

An Irish semi-circle

20th August to 26th September 2003

38 days

1738 kms /1086 miles

Road are for journeys, not destinations

Day 1 20th August Weymouth to Kinsealy (near Dublin)

This time we had something of a dilemma. Our neighbour Sveta was going to Bournemouth and offered us a lift to the airport. It was a kind offer but we had been looking forward to the ride and the management was keen to make sure all the machinery worked. Even at 8am in the morning in Weymouth you get the odd English driver who marks them all out as the worst in Europe. So once clear of the town centre we took to the prom. Although officially banned to cyclists by a long gone poisoned dwarf from that rare breed here, the Liberal Democrats, we only met other cyclists and joggers.

As we climbed over the downs on the Coombe Valley Road the main drive chain broke. Something like this always seems to happen whenever oil is applied. The management usually puts on new bits about once a year and was most disgruntled by a failure when it should only be about halfway through its working life. He was also a bit cross because the tools were at the bottom of the bag. This kind of thing always tempts providence. The repair delayed us a bit but we were soon freewheeling down onto the flat lands of the Frome valley. At West Stafford we met our friend Janet Read waiting for other members of our club "Wednesday Wanderers" who were meeting at East Knighton. As we went on we met others coming the other way and stopped to talk to Vicki Hinchcliffe and Alan Beesley. We then passed Corfe Castle and climbed along the edge of Ballard Down and through Studland to the Sandbanks Ferry.

Having eaten lunch we were looking forward to a pleasant ride along the Bournemouth Prom. We failed however to take into account the vagaries of the Bournemouth unitary authority. We cycled happily and legally along here in June on our return from Spain. Without making it clear to the cycling public, cycling is not allowed between 10am and 7pm at this time of year. Not only that but they have redcoats to enforce this ban. The local burghers do not seem to have considered that the alternatives are the dangerous and hilly roads of their unpleasant town. We got through by claiming the stoker's disability. This is not actually unreasonable but very demeaning and should not be necessary. Still it should be open again all day by mid-September, sod them. After a short wander through the streets of Boscombe we arrived at Hurn Airport. It is really still a shed in a field and has to be the best place to start a flight from. We broke the tandem down into three bits and it went as a wheelchair. That's the stoker again. Ryanair is expensive for bikes because, unlike easyJet, they don't have a sports equipment allowance but wheelchairs go free.

The baggage handlers were a bit dubious about leaving the tyres inflated. Ryanair is happy and so is the CTC but not the working classes. We did convince them and the management thinks it is a good test for the tyres and rims and could just seat them nicely. Schwalbe say inflate to 70psi. The management had already put in 80 and presumably the hold pressure would push this

up to about 130. The way he looks at it is that it saves him wasting energy pumping them up to this pressure to test the rims.

Fortunately it was a short flight as Sean, who took the third seat in our row, could have been a bit much had it been longer. He was going home for his sister's wedding and while friendly enough and full of possibly useful information he was also drunk and had lost his volume control.

At Dublin Airport we took about 40 minutes to put the bike back together. The only damage the baggage handlers seem to have done was to the stoker's freewheeling device. She was quite excited when it looked as if she would be able to avoid pedalling at all. The management however was having none of it and had soon levered the offending bit out of the way so that she could pedal.

The outing from Dublin Airport was the easiest we have experienced anywhere. A short ride around the perimeter and then onwards along some country lanes got us to our pre-booked bed and breakfast at Kinsealy. Having settled in we cycled the couple of miles to Malahide beside the sea for a pizza.

Day 2 21st August Kinsealy (near Dublin) to Drogheda

The stoker says that it was because we had to repack everything that we did not leave till 11am. She did however have a lengthy conversation with Ciara our hostess, which may have taken a fraction longer than for the management to load the tandem.

We again went on into Malahide and bought supplies for the day. We then made our way inland beside the inlet from the Irish Sea and soon after passing through Swords were into pleasant country lanes. There was a gale force side wind but the sky was mainly blue and it was warm. About the most exciting thing that happened was that we found a beautifully fresh head of broccoli on the road which we picked up for our dinner. This is just as cycle touring should be.

As lunch time came on we found a field sheltered from the wind by a high hedge. Having eaten the management at least took a nap. We were however disturbed by the farmer arriving in his car to check out his unannounced visitors. Having established that we were not tinkers bent on mayhem he wished us a pleasant stay and backed out of the field.

It was here that we experienced our first soft rain. It was insufficient to require waterproofs but enough to get us on our way. In fact not at all unpleasant. The management however had forgotten where we were. The GPS works fine here but Garmin doesn't have a detailed base map for Ireland. So we were in the middle of a maze of lanes and lost. It all sorted itself out as we got underway but it looks as if the hard done by stoker has yet another job. She has to remind the management to note where he is before he nods off. Life is very hard.

We went on into Drogheda and booked into an independent hostel. It was ridiculously expensive but we had a nice room with en-suite facilities and could cook a decent meal. By now it was raining but we had a look around the town which has more to see than we have time to give it. But that's life on a cycle tour and at least we had a look at some of it.

Day 3 22nd August Drogheda to Dundalk

We had an awful night. First it was noisy neighbours with a very loud TV and then a couple having a loud and violent domestic. The traffic was also noisy. It was a shame because the warden and the other guests were very pleasant.

We wandered off into town and after crossing the river turned right, following the estuary towards the sea. It was flat, pleasant, rural and wet. The soft rain had started. It was so soft that

it was easy not to notice until all of a sudden we were soaked through. That is, the management was. The stoker had sufficient sense to put her waterproof on sooner.

We continued north along the coast. It was not the direct route but it was very pleasant and quiet. Needing a rest we stopped at a lay-by beside the sea. A German family car was just leaving without their odd looking short legged black mongrel dog. We then realised that it was not theirs. At least we hope it was not. As we left it ran beside us, its short legs going at a most amazing rate. It was not at all aggressive and dodged into the hedge when the odd car came. The dog kept this up for about 6km. We began to feel a bit guilty and then the first downhill approached. We accelerated as did the dog. The inevitable happened and we lost him. We both felt a bit sad but hoped he would find his way home.

We found a rather smart shelter for lunch. This is an unexpected bonus in a country without bus shelters or church porches. We had no idea what it was built for, perhaps it was some kind of folly. On we went towards Dundalk. Turning off the main road we came to a rather pleasant seaside place called Blackrock. We nearly decided to stay there and the stoker knocked on a door but they were out. Unfortunately we carried on into town without looking further.

Dundalk seemed rather like many English towns before pedestrianisation. It was entirely overrun by cars getting nowhere much but just going in ever decreasing circles around numerous one way systems. Failing to find the tourist office we made for the railway station. There is usually accommodation nearby. Having passed a couple of places on noisy roads we found a pleasant B&B in a residential road. It was full, apparently people were booking all the local accommodation to see the rock band Red Hot Chilli Peppers. The landlord was however very helpful and found us a place by phoning a friend. We were very grateful even though it was on the other side of town.

We plunged back into the wallowing stinking traffic jam and were soon comfortable. The only down side was that we were only a few hundred metres from where we had turned off for Blackrock but we had done at least 10km since then.

Day 4 23rd August Dundalk to Armagh

This is being written while today's puncture is being mended. This is the first we have had on the tandem this year and it came as a bit of a surprise.

Last night was very pleasant. We walked down to the local pub and had a very good meal washed down with Guinness. It only tastes good to us in Ireland but everyone to their own.

It was raining when we awoke but by the time we had consumed our huge breakfast it had stopped and the landlady assured us it would be a hot day. We did not take her at her word.

We had not gone more than half a mile when the ominous bump of a puncture occurred. It looked like a slow puncture but we had long ago learned that it is quicker and easier to change a tube than to pump the thing up again and again. And then change the tube in the end. It does feel like a lot of work to unload the tandem, disconnect all the cables from the rear wheel and fix a puncture. It did however take the management about ten minutes which is hardly very long on a tour like this. Much to his regret the stoker and her union have never accepted that the rear wheel is her responsibility. He is just grateful that she helps with the unpacking and hands him tools. Some stokers who will not be named but carry a white stick have been known to go to the pub.

Back on the road we made our way through central Dundalk for the third time and headed north towards the border on a pleasant B road. Had we not had the GPS it would have been quite difficult to tell exactly where the border with Northern Ireland was. As Mapsource has not done Ireland we were surprised it even had this line on it.

There was a petrol station on the border but it all looked a bit run down. Even the field fences didn't run along the border line. It must be one of the most boring borders we have ever crossed.

The scenery on both sides of the border was very pleasant. The roads were quiet and the mountains were the backdrop for our ride. There was no sign of the recent military presence. The roads were narrow unlike the usual acres of military tarmac and there was little barbed wire around. Perhaps for once they were only too pleased to leave and good riddance.

We were stopped as we went by a passing tractor driver. "Could u tell the man in the red jeep that I've left me boots in the mushroom house?" "To be sure" said the stoker who is trying to become fluent in Irish. A few minutes later we waved down the said jeep driver who was very grateful as he reversed back up the road.

As we got further on we passed through villages with a preponderance of flags. It has seemed to us during our travels that people who need to fly flags have problems with their identity. The management in particular found it threatening to see the Union flag nailed to numerous telephone poles. At least in England we have a right to be what we are. He had the feeling that here in some of these villages that right does not exist.

Armagh is an extremely pleasant town if a little pious for our irreligious tastes. It is billed as being the episcopal capital of all Ireland and certainly has lots of churches. More importantly it has useful food shops and a first class Youth Hostel. Our room is better than some three star hotels we have been forced to use and the kitchen is first class.

And as for that puncture the management had to put the tube in the sink to find the hole. It has now dried, had two layers of solution and a patch properly applied. The rain which came on as we arrived has also stopped.

