



**SHETLAND 23**  
18-25 JUNE 2023



**TEAM SHETLAND '23 : 750km in 7 days for UK Veterans, Reservists & Families!**

On Sunday 18th June 2023 a team of four intrepid cyclists set off from northern Scotland on a dramatic 7-day bike ride around the Orkney and Shetland islands - all to raise much-needed funds for UK veterans' mental health charity, PTSD Resolution, via [Just Giving](#)

Here is an on-the-ground account of the 'Shetland '23' challenge, from the team: ex-Royal Marine, Jonathan Thomson; Jim, a former naval pilot; Matt, a former Royal Marine; and Jez, also an ex-Marine and an amputee.

**TOTAL STATS: 717km cycled w 25,538ft of climb (just short of the height of Everest!)**

### Our Story



In 2020 my team helped me to cycle the North Coast 500. In September 2021 they helped two of us across the high cols of the Pyrenees and in 2022 three of us cycled unsupported for seven days in the hills and valleys of Wales. In total we have raised nearly £75,000 which will have given many UK Veterans essential treatment for the pernicious condition of PTSD, thereby also helping their families, friends and colleagues.

Our plan for 2023 was to start from the remote Scottish station of Forsinard, 50 km

south of Thurso on June 18th and travel by bike and ferry to the very north tip of the Shetlands, aiming to get to the Northernmost Point on the longest day - and then cycle all the way back to where we started. We planned to do this in seven days covering a distance of 751km using 10 ferries.

*- All expedition costs were met privately by the team so all funds raised will go straight to where they are needed.*

Thank you,  
Jonathan, Jim, Matt & Jez.

## **DAY 0 - Saturday 17th June 2023**

The start of an adventure usually means travel. Over the last two days, from four different start points we've moved into the heart of the north of Scotland through Inverness and on up to the flow country of Sutherland. We have used car and rail on routes full of isolation and beauty. Tomorrow we get on our bikes and head north, over the seas to Orkney and beyond.

Go well everyone and more tomorrow,  
Jonathan, on behalf of Jez, Jim and Matt, fellow pilgrims

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## **DAY 1 - Sunday 18th June 2023 - 104km ridden, with 3,100ft of climb**



Hello,

The start of an Expedition is always a good moment confirming as it does planning, training and fitness and so it was today as we set off down the lovely single-track road that took us to the sea.

House Martins patrolled the skies and highland cattle, deep in the undergrowth noted our passing with uncomprehending eyes. Little brown drumlins dotted the upper valley overlooking the clear and bubbling river. However, all changed as we turned east towards Scrabster and our ferry. A strong wind was on the nose to the delight of the many wind turbines that were turning busily but to the dismay of the hardworking cyclist.

And then we went to sea across the Pentland Firth, past the Old Man of Hoy and some huge cliffs and on to our place of rest 50km distant. Tomorrow we explore Scapa Flow.

Thank you for following us,  
Jonathan, on behalf of Jez, Jim & Matt, fellow pilgrims

**Maps below show our two routes for today, split by the Pentland Firth - and The Old Man of Hoy, picture taken from our ferry today by Jez**



## Shetland 23 - Day 1 route 1



## Shetland '23 - Day 1 route 2



## DAY 2 - Monday 19th June 2023 - 100km ridden, with 3,592ft of climb

Hello,

We breakfasted solidly. As we cycled through bullying wind and lashing rain our bodies demanded more calories and the stokers within shovelled much needed porridge-derived energy into our bloodstreams and we went well. But sodden we finally sort refuge and enjoyed nourishing toasties, emerging a bit drier to a good afternoon...

