

Not many ventured out in the ice & fog for the mornings escapade, but those that did were amply rewarded for their efforts. Trencherfield Mill 09:55am, five riders had braved the freezing temperatures and were already waiting when yours truly got there. Turned out in plenty of time but the journey from Three Sisters down the farm track to Scotsman's was a little precarious to say the least, got the bike stuck in the pond that forms near the farm entrance. Managed to cycle through the first few feet of ice before coming to an abrupt halt, couldn't pedal through it but neither could I stand on the ice to get off the bike, splendid candid camera moment!

On finally reaching Trencherfield it was apparent though that not everyone had viewed the conditions as a challenge and had given the ride a wide berth, very wide indeed. Not to worry though, the six of us that had made it (AKA the "mentally deranged") were all keen to go ahead, following a safety briefing that included ("whatever you do, don't fall in the canal") and route outline we were on our way up to the Balcarres.

Conditions varied as we made our way along the towpath to the Whelley Loop, quite dry sheltered sections, others white with frost and some quite shiny, no doubt slippery as well. Canal was frozen over in several places and free-flowing in others, much to the resident Swans relief I would imagine! Whelley Loop reached; incident free, it was time to head towards the plantations before turning right and heading up the single track to Balcarres. The sound of ice crunching under the bike wheels is quite exhilarating, it is for me anyway and we were going to get plenty of it. Every puddle had frozen over and we were treated to encore after encore for the whole ride. Passed numerous people out walking, both with and without dogs but the icy conditions seemed to have created a kind of mutual respect. Dog owners, the majority anyway, kept their dogs under control as we passed by and were thanked accordingly, walkers kindly stepping aside to let us pass and exchanging pleasantries, quite like this winter riding lark!

One or two short sections of the track we used are quite boggy, even in good weather, throw a bit of surface ice in the mix as well and you do have a challenge, one that we all rose to one way or another as we duly climbed our way up to the Balcarres. The last 50ft of climb had seen a remarkable transformation, from low-lying fog to blue skies and sunshine, quite surreal. Made the most of it though and stopped for a well-earned breather and general chinwag, the drunken exploits of one particular member getting top billing. Suitably recovered it was time to press on, bit of road this time. So with lights on, anticipating the fog we set off for Borsdane Wood, hundred yards down the road, much as expected we were back in fog and would be for the rest of the ride. Safely made our way through the roundabouts at Aspull and soon reached the tranquillity of Borsdane. Always a pleasure the ride through here, especially in the direction we were heading, nearly all downhill, certainly worth the earlier climb.

Hindley next up followed by Amberswood, Low Hall, Bickershaw, Abram and Crankwood as we headed to the Nevison for lunch. Couldn't believe how well the ride had gone, no mishaps or incidents apart from a brief stop to put some air in one of Rays tyres, the cycling gods had been kind to us, probably as some kind of reward for venturing out on such a morning. Bikes safely secured round the back we made our way inside and settled in front of a roaring fire. For those of you that haven't been before its like stepping back in time, a modern day reminder of how pubs used to be. (Well worth a visit)

With lunches ordered and beverages in hand we set about (as per usual) putting the world to rights along with many other topics that cropped up during the wait for service. To be fair they had said at ordering they had run out of bread for one of the dishes and had sent someone out to get some, got to wondering at one point whether they had decided to bake some instead. No one seemed to care though; the pub was cosy, warm and very welcoming, rather put out when it did arrive, could have stayed in there all afternoon. All good things come to an end at some point though, so with lunches polished off it was time to head back into the cold for the relatively short journey back to Trencherfield.

When securing the bikes we used a couple of different locks (just to be on the safe side) Jim using his newly acquired Kryptonite D Lock (one of the most secure on the market, apparently) all the locks were duly removed until it was Jims turn. As some of you may be aware, Jim has been known in the past to forget the combination code, wasn't going to happen today though, this one used a key. Several minutes passed and the lock was still in place, the bloody thing wouldn't unlock, try as he might he was getting nowhere. Several others had a try, all to no avail. Picture the scene if you will, we'd just emerged from a nice warm pub, the fog was beginning to close in, mercury was starting to fall and our bikes were going nowhere, well some of them anyway, the lock certainly lived up to its reputation, we had the key and still couldn't open it, time for drastic measures.

Denis wandered back inside to enquire if by any chance, they happened to have a set of bolt cutters to hand, (as all good pubs should), surprisingly enough though they did have a set, not behind the bar but in a container outside. Couple of minutes later the Landlord appeared wielding them ready for battle, the lock wasn't having any of it though; cutters wouldn't touch it, 1: 0 to the lock (certainly got what you paid for Jim). Next up the hacksaw, Landlord wandered off to get one while Jim beavered away with the key trying his utmost to get it to work. Hacksaw was duly produced, time for round two, who was the money on this time? The lock thought better of the imminent confrontation and in an effort for self-preservation finally succumbed to Jim's efforts, the bikes were free, 1:1. Moral to be learned, if Jim ever offers to secure your bike for you, think carefully, very carefully indeed. Wouldn't have minded but he didn't put the lock on his own bike, makes you think doesn't it!

Ordeal over and Landlord thanked for his efforts we set off back to Trencherfield, quite chilly along the canal towpath but Denis had the bit between his teeth and upped the pace in an attempt to keep us warm, sure that was his intention anyway. Denis peeled off at Scotsman's leaving the rest of to up the pace yet again for the final leg back to the Mill; we'd only been toying with him.

Superb ride in difficult conditions, but that just seemed to add to the enjoyment, last ride of the year and it certainly didn't disappoint. Many thanks to Ray, Joyce, Anne & Denis for coming along and a special thanks to Jim for providing the days entertainment. If you happen to see a nearly new Kryptonite lock for sale on e-bay in the Wigan area, think long and hard.

Happy New Year everyone, see you in 2015.