

Follow the Yellow Gorse Road

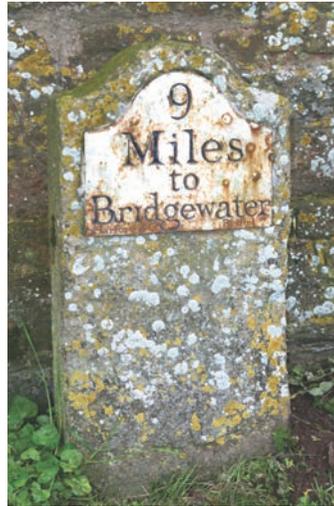
A cycle ride from Land's End to John o'Groats



John Hopkins and Gordon Leadbeater

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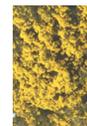
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Gordon Leadbeater

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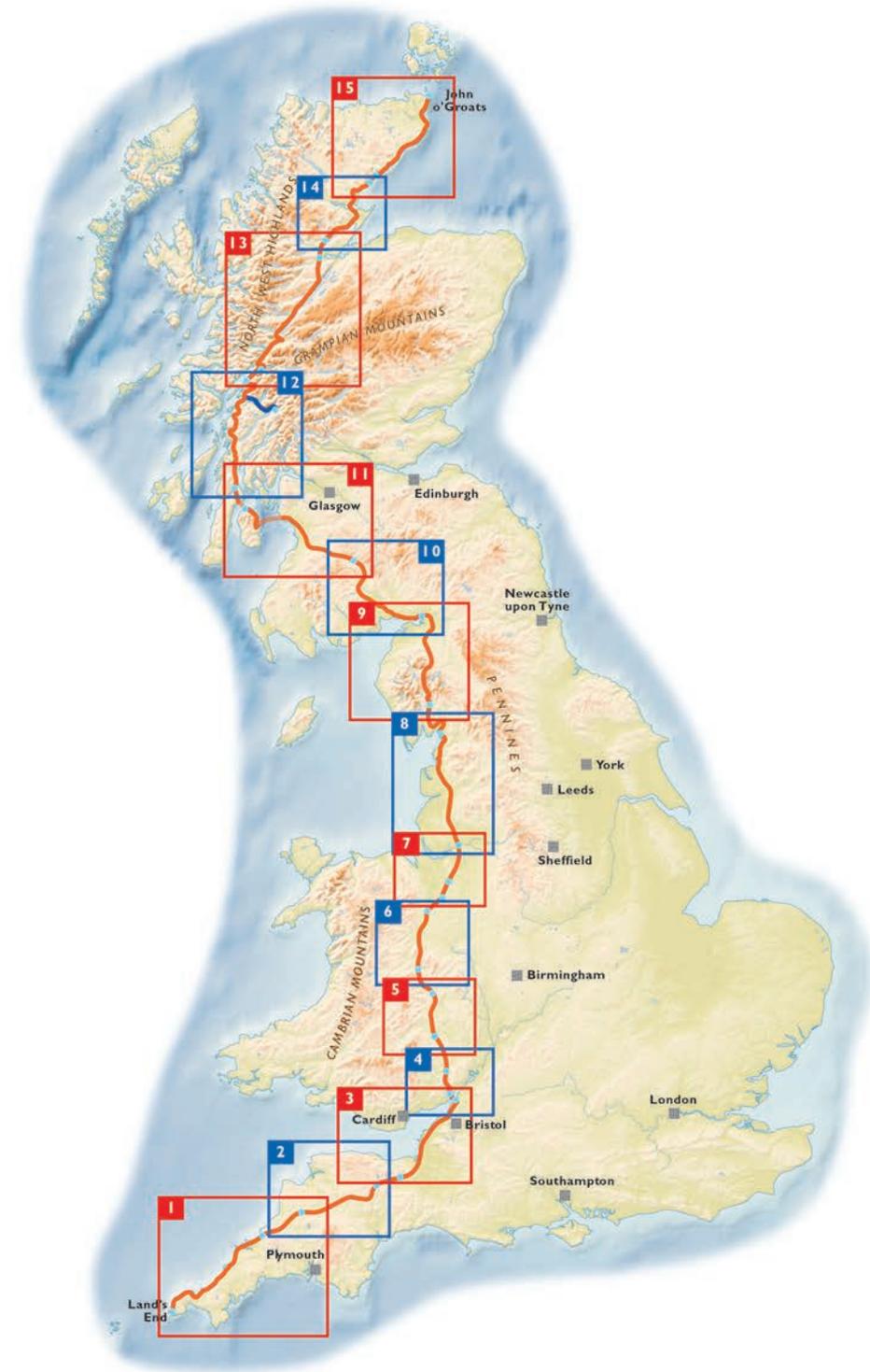
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foreword

