KIEREN It started as a casual suggestion – “Kieren, you’ve organised a bike ride before, fancy doing another?” – but it became one hell of a mission. I thought about pulling the plug in December 2013 after the co-organiser had to pull out because of family problems. Six months later, things still weren’t coming together: we had some sponsorship problems, the shirts hadn’t arrived, the route wasn’t finalised, many of the hotels hadn’t returned emails, we didn’t have a driver, and my PC had flared up worse than it had done for a couple of years. Still, I’m so glad I didn’t pull the plug.

There was certainly a lot of stress getting the ride sorted, a lot more than I had naively anticipated. Before this when I heard anyone say “I work in events”, I’d thought: “You get paid to organise big parties, how difficult can that be?” About as difficult as trying to stuff well-oiled spaghetti into a well-oiled plastic bag, which contains 8 well-oiled octopi on speed. In fact, that might be easier.

The Thursday before we left, with just one week to go, the energy food – provided by our sponsor, Mulebar – arrived at my door. Almost synchronously, I got a text from DHL saying that our shirts would arrive the next day. I burst into laughter, then tears; that’s when I realised how stressed I was feeling about the whole thing. Everything was finally falling into place: Phil Gard had sorted the route, the part of the ride organisation I was most afraid of; Martin – a friend – had stepped up to be driver, and was a professional photographer to boot. The team where training their hearts out and raising an ever increasing sum of money.

All the organisational jigsaw pieces were beginning to slot together. But the two things I had absolutely no control over – the weather and my skin – were not playing ball. My skin in particularly was really frustrating me, and I think it was this frustration that was partly to blame for my tears that Thursday.
KASSIA I have a history of gamely signing up to things in a fit of enthusiasm only to be smacked in the face a couple of months later with the realisation of the scale of the challenge I've set myself. This was no different.

Kieren and I had, two years previously, cycled to York for PC Project and I had found it incredibly difficult. I'm not a naturally sporty person, or a natural cyclist. I didn't have a bike of my own and borrowed Kieren's full-suspension mountain bike for the cycle. We had travelled on quite a few very busy, very dangerous A-roads during the 3 days it took to get to York and, on the 3rd day I had hit the wall. I spent most of the day either in tears or on the brink of them and then spent the following day alternately being sick and passing out on the train back to London.

This was the experience in my head with about 3 months to go. I was training as much as my job would allow - not much - but there were moments when I felt sick with worry about not being fit enough and the dangers of cycling on busy roads. Still, this time around I had a road bike of my own and was very reassured that we would have a car to put our things in rather than carrying them ourselves.

KIEREN I hadn’t been able to train for a while, and the training I had done had been achieved only by using painkillers to get on the bike. This had led to a couple of injuries, and I had stopped training 3 weeks before we left. I had Tracey, a lovely physio sports therapist lady needling and prodding me back into some sort of physical shape, but ultimately if my feet didn’t improve, I was in trouble.

That Thursday passed, and with it my mood lightened. I don’t know if it was the cooler weather, the lowering of stress levels now that the final pieces of organisation were in place, or what, but my feet where good enough for me to walk without painkillers by Wednesday. Mira and I packed the car and drove to the hotel that night. There was a feeling of excitement, and fear.
The first morning was up at 5am, breakfast at 5.30, briefing about how to work as a team and on the road by 6.20. London was hectic, and with 4 punctures in 90mins – all on Kassia's bike – I was beginning to feel a little dubious. Nonetheless, the cavalry – Martin in my sister's car – arrived as planned and we hitched a ride to the bike shop to replace the tire and crack on. The Volvo at this point smelt a lot like dead people, but I guess that will happen when you have two children and a dog with leaky anal glands. Martin valeted the car, and installed 8 magic trees, and by the end of the trip it smelt more like the perfume section of a department store known as “A Pound Shop”. Still, we could not have done the trip without the Volvo of Love Justice and Redemption – to give it it’s full title – and a big thanks must go to Marekka and Jonny for giving us their car, MOTing it, washing it, and having Martin insured on it. Moreover, Mulebar only sponsored us because their owner “sweats” with my sister: they go to hot yoga together. From such a tenuous link, they were generous enough to give us the biggest single donation – in kind – that the ride received, outside of a donation from the Economist Group – £1000 – for Kassia in a matched donation. The biggest donors were the friends and family of the team, who helped us raise 40ish% over the – ambitious – total. Amazing.