Day 5 24th August Armagh to Magherafelt

It would be tempting today to say that we had a nice ride, good weather and pleasant scenery and leave it at that. To do that would be a cop out but it is difficult to record our feelings about a country with so many contradictions.

The hostel warden at Armagh couldn't have been more helpful but politics were difficult to avoid. He did however mention that we would see few Irish tricolours but mainly the Protestant and Union flags. He put this down to the fact that in the face of overwhelming common sense the rump of the Orange order still had to make a show. The Republicans on the other hand no longer saw such things as being important for their cause.

There is little doubt that this area of the North is less prosperous than the area immediately south of the border. Towns and villages are usually beautifully kept with lots of flowers but the housing is often forbidding. The worst areas seemed to have the most Union flags nailed to the telegraph poles.

The individuals we met could not have been more pleasant. As with most of the Irish both North and South they were always keen to start a conversation and it is difficult to get away without being rude. They were all a little bemused that we were tourists and found it difficult to understand why we would want to come here. They did however make all the usual remarks about the tandem that we have heard a thousand times before in about ten different languages.

At lunch time we stopped at Stewartstown. As we entered we passed the police station and were shocked by its appearance. The management had seen nothing like it since he was in Poland during communism. It was fortified with large gun emplacements over the main entrance. The vehicle entrance looked rather worse than the Verne prison and the whole thing was topped with steel and barbed wire. Inside the compound was a huge radio aerial which was obviously not for mobile phones. Rather amusingly, immediately opposite was a modern Texaco petrol station and

supermarket. We think there would have been one hell of a bang if the police had shot their guns that way.

Moving away from this and ignoring the Union flags we came to a nice square where we settled down for lunch. We were approached by a much tattooed born again biker and as usual enjoyed a pleasant chat. He mentioned that the town was quiet because people were away "marching" and were we not interested. In the interests of politeness we did not mention that we have had more than a bellyful of marching men. And we were not talking about Orange men.

Having had lunch we looked at the nearby war memorial. It was interesting that the dead were listed in order of rank and, as usual, far more people were killed in the first than the second war. It would seem that in this town to die an officer your name had to be Stuart. This was Stewartstown. It would be nice if the masses got their own back over the Stuart family by purposely misspelling the name of the town. But it is probably just wishful thinking.

We went on to the shores of Loch Neagh, a stretch of fresh water bigger than from Bournemouth to the Needles. There was however not a sail in sight and only the very occasional motor boat. We came across a centre with an EC funded marina and wondered how much each berth holder was paid to keep a boat there. There were only a dozen or so smallish motor cruisers and four rather sad looking yachts on some rather nice looking jetties.

The loch side itself was being enjoyed in a very leisurely way by local families. It was rather like the fifties in the UK. No crowds, no queues and people just enjoying themselves beside the water, children on the swings and adults on the seats.

At Magherafelt we stayed at the private hostel. It is pleasant and cheap but not up to last night's standards. Magherafelt claims to be the fastest growing town in Northern Ireland. The only Union flags we saw on the way in were in front of the Orange Hall, a rather run down building on a minor road. Perhaps that's one of the reasons why it is growing faster than some of the less pleasant places we have seen which were bedecked with flags.

Day 6 25th August Magherafelt to Whitepark Bay (near the Giant's Causeway)

It is something of a transit day but things never work out quite that way. The management was as usual up bright and early and by a combination of cajoling and encouragement we left soon after 9am. Last night we managed to get the tandem up into the living room on the first floor. The management had been very reluctant to take off the front bit. That was OK because the stairway was high enough for it to stand on its rear wheel to get around the corner. We were also lucky because there were only two other people staying. We think they were young girls from out of town who had come for an evening out and preferred the night in a hostel to a commitment they did not want to make.

The hostel itself was rather odd. It was clear from the things left around that people lived in it on a regular basis. The cupboards and fridges were full of food and there was a dry cleaned suit hanging on the door. Magazines were left lying around and the TV had a satellite receiver. We reckon that it was perhaps used by the working classes but it will remain one of the minor mysteries of life.

The roads had quite suddenly changed. The main roads were less heavily used and there were no country lanes that went anywhere useful. This change has both its good and its bad side. On one hand it is rather nice to meander along the tiny lanes like an Irish tinker. On the other hand it is also nice to be getting some good miles in on smooth tarmac.

We had a good distance to do today and getting a good way by lunch time was useful. We also needed to shop for supplies because our pre-booked hostel at Whitepark Bay is in the middle of

nowhere. Things went well. We passed by a large town centre Tesco because that pig headed management was on a roll and did not want to stop.

Lunch was in a Protestant church yard overlooked by the grave digger. The church door was locked, no doubt because of fear of the troubles hitting this little village. We then went on a little way and found a large Spar shop in a garage. It had all we needed except wine and it was the last shop we came to before the hostel.

Days 7/8 26th/27th August Around Whitepark Bay and the Giant's Causeway

We seldom record very much of what goes on on our days off. We also seldom take more than one day off. This is an exception because of this exceptional place.

Whitepark Bay Youth Hostel is high above the white sands of the bay. It is about 300 metres from the road and has panoramic views with no other habitation nearby. To the north, 24 miles away, we can see Islay. The management can almost smell the fine peaty whisky. To the north east is Rathlin Island and beyond is the Mull of Kintyre. To the west only six miles away is the Giant's Causeway but we can't see that. Not only that but the old hostel, the remains of which look fairly primitive, has been replaced by a new building with every comfort. Our ensuite room even has a sea view. And to make it feel nicer it was funded at least in part by the EC so we got some of our taxes back.

We cycled down to the Giant's Causeway and then walked three or four kms to look at the black basalt rock shapes from which it is made. We particularly enjoyed seeing it from the Irish side. On another day off four years ago we saw the other end of it at Fingal's Cave on Staffa. Like at the rope bridge to Carrickarade Island which spans a steep drop to gain access to the island there were many visitors. They are both owned, run and regimented by the National Trust. It is somewhat restricting but interesting to see how far the predominantly fat and lazy motorists can walk when the mood takes them. They are of course very slow and sweat a great deal. We guess the heart attacks are frequent. It has to be said that it was unusual to see anyone much over 50 walking. Presumably the majority of the baby boomers have succumbed to obesity and lack of exercise. What a sad demise.

As a side line we visited the old local school now converted to a museum to show how pupils were taught about a century ago. It was disconcerting to find out how similar it was to the management's own school in Headley, The Holme School Hampshire. A similar museum on Portland could really pull in the crowds. We also tried the local Sustrans Route to Bushmills. It had the usual barriers which were impassable with a loaded tandem, trike or child trailer. It is about time someone sorted out Sustrans. Perhaps if the bosses' salaries were withheld for a month or two things would improve. The only good thing was that the barriers were made of wood and it would be easy for local cyclists, if there are any, to saw their way through. By dint of lifting and grumbling we made our way to Bushmills where we tried the local whiskey and bought supplies.

On the whole it was a wonderful couple of days off in great weather for these northern climes. The stoker says that the management is already getting itchy feet to move on but the management says not. She says his boredom threshold is unacceptably low. He denies this and claims in his defence that he could just about put up with another day here but would prefer not to.

Day 9 28th August Whitepark Bay to Downhill

We suppose a week into this trip we should be fairly settled into travel. We are not sure that this is quite the case. In most of the rest of Europe we move on happily with only a vague idea of where we will pitch up. The management, at least, is quite relaxed about this. He has absolute confidence in the stoker's ability to find him somewhere to stay. The stoker on the other hand

finds that her stress level increases as the day goes on and she only relaxes when we are unpacking our big yellow Bob bag in whatever accommodation she has been able to find.

In Ireland with the benefit of a mobile phone and a partial comprehension of the language it has been possible to book a day or two in advance. So today we knew right from the start that it was not to be a very long day.

As we pushed the bike up the very steep slope out of the hostel to the main coast road the weather took a slightly down turn. It would have been quite unreasonable to expect yesterday's balmy weather to last. At least the strong wind was behind us and it was not raining.

The coast road, although a main A road, was not busy and the views lovely. There was also a Sustrans route for much of the way. However for at least the first 10km it was impassable by the tandem and trailer. Based on bitter past experience we also were very wary of following it. It was very likely to go in the right direction for a few miles. Then for some odd reason of its own suddenly to take off up a steep hill in almost exactly the wrong direction. It will then come back onto the route a mile or so down the road via an impassable steel gate erected by the local Rotary Club. Or perhaps by the local Orange Lodge here.

So we braved the only alternative and found that it was not too bad. We stopped to look at Dunluce Castle, a very impressive ruin on the sea cliffs. We also passed through the resort towns of Portrush and Portstewart. As usual the most run down places were the ones with the most Union flags flying. We passed through these anachronisms to modern Europe quickly. We felt sorry for the residents especially those who disagreed with the flag fliers. We were resentful of the amount of our taxes wasted here to support these dinosaurs and the English aristocracy over the years of the Troubles.

We had lunch on a cold picnic table just outside Coleraine. It was near to a marina and the yacht club and when a short shower came through we took shelter in the club porch. Our membership of Castle Cove Sailing Club would have got us in had it been open.

Coleraine was a pleasant town with little flag waving. The cycle route through the town centre worked better than most. Had we stayed on it we might have had a pleasant 10km. As it was we used the main road because we did not trust it.

At Downhill we again did the touristy thing walking the mile or so to the ruined house perched on the cliff top and to Missenden Temple. By now the sun had come out and it made for a bit of relaxed sight seeing. That is, the stoker was relaxed and the management tagged along getting better behaved as the views improved.

After a steep descent we booked into yet another hostel. It is in a pleasant old house near the wide sandy beach at the foot of a steep cliff. William welcomed us and gave us a pleasant room at the top of the house with a fine sea view.

