

News for August 2009

Thursday 6th August - report from Bill Balchin. August did not start so well with Sue Britton's rearranged Tuesday ride on the 4th being scrubbed (for the third time) because of the weather. After a wet ride the previous Thursday the forecasters were predicting sunshine today, and sure enough there was dry sunshine for our ride to Shirenewton. Several people who had brought their best bike and left the waterproofs at home were among the two dozen who paused at the bridge to phone-in food orders to the Huntsman Hotel. We took the main road to the roundabout before Chepstow racecourse, then left towards Devauden and took a left at Itton. After a swooping descent there was another small climb and we were at the lunch stop.

Despite a lack of visible staff they coped admirably as the numbers swelled to over forty cyclists, plus a handful of civilians who must have wondered what was going on. With everybody fed and watered we left on time, just as a few spots of rain began - surely just a small shower. The drawback at the Huntsman is that within ten yards of leaving the pub there is a short but steep climb waiting for you on the way through Shirenewton village - not too good if you overdid the hospitality, several decided to walk. Dawn had given instructions for the homeward route but at the turning five minutes later I had forgotten them and ended up with a few others on a different route but ended up in the middle of the main peloton on the approach to the bridge. It was here that the light rain moved up a gear and came down steadily - I was expecting to see Richard Angwin with burnt ears on the local news that evening. Still - no wind, not cold and good company so not too bad.

Tuesday 11th August - report from Bill Balchin. The weather is a really important factor for cycling so I am pleased to report that today it was first class - dry, not too hot or windy and good visibility for the varied scenery as John Upward took ten others on a trip from Caerleon. We soon picked up a single track lane with a better surface than most A roads that followed the line of the busy A449 and eventually took us past the prison into Usk for morning coffee at the Nags Head. We then took NCN42 through Bettws Newydd into Abergavenny, although at one point it seemed that every road was labelled as Route 42. Lunch was at Govilon. John's original pub choice had closed down so he checked with a different venue, only to arrive on the day to find that one closed as well. Luckily the Lion pub was serving meals and a decent pint of Old Speckled Hen.

After lunch we got onto a cycle track on a disused railway that provided splendid views of the surrounding scenery without leg busting climbs. There was enough climbing to do out of Brynmawr onto the Coity Mountain before more cycle track to the Big Pit at Blaenavon for afternoon tea. Then my favourite section on cycle route 492 - a seven mile gradual descent into Pontypool. It would have been a drag in the opposite direction but a delight for us. Then through Pontypool on an assortment of tracks, under-passes and bridges. This must be a prime example for councils serious about cycle transport of how to do it properly.

A plunge downhill past the Llandegfedd reservoir was followed by the obligatory slog up the other side where we said goodbye to Alan Hayward and pressed on to Caerleon to pick up the cars. Total distance about 58 miles, total enjoyment one hundred percent. There are some pictures in the photo gallery.

Thursday 13 August - report from Pete Campbell. And another day this week featuring the sun. Nineteen riders assembled at Ashton for the ride to Clutton, following a route put together by John Killick. There was a short early stretch down the A38, but mostly we rode along quiet lanes, going past Winford Manor, and through Chew Stoke and Stowey. Chew Valley lake was glimmering in the sunlight, and as the sun rose higher, the shade from the wooded sections was more and more welcome. I've been riding on most Thursdays for around six months, since retiring last Christmas: today's ride gave me another of those "I can't believe I can do this on a working day, and I get paid" moments!

I guess I'm not the only one to think that.

The Hunters Rest was today's lunch stop. It was built 250 years ago by the Earl of Warwick as a hunting lodge. There was no sign of aristocracy on our visit: probably put off by the thought of a bar full of cyclists. Most riders and the few drivers lunched inside, while others sat outside at tables next to the Hunters Rest's own miniature railway. It was not running for us, so no lunchtime entertainment. Engineering fans can check out the railway's website: <http://huntersrestrailway.webs.com/>.

Then home again. Most went towards Bitton, but a "select" seven rode back to Ashton, finishing the day on a high, checking out the view of Bristol from the top of Dundry.

Thursday 20th August - report by Tony Conibear. This was the 4th year running for this motorised ride from Malmesbury garden centre to the Eliot Arms at South Cerney and every year turns out different. This year was definitely no exception.

The aim of these rides is to offer some variety to our familiar schedule of pubs and start locations and venture slightly further afield, yet retain the moderate ride distances associated with the normal Thursday event. Support for these rides however has never been great, perhaps because of the car element. Some have always used these events as the basis for planning a longer ride so for the 2nd iteration of this ride in 2007 it was offered with an alternative longer option from Chipping Sodbury, with several timed meeting points en route to Malmesbury. That year the resulting turnout was astonishing. Ten at Sodbury, two more at Acton Turville and others riding their own routes to Malmesbury. Similar last year. Not quite so many but still more riders than drivers at Malmesbury.