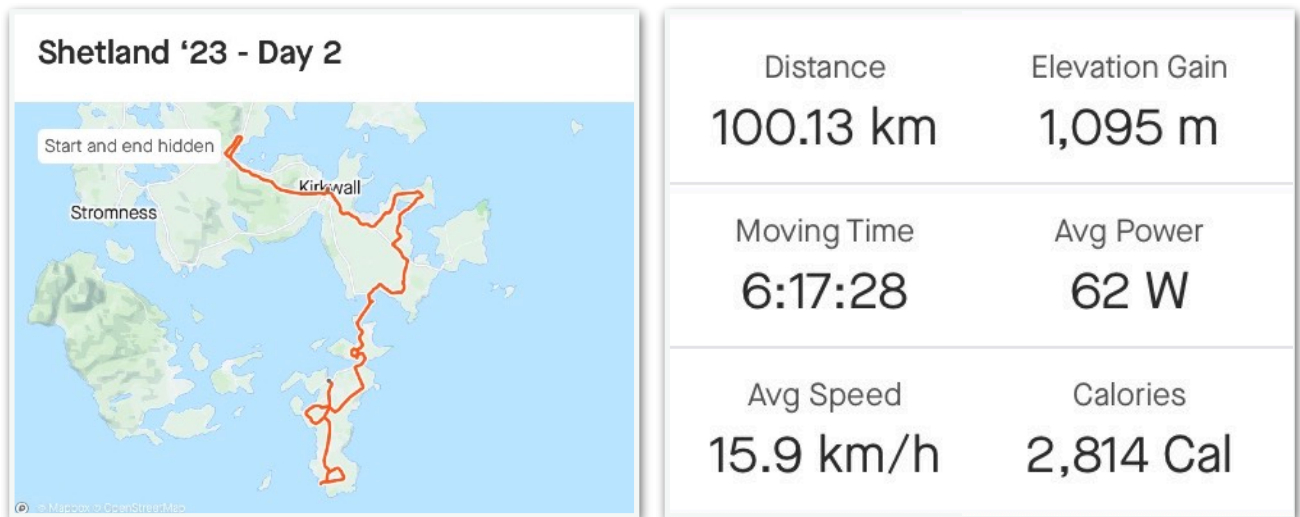


Our route took us up long hills and past large and stunningly green fields studied with bright yellow buttercups and little unidentified white flowers. In boggy corners young irises bobbed in the wind and by roadsides we found small purple orchids surviving the daily traffic. A curlew, lots of oyster catchers and, unusually a barn owl on the prowl were amongst the ornithological delights on offer.

Tomorrow we explore the other side of Scapa Flow and cross to the island of Hoy.

Go well, and thank you for following us,  
Jonathan on behalf of Jim, Jez and Matt, fellow pilgrims

***Our pictures show our route for today and two cyclists moving towards the storm behind a school bus***



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**DAY 3 - Tuesday 20th June 2023 - 100km ridden, with 3,251ft of climb**

Hello,

An early ferry across to Hoy took us onto the vastness of Scapa Flow which shimmered away into the distance. In our minds we imagined the Grand Fleet of 1914, sleek, purposeful and at anchor but on a short leash surrounded by the constant activity of support and supply...



Later we cycled past the Royal Hotel, shore headquarters of the Commander in Chief and his Staff in those distant years. Ghosts from history stalk the land, emphasised by the immaculate Royal Navy cemetery which gave poignant reminders of ships long past.

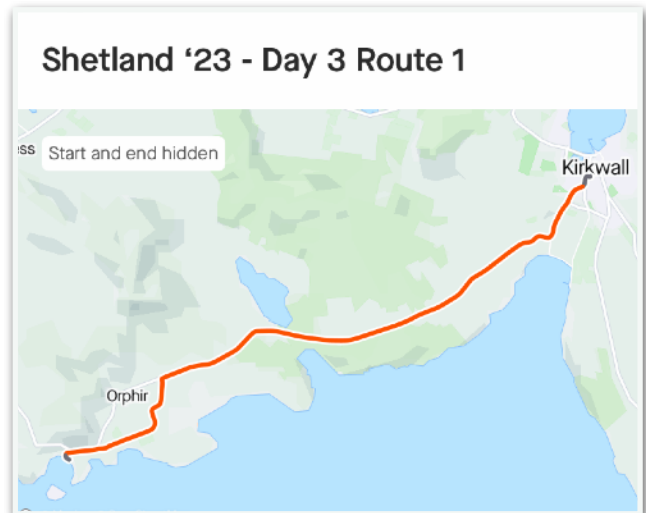
Hoy is an island in two parts. We cycled the southern end amongst its luscious green fields home to well fattened lambs keeping close to their mothers. And then we headed north, into heather clad hills which provide challenging climbs for the cyclist. Their impressive cliffs are also home to a huge number of sea birds, some of which accompanied our late afternoon ferry, skimming the water as they sped past on urgent business.