Day 10 29th August Downhill to Ballygorman (near Malin Head)

We awoke to a fine day but with a gale force wind battering our elderly sash window. The stoker was not feeling good. Our pleasant room had a sloping ceiling and even though there was not the slightest need for her to go that way she banged her head twice. After this the management put a chair in the way in the hope that she would not batter herself senseless. Anyway the bangs seemed to have gone to her legs and severely reduced her stoking of the tandem.

As we left the hostel we rode along the top of the beach under the steep cliffs and then emerged onto a windswept plain. We turned into the wind against which we had to struggle for the rest of the day. Give us a mountain to climb anytime rather than headwinds like this.

Following the “end of the troubles” a new ferry now runs between Magilligan and Greencastle. The stoker had discovered this on the internet and it saved not only some busy roads but also going into Derry. In the past this area had been very remote. On the way to the ferry we passed a most forbidding army base complete with barbed wire, video cameras and red flags. Next door was an equally unpleasant looking prison. At least the prison seemed to have some facilities for visitors and hopefully being in Northern Ireland keeps the army away from Dorset.

At this point we were overtaken by an elderly cyclist who passed the time of day. As we waited for the ferry he explained that he lived in Ballymena and got the train to a nearby station. He then caught this new ferry and went for a day’s cycling in Donegal. Or we suppose he may have had an assignation. Who knows.

The wind had whipped up quite a sea in the mouth of Lough Foyle. The ferry was the normal design for carrying cars. We don’t think we have ever been on a ferry of this type which rocked and rolled so much. The tandem needed moving back to avoid the water which was coming onto the car deck.

Immediately on leaving the ferry we felt the change for being in the Republic. Everything was more pleasant and prosperous. The towns and villages looked nicer and the people somehow softer. We followed the Lough south to the small port of Moville. We learned later that it was from here that many people left for America during the 1840/50’s to avoid the potato famine. Whenever we see an appeal for those starving in Africa we always think of the Irish during this period. The English almost completely ignored them, or worse, while they starved to death in huge numbers. Let’s hope that future generations will not think that we in the west were just as cruel to the starving in the third world.

From here we had a long climb over the centre of the Inishowen peninsular. Increased stoker heat but less than usual steam made this a tough and long climb. It also damaged the management’s ability to think straight and navigate properly. Fortunately we did not go a very great distance in the wrong direction but it would have been better not to have gone wrong at all. The stoker did however feel that she should make her dissatisfaction clear.

The scenery all day has been very pleasant but as we neared Malin and our destination for the night it became special. The colours were those we have only seen before in northern countries like Scotland. The many rocky islands and headlands set in the blue sea and framed by the mountains behind were very like the Hebrides.

We arrived at the very comfortable independent hostel and were welcomed by the owner, Mary. We needed all the comfort we could get.

Day 11 30th August Ballygorman via Malin Head to Bunrana

Having recovered from today’s cycling we spent the rest of the evening until quite late (for us) chatting to the other hostel residents. There were only half a dozen of us but everyone had plenty to say and a tale to tell.

The hostel is about 6km from Malin Head which is the most northerly part of Ireland. It was certainly the nicest hostel we have stayed in so far. Mary’s personal touches made up for the slightly fewer facilities than the larger hostels we have stayed in. For example the stoker enjoyed wild salmon which Mary kept for just such as she. It was also nice to buy very fresh eggs for breakfast. We would have liked a day off to explore but we are not due one yet a while.

We left in the sunshine for the final attack on the end of Ireland with farewells to the others. When we got to this most northern point there were a few others around but as is usual in this remote area not very many. It was marked by a rather austere tower. It was only after reading the information on the notice board that we realised what an important place for communications this

had once been. Many messages of great importance had been sent here and forwarded by telegraph to London in the early days of Marconi's radio communication.

Below us and engraved into the earth were the letters EIRE. This had been done to indicate to fliers during the second war that they were over neutral territory. This revived almost forgotten memories from childhood of the Republicans siding with our enemy. This was fuelled by the constant anti Republic reporting by the English media. After feeling briefly annoyed that they were neutral, we wondered how we would have felt. Would we in England be willing to fight to support an oppressor, let alone one who for centuries had tried to beat, rape or starve us into submission.

We went back to the hostel, picked up our bags and rather reluctantly headed south. We passed through the little town of Carndonagh and from there headed into the mountains. Here we had yet another change to the scenery. We were now steadily climbing through remote peat bogs with the mountains rising to our left and the distant sea to our right. From the summit we plunged down to Buncrana. Here we booked into a Bed and Breakfast house and went into the town for supper. At least the stoker's legs seemed to have got back to normal today.

Day 12 31st August Buncrana to Letterkenny

This part of the route was one of the more difficult to plan. It seemed to be main roads or very large roads with few practical alternatives. At one stage our hopes were raised that we might be able to avoid this area altogether. A ferry is planned from Buncrana to Rathmullan across Lough Swilly. Unfortunately for us it did not get off the ground this year. So south we went on the main road. There is not much to recommend this route but it is probably better than the alternative of going through Derry. Buncrana is a bit down at heel but fortunately for us seems to sleep in on Sundays so the road was quiet.

At Burnfoot we met a German family of five cyclists on holiday here from Bavaria. We discussed our plan to go to a stone age fort and then attempt a route off the main road to Letterkenny. They had been that way and we think used the German version of the Dorset vernacular cycling word "lumpy". It certainly was.

We climbed from sea level to about 240 metres in what felt like about a km. The stoker was heard to puff although not complain because she was, as usual, the main instigator of going to such places. The fort was very much intact. It is round with three levels of walkways inside. The tourist blurb is rather ambiguous about its history. As visitors to many such places this approach is not normal. They are usually certain that the sun came through this hole with the sole purpose of illuminating this virgin or that hunk sitting naked on that altar etc. We think that with this one what it boiled down to was that someone found a few stones on the top of a magnificent hill in 1870 or thereabouts and built a very nice round view point. The views were certainly superb. We could see the ill-fated Derry to the east and the whole of Inishowen to the north. We could also see much of Loughs Foyle and Swilly. The clouds with the odd patch of blue sky only made this more impressive.

Unlike the few other vehicles at the "Fort" we turned left out of the gate rather than right and back to the super EC Highway. This involved a risky piece of navigation using Autoroute maps. This means we were trusting our navigation to Bill Gates and Microsoft. Now when the computer crashes it is annoying. But this is nothing like how annoying it feels to follow a map carefully and then find that the roads shown just don't exist and others are there which should not be there etc. OK we know that is what Microsoft excel at but they are not half way up a mountain on a tandem. As it was we made it using the almost useless GPS (because of lack of Garmin Software). It did however involve longish distances on roads which could be considered off road and some more steep climbs. It was however interesting to see some really rural parts of Donegal which cannot be seen even from the ordinary minor roads.

We went on into Letterkenny on the main road. It is a large town with a far from pleasant urban sprawl. We suppose the Irish have to have some businesses somewhere but they are even worse than we are in Dorset at siting them.

The hostel here has a poor reputation and we were surprised how well it looked when we first saw it. It proved to be the wrong impression. It is hard to see how a modern building in a pleasant residential area could have got into this state. It is also hard to see how it can carry on as a hostel for much longer. We could not decide whether it would be better to knock it down and start again or just completely gut it. It's a shame because until the ferry starts it is a very useful place for a hostel. Still that's travelling. We will be gone tomorrow and we have to take the rough with the smooth.

Day 13 1st September Letterkenny to Tra na Rosann, Melmore Head

Letterkenny is apparently the regional centre and as such it took a while to get away from traffic. It was not supposed to be a very long day and the management had devised a slightly circuitous route on less busy roads. They were "R" roads which are the equivalent of busy B roads in England. Taking to the country lanes as we do in Dorset is in effect to go off road as they seem to deteriorate into unmade tracks.

The ride improved as it went on and we were further from civilisation. This is a difficult concept in Ireland because unlike many places we have been to the countryside is heavily populated here. People do not seem to live in villages and leave the countryside empty but have houses scattered all over the place. On several occasions we have gone into a field for lunch and had people looking over the hedge to see what we were up to.

Today we followed the edge of the sea lough called Mulroy Bay for some of the morning and most of the afternoon. It reminded us of the fjords in Denmark which are somewhat gentler than those in Norway. Here as in Denmark the land and water blend together to make a complex landscape of islands and inlets.

We ate lunch on a new concrete pier and then when the soft rain came down made our way to Carrickart to buy supplies. The stoker had been informed when she booked the hostel that this was the last place with supplies. As an afterthought she went into the chemist to top up our meths bottle (for cooking not drinking). She was gone for ages because the elderly pharmacist measured every single drop into a long thin glass pipette before he put it into our bottle.

The next eight or so kms to the hostel were spectacular. And unfortunately rather steep. We again had sea on all sides with islands and mountains in the foreground and background respectively. It also helped that the sun had come out and the sea was a Mediterranean blue but we think rather colder than the Med.

The hostel was one of those real old fashioned ones. The building was well away from the road on a track only just passable by car. It is a stone building with two big dorms and a small family room which we had booked. There were none of your city travellers here. By the time sunset had come we were nine people in all including the warden, his wife and three year old daughter. We all had a very convivial evening around the turf fire. Unfortunately another sprinkling of the soft rain ruined the sunset over the sea.

Day 14 2nd September Tra na Rosann, Melmore Head to Dunlewy

For part of yesterday and last night the management's back had suddenly gone bad. He has a recurring back problem which seems to have got worse with his great age. It has never been a problem cycling but getting onto and off the bike is another matter. Fortunately the beds in the

hostel were very comfortable. A combination of being dosed up on ibuprofen and a good night's sleep seemed to effect at least a partial cure.

When we awoke and looked again at the view we were tempted to stay another day in this lovely place. But it was at least a day too soon so moving on took place.

