

## Tour-de-Wigan

Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> July 08:00am, steady rainfall and leaden skies, would this have an effect on numbers for the ride? Probably. Thought the conditions were great personally, couldn't wait to set out. Rain stopped however just before setting out time and although it threatened now and again we were treated to a quite pleasant dry day for the tour.

Got to Plank Lane just before 09:00am to find Caroline waiting, yes she was actually early, couldn't believe it. Harold was late though, at least some normality remained intact. 09:05am sure enough Harold appeared, right on time (Harold time that is, just to clarify). Off we ventured along the canal in the direction of Trencherfield, chatting away merrily as we trundled along. Crossing Scotsman's Bridge we happened upon Alan who rode with us for the last mile or so. Ray & Joyce were waiting already when we got there, Jim joined us shortly afterwards, no not that one the other one, Jim H from now on. Just waiting for our designated leader, Jim had made a tactical withdrawal from the ride and had deputised Denis with the task of leading and placed him in charge of the map, really Jim!!!!

The grey clouds above raised the suspicion that Denis may be a no show, but shortly before 10:00am he duly arrived, shame on those who dared to doubt! Eight riders it was then, not a bad turnout at all. Quick discussion followed regarding the route, Denis was to lead to Haigh Hall following Jims directions, Harold to take over from there. The A49 was mentioned as being part of the route from Standish back to Wigan, Jim H offered an alternative off-road route that intrigued the group, so much so, that off-road it was to be.

Canal towpath with Denis at the fore, winding our way past the Pier and the DW towards Crooke Village. Leaving the canal it was farm track all the way to Vicarage Lane in Shevington, before us lay a series of quiet roads leading to Elnup Woods. First turning, you guessed it Denis went slightly awry, error corrected we set off again; next junction the same happened, re-grouped and with Denis demoted yours truly took point to Elnup, (Trans Pennine here we come). The Cote de Elnup followed the short but sweet descent into the woods, one of Jims slight climbs, a mile or so of gradual climb across the fields as we made our way to the Cricket Club. Enjoyed a few minutes at the top, taking on fluid and discussing rugby etc. before Jim H took the lead for the off-road section to Wigan. Suggested he could get us to Leyland Mill Lane, without using the A49 at all, seemed like a good idea and he had the lead, so what the Hell.

Tarmac section narrowed and turned to farm track, this in turn narrowed and went to single track, supposed to be Bridleway but was seriously overgrown. Quite a few twists and turns, mud baths, nettles and brambles greeted us as we made the downhill run. Prompted one or two to say no wonder Jim was going to use the road, I for one thought it was great, bit of nettle rash to show for it that's all. Inspired by the general enthusiasm, Jim H endeavoured to do as much of the route as possible off-road. More single track followed and I mean single, no room to pass whatsoever, guess what we encountered though, a couple of horses coming the opposite way. Quite a sight watching horses walking backwards to a suitable passing point, obstacle overcome and thanks expressed to the riders on we pressed. Skirting through Gidlow Cemetery, we made our way via Whitley Crescent to the top of Leyland Mill Lane ready to assault the Cote de Balcarres.

Drinks taken and breaths caught it was time to get underway once more, Jim H still had the lead and by this time had turned the ride into a bit of a quest, could we do it without using roads. Highly unlikely, but he was going to give it a good go that's for sure. Climb up to the cottage completed and after crossing into the plantations; he took us off-road once more, this time to negotiate the climb up to the Hall via the woods, cracking route this I might add, definitely use it again. Stables Café was the next stopping point to make use of the facilities and for some, an impromptu lunch break. Happened to notice umpteen other cyclists milling around, the Manchester to Blackpool charity ride was taking place and Haigh Hall was a stop off point, we had dropped right into the middle of it.

Exiting the Stables and heading for Cooperas Lane we got a few strange looks as we headed in completely the opposite direction to the other riders, the Marshall's were most bemused by this, not sure if we heard the "your going the wrong way" call. Spotted something we could certainly do with, not sure if our budget will stretch though, a motorcycle support rider repairing someone's puncture. If we could get one that could map read for Denis as well we'd be laughing. Balcarres summit reached roads were once more avoided (just as well they were full of b\*\*\*\*y cyclists). Track down the side of the Church then across field towards Fingerpost, very short road section, then off-road again past the rugby club and along more single and in some places non-existent track to the Gerrard Arms. Borsdane Wood next up, didn't see any of wild Boars just a few angry dog walkers as we made our way through and into Hindley, stopping at Tesco's for the official lunch stop. Only Denis ventured inside, the rest of us had brought snacks along. Quite a while later it was pondered if Denis was doing the weekly shop while he was in there, and were we all going to have to carry an additional bag.

