

North West 200, 10-15 May 2006

Andy Woodward, Ride Leader

Pilot	Bike
Graham Bailey	R1200GS
Dave Graham	FJR 1300
Ian Stavert	FJR 1300
Paul Cote	R1200 GS
Jon Hanson	R1200 GS
John Deal	Varadero
Tom & Leslie Ann Stevens	Black Bird
Al & Caitlin Lord	VFR 750
Tim & Sandy Cutmore	R1150 RT
Budge & Di Burrige	Silver Bird
Andy & Sue Woodward	Blue Bird

As a bike racing fan for the last 30 odd years I have spectated at GPs, home and abroad, Transatlantic races (remember them ?), BSB, WSB, Club racing, Hillclimbing, Motocross – you get the picture. But two big events eluded me and for one reason or another I never got to attend them. Firstly the IOM TT (which hopefully I will get to next year **[Us too, we just booked the ferry! – Ed]**) and the North West 200.

After a conversation at one club night in Summer 2005 a plan was hatched to be amongst the 120,000 odd spectators for 2006 event. Also, never having visited Northern Ireland before, the trip presented an opportunity to add a few days touring into the itinerary to take in well known tourist spots such as the Giants' Causeway.

The North West 200 is one of many road racing events that are held between April and September each year in Northern Ireland. The North West is the biggest and most well known event attracting top riders and teams as well as the huge number of spectators to the 8.9 mile road course nicknamed "The Triangle" due to the shape of the circuit.



Ready to roll at Ledbury



"Didja see any decent scenery in Wales?"... "Oh, I spose..."

The course runs along the coast road between Portrush and Portstewart, along which the start and finish is situated, and runs to the edge of Coleraine and back to Portrush in an anticlockwise direction. With speeds over 200 mph achieved on country lanes it should be an impressive sight that we don't see on the mainland.

[Except when Eric Bush leads a SAM run! – Ed]

Early in the year, after the race dates are confirmed, B&B Accommodation for 17 people was difficult to find but a converted farmhouse close to Bushmills was booked for 4 nights over the race weekend. Ferries were booked from Holyhead to Dun Laoghaire on the fast cat and rather than chasing 200 miles to catch the ferry an overnight stop in Holyhead was planned. This meant a civilised start time and a scenic trip through the Welsh countryside rather than the

usual motorway blast to make the ferry.

So on Weds. May 10th 12 bikes loaded to the gunnels convened at the fuel station in Ledbury. All introductions conducted and with the sun shining (as ordered, of course) the convoy departed at 10 am, our destination Welshpool for lunch using the trusty old A49 then cut across on the A490 & 489.

Lunch was pre booked in a trendy restaurant, The Corn Store, in the



We sweep through Wales. Wow!

middle of town. An excellent light bite for lunch and an hour later ready for the next section. Except, Daves' FJR had a momentary glitch and wouldn't start. Soon rectified by his breakdown company **[A bodge for a Fudge! geddit? – Ed]**, it performed faultlessly the rest of the trip.

Now if you enjoy twisty scenic routes take note. The run from Welshpool to Ffestiniog is a cracker and well worth checking out. Take the A490 out of Welshpool to Llanfyllin then pick up the B4391 to Bala. Through the town



Sandy, Sue & Caitlin: fuel stop Karaoke

onto the A4212 then part the way along rejoin the B4391 to Ffestiniog, you won't be disappointed. Which brought to our next stop, a tea and cake stop in Beddgelert supposedly for 30 mins but ended up nearer 90 minutes - still it was very pleasant, Thank you Graham for arranging it.

Holyhead beckoned, so after a scenic tour of Anglesey due to a road closure we finally arrived at the B&B

2 hours late. See what I mean? Not a good idea chasing the ferry crossing! The ferry was booked for 08:55 the following morning so a 'few' beers and fish and chips made for that evenings' entertainment.

A straight forward ferry crossing saw us arrive in Dun Laoghaire late morning. We were greeted by more sunshine, are you sure this is Ireland? And it lasted all day, wow what a start! A regroup just outside the port entrance and we were ready to tackle exiting the town. I'd heard all sorts of horror stories of trying to find the Dublin ring road and as I was leading I was a bit apprehensive. Needn't have worried, signs everywhere so onto the M50 and head North! Yeah, for about 5 miles then into solid traffic. Jeez! Filter? Or not? Had to be done. Remember the panniers, remember the panniers. We came across an accident involving a very mangled bike 5 miles down the road which was the cause of the traffic chaos. A sobering sight.

The route through Ireland across the border and onto Bushmills was chosen because all I had to do was to remember three road numbers – M50, N2 and A29 easy huh? Well despite the traffic hold up it all went to plan and we arrived at 5.30 pm, off-loaded the gear at the B&B, showered, changed and ready to sample the fabled Guinness at the

local hostelry, The Smugglers Arms. Taxis arranged and a well deserved meal washed down with the black stuff to end a good day.