The management rather foolishly decided to ride the tandem down the track. There was no chance that the much more sensible stoker was going to get on until it was on the road. It was a very wise choice as the management very nearly had a very nasty crash. There is a limit to how hard the brakes can be applied without crashing on a loose downhill surface and this limit was reached fairly early in this descent. He then just let the tandem go and was very lucky not to end up in a big heap on some nasty rocks.

It is a tribute to all of the equipment that everything stayed together and now down at almost sea level we started the steep climb out. This kind of climbing early in the morning is pleasant enough. We were surrounded by sea, hills and blue sky and apart from some deserted holiday caravans very little sign of people. As we came up over the ridge and looked inland we had a fine view of the higher mountains. We knew that was the direction we were heading but not which exact protuberance we had to make for.

We still however had another descent down to sea level before starting to climb. It was about here that the mobile phone announced a text message. We were both surprised as we usually turn it off during the day in view of O₂'s extortionate charge rate for calls to and from abroad. It was the management's daughter Elisabeth who was very excited because she had an offer for her house. The stoker compiled an appropriate reply and sent it off while we were going along. We don't think the correct procedure for this level of technology is included in the stoker's union manual.

Using Bill Gates's map and with a slight prompt from the GPS we stopped at an unsignposted junction up a minor road. It looked about the right place to turn off for Glen, a village on our way. As we scrutinised all the information available last night's hostel warden pulled up beside us in his car. After a slightly caustic comment about the management's navigational abilities he confirmed that we were on the right road. He must be the only person in the civilised world to be unaware of the vagaries of Microsoft software.

Direction finding was a bit tricky but the route itself continued to be great. We went from the green coastal strip up to a huge land locked lake. Above this we were into peat bog moorland. We hardly saw a person let alone a vehicle. The only interruption to our peace and quiet during the whole morning was the need to cross an N road but even that was narrow and not busy.

Around lunch time we emerged into a kind of civilisation. Our tiny wobbly road over the peat bog joined a wide EC type highway which, like most of these roads in the whole of the EC, carried little traffic. It seemed to serve the Glenveagh National Park. All the time the mountains were getting nearer and the agriculture was mainly forestry and small time peat extraction.

We attempted to stop at the Glenveagh National Park for lunch. It had facilities like a visitor centre and café which the stoker explored while the management put the tea on. We just managed one cup before we were driven away by midges. Thinking about them still makes our heads itch even as we write this. We did however manage to avoid a major attack and moved on as quickly as we could. A while later we found a better place on high moorland where the very light breeze kept most of them away.

The rest of the day was spent climbing over the pass to Dunlewy, just below Errigal mountain which at 751 metres is the highest in Donegal. The EC style road was still being built here and it was funny watching the drivers bouncing along the several kms of bumpy surface. The management felt that what was needed was for every other one of the surveyor's level posts to be lowered by about 50cm. This he thought would have the effect of instant traffic calming on

the finished road. Built the way it is laid out will only result in a significant number of BMWs and Audis ending up to their doors in peat bog. And it will spoil a nice cycle ride.

The Irish Youth Hostel is again fairly basic although it is supposed to be slightly more up market than last night's. It is set in the mountains and in ideal walking country. It is also next door to a garage with a limited range of supplies. This is a good thing because it was the only shop we had seen all day and we were almost out of dinner type food. The stoker went off to the local bar for a bottle of wine. She did come back before dinner time but it is hard to get away from a chatting Irish barman.

Much to our surprise we were the only residents at the hostel. This has the advantage of having no hassle in the kitchen and being able to leave our stuff around everywhere. It was also very eerie especially in Ireland. Here every hostel we have been to has been a hive of activity accompanied by never ending conversations. Nobody can talk like the Irish or be as good natured when it suits them. The only way to avoid this when one has had too much is to retreat to a quiet room. We seldom feel the need but most good hostels have one of these rooms and they are used.

Day 15 3rd September Day off in Dunlewy

As usual we just loafed around doing emails and such. The hostel is in a magnificent walking area and even without going to the top of the mountains it is a pleasure to be here. In the afternoon we walked down to the lake and the large visitor centre built there by the local community. Sadly for them there were no coaches. Their problem would seem to getting them off the Ring of Kerry. Still, it's nicer this way for us.

Day 16 4th September Dunlewy to Glenties

Whatever day of the week it arises on Monday morning is always Monday morning. This applies even if you are on a cycle tour and it happens to be a Thursday. It was a little easier this week with a gentle descent in nice weather with Mount Errigal behind us. In this remote part of Ireland in most places there is only one road that goes anywhere. Most of the side roads just go to an isolated hamlet or one farm. The traffic level is very low by English standards but one can be confronted by the largest vehicles. The surface and width vary from full EC standard to narrow, twisty and bumpy. Often when a lorry goes by the whole road shakes like jelly as the underlying peat bog shakes.

In the late morning we arrived at the small town of Dunglow. The stoker wanted to go into the town centre to the tourist office and the management uncharacteristically agreed. What she didn't know was that he wanted to try a by road which left from the back of the town centre. The town centre proved to be very entertaining. The locals have great difficulty with the car culture. The older people drive very slowly with almost a total lack of any real control of the vehicle. At the other end of the scale is the farm boy with go faster stripes who drives like an idiot but can park the thing on a sixpence just like he does the tractor. The town centre had come to a complete halt. The reason seemed to be a bus which kept stopping and opening its doors. The reason was not clear but most likely the driver just stopped to chat with his friends along the high street. The consequence of this was that the older drivers were refusing to drive through spaces that even the bus itself could go through. The farm boys were roaring through tiny spaces only to come to a complete halt face to face with a confused driver half way past the bus but too scared to go on. Somehow it eventually managed to sort itself out but it all took about twenty minutes by which time the bus was long gone. The stoker in the mean time had followed both signs and directions to the tourist office without success. It was not until later that evening that we established that the office had closed for the season at the end of August, presumably also removing all evidence of its existence.

The management was more successful. By climbing the biggest hill out of the town he found his tiny road over the bog. It was peaceful, quiet and beautiful. Most of the houses were traditional and all in all it looked just the way one expects Ireland to look. The weather was pleasant and we found a soft peat bank in the sunshine near to the sea and on the side of a valley. Not only was the turf very soft for the management's snooze but the stoker was able to pick the many sweet blackberries nearby.

As we proceeded along this road we came across a sign saying 15km to our destination. We think it should have read miles. That was the actual distance we cycled. And we did not get lost.

Glenties is a large "plantation village", that is it was established by the British to "bring modern agriculture" to the backwood Irish. Or, if double speak is removed, to make as much money as possible from the people of Ireland just as we did in the colonies. Now it is a very pleasant place with a range of attractive houses and shops all well maintained and painted in the usual varied colours of the Republic.

The hostel is run by Aidan Campbell who is also the local travel agent and estate agent. He couldn't have been nicer or more helpful. And even better his hostel provided clean large en-suite rooms and a good kitchen.

After check in we were immediately approached by Xavier and Isabelle from near Paris. They were on holiday and also travelling by tandem. We spent most of the evening together and also prepared our meals and ate together. Much of the conversation was around where we were going but the two managements got deep into the technicalities of tandems. Isabelle, who is blind, insisted that her management translate much of this for her. Her English was not up to the technical stuff but she had a keen interest. The stoker, having heard much of it before, wisely let them get on with setting tandem construction, maintenance and destruction.

Day 17 5th September Glenties to Derrylahan near Carrick

There was no hurry today. Firstly the weather forecast for the morning was not very good and secondly we did not plan to go very far. We had prebooked a hostel for tonight and need not arrive until 5pm.

We waved Xavier and Isabelle off. It was interesting to see the difference between equipment "needs" for our longer trip and their's for a short cycling holiday. We are much more self sufficient with full camping gear and tools to repair the tandem etc. They had pre-booked every night and carried fewer of the things we consider important. We think we probably had less clothing and personal things than they had but of course much more altogether. Our bikes were also different though surprisingly similar in weight. Ours is designed to stand weeks of misuse on bad roads. Theirs was originally a competition machine. They did not even have room to fit mudguards and being French saw little need for them. Actually in our travels in France we have seldom seen natives out in the rain. This may account for his views on mudguards which most English cyclists find odd to say the least.

We had another look around Glenties which was nice. The church in particular is modern and looks like a diagonal lump of grey slate coloured cheese. It received awards for its architecture by Liam McCormack and mention is made about the dripping rain falling from the slate roof into the pools below. We were more impressed by the inside which was full of light and with some pleasant spaces.

By the time we got going the heavy rain which we had during the night and which was also forecast for today had mainly moved on. The main road was small here and little used and we were soon at Ardara. This is now a very pleasant tourism based weaving and knitting town. Aran sweaters are there in profusion and apparently they are very cheap. They are however of little use to us even if we had the space to carry them. We have a drawer full of similar things

at home in Weymouth which we have not worn since leaving Surrey. We don't do much cold weather in Weymouth. We were looking for a book to read having donated the last used one to a hostel book shelf. There was no book shop or charity shop in town but we found a book in a weaving centre. It seemed OK but just as we were making a decision about whether to buy we were approached in a very nice way by the author's wife. Conversations in West Donegal seldom take less than half an hour. (The phone companies must be very rich here.) But this conversation was very interesting and even the management did not resent the time. The author's wife explained how they had published the book themselves and dealt with the funding, marketing and other requirements. It gave us food for thought. We also had a look at the church window designed by Evie Hone and inspired by modernism. A local lady leaving the church was friendly and helpful but said if we needed any more information we should talk to a local as she had only married into the community. As she went on to tell us that her grandchild is named after the aforementioned Evie, this could have been thirty years ago.