A long day full of unusual experiences.

Next we head overnight for Shetland, hoping to arrive there in the early morning for fresh adventure in a different land.

Thank you for following us and go well,  
Jonathan, on behalf of Jez, Kim and Matt

***Our photos show a lone cyclist passing an empty Scapa Flow, and the maps from the three rides that were separated by our two sea-crossings***



#### **DAY 4 - Wednesday 21st June 2023 - 102km ridden, with 4,500ft of climb**

Hello,

We slipped ashore from our overnight ferry into the soft rain that swept across Shetland, and cycled over the hills to Scalloway, the World War 2 base of the Shetland Bus. This was a small fleet of Norwegian fishing boats that sailed in and out of Norwegian waters, facing huge danger with legendary bravery.

From there we cycled over high moorlands to the Atlantic coast where, in a small sandy bay, a seal poked his nose above the water in welcome....





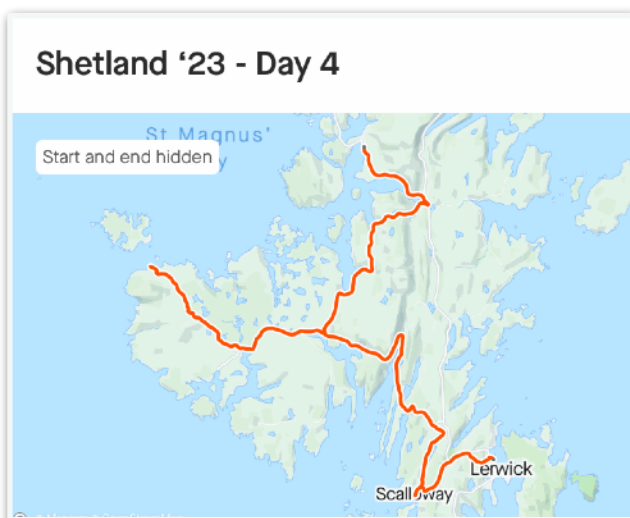
We spent much of today in mist and rain so visibility was poor. But we enjoyed a profusion of highly coloured wild flowers that flowed by our busy feet, even on the high moors.

Above us a variety of bird life - curlews, oyster-catchers and lapwings to name a few, made their presence felt with riotous song and occasional dive-bombing forays, but we survived and had an excellent day.

Tomorrow we tackle a long ride to the far north which will include four ferry crossings and some complicated timings.

Thank you for following us,  
Jonathan, on behalf of Jim, Matt & Jez, fellow pilgrims

***Pictures show map of the day; a cyclist heading for mist & rain; and flowers by the roadside***



## **DAY 5 - Thursday 22nd June 2023 - 135km ridden, with 5,661ft of climb**

Hello,

A long day that saw us cycle as far north in the British Isles as is possible on flimsy road bikes.

We took four ferry crossings as we travelled to and from the islands of Yell and Unst. Our route took us past the nascent UK Saxa Vord Space Port which will lie just to the south of what was our final point.

Our day took us over high moorlands, home to hundreds of ground nesting birds which produce a cacophony of intermingling sound. Earlier a small flock of starlings took fright as we approached. Skylarks hovered above us as we cycled, chattering in their distinctive way. Sparrows clustered in the few hedges and as we sailed between the islands a gannet did a perfect and lightening fast vertical dive into the sea as it sought its prey...



Tomorrow we turn south, back to Lerwick for an evening ferry to Orkney as we retrace our steps but we know that we will have barely scratched the surface of what there is to see and learn in the isolated and lovely places we've been privileged to visit.

