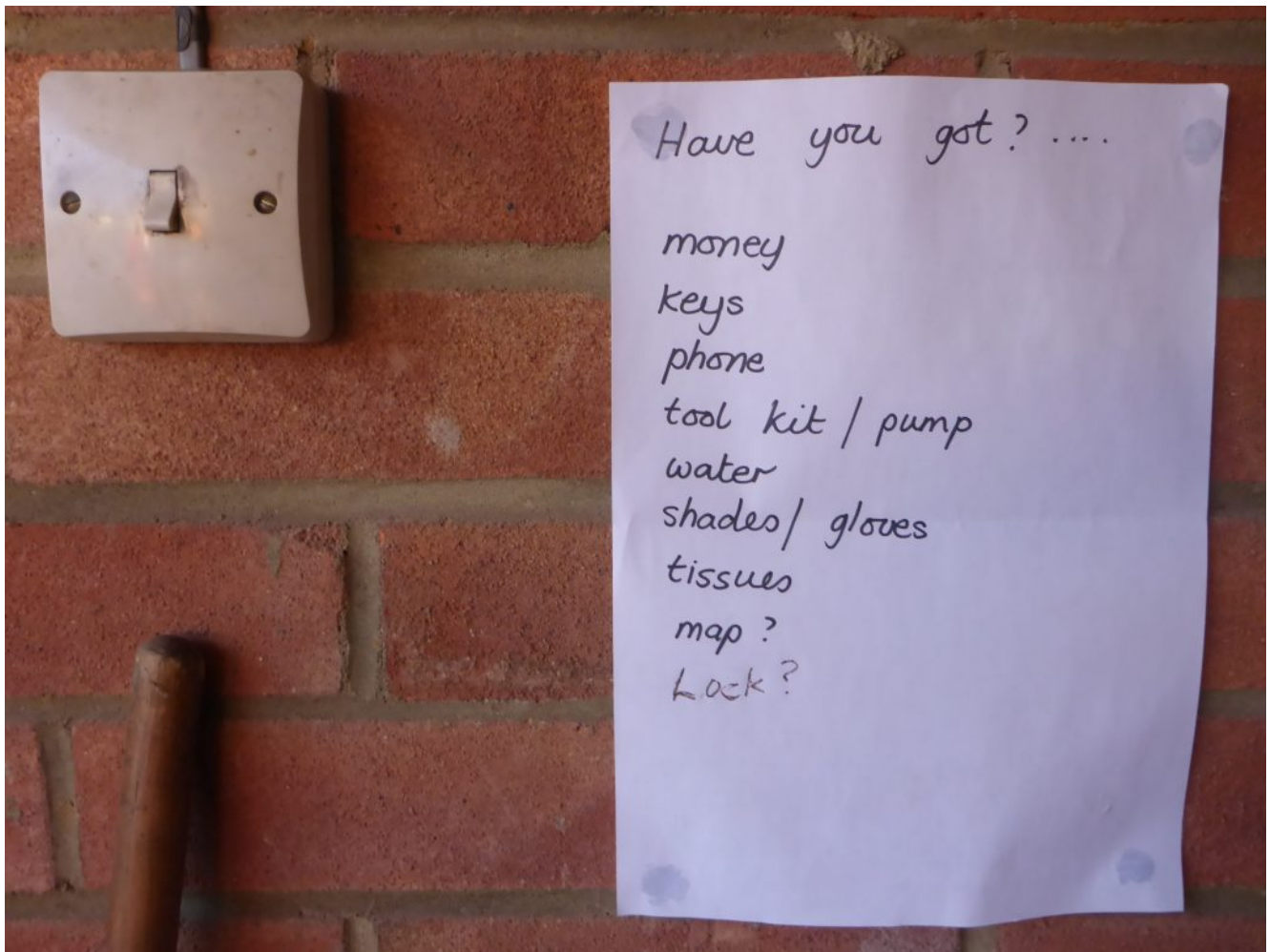
Brothers in the Somerset and Dorset Arms

It turns out that Burnham on Sea is home to some original comedians. Not content with the industry standard "She's not pedalling on the back!" hilarious jape, one observer shouts "Get yer own bike!" when he sees us ride past. This is by far the best tandem heckle we've heard to date so we have to congratulate him for making our day. Our final Warmshowers hosts for the night appreciate this joke too as Allan and Maggie have also travelled the world on a tandem. Being able to chat and share similar stories about the moments we've all experienced travelling on a bike made for two is just what we

need to round off our last night.