We were then on our way out of town towards the highest cliffs in Europe. This obviously had to involve a climb and Xavier and Isabelle had already told us about the Glengesh Pass. It was like many of the valleys in the Lake District. It started with a gentle pull up beside a stream but the steep bit to come soon came into view. We ummed and rred about whether we had lunch before or after the climb. On the whole we took the wrong decision but for the right reasons. We stopped on the side of the road and soon had the tea made. Then the midges descended because the wind had lightened. In the faces of midges we ate quickly and continued upwards. We now had the energy to go on but not sufficient rest. However we learned long ago in Scotland that no one in their right mind argues with the midges.

Having watched several vehicles go up and down we knew that the road with several hairpin bends was steep. It was in fact very steep and we used our very low bottom gear all of the way up, which is unusual. Would that those hundreds of doubters who have shouted after us in ten different languages over the years that she on the back is not pedalling could see her now. To move at a speed so slowly that the computer did not even register caused the stoker to puff loudly. We stopped to rest three times on the way up but rode all the way mainly because the tandem is even harder to push. The climb was to just under 300 metres from just above sea level so would have challenged most people even if the road builder had not chosen the steepest route.

Over the top and we had miles of high wild bogland in front of us. Also the cooling breeze which had come up not only refreshed us but kept the midges at bay.

The first village we came to was pleasant in every respect except one. Someone had built an enormous smelly fish processing plant in the middle of it. There was no doubt some logic to this. The village is on a cross roads but it is also several miles from the sea. It is served by very tiny roads, one of which is the pass we had just climbed.

We carried on down the valley to Carrick where we bought supplies for two days. We then went on up to the hostel located nicely up the southern slope of the river valley. Shaun the owner welcomed us with a cup of tea and showed us to our room. It was purpose built en-suite US motel style. In fact it was much better than most motels as it fronted onto the farmyard with the hills in the background.

Day 18 6th September At Derrylahan near Carrick

We are about halfway now. Or at least if we are not the management will have to revise his route. There is of course little possibility that he has even considered this and we think we are more or less as planned.

The plan for today was however less defined. The weather was clear with fluffy clouds bringing the odd shower of rain off the sea. The Irish have the rain dealt with as an art form. Soft light

rain is more or less ignored. They do however seem to know just when to put on waterproofs or when it is better to shelter. All very clever. We wish we could do it half as well.

Having got up late and each individually entered into several long conversations lunch time soon approached. It then became pleasant to sit in the sun. It was easier than getting the tandem out and doing the 20kms return trip to the cliffs. As each shower went through the changes to the light over the hills, sea and estuary have to be seen to be appreciated. The stoker did have the camera out but memories count for more than photographs on days like today.

After a late lunch most of the hostellers had gone and we were left with Shaun and his extended family. One of them, Frankie, was putting slates on the windward side of a roof before the winter gales set in. Why they had not done the whole roof earlier in the summer is something only they could explain. And they would but it would take a very long time. In the meantime Shaun and assorted other family members were bringing in three cows. One needed A.I., one has mastitis and the other just kept the first two company. While they were doing this the chickens had got into the shed where all the spare stuff was kept. This kind of thing just went on and on.

Later in the afternoon we walked the half an hour or so to the local pier to meet a boat from Teelin to take us to look at the sea cliffs of Slieve League. Shaun had organised this for us in his spare time. It was a lovely sunny evening with a moderate wind blowing. The boat was hardly late arriving at all at all and the trip was very pleasant. The sea was rough and choppy but the management's stomach held up.

The skipper was refreshingly frank. He did a spiel which basically said that these cliffs are the highest sea cliffs in Europe. He had never needed nor tried to learn the usual tourist rubbish which most such people pester their customers with. Someone asked whether the cliffs were higher than the Cliffs of Moher. Yes, he said, the tourist industry having got it wrong for many years were not going to change their story now were they. The management warmed to him.

Back at the hostel the kitchen dining room was full of walkers from the North. There was also a good number of Shaun's relatives in various stages of inebriation. Apparently there had been a series of matches on the television since about 11am, all of which required lubrication. People came and went and the convivial evening went on.

The stoker in the meantime was talking to one of the walkers. She had seen us eating lunch beside a War Memorial in Stewartstown (the place with the fortified police station two weeks ago). It just goes to show that you have to be careful what you do when riding a conspicuous vehicle like a tandem with a bright yellow trailer.

Day 19 7th September Derrylahan near Carrick to Donegal Town

Leaving Shaun's place is not that easy. The best thing to do is to slip away at about seven in the morning before anyone is up and after the rest have gone to bed. We were not up till 8am. At least the management was. By the time we made the kitchen for breakfast the walkers were in and another group had come from Omagh for coffee. Short of missing breakfast, something not done by either of us, socialising was bound to continue in a noisy Irish way. Shaun himself, a late riser, turned up and we were lucky to extract ourselves by 11am.

Directions given by Shaun are given with great enthusiasm but difficult to follow. The management, having heard him point innocents of several nationalities in "the right direction", determined to look at the detailed map. Shaun however caught him but again turned up trumps by sending us up a road with grass in the middle. Much to our surprise it went in the right direction and we came out on the right road beside the ruined Spanish Church. We don't know what it was and it will ever remain a mystery to us.

The first part of today's ride around Donegal Bay would have been very pleasant had it not been for the weather. It started with light rain and gradually got worse. Even in these conditions which no camera could catch we enjoyed the misty rainy seascape. We passed through Killybegs which is the largest fishing port in Ireland. In the 1970s and 80s it was the home of the mackerel millionaires. Even now with fishing in decline there were a good number of ships at least five times bigger than the biggest ones we have seen in Weymouth.

As we went onwards the rain got heavier and was not soft. The road also got gradually busier as we neared Donegal Town. We were lucky to find a little shelter in a sports pavilion porch for a quick lunch. Thus warmed up we made it to the hostel.

Day 20 8th September Donegal Town to Grange near Sligo

Donegal Hostel was very definitely a town hostel, full of the young from many different countries on the tourist trail. We were perhaps twice most of their ages but they were as usual very nice to us. And quite incompetent in the shared kitchen.

As we left the hostel, Linda the owner and warden was distraught because her dog had gone missing. She was off searching for him and about to phone the local radio station. We remembered the dogs that had followed us for lots of kms and felt a bit shall we say guilty. Though hardly any cyclists really have much time for dogs.

Today was a day of contrasts. Donegal Town, a km down the road, was pleasant and quiet. The stoker managed without difficulty to buy a memory card for her digital camera, having already taken over 300 pictures this trip. The road out of town was wide and quiet but we soon joined the busy national road towards Sligo. It was not impossibly busy but hardly what we do these trips for. Based on Bill Gates's maps we turned off for a quieter ride. Here a pair of tinkers, the first we had seen, pulled up in a decrepit red van. We hoped that they might be offering help or directions. We were wrong. Their main purpose was to try to sell us an awful looking digital watch. The oddest things sometimes happen to cycle tourists.

After a while we ended up on a very pleasant beach, a dead end. We went back a bit and took another road in a westerly direction for quite a long way. We again ended up on the beach. Much against the stoker's better judgement she failed to prevent the management going down onto the beach and pushing the bike along. Normally he will never go back but she has on rare occasions in the past managed to make him see sense. After 15 minutes of pushing we found a way off which led to a road. It required complete unpacking of the tandem and disconnection of the trailer. This lot then had to be carried across the shingle at the top of the beach. It then had to be taken through an abandoned farm and over a gate. The gate was not locked but this was not discovered until the tandem had already been lifted over. On reaching the tiny road we had no idea which way to go so we turned right (to the west again). After a bit the road deteriorated into a track. The management's stupidity was fortunately halted when we came to an electric fence across it. He did survey forward a little way on foot but agreed to turn around. We wandered back east along tiny lanes and eventually came back to the main road only a km or so further on from where we had left it.

We now had the contrast of the tiny farm roads with grass in the middle to the roaring wide highway. Fortunately after a couple of kms we turned off onto a medium sized road down to the coast at Rosnowlagh. Here we had lunch by a ruined church and soon after had to go onto the roaring road again.

The hostel at Grange was very rural and 500 metres off the road in the shadow of Benbulbin, a great loaf of bread shaped mountain. Phil the warden was a pain in the backside but runs a good clean hostel. The management wasted the evening in pointless conversations and failed to do the jobs he should have done because of it.

Day 21 9th September Grange near Sligo to Beltra

It was wet when we left late. Fortunately we were left to our own devices and saw no one before we went. After a brief ride on the busy road we took to the country lanes. The navigation was relatively easy compared with yesterday and went as predicted. After only very short bits on the National road we made it into Sligo via its back door. Sligo is a busy little town with a most unpleasant one way system. Rather wet we decided that a café would be nice for lunch and found just the place. A huge bowl of soup warmed us up and apple pie filled the space left. And even though this country is very expensive we did not pay very much for this.

We again took to the never ending one way system and found our way out of town, again on small roads. We followed signs to Carrowmore megalithic cemetery. Here for a couple of euros we did a guided tour of the site which was very interesting. Even the management enjoyed it, perhaps because it was very low key. But it is also a very pleasant place even in the rain. While quite low lying the broad plain where the passage graves are located is ringed by high hills and mountains. It is easy to see how ancient people were drawn to this place.

The last part of the day was again spent on a busy road. As we are now getting a bit further from civilisation the traffic is a little less roaring. The downside is that there were few places to stay. By the time 5pm came we were very wet. We passed a pub with a B&B sign then a little way further on a Post Office. We stopped here and asked about the chances of finding somewhere soon along the road. These seemed very low so we retraced to the pub and booked. At least the management got a night off from cooking and was able to catch up with the jobs he should have done last night.

Day 22 10th September Beltra to Ballina

We think the landlady was keen to see us go. Beneath what in her case was a rather strained Irish hospitality she was under stress. Having a teenage son with “car troubles” was bad enough. Not being able to get on with the housework because of a power failure may have been just too much.

