

Dragon Rally Feb 8/9 2014 – *The Journey is your destination!*

The weather forecast was good for Friday. Saturday and Sunday was not so good but we'd worry about that when we got there. For now we could enjoy the sunshine.

A 9.30am meet at Crumlin Shell Garage saw Big Nige, Jase and Ian make up the Caerphilly contingent which would have been 4 but Nigel's mate Andy was a no show. Big Nige had gotten out of the wrong side of bed cos Jason had kept a promise to phone him in case he slept in. A quick fuel and we were off to Abergavenny via Pontypool to meet Chris Amos at the Bus Depot. It was a crisp sunny day and the riding was already good. Chris was waiting with his XR650 loaded and low geared for the road work. A brief chat with some English fella in a fancy leather suit riding an Olive green Armstrong in Army fashion, complete with Steel panniers and chunky tyres, also heading for the Rally via the slow roads, and we were off.

Nige had planned a bit of an alternative route running up alongside the English Border till Mid Wales before heading North West. A short ride up the Hereford road and left at the Skirrid Inn took us towards Llanthony Abbey and the Gospel Pass. The lane winds slowly uphill and we noticed the temperature drop as we began to see the water on the road turn to slush then snow as we went over the mountain. There were a pair of tracks in the snow where a car had been but they were a bit narrow and with a gusting side wind they proved damn tricky for the several miles of mountain road. At one point Big Nige took the Beemer for a bit of mud plugging as the wind forced him off the tarmac and into the gutter, luckily his years of trial riding stood him in good stead and he managed to stay upright even if he did take a few dabs. The mountain road drops slowly down into Hay-on-Wye and the snowy roads turned back to wet roads as we got our first glimpse of the river Wye in full flood. We then started heading North towards Kington then Knighton before taking the mountain road towards Llanbister, Bwlch-Y-Sarnau and on to Llandidloes for an all day breakfast at the Dolwen Café. As usual it was full of bikers on the way to the Rally and we bumped into Pug on his trailbike with a couple of lads, although he'd already decided that the weather forecast was too bad so was heading home.

From the Café we doubled back to Llandidloes and took the mountain road past the Llyn Clywedog reservoir to Staylittle before taking the mountain road towards Machynlleth above the Dylife Gorge. Part way across Big Nige decided to do a Ewan McGregor and partake in a spot of adventure riding on the GS. He took a Stoney track out over the Gorge for about a mile with a cracking view of Cadair Idris in the distance. Chris Amos was happy enough on the Big XR but the Tigers were struggling and Jason had a little lie down on a short slippery climb, the Tiger had a soft landing but he soon realised it was no easy task to pick it up fully loaded – luckily Chris was stopped nearby laughing his head off so the two of them managed to get it off the ground, no harm done and five minutes later we'd returned to the tarmac.

Dropping down off the mountain we took the A489 to Cemaes Road and on to Dinas Mawddwy before taking the narrow road up over Bwlch-Y-Groes (The Pass of the Cross), one of the highest mountain passes in Wales at 545 Metres. A stop at the carpark on the top was a photo opportunity, the Snow capped mountains of Cadair Idris and Aran Fawddwy providing the perfect backdrop. The pleasant weather had allowed us a good look at the valley climb to top and, in Big Nige's own words it was 'Bootifull!'

The drop down the mountain took us to Bala alongside the lake before a bit of a detour at Ian's request. Instead of heading Northwest we went Northeast towards Chester and doubled back onto the Horseshoe pass before a brief stop at the Ponderosa Café on the top and another photo opportunity. Having negotiated the pass we dropped into Llangollen, the river was impressive and we started to see lots of bikers as well as tourists milling about. A fuel stop saw Nige chatting to a couple of Irish guys on big tourers who were planning on staying at a hotel rather than camp – pah!

It was starting to get on to dusk so we decided to blast up the A5 to Corwen and on to Betws-y-Coed and Capel Curig before taking the Pen-Y-Pass to Llanberis. As we climbed out of Betws-y-Coed the temperature dropped and the rain came in but as we went over the mountain and into the pass the rain stopped and with Snowdon snow-capped and shrouded in mist we flew down the Pen-Y-Pass with the road to ourselves using both sides of the white line and flowing between the stone walls. Awesome. Through Llanberis and on to Caernafon, we arrived at the Travelodge just before dark at around 5.30pm. 8 hours in the saddle and 240 miles. By 7pm we were in 'spoons' ordering a Steak and a pint!

