

Success!



Peddalling the

PEAK

Robin Evans tells the tale of 17 colleagues who crossed Derbyshire as they recreated the inaugural easyJet flight from Glasgow to Luton to mark the company's 20th birthday... by bicycle

ENGINEERS, managers and pilots from across Europe rode 400 miles over four days, traversing the Borders, Lakes, Dales and the Peak. This route normally takes 50 minutes by air, but was far longer and grittier on two wheels. Preparation focused on wet-weather gear, daily riding in all conditions and a large pinch of family tolerance, though the training was a privilege in a mild autumn. All hardware travelled north in a support van the day before. This was the first time most of us had met, motivated by six weeks of training to see if we could pull it off. As a pilot I was looking forward to seeing my own country at eye level and escaping the flight deck to understand my comrades.

Day One (Glasgow–Carlisle) is a dry day of easing in physically and socially. We push through the morning rush in darkness, becoming acquainted with each other on the rural climbs and moorland plateaux south to Lockerbie. Twilight falls approaching Gretna Green for an obligatory border photograph, the first milestone of the mission. We cruise into Carlisle ten hours after starting out, again in darkness, a tempo that would become very familiar.

Day Two (Carlisle–Burnley) starts wet and gets dramatic. We skirt the Lakes via Shap, staying on empty country roads. The scenery is impressive but the Forest of Bowland sees the weather close in and the group splinter. At a feed stop outside Clitheroe I believe we're nearly home but there is bad news: there are two climbs and 20 kilometres remaining. We grind across Pendleton Moor in darkness, completely soaked. The atmosphere is one of bruised relief, but there's no time to dwell: it's another hard day tomorrow.

Day Three: Burnley to Derby. I find myself struggling almost immediately. This is new physical territory to an experienced rider; the ability lost over repetitive days, exacerbated by minimal recovery time is scary. I feel as if I start each day another



The road ahead through Derbyshire



PHOTO ROGER BROWN

Tackling the Peak District leg

15% depleted. However, the company and autumnal, post-industrial scenery are just the tonic to raise spirits. Then the rain starts, the route becomes heavily urban and for the first time I find myself cursing the mission.

Suddenly: a crash. Riders scatter on the slippery tarmac but there's no lasting damage. We're outside the blue plaque-marked early home of Brian Wilde (*Foggy in Last of The Summer Wine*) in Ashton-under-Lyne which evokes a sense of northern culture. We cross into Derbyshire via Hadfield, heading southeast. After four hours in the saddle I finally placate grumbling muscles and dry out. We chance upon an Armistice Day ceremony and for a few surreal minutes there's total silence, except for chirping birds. A friend started out this morning with a poppy on his handlebars: ride with pride. Any hardship suddenly seems negligible in comparison.

This is my first real taste of Derbyshire; the bikes allow us to traverse counties in a day, but with a direct connection to the world and a reminder that to appreciate a view you have to work for it. I had no idea that the peaks of the Peak District rear up so immediately outside Glossop; there's a real sense of gazing down on the UK.

I spy a sign for Snake Pass and can suddenly visualise where I am. With over 100 miles a day to achieve, we navigate a planned route by bike computer, depriving us of much contact with real maps. I'm gleefully anticipating a swift descent into Hayfield as the drystone walls along the A624 unfurl in front of me but in a cruel twist, it's spoilt by a prevailing southerly wind.

Our daily routine is fuelled by two lunches, the first at Millie's Tea Rooms. Their chocolates are wasted on me at this point; ▶



PHOTO ROGER BROWN

No time to waste!

I drift into a daze awaiting a salmon bagel, senses equally overwhelmed and exhausted. Despite daily calorific expenditure averaging 4,000, twelve-hour days leave no time for regional gastronomy. Alas, there were no deep-fried Mars bars on day one, Kendal Mint Cake on day two or a sampling of the Bakewell Pudding today. Hardy walkers and bemused locals wonder what the invasion is all about – you're a friendly bunch, consistently the region that took the most interest in what we were doing.

“Hardy walkers and bemused locals wonder what the invasion is all about – you're a friendly bunch”

In stark contrast to yesterday it's still dry as tyres crunch onto the Monsal Trail, our only off-road section and a memorable highlight. On a mild afternoon we encounter plenty of Sunday walkers... and their pets – an earlier brush with an inquisitive hound caused mayhem

amongst our wheels. To this Midlands boy, there's also a palpable sense of the last of the terrain receding. The second lunch is at a café in Matlock, reminiscent of that for the unfortunates in *The Apprentice*. However, we're made to feel very welcome and no combination of things is too much trouble for the owner, his wife and their little baby. Matlock Bath awakens all the senses, lighting up the dusk and teasing us with the aroma of fish and chips: dinner is still a while away.

The rush hour has passed by the time we

reach Derby. Still on a high, I impishly decide to ride through the front door of our hotel. The polished floor offers no traction beneath my cleated foot and I collapse like a newborn foal. Explosions of laughter. The receptionist looks up nonchalantly: 'Evening!' There's the usual frantic rush to dry wet gear and hose down oily bikes. There is just enough time for swapping stories over a Thai buffet in town before our final push home tomorrow.

Day Four (Derby–Luton) is the earliest start of the lot, awaiting the first wisps of a pink sunrise. We depart Derbyshire skirting The National Forest. There are consistent signs of fatigue and the driving style is becoming a lot less tolerant. There's also an unwelcome shadow that the journey will soon be over. We arrive at HQ to a welcoming crowd and I find I'm lifting my steed aloft, shaking it in equal parts anger and triumph. Glancing around I find everyone doing the same.

So what made an indelible impression upon me? Simple, daily treasures like another subtle change of accent or style of signpost. A sense of community rhythm: parents commuting, children going to school and then the reverse. To spectate on much of your own country with a like-minded team was a privilege, all of us finishing despite our own personal battles. The £21,000 raised from this incredible fundraising effort will help UNICEF to keep children safe from polio. Since 2012, easyJet and UNICEF's Change for Good partnership has raised over £9m, helping to protect millions of children around the world from disease. ♦

Below: A moment to stop in Derbyshire to catch our breath and admire the view

