

LONDON-EDINBURGH-LONDON 26TH JULY – 31ST JULY 2009

Well here we are – the other side of this event at last!! The 26th July and this bike ride has been in our diaries for so long now, and a part of our daily routine with training and preparation, that the enormity of it had totally lost its impact. The mind began to focus as we collected the campervan which was to be home for myself and the children and mobile canteen and bed for the Moulton Team (Simon, Shaun Moulton and Dan Farrell). The Moulton bikes are made in Bradford-on-Avon by Shaun's company and are excellent for endurance rides. They have small wheels so are treated with some derision by others until the Moulton guys fly past them up the hills!



Packing the motorhome

The Moulton team just before the start

So, we loaded the van on Saturday and set off for the Lee Valley Country Park to register and start. Sadly Simon had no sleep that night, partly due to being in a van with three children and partly because the enormity of tomorrow was hitting him! He started finally at 1.30pm on Sunday after a tense morning of wanting to get on with it. He felt tired and not 100% as he set off – a fact which worried both of us, but luckily the adrenalin and the company of the other two got him going and he was in his stride very quickly. Their plan was to cycle through from 1.30pm on Sunday until Midnight on Monday with a short 1 hour stop at midnight on Sunday night, to refuel and have a quick sleep and change of clothes.

Having seen them off, the children and I set off up to Washingborough, Lincs where the first rendezvous was planned. On the way up we visited the Shuttleworth Collection at Biggleswade – highly recommended. We arrived at the community centre at about 7pm and settled down to wait for the boys. It was pouring with rain and when they arrived at midnight they were wet through and tired. They were off again very quickly, having filled up with pasta and changed into dry clothes. The kids and I stayed there for the night and on Monday morning set off up the A1 heading north. We visited Normanby Hall where the children were able to spend a few much need hours out of the van and running around. The rain threatened all day and periodically came down very heavily which made for another uncomfortable day in the saddle for the boys. We stopped briefly at a campsite in Scotch Corner to recharge and top up water etc and have a much needed shower – the last of the week as it turned out! The Monday night rendezvous was in Alston, Cumbria – a massive 537 km in 36 hours with little sleep – and a very long drive for myself and the children in one day too. Luckily the motorhome had a tv/dvd player, which made life a lot easier as they were able to settle down and watch a film while I got rid of the miles!



The Alston Checkpoint

Preparing to leave Alston

The children at Steel Scragg

The drive up through Cumbria was beautiful and I have to admit I loved it – the sun was shining (about the only time it did!) and the scenery was breathtaking, particularly at the top of Yad Moss (the highest point on the ride). The roads were very windy and covered in sheep and I did say a silent prayer asking that if I was going to break down could it not be now! I arrived in Alston at about 9.30pm just as it was getting dark and as it was starting to rain – the boys were due in at 10pm and I had a tent to put up and there was no level standing for the motorhome, so I had to jack it up with ramps so that we weren't sleeping on an angle. By this time the wind had got up and the rain was coming down, so I was wet and cold too and the kids couldn't get out of the van, despite having been in it for 5 hours driving. The boys didn't arrive until midnight in the end as Simon had suffered three punctures in and around Baynard's Castle, which obviously slowed them down tremendously. It also meant that they were riding the steep, windy and narrow Pennine roads and up over Yad Moss in the dark, with the wind and the rain adding to their problems. Alston sits in a bowl and the climb up from the previous checkpoint is some 14km then a drop of 6km down into Alston.

After a quick supper they changed and got their heads down, starting out again for the next pull up to Edinburgh at 5.30am having been up and stretched and fed from 4.30am. It wasn't raining as they left, but the wind was strong and blustery and they had a lot of hills to climb.