It was with great pleasure that I embarked on cycling from Land's End to John o'Groats in the company of John Hopkins – though I have to confess that my participation in the journey was from the luxury of my garden hammock. John's delight in the glorious British countryside, his fascination with the idiosyncratic, the history of place-names, the siting of milestones; his enthusiasm for architecture, industrial history, good food and whisky, his squirreling of anecdotes, all make for a book that is as interesting and pleasurable as the journey itself.

What John sets out to do – and achieves – is to explore the diversity of the counties as he rides through them. Every page is graced with fine photographs of both the familiar and the strange, inviting the reader to say 'Oh! I remember that!' or 'I'd love to go there!'. Perhaps, because John has been so modest about his personal fitness, he gives us a comfortable sense that the journey is do-able, even must do-able. And indeed it is, in some form or another. We do, after all, live in a stunningly beautiful country, and it is ours to explore and to enjoy. But this has been a very personal journey, and we are fortunate to be invited to share it. By the time we roll down with John into John o'Groats I think every one of us must share with him the traveller's well-earned satisfaction and sense of achievement.

Berlie Doherty



for Rachel





Donairland

Donairland

Scottish Highlander

Scottish Highlander

Introduction

A lifetime ambition of many cyclists is to ride from Land's End to John o'Groats or vice versa – the End to End ride. Various books have been written on the subject and I have duly been inspired to join this somewhat intrepid book club.

How did I come to do the ride with my longstanding school friend Gordon Young? During a game of golf in early 2002 he mentioned that he'd always wanted to cycle from LE to Jo'G and would I like to accompany him. The idea immediately appealed, but I asked for a fortnight's thinking time, during which I would test my general level of fitness with one or two strenuous rides into the Derbyshire Peak District. Two weeks later I was back with the answer – 'yes'.

In the months leading up to the ride my thoughts turned to sponsorship and charities which I support. I had just served three years as President of the Derbyshire Red Cross and knew that they needed a defibrillator unit, costing about £2,000, for a new ambulance. That would be one charity. The other was Water Aid of which I have been a long time supporter. In 1990, when I first became aware of the Charity, a donation of £10 would buy a shovel and a bag of cement, the requisites for African

villagers to dig and line a hole in the ground thereby gaining access to the water table below. This is one charity where the money does get through to the needy, for they have people on the ground, in their 15 chosen countries in Africa and the Indian subcontinent, who pass it directly to the recipient villages.

Even before I started the ride, £8,000 had come in from friends, relatives and business connections. This was overwhelming and if I had thought of quitting (which I hadn't) at any stage, then this was the spur to keep me going. When I returned home, almost four weeks later, another £2,000 was literally on the doormat and during the ensuing months I received a further £1,500. I had, therefore, raised an amazing £11,500 in all. This was a terrific response which I greatly appreciated, as did the charities. In the Appendix I indicate what the funds raised helped to buy.

Before the ride started many people asked why we were cycling uphill. In fact the journey was a net downhill one. The starting point at Land's End is approximately 120 feet above sea level whereas the finish at John o'Groats is near enough at sea level. Winds can change direction and play a major part in progress. The south westerly



on our backs helped propel us through the first part of Cornwall.

And so in April 2004 Gordon and I set out on our big adventure with Rachel, my wife, driving the support vehicle with all our spares. We had the added good luck to have near perfect weather conditions throughout the journey. This enabled us to enjoy to the full the wonderful and varied scenery as we cycled the length of England, criss crossing the Welsh border several times and then heading north through Scotland.

