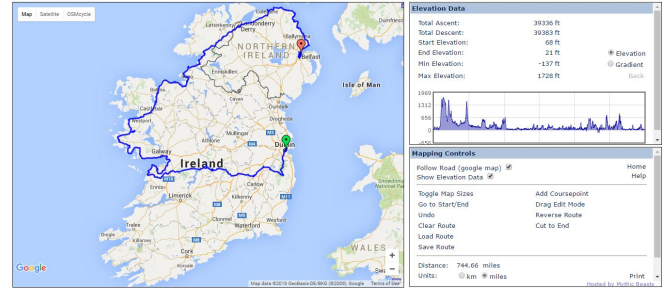


North Ireland/Wild Atlantic Way Cycle Tour 2016

by Malcolm Rawlins

July 7th 2016 my 'E2E' cycling buddy Dean and I set off on our bikes, from his house in Leighton Buzzard, to Milton Keynes where we boarded a Virgin train to Holyhead. As on previous tours, we booked the train and cycle permits as soon as they became available, roughly 90 days before the day of travel. There are only six cycle spaces on Virgin trains (some only 3) and no permit = no bike on the train. We took the Stena Line ferry to Dublin where we had a B&B hotel booked. Dean wanted to go and look at St. Joseph's Industrial School, Artaine in Dublin, as one of his ancestors was sent there in the early 1900s for nicking a watch. We spent the evening sampling the pleasures of this lovely city including a quantity of 'real' Guinness and a budget Asian banquet, more of which later.



Day 1

South from Dublin through the Wicklow Mountains National Park. A rather round-about and very hilly route to our first destination of Athy (pronounced ath-eye). The steady climb into the mountains starts as you leave Dublin, and continues relentlessly for about 10 miles, but the beautiful scenery was very much worth the effort.

Day 2

From Athy to Birr (burr). This is an interesting town with a Victorian castle and famous outdoor 72" reflector telescope "The Leviathan of Parsonstown". We stayed in a B&B set in a circular field plan dating from the 15thC. The house at the centre is sadly a modern affair these days. We discovered more of Dean's family heritage, including the workhouse where some of his ancestors were born and lived, and the cottage where his grandfather Eamon Sutton lived. It's now so overgrown we cycled right past it even though we knew roughly where it was located. We even met an elderly gentleman who had shared a house with some of Dean's ancestors when he was a boy.



Day 3

Dean not well. We set off on the 82 mile route to Doolin on the West coast but, after 20 miles, Dean became exhausted and had to stop. It later transpired he'd contracted Campylobacter food poisoning, we think from the dodgy Asian buffet in Dublin (eat all you can for Eu6.99 – we should have known better). Dean caught a Taxi with his bike and I cycled on for Doolin. Most of remainder of that day's ride was into a severe headwind and driving rain. I did get to see Father Ted's house, which is in a remote part of the Burren (not on Craggy Island). A very nice young lady, in a very smart Mercedes, pulled up to take some photos and kindly offered to take one of the drowned rat cyclist, with the house in the background. In Doolin I met up with Dean again and with Mark and Paul who had come out after us and taken a train from Dublin to Limerick. They had cycled up the coast to Doolin, past the Loop Peninsula and magnificent cliffs of Mober. They would cycle with us for the next 500 miles to the Giant Causeway in county Antrim.



Doolin was our point of joining the Wild Atlantic Way, the 2000 km tourist trail that stretches from Kinsale County Cork in the South, right around the west coast to Derry in the North, taking pretty much the most coastal route possible, even diverting onto islands in some places (on my retirement bucket list!). Due to the limitations of time and mileage we took a pragmatic route following the WAW wherever it was feasible to do so. We set off for Galway, diverting from the coastal road to take in the best of the Burren in County Clare. The desolation of the Burren has to be seen to be believed. Hardly any vegetation grows on huge areas of bare rock where there seems to be no sign of wildlife, not even birds. This is a karst landscape of bedrock incorporating a vast cracked pavement of glacial-era limestone, with cliffs and caves, fossils, rock formations and archaeological sites, unlike anything I've seen anywhere else. Here you can see Neolithic dolmen and wedge tombs, built from the local limestone slabs nearly 6,000 years ago. There are also barrows and cairns from the bronze and iron ages. We visited the Aillwee Caves, Poul nabrone portal tomb and Gleinsheen Wedge tomb on this leg of the journey, also Dungaigue Castle. Dean was still too ill to ride and went ahead by bus. Day 4 ended in Galway, a medium sized harbour city located where the River Corrib meets the Atlantic Ocean, which gives its name to the county. A broken gear cable on my bike, as we entered Galway, was quickly replaced with a spare I was carrying, once we were at the B&B.