Supper in the van

After they'd gone I decided to take the children up to Hadrian's Wall and brave the weather. However, not two hours into the day I had a call from Simon to say that a ligament in Dan's knee had given way and that he was probably going to have to pull out. This was a nightmare as Dan was the

experienced one among them and certainly not the one we would have expected to be pulling out at any stage. Simon told me Dan would ring me later and arrange for me to pick him up. In the meantime, the children and I went to Steel Scragg, an enormous rocky hill over which the Wall runs and which required a vertical, rocky climb, rewarded by the most spectacular views – even Ben was enthusiastic and lots of explorer games ensued once we'd got over Hannah's tantrum (I can't remember what it was about, but it was loud and long!). However, true to form the rain and mist raced towards us and from lovely sunshine the weather turned wet and windy and by the time I got the children back to the van, we were drenched! I had intended to get them to a museum, but the call from Dan came through – he'd been told by a doctor that under no circumstances was he to ride a bike for the next 6 weeks. This was really bad news and poor Dan was massively disappointed. Plans for the day were ditched and I headed off to Longtown to pick him and his bike up, then down to Carlisle for him to catch the train. I was on my way back to Hadrian's Wall when I had another call from Simon to say that Shaun was also out of the running with a painful Achilles tendon – it was all going badly wrong. Simon was now on his own and I worried for his morale.

I arranged to meet Shaun at the Eskdalemuir checkpoint which was to be my next rendezvous. I arrived at 5.15 and Shaun shortly afterwards looking tired and dejected and limping badly. By this time the wind was gusting hard and the rain was coming down in stairrods and Simon was out in it fighting his way through the Scottish hills to Dalkeith. At this stage the wind was behind him, but he still had to get back down to me at Eskdalemuir by midnight to stay on schedule. When he turned to come south the wind was full in his face but he had found a friend to ride with – an amazing chap called Mark who was partially sighted and almost totally blind at night. He got back down to Eskdalemuir following Simon's tail light which was all he could see. In the meantime, and I had three hyperactive children who hadn't been able to get out of the van for hours and still couldn't. We camped in the car park of the Tibetan centre in Eskdalemuir – the most extraordinary Buddhist temple, gardens and meditation centre situated in the middle of nowhere. We played charades, then got them into bed and settled down to try and get some sleep before Simon arrived. The van was being rocked by the wind and it sounded like someone was throwing buckets of water at it so unsurprisingly neither of us found sleep easy, wondering how Simon was doing and whether he was safe. After a while we decided to move back to the control so that Simon wouldn't have to try and find us in the dark - this wasn't easy – there wasn't any off-street parking and the roads are narrow – the motorhome seriously impaired the space but we did it anyway – there was no way Simon was going to want cycle back to the temple in this weather. We sat in silence watching the road and willing him to come round the corner. Just after 1am he appeared and the relief in the van was palpable. He appeared at the door very bedraggled and shattered but still smiling – Shaun and I were in awe!

We fed him, warmed him up and got him to bed for a couple of hours then sent him off again at 5.30am for the ride back to Alston and that 6km hill which he was going to have to face this way. He looked a lonely figure as he cycled away in the half-light.



A lonely figure leaving Eskdalemuir -5.30am Wed.

Shaun and I headed back to the train station at Carlisle so that he could get back to London to sort out his tendon, which meant another boring hour sitting in traffic for the poor children. Feeling very keenly that they needed some fun, I, rather stupidly, decided to take them to the Beatrix Potter Attraction by Lake Windemere – a short hop down from Carlisle, but crucially, taking me west of the Yorkshire Dales. The attraction was lovely, but it had meant a long time in the van – crossing the Lake District in a 25 foot motorhome is not a fast business. The scenery was amazing again and the children loved the drama of the Kirkstone Pass. I nearly got stuck in a car park and ended up abandoning the van on the side of the road with a silent prayer that it wouldn't be clamped ! The horror of the return journey then struck me as I realised I was the wrong side of the Yorkshire Dales and had a 150 mile journey back to the next checkpoint at Thorne – I could have kicked myself – the result of not enough sleep and not sticking to original plans – a good lesson learned.

