

The Fridays' Tour of Ireland June 2019

Dublin to the Shannon via some Mountains

The Report



Model of the route through Wicklow Gap by Martin Bellwood

Prologue: Saturday 22nd June [Ian Macsporrان]

Having been flagged since late in 2018, the starting point of Dublin seemed to some regulars a difficult destination. Yet seven hardy souls found their way to Lus Mor, our accommodation for two nights in the Wicklow Mountains, to meet up on the first evening. Two crossed independently from Pembroke Dock and Fishguard to Rosslare and either pedalled all the way or pedalled and caught a train; two crossed by car from Holyhead to Dublin; three arrived in Holyhead from two trains for another ferry to Dublin.

Ceri and Wendy had offered to meet Gordon, Naz and Ian at Holyhead and take their panniers in their car to Lus Mor. Delays along the main roads in North Wales scuppered the plan so that, by the time they had emerged from the Irish Ferries crossing, the three had fully loaded bikes for an ever-upward evening journey: twenty-four miles which started to ascend before we'd left the city boundary and which climbed seriously on entering the Wicklow Mountains.

At Lus Mor we were seven. With our first Guinness we toasted the absent Charlie who had made the first moves to get the Tour going and had accompanied Gordon on a recce about six weeks beforehand. Gordon provided excellent notes and .gpx routes for the week and so we knew what to expect. And ... Bingo!! ... Wendy offered to put our panniers in her car for our "moving-on" days later in the week!

Day 1: Sunday - A circuit of the Wicklow Mountains [Ian Macsporrان]

We set off brightly on a classic cyclists' circuit involving a climb to the Sally Gap, "a remote crossroads surrounded by bogs and deep heather". The first mile was good: an unmade road away from Lus Mor and then an undulating side road. Next was the immediate challenge of climbing 1,000 feet in the next two miles!



(l to r) Naz, Ceri, Gordon, Martin and Ian at Sally Gap; photo by Claudine

But then we had the joy of a beautiful and lengthy descent along the old Military Road, constructed after the 1798 Rebellion. Twelve miles with hardly the need to touch the brake levers. And more than usually deserted: an air ambulance had landed on the road to answer an emergency and a young Garda, although turning most cars around, advised us to wait. The result was that fifteen minutes later we continued our descent, with very few cars for company, to a café popular with cyclists for lunch at Glendalough Green.

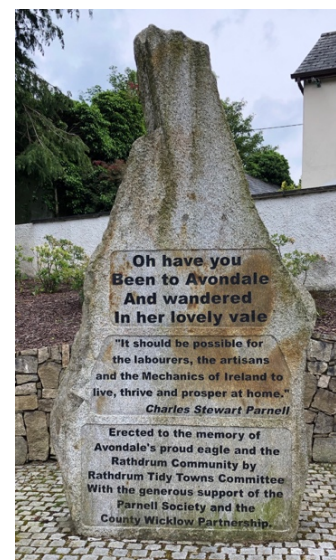


The value of the recce proved itself with another ascent and descent to Glenmalur where the friendly pub offered shelter from a not unpleasant drizzle. A short forest ride and we paused in Rathdrum at the monument to Charles Stewart Parnell, born nearby and leader of the nineteenth-century Irish Parliamentary Party in the House of Commons and vociferous proponent of Home Rule.

Undulating roads took us back to Roundwood, the nearest small town to Lus Mor, and the site of the highest pub in Ireland, Vartry House. We arrived there just in time to shelter from a cloudburst of rain. We needed a second Guinness to be sure it was dry enough to go outside again. This set the pattern for a week where the weather was either very kind to us or we just missed heavy rain.

Fortified now, we made good progress up the ascent to Lus Mor with its comfortable accommodation and friendly staff.

[43 miles and over 4,100 feet climbed.]



Day 2: Monday - Lus Mor to Naas [Martin Bellwood]

Knowing that the day would involve a bit of a hill, we stocked up at breakfast by eating as much as possible, I became toast monitor, Gordon arranged his toast and jam with strict discipline.

A quick photo of the group and we were off, up the bumpy track to the road, and then on 10km to Laragh where we went past the excellent Glendalough Green cafe and deli. I think deli is short for delicious in this case. Glendalough lake a little further on was very quiet and tranquil. The water hardly had a ripple, and reflected the hills around as if waiting to be photographed, which of course we had to.



