



A CYCLE RIDE IN THE DULAS VALLEY

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The Dovey and Dulas valleys lie in a beautiful part of Wales. The cycle ride described is only twelve miles long, but there is a wealth of interest along the route. On the outward route it follows the national cycle route and the return journey follows the 'A' road, which, while busier, does give a change of scene. It's also a straight downhill run, with no uphill – just freewheeling! For those who prefer to avoid traffic, it is possible to do a 'there and back' cycle ride.

We begin at the small market town of Machynlleth. 'Small' is the operative word: consisting of just three streets with a population of less than 2,000. Despite its small size it was suggested as a seat for the Welsh Assembly: undoubtedly the reason for this honour was the fact that Owain Glyndwr was crowned Prince of Wales here in 1404. The black and white building that is generally known as Parliament House is still standing, but is believed to be of somewhat later date than that of Glyndwr's investiture. It is a Grade 1 listed building, a well worth a visit.

A word of advice – don't do this ride on a Wednesday if you like shopping – you'll never get away! One of the best street markets in mid Wales is to be found in Machynlleth and has been in existence for several hundred years. Its traders come from as far afield as Criceth, Caerleon and Coleshill. And equally, if you don't like street trading, it may well be best to avoid Wednesdays, because you'll find it difficult to manoeuvre through the hordes of people thronging the streets on market day.

I have suggested starting this ride at Machynlleth and cycling as far as Corris, although it is feasible to do it the other way round. If you start at Machynlleth you'll be cycling uphill on the outward journey, and be able to look forward to a downhill run on the return, especially if you choose the 'A' road. There are plenty of pubs and cafes in Machynlleth, and should you decide to come by train, the railway station is conveniently situated *en route*. There is parking in the centre of the town.

It is interesting to note that John Wesley in 1747 on his travels through Wales almost certainly went from Machynlleth to Dolgellau by the route of our ride. Needless to say, he didn't cycle it!

Our road follows the valley of the river Dulas. In Welsh, 'Dulas' means 'blue-black' and the name is very appropriate, for that's the colour of the river as it runs over its bed gouged out of the slate. The disused narrow-gauge railway line also runs in the valley and follows closely the course of the river. The railway was built to carry slate from the once prolific mines of Corris and the nearby village of Aberllefeni. While the Aberllefeni mines are still working (albeit at a fraction of their previous capacity) and employ half a

dozen men or so, the Corris mines are sadly now defunct. The railway took the slate down to the port of Derwenlas, two miles beyond Machynlleth. In exchange, lime was carried up the valley in order to neutralise the extremely acid soil of this part of Wales.

It is best to start the ride in Maengwyn Street, the main thoroughfare of Machynlleth and near the town car park. The imposing town clock stands at the end of the street and was built in the 1870s to celebrate the coming of age of Viscount Castlereagh, a member of the Londonderry family who were large landowners in the area. At the clock turn right towards Dolgellau. Make your way past the church on your left, and, just as you leave the town, the railway station on your right, where you can join the route if you choose to come by train.

Less than a mile further on you'll come to the bridge over the river Dovey, which is the river's lowest bridging point. Just beyond the river lies the hamlet of Dovey Bridge which you can see quite clearly. It consists of a few houses, including a row of cottages, and a chapel. Once upon a time there was a blacksmith's workshop. This workshop ceased to function more than forty years ago, and was taken down when it became unstable, but I can still remember the pungent odour of the smouldering hoes as the blacksmith plied his trade. The chapel is no longer a place of worship, and has been converted to a holiday cottage. The bridge itself is a listed building and dates from about 1830.

Just before the bridge, turn right on the marked cycle way. From now on it will be uphill nearly all the way until you get to Corris. The gradient isn't too steep but it is almost relentless; there are a few patches of downward run to serve as welcome relief. However, there's usually a following wind, which can be a great help, both physically and psychologically.

After about half a mile you'll cross the Millennium Bridge, over the River Dovey. This was built to accommodate cyclists. It's necessary to join the 'A' road shortly after this bridge, but there's a marked cycle lane away from the traffic. Turn right at the tollgate cottage, following the marked route. You'll pass the old water mill on your left: this, until the late 1950s, was a working flour mill. From here onwards there will be very little traffic indeed – a factor that makes the ride extremely pleasant. It's a lovely run, especially on a hot summer's day, partly because there are some superb stands of broad-leaved trees, particularly beech.

You'll see the river clearly below you as it winds its way among lush meadows – here orchids grow in spring and summer, and I've seen otters playing on its banks. Early in the year violets and windflowers decorate the hedgerows and shortly afterwards, the first primroses are to be seen on the sides of the lane.

In a couple of miles, just before the tiny hamlet of Esgairgeiliog you'll see the Centre for Alternative Technology signposted on your right. It has been set up on a disused quarry site and its function is to work out solutions to environmental problems: if you've time to spare it's well worth while stopping. There's plenty here to explore – for instance, the environmentally friendly methods of heating and lighting, the organic gardens, demonstrations of good compost making, a self-build house, water turbines, wind generators and much more.

A further two miles' cycling brings you to a sharp turn and a bridge over the infant Dulas. Cross this, and pass a row of miners' cottages on your left. Go up a steep hill and turn

left. As you approach the turn, you'll see the Slater's Arms, which is definitely to be recommended. Reaching this halfway point is certainly a good reason for a pause to quench your thirst. You're now in the village of Lower Corris where the narrow gauge railway starts, and the tiny railway museum is worth a visit. These railway buffs have their own diesel engines but need a licence to run them. It is hoped to get a grant to extend the track further.

The Corris railway was once, in more senses than one, a lifeline. An old friend of mine, now in her late eighties, recalls how as a teenager she was overtaken by an attack of acute appendicitis. She was bundled onto the railway and transported to the hospital in Machynlleth for an emergency operation.

After passing the church on your left, you'll cycle steeply uphill and come to the 'A' road. Opposite the turn the Braich Goch public house is situated – another hostelry where you may choose to imbibe.

Turn left on the 'A' road to cycle back to Machynlleth. If you prefer to avoid traffic it is of course perfectly feasible to follow the marked way back to base, but following the 'A' road does give a very pleasant freewheel back, with very little need for pedalling indeed.

In a couple of miles after turning left you'll come to a magnificent stand of broad-leaved trees, mainly beech, on your right. The Forestry Commission has attempted to show a friendly face here: it offers a car park and marked walks including a forest trail.

Soon you'll be back at the tollgate cottage and rejoin your outward route. You may choose to follow the main road back through Dovey Bridge, turning left to cross the bridge and thus back to Machynlleth or, alternatively, follow the marked cycle way.

NOTES:

The name is "Dolgellau" is the Welsh spelling; it is spelt "Dolgelley" in English. The former is officially recognised, and is the form I have chosen. However, be prepared to see either.

It is possible to hire bicycles in Machynlleth

Accommodation: there are hotels, guest houses and B & B's in Machynlleth, as well as elsewhere along the route.

Maps: The route is covered by the Ordnance Landranger series (1:50,000) sheets 124 (Dolgellau) and 135 (Aberystwyth)

Ann Griffiths, February 2012