Our final Warmshowers hosts of the trip Allan and Maggie



Checklist by Allan and Maggie's garage door

I manage to squeeze a few more zip ties onto the wheel before we set off in the morning. This arrangement means we can change gear but we can't stop pedalling. If we do, then the zip ties will break which we discover 1km after leaving Allan and Maggie's house. I attach a fresh set and then we're off again. It's the last day of a very long journey and it's not far to Bristol now so the sights become more and more familiar. Up ahead we can see the top of Cheddar Gorge cutting into the top of the Mendip Hills, a classic road climb that I've scaled countless times. Today we're looking for something a little less taxing for our route home though so make our way up to The Strawberry Line, an old railway line converted into a cycle path. Railway lines have the advantage of being as flat as possible so this serves our purposes perfectly. It also takes us past the home of Thatchers Cider in Sandford where we're met by two cycling legends: Matt and Drew. Their warm welcome is aided by some complimentary glasses of the

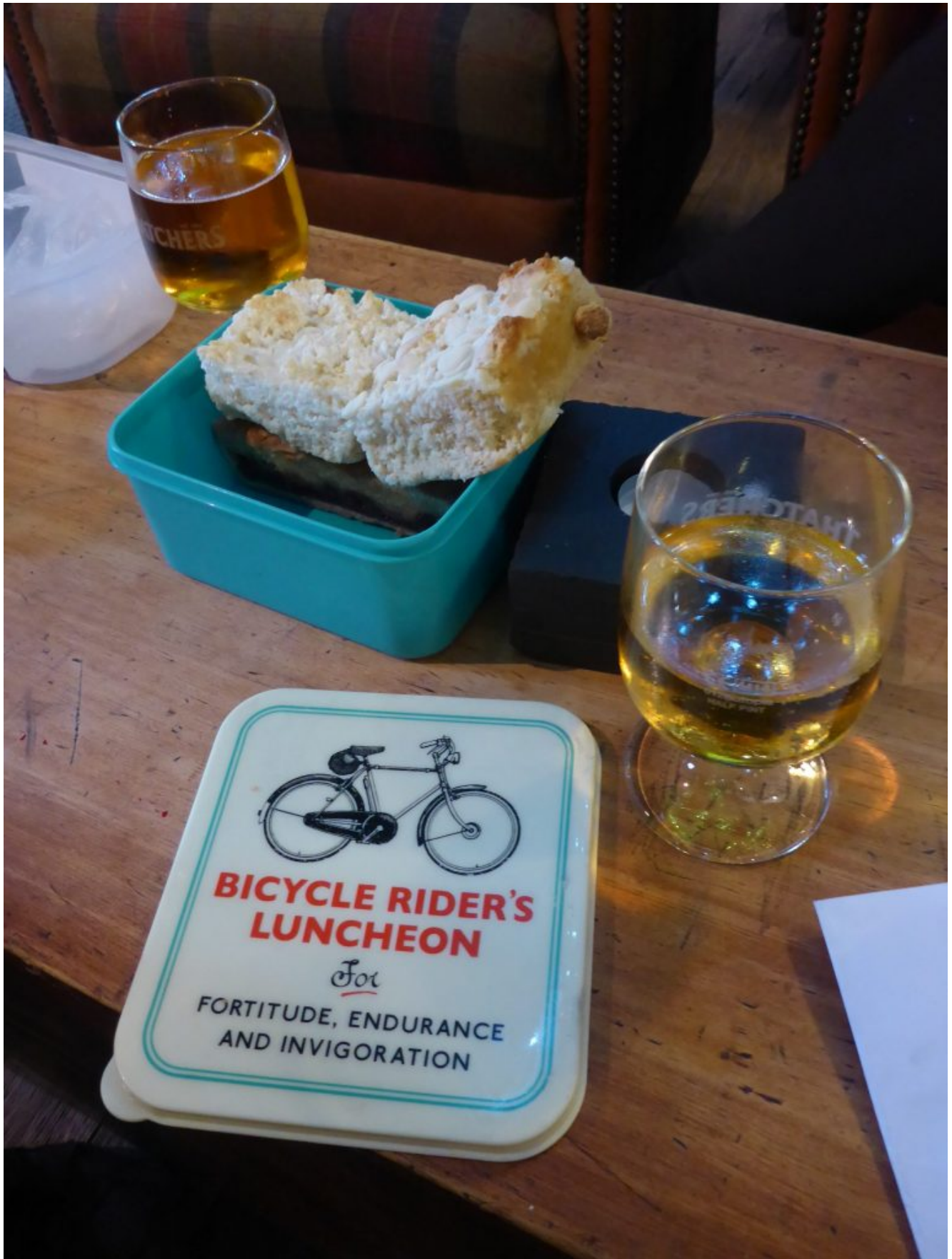
fizzy apple stuff fresh from the brewery. Somerset is to cider as Bordeaux is to wine, Porto is to port, Kentucky is to bourbon and Georgia is to chacha.