Retracing our steps a little back to Glendalough, and the cathedral and other buildings, brought us back to the tourist area, though not crowded, there were a few guided tours. An interesting site, and one of great importance at one time. We stopped there for coffee next to a van advertised as Kevin's Cones, though a relation to Saint Kevin was probably tenuous.



From this point, it was the climb through Wicklow Gap. Rising 1100 ft in 4.3 miles but well graded, and little traffic other than two huge logging trucks. The flies followed and annoyed for a while, but lost interest when we left the trees. Halfway up there is a deserted lead mine and the remains of a chapel. At the summit we stopped to recover and admire the view, a boardwalk leads to a large wooden

platform that could once have been the base for a bandstand, it wasn't, but I liked the idea of a brass band playing at the top of the mountain in a huge space.

Now the reward for all that climbing, the descent, a fantastic 9 miles of downhill on a good surface with fast sweeping bends, hardly needing to pedal, stopping just before Locktown Bridge to regroup and turn to the north, through Valleymount, over the lake Liffey and into Ballymore Eustace, where a very excellent lunch was taken at the Ballymore Inn. The road on to Naas was fairly level, and in a



short time we were at our hotel, covering around 37 miles of varied riding, with 2,500 ft of climbing.



Before our evening meal we called into Thomas Fletcher's, a bar with whisky in the barrel, and the most beautiful and interesting wooden furniture. Screens divided the bars, with stained glass, it being once a shop, a bar and a lounge. Some of the old shop fittings were still in place, drawers with names of herbs and spices on the fronts.

We ate at Rustic, an Italian restaurant that was like a Tardis, very small at the front, but expanded to a very large space at the back and, I discovered, more upstairs. It was Monday night, and very busy and noisy. A nightcap was taken in Grace's, where Guinness and whisky may have been sampled.



Day 3: Tuesday - Naas to Portlaoise [Claudine Conway]

When we departed Naas on Tuesday morning after a night disturbed by fire alarms and an uninspiring breakfast that included a half-hearted attempt by jaded hotel staff to persuade our Muslim companion of the merits of unsolicited Irish charcuterie, I felt for a while that I might have drawn the Ride Reporters' Short Straw. The previous afternoon's storm-dodging descent from the Wicklow Gap into the elderflower-scented lanes of County Kildare, which were steaming softly in the afterglow of summer rains, was a tough act to follow.

So the exit from Naas, through a maze of roadworks and over a succession of unfriendly surfaces, was not an auspicious start to the day. Neither balmy like the previous day, nor chilly enough to count as bracing, it might have been half an hour or much more I spent entertaining The Big Questions like whether putting arm-warmers on would make things slightly better or slightly worse.

But tours aren't only about the show-stoppers. There has to be a show to stop, and much of it inheres in the quiet passages that connect the memorable episodes together.

As we rolled off another dull roundabout, a vast plain hove into view, strung with lines of bright white fences and presided over by an immense and imperious luxury viewing gallery with a giant Ryvita for a roof. The Curragh!

Four men of a certain age immediately leapt from their bikes to take selfies with a



giant bronze stallion (readers may make of that what they will), while two of us rolled further down the road to stop and look back, admiring the edifice and some flesh-and-blood racehorses being exercised ahead of Derby weekend.

On to the town of Kildare. Bunting in the shape of racing silks in jockey colours for the Derby was strung festively about in a square with a nice little market hall. Had we arrived three weeks earlier we might have exclaimed 'Gordon Bennett! The whole darn place is awash with classic cars!'. Today it was just bustling in a cheerfully everyday sort of way.

A coffee shop called Square, on the square, served us excellent coffee... and some squares. Of flapjack and tiffin and brownie and suchlike. The interior was all wood and glass and steel and as well as coffee they sold handmade blankets in pleasing muted colours, and interesting books. They describe the art on the walls as 'rotating'. I watched it carefully, but in vain, for signs of movement, so I guess they mean they swap it around now and again.

After coffee, our leader led us across to the grounds of St Brigid's Cathedral, where he had plans to send us all to the tower, which turned out to be a slender item over 30m high and about a thousand years old. We were promised splendid views from



the top, which appeared accessible by means only slightly less arduous than scrambling up the golden hair of a captive maiden.