Once out of London, the surroundings became more pleasant, the road users more considerate, and the going somewhat less stressful. Having lunch on the first day the group was a little stunned I think; the realisation that we were finally getting going was slowly seeping into people consciousness and muscles. That afternoon was a little raucous and disjointed, but we were enjoying ourselves, and that was one of the things that kept the ride going most – laughter. The 5 days seemed to get longer, and harder as each one went by, but the thing that stopped them being interminable, was camaraderie and laughter. That will be one of the things that I’ll remember most about the ride, there was always someone to talk to and laugh with within 10 metres of
you. No email, no phones, skype, facetime or facebook was necessary, they were just there.

We arrived in Peterborough relatively early – 5pm – considering the flat tire count. A good days cycling. Dinner on the first night was extremely welcome, never has a free salad bar seemed like such a thing of beauty. I had to leave early though as all the food and energy bars had had something of fermentation effect on my stomach; I thought I might explode, and in the car park I practically ripped my trousers with a thunder crack of wind. Poor Martin had to share a room with Vesuvius.

**KASSIA** I was mortified by the punctures, particularly since, because I never get them when commuting, I have no idea how to change a tyre. (I'm sure I could figure it out but it would probably take me about half an hour, rather than the 90 seconds it took some other members of the group!) It definitely didn't feel like an auspicious start. Still, once tyres had been replaces, snacks consumed and more inner tubes bought I felt much better. My back niggled a little - one of the punctures had been the fault of a mammoth pot hole that the group hadn't seen until we were right on top of it, and the shock of going over it had jarred something.

Each day was mentally tough in its own way. On day 1 there was the risk of pushing yourself too much and not leaving enough in the tank for the remainder. There were also hand signals to be learnt and the rhythm of the team to be fitted into. But the camaraderie and the feeling of being a team really began to kick in, and made a huge difference. Arriving in Peterborough was a great feeling. That feeling of having embarked and of properly being on the journey was amazing, as was being able to see the distance travelled in a satisfyingly long red line stretching north east from London on my Strava app.
Day 2, a pleasant ride round some lakes started a day of an otherwise flat and boring nature. Kassia and I had cycled this route on London to York, the flat landscape seems to invite a sense of déjà vu – it all looks the same. It was this flatness that we would look wistfully back at on the following days.

MARTIN BOUGHT KRISPY KREMES, WOOHOO; we ate them for tea. This was the longest day, we had 117 miles to cycle, and we didn’t arrive till 7.30 – 13 hours on the road. That day I had eaten 8 energy gels, 4 energy bars, beans on toast, eggs on toast, cereal, a mammoth brownie, a Krispy Kreme, a banana, cannelloni, fully loaded nachos, blue cheese salad, and Tagliatelle meatballs; the last two in a lovely restaurant in the hotel overlooking the Humber bridge, and some wedding fireworks. Je suis le winner.

This was my least favourite day. It was the longest at nearly 120 miles, and it was dull. The roads were dull. The view was dull.

I was also struggling to get the food intake right. It sounds ridiculous but it's difficult to get the balance right. You don't want to rely too heavily on the short, sharp bursts the energy gels give you—Phil and Mary were very sceptical about the gels and energy bars—but without them I found myself hitting lows just before lunch and tea time.

The third day wasn’t as long thankfully, but we began the day with a long climb, punctured by some awesome descents. Adam decided to spend some time riding behind what John called “The Barn Door”; a massive chap, who cycled past us at quite a rate, but somehow was using his entire body to cycle – it was rather like watching a spider monkey DJ-ing on a unicycle. He was off to the pub it turned out, but only got there after Adam had stalked him for 20 minutes. I can only imagine what he felt on his mountain bike, squiggling for all his worth, whilst a lycra clad speedster cycled 2 foot behind him. Fear?