Thank you for following us,  
Jonathan on behalf of Jim, Jez and Matt

***Our pictures show us at Journey's End, on the island of Unst, and just one map (there are 6)***

### **Shetland '23 - we reach the northernmost point**

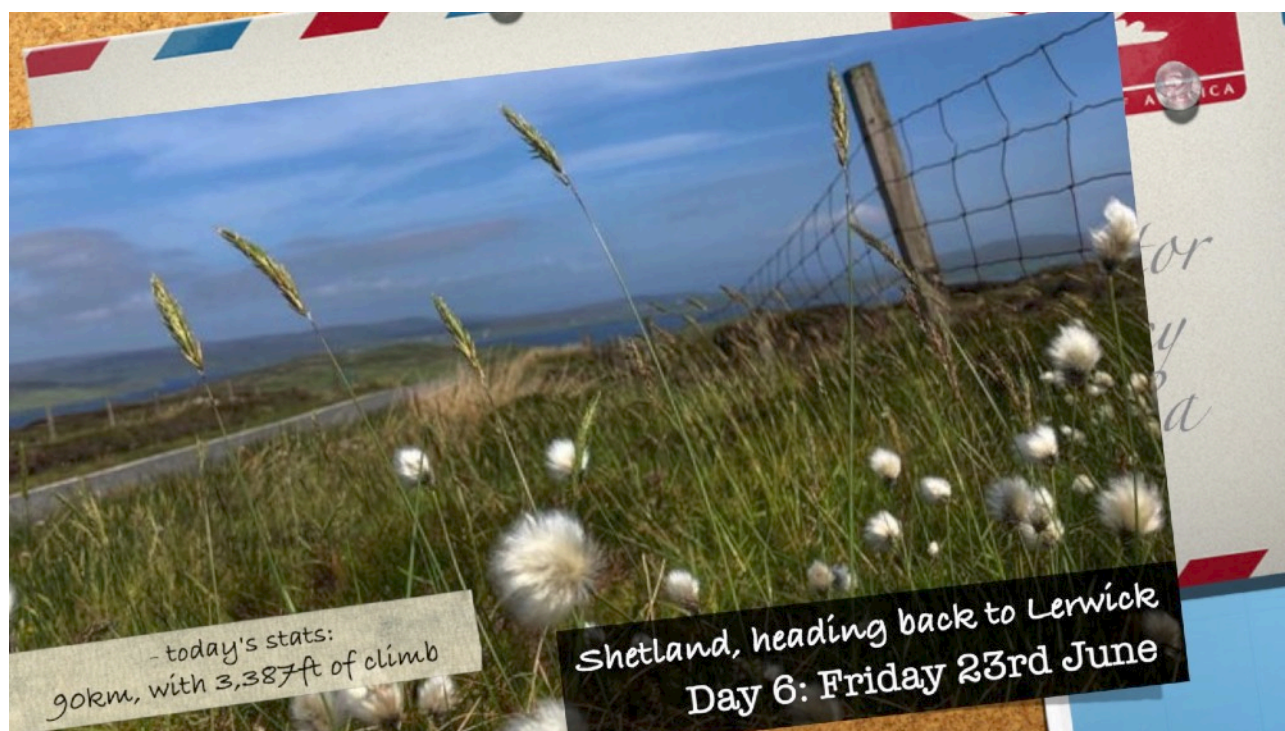




## **DAY 6 - Friday 23rd June 2023 - 90km ridden, with 3,387ft of climb**

Hello,

Today, our last on Shetland, we headed east on a lovely and calm morning. The waters of Sullom Voe rippled in the unusually light breeze. Lambs, with their little tails wagging furiously, sought out their mothers because they wanted some breakfast. A rabbit, also looking for food popped its nose out of its burrow but saw a very large crow so scuttled back underground. The crow realised that his breakfast was now probably not on, so flew away - all of life was there for us to see. On the coast we noticed the extra lushness of the wild flowers with bright yellow vetch by the road, a mass of irises further in and on the hillside clouds of cotton grass that looked like a late winter snowfall; they nodded in the breeze as we cycled by...



Our route east took us to the waters where the World War II Shetland Bus started operations before moving to Scalloway. We then cycled south along the coast on a lovely bobbly and narrow road. In the higher hills we passed a massive wind farm still under construction but well placed to catch the big winds that struck us in the afternoon, battering our puny man-powered machines as we made our way. But our ferry beckoned so our ride was slightly curtailed although we still have the ride into Kirkwall late this evening.

Tomorrow we wake up on Orkney, cycle via new routes to our ferry back to Scotland and thence back up to our start point in Forsinard.

Thank you for following us,  
Jonathan, on behalf of Jim, Jez and Matt,  
fellow pilgrims

***Our pictures show cotton grass blowing in the wind, and our map of the day***





## DAY 7 - Saturday 24th June 2023 - 83km ridden, with 2,047ft of climb



Hello,

It was foggy when we pulled out of Kirkwall this morning. The wind was asleep and the turbines struggling to get going, not unlike your cyclists. However, we were quickly back in the lush farmlands of Orkney with handsome black cows, chubby and content sheep all amongst the deep green grass.