Day 4



We followed the coast, more or less, along the Galway peninsula with stunning views of the Aran Islands off to our left. We then cut inland and across Derriginlagh Bog which was quietly desolate. Being predominantly coastal, or bog land, this part of the ride was fairly flat, although the constant backdrop of the Connemara Mountains added some 3D perspective. Dean was able to ride with us for about 20 miles but then had to bail out and bus it on to meet us at our accommodation in Clifden, on the coast at the end of the peninsula.

Day 5

Day 6

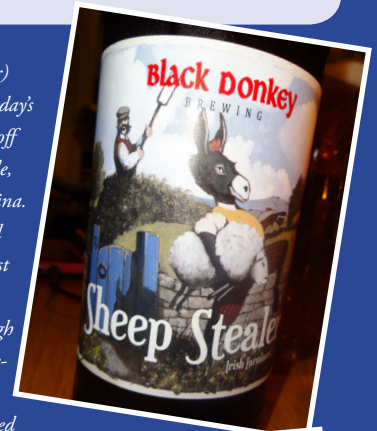
Clifden to Balina (Balinar)
This was the longest single day's ride. From Clifden we set off

LINE
inland, across the hilly county Mayo countryside, past many Lochs (or Loughs in Ireland) to Balina. The weather was not brilliant, raining off and on, and with quite a strong headwind for most of the ride, though nothing to match my solo ride to Doolin. At one point we passed through 'The Lost Valley' Louisburgh Co Mayo. This time-

frozen area has remained largely untouched since the villagers were driven out during the great 'potato' famine of the mid 1800s. The tumbled down walls of their cabins, the multitude of potato plots they left behind, even the stones removed from the rocky soil remain in clusters exactly as they left them, giving testimony to the hardships they endured. Meanwhile Mweelrea, the highest mountain in Western Ireland, loomed above us.

In this section, a front-wheel puncture on my bike was the only other 'mechanical' that occurred on the ride.

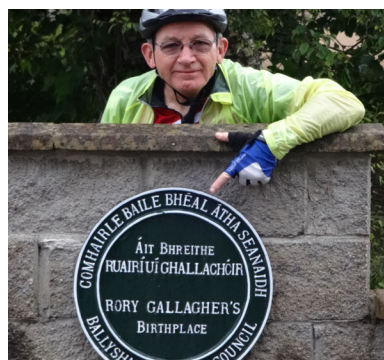
At Ballina Dean was still very unwell, so we **deserted him** arranged for him to see a doctor the next morning. He got some medication and made his way back to Dublin by train to catch an early ferry home. As he said "at least trains and ferries have toilets!"



Balina to Ballyshannon

Day 7

The ride from Ballina mostly followed the WAW along the coast through Co. Sligo, and offered good views of Knocknarea, a 327m limestone hill (looks like a mini version of Ayres Rock) and Benbulbin, another spectacular rock formation which is part of the Dartry Mountains (Yeats' Country). A high point for me was Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal, birthplace of blues/rock guitar maestro Rory Gallagher. We visited the, now derelict, hospital (ex-workhouse) where he was born and had the obligatory photos taken with his statue. I'd tried to time the ride to coincide with the Rory Gallagher International Festival, held every year in June, but it wasn't possible. Ballyshannon is a very pretty village spanning the river Erne and lays claim to being the oldest village in Ireland.