Giants' Causeway: fantastic

Friday morning dawned, yep that sun is still there. So with the group deciding to do different things, Sue and I set off with Johns and Jon, and headed out West to Donegal, our destination the Slieve Cliffs in Donegal Bay. Description can't do them justice. They are reputed to be the tallest in Europe at 1972 ft high. Just as spectacular is the narrow track to get to the car park, 600ft drop on one side! With just a rickety wooden fence along the edge. Not very funny with a stiff breeze blowing as well! But worth the effort.

I had heard the roads in Eire could be in poor condition, and they were right but no more so than the unclassified roads in this country. But I was amazed to find in the village of Carrick the road through the village centre missing ! All that remained

was hardcore for about 100 metres, no roadwork signs, no warning! Still it all adds to the character of the area. **[Like the stream that flows across the main road at the tip of the Dingle Peninsula! – Ed]** Our return took through the breathtaking scenery of the Blue Stack mountains with several stops in various bars and cafés all with differing levels of service but all friendly and welcoming. This was a recurring theme through the time we were there. Everyone we met from both sides of the border was friendly and approachable **[Apart from the dog at the B&B – Ed]**.

The rest of the group had visited the Giants' Causeway, Joey's Bar in Ballymoney, (Run by Joey Dunlop, one of the most successful Irish road racers, until his untimely death in 2000) (There is also a garden of remembrance nearby) and a run along the scenic A2 Antrim coast road, a must do if you are in this area.



I'll have a Budge on the rocks, with a dash of Di and a slice of Ian please



Flypast before races: Lancaster, Spitfire, Hurricane - gorgeous

Our Donegal excursion covered over 220 miles and meant a late return so it was straight to bed ready for the next day, Race day.

Saturday 13th May – NW 200 race day. Still bright sunshine! What's going on? And the sun is forecast to stay all day, fantastic. A decision had been made previously to get taxis into Portstewart instead of taking the bikes. A good decision as it turned out. Bikes parked everywhere in the town, expensive official parking and then what to with the gear. Budge had reserved grandstand seating for us all at York Corner in Portstewart golf club, a good move thanks Budge. This afforded a good view of the race bikes at speed along the coast road, with ordinary housing as a backdrop, and into the sharp left hander that is York Corner.

The roads would be closed at 10 am and racing would start at 11 am. There were to be six races in the

program, including superbikes, supersport and superstock events, similar to the classes we see over here, although it differs from the IOM TT event in that the races are a mass start. But it was odd to see people, bikes and cars milling about on the course up until road closure and then suddenly it's quiet.

We had a good day's racing with no major incidents, however the big named riders dominated the two superbike events but good to see Steve Plater taking both wins and taking the lap record as well. It is a spectacle that I am glad I made the effort to come and watch and the reaction from everyone else in our group was of the same opinion. I



Race day: John follows the action. Not



Heeeere they come!

would recommend race fans to make the trip at least once.

What to do once the racing is over? Same as everyone else: hit the bars to further sample the Guinness. Then taxi back, perfect.

Sunday morning awoke to a change in the weather, overcast with rain in the air. Due to a change in Stena sailing timetable, some of the group

would be leaving early today to overnight in some hastily arranged accommodation in Dun Laoghaire ready to cross early Monday morning.

For those of us staying over, a ride around the NW 200 course, and our turn to visit the Giants' Causeway, and a ride down the A2 coast road. The coastal ride got as far as Carnlough as by this time the rain was lashing down. Enough was enough, a retreat to the B&B was in



Around York Corner they go...



Close racing – fantastic!

order, a change of clothing and an evening meal at the Smugglers Inn for a reflection on the previous few days.

Monday was the planned B&B departure day with a steady run back down the reverse route to catch the 6.30 pm sailing from Dun Laoghaire. No problems encountered, just poor signage into the port with a small inadvertent detour.



Look! It's Martyn Hillier on the Glos BikeSafe machine! Go Martyn!!

Two hours later, a trouble free arrival into Holyhead then head for home on the A5- M54 – M6 – M5 route and roll into home in the early hours of Tuesday morning.

So 1100 miles later was it worth the effort, worth waiting for? Of course it was! Between us, Budge and I had managed to keep everything running reasonably smoothly. The weather made the trip more memorable, the spectacle of the NW 200 itself was unforgettable. I hope all concerned enjoyed their trip **[Oh yes, ta very much! – Ed]**, so thank you all



Glos Road Safety Camera Partnership chase bikes around track: pictures too blurred to prosecute

for the fun and great company. All in all a nigh on perfect holiday.

Until next time ♦

Bill Little M/C Open Day

You are invited to join the bike meet and show your classic at our annual open day and autojumble at Bill Little Motorcycles, Oak Farm, Braydon, Near Swindon (Signposted locally).

Saturday, 12 August, 2006.

Expect a great day. FREE Stalls, admission and camping. Tel: 01666 860 577

Starting at 10.30 a.m. until late including lunch time BBQ, rideout, early evening beef/pork roast, bar and live rock band. ♦