A couple of Caerphilly old boys joined us for a beer, Paul Miles and Moz were staying at the hotel opposite us so we shared a beer or two and had a laugh. By 2am we'd exhausted all our pub options so it was time for that great British favourite, Kebab with salad. Big Nige got a knockback at the first Kebab shop – they'd already shut up shop. The second shop was also shut with some old guy mopping the floors but with a bit of persistence Nige blagged three Kebabs with all the trimmings. We didn't actually see anyone cooking anything so whilst scoffing them in a doorway to shelter from the wind and rain, we wondered if they'd got the kebab meat out of the bin. Could be a rough night!

Saturday we had a lie in, before hitting Morrisons for Breakfast and a spot of shopping – the usual, PIG, more PIG, some porridge and some sherry. Sorted.

'Derek the weather' was spot on with his forecast yet again, it was chucking it down with rain and blowing a force ten gale. By the time we got back to the hotel, Chris's bike was gone, obviously fed up of waiting. We changed, loaded the bikes and were on our way by 12 noon. We decided it best to use the dual carriageway to get there quick because the weather was crap. Trouble was, the weather was crap! A half hour white knuckle ride along the coast in a bloody hurricane, leaning the bike at what felt like 45 degrees and trying to avoid being sucked under the wheels of every other juggernaut. By the time we reached Conwy I was a quivering wreck, with my heart in my mouth and in need of clean underwear. We rode into Conwy and needed a couple of laps of the town's one way system to get our bearings. We headed out on the Trefiw road and after a couple of miles we were pointed to the checkpoint which turned out to be the campsite also. It was persistently raining and windy as hell as we pitched the tents on a sodden area behind a copse of trees. We were sheltered from the wind at least and the copse provided a perfect spot for rigging up Nigels 10ft Tarp. We rode the quarter mile to the pavilion on the other side of the campsite and picked up our goodie bags before opting to ride back into town to find a pub to watch the match. As they played the anthems we were sat under a big screen with a Pint of Guinness with the place almost to ourselves. The Welsh Team disappointed but at least we'd been warm and dry for a couple of hours. Back to the campsite and time for the first 'Spark up' of the season. Under the tarp we lit the bbq and scoffed Pork Chops, Chicken and Sausages washed down with a nice drop of fortified wine. It was pissing down but we were happy as pigs in shite. Big Nige took a funny turn but couldn't blame the chef cos

he'd cooked it all himself and me and Jase were just fine. He went for a lie down and when the wine was gone Jase and I headed down to the pavilion to catch the second half of the Band. It seemed like a good idea at the time and with big grins on our faces we got back to the tents in no time at all – but that's another story, ask Jase, the rebel, and he'll tell you all about the ambulance.

We were tucked up in bed not much after midnight and somehow managed to get some sleep in the howling wind.

I'm not sure if it was the daylight that woke me or the constant revving of bikes but it was bloody early. By the time we'd got up most had already left. Jase got out the porridge and the coffee and fired up the meths cooking stove. By 11.00am we were packed and off home. The weather was slightly better, still raining but less wind. We took the Trefiw road heading South on the A470. With the wind pummelling us we arrived at Betws-Y-Coed and followed the A470 over the mountain to Blaenau Ffestiniog. The skyline was thick, dark grey cloud matching the colour of the slate quarries perfectly. The road around Trawsfynydd was interesting in the strong gusts especially along the open straights at 70mph! At Dolgellau we headed West to Dinas Mawddwy before taking the mountain road to Staylitttle and on to Llandidloes for another stop at the Dolwen for a welcome warm and a Beef Roast Dinner. Warmed, dried and stuffed we headed off in the rain to Rhayader and through to Builth still leaning into the wind. The river Wye was in full flood as we rode parallel along the road to Llyswen and onto the Brecon road. The sun came out briefly and we were blinded by the road glare before the rain returned outside Brecon. By the time we reached the Storey Arms the dark clouds were dumping snow flurries, reducing visibility and slowing the traffic. We took the Heads of the Valley road to Merthyr and onto Tredegar in a mini blizzard, talk about four seasons in one day! Home before dark, cold, wet but all the better for it. A great weekend of riding despite the weather. Thanks go to Big Nige for navigation, awesome as usual. Riding Mid and North Wales at any time of year, and in any conditions is not to be missed. Hopefully we'll be back again next year. Cheers.

Ride report: Ian Craig.