We left as we had arrived in the pouring rain. We stopped off just up the main road at the post office for supplies. It gave us a chance to thank the post mistress for her help last night. Then a couple of hundred metres further on, with very great relief, we left the main road. We hope we have seen the back of heavy traffic now until we reach Dublin. The main roads from Killybegs via Donegal to Sligo are just too busy to cycle on and have been difficult to avoid.

We were now on the “Coast Road”. It was probably the old main road to Ballina but had been bypassed by the roaring highway. It was a lovely ride and in contrast to the last few days the management was not stressed over the navigation. The weather also eventually improved with sunny spells between showers. There was just enough time between each shower to dry off. We have noticed that in this weather the locals seldom wear waterproofs. Mind you some don't bother even when it is pouring down.

We found a nice lunch spot in the very substantial porch of a closed hotel and would you believe “nite club”. Getting into Ballina was something of an aggravation. We followed a minor road really close to the estuary where the town is located. The road was however reminiscent of those in Surrey with steep ups and downs.

There is a hostel at Ballina but it had been bad mouthed by travellers we had met on the way. Furthermore it was 3kms in the wrong direction so we gave it a miss. It is the old story - we all tell ten people about poor or unsatisfactory service and many (most?) businesses never learn. The stoker went into the Tourist Office but found a sign on the door saying back in 2 mins. These were Irish minutes but to be fair to her the officer did eventually come back and we got a list of B&Bs. The first one we approached also offered “self catering” and showed us a

bungalow at a very attractive price. And it had excellent facilities. She failed to mention that she let each bedroom separately. One other person did turn up but this made very little difference to us. Ballina is a very pleasant town with a good variety of local shops. One very attractive shop assistant noticed the management's nearly Dorset accent. She gave him credit for knowledge of the best London University Colleges. Surprisingly she had picked on a person with a little knowledge of these. Let's hope she gets the place she wants.

Day 23 11th September Ballina to Pollatomish

Today we awoke to driving rain with every indication that it would continue for most of the morning. What was almost worse was that when the rain cleared the head wind was likely to be gale force. This information was based on the management's Yachtmaster theory course and for once he was correct.

Once out of town and on the coast road the traffic was again very light. We were making a special effort to get some kms under the wheels before the head wind set in. The stoker was disconcerted to find that the management's plan did not include a hedge, or indeed any other stop for 20kms. She did suggest that not scheduling toilet stops could contravene the stokers union rules. He was however intransigent and she did hang on.

With the increasing wind came some pleasant sunshine and some spectacular coastal views. They rivalled the Dorset coast but of course we did not have the Dorset level of traffic. In fact hardly any traffic at all. It also began to feel remote. We passed through the village of Ballycastle and even in the village there was an "end of the world" feel about the place.

Just before lunch we had a long climb up to Ceide Fields. This is a surprisingly interesting place considering that all it is is a peat bog overlooking sea cliffs. It has an outstandingly designed pyramid shaped visitor centre. Furthermore this not only houses a museum about the bog but also a fine café with lots of good cycling food.

We stayed here a couple of hours. The management hoped that during this time the gale force wind he had predicted and was indeed blowing would decrease a bit. We did a guided tour and learned by walking about on the hillside that buried two metres under the peat was a 5000 year old farm. As if we had not been outside enough. The farm sounded pretty much like the existing farms and we had seen plenty of those.

The afternoon ride was long, hard and slow against the wind. The countryside here may be spectacular but given a head wind there is very little shelter. Furthermore peat bogs have those aggravating ravines running across them. You can't see them till you get to them. When you do they go steeply down and equally steeply up. On one of these we had a small mishap which brought the management up a bit short. Having messed up a gear change at almost zero speed we dropped the tandem. The management stepped off but the stoker rolled off onto the deserted road. She had a very minor scratch on her leg but because of the warfarin it bled a fair bit. We do still need to be careful.

We didn't arrive at our very pleasant hostel at Pollatomish until 6.30pm, pretty exhausted. We were the only guests and had the facilities to ourselves. We were too tired to go up the road for supplies but ended up with a very substantial meal from our leftovers and those left by previous people staying here.

Day 24 12th September Day off at Pollatomish

As usual on days off we got up late and lounged around doing chores and tweaking the route. The hostel has very nice views over the estuary which we enjoyed while sitting in front of a warm

peat turf fire. The independent hostels don't chuck you out during the day and this one provides a large basket of turfs.

Day 25 13th Sep Pollatomish to Lough Feeagh quite but not very near Newport

We moved on with mixed feelings. We had had such a pleasant day off doing little and enjoying our peat fire. In this area things are so removed from the world in which most of us live. Silence most of the time. The village pub and shop within a short walk. And most annoyingly we even had to walk up to the village to get a phone signal. On the other hand staying much longer would be incredibly boring and we needed to know what was round the next corner.

During the night we had been rocked to sleep by the sound of a southerly gale. When we left to go south it was still blowing and its strength was undiminished. On days such as this a cycle tourist has a couple of fairly straightforward options. To stay or to go and we went. This part of Ireland, although very hilly and in places mountainous, seems to almost merge with the sea. Consequently when the wind blows it blows and there is little to stop it. We battled up and down towards and along the lee side of a lake towards Bangor. It was extremely hard going and we were pleased to rest at a sculpture of stone sheep. It was not unlike the concrete cows in Milton Keynes. The stoker, ever keen for an unusual photo, persuaded the management to sit on one. He said he was happy to do this but reluctant to do any of the lewd things some people attempted with the concrete cows.

Having fought our way to Bangor we rested in the windswept streets of this large village. The grit blowing around stung the management's legs. We risked not getting supplies here as we still had a way to go but the stoker took the opportunity to stock up on chocky biscuits. The next part of the ride was surprisingly pleasant and given less wind would have been very nice indeed. Even though we were on National Road 59 there was very little traffic. We climbed gently up a valley beside a winding stream and the wind was at least not into our faces.

After a while we began occasionally to see the top of a tower. As we went on it became clear that this was the stink horn of a power station. At first it all seemed very odd considering we were on a peat bog in the middle of nowhere. It then occurred to us that the thing was not working. Then as we got higher up we saw behind it a line of wind turbines. Things began to fit into place though in one important aspect we were wrong. We realised correctly that the plant was here because it was powered by burning peat. In this aspect we were correct. We then wrongly assumed that it was not working because it had been replaced by the adjacent wind turbines.

Next door to the power station and beside the musical bridge we found a pub which incorporated a shop. We were very pleased about finding the shop, or the dinner menu could have been very restricted indeed not to mention breakfast. The shop keeping landlord said the power station was "down" for two weeks for repairs and soon to be powered by gas. So much for wind turbines replacing the alternatives in this world where we are all greedy for more power.

The musical bridge was another attempt at attracting tourists. The idea was to take a stone and run along the river bridge letting it rub along the capping stones. The management said he was quite happy for the stoker to do this as we cycled by but neglected to stop long enough for her to pick up a stone.

By mid afternoon we turned off the main road and climbed into the mountains proper. It was not the best time of day to start a climb but that's where the hostel was. Fortunately the wind had by this time moderated and although the sky became dark it didn't rain. After a bit the management noticed, he can be a bit slow, that his saddle was wobbly and at a funny angle. Having established it had come loose and nothing worse he put it down to extreme pedalling due

to headwinds. Fixing it took a while - nothing is that straightforward on a tandem. We did however have an opportunity to enjoy the mountain scenery.

The last bit to the hostel, across the tops and down through a forest, was on unmade forest roads. Had the hostel not been signed we would have been very concerned. As it was we nursed the machine over the larger ruts and gullies.

We arrived at the hostel rather late and tired. It is beautifully situated beside a lake with mountains all round. Again silence rules.

Day 26 14th September Lough Feeagh to Leenane

The hostel is in a hunting lodge originally built in the 1850's and much altered since. Right up to the 1930's it was occupied by colonial English. Reading the history they seemed to be even more arrogant than the American colonials today. Presumably the locals got some employment out of them but the Irish government managed to get the house back from them in the end.

It was a drizzly day with occasional rain but quite warm. As we left the hostel we could just about see the lake but not the surrounding mountains which were shrouded in mist. We were soon onto National Road 59 heading south. Unlike most of the main roads this one is cyclable. It is certainly not a tinkers road but on a wet Sun in September it was fine.

The management was all for pushing on direct to Leenane because it was too wet to stop. But the stoker's legs were not so keen. As luck would have it we came by a village hall with a generous sized porch and thought it was worth investigation. The stoker tried the door and found it open. We were thus able to brew up in comfort and use the toilets. No one disturbed us and we left after an hour and are sure no one would know we had been.

It was not too far to go in the afternoon and the wet is much preferable to yesterday's headwind. Here the stoker admitted to finding a way of not pedalling at all. She already has a free wheel but this clicks and if it clicks much the management complains. She can avoid this clicking by derailing the chain in a rather clever way. She does however claim not to have used this device up until now.

As we went on we came into the northern part of the Connemara Mountains. Unfortunately they were pretty much obscured by mist and rain. They did however rise steeply beside the road and there were many rushing streams and waterfalls. It is impossible to see everything but we were sorry not to see the tops.

At Leenane we booked into a B&B. When it came to putting the tandem in the shed the management came across a cast iron Cyclists' Touring Club sign dating from the 1930s. He has been after one for years and immediately entered into negotiations to buy it but the owner would not consider parting with it. He seemed to think it was worth 700 but we are not sure whether that was pounds or euros. The management did not in the interests of upsetting anyone mention that under the terms of the agreement when the signs were issued they remain the Club's property.