The Strawberry Line cycle path



A round the world tandemist, a transcontinental racing NLP Wizard and a PBP veteran



Cider and cake

Our small and slightly wobbly peloton then continues on to Yatton, increasing in numbers when we meet two lads from

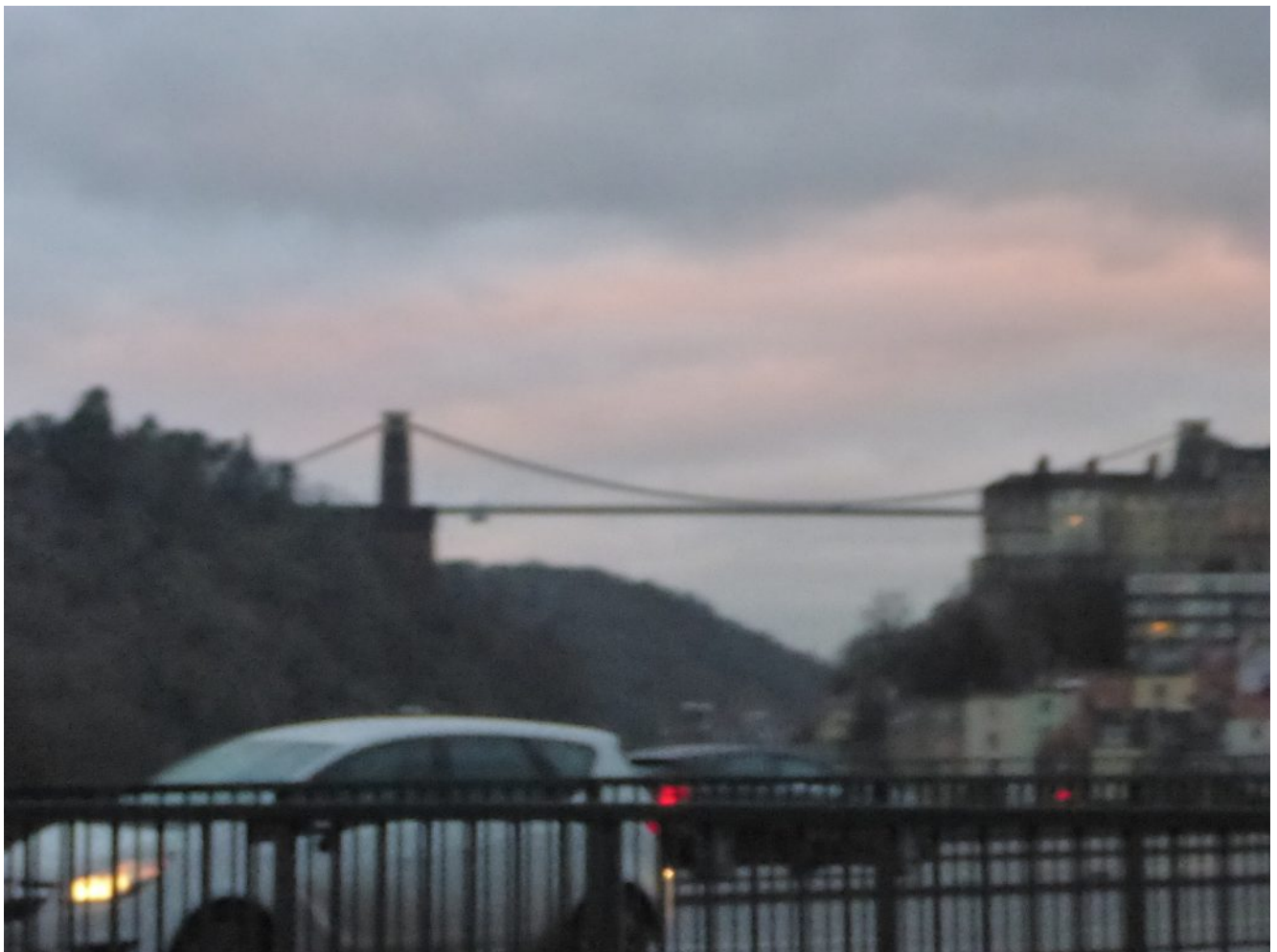
Birmingham who are on a trip from Brum to Burnham and back. Aircraft strength zip ties are issued in Yatton by the Las Vegas Institute of Sport's very own Director Sportif Dylan who informs us that they are "Stronger than the ones used by police as handcuffs". The riding has been anything but hard so far today but I eat a chicken pie to keep my energy levels up just in case.