This year the weather intervened. Thursday had the worst forecast of the week. Numbers would certainly be down. There were glimpses of blue sky when I got up that morning but Radio Bristol was reporting rain coming up the the Bristol Channel on a strong south westerly. The tree movements confirmed it. This was reportedly going to pass through quickly and be clear by late morning. It was with no surprise that I initially found myself standing alone at Chipping Sodbury war memorial. Then Dave Ashton arrived and after opting to don rain jackets set off at 8.30. in light rain. When we crossed the A46 at the Cross Hands it chucked it down and it was a rather scary ride down to Acton Turville with traffic passing in such poor visibility. At the Luckington road junction we joined two caped crusaders sheltering under the trees until the rain eased. The enhanced group of four then flew up to Malmesbury on the strong tailwind to be met in the garden centre cafe by a sodden John Bishop, having arrived at Sodbury a few minutes after our departure and taken a more direct route overtaking us. With the drivers and a few more riders joining, 14 set off in the warm drying wind for South Cerney. Jackets were soon removed.

As you potter along these country lanes enjoying conversation it's only the occasional

call of 'car up' that reminds you of accompanying colleagues. Pausing at cross roads we realise our numbers had reduced. Where's John Huish and Tony Weaver ? (on their folding bikes). Search party despatches and finds John back down the road with the Brompton's hub gear delivering permanent neutral. Terminal failure and no team car. John and Tony decided to walk back to a suitable waiting point whereupon Tony would ride back to Malmesbury to collect car and complete the rescue (..... more to follow).

The remainder continued through Minety to the Ashton Keynes junction and one of those familiar 'Road Closed Ahead' signs. Obeying such instructions is always debatable because generally the obstructions are found to be passable by cyclists and pedestrians. This time however, with clouds once more threatening and not wishing to be turned back, an alternative route was taken towards Somerford Keynes and joined Spine Road West. A decent off-road cycle path continued to South Cerney where we caught up with the Bath group. This swelled our numbers to a respectable 17 at the pub. A phone call announced that John and Tony were enjoying lunch at the Old Royal Ship, Luckington. Tony having towed John to Malmesbury !. Oh don't you wish we'd had a camera crew. A definite You-Tube moment.

By the time we left the pub the sun had made it's promised appearance for a pleasant meander through the lanes for more tea and cake at the garden centre. Only one problem, that strong south westerly was still blowing, only this time it wouldn't be of assistance!

So for most of us it was good day out, and would you believe NO PUNCTURES.

A few other comments on the day:

When we arrived at Acton Turville John Turton sheltering under the trees told us that Sue Britton had ridden down from her car (parked at Tormarton) with bar end shifter unable to maintain front mech out of granny ring. Unable to contemplate such a low geared day was about to ride back to car when Brian Trott drove by en route to Malmesbury. He took Sue and bike back to her car and she continued to the garden centre and pub in Brian's car. So we had 12 leave the GC on bikes with 2 remaining in the cafe. Loss of JH and TW we were down to 10. Jane Chapman left us at Spine Road West needing to get back early to Shirehampton. Now down to 9. Brian and Sue were at the pub (back up to 11). Bath group were 6. Total 17.

All we needed was for Lance to Tweet that he was coming to Malmesbury for a ride !!

And now an account of the Weaver/Huish escapade in verse from Tony Weaver:

ODE TO JOHN H.

My Mate John was always bolder
With his passion for a Brompton folder
In Brompton world championships he did compete
In rain, wind and sultry heat,
Wearing just Shirt, collar, tie and booted feet.
The Glamour of this did not end well
As I have heard people tell.
One Thursday ride when 10 years older

Age caught up with this little folder
Its health declined and was struck down ill
John pedalled and pedalled to get a thrill
But the rear wheel just stayed still.
Johns face was red, the air was blue,
“Oh deary deary, golly gosh, what shall I do“.
Seven miles to travel on foot alone
But help arrives from a Giant and Tone
To tow him slowly home from afar
He Strung from seat to handle bar
A length of old baling string
And up Hill and Dale the Team did wing.
Encouraging words at the rear John nattered
To Tone up front who was completely shattered.
The final words from John that night
“Tone how about a pint!”

Tuesday 25th August - Worcester Wander - report from Tony Conibear.

Various means have been used to plan these longer Tuesday rides including adapting routes used for audax events. This ride was based on the "Silk Run" 100k audax run by The Black Sheep cycling club and starting from Tewkesbury. The description provided by the event organisers sums up ride beautifully: Spend a leisurely day cycling through the lanes of the Evesham Vale. Only one hill to climb before coffee, then even more quiet lanes for the rest of the day. A good ride for riders of all ages and abilities. Experience cycling through one of the finest historic country parks in England.