Our leader sought to inspire confidence in his troops by announcing that, as he'd been up before, he would leave us to enjoy it while he went back to Square for another skinny decaf oatmilk mochaccino (or whatever his secret is). The kindly yeoman of the tower offered to mind our bags and other

accoutrements, which he assured us would be a hindrance, and flattered us by letting us all in at pensioners' rates, and we clattered up the metal stairway in our cleats to the unexpectedly ornate doorway, which was at least 3m off the ground. Further reassurance came from Martin, who said that his vertigo probably wouldn't kick in properly until he was at the top. It's as well no-one mentioned claustrophobia, as we climbed a succession of offset wooden ladders and squeezed through hatches in wooden floors supported by corbels, the walls tapering in as we ascended. In the event Martin coped just fine with the height, although as a busload of German tourists were ascending the ladders immediately after us and it's a bidirectional single-track system within what is essentially a big chimney, we briefly hoped that the nice man at the door discouraged smoking as keenly as he dissuaded us from excess baggage.

I don't suffer from vertigo, but luckily one can replicate the experience by accidentally moving one's mouse too fast around this [clever virtual tour of the tower](#).

When we finally emerged again at the bottom, our host took some pleasure in telling us that he had saved the information that the tower has no foundations for when we got down. It sits on a ring of stones a little like those pot feet you get in garden centres. Turns out the reason the door is so far off the ground is not so that you can pull up a ladder and chuck things at enemies, but because everything below it is essentially ballast. Anyway, it's been there a while...



It seemed rude not to pop into St Brigid's while we were there, although it seemed a slightly sedate enterprise after the tower. Nice windows, though, and St Brigid has her own rather natty type of cross, of which little examples made of reed are scattered about. And a kitchen, which is not actually a kitchen but a burial chamber. And a big hole in a cornerstone of the cathedral which we made Nasir stick his arm through. There are several interesting things one might relate about

St Brigid, the most important being that she was reputed to be able to turn water into beer. That's my kinda saint.

The second half of the ride was prettier than the first - as we crossed into County Laois (we might even have skimmed the edges of County Offaly?) it was all quiet little roads that crossed over bigger ones and connected everything together with the pleasing, unobtrusive sort of logic and rightness that has Meticulously Recce'd Fridays Tour written all over it.



Gordon had warned us that at some point on the ride he would shout 'low gear' before a sharp right turn, and would mean it, by way of a warning about a humpback bridge he had previously declared so steep and sudden as to be virtually unrideable. Naturally, most of us took this as a challenge, and happily nearly all of us got away with it. A stop here and another one shortly afterwards formed the Traditional Pontists' Afternoon Diversion, and then we were on our way toward the

promised highlight of the afternoon.

We dipped under a motorway, paused on an attractive green, and then a short, steepish climb took us up to Dunamase Castle. A puncture temporarily rearranged the usual KOM hierarchy, and for once Team Slow got to the top first, which gave me time to raid Nasir's stash of dried banana chips as we parked the bikes up and set off to explore the ruins.

The land we had ridden through that day was flat, which made the castle, on its rocky outcrop surveying the plains, a gratifyingly literal culmination of the day's ride. Face to the west and raise your eyes beyond our destination town of Portlaoise, and you might notice the deceptively soft profile of the Slieve Bloom mountains (of which more later). Had I dwelled for longer on those, the castle would have seemed a prelude.



After dropping two of our number at a well-appointed out-of-town hotel in a somewhat soulless location, we rolled into Portlaoise, which, someone once wrote, is '*not a town in which the visitor will find much of interest. Its prominent institutions are a large lunatic asylum, a grey convict prison and one of the most inconveniently situated railway stations in the country*'. A hotel opposite our digs seemed keen to build on this reputation by serving us the most undistinguished dinner of the tour, but our spirits were restored

by a small boozer by the name of Bergins (of which, also more later), and by a washing machine in the flat. The holy grail of cycling tour accommodation amenities, as any fool knows, is a heated towel rail, but a flat with a washing machine runs it a close second. Don't let anyone tell you the romance of cycle touring is dead.

Day 4: Wednesday - In The Slieve Bloom Mountains *[Nasir Mahmood]*

The framework for this ride was discussed late the night before and followed several rounds of Guinness. Gordon, the Captain, waited until we were relaxed to ask of our preferred option. Option one: entailed three climbs that were "not that steep" and followed a loop of the Slieve Bloom. Armoured with Ireland's fine stout and the confidence of conquering the Sally and Wicklow Gaps (Cat 3 climb) in the preceding days, we eagerly nodded "yes". Hubris ensured we never got to option two.