Drew with one of the boys from Birmingham and a waving Matt
The roads we're on now used to form my commute into work. I used to know every twist and turn and pothole but today it feels fresh and exciting and different again. Nick has joined us and we all make slow progress, counting down the kilometres. Even a railway bridge is enough of a hill to force us to get off and push so our lead-out men have to be very patient.

With what must be only 10km left to ride we get a a bit too

excited, push a bit too hard and break all the zip ties again. The last batch get fitted and now we have to be extra careful as if these break then that's it. We could walk in from here but that would be a disappointing way to end the journey. We crawl through Long Ashton then into Bedminster before we get our first view of the Clifton Suspension Bridge one of the most recognisable icons of Bristol. Another moment to capture and remember. A lump forms in my throat as we skirt around the docks, past the City of Bristol Rowing Club where Kirsty and I first met. Past the Cathedral where a car turns in front of us and comes close to knocking us off which could have been an even more disappointing way to end the journey. Unscathed we then roll down into traffic chaos in the centre of the city. It may have taken 54 zip ties and countless boxes of ibuprofen but it looks like the bike and its crew are actually going to make it.



A blurry Clifton Suspension Bridge. Still one of the finest

bridges in the world. (a better photo of it can be seen [here](#))



Riding along the Bristol docks past the SS Great Britian



The final few metres of the trip, surrounded by road works and traffic

Matt has not only been my wingman on many an adventure but he has also coached me through various races. I remember one piece of his sage advice quite clearly at this point and that is to remember to savour the finish line moment. It's easy to get carried away in those last few pedal strokes or footsteps and to not pay close enough attention to what is actually happening around you but it's really important that you do. So much effort and time has been invested to get to that moment where you finally achieve your goal and if you blink you'll miss it.

I reach behind me to find Kirsty's hand as we gently spin up to the Roll for Soul Cafe, the place where it all began back on 16th August 2014, 851 days ago. This is the finish line, the end of the road, the completion of our journey. We step off the bike for the last time and wrap our arms round each

other. We've done it!



The Finish

After this moment it all becomes a bit overwhelming. I'd

almost forgotten that it's my birthday so the celebration of getting round the world is combined with a celebration of another lap around the sun. Friends arrive to share a few drinks, some have come a long way to join us and it's amazing to see everyone. There are so many moments in our friends lives that we've missed that it's going to take a long time to catch up properly. Technically we're still homeless having not had the heart to turf out our tenants just before Christmas. It's tempting to pitch the tent somewhere in the city but at the same time we're grateful for the offer of a bed for the night from our friends Lynn and Dave.



Dark and stormies to celebrate – the official cocktail of the Las Vegas Institute of Sport

Waking up in Bristol should seem very strange but at the same time feels surprisingly normal. We've become so used to adapting to new situations that it seems we're able to settle into an old situation just as quick. But I think it's going to

take a long time to gather our thoughts about everything we've been through over the last 851 days. Behind us we can trace a tyre wide path that stretches full circle around the world and all along it are memorable moments. So many places, views and countless amazing people. I'm not sure if linking up these moments into a continuous line makes the world feel smaller or the fact that it took a long time to ride around it makes us realise how big our planet is. One thing for sure is that there's a lot more to explore either side of that line and certainly a lot more moments left to live.



Sunrise over Bristol

I'll be back with the much requested list of statistics sometime soon along with an extensive list of thanks to everyone who made the journey possible or helped us along the way but for now we've got Christmas and New Year to celebrate. I hope everyone has a great festive holiday and wish you all the best for an exciting 2017. Thanks for following our

adventure.

...and if anyone can guess the exact number of kilometres that we finished on then they get to choose five items from our bag of international single serving condiments.