Leenane was visited by the management about fifteen years ago. The change here is typical of that throughout this country. Then it was rather run down and remote. It had a bar with a shop behind and a B&B. Now it is a thriving centre for tourists with shops, several B&Bs and cafés and a hotel. He preferred it then but is quite happy to enjoy today's facilities.

Day 27 15th September Leenane to Benlettery

After photos of the CTC sign, together with Richard whose aunt was the original owner, were taken we moved on. We were still on National Route 59 and it was still OK by bike. The sea

estuary here has been claimed by the tourist industry as Ireland's only fjord. The management suspects that it would be a bit difficult to get cruise ships in. About the same level of difficulty but for different reasons as getting them into Portland Port. The views were however very wonderful.

Unlike the Eskimos with regard to snow the Irish don't seem to have 99 words for rain. The weather forecast had promised 19 degrees and warm sunshine after the sun had burned off the morning mist. As it was there was a very low level of precipitation which got less wet which is difficult to describe. But we have done our best.

Progress was somewhat slowed by the stoker's frequent request stops to take photos. The management got his own back by carrying on into Clifden for lunch and we did not eat till well past the 1pm dead line. We established ourselves on a seat in the town centre. Unfortunately we were prey to the US equivalent of Italian loafers. They approach us and ask about the tandem and where we are going. Because they don't actually speak English they don't usually understand the answer. They are normally completely ignorant about what we do and often condescending. It is hard to believe that this breed, with an apparent total lack of understanding of cycling, could produce a multi winner of the Tour. We suppose it is remotely possible that these pests are of Irish descent which may account for it. Anyway the management, unable to move to the other side of the street while watching the bike to see they didn't nick anything, can't resist a bit of fun. "Have you been far". Well we started in Portugal in May, spent four weeks in South West England for a rest. We then had a look at Scotland and now we are here. "How wonderful what a way to travel" etc etc. Well it gave the management some pleasure and eventually they all went off on their buses bound for the next tourist attraction.

We also went our way. We were sorry that this place which must even a few years ago have been nice could now only be described as tacky.

A few miles along the road we checked into a hostel. It is a walkers hostel and very pleasant. Immediately behind it Benlettery rises steeply and to the front are lakes and smaller mountains. It easily rivals the English Lake District with the advantage that cycling is still civilised here. With any luck the Americans will not find it and the Saga buses will find the road too bumpy. But they will come if the Irish have their way so come now or forget it.

Day 28 16th September Benlettery to Kilronan, Inishmore, Aran

As we prepared to leave the hostel it was slightly overcast and cloud covered the tops of the mountains. The hostel warden was advising some young walkers to stay down low. He was wrong but no doubt for the right reasons. The mist cleared to a wonderful sunny day.

We left on the main road and were soon turning south onto a minor road. We then cycled for all of the morning on narrow roads across the peat bog and beside lakes and rivers. There was hardly a vehicle to be seen. This is how Ireland is supposed to be. We reluctantly emerged onto the newly up (down?) graded coach road about lunch time with an hour's ride to the Aran ferry.

We had not seen a shop all morning and were out of bread. With time on our side and a grassy bank to sit on we cooked spaghetti and stirred in banana and jam. We seldom go hungry. The management then had a very pleasant nap, Puckoon style, before we wandered down to Rossaveel for the ferry to Aran. The crossing takes about an hour and was smooth and pleasant in the sunshine.

The stoker had booked a hostel but when we looked at it we decided not to stay. It was very dirty, untidy and smelly. Fortunately on Inishmore there are plenty of alternatives. We could not find a hostel with a private room and so booked into a B&B. It was just out of the main village but near to a large hostel with a very pleasant restaurant. We were able to eat proper vegi food for the first time in Ireland. Except of course that which we cook for ourselves.

Days 29 and 30 17th and 18th September Kilronan to Doolin

We suppose these are days off though we did do a reasonable amount of cycling around the island. Inishmore is a very popular tourist destination. It does not, fortunately, have a car ferry so is not overrun by motor vehicles. It also tends to mean that most of the people, unlike the car dominated mainland, have not yet lost the use of their legs. This can be a mixed blessing in that people can get to even the remote places once they throw off the tyranny of the car. We have become used to having these remote places to ourselves.

Inishmore is a very special place and we have certainly not seen anything like it on our European travels. It is like a great rocky breakwater in the Atlantic Ocean. It rises to 120 metres above sea level and has some wonderful sheer cliffs to the south. Man's influence has had an enormous effect on the rocky environment. The island is divided by stone walls into innumerable tiny fields. Many of the fields appear to support tiny amounts of grass between the limestone pavements. The original houses were also constructed like the walls. They were thatched with dried grass held down by nets of rope attached to horizontal pegs just below the eaves.

The management describes the landscape as a horizontal mountain and it is one of his favourite places. He also very much likes the traditional fishing boat, the curragh, but fewer seem to remain each time we come. The ones we saw were about five metres long and 1.5 metres wide. They have rounded hulls with a kick up in the bow like a modern rib.

On the 18th we had heavy rain but even so explored the less severe east end of the island before boarding the "Happy Hooker" to Doolin. This one and a half hour crossing has caused the stoker much worry over the last couple of days as she has heard rumours of its non appearance. Without it we would have problems getting to the airport on time. As usual the management was very laid back about it which did not help. As it was it came in on time. We had a bumpy crossing but were rewarded by a magnificent display of bow wave riding by a shoal of dolphins. They are much more spectacular close up from such a small boat than from the decks of a large ship.

Day 31 19th September Doolin to Gort

We must be getting boring but we didn't even go to the pub last night at this place which is famous for Irish music. Instead we were quite pleased to pedal up the hill away from it. Like much of Ireland it has expanded very quickly from a pleasant village to a large tourist area with little now to recommend it.

We were soon on the tiny tinkers roads and stayed on them all day. It is amazing how quickly one can get away from tourists given a bike, a map and some country lanes. This proved very useful in Lisdoonvarna. We stopped in the town for supplies and the stoker was hardly gone into the shop before the dreaded American tourist arrived. They are like midges in terms of annoyance but fortunately don't itch afterwards. The stoker returned when the American had just made the usual first few crass comments about cycling. The management got in quickly and asked him if he had pulled yet. That's what Lisdoonvarna is for in September. We have no need to repeat his answer. The stoker quick as a flash said well what are you doing here then. We were grateful that he slothed off though in a way felt sorry for him and his sort who seem to be without a sense of humour. Before the next one attacked us we made for the country lanes again. We don't think their tour operator has told them about these yet so we are generally safe out of town.

Further down the road we came across a couple of German girls on hired bikes with a blow out. They were trying to do the repair but did not know how. The management mended the puncture for them but could do nothing about the split tyre. They were about 15km into a 60km ride

which we thought was pretty ambitious on hired bikes. With the tyre pumped up only to be puddingy they pressed on.

Even though we were in the Burren all day we did not come across the famous limestone pavements until the afternoon. In fact the stoker had been having a go at the management for planning a route which avoided them. He was however fully vindicated. The pavements duly appeared all around us and are magnificent. We enjoyed in silence the changing colours of the limestone as the light changed on the nearby mountains and valleys. We also came across some extensive and unusual ruins of a cathedral at Kilmacduagh with an impossibly high narrow round tower. The notice board said it is two feet out of true at the top. We just could not see what kept it up.

We pedalled into the medium sized town of Gort and by chance spotted the hostel in the main square. We were soon booked in and eating pizza. One of the few evenings when we have not prebooked by phone the night before.

Day 32 20th September Gort to Portumna

It was not the best hostel we have stayed in. That combined with a poor weather forecast had us on the road a little earlier than usual. Unfortunately this advantage was wasted by the management in conjunction with Bill Gates's map. Instead of getting well on the way we ended up wandering around the very minor roads which surround Lough Cutra. In this way we managed to do about 10km extra.

It was a very odd morning as far as the weather was concerned. We left Gort in a heavy mist. The sky was also very dark rather as if a thunderstorm were coming. We felt quite vulnerable on the road as all the cars had their headlights on. It was also very cold compared with how it had been. It felt like the first day of autumn and we felt a little sad. It was also a cobweb day. All of the hedges and trees beside the road were covered in cobwebs which were then covered in mist droplets. As a child in the country the management used to collect these on flexible sticks held in a circle. The stoker never saw such things in Manchester and enjoys them all the more for that now.

As the morning progressed we climbed the Aughty Mountains. Not that we knew we were doing it because they were invisible in the fog. But they did not look very interesting when we got to the top and the fog cleared.

The afternoon became very pleasant and completely unlike the weather forecast. We had a picnic in a ruined monastery. Then for the first time in days we were in pleasant green flattish pasture land which was the Shannon valley. We checked into the independent hostel at Portumna. The Rough Guide says it is the best in Ireland and we have no reason to doubt them.

There was an interesting piece on the radio news tonight. There had been a "freak" landslide on the mountain near to the hostel in which we had stayed at Pollatomish on the 12th September. That was about as remote as we got and it is interesting to think that we could have been marooned there had it happened then.

Day 33 21st September Portumna to Clonaslee

It was raining when the management got the stoker's tea. Without it she has a certain reluctance to pedal. He wondered whether he could modify the plan to stay here another night. We normally take the rough with the smooth when it comes to places to stay. We don't think much about it unless it is especially good or bad. Portumna hostel is exceptionally good. Its location in a large 1847 school building makes it unusual. The comfortable en-suite accommodation and friendly service make it the best we have come across in Ireland. In fact in July we stayed in a

three star hotel at Glasgow airport owned by a national chain. It was significantly inferior to this hostel in every respect. If you are in this area don't miss it.

As it was the sun came out and after a leisurely breakfast and much chatting we left at about 10.30am. We crossed the Shannon just before the 11am bridge lift. We understand being west or east of the Shannon is an important thing to the Irish. We were on R roads, the equivalent of UK B roads, for most of the day. Traffic was light and the surface was good so it was easy to make good time.