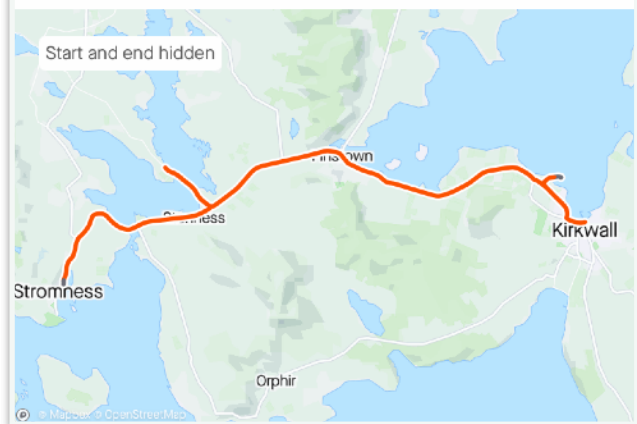
Our route took us via the Ring of Brodgar, a Neolithic henge, and the Standing Stones of Stenes both estimated to be over 5,000 years old.

As we crossed from Orkney back to Scotland the Pentland Firth was flat giving us a superb view of seabirds with fast beating wings scuttling inches above the water like little hovercraft. A school of dolphins pattered by on their early morning business so there was lots to see.

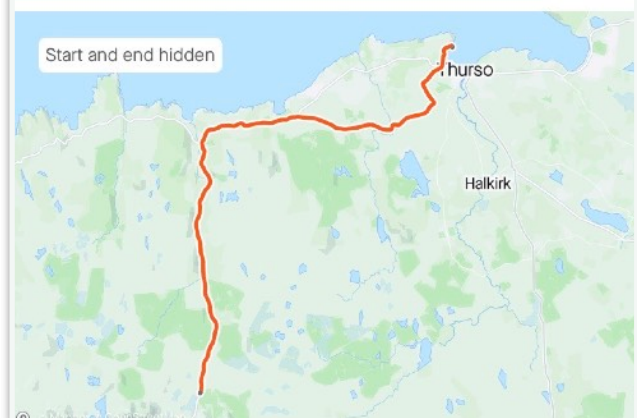
And then we were back in Scotland cycling the 50km back up through the hills beside an excellent fishing river until we reached our start point at Forsinard.

We had finished and achieved our aim - the end of an extraordinary week which will take time to digest.

### Shetland '23 - Day 7 Route 1



### Shetland '23 - Day 7 Route 2 - end of adventure!!





Tomorrow we will attempt to summarise...

Thank you for following us,  
Jonathan, on behalf of Jez, Jim and Matt, my  
fellow Pilgrims

***Our pictures show the Ring of Brodgar seen  
as we cycled by, and our maps of the day***

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## **REFLECTIONS - Sunday 25th June 2023**

Hello,

You have kindly followed us as we cycled from northern Scotland to the northernmost bit of road in the British Isles, and back. The stats are: cycled 717kms and climbed approximately 25,538ft, so just short of the height of Everest.

We met kind and helpful people, saw lovely countryside, endured soaking rains and battering winds and enjoyed peaceful and sunny conditions when the elements relented. In Scotland we cycled almost the entire length of a great fishing river, twice. On Orkney we were struck by the dark green fields. In one a distinctive black bull stood on a hillock in the morning sun surrounded by buttercups, looking down at his progeny clustered around their mothers. In the Shetlands we noted the abundance of birdsong on the open moorlands suggesting a lack of foxes. When on the ferries we were entranced by the many seabirds darting, skimming and feeding. And we visited sites of deep historical interest, some from almost the beginning of recorded time...





Most importantly though, with your generous support we have raised a substantial sum that we know PTSD Resolution will put to very good use. Your generosity has made our efforts completely worthwhile.

Thank you and goodbye,  
Jonathan, Jim, Matt & Jez

***PS: It would be impossible to show our journey in a few photos but please see a small selection...***



You can still support 'Shetland '23' - and UK Veterans, Reservists & families - here:

**DONATE**



And learn more about PTSD Resolution [here](#)