We finally arrived in Thorne at 8pm where it was still raining. Simon was due in at around midnight again but didn't arrive until 1am, tired and of course soaking wet. By now I had a van full of wet clothes which wouldn't dry and Simon was getting very short of kit. Thankfully, Shaun's was still on the van and we raided his bag for clean, dry clothes to continue with. We also raided his snack bag which was amazingly well stocked with the essential fig rolls! The routine in Thorne was the same, change, food, sleep ready for the off again at 5.30am. I wasn't having any contact with Simon during the day – he was eating at the various checkpoints during the day and taking a spare set of clothes with him. That way I was free to do things with the children rather than having to follow him. It also was easier psychologically for him – seeing me half way through the day and having to continue cycling would be really hard, by doing it this way, when he arrived with me it was for a few hours and signalled the end of his day. The psychological element of this ride was vital to get right. So on Thursday I headed on south and found Sundown Adventure Land, a sign which proved too tempting, so we veered off the A1 and found a children's heaven of rides and attractions which killed 6 hours very quickly and gave them a really good day out of the van and in the fresh air.



Leaving Thorne, 5.am Thursday morning

Simon was really feeling it by this stage. He was looking more and more tired each evening and it was getting more and more difficult to get out of bed after a sleep as his muscles stiffened. He decided that on Thursday night we would meet at the Gamlingay checkpoint south of St Neots, at around 10.30pm, he would have a quick supper, change and ride through the night to complete the last 65km to the finish, hopefully arriving by 4am. This was what we did, the children and I arriving there at 8pm having had a lovely day playing. Simon got in at 10.45pm looking on his last legs. By this time he was slurring his words and his brain was clearly not functioning at its most alert! I was very worried for his safety despite the Pro Plus. He set off with his new friend, Andrew Neal who he'd met up with on leaving Thorne that morning. The two of them were suffering and nursemaiding each other through the ordeal. They set off at 11.45pm and I waved them off for the last time.

As planned I set off from Gamlingay at 2.30am and drove down to Cheshunt to be at the finish to meet them. I arrived at 3.30am and Shaun drove up from London to be there too with a bottle of champagne. At 4.20am Simon rang me to say he'd be another hour and he sounded drunk he was so tired. They finally appeared round the corner at 5.30am massively relieved that this was it and they could finally stop! He had completed the ride in 112 hours – well within the limit of 116 (which was extended to 118 because of the bad weather). Simon looked 10 years older – unshaven, grey and red-eyed, but he still had a smile on his face and a huge sense of achievement. I was immensely proud of him and in awe of what he had put himself through with such focus and dedication, never once showing any signs whatsoever of giving up.



A relieved wife/daughter

The medal (it is there!)

Shaun welcomes Simon home

It was a great experience for all of us. We were all challenged by the week in many different ways. The endurance ride itself was enormous – if I hadn't driven it myself I don't think I would have felt this so keenly – but it is an incredibly long way in such a short time and Simon had to dig very deep to get himself through it. We drove home immediately and he was able to enjoy a much needed bath. The children were slightly agoraphobic when they got into the house but very glad to be home!!

Needless to say, we are still collecting any sponsorship and the Just Giving website is still open and taking donations! (www.justgiving.com/simonjacobs4waa). Alternatively you can just send us a cheque made payable to 'Wiltshire Air Ambulance Appeal' to The Grange, Worton, Devizes, Wiltshire, SN10 5SE and we will present it to them for you.

Finally, a huge thank you to all those who have already sponsored us, particularly Chris Farnsworth who has delivered, on a regular basis, industrial quantities of Aloe Juice which has kept Simon in the peak of health through the training and the ride itself – no he isn't sitting next to me!!! We also owe a huge thank you to Dave Fegent of A Class Luxury Motorhome Hire, Swindon, who let us have the motorhome at half price for the week – it proved to be an essential element of the whole week and we are extremely grateful to him for making it affordable! And finally finally, I must say a huge thank you to my girlfriends who texted me on a daily basis, giving us encouragement and finding out how we were doing. It was lovely to have so many of you thinking of us and cheering us on and was hugely appreciated in some very lonely moments waiting for Simon's lights to come round the corner.

How extraordinary that all this should have happened because of one errant ewe!!!



The face of a tired man!!