It was sunny and warm when we left Portlaoise and with a tailwind, breezed (sic) into Clonaslee for the morning coffee. Coffee and cake consumed, we commenced riding in the sunshine and turned off the main road into the aptly named Hillside View for climb one. This was a reasonably smooth single lane flanked by tall hedgerows and mature trees. The road encouraged two abreast and I rode with Ceri on my right. So far, so benign.

About a third of the way up, the road notched up a level in steepness and the green cover gave way to exposed moorland. The increased gradient and the loss of shade quickly caused overheating and I began questioning my choice to wear a black jersey. Ceri, meanwhile, appeared unaffected. He continued normal conversation while I was puffing from every crevice. Unable to keep up comfortably, I made an excuse to stop to adjust my clothing and suggested he continue. Watching Ceri disappear up the road, I mounted my bike and continued to suffer in silence.

As I was reaching a low point, I saw white writing on the road: "4km PEDAL". This was brilliant. It was just the boost I needed. Knowing that countless others had suffered before me and were cheering me on in spirit, I gained a second wind. Thereafter, the summit arrived quickly and I saw several of the team sitting at a picnic table enjoying the spectacular views across the valley. A long and steady descent followed and we arrived at the base of climb two.

The Strava sign at the base suggested this was shorter and steeper than climb one. Armed with this knowledge, it was everyone for themselves as we set off individually. The road benefitted from greater green cover and whilst steeper overall, can be summarised as a series of ramps with flatter intersections offering recovery. The summit arrived quicker than expected and we reconvened. A short break followed during which glycogen levels were topped up before a lovely winding descent to Kinnitty.

There, some of us enjoyed a thoroughly deserved ice cream and customary coffee. Rested and refreshed we enjoyed several undulating kilometres to the base of climb three.

It was now middle of the afternoon and the sun was at its strongest. Again, it was everyone for themselves. This climb had hedgerows in the earlier section but soon gave way to open heather. Following a few meanderings, I could see some of the team disappear onto what looked like the summit. Except, this was no summit. At the top, the road dropped down to the bottom of the valley and the climb resumed again. Part two of climb three was longer, steeper and directly into the sun. I desperately reached for that emergency bottom gear but



the click was not forthcoming - I'd been in the bottom gear for the previous half hour. It was time to utilise the full width of the road and my progress became diagonal rather than straight up. Still, being from the North we're all 'ard' so I was not going to walk. Many painful pedal turns later, I arrived at the summit which was marked by a stone monument to a J I Fanning, founder and Chairman of the Slieve Bloom Association. We'd conquered the Slieve Bloom mountains. Now a long descent followed by a somewhat undulating route led back to Portlaoise.

So this was a challenging ride and I'm glad Gordon was scant in his description the previous night. Had I known how tough it was I would have been tempted to ask about option two. As it is, several of us agreed the ride pushed us to our limits and made us better for it. After all, when you get through a toughie like that, everything else is downhill.

When we got back to Portlaoise - having taken refreshments at the appropriately named Deadmans Inn in Ballyfin - Claudine, Nas and I did not dare to sit down in case we fell asleep. We just had time to shower and meet up with Ceri and Wendy to eat. Food came rather slowly and Nas almost nodded off while eating. Claudine and I, however, fancied a drink in Bergins, the previous night's quiet bar.

Tonight the room was full (with another twenty people in the smokers' corridor outside) and alive with the sound of music. Eight musicians - fiddles, squeeze boxes, guitars, spoons and voices - were at one end, surrounded by listeners who joined in the songs. The other end of the room by the bar was crowded with noisy drinkers, the shouted craic competing with the music. We squeezed in and were engaged in conversation by several people. It was one of those spontaneous discoveries that travellers dream about. Sadly, after a couple of drinks, standing up after a long day in the mountains proved more than we could manage.

Day 5: Thursday - Port Laoise to Tullamore [Ceri Jones]

We gathered at 9.30am on the end of Bridge Street, opposite the St Peter and Paul's Church in Port Laoise. With a good weather forecast, blue skies and a stiff breeze, the application of sun block was a must.

The route, mostly quiet country lanes, took us through Mountmellick and Geashill (19 miles) where we stopped briefly for a snack, mostly consisting of food items obtained from our morning's breakfasts.

The local farmers had been busy cutting the hedges and by the time we reached Tullamore at noon Nas realised he had a puncture caused by a sharp thorn.



On reaching Tullamore the group briefly dispersed to drop luggage at the evening's accommodation and have some lunch - and for Nas to repair his tyre. Of note for lunch was Quigleys Cafe, Bakery & Deli shop in the centre of town.

