THE RING OF GULLION CYCLE TRIP

Wednesday July 25

Inspired, no doubt, by the exploits of Bradley Wiggins (no relation to David?), six members of the Spartan Red Sox mustered at Newry station on July 25 to take part in an unofficial cycling expedition to South Armagh. Frank Hughes had nominated the day, and organised sunny and calm weather but unfortunately had had to pull out at the last minute because of work commitments. In his place, Robin Morton volunteered to lead a trip around the Ring of Gullion based on a route first navigated by Doug Ferguson.

Three arrived at Newry by train, restored by a cup of coffee en route, while three came by car. We pedalled off at around 11.45am heading up along the busy A25 Camlough road. In the village we headed left along the quieter B30 Crossmaglen Road, diverting down a smaller road along the western flank of Camlough Lake before taking a right up an impossibly steep (i.e. get off your bike and walk) hill to a super viewpoint over the lake and Camlough Mountain. Time to get our breath back and have a quick drink.

The lane we were on traversed the northern flank of Slieve Gullion, and with the ascent completed it was a welcome downhill run along the quiet, twisting road lined with fuschia hedges, past pretty farmhouses and neat fields, coming to a shuddering halt at a T junction. All were impressed by the views of the Ring of Gullion, the volcanic outcrops which encircle Slieve Gullion. From this junction, it was a quick right and then left, back onto the B30. A couple of miles down the road we took a left, and coasted down into Mullaghban village. Unfortunately the bar cum undertakers in the village did not serve food, and so we repaired to the supermarket for bananas, chocolate and energy drinks. Time out was called while these were consumed.

From there it was up and over the next ridge, following a winding and steepish road, but time to admire the magnificent hedgerows as we puffed up the hill. Nice views back over Mullaghban to Slieve Gullion. What goes up must come down and in no time we were passing through Silverbridge, back on the B30 and a straight but hilly run to Creggan. Much comment about a milepost which indicated the distance to Crossmaglen to be four miles, followed by a second about half a mile on which gave exactly the same mileage. And they turned out to be Irish miles.

Crossmaglen was sleepy and peaceful on a sunny afternoon and happily the Cross Square Hotel (opened seven years ago with International Fund for Ireland support) was still open for lunch, even though it was 2.15pm. A warm welcome from the staff and an extensive menu. Bikes locked up outside, almost 20 miles done, the party collapsed gratefully into soft seats with backs before wiping sweat from collective brows and devouring jugs of water. A sizeable feast ensued, and body and soul were restored for the challenges which lay ahead. The bike bell rang at 3.30pm.

From Crossmaglen it was south east along a peaceful meandering downhill road, noticing the cross-border electricity interconnector overhead. Suddenly the road signs changed and we realised we had imperceptibly crossed into County Louth. At the crossroads at Shortstone we headed north east and stopped to take in the view of the impressive ruin of Castle Roche, which has since Norman times guarded the Gap of the North.

A couple more twists and turns and we were heading north, back across the invisible border, to the touristy looking village of Forkhill. Slieve Gullion was drawing ever closer, and the afternoon was getting ever warmer. On we plugged up a grinding hill on a busy road past Dromintee and so to Slieve Gullion Courtyard, which offered refuge and refreshment. Afternoon tea with apple pie and ice cream was the perfect antidote to those hours in the saddle and we relaxed in the sun in the pleasant surroundings of the courtyard. Nice to see the cafe so busy.

It was 5.30pm and all hope of catching the 6.05pm train from Newry had evaporated. However, our fallback was the 6.50pm local train to Belfast.

From the courtyard we followed the exit sign and then continued in the direction of Killevy Castle along a private road which turned into a path which then ended abruptly at a steep slope leading down to a stream. Nothing for it but to carry our bikes across the stepping stones kindly provided in the stream.

Back down to the quiet road heading north to Killevy Old Church, where attention was paid to the description of the 5th century monastic site as we caught our breath. Then a steep downhill and sharp left onto a road up the eastern flank of Camlough Lake. We were bathed in warm sunshine as we pedalled our way past the lake, enjoying great views down across the water. Once destined to be the location of an innovative hydro-electric scheme, the lake is now purely for leisure. A pause to admire the view and then on to Camlough, the only hazard being three cattle which were grazing quietly by the roadside.

In Camlough we swung right and back onto the A25 road for a bit of uphill work and then cruised down towards Newry station, admiring en route the magnificent sight of the 18-arch Craigmore Viaduct, the highest railway viaduct in Ireland.

Arrival back at the station was shortly after 6.30pm, plenty of time for the train to Belfast. We bid our farewells, well satisfied with what had turned out to be a 40-mile cycle. Thanks to Stephen Gilmore, David Flinn, Pat O’Neill, Richard Middleton and Anne Lockwood for their energy, enthusiasm and company. We had mastered all the ups and downs and successfully completed a circumnavigation of Slieve Gullion. An average speed of 10.9mph, let’s see Bradley try to match that!

ROBIN MORTON

PS: More cycle outings are in the offing. If you would like details please email me at romorton@gmail.com