

Re: Llanfair PG 400 - 25/05/13 – part 1

The thing I find about North Wales is that it's got a multi-faceted charm that you don't find elsewhere in Wales: it's got hills, BIG hills, and mountains; there's a coastline that varies between salt marshes, sheer cliffs and Victorian promenades; caravans of the static and towed variety abound; the accent switches from Scouse to Welsh somewhere around St Asaph; and it's got castles, *lots* of castles, some of them are even real!

For the TL:DR crowd: it was hillier than the description of the ride suggests; it didn't rain, in fact it was gloriously sunny the whole time, except when it was dark and we had a full moon (but it was very cold); no mechanicals; the plan mostly went to plan until Tubby Cyclist decided to punish my legs for some reason, at which point a couple of elongated rest stops and a slow final leg put paid to the plan; I didn't eat a massive amount, but I didn't go hungry or thirsty; I met several yacfers not met before: MemSec (the organiser), Bikey Mikey (in passing), MiddleAgeCyclist, srsteve, mds101, JayP, and others I am sure: good to meet you all; as usual I found that my ride was interleaved with others at regular intervals, not so much that we rode at the same speed, but at the same overall pace, which I still find interesting. This was my second 400, but it completes my SR of BRM rides.

For me, all the rides between now and July are preparation for LEL, so I was riding all-up 24kg laden weight, prepared for most things: the only compromises was that I wasn't carrying full-winter gear (although most of it, certainly enough for this ride), and I had small bidons not large. Oh, and I was breaking in my first Brooks saddle: a Professional, which is the narrow one; post-ride I think my arse is telling me I should've gone for the full-width B17 🤔

This is quite a long post: with all the URLs of the photos, it has gone a little over the character-limit for a single post, so I've had to split it in two 😊

Where are we going again?

I have ridden the Welsh end of this ride a couple of times this year and knew what to expect, but this ride starts in England, just south of Manchester, and it was the first time I'd experienced it. As well, I was looking forward to riding the Chester Greenway, which is a converted disused railway track that goes right through the centre of Chester and out to the railway bridge over the River Dee at the old John Summers/British Steel/Corus site at Shotton.

I was still fettling in the sun, chatting to Big Saxon when Mike/MemSec set the riders off and so it was a quick dash to try to catch someone's wheel: it took a few miles, but I caught onto a VC167 group going quite well and it was nice to get a quick group going, taking turns on the front. The route took in lots of back-country lanes and B roads through what looked to me like typical Cheshire-set villages and towns, with high walls and automatic gates, the domain of footballers from myriad north-western football teams. And the number of high-end Chelsea tractors, beamers and the like that cut us up or overtook us on blind bends seemed to me to be well above normal.



This part of the route was surprisingly uppy-downny considering it's supposed to be the Cheshire Plains, i.e. flat, and I was worried that honking up hills, however small, so early on would mean undue sufferage later, but having ridden the Bryan Chapman Memorial (600) the previous weekend, I was feeling like I could conquer anything.

After at least one visit from the puncture fairy (not me, fortunately [for me]) and a couple of comfort breaks (not me, either), the group dwindled and I ended up riding with Tubby Cyclist, who I last rode with on Yr Elenydd, where we agreed NOT to ride up a bastard-step hill there (and as it happened got steeper further up), but the change from winter to summer gear meant a moment before I recognised him. As it turned out, we would ride together later as well. Also srsteve was in this group and mds101 IIRC.





According to the route sheet there was an info control just before we turned onto the Chester Greenway, but I hadn't checked the brevet before setting off to confirm the question. Nobody else seemed to think there was one (was I using a different route sheet?), so I stopped under the railway bridges to check, which meant getting dropped by the fast group. No question in the brevet, so a concerted five minutes' effort on the bike and I closed back up to the back of a group, which I stayed with until the control at Connah's Quay, at the other end of the Greenway.

The Greenway itself is a surprisingly well surfaced Sustrans-type bridleway that goes right through the middle of Chester, avoiding any tricky navigation and traffic: literally stay on it until you get to the bridge at the far end and try not to run into any dog-walkers. We set a decent pace into a slight headwind as a group of six or so, and it was a very pleasant run across the Dee flats in the sun.