In the afternoon we (minus Ian - who wanted to rest aka visit the distillery) took off west, via the local cycle shop for spare inner tubes, to the River Shannon and Clonmacnoise. We were helped by a strong SE wind but we were not looking forward to the return with the wind expected to be in our faces. On the outward journey we stopped briefly at Boher to see St Manchan's reliquary in a local church which as well as housing this 12th century relic also had a set of rather beautiful stained-glass windows designed by the famous Irish artist Harry Clarke. The visit was made

more memorable due to the fact that a wedding had only just finished in the church and we looked somewhat under-dressed, mingling with all the guests! We also met a friendly and very welcoming priest who acted as our tour guide

Our objective Clonmacnoise, is situated dramatically on the bank of the river, which looked beautiful in the sunshine. County Galway and the west of Ireland were just on the other side.... We visited the museum, with some impressive stone crosses from the 8th-10th centuries, and the ruins of the monastery (founded 544). After a quick ice cream it was time for the return journey.

Combating a strong head wind, we cycled in a close group.



Dinner was booked at an Italian restaurant in Tullamore for 8pm, hence the urgency not to be too late. However, most of the group found irresistible the prospect of a beer at Gussie's Bar & Lounge / Supermarket in Ballycumber.

With about 3 miles to go, after he had decided to forego a drink and head home, Ceri had the second flat tyre of the day and with no spare inner tube available, the only option was a quick phone call to Wendy who was waiting in the hotel in Tullamore to rescue him in the car. (*"Enough said!"*)

All in all, a long, hot, tiring but rewarding day, (75 miles and 2,200 ft ascent). At least we all made the restaurant by 8.30pm - and the owners did not appear to mind that, because of the rush, most of us were still dressed in cycling kit.



Tired, hungry and happy: arriving in Tullamore

Day 6: Friday - Tullamore to Garadice. [Gordon Parker]

Ceri used a borrowed inner tube to fix his flat after breakfast and we all placed our luggage, gratefully, in Wendy's car. We followed gently undulating lanes to Kilbeggan for coffee. The recce'd route had been rejected so this section was new and, as the leader missed a turn, we fortuitously noticed a gate with a beckoning sign: "St. Hugh's Well and Headache Stone"! We could not pass by so wandered through several fields in pursuit of what turned out to be the plainest stone imaginable!!



Seven miles after coffee, passing the pretty Kiilbeggan racecourse, we joined the Athlone to Mullingar Rail Trail at Castletown Geoghegan and followed it - silky smooth, dead straight, dull but fast - for 8 miles into Mullingar. It was a shock to suddenly come upon the urban congestion of roadworks! But it was lunchtime....

There were several options for lunch including discussing patio foundations with Polish workmen, sitting in parks and

eating well and comfortably in Days Bazaar Café (which had lots of private rooms for assignments....)

We left the town along the Royal Canal Way meandering through the countryside to Darcy's Bridge and then on roads through several delightful villages to Longwood for beer and ice cream.

A final 11 miles took us to Hatton's for some rest, pre-dinner drinks, dinner and post-dinner drinks in the local bar where everyone was friendly and accepting of the strangers in their midst, more than happy to chat (as everyone has been) but equally happy to leave us alone.



[58 miles, 1250 ft ascent.]

Final Day: Saturday - from Garadice to Home. [Gordon Parker]

We woke to thunder. Undaunted, Martin headed south to Rosslare as soon as his bike was released from the locked Function Room cum bike store.

The rest rode four miles through drizzle to The Timeless Café in Kilcock for an excellent last breakfast. Ceri and Wendy started their long drive back to the Stena Line ferry, Holyhead and Cardiff.



The four remaining cyclists rode along the Royal Canal Way via Maynooth - where we were briefly delayed by a swan on the path - then past the giant Intel plant in Leixlip, the original home of Guinness.

A short climb took us into St Catherine's Park and soon after down to the Liffey. We rode four miles through the Strawberry Beds alongside the river in a flat, narrow but very quiet valley. The speed humps may have irritated us but clearly did their job of dissuading traffic. We emerged into Phoenix Park, thence to residential streets and, finally reunited with the Royal Canal, had time for a coffee as we watched Dubliners heading for the Pride march, dressed for the occasion.

The final four miles took us past Croke Park and out through the docks, The Tour was over but this time we were allowed to cycle on to the ferry which was a suitably celebratory finale!

[29 miles; 540 ft ascent.]



Swans on the path!



Phoenix Park



Ceri found a Pride March of his own!