

Looking through my list of cycling objectives for 2019 there was one remaining that I hadn't attempted, everything else had been cycled even if not achieving the target result.

Then the good people at Grampian Cycle Partnership (GCP) launched their cycling friendly North East250 route, this was the catalyst for spurring me on to complete my objectives, the NE250 was the missing link on my 2018 bucket list.

This was to be my season finale, and the planning started, choosing a date, recruiting my faithful training buddy, Mike and studying the route. My fitness wasn't what it was a couple of months ago after a recent 3-week break from the bike and the indulgences of a 2-week summer holiday in France, however the recent Ride the North event helped restore some of the fitness that had been lost.

At 4am on Saturday 7th September, Mike and I rolled out of Pocrá Quay in Aberdeen along Beach Boulevard and enjoyed the near deserted roads as we left the city and turned off onto the B999, when we joined by a badger that popped out of the verge and ambled along with us for a few metres. Following the route through Potterton to Balmedie we were soon on the old A90 road and we both commented how even at this time in the morning this section of road would have been a no go for cyclists prior to the AWPR opening.

We then cycled passed the opening to the Trump golf estate, where an enormous white stretch limo was parked outside, which sparked some humour as we wondered if Stormy Daniels was waiting inside, our minds moved seamlessly from Stormy to the weather and the increasing presence of a head wind doing its best to hinder our progress up the coastline.

Through Newburgh and the Forvie National Nature Reserve, the home to eider ducks, terns and oyster catchers plus the colony of seals sheltering in the stunning dune system at the mouth of the Ythan River.

As daylight was beginning to breakthrough, we then saw the dramatic outline of Slains Castle, the inspiration behind Bram Stoker's Dracula.

From a fictional scary character to some real-life scary characters as we entered the Blue Toon and the Peterhead Prison Museum, which housed some of the most notorious criminals in the UK. We followed the bike path round the Peterhead bypass with its very smooth surface, onto the A90 as we headed towards the Broch.

At Fraserburgh, the staff in the Tesco Café opened 20 minutes early to give us our breakfast, which was greatly appreciated. The staff couldn't have been kinder, and all approached us taking interest in what we were doing. Fully charged up it was now time to turn the corner and head in a westerly direction towards Elgin.

We knew that the wind coming from the North West was going to make this even tougher and the relative flat of the road travelled was about to change, when we enjoyed a 20% descent after Sandhaven, we knew there would be a price to pay for such a descent! We didn't have long to wait, a short 9% climb lead us to the crossroads taking us down a steep drop to the village of Pennan, home to the most famous phone box in the UK, following the scenes from the iconic film Local Hero. As we enjoyed the beauty of this village and the surrounding bay, we viewed with some trepidation the only option out of Pennan, retracing the road in, and this meaning climbing the hill that averages out at a 10% gradient. As we caught our breath, it was straight into another steep climb on the B9031 that has ramps of 14%, with both of our back tires slipping as we battled the gradient, the

only way to keep moving was to sit down to keep the extra weight at the back of the bike – tough going.

It was then time to take in another of the stunning seaside villages as we entered into Gardenstown and as we descended it was more like an Alpine village with all its switchbacks as we held firmly to our brakes as we dropped to the shoreline beside the small creel boats. We couldn't spot any dolphins, but perhaps the waters were too choppy for them.

Back out of Gardenstown with a mere 10% average gradient, we then followed the cliffs around Troup Head, which made for stunning scenery, which houses the largest mainland gannet colony in the UK. Soon we arrived in the towns of Macduff and Banff, less than 1 mile apart. Macduff housing Marine Aquarium and Banff with some stunning architecture, we carried on through to the picturesque village of Portsoy to the equally beautiful Cullen where the old railway bridge dominates the landscape.

What was noticeable was the pride the people take in their properties and the communities as we cycled through the pristine fishing villages from Portknockie to Port Gordon before heading to Spey Bay which houses the Scottish Dolphin Centre.

Lunch was in Garmouth, where we had the finest coffee at the Garmouth Hotel, they roast their own coffee beans, what a find, nice staff, good food and as I said amazing coffee. Just what we needed to buoy us up and start heading away from the coast through Elgin and into malt whisky country, following the River Spey through Rothes and the amazing Dewar stills at Craigellachie onto Dufftown, the home of my favourite malt, Balvenie.

The relative flat of the first 200km was now over and we had to find our climbing legs as we cycled through the beautiful Glenlivet estate towards Tomintoul and into the Cairngorms National Park. The purple heather on the hillsides was stunning, as we opted to have a quick pitstop in Tomintoul before tackling the Lecht and Gairnsheil passes.

Leaving Tomintoul, the chat soon stopped as we both cycled along the contemplating the pain that was awaiting us, the main climb is hidden until you round the corner at Well of Lecht, where a stone commemorates Colonel Lord Charles Hey and the 33rd regiment who built the road in 1754. I just wish Charlie and his troops had built the road around the hill and not the most direct route to the top!

As we turned the corner the scale of the climb becomes evident and we ground our way up, with traffic queuing behind as we battled the 20% ramps. Thankfully I remembered from previous cycles not to assume the ski centre is the peak, once you get to the station there is still some climbing to be done. The reward for the Lecht climb is the most amazing views and fabulous descent of around 5 miles, where we hit speeds of 50mph.

Turning off the A944 at Corgarff onto the A939 it was time to take on Gairnsheil Pass, despite the sun beginning to set the colours were just stunning as you could look over towards Braemar, I was clearly causing some concern to a Hawk, who was giving out warning signals to me that he was a bit agitated with my presence in the area, unfortunately I couldn't go any quicker but it did spur me on getting to the top, thankfully for both Hawk and me I eventually reached the top and we went our separate ways as I enjoyed the near 15km descent into Ballater and another feed stop.

A quick bar supper at the Deeside Inn was just what was needed and a boost with a chance meeting with my old college mate. Fuelled up and in good form it was time to start heading East as we made our way out of Ballater along the South Deeside Road, which was beautifully deserted as we exited

the Cairngorm National Park passing the entrance to Glen Tanar Estate and skirting Aboyne, lit up just on the North side of the River Dee.

We now had a decision to make as we cycled through Finzean, 17 hours into our day the turn off for Cairn o Mount was approaching, one of the real iconic climbs in the North East. We ended up convincing ourselves that we were taking the safe option and not the easy option – big difference – taking into account how cold and tired we were, not withstanding cycling in the dark again, so we headed into Banchory and also the North Deeside Road to passing the Rob Roy statue at Peterculter was the signal we had done the magnificent North East loop.

We cycled 230 miles in just over 18 hours and enjoyed the most fantastic day on our bikes, with stunning scenery and the diverse landscape that North East Scotland offers. I would recommend anyone to do this loop, perhaps maybe do it over 2 days though to enjoy the abundance of attractions along the way.