

Leeds to Wigan on the Leeds/Liverpool Canal 16-17 August 2015

Day 1

A group of eight cyclists set out from Wigan on a bright Sunday morning heading for the Leeds Basin and the commencement of the ride back to Wigan. We were grateful to Doreen's partner Alan who had offered to run four of the group and the eight bikes over to Leeds. We met up at Trencherfield Mill and, after removing a few front wheels, managed to fit all the bikes in the trailer. Alan, Denis, Alan C, Roy and Enid finished securing the bikes in the trailer while Jim, Tony, Phil and Jean made their way to North Western Station to take the train.

Everyone arrived safely in Leeds with the trailer having been unloaded in advance of the train travellers' arrival. After thanking Alan for his assistance we commenced the ride shortly after 1pm. We had cycled just a few hundred metres before we hit our first technical problem. Enid had a cycling rack fitted onto her bike and her cycle seat had dropped down. Jim and Roy eventually managed to resolve the awkward problem with Enid and Tony watching them struggle. We had lost 15 minutes but that wasn't going to be the last breakdown stop by any means.

We eventually got going maintaining a good pace on the good surfaces in and around the Leeds area. Our biggest problem was the proliferation of other cyclists, walkers and families with dogs who were out enjoying the bright August afternoon. Our bells were constantly ringing as we frequently had to slow down to pass pedestrians. The lads were not complaining, however, when we overtook a rather attractive young female jogger who had passed us earlier when we were resolving Enid's technical problem.

We had decided to travel for about an hour before taking lunch and began to make steady progress as the numbers of pedestrians and cyclists thinned out on the outskirts of Leeds. We passed through Apperley Bridge (not as nice as our Appley Bridge) and Shipley before reaching Saltaire around 2.30pm. After a short cycle to a sports bar that was closed we settled down for lunch at the Boat House Inn. This was a refurbished Victorian boathouse in a beautiful setting on the banks of the River Aire. The food was good and the traditional cask ales went down well with the boys though Tony wasn't too impressed when Roy asked for a lager top!

It was during the stop at Saltaire that both Jim and Enid realised that they had each got a slow puncture. The tyres were soon pumped up and then we were off.

Unfortunately, we had to have frequent stops during the remainder of the day to add pressure to the tyres, particularly Enid's which was taking the additional weight of her rucksack.

We soon reached Bingley Five Rise Locks which, as the name implies, is a sequence of five connected locks that rise steeply over a distance of about 100 metres. We tackled the short climb to arrive breathless at the top and spent a few minutes examining the locks before moving on.

Denis had settled down at the front of the peloton as we headed from the outskirts of Keighley into the countryside. The paths began to narrow and became really bumpy in parts as we constantly changed from stoney to grassy surfaces. It was tough going and difficult to maintain any real pace. Earlier in the ride we had been travelling at 14mph but we were now down to 7mph. The bridges were also a pain as we had to slow down to navigate the narrow, cobbled path beneath each bridge. As we headed towards Skipton, Alan and Denis broke away from the group to arrive in advance of the rest. After a quick phone call it was agreed that they should continue on to Gargrave and our overnight stop at the Premier Inn. It was around 7pm before the

main group checked in and crammed the bikes into the small store room. Although we had only travelled 35 miles everyone felt that it had been a tough day in the saddle due to the rough terrain. Enid declared that it had been the hardest ride she had been on and much more difficult than France.

We all agreed to have a quick shower and meet around 8pm but the girls needed another 15 minutes – as girls do! We finally trekked into Gargrave to the Bollywood Cottage (you've guessed it – an Indian Restaurant), the only restaurant in town. It was full and we were told that we would have a half hour wait. Following glowing recommendations from a couple of locals, we decided to wait rather than walk further to try to find a pub with food. It proved a worthwhile wait as we all enjoyed the food and the opportunity to have a good chat. We headed back through the darkness to arrive at the hotel around 11pm to settle down for the night.

Day 2

We were all down early for a hearty breakfast to set us up for the day although the girls were a bit more particular with Jean just having some healthy food stuff. Jim, Denis, Tony and Alan were soon into changing the inner tubes on Jim and Enid's bikes. We had, however, discovered late on Day 1 that Enid had failed to bring a spare inner tube much to the disdain of Phil who had chastised her for committing such a basic omission.