Lunch consumed and with just over halfway completed it was back on the bikes, Jim H hadn't finished with us yet. Led us around the back of St Peters Pavilion playing fields along the perimeter of the rugby pitches finally emerging at the side of La Cava. Certainly knows his off-roads. Amberswood and a half lap of the Lake followed before heading into Low Hall. Jim H handed the leaders jersey to Harold, who not wanting to be outdone led us through some quite challenging sections, very similar to what we had already encountered, overgrown single track, (typical for this time of year) with the added bonus of copious amounts of mud, just as well Roy wasn't with us! First section through Low Hall across to Park Road we crossed paths with the Hindley Active Living group heading in the opposite direction. Next section took us behind the remand centre across to Bickershaw and along the side of the old Turners factory at Hindley Green. Short road section and through what appeared to be a gap in the bushes it was more rough terrain, for a short section anyway, before it opened up slightly and the surfaces improved. Atherton Cemetery passed by, it was Howe Bridge next up leading to Gin Pit and Colliers Wood area on the outskirts of Tyldesley. Another very short road section led us to Marsland Green Lane and the towpath back to Wigan. As per usual into a headwind, quite a strong one as well, just what we needed

Butts Bridge saw Harold bid farewell, his wife appeared in the garden to tell him tea was ready, thought we were all invited at first, hints not taken though it was back into the prevailing wind towards Plank Lane. The group had become quite stretched out at this point with one or three of us lagging behind, the Hares stopped for breath around Pennington area to let us catch up although it was still rather a split assembly.

Couple of the Hares contemplated going back via Crankwood to get out of the wind, not everyone heard this though. Alan enquired as to which point everyone was riding to, Plank Lane for Caroline, Dover Lock for me, Alan's ears pricked up! Will it be open? Anyone fancy a pint, it just had to be Alan. Again not everyone heard this, but there was a general consensus. Plank Lane next stop, the hares on reaching the bridge crossed over heading for Crankwood. Joyce unaware of what was happening and feeling exhausted was a bit put off by the prospect of the inclines that lay ahead. Said we would ride with her along the towpath and meet up with the others at the Pub, Caroline's ears pricked up this time, Pub, drink, whereabouts, couldn't pass up on the opportunity, she was riding past home to come to the pub and ride back. What a Girl!!!

Beckoned to the hares to carry on and the four of us gritted our teeth for the mile or two to Dover Lock. Bikes dismounted and chance for a well-earned rest on the balcony along with one's preferred tippie. One pint led to two, mainly instigated by Caroline, (she does like a drink) as we talked about the days ride and how everyone that went had enjoyed the French trip and ride comparison's with today's. Caroline by this time had drunk up, leaving the supposed beer-monsters with glasses still half-full, Harold would have been proud. Denis challenged her to a red wine session at Taybarn's; challenge it seems was well and truly accepted, watch this space.

All good things must come to and end though and with not wanting to drink too much and cycle it was time to get going yet again. Caroline headed back to Plank Lane, yours truly to the Three Sisters, leaving Denis, Alan, Ray, Joyce and Jim to continue back to Trencherfield and home.

Great ride in great conditions with great company. Probably did around the 37 miles originally planned but with several deviations, 95% of the miles off-road. It had been a tough day but everyone seemed to have enjoyed it, may be worth investing in some nettle and bramble proof body armour if we do it again! Many Thanks to Denis, Jim H and Harold for leading, very much appreciated and to Jim T for planning, not that we took any notice of them!

Wouldn't be right to finish without awarding the tour Jerseys

Yellow goes to Harold, not for any particular reason other than he happened to be wearing his replica Yellow Jersey.

Green for most points scored (Brownie points that is) goes to Jim H for showing us quite a few new off-road routes, will be doing some of them again I'm sure.

Polka Dot for King of the Mountains (leave that up to you to guess) certainly wasn't Denis; saw him in the front Granny ring at one point. (No offence meant Grannies)

White for best rider under 25, has to be Caroline, certainly looks under 25, besides that, anyone that can out-drink Alan & Denis deserves an award of some description.

Finally, we appear to have gained two new members in Caroline and Jim H, welcome aboard!

Till next time!