Lucky dip

Back in Europe – the beginning of the end

written by Marcus | 23 December, 2016



If there are any followers of our blog left then I must apologise for the increasing scarcity of the posts. One of our aims for this trip was to spend less time looking at screens and as the journey has progressed that aim has been easier and easier to achieve, but at the expense of putting fingers to keyboards and keeping up to date with what we're up to. Hopefully we'll have more time to complete the story once the bike has been parked up. An event that is now rapidly approaching.

But to briefly bring you up to speed. We left the States at the beginning of November and found ourselves on the Azores for a few days thanks to a well timed and well priced deal on a flight. From there we had the shock of not only returning to mainland Europe but also hearing that Trump had won the US election. You know how people remember where they were when they hear about a groundbreaking news story? For us the day of Trumpageddon took place when we were in Lisbon.



Sunset over Lisbon

As well as tiny coffees and tasty pastries, Europe is of course full of ancient history and for hundreds of years pilgrims have been making the journey to Santiago de Compostela in Spain on what is known as the Camino de Santiago or 'The way of St James'. We decided that these routes would be a nice way to shape our journey north so we attached a scallop shell to the bike and followed the Portuguese Way up to Porto then into Spain to collect our certificate in Santiago itself. Then going against the flow of pilgrims we picked up the Camino del Norte to ride up to the north coast of Spain and along the bay of Biscay to Bilbao.



Collecting stamps in our pilgrims' passports



Santiago de Compostela

There are Camino routes all over Europe and in fact one starts in our home town of Bristol. A trail of yellow arrows can be

followed up the atlantic coast of France, using the Velodyssey, Euro velo 1 cycle route and then into England for the final stretch.



Following the Velodyssey through France

So we're now just north of La Rochelle, half way up France. A country that feels strangely familiar as the closest neighbour to England. Even though my schoolboy French doesn't extend far beyond the first few chapters of a Tricolour stage one text book it's still infinitely better than any of the other languages we've had to grapple with over the last two and a bit years. We can finally enjoy good cheese and great bread. Pain au chocolate for second breakfast. Vin rouge with dinner.



Tres bien

This last stretch has not been without its challenges though. The old saying of the rain in Spain falling mainly on the plane is a lie for the convenience of a rhyme. In fact the rain in Spain fell mainly on the tandem. The days are getting inconveniently short and the nights long and chilly. This does have the advantage of having more camp fires, though we've not learnt the French for marshmallow yet.



Pas de mallow de marsh?

Getting so close to the finish line it seems like everything is hanging together by a thread. Two tyres exploded in one day. A fork was left behind at a hostel. The stove splutters to stay alight and needs an overhaul. The rear hub on the bike has begun doing some serious complaining. The parts would take too long and cost too much to be sent from the manufacturers in California so we're trying to nurse it through to the end with a can of WD40 and some tlc.

Kirsty has cause for complaint too after a nasty bout of sinusitis was followed up by a persistent sore knee. Rattling along with a box of ibuprofen in her pocket is not ideal but seems to work. My nose has been running like a tap from a cold that has been hard to shift. Tempers are on edge as if we've not spent time apart for over two years. But we're holding it all together, just.



Another frosty morning

The question that is top of everyone's interrogation is now what will we do when we stop? For ages we've managed to put off giving a serious answer to that by saying the end was too far away to worry about it. But it's not now. The end is a matter of days and not many kilometres away. But our answers are still suitably vague.

Our lives have been incredibly simple since August 2014. Decisions have been not much more complicated than to pick a direction to ride in at the start of the day and to pick a place to pitch the tent at the end of day. In between we keep stocked up with water, basic food and cake and it seems to work out ok. 'What's next?' could be something a whole lot more complicated but hopefully not. Either way we need to give it some time to mull over and see what opportunities take our fancy.

To be honest what I'm looking forward to is adjusting back to a life off the bike one step at a time. Enjoying simple novelties like wearing a pair of jeans, cooking something in an oven, sleeping in the same bed two nights in a row or having a shave (actually that might be taking things too far). More than that though we can't wait to catch up with friends and above all spend Christmas with our families. Once we're through all that then we can work out how to answer the 'what's next?' question.

For now we're enjoying the final few days of our journey. The last few evenings under the stars. The last few cafe stops. The ongoing hospitality of strangers. Beautiful winter scenery. Hopefully the last burst tyre. Soon we'll have the last ferry journey, then the last road back to where we started. And that will give us plenty more to write about. See you all soon.



Location for Kirsty's last birthday on the road