

## **EASTER TOUR 2005 BASED AT MINNIGAFF YOUTH HOSTEL NEAR NEWTON STEWART, GALLOWAY**

The Dumfries and Galloway Region of South-West Scotland is steeped in history and culture and with mountains, moors, lochs, estuaries and bays it is a perfect place for lovers of the outdoors. Add to this the fact that many visitors to Scotland don't stop before they get to Glasgow and Edinburgh it also means that most of the roads are lightly trafficked making the area perfect for cycling.

For many years Bury CTC has had a tradition of an Easter tour using Youth Hostels the only difference this year being that we were in Scotland not England.

### **Thursday 24 March**

An advance party arrived on Thursday and Mark was able to get a ride in along The Machars, an area of undulating lowland extensively farmed, to Isle of Whithorn with its harbour for fishing and pleasure boats.

### **Good Friday 25 March**

For the Thursday arrivers able to make an early start, Good Friday saw a visit to Ayrshire going out along the Queen's Way with wild goats on nearby hillsides and passing Clatteringshaws Loch with its visitor centre and recreation of a stone age shelter. A fast descent to New Galloway and a crossing of the Water of Ken brought us to St John's Town of Dalry and elevenses on a form in the sun. Following the road to Kendoon we saw the Hydro-electricity power stations which are unintrusive with their lack of cooling towers.

There was virtually no traffic along the B road to Carsphairn and not much as we followed the A713 to Dalmellington for lunch. Since the closure of most of the coal workings in this area the town seems to have struggled to find a new identity although the Scottish Industrial Railway Centre is nearby. A moorland ride to Straighton followed where we turned into the valley of the Water of Girvan and began a climb to Stinchar Bridge where we had a view of the Ailsa Craig out in the Irish Sea. From the summit there is a 20 mile ride on mainly downhill and level roads all the way through Glentool Forest and back to Newton Stewart.

Our main party had driven up to the Youth Hostel on Good Friday morning and opted for a short ride in the afternoon to Wigtown and the Bladnoch Malt Whisky Distillery.

After bikes were unloaded and set up, the Hostel warden kindly opened up early and allowed us to drop our belongings in the dormitory before we set off to find a café in Newton Stewart. Crossing the Cree Bridge connecting Minigaff to Newton Stewart we turned left on to the main street and soon found a café. The owner showed us a suitable place at the rear to 'park' our

nine bikes and one tandem. As we began to lock our bikes together the owner said that it would not be necessary. We told him we came from near Manchester and he soon understood our security awareness. Once inside the café we soon learnt from the waitress that we would be one of their last customers as the place was due to close down at 5pm that day.

Refreshed, we mounted our bikes and left the town with Terry in charge of map reading. Soon rescued by Nigel we turned round and headed in the right direction for a disused railway line which would take us to Wigtown. As the narrow lane grew muddier we began to have a bad feeling about it all and soon on reaching a 'muddy' farm we could go no further. A chat with the farmer confirmed our suspicions. Retracing our tracks we got back to the main road and soon turned left onto a quiet B road which proved very pleasant and our first experience of virtually traffic free roads. We came across the Torhousekie Stone Circle where we stopped for a breather and to admire the 4,000 year old ancient monument. Photographs were taken before we remounted and rode into Wigtown.

Here we asked directions to the Bladnoch Malt Whisky Distillery where we knew that a free dram was on offer to visitors. The distillery is in a beautiful location on the bank of the River Bladnoch. We booked in for a tour and our guide was the owner of the distillery – and a great character he was too. At the end of a very interesting tour (with tasters at intervals) we made for the bar where we got our sample drink (in fact two). Very nice it was but we were not tempted to buy a bottle at a price of £30!

Back on our bikes we wobbled back to Wigtown for a café stop and then on to a deserted back road leading almost all the way into Newton Stewart. Glancing to our right over Wigtown Bay the impressive Cairnsmore of Fleet rising to 2,331 ft was always in view. After locking up our bikes and taking a shower some of us headed into the town for a chip shop tea and a few pints in a rather smoky pub. Some opted for an Indian.

### **Saturday 26 March**

We, and everyone in the Hostel, were awakened earlier than expected on Saturday morning by the tones of the fire alarm. No panic in the mens dormitory though as we all guessed that it would be Eric cooking his bacon. Sure enough this was the case - he had omitted to turn the vent on. He went on to enjoy his bacon butties regardless.