98 miles later we arrived in Darlington, where the roundabout that was supposed to be there wasn’t, and had been replaced by a dual carriageway – making the last mile a little tricky, or to use the terminology of the road: shit. The toll was certainly beginning to show that day, John had been sick en route, I had nearly come off over cooking a corner on a downhill, Kassia couldn’t...
remember her room number at the hotel and had wandered the corridors in a
tiredness stupor, and I just wanted to stop. Both I and Mira required steroid
cream on our bums – though I am sure hers looks better in lycra than mine;
John voiced it well when he said: “it feels like someone has replaced my thigh
muscles with pure pain”.

**KASSIA** This was the day I realised I was weird. I genuinely enjoyed hills, and not whizzing
down them, which everyone enjoys, but climbing up them. The first hill of the morning
was just joyful - the sun was shining, the view was good. Also my fitness had increased to
the point where I was happy to sit at the front
with Phil or Mary or Kieren and take the load
for a while, which I found immensely satisfying. Also the place we stopped for
lunch, just after driving through the most ridiculously grand stately home, was
incredible. Who knew jacket potato and chilli could be so delicious? Or that
fruit cake topped with Wensleydale is awesome?

There are snatches of views and memories of cafes and lunch stops that stand
out, but the vast majority of our time was spent between these punctuation
points, and what made these stretches more than grinding out pedal
revolutions were the great chats that we were beginning to have with each
other on the road. About
everything from shared interests,
niggling injuries, past relationships
and childhoods.

**KIEREN** Day 4, we spent the
morning – the whole sodding
morning – climbing. The Pennines
are beautiful; despite the fact they
seem to always go up more than
down, stunning. We stopped for
coffee at the bottom of our first
climb, and John had a small
morning snack: a full English. After another mammoth climb, lunch. Sunday
roast – extra gravy, like a professional. I watched Phil eat a desert with a
velocity that defied belief, it was like watching a Dyson do desert. Full marks
have to go to Martin for finding that place. Full marks should go to Martin for
many things: arriving in hotels to find ourselves checked in with keys ready, or with instructions on where to put bikes, or countless other details that were attended to.

**KASSIA** Hills! I <3 hills and this was The Day of the Hill. As motorbikes swept by out of nowhere like angry wasps we climbed and climbed and climbed through beautiful countryside in blazing sunshine. They definitely weren't everyone's favourite though, and some people were beginning to get injured and really suffer. Tears were shed at the top of long ascents and gaps grew that took 5 or 10 minutes to close up.

**KIEREN** Its an odd little bubble you get into on a ride like this, the world seems to recede somewhat. I didn’t read the news, watch tv, send any emails, or talk to anyone outside the people on the ride, and a friend at home. This bubble though is the people in it with you, and I guess you get to know these people better than you have before. Martin gets further credit here I feel. He really did have to help me. Piggy backs at 5.25am anyone? Piggy backing a sweaty cycling dude in the evening? Perhaps an evening spent listening to a cyclist complain about the sores on his ass? Do any of these activities come into your imagination when you’re asked the question “do you fancy being the driver on a bike ride?”. I am sure they weren’t on Martin's agenda for being driver to 9 cyclists on a 5-day mission. Equally, I am sure he didn’t imagine having to share a room with a man who spent most evenings swanning around the room naked apart from a sarong. Clearly the sarong covered the essentials, but, nonetheless, harrowing to awaken to the sight of me, with my Lycra shorts round my ankles, spreading chamoix cream and antibiotics on my bum. As Martin said at the beginning of the cycle: “There are some things that cannot be unseen”. I think he may develop trauma symptoms.

Strong male nudity aside, I got to know a different side to Martin. I had never realised his secret-spidey skills where so universal. His capacity for tune hunting is widely recognised. On a ride like this, sometimes the conversation can become mundane, and a little you know, that thing. Nebulous. No, not that thing, the other things. No, I don’t know. Which thing? Apples. The thing about apples is that people – it turns out – have their favourites. (Mine happens to be
Pink Lady, but that may just be because it’s the only apple variety I know.) It was during one of these meandering conversations that Mira mentioned she liked Braeburns. Three hours later at our next stop there were Braeburn apples. Those are Martins secret spidey skills. The Krispy Kremes that kept appearing, the well timed stop with rain clothes and bike lights, the awesome tunes playing for short snippets as he cruised past, the camera shots along the way that did leave one feeling like some sort of cycling legend. All these things, they all happened as if by magic soap bubbles and butterflies. Martin, I guess, was the caring, sharing, listening legend; he took the role of driver and made it the role of home.

