

Tour d' Isle of Wight

I didn't do much cycling prior to 2010, just the ride to work now and then and a one-off London-to-Cambridge charity ride, but in the spring of that year I decided to tackle the Lands End to John o' Groats trip to celebrate retirement from work. It was a good ride and I really enjoyed it so afterwards I joined my local 'University of the Third Age' cycling group and tried to keep myself vaguely fit by going on their weekly rides around the area.

One week I happened to mention to my fellow riders that it would be nice to go for an away trip of a couple of days.

'Sounds good, you organize it!' was the response which I should have foreseen.

Oh, alright then. So a month or so later off we set to the Isle of Wight for a leisurely (well we are all retired) circuit of the island.

Wednesday 22nd June 2011 - Day 1

Home to Shanklin

My friend, Andrew, had come down to stay with me the night before the trip so we were able to have a couple of training pints at the Rose and Crown.

Next morning, bright and early, we got ready, loaded the bikes onto the rack and drove down to Portsmouth where we met the rest of the gang in the car park in Gunwharf Road. There were ten of us in all: myself, Andrew, Stewart, Frank, Allen, Stan, Aaron, Terry, David and Rob.



We rode down to the harbour terminal and took the catamaran ferry to Ryde – a reasonable £15.80 return for anyone with a bus pass and the bike goes free.

There had been a shower or two on the way down but the rain had passed over now and the day was OK from this point on – white cloud and occasional sunny spots albeit a bit windy. On the island it was good cycling but there were some largeish hills lurking in wait for us. We all managed OK although Terry's gears quickly stopped working in the lowest ratios.

We stopped for lunch at a farm café - £6.10 for a cup of tea and egg mayonnaise baguette for me - then rode on to Brading, pausing at the top of a long hill for a quick look over the hedge at the remains of a Roman villa in the next field. A few miles further along we called in at the vineyard at Adgestone, bought a bottle of their own red wine (£13) and shared it between us. They kindly provided us with glasses so we didn't have to be uncouth and drink from the bottle and it was very pleasant sitting there in the sun sipping away.



The hotel we were staying at for the night was the Brunswick Hotel in Queens Road, Shanklin, charging £60 per person per night. It was large, clean and well-appointed with two swimming pools – very up market – and we had managed to get 5 twin rooms there.

In the evening we gathered for a pint in the hotel lounge then walked down to the front and got a meal in a pub called the Steamer Inn where they were serving some quite palatable beer called Tizzy Wizzy. Then we had a pint or two in the Chine.

Thursday 23rd June 2011 - Day 2

Shanklin to Totland

In the morning after a reasonable breakfast at the Brunswick we fixed Stewart's overnight puncture and had a feeble bash at sorting Terry's gears out – he still couldn't get the lowest cogs, making the hills a bit tricky.

The morning was nice but showers were forecast for later in the day. We set off and Terry's gears improved a bit so we carried on instead of diverting to the bike shop in Ventnor as had been suggested. I was navigating with the aid of the Adventurer 2800 GPS mounted on my handlebars but of course you can't be looking at it all the time so there was the inevitable overshoot from time to time. Unfortunately on one such occasion having just happily whizzed down a substantial hill I discovered that we now had to turn around and painfully slog back up it again, resulting in some rather non-supportive cries of 'After him! Lets kill him!' from my old friend Andrew. It's hell being leader, eh!



We passed the Donkey Sanctuary that Stan had suggested we visit but it was closed so we just looked over the fence for a minute or two then pressed on to Niton where we had a cup of tea. There was a nice level stretch after that, very pleasant riding, but it clouded up and we had one cold shower before stopping for lunch at the Sun Inn, Hulverstone. It continued raining while we were in there guzzling but by the time we set off again for the last leg of the day it had obligingly stopped.

More showers ensued, however, and we had to endure a dire slog up a very long hill on the approach to Freshwater Bay. Rain, traffic and strongly gusting winds made this stretch absolutely awful, hard work and dangerous. We bashed on though and made our way to the

Needless at the western extremity of the island, the rain petering out now, so we had a look around and another cup of tea in the Needles car park café. Then the final mile or so back into Totland to Littledene Lodge (£28 per person) where we were staying – again 5 twin rooms.

There was a 'For Sale' sign outside Littledene Lodge which didn't look very promising. I rang the bell and after a wait of a minute or so the door creaked open and an unshaven, rumpled face appeared. The owner of the face looked at me blankly for a moment then said in a deadpan voice: 'You've got the wrong week.' This turned out to be Trevor, the proprietor and that was his idea of a joke. A very dry and droll character was Trevor, but very amiable; he told us where we could go to eat in the evening and rang up to make sure the pub would be able to cater for us. He seemed to be running the place on his own.

Littledene was rather more basic than the Brunswick but this was reflected in the cheaper cost and it served its purpose alright.

That evening we all made our way to Trevor's recommended pub, the Broadway, where I had a pasta pomodoro, quite nice, and a few pints of Titanic beer. Plus an apple crumble and custard for an extra £4.

There was a woman called Christine in the pub, age about 50, with her friend, Mary, who was bordering on senile. Christine worked for some university in America now but had been born in Preston and she chatted with Stewart and then with the rest of us for a while. Another girl on her own was sitting at the bar doing the Daily Telegraph crossword – I told her 'haha' was a sunken fence but couldn't help her with her final two clues.



Friday 24th June 2011 - Day 3

Totland to Ryde, then home

The last day was fine and sunny and the riding on this side of the island was a lot easier with fewer hills to tackle. The first stretch, from Freshwater to Yarmouth, was a nice ex-railway track – off-road, leafy and away from the traffic. We carried on along easy, rolling roads and reached Cowes where we got lunch at a chip shop – spring roll, bread roll and chips for me. Then it was over the free, chain-driven ‘floating bridge’ to East Cowes.

More easy riding took us to Wootton where the Isle of Wight steam railway ends. As luck would have it a train was due to arrive five minutes after we got there so we waited for it to arrive. When it turned up Andrew, a steam train enthusiast, decided to use his heritage membership and take his bike on board for a trip to Smallbrook Farm where he could catch the electric train back to Ryde and meet us at the ferry terminal.

The rest of us continued the ride and reached a spot where there was a coastal cycleway for the final two or three miles. It proved to be a bit too rough for Stan who was riding a road bike with narrow wheels so he turned back with Frank, Allen, Aaron and Rob while Stewart, Terry, Dave and I carried on. The surface wasn't too bad and some way along we came across a Benedictine monastery called Quarr Abbey, a large, eastern-looking brick building, built in 1912. We had a look round then carried on to Ryde where we met up with the others, caught the ferry and drove home.

All told the trip came to about 84 miles for the circuit of the island. Not overly strenuous but it was a nice break away from home and a change from the usual local rides. It must have had some good points anyway as the number of riders signing up for this year's outing, a circuit of Anglesey, has gone up from 10 to 14.

So, Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlantysiliogogoch here we come.

Alan Thomas