Once breakfast was over we set off in ideal weather conditions northwards through Glentool Forest and when one member punctured it was a good excuse to visit the tea room at the Glentool Visitor Centre at Stroan Bridge. When we recommenced the ride we were skirting the highest mountain in the region; Merrick at 2,764 ft. Although we were climbing towards the 1,280 ft Nick o' the Balloch Pass the gradient is so shallow that it is barely a drag to the summit. Following a fast and exhilarating descent into Ayrshire we then followed the valley of the River Stinchar to Barr where we had an alfresco lunch on picnic tables on the river bank. From here onwards there were no

cars on this valley road and we were able to take in the scenery and the signs of spring with the lambs in the fields.

Even the main road to Barrhill was quiet and after a tea stop in a local pub we took to the moors along one of the most desolate roads in Scotland. It is 13 miles to New Luce before which there are just a few farms in an oasis of green fields around Glenwhilly where the Glasgow to Stranraer railway line parallels the road for a couple of miles. From New Luce we took the rolling Three Lochs road to Glassoch Bridge and the site of a new wind farm where the tarmacked road had disappeared under a rough track laid down for contractors' vehicles. This is where Eric experienced a front tyre puncture. We then enjoyed a trouble free ride on forest roads back to Newton Stewart. Total mileage for the day was 71. Later on, for those not doing their own catering, a group spent the evening in The Crown Hotel where a bar meal and a few pints were enjoyed. Others joined later on and some of the group made a full night of it visiting other hostelries in the town.

### **Easter Sunday 27 March**

Sunday saw us heading north out of Minnigaff on a very quiet gentle uphill road before joining the A712 in the direction of New Galloway . This A road was remarkably free of traffic and the views were magnificent. At one point we all stopped at a beauty spot with a raised platform view over the Glen of the Bar. Here some of us took the opportunity to don an extra layer of clothing as moving the clocks forward an hour the previous night had made for an 'earlier' start. We continued up the road until reaching Clatteringshaws Dam where we stopped to regroup then turned right onto the Raiders Road which crosses Forestry Commission land. Motorists usually have to pay a toll here, but cyclists go free.

This 10 miles rough stuff stretch was not welcomed by everybody but it was a great experience riding through this remote quiet landscape ending at the tranquil Stroan Loch. The Raiders Road follows the Black Water of Dee to the Stroan Viaduct on the long closed "Paddy Line" from Dumfries to Stranraer which was used in the original film of "The 39 Steps". We regained tarmac at Mossdale and after Laurieston Forest we stopped to see the Girvan 3 Day professional cycle race pass through. From the tops we had a stunning view down to Fleet Bay before enjoying a swift descent to Gatehouse of Fleet where we enjoyed afternoon tea in the original Gatehouse which was the first and, for some time, the only building in the area. This is now adjacent to the Murray Arms where Robert Burns wrote down the words to 'Scots wha ha'e'.

We now had a 7 mile ride to the former Gatehouse Station at Upper Rusko with beautiful views towards the Clints of Drumore and Cairnsmore of Fleet. Another descent to Creetown was followed by an unscheduled stop for another puncture. The horror film "The Wicker Man" was filmed extensively in Galloway and the interior of the Ellangowan Hotel in Creetown was used for pub interior shots. The local museum also houses a smaller reproduction of the Wicker Man itself. We then followed the Sustrans route along the old railway line back towards Newton Stewart.

## **Easter Monday 28 March**

Easter Monday saw a shorter ride as most of us had to return home so the coast road to Wigtown was taken. Here we saw memorials to the Wigtown Martyrs, a young girl and an old woman who were Covenanters and refused to swear allegiance to the King, only recognising God due to their religious beliefs. They were tied to the stake in Wigtown Bay at low tide and had until the tide reached them to change their mind, swear allegiance and be released which they steadfastly refused to do. Their graves are in a nearby churchyard. Wigtown is designated as Scotland's Book Town with many shops in and around the town and one of these was visited before morning coffee was taken. A whistlestop tour of Garlieston was followed by lunch in Wigtown on the Pilgrims Way as St Ninian came to this area from Ireland to establish Christianity. Then we meandered through the lanes back to base for a quick shower and a change for the drive back to Bury.