**KASSIA** Seconded. Martin did a thousand things to make the journey what it was. Knowing that if you got into trouble he would be at hand was a huge relief. Arriving at a break to be greeted with your jumper and a car full of snacks and chamois cream was enough to snap you out of a bad mood. He was the rock that hugged like a bear.

**KIEREN** The road itself required a different set of spidey skills; for this we relied on Phil and Mary. Mary was mum on the trip, but mum with a carbon bike, road skills, a Garmin navigator, a medical doctorate, and all the cycling knowledge you could wish for. There were a couple of occasions when a gaggle of men would be pushing out 80% of their max and Mary would “just pop up to see Phil” and cover the 100 metres to him in a time that left one feeling a little bemused. If one tries to conjure a title to put all this together Dr Mary the super-fit-cycling-dudess-knowledge-base-badass would have to do. Sadly, I don’t think it’ll fit on the commemoration stationary. No, we’re not doing that really; but genuinely Mary’s a rock-solid, rock-like solid thing.

Phil was sort of dad, actually better to call him a shepherd. A shepherd of what in group organisational terms might be referred to in a memo as: They had the capacity for some order, and to keep an eye on each other, but ultimately lacked a true organising focus or ability. To put it more bluntly, the team resembled a bunch of LSD taking Meer cats, on bikes. Phil managed to get that organised bedlam from one end of the UK to another, no mean feat. Hardcore.
This is of course a touch harsh on the team. After 4 months hard training the team - 2 of whom hadn’t ridden a bike till earlier in the year - completed the equivalent of 25ish% of the Tour de France. Sure the Pennines aren’t the Pyrenees, and the Scottish lowlands don’t have many 50% gradients. But then no-one on the team did any performance enhancing substances. Other than Krispy Kremes. There were some painkillers taken, and I still remember Adams comment “Mate, do you lie to yourself, like how far there is left for the day? I do, also I’ve taken a couple of painkillers and these energy gels, so basically cycling turns you into an over-eating, compulsive liar and a druggie – now I know what happened to Lance”. Moreover, none of the members of the team had heard the “calls” that we learnt at 6am on the first morning – car-up, car-down, pothole, gavel, mud etc – which we were meant to shout out to warn each other of an upcoming obstacle. But by day 2 the team was working as a, well, team. Whilst we would often break in to small groups of 2s and 3s strung out over 50 metres, we would still warn each other of obstacles, communicating – or indicating – in a way I would sorely love drivers in London to do.

There was in my mind a high point to day 4 – John’s impression of “the Barn Door” – he got the flailing arms and legs with the question mark forming back movement just right; I nearly fell off my bike laughing.

Day 4 ended in a hotel that did feel strangely like the set from the Grand Budapest Hotel. The hotel was a little eccentric; it had an old world faded elegance. (KASSIA: It was creepy.) Big high ornate ceilings, chesterfields in the bar, odd statues all around the place and a manager who was brilliant. Not only did he look after us like kings, he nonchalantly put his arms round Phil and asked “what time you want breakfast in’t mornin?” when we replied 6am, he was aghast “SIX!” “Six o’clock!!”. I thought he might burst with horror, but once his incredulity had subsided, and the hysteria of John at witnessing this reaction receded; we were reliably informed that this would be so, and it was.
**KASSIA:** As great as the beginning of day 4 was - and I really loved the beginning - the end was hell. Kieren was beginning to find cycling really very difficult as his skin deteriorated and injuries and niggles amongst the rest of the team were mounting. When we reached Scotland the quality of the road surface - we are all tarmac experts now - was dramatically worse, so bad that our reaction to reaching Scotland was muted through waves of pain. Mary passed around her home-made flapjacks, which perked us up a little, but those last 20 miles were hell.