Alan gave Enid his spare Presta inner tube as nobody else had wheels with Schrader tyre valves. The bikes were ready for off and, following the application of a little extra protection to the posterior (boys only), so were the cyclists. It was a beautiful morning with light sunshine and little wind as we set out on the return journey to Wigan. The sun was shining on the canal and providing a reflection of the cyclists, trees and bridges. The initial paths weren't great but they were sufficiently level to enable us to make steady progress towards the Lancashire border. There were just a handful of dog walkers in the first few miles as the canal continued to rise steadily via a sequence of locks. A TV transmitter atop a hill gave us welcome relief with an indication that we were reaching the high point of the route. A short burst of Lancashire la la la lah from Tony a few miles on provided the good news that we had crossed the border. The grass was greener now and the air smelled sweeter now. We had to leave the canal briefly as it wound through the Foulridge Tunnel near Colne. The diversion took us up to Lake Burwain, a reservoir in an attractive setting. The narrow path leading to the reservoir was a bit hairy in places and we chose to dismount rather than risk a nasty fall. Once we had negotiated the access path we spent a few minutes admiring the view, grabbing a quick drink and taking a photo before continuing onwards.

The canal then wound its way through Nelson and Burnley where the water didn't look too healthy and there was quite a bit of rubbish strewn about in places. We then reached the Gannow Tunnel where we were again required to leave the towpath. It was a steep climb over the hill which Enid didn't fancy cycling up but the rest of us crawled our way up it as best we could. We stopped for a few minutes at the top to get our breath back although Denis suggested that we would be better keeping going as it wasn't good to strain your heart and then suddenly stop. Thanks for the advice Denis but we'll risk a couple of minutes break! Tony and Denis led the way over the top of the hill and across the road to find the linkway back to the canal towpath with Jim and Alan following behind. Enid, Jean, Roy and Phil were held up by traffic as they crossed the road and as they continued onwards they missed the towpath sign. They obtained directions from a local to get them back to the canal but a phone chat

with Jim determined that the group had found their way back to a section of canal before the Gannow Tunnel. This meant that they had to follow the towpath and negotiate the climb over the hill all over again! Needless to say that did not go down well and Enid took some convincing that she would have to push her bike over the hill again. Tony rescued the group as they came down the hill and we soon reunited. Tony then informed us that as he and Denis had been forging on ahead he had crashed into a young Asian guy as they went under a bridge. Fortunately, Tony was unharmed – we're not too sure about the Asian guy though as Tony is pretty solid! We continued on at a steady pace passing over and under the M65 motorway as we headed for Blackburn. We then encountered several miles of soul-destroying narrow towpath on the approach to Accrington. Again this slowed us down as we had to maintain concentration to prevent any accidents. We decided to leave the canal at Accrington to grab some lunch and "cheat" by avoiding two loops of the canal. We found a brilliant roadside butty box manned by a delightful lady who made us butties to meet our requirements and provided us with a brew and bottles of water to top up our supplies. We were lucky to catch her open as we arrived at 1.55pm just five minutes before she was due to pack up for the day.

Suitably refreshed we hit the road – well for about 100 metres or so! Good old Enid had got another puncture in the same back tyre. Denis set to work switching the inner tube while Enid kindly returned Alan's inner tube with the puncture in it – thanks a lot Enid! It was Phil's turn to cough up his spare to the shame faced Enid. After that brief interlude it was back to the road and a long uphill climb to link up with the canal again.

After rejoining the canal we cycled on towards Blackburn before meeting a familiar cyclist coming towards us. Len had cycled from Wigan to meet us and perked us up when he told us that it had been all uphill all the way for him so we could enjoy the downhill return into Wigan. We continued for another 10 miles or so before Denis, who was setting the pace as usual, made a splendid decision. He spotted the Top Lock pub next to the canal at Wheelton and we all jumped at the chance of a break in the mid-afternoon sunshine. Most of us were tempted into a couple of drinks though one or two, who need not be named, couldn't resist a third. We all enjoyed a good natter in the sunshine glad to give our backsides a rest from the saddle.

After the welcome break we cycled on into more familiar territory – Botany Bay, Adlington, Arley and on to Haigh. Almost there! Enid and Jean departed the group at Haigh to make their way home to Swinley. Jim, Roy and Tony dropped off at New Springs leaving the others to make their way into Wigan. Alan, Denis and Len headed off across town to Hawkley Hall while Phil dawdled his way back into Wigan. He was joined by two intrepid kids who wanted to know whether they could get to the DW Stadium down the canal as they had made their way up through Haigh Hall. Being a gentleman (author's prerogative used here) he guided them down to Robin Park and they headed home to Crooke Village.

When Phil arrived home his Garmin showed 59 miles for the return trip and a total of 94 miles over the two days. We had been lucky with the weather with no rain, little wind and dry conditions on the towpaths but we have all seen enough of the Leeds-Liverpool Canal for a while thanks very much!