The route taken was based on the one set out in Phil Horsley's excellent book, *'Land's End to John o'Groats – The Great Bike Adventure'*, bought at the outset for me by my daughter, Clare. We made various alterations in England to suit our itinerary which was linked to beds for the night at certain friends' houses. We took a more northerly route through Cornwall and Devon and a more direct one through Somerset, with a stiff climb over the Quantocks from Cothelstone, taking us down into Bridgwater, rather than circumventing the hills to the east.

In the main, I have chosen two 'signature towns/villages' in each county through which we cycled drawing on a range of ingredients: history, geography, economics and people we met. I was also interested in places where famous people who have helped to shape the future of Britain, Henry V for instance, were born, lived and worked.



I have added one or two quirks to highlight my own eccentric range of interests, which include spotting walled Edward VII letterboxes. These are very rare. Gordon Young introduced me to milestone spotting, a change from my boyhood addiction to trains, to which I refer in the Devon chapter. A sample of the many different styles we saw are scattered throughout this book.

People bring places alive and we were fortunate enough to meet many from varied walks of life during our journey. We conducted, without realising it, our own eco-

nomic review of what made, and continues to make, eight counties in England, one in Wales and seven in Scotland tick. We all read newspapers and see TV news, both local and national, but there is no substitute for getting to the grass roots level in every sense of the word to appreciate the wonderful countryside in which we live.

I was fortunate in my formative years in that my parents took my brother and me to different parts of the country each year for our traditional summer holiday. I well remember my excitement in 1953 (Coronation and Everest Conquering Year) being told that Cornwall was on the agenda for August that year.

My abiding memory of Land's End was the vastness of the sea, interspersed with jagged rocks as well as the strategically sited lighthouse. The day we went was not a particularly bright one and the place looked a little forbidding. It was, however, 'the End of the Country'. Hence I had been and I had seen, but I had not conquered (yet). *Veni, vidi, vici* and all that.

In April/May 2004 England's green and pleasant land looked just that. The Welsh Border scenery was stunning and the view from Devauden on the back road from Chepstow to Monmouth looking west to the Black Mountain is stamped indelibly on my mind. In May 2004 when I arrived in Scotland I was to see the reflections of the many mountainous backdrops on the lochs, the grandeur of the Munros and the splendid north eastern

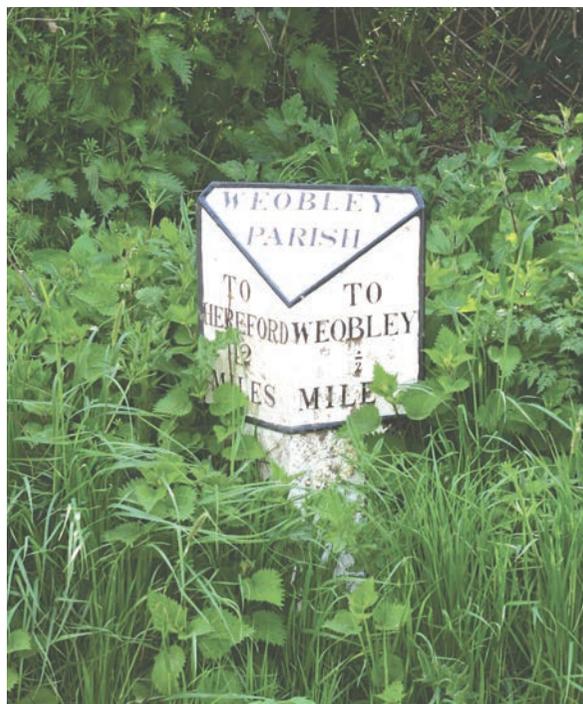
coastal scenery (reminiscent of north Cornwall) as I rode the last leg of the journey from Brora to John o'Groats.

As we left Land's End gorse was flowering and throughout the journey it was a constant wayside companion, welcoming and bright. It seems to grow everywhere and anywhere. It is found on rocky headlands, in hedges, fell-sides and on golf courses. The flowering of most other plants is controlled by night length but gorse flowers all the year round. Why? No one seems to know for certain but undoubtedly it seems to be day-neutral.