**KIEREN:** I began the final day with a sense of elation, but also the knowledge that it wasn’t yet over. We had been very lucky with the weather till that point – in 40ish hours of cycling we had had maybe 3 of rain. Today though we were forecast a strong headwind, and most of us were feeling pretty empty. Equally, no one had come off, no one had been hit by a car, no injury or accident, and with the fact that some drivers drive like lobotomised bulls – this was a miracle. Mira had nearly been hit by a bus, and later that day both Kassia and I were nearly hit by a lorry; but it was only on the last day that I really began to worry about accidents – I guess by then our clean sheet was adding a pressure. Whilst worrying about accidents, I remember looking round at Katie who had been struggling in the face of some mean Achilles heel pain and seeing the look on her face – certain, unwavering, determination. We’ll be okay I thought, I’m on a team of people who will just keep going.

That day started like the previous two – with a long, long climb. But the view at the top was like totally boss, innit; and whilst applying anitbiotic cream to your ass in a lay-by in front of tourists is a little degrading, the view, and Martins happy words, made up for it. That day we lunched
in a café, receiving another donation, a number of which we got along the way. En route we collected another £100 pounds for the charity swag bag, and a jar of honey which we ate for breakfast on day 5. Day 5 was the day I invented “Blackeroni” – macaroni with black pudding and bacon, the lunch of champions, and anyone on a calorie controlled diet, where “calorie controlled” means “eat what you like, consequences are unlikely”.

**KASSIA:** Day 5 was a 2-pairs-of-cycling-shorts kind of a day. I slipped on another pair after the first coffee break, and several others followed suit after lunch. We had decided to take the more direct route - it was very windy, with sharp gusts - but this meant travelling on the dreaded A roads. Some cars were really great and gave us loads of room, others gave us inches.

And still the road surface was lumpy as hell. On one particularly steep hill Jonathan's water bottle was juddered off his handlebar-holder and both Katie and I didn't have time to avoid it. Luckily it was empty and happened to fall side on, so that we both passed straight over the middle of it. But it was terrifying. On the final approach into Edinburgh my phone case bounced open prompting a panicked dash into oncoming traffic to attempt a rescue mission.

The arrival was far less anticlimactic than I'd feared. We whooped and sprayed champagne and then quickly rushed to the hotel for much needed showers and even more champagne. Dinner was incredible, and incredibly close. And, apart from slight tension over the playing of some videos too loudly during what was supposed to be an emotional present-giving ceremony, the team bond felt stronger than ever, even as we all said goodbye after breakfast and headed home.

**KIEREN:** If Phil and Mary where the Mum and Shepherd of the group, I was big brother. Not in the CCTV rat torture way, but a person to cajole and organise the team; basically my main skill
was having a loud voice. I am literally the big brother of Kassia, a person who in
my slightly patronising and chauvinistic way I felt protective toward. I
remembering the giant lorry that had nearly just taken me of my bike driving
off toward to Kassia in front of me. At that moment all I wanted to do was join
the driver in the cabin for a game of human arson. Luckily he passed her with
5cm to spare, and all I could do was curse his name and wish flying monkeys on
him, and his family, and maybe some of his friends, maybe he might die in a
freak boating accident. Er, sorry, I was busy not holding a grudge, back to the
story. Kassia was a trouper for the whole ride, look up stoicism in the
dictionary, there should be a picture of her, flanked by Katie and Mira. Mira
will stand out in my memory of this ride as the person who complained the
least, who at one point said that “I want to punch you in the face you’re so
stubborn” and who brought some amusing compassion to the ride. What I mean
by this is that whilst everyone passed the corpses of countless wildlife roadkill
with no comment, Mira would invariably say “oh no” and sound genuinely sad
about another life lost. Whilst amusing, the warmth certainly radiated.

The final push into Edinburgh was pretty tough, I think by then we just wanted
it to be over, or to have a cocktail of illegal substances – mainly class A’s –
pumped into us. But we
made it. Sore, battered, but
all in one pieces. I got into
the bath filled with
Magnesium salts and joy,
with a Krispy Kreme at 5.30
in the afternoon. Martin had
also rigged up Eye of the
Tiger to play in the
bathroom, a Proper porno
star ending to the Smash up
The Country ride.