

Coventry Section Easter Meet - 2nd - 5th April 1999

Seven of the Section descended on Capel-y-ffin Youth Hostel on Good Friday, ready for a long weekend in the Black Mountains. Actually that isn't really true as it's $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way up a very big hill when approached from the south, or a little way down from an even bigger hill when approached from the North. Anyway, without being too pedantic, we somehow got to the hostel: Bob Knight rode from Coventry and everyone else made different arrangements!

We had our usual banquet on Friday night followed by Birthday cake, thoughtfully made by Sheila to celebrate Terry's change of CTC membership status, after which we went to bed as the pub was a four mile descent away.

Saturday was deemed to be roughstuff day, so that a smattering of new mountain bikes could be given their first real test. The plan, which we stuck to, was to descend a mile into the village of Capel-y-ffin, itself, and then turn north west on a short spur of tarmac. The road turned into a track which was mostly rideable up the steeply sided valley of Nant y Bwlch to the ridge along the top of the Black Mountains. Unfortunately the promise of Friday's sunshine did not materialise and we were dogged by low cloud and complete absence of views..

We had expected the route along the ridge to be indistinct, as it is shown on the map as a "line of imagination", perhaps the cloud was a blessing in disguise as we couldn't see the sheer drop below us as we stumbled along between the rocks. It really was a shame as the views over old Radnorshire are stupendous from the ridge. Anyway after about two miles and a stop for Easter eggs we arrived at the track down to Grwyne Fawr two hours later. The track steadily improved in quality as we descended and was mostly rideable to the reservoir which suddenly loomed out of the mist as we dropped out of the clouds and was followed by a magnificent seven mile descent through a delightful valley to Pont Newydd.

A diversion was made to Crickhowell for tea and to supplement the evening banquet with cycling spirit, to be followed by an ascent of nearly 1000ft to the hostel. We succumbed to temptation at the pub in Llanthony before the final push to the hostel and met an interesting couple from Merthyr Tydfil who were camping with their home-made motor tricycle. In particular, they told us about an old miners pub overlooking the Sugar Loaf mountain and an abandoned coal mine now open to the public. We decided to visit both on the morrow.

Another banquet, thanks to Terry's culinary skills, with liberal quantities of bacon and blue cheese sauce and so onto Sunday. Still with 100% low cloud cover we descended for elevenses into Abergavenny and set off again for Blaenavon, with just the small matter of a 900ft climb in 3-miles between us and lunch. As usual the pelaton split up on the hill, but we were one short when we finally mustered troops at the top. It was believed that Ray had "found his form" and gone storming straight over the summit. What a shame that the pub was down a lane about 200 yards before the summit!

We had an excellent Sunday lunch, although it must be admitted the service was a little slow. It was noted that for years we had joked that we should carry mobile phones for just such a situation in which we now found ourselves... but who had his telephone number?

About four o'clock we finally made it to the pit at Blaenavon, to meet Ray coming in the opposite direction along the road, having had lunch (thankfully) and visited all the above ground sites (sights?) at the pit. Undeterred he followed us back to the pit where we just managed to get on the last underground visit of the day (although Ray declined to come down). Quite interesting, but it didn't make as much impression on me as the slate mines in Ffestiniog.

Our way back was past the pub at Pwll ddu where we had had lunch to Gilwern along a very exciting lane round the edge of a sheer cliff, with no crash barriers and a very steep descent to the River Usk. And a long grind back up to the hostel, sneaking in with the last of the light, to a third sumptuous banquet prepared by Sheila

We had had two quite hard days of cycling and when the day dawned with low cloud again, I don't think many of us relished the thought of grinding back up to the hostel from Llanthony a third time in as many days. So on Monday morning we waved Bob Knight off on his ride back to Coventry and to

Sheila who was doing a train assist to Gloucester and we drove into Hay-on-Wye for elevenses before driving back to Coventry. There was a sting in the tail: Sheila got almost to the top of the Gospel Pass when she realised she had left her gortex jacket at the hostel: there was no option but to go back for it and climb the pass again.

Epilogue: the weekend had had a chequered start as it had originally planned for Staunton-on-Wye. The hostel was full so we tried St.Briavels, that was also full so we booked Capel-y-ffin, knowing full well the disadvantages of using it for a “centre tour”. One of the objectives being to ride through the Golden Valley, which we never actually did!

Bob Tinley