At Birr the management could not resist an attempt to bypass the town on minor roads. This was despite the fact that our map is not that good. This went well to start with. He then turned in the right direction through a modern Irish kit mansion estate. At the end of it we could only continue on an unmade track. This time he was lucky. A couple of kids, they still go out to play here, confirmed it came out onto a road. When it did come out he said it was exactly where he expected.

Today's "rowt" was planned to go to Cadamstown where some years ago there may have been a hostel. As we half expected it had closed, if indeed it was ever open. The area is pretty but feels remote and rather run down. B&Bs were not all that frequent and the stoker enquired in a tea room. We went on for another 10km and found the recommended house. We were again lucky with the accommodation and even more because the rain held off till we had unloaded the Bob.

Day 34 22nd September Clonaslee to just outside Mullingar

Irish hospitality is alive and well in Clonaslee. Deirdre spent ages in the evening trying to book us a B&B for tomorrow without success. There is a ploughing competition on in the area which has taken all of the accommodation. We were also welcomed into her kitchen to prepare our simple evening meal. Joe came in from his print workshop, which is attached to the house, with a bottle of wine. Not only all that but the B&B facilities were very nice, and cheap.

We were waved off in the morning by the whole family. The management had changed the planned route, going directly north towards Mullingar. We hoped that by doing this we would be able to find a B&B on the way. By fluke rather than because the signs made any sense we found the Tourist Information Office beside the Grand Canal at Tullamore. On payment of four euros we were eventually found a B&B near to Mullingar. This was not bad value for money when there is little accommodation around. But normally there are so many B&Bs it is a rip off. Anyway the stoker was happy for the rest of the day.

The management then excelled himself by planning a route which kept us on the tiny tinkers roads for much of the rest of the day. We even had the opportunity to fail to find St Hugh's holy well and "Headache Stone". We also investigated a ruined church cemetery and possible castle.

The B&B is in a fine house built in the 1750's within its own grounds. It looks as if it ought to be a wedding venue with a wide drive and steps up to the front door. Shame about the facilities and the price. Still at least we have somewhere and the landlady took us into town by car so that we could eat which was nice.

Day 35 23rd September Mullingar to Trim

Bright sunshine came through the fine Georgian windows when we awoke. Even though we were up early the departure was late. The stoker blamed the management. He seems to have adopted the Irish habit of excessive chatting.

Navigating on 250,000 maps is not easy even with the GPS to help. Consequently we did a quaint little tour of a steep field 1km from the main road. We should have turned off 300 metres

further on. We did however excel ourselves by finding our way through a network of tinkers roads during the morning. Even in the afternoon we only used a very quiet R road.

Lunch was late. Because of our huge breakfast we passed by a perfectly good place at 1pm. After this we could not find anywhere suitable to stop. Rather surprisingly we passed through an area of commercial peat extraction. This was the first we had seen in the whole trip and it was appalling. Great stretches of black peat bog and on either side very poor agricultural land. Everywhere else peat has been cut by very small operators as a cottage industry.

We eventually, nearly an hour late, found a small area of grass in a small village opposite the Health Centre. It could not have been more removed from similarly named places at home. At about 1.50pm a confused elderly lady turned up, went in, came out and then enquired of us about the presence of a doctor. The stoker went to investigate only to find that even though the doors were open and computers etc in place not a soul was in the building. At a minute past two a doctor turned up in his Merc. Between then and when he left less than 45 minutes later about half a dozen patients turned up. After he had gone the stoker went over to use the facilities and again found the building deserted. In the meantime on a sunny Irish afternoon the management was pondering double speak. He had once managed to read George Orwell's 1984. How come a centre which only deals with the sick is call a Health Centre? How come a Leisure Centre to which the young confused drive their cars to "work out" is called Leisure Centre? He had no answer but felt it wise to avoid both at least as a customer.

We arrived at Trim. The management was not put off when the stoker observed the Irish road signs. The first we saw said 7km. The second 10 minutes later said 8km and the third, another 10 minutes on, said 9km. Not only that but we were 10 or 12 km nearer to Mullingar, our starting point, than our computers said we had travelled. Fortunately for the whole civilised world some aspects of Spike Milligan's Ireland are alive and well. It is best to ignore signs and only ask for directions if you have a great deal of time to spare.

We arrived, despite the signing at Trim, on schedule with the management's estimated distance now showing on the cycle computer. He can be very boring at times.

Last night, by sheer fluke and considerable luck, we had managed to book a B&B at Trim. We only realised how lucky when we arrived. Apparently all the rooms in the area had been booked by the ploughers months ago. We had dialled just at the right time to get a cancellation.

Trim is a nice town with good shops. It also has the interesting castle that formed the film set of Braveheart.

We are now well within the influence of Dublin. There is the same kind of contrast between here and the West of Ireland as there is between South East England and the West Country. Still, we have got to within less than a day's ride of the airport without having to deal with heavy traffic.

Day 36 24th September Trim to Swords

The B&B lady kindly gave us very good directions to get out of town on quiet roads. This despite the fact that she was much harassed by fellow guests wanting breakfast at 6am so that they could go to the ploughing competition.

Once clear of the town we diverted from the direct route and managed to avoid main roads for most of the morning. We could have made a further diversion to Tara Hill, the ancient seat of Irish Kings and Queens and also a neolithic site. After considering this we were unanimous that we were completely historied out.

We were now in Dublin commuter land and in the afternoon we had to put up with traffic. We even passed a queue of cars every bit as long as those in Surrey, waiting to pick up their little

darlings. We suppose it is inevitable here with the silly Irish policy of allowing endless ribbon development. There is also very little public transport.

Swords is a busy working town and we cycled through the town centre and found a pleasant B&B only 6km from the airport. We had time to enjoy a walk around the very interesting church. Nearby is one of those tall thin round towers for which the historians have yet to establish a use. The castle is currently being done up. It is hard to see it ever being very interesting but it might bring in a few tourists.

Day 37 25th September Swords to Bournemouth (with the help of Ryanair)

We allowed ourselves an even later breakfast than usual. After this we had to repack the bags for the airline rules. This meant that all electronic stuff and batteries had to go in the hand luggage. All tools, knives etc had to be in the checked in luggage.

We finally left the B&B soon after 11am and had, for once, loads of time to cycle to the airport and take the tandem to bits and put it in the bags. After check in at 1.30pm. we had peace and quiet to have lunch and write the diary.

Ryanair flights have a reputation for being on time and this one was no exception. It even arrived ten minutes early. We did wonder whether this was partly achieved by the pilot doing a high speed landing. Certainly it was the first time we remember being thrown forwards against the seat belts when he put on reverse thrust and the brakes. The management would have been in deep trouble had he been brave enough to apply the same procedure on the tandem.

Exiting Bournemouth airport is simple. You get off the plane, walk through the shed picking up your bags on the way and you are out. It could of course be improved if you were allowed to pick up the bags from outside the plane. This would no doubt be too difficult a concept for the airport. They will no doubt only be happy when they have incorporated all the delaying features planned into all big airports.

Putting the tandem together after a flight is always a bit worrying. It is even worse when everything is covered in five weeks grime and oil. Once again however it all went together well. It did take about an hour but this was mainly because the management was doing it at arms length. This was so as not to end up looking like a grease monkey.

With the GPS set to reverse our route to the airport we left to follow the track at about 5.45pm. It was reassuring to see a neat map of Bournemouth suburbia on the screen with us moving nicely across it. Because of lack of a decent base map the GPS has only been of limited use in Ireland.

As we got near to the coast at Boscombe we started looking for a B&B without success. We suppose we had got used to there being so many in Ireland. We cycled along the promenade, now permitted by the great and wise in Bournemouth because it is low season. We did however realise quite soon that there are no B&Bs on the beach. Following the advice of a passing tourist we went off and up at Alum Chine. Here we booked into a convenient typically Victorian holiday hotel.

Day 38 26th September Bournemouth to Weymouth

Having repacked the bags into cycling order and taken them to the tandem we found a flat rear tyre. Cursing Ryanair (unjustifiably) and the fact that it was, as usual, the rear the management got on with changing the tube. He could find no sign of what caused it but perhaps he did not look hard enough.

We found it warm and dry as we cycled the rest of the way along the prom to Sandbanks. Apparently Sandbanks has now become millionaires row and several footballers live here. It

doesn't say much for their discrimination. They live in an urban mess by the sea and are confronted by a constant line of traffic waiting for the ferry. However they probably live somewhere else most of the time.

On the Sandbanks ferry we were joined by a group from Farnham 6th Form College. They had long poles and things to stick in the ground. We speculated that they were doing a survey of the famous nudist beaches of Studland. There are worse ways of spending a day in sunny late September. We went on through Corfe and Stoborough and had lunch in the café at Wool. The cycling here, except for the main roads, is every bit as good as in Ireland.

Near Woodsford on the excellent cycling road from Moreton to West Knighton we got the ominous bumping from the rear wheel. Another rear wheel puncture had been inflicted upon us. We did another quick tube change but again could not find the cause.

We arrived home at about 5pm. It is lovely to be back with all the home comforts. It was of course particularly nice to have cycled to and from our own front door.

And a short postscript on the punctures. The management found that all three were in exactly the same place on the tubes. The last two at least were caused because the wire in the tyre edge had become uncovered and then rubbed a hole in the tube. He cannot account for us not having more punctures in Ireland. It could be just luck or perhaps some technical reason of which he is unaware. All modern tyres are badly designed for expedition touring. The Schwalbe Marathon XT is the best of a bad bunch. It also has to be said that we did not deflate the tyres for air travel. This may have made things worse and we will let a little air out next time just to be on the safe side. We will also revert to taking a spare.