Ballyshannon to Derry/ Londonderry **Day 8**

From Ballyshannon we headed inland through Co Donegal, passing through the very scenic Barnesmore Gap in the Bluestack Mountains which, for me, was reminiscent of Glen Coe in the Scottish Highlands but without the incline. The crossing from Eire into Northern Ireland was indicated by nothing more than a speed limit sign denominated in kph on one side and mph on the other!

We eventually followed the bank of River Foyle for several miles into the city of Derry/Londonderry (depending on your loyalties). Reminders of 'the troubles' are clear to see in the many murals painted on buildings, now protected as part of the cultural heritage.



Day 9 Londonderry to Ballycastle via Giant's Causeway

This was the last day Mark and Paul would cycle with me. We headed NW roughly along the coast to the world famous Giant's Causeway, where hexagonal basalt columns rise vertically out of the sea like monsters teeth. On the way we passed the remains of Dunluce Castle. From here Mark and Paul headed South to Ballymoney, from where they started the train journey back to Dublin, and I headed on to Ballycastle, at more or less the NE tip of Ireland.



Ballycastle to Belfast

I opted to take the coast route from Ballycastle to Belfast, following the Giro d'Italia 2014 course, on the recommendation of the B&B proprietor, a cyclist himself. This route is very steep in places, hard work on my loaded up hybrid (35 kg – half my body weight) with very sharp hairpins. It is undeniably beautiful though, with spectacular views, and well worth the agony. Blessed relief follows as, once down at sea level, the next 50 miles is almost flat and very scenic coastal road following NCN93 through Carrickfergus to Belfast.



Belfast **Day 11**

I visited the Botanical Gardens and cycled about 10 miles out of town looking for Belfast Castle, which I never found. I then took a river boat tour of the dockyard area including the Titanic docks. I finished up by cycling around the docks viewing them from the landward perspective. I also did a city tour on my bike, following the tour bus route to make sure I missed nothing. There are many more reminders of 'the troubles' here and I got the impression that, whereas the people in Derry have a desire to put the past behind them, in Belfast the tensions still run quite strong. I guess time will tell.

That evening I caught the overnight ferry back to Birkenhead. The next morning I cycled the 30 or so miles along the very attractive NCR89, following the coast to Neston. NCR568 then took me to Chester for my train back to Milton Keynes, where I was met by a now 'mostly' recovered Dean.

Day 10

**10 days
800 miles
(744 in
Ireland
the rest in
England
getting
there and
back).**

MEMORABLE THINGS FROM THE TOUR

I got wet to some extent almost every day – well this was the 'Emerald Isle' after all and I didn't expect anything different!

GOOD POINTS:

- The coast route from Ballycastle to Belfast following the Giro d'Italia 2014 course. Very steep in places on my loaded up hybrid (35 kg – half my body weight) with very sharp hairpins. Followed by 50 miles of almost flat and very scenic coastal road following NCN93.
- The Wicklow Mountains National Park. Fabulous scenery but lots of climbing, straight out of Dublin, though not as steep as the Giro route.
- The people. Universally friendly, sit next to somebody in a bar and within 5 mins you've got a new friend. The drivers are courteous and tolerant towards cyclists, even in the cities. Some even wave to you, and not with two fingers as they would here. They seem to be in much less of a hurry than UK drivers.
 - Cycling across the Burren and Derrigimlagh Bog.
 - Everywhere on the Wild Atlantic Way.
 - The Guinness, which is definitely different to what they sell here.
 - The three friends that I cycled with

NOT SO GOOD:

- Cycling 82 miles from Birr to Doolin into a 25mph headwind and driving rain.
- Dogs – Outside of urban areas the Irish dogs don't seem to be used to cyclists and, rarely being gated in, tend to chase cyclists - biting at their heels. This happened pretty much every day when we were in rural areas.
 - Poor Dean's malaise.

INTERESTING:

- The general scenery and geology.
 - The Rory Gallagher connections at Ballyshannon.
- The 'Leviathan' 72" reflector telescope at Birr (constructed 1841).
 - The Giant's Causeway.
 - The Titanic Docks tour by boat (Belfast).
- The reminders of the 'troubles' in Derry/Londonderry and particularly in Belfast.