

Re: Llanfair PG 400 - 25/05/13 - part 3

Are we there yet?

I tried not to spend too long at the turn at Holyhead: I was ahead of schedule, but there was no point in squandering that time. So a quick piece of cake and some rice pudding for desert and then back to Valley for fish&chips with ladles of curry sauce over the top, mmmmm! 🍽️ It was funny in the chippie, because the ladies behind the counter thought we were all bonkers having to now ride all the way back to Manchester.

Dinner with Tubby Cyclist and two others and then the four of us set off on the return: the other two guys' names I never asked, so I was unable to forget, but I probably would've done. TC did tell me after we left Abergele later, but I've forgotten: Stuart was one I think, plus one other.

Having ridden the official route along the B5420 twice this year, and so knowing that it's a lot kinkier and lumpier than the main A5, and having seen quite a few riders returning along the A5, I suggested we could save a bit of time riding that way. None of the others thought to disagree 🤔 So we ended up riding all the way back to Menai Bridge in about 75 minutes, which is about half an hour quicker than I've managed the official route on my own, but to be honest in a group there would probably be only 10 minutes difference. And it was interesting to see the A5 in reverse. The return is via the original Menai crossing at the eponymously named Menai Suspension Bridge, which is the sibling of the Telford suspension bridge at Conwy and is said to be the first modern suspension bridge in the world.



Since I know this route pretty well, I ended up on or near the front for much of the navigation back from Bangor to Abergele. I climbed away from the group out of Bangor and up through the lanes to give myself a couple of minutes' buffer to put some knee-warmers on – it really was getting quite chilly. When the others caught me, they'd picked up another rider, Wayne, who had been on a training ride from his home in Prestatyn to Bangor and had ridden with some of our riders and had decided to ride all the way to Holyhead with them 🤔 He'd stopped to buy some lights in Bangor, but wanted to save batteries, so he rode in our lamplight all the way back to Prestatyn. We rode back along another section of Telford's original coast road, which clings to the cliff around the Penmaenbach tunnel.

In Llanfairfechan there's an alternative route to the NCN5, which turns left immediately after the start of the climb, and then the first right: this is the steepest gradient of the ride, if you choose to ride it: it's 25% territory for about 50m. It's actually signed as NCN5, although most people take the slightly less steep scenic route up Pendalar. Only two of us rode it – myself and Wayne – popping out at the top just ahead of Tubby Cyclist.

As the temperature fell, my legs started to spin more freely: it's odd, but I've noticed this before. On the hills on the return, I was able to find a gear/cadence that worked for me and was simply riding off the front of the group. It's probably not that great, but riding a 24kg fully loaded bike with limited gears and finding yourself leaving everyone else behind on long climbs like the one up through Old Colwyn is kinda grin-worthy 😊 That said, Tubby Cyclist had his revenge on the flat 🤡

The temperature was less than 5°C by the time we got to the bicycle park outside McD's in Abergele, and nobody was in any hurry to move on. Even JayP joined us for a bit. srsteve regaled us with stories of having ten sugars in his coffee on such-and-such a ride; and promptly put ten sugars in his coffee 🤢 When we did proceed back outside, it was a case of get a move on or become hypothermic: my GPS recorded 4°C on arrival and 1°C on departure and it fell to zero before long.

The leg from Abergele to the M56 services at Elton is the low-light of this ride for me, unless you like time-trialling for three hours. The distance is just 65km, and should take about 2.5 hours, and it's almost flat. I was riding with Tubby Cyclist and Wayne at this point, as the other two had left just before, and so TC decided we needed to catch them: this was his cue for "let's see what we've got left in the legs and then burn it all in one big burnout"!!! I took the front a couple of times on the run to Rhuddlan, which has an amazing defensive castle (but they'd turned the lights off, so you couldn't see it) but the further we got, I was less inclined to sit on the front. Wayne took just one turn: he had his light on at this point, as we were just a few miles from his home. But TC did the bulk of the work on the front and I was hard-pressed to keep on his wheel, let alone take the front. We caught a few guys, but in the end it was all too much and we stopped just after the New Dee Crossing (the fancy new bridge) and some of the passed became passers. Back on the road and I was lagging: TC started to stretch back onto previously passed wheels and as we joined the A494 expressway for that mile from Sealand to the turn off towards Stanlow oil refinery, my legs said "enough!" and just stopped dead!! I have felt on the brink before now, but never quite such

a sudden and total loss of power. The others rode on, I knew I'd eventually make it to the services, but for now it was time for an energy gel and some slow, steady cycling.