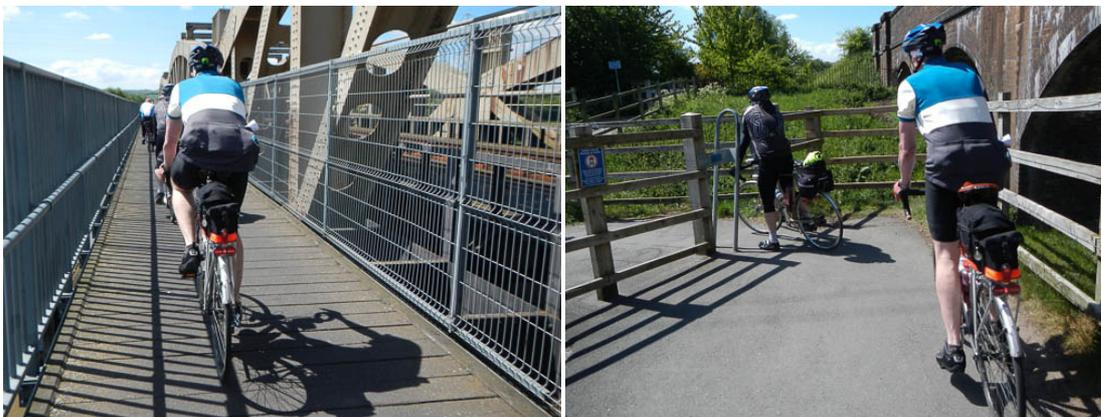


The old railway that the Greenway is based on used to go flat across the A494 expressway, and the 494 had an amazing hump-back bridge over the top, which at 70MPH was rather exciting (especially as there was always the risk of stationary traffic the other side). Since the railway was removed, the expressway is now a four-lane motorway in all but name at this point and there's a new cycle bridge over the top instead: this was about the only traffic we saw while on the Greenway, it really does go through the middle of nowhere and you wouldn't believe you'd passed within about a quarter of a mile of the centre of Chester! That said, the traffic heading west into Wales was stationary as it always used to be, bringing a smile to my face 😊



At the end of the Greenway is a sudden view of the River Dee and the old swing bridge that the railway uses to cross at this point. The bridge hasn't actually swung for well over 20 years, possibly 30, but it's still of the characteristic steel-girder style. At this point we are passing through the old British Steel Shotton Works, Colourcoat division, where steel for Hoptpoint washing machines and Toyota cars used to be finished. On the left was the original neo-gothic architecture of the John Summers office, where John Summers set up shop in the 1800s making steel hob nails for boot makers (although the trees hid it from view). On the right the plant stretches for three miles towards the Irish Sea with some mahoosive production sheds, waste recovery ponds and even its own jetty. John Summers was subsumed into British Steel in the mid-20th century, becoming Corus in the early 21st century and is now a defunct works. I worked there as a student and it was an eye-opener on what "heavy industry" looks like! On the return leg we passed around the far end of the site.

The drop off the walkway along the side of the railway bridge invited bruises with the two width-restricted barriers: I am of slight build and rubbed shoulders quite hard here, some of the broader-shouldered riders would had to have gotten off and walked/crouched through I think. No wonder the velomobile wasn't going to make it through, and I wonder whether the trike didn't have to be lifted over? A quick dash along the south bank of the River Dee with a view across to the now-boarded-up John Summers HQ (flanked by its 1950s extension) opposite and then around the corner and to the first control, where Mike had set up a bananas-and-cake-and-squash control.





Since this is technically an X-rated event, i.e. no TLC just grab receipts, it was good of Mike to provide pop-up love along the way: he ran a control at Connah's Quay (70km), Holyhead (200km) and arrivée (413km), although we also passed him just after Penrhyn (250km) on the return leg, where he was just checking everyone was feeling okay as they passed. I asked him at the end why he'd done it and whether he'd enjoyed it and he said with some enthusiasm that he did enjoy being more involved in the ride itself, since ordinarily he'd set everyone off and then wait for brevets to arrive in the post a few days later. He also mentioned that since the ride was full, the budget was there to enable him to extend the hospitality he was able to offer. It struck me that there's a definite tipping-point in the number of riders beyond which organisers are able to offer more support and as this was only the third or fourth time this ride has been run then I think that bodes well.

At this point a local rider stopped to chat and seemed genuinely interested in what we were up to. Although I set off without him, he did say that he was going to join us for a bit up to Halkyn for the company and I believe he rode with a later group. Bikey Mikey also rolled in after me, which I found surprising, because he'd been ahead of me out of Poynton, but it transpired a wrong turn before the Greenway had cost them some miles.

The ride through Connah's Quay was depressing, as a strong headwind was heading up the Dee estuary and it felt like proper hard work. It's also not a very glamorous town, so not much to see here, move along!

To be continued!