THE CAMBRIDGE HRINGVEGURINN EXPEDITION TO ICELAND, 24 July – 24 August 2016
Chase Caldwell Smith and Kate Ellison, Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge

AIMS AND OUTCOMES
The purpose of this expedition was to circumnavigate Iceland by bicycle along its famous Ring Road, ‘Hringvegurinn’. We aimed to use the expedition as a vehicle to raise funds and awareness for OCD Action, the largest OCD-focused charity in the UK. In both endeavors we were successful, although in different ways than we originally imagined. While we did not cycle every inch of Iceland’s Route 1, we did cycle over 1200 km in total. And, including gift aid, we have raised over £1000 for OCD Action.

PHASE 1 – Arrival, Northwest Iceland and Tröllaskagi
1 – Arrive in Reykjavik
2 – Reykjavik to Grundarhverfi (bike)
   Grundarhverfi to Borgarnes (bus)
3 – Borgarnes – Bifröst (bike)
   Bifröst – Blönduós (bus)
4 – Blönduós – Varmahlíð (bike)
5 – Varmahlíð – Hólar (bike)
6 – Hólar – Lónkot (bike)
7 – Lónkot – Siglufjörður (bike)
8 – Siglufjörður – Dalvik (bike / car)

We arrived in Reykjavik, set up camp, and retrieved our bicycles, helmets, repair kits, and other necessary items from Reykjavik Bike Tours. The next day, we set off, only to find that due to the heavy traffic near the capital and the inclement weather, it would be unsafe to continue by bike for the time-being. We therefore took a bus from Grundarhverfi to Borgarnes. The next day we cycled to Bifröst across the hills and plains of western Iceland, where due a lack of campsites for the next stretch of road, and due to lower energy levels on our initial days, we decided to take a bus to Blönduós. From this point on, the expedition began gathering momentum. We cycled to Varmahlíð, then continued northward, leaving the Ring Road, to the cathedral town of Hólar, one of Iceland’s two medieval bishoprics. We passed through Hofosos, with its curious rock formations, and spent a cold night by the sea in the tiny outpost of Lónkot. From here we cycled to Siglufjörður, where we enjoyed a hot meal and visited the local Herring Museum, which despite its odd premise, was fascinating. The next day, we continued southward to Dalvik, but were interrupted when Kate had a tumble from her bike. She suffered no serious injuries, and kindly passersby were quick to help, offering us first aid and even driving Kate and her bike to the nearest town. We learned from this incident to always have our first aid kit available at the top of one of the panniers.

PHASE 2 – Northeast Iceland and Myvatn
9 – Dalvik to Grimsey (round trip, ferry)
10 – Dalvik to Akureyri (bike)
11 – Akureyri to Húsavik (bus)
12 – Day in Húsavik
13 – Húsavik to Laugar via Góðafoss (bike)
14 – Laugar to Reykjahlíð (bike)
15 – Reykjahlíð to Krafla (round trip, bike)
16 – Reykjahlíð to Egilsstaðir (bus)

The day after Kate’s fall, we had a rest day, and travelled by ferry to the Arctic Circle, which passes through the island of Grimsey. We also saw puffins, which was very exciting. The next day, we cycled to Akureyri, Iceland’s second largest city, where we spent much of the next day touring the city and its museums. We caught the bus to Húsavik, where we spent the next day, visiting its renowned Whale Museum. We then cycled to Laugar, making sure to visit Góðafoss Waterfall on the way, into which, legend has it, an Icelandic chief threw his Norse idols after converting to Christianity. At last, we entered the alien landscape surrounding Lake Myvatn. We were warned of the midges, but aside from a dismaying first encounter to the west of the lake, we were left largely untouched for the next few days, which we used to explore the surrounding region – including soaking in the Myvatn Nature Baths, hiking through the lava flows of Krafla, peeking into Grjotagja (the cave which features in the television show, ‘Game of Thrones’), and climbing Hverfell, an extinct volcanic crater. At the conclusion of our geological extravaganza we caught the bus across the barren highlands to the eastern town of Egilsstaðir.
PHASE 3 – East Iceland and Vatnajökull

17 – Egilsstaðir to Stöðvarfjörður
18 – Stöðvarfjörður to Djúpivogur
19 – Day in Djúpivogur
20 – Djúpivogur to Höfn
21 – Höfn to Kálfafellsstadur
22 – Kálfafellsstadur to Skaftafell
23 – Day in Skaftafell
24 – Skaftafell to Kirkjubæjarklaustur

We are proud to say that after Egilsstaðir, we cycled all the way back to Reykjavík, without taking another bus. From Egilsstaðir, we headed back toward the coast and plunged down to sea level along one of the longest downhill rides of the expedition, and camped in the tiny village of Stöðvarfjörður. The next day we set off along the coast, threaded our way around a huge fjord, and arrived in Djúpivogur, where we stayed for an unplanned day due to inclement weather. Next, we set off on the longest cycle of the trip, passing along the coast to Höfn, where we had our first glimpse of the massive Vatnajökull icecap. We continued along the coast, staying in a small campsite on the way to Jökulsárlón, the glacial lagoon that features on almost every Icelandic postcard. It lived up to the promises of our guidebook, and we spent a large chunk of our day gawking at blue icebergs and the local seals. We then cycled toward Skaftafell National Park, where we spent the next day hiking and glacier-watching. At last, we headed across the Sandur, a huge expanse of black sand, battling our way through the rain to the nearly unpronounceable Kirkjubæjarklaustur.

PHASE 4 – South Iceland & the Golden Circle

25 – Kirkjubæjarklaustur to Vik
26 – Vik to Hvolsvöllur
27 – Hvolsvöllur to Reykholt
28 – Reykholt, Geysir, Gulfoss, Laugarvatn
29 – Laugarvatn to Þingvellir
30 – Þingvellir to Reykjavik
31 – Day in Reykjavik
32 – Departure

As our expedition came to a close, we passed through the town of Vik, and gawked at several waterfalls, including the mighty Skógafoss and Seljalandsfoss, before staying in the town of Hvolsvöllur. To avoid the traffic around the capital, we then left the Ring Road and passed through Skálholt, the other medieval Icelandic bishopric (in addition to Hólar), before staying in the little village of Reykholt. The day next, we visited the geologically active (and extremely touristy) zone of Geysir and the thundering waterfall of Gulfoss. Finally, we turned back west toward the capital, staying a night in Laugarvatn. The next day, we entered Þingvellir National Park and marveled at the site of the medieval Icelandic Parliament, which was nestled dramatically in a scarred landscape, where two tectonic plates wrench away from one another. In the final home stretch, we climbed one last large hill and then joyously dropped down toward the sea, triumphantly entering Reykjavik, where we visited museums and major sites. However, Iceland had one last surprise in store for us. On our final night, while waiting for the bus to the airport, we were astounded to see the ghostly flickers of the Aurora Borealis, which danced above us in the night sky. It was, indeed, a fitting end to a challenging, but rewarding expedition. Even though we had never before attempted a major cycling tour, we managed to learn in the saddle, finish our ride, and complete the circle.