

Cuerden & The Wheel

Beautiful sunny morning graced our visit to Cuerden Park, touch on the cold side but other than that perfect cycling conditions. The planned route was the Guild Wheel with a couple of twists; firstly we were adding another 10 miles to it by starting from Cuerden Park, (some of us anyway). Secondly we were going to do it counter clockwise, every time we've done it previously its been clockwise so high time for a change, (they didn't know about that part though). Plan was in place so all that was needed was some willing Guinea Pigs, I mean participants. First to arrive was our new member John; he came along with us on the Tatton Park outing and yet still decided to join, strange breed over in Lymm! Slowly but surely the days contingent began to arrive, but a few seemed to leaving it quite late. Happened to be Farmers Market day in Cuerden and the car parks were beginning to fill, we had 4 cars in there at the time but were expecting a couple more. One of the Marshalls seemed to be getting a little anxious about this so on seeing our bikes he enquired where we were headed and how long we were likely to be, grey matter began to whirl before asking if we could do him a favour and relocate a couple the cars, not a problem was the reply. This kicked off a game of musical cars, moving them off the main parking area he guided us down a couple of side roads, blocking in himself and a tractor in the process. With a few people still missing and almost ready to get underway the Marshall reappeared albeit rather sheepishly and asked if we could move the cars yet again, he hadn't thought it through properly, amused us no end. Cars relocated once more and a couple of phone calls form missing riders taken it was finally time to get underway. The missing quintet had all ended up on a different car park, nine of us had found the one detailed on the website so it must have been down to poor map reading, yes before you ask Enid was one of them, along with Doreen her partner in crime.

The other car park that they had all somehow decided to use was on the way and just so happened to cut a mile or so off the journey, very suspicious! First leg wasn't going to be that far then, setting off we had a delightfully steep downhill section offering some fantastic views over the park, as per usual though after every downhill there's an uphill to follow, this followed immediately and although not very long it was reasonably steep, got them panting straight away (bet they loved me), little did they know what else lay in store, more so would they remember that the steep hill we'd just come down would need riding back up again on our return, the thought that they wouldn't amused me no end! Alternative car park reached we met up with our famous five, not The Famous Five; they would found the correct car park! After hearing various excuses as to why they'd got it wrong it seemed that a crash course in orienteering wouldn't go amiss. Not to worry though we were at last all together, without any detour and the only time we'd lost was by shunting cars around Cuerden. Finally we were ready to roll, next stop Avenham Park.

First section was a touch on the Urban side, cycle path alongside the A49 to Bamber Bridge following NCN55, through an industrial area and under a low (very low) tunnel, prior to accessing the cycle path into Avenham. Personally I didn't have any problem with the low tunnel, as you can imagine, didn't even realise it was low, bit of an ordeal for some of the others I would imagine. Urban sprawl left behind it was cycle path for the next mile or so with a tree lined avenue, aka the "Old Tramway" to finish with as we crossed over the Ribble and entered the park. Automatic pilot kicked in at this point, every time I'd done the Wheel before it had been a left turn, today was no exception. Quickly realising my mistake, it was a case of stopping and turning the group round, whilst informing them of the plan to try the route the opposite way. Everyone seemed happy to go along with it and the navigational error made it look like a spontaneous decision (little did they know). First few miles was along the banks of the river affording some great scenic views of the surrounding countryside along with the noise of the water cascading over the shallow rapids, really is a superb route. Winding away from the river it was into Brockholes nature reserve and the start of the day's fun, (for me at least).

The Guild Wheel rode clockwise as many of you will know, is a series of gentle climbs married with some rather nice steep descents, none steeper than the drop down into Brockholes, 20% gradient the sign says not sure what that means in old money but it's definitely steep. Have you put the pieces together yet? Leaving Brockholes we had a little climb on our hands, advised them what was in store and suggested that some of them may need to walk it, "may need to walk it" came the sarcastic reply. Time to give it a go anyway, was going to be tough either riding or walking the rough cobbled sections and slalom gates would see to that. Everyone made it up safely, some managing to ride, others being sensible and walking, but we all got there eventually. Jim T in his wisdom (or lack of) announced that we had reached the highest point of the ride and it was all-downhill from now on (may live to regret that bold statement Jim), didn't believe him for one minute! We'll be kind though and put it down to oxygen starvation, after all it was a tough climb. Coffee stop was planned as usual for the Broughton Inn, few miles to go yet though including, surprise surprise a few more hills, saw more people get off and walk than on any of our previous rides, prompted Margaret to say that she'd rode the Guild Wheel several times and had never had to get off and push before, little did she realise that there was a 10% gradient yet to come, my popularity was what you might call questionable! Broughton finally reached, halfway point as well as it happened, time for a well earned and much needed rest. Coffees and the occasional pint seemed to be a popular choice, don't think anyone got anything to eat though, probably too exhausted from all that climbing, but at least it was all-downhill from here, apart from the four or five climbs I could think of.

Suitably refreshed and world once again put to rights we were back underway, always looks different riding a route the opposite direction, that was confirmed when I missed a turning and led most of the group down someone's drive, just as that someone was driving out, didn't seem impressed at all repeating several times that the Guild Wheel was the next turning, only a matter of feet away. Wonder how many times that's happened to him over the years, small wonder he wasn't amused! The miles passed by and soon we were heading back along the banks of the Ribble, Docklands side this time, before making our way through Avenham Park ready to retrace our steps back to Cuerden. Tree lined avenue, cycle path, very low tunnel (remember that one) just to make it slightly more challenging, someone (assume it was kids) had piled some grass up in the tunnel and set fire to it, couldn't see a bloody thing, case of hold your breath duck, down and hope they hadn't dug a hole at the other end, kids eh, never did anything like that when I was younger, honest!

Ye Olde Hob Inn at Bamber Bridge was deemed a suitable watering hole to finish off the ride, the days guests bid us farewell at this point as did Anthony who was riding back to Wigan along with Jim H who has a long standing Sunday afternoon appointment at the Bocket, the remainder enjoying some alfresco dining as we watched the world go by. All that remained was the mile or so back to Cuerden, not forgetting the final hill of course. Thought about taking them back via the A49 along the flat, but they all seemed eager to do it and as they say what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. I could have left them to it but being the fool I am, rode up the hill with them only to bid my goodbyes at the car park and ride back down the hill to continue my journey home, any clues that I quite like hills!

Fourteen of us in total, 31 miles covered, probably felt like more, lovely weather and some great company, think we can class it as a success. What did we learn from the day's events though, avoid parking at Cuerden on market day, several of our members and guests can't read a map (or can they), never believe Jim T when he mentions hills (or to be precise, the lack of), finally treat any route that yours truly suggests with a great deal of suspicion!

Thanks for coming everyone, see you next time!

Forgot to take any bloody photos again, volunteer please!