There are mixed feelings on reaching journey's end: elation at the achievement, but also mild disappointment that the cycling is over. Tomorrow it was back to Sheffield in our case and back to normal life.

A few thanks are now due. The first is to Berlie Doherty, an award winning author of international fame, who not only kindly agreed to write the foreword but also came up with what is I feel a most appropriate title.

The book is dedicated to Rachel. They say that there is a book in each of us. As Rachel knows I have had it in mind to get 'the one' out of my system for the last 25 years! At last this ride has given me something to write about and to tag onto it my varied personal interests as I progressed northward. One of my criteria for doing it was to have a backup vehicle and Rachel, very stoically,



volunteered to accompany me. Besides booking B&Bs, providing sustenance and acting as a general factotum, she would often be at ambiguous country lane forks and would point left or right, as the case may be, thereby enabling me to keep pedalling rather than stop and consult a map. Whilst I rode nearly a thousand miles she covered over two thousand five hundred in the car.

Special thanks are due to Gordon Leadbeater who came with me at the same time a year later and took the majority of the photographs featured in this book. His

considerable skill and experience was exercised to the full in making the most of generally poor weather conditions. Gordon Young also deserves particular mention not only for dreaming up the idea in the first place, but also allowing me to include some very fine pictures he took on the ride. I wish also to record my appreciation to John and Jean Alford for their hospitality both at the beginning and during the ride. My daughter, Rebecca, and longstanding friends Jill Burlton and John Rider have also put in much time in helping to correct and improve the text in many places.

Finally I am indebted to Stacey Shepherd, my secretary, who typed the initial draft from my handwritten scrawl and many others, too numerous to name, who have also helped with knowledge, local to where they live and in many other ways. They know who they are and I thank them all.

I hope that some of the interest and pride I have enjoyed, and continue to enjoy, will translate through to those who read of my 992 mile 'adventure'. Maybe some of you who read this book will be sufficiently motivated to ride the trip one day, or at least drive the route. For me it was a stimulating experience which I would not have missed for the world.



Cornwall – Land of Romance and Legend

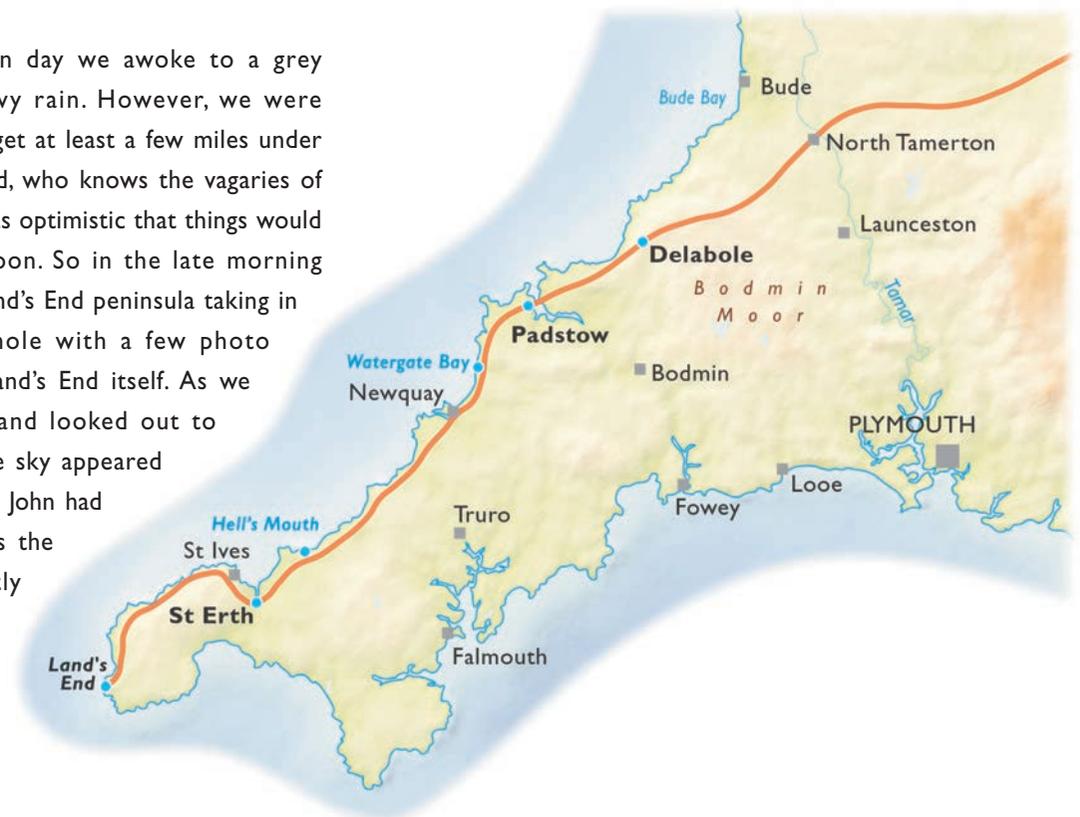
Gordon and I left Sheffield on 20th April, 2004 with two wives, three bikes and our clothing requisites for the ride ahead. After a 360 mile drive we were within 20 miles of Land's End where we were to spend the next three nights with Rachel's cousin and her husband, Jean and John Alford, in their house just inland from St Ives. The idea was that our first day in Cornwall would be an acclimatising one with the ride proper starting the following day.