The services at Elton was a picture: there's a large, spread-out Costa there and the entrance was filled with bikes, while the seats and sofas were filled with dozing cyclists (apart from Tubby Cyclist, who was wide-awake and stayed long enough to make sure I was going to be okay, then headed out, the damage already done [to me]). (Aside: MiddleAgeCyclist, if that's you on the left-hand end of the sofa, you didn't snore. That I heard.)



I grabbed a hot toastie and some coffee and sat down to eat. When I woke up I continued chewing the mouthful I had bitten off before going to sleep. And then woke up to swallow. And then woke up to take another bite. Each time surprised that I hadn't finished it yet – I truly was that tired! Eventually I got some beauty sleep and woke up thinking it must be time to leave, only to get the not-enough-sleep shakes and so put my warm socks on and went back to sleep. I lost an extra hour over the plan here just because I was absolutely drained (thank you TC 😊).

The final leg to arrivée was 58km of hell on Earth. Everything in my legs was spent and I couldn't raise a cadence above about 65 except on the downs. The ups I had nothing in my legs to deliver as torque, and not enough cadence, and so honked up the slightest incline in 34" gear. Occasionally (and rather embarrassingly) availing myself of the 24" gear (when nobody was looking) 🤪 For me, this is what people mean when they say "character building": you've got nothing left, everything hurts, and you just want to go home; but somehow you keep digging a little deeper and finding something, anything, to distract you from the pain and bring the goal a little closer. If I had been less engrossed in my own

discomfort, I might've taken more notice of all the bridges, canals, railways, etc., that litter this section of the route along the M56: this is a real industrial heartland of yore. And passing underneath both runways of Manchester Airport is unexpected, although you don't get to see very much. Then back into footballers'-wives territory.

Eventually, exactly 24 hours to the minute after starting out, I made it to arrivée to find Mike had already packed away the promised bacon-buttie-making equipment. There were quite a few riders standing around chatting, including JayP 😊👍 I should've just stayed on his wheel 🤔

Poynton didn't look like it had many big-breakfast-style cafés open on a Sunday morning, so it was another Costa, which is where Big Saxon found me, sunning myself, not distressed exactly, but definitely feeling the worse for wear. But I wasn't Lanterne Rouge by any means as there were nearly a dozen riders rode in while I was sitting there. And despite the performance set-back on the last two legs, and the overly long final two stops, it was still my quickest standalone 400km to date, only beaten by the first 400km of the BCM600 last weekend, which was around an hour quicker.

As for leaving Poynton, I was definitely Lanterne Rouge: I sat in the car with my feet up on the dash and the door wide open and went to sleep. I didn't leave until midday. I then had to stop a further three times on the way to rest and/or sleep, which on a three-hour drive is unheard of for me. But I made it home safely by 5pm in time to take Mrs WB out for dinner, since the boys are with their grandparents for half term 😊

As I have said previously, North Wales is my favourite place in the UK and this ride has a very North-Wales feel to it, particularly the feel of the coastal corridor. There are few points in the ride where you are thinking "blimey, a mechanical here could be difficult", it's not at all remote, but it has a really lovely feel, amazing scenery, and so many castles, follies, bridges, historic towns, oddities, caravans, sheep, and cyclists.

This ride really is great fun and compared to some rides it's not at all hard when the weather's not particularly Welsh, although there's over 3,500m of climbing, so it's not exactly flat either. The contrast between England and Wales is extraordinary (although I count the whole of the run from Prestatyn to Connah's Quay as not-particularly-Welsh, i.e. English, so some interpretation required). Mike's route is interesting and scenic with a great mix of fast and straight roads and wiggly lanes. The use of Sustrans paths works well on this ride, because they aren't as over-safe as many have become, so they are still usefully quick. There are plenty of 24-hour services that are fully open and so you never feel like you're out in the wilds courting disaster. Unlike many of the shorter rides, with this ride you definitely feel like you've Gone Somewhere, because you do cross a good chunk of England and then Wales entirely before returning again, like King Edward I, under whose reign a string of castles right across this area was built (several mentioned above).

Next time I think I would prefer to take it a bit more steadily and enjoy the ride more, rather than clock-watching, which I was did this time. It really is a ride to savour 😊👍

And thank you Mike for your pop-up TLC: it was not expected but very very welcome 🙌

I'm now having at least a couple of weeks off the bike to recover.