This was Sue Britton's 4th attempt at leading this ride which had previously been rescheduled and cancelled for various reasons, most significantly our less than glorious summer weather. Five riders decided to risk the chance an occasional shower forecast that's been a familiar element of this years summer and departed from a rare find in Tewkesbury, a little pay and display car park at £1 all day!. That's after negotiating the most elaborate of pay machines with key entry of full registration and a friendly parking warden that turned up at 8:30 for some entertaining chat. Tewkesbury's low location on the Severn makes it notorious for serious flooding and GPS record of the ride showed we were starting at an altitude of 54 feet. So it would only be going up !. Heading south out of town on the A38 we soon turned east into the quieter lanes through Gotherington, past the Bugatti Owners Club and the site of the annual Prescott Hill climb. A bit further on at Gretton our first pause. Just like last Thursday, someone's missing. Ian F hearing something falling in the road and seeing batteries being flying in various directions, stops for a search. Eventually rejoins the group who are by now discussing the architectural merits of Gretton church. Anyone lost a back light ? offering a bit of red plastic and two AA's as Malcolm gazes down at the empty housing bolted to his Dahone folder. Is their a curse on folding bikes?

We'd been ascending very steadily since Gotherington, but at Stanway it starts to get serious and it becomes necessary to call on the assistance of granny to reach our coffee stop at Broadway Tower. A Bugatti would have been welcome. This was the highest point of the ride at 1040 feet. The Rookery Barn cafe at the Broadway Tower Country Park supplied the obligatory coffee and toasted tea cakes. The lady in the cafe must have had her mum in charge of the toaster in the kitchen as each tea cake

order resulted in ".. another one Mum". Cyclists have been known to strip cafes of their tea cake stock like locusts.

It was definitely a tad cooler up here so on went another layer for the descent down Fish Hill to Broadway. Part way down this narrow twisty section of the A44 we come upon the tail of crawling traffic and cautiously weave our way through, finally finding the culprit. A tractor towing a large trailer piled with those huge harvested hay bales. I guess this is where you get the baling string used for towing sick Bromptons. Easy for a bike to pass that and a euphoric delight at speeding on down a traffic free carriageway. So quick that we almost missed Malcolm who was over the wide grass verge and disappearing through the hedgerow, having spotted a part obscured cycle route sign. This is one of those directions on the route sheet with the added note easily missed. We ultimately decided to remain on the main road and take the slightly longer route into Broadway. Subsequent referral to the OS map showed that the signed cycle route did in fact lead onto the old (pre current A44) road into Broadway. Broadway is a sort of Bourton-without-the-Water with its tea shops and gift shops. As we were passing through three large coaches pulled up at the roadside and a battalion of senior citizens commenced disembarkation to descend on their targets. Made mental note to keep active and cycling for as long as possible!. I suppose we're only doing the same thing on bikes.

Childswickham, Aston Somerville, Wormington, Dumbleton (doesn't Harry Potter live here ... no, thats Dumbledore), Beckford and on to the excellent Yew Tree Inn at Conderton. Here we finished with the cheapest coffee so far this year, 95p, including a mint choc. Conderton is less than 5 miles from Tewkesbury as the crow flies but still 30 miles to go on our planned route as we now head north toward Worcester. Still no rain although a few threatening clouds lurking. We appear to have been lucky as large puddles are encountered as we proceed to Norton, just on the outskirts of Worcester and St. Peter's Garden Centre for our afternoon tea stop. There are clear views of the Malvern Hills in this area and there was some very nice artwork on display in the cafe by a local photographer. Any that were not hanging absolutely plumb vertical were promptly realigned by Malcolm.

The route now turned South towards Tewkesbury, crossing the M5 and M50 motorways at Strensham. Although now facing a head wind the lanes provided sufficient shelter and we arrived back at the car park at 5.30pm. A nice day out. Maybe next year should consider entering the Audax. Thanks to Sue and Brian for their extensive preparations of the ride.

Thursday 27th August - report from Bill Balchin. The Catherine Wheel at Marshfield was the target as twenty one cyclists waved goodbye to a steam train at Bitton station and took to the cycle track into Bath. That is a sizeable group to negotiate route 4 through the twists and turns but Tony Weaver kept everybody together. We even saw a camera crew with the BBC's Nick Knowles in Great Pultney Street - spending my license money wisely I hope. Onto the canal towpath then off again at the toll bridge we cycled towards St Catherines valley but took the less testing right fork before the climbing started. Not that our route was a push-over, and a bit of macho stuff developed between a few of the stronger riders. Waiting at the top in a haze of spare testosterone, Martyn came out with the quote of the day "I've never had to use the granny ring on this bike yet".

The general consensus on my table at lunch is that the Catherine Wheel is one of the pubs better organised to cope with an influx of hungry, thirsty cyclists - and today was no exception. Only Berry seems to get picked-on by ordering his meal with everybody else but having it arrive twenty minutes afterwards, and that is not even roast swan. We wondered what was happening when John Bishop made an announcement which turned out to be a presentation to Tony Weaver of a new hank of twine for towing broken Bromptons (as recounted in last Thursday's escapade).



The weather was still dry and sunny for the homeward trip as we took a direct route back down Hinton hill and into Pucklechurch before splitting up for home. Another excellent day, but it is a bit worrying to think that this is almost the end of August so I guess we have had what passes for Summer this year.