Cornwall is unique amongst English counties in more ways than one. It has 300 miles of coastline and is bordered by only one other county, Devon. It has an abundant source of food on its doorstep and off its shoreline. It has a wonderful, mainly temperate, climate with the southern tip of the Lizard Head having a map latitude reading in the 40s, compared with the rest of the British Isles' 50s. And it also has a wonderful history due in no small part to its location, natural coastal beauty and ruggedness, ideal for smuggling in times gone by!

There are many ways in which to cross the county when starting from Land's End with the ultimate destination being John o'Groats. We plumped for the

north coast. Having spent many family holidays in Trevone, a small coastal village three miles to the west of Padstow, we have come to have a great affection for this coast, with its spectacular walks, bays and cliffs. The Atlantic thunders in which helps to make body and Malibu surfing enjoyable pastimes also.

On our acclimatisation day we awoke to a grey ominous sky and heavy rain. However, we were champing at the bit to get at least a few miles under our belt and John Alford, who knows the vagaries of the Cornish weather, was optimistic that things would improve in the afternoon. So in the late morning we drove round the Land's End peninsula taking in Penzance and Mousehole with a few photo calls and headed for Land's End itself. As we had a leisurely snack and looked out to sea the first bit of blue sky appeared in the southwest and, as John had forecast, within minutes the sun was shining brightly overhead making everywhere steam and glisten.





The gorse, which was to be our wayside companion for much of our journey

We quickly removed the bikes from the roof rack, leaving the spare one up there in case of mishap, and rode down to the start with its familiar signpost, New York 3,147 miles on one arm and John o’Groats 874 miles on the opposite side. Our more scenic route was to be over one hundred miles further! After a quick photo shoot and a few coins in the charity box from wellwishers, we looked south and bade farewell to the Longships Lighthouse and the low lying Isles of Scilly on the horizon. The gorse, which was to be our wayside companion for much of our journey, lifted our spirits even more. Yellow has always been my favourite colour and is often associated with cycling – the *maillot jeune* being the Tour de France’s winning uniform.

As we cycled out of Land’s End, we also picked up the smell of wayside garlic wafting from the high banks so with that, the gorse and the sunshine it felt good to be alive. The day’s ride was to be a mere 20 mile pipe opener along the North Cornish coast and we were soon passing Morvah with its 15th Century granite church tower. John Betjeman wrote of this village as a *‘treeless, wild and granite strewn moorland parish.’*

The rugged landscape was dotted with derelict engine houses. These protected the great pumping engines used to extract water from the numerous tin mines all over West Penwith. It has been said that, *‘wherever in the world there is a hole in the ground you will find a Cornishman – even Mexico has a Cornish cemetery!’*



Derelict engine house

Having enjoyed the spectacular coastal scenery for the first 15 miles of our ride we turned south at Towednack and passed the small hamlet of Crippelsease, learning later that day that cripple is the old name for sheep and it was here that the shepherds rested. This brought to mind Cripplegate in London where the sheep were driven through the gate to be counted before meeting their ultimate fate.

We were soon at Tren crom Hill from the top of which we learned that, when there was an eclipse of the sun in the year 1999, approximately 2,000 people waited and watched in anticipation. They were to be disappointed for the rain came down and the visibility was poor. This is an ancient hill fort and is the only place in Cornwall from which one can view both the north and south coasts at the same time. Following our afternoon's ride we climbed to the top and admired the spectacular view happy in the knowledge that we were on our way, having ridden approximately two per cent of our ultimate journey!

The sand pits of St Erth

Two miles down the road is St Erth (formerly spelt St Earth). On the wall outside the Star Inn in the main street there is a helpful information sheet produced by the Cornwall Wildlife Trust. It states that from about 1834 until the early 1950s this area was a bustling centre of sand extraction. The pits were worked for



Gordon and John fully prepared for the long journey ahead

the sand, which was moved from the pit face in small trucks along a narrow tramway and then taken to St Erth railway station, before being despatched all over the country. Due to its natural moulding properties the sand was used at Harvey's Foundry for casting metal components. The sand grains were rammed into a moulding box around a wooden pattern. The thin coating of clay naturally covering each individual sand grain allowed the pattern to be removed without the sand impression collapsing inwards. The engineering company, Harvey's of Hayle, was casting the massive flywheels for the pumping engines used by the mining

industry at a time when only the Darbys of Coalbrookdale in Shropshire could rival them. We were told that the Cornubia Hotel in Hayle is named after the finest ship built there by the same company.

The old sandpit, formally known as Harvey's Pit, is now owned and managed as a nature reserve by the Cornwall Wildlife Trust. It is of national geological importance providing evidence of the climate and geography of West Cornwall some two million years ago in late Pliocene times.



The St Ives school of artists

St Ives drew us that first night and we enjoyed a first class seafood meal in one of the waterfront restaurants. Once a fishing village, it subsequently became the home of the famous 'St Ives School of Painters' who have based themselves there since 1885. The new Tate Gallery houses sculptures by Barbara Hepworth and pottery by Bernard Leach, as well as paintings by internationally famous artists such as Terry Frost, Patrick Heron and Christopher Wood. The local artist, Alfred Wallis, who came to art late in life following the death of his wife when he was 70, was clearly one of the best. He had been a local fisherman and was completely untrained, but nevertheless brought his own very special talent in expressing himself with pictures drawn on basic materials such as driftwood and cardboard.

From Hell's Mouth to St Agnes' beacon

Leaving St Erth we cycled through to Hayle with its inland lake and numerous sea birds, spotting amongst them an egret. After two miles we were passing through Gwithian before heading to the north coast and the spectacular Hell's Mouth. This is a huge bay, lashed by the Atlantic crashing in against a series of formidable rocks. Added to that we were greeted by a cacophony of sound from the numerous species of gulls nesting there.

From here one can see Godrevy Lighthouse which was the inspiration for Virginia Woolf's novel, *'To the Lighthouse'*, published in 1927. She referred to the island upon which Godrevy stood

'with a dent in the middle and two sharp crags and the sea swept in there and spread away for miles on either side of the island.'

Francis Kilvert, the Victorian diarist and curate from Herefordshire, came on holiday to stay in the rectory near Hayle. He too was enthusiastic about the island with the Lighthouse of Godrevy –

'the magical lighthouse on the black island among the white foam breakers.' When he departed he wrote, *'Godrevy farewell, unknown but now a dear possession forever, a memory forever!'*

We continued along the north coast dropping into



A test for the legs and the gears! Riding up and out of Porthtowan



The little egret

the small coastal village of Portreath followed by our first 'switchback' ride into and out of the bay at Porthtowan. Another four miles or so and we cycled into the old port of St Agnes.

St Agnes' beacon, a prehistoric hillfort, dominates. It can be seen for miles around from St Ives to Newquay and further. Just outside here in Trevellas was a thatched cottage, Harmony Cot, which was the birthplace in 1767 of another of Cornwall's famous sons, John Opie, who was to become a great painter.