

RADAR RIDE

HELL ON 2 WHEELS

WERE THE TAILWIND SECTIONS OF THE 2010 RADAR RIDE ENOUGH TO MAKE UP FOR THE HELLISH HEADWIND?

By Gary Hitchen

What a difference a month can make!

June 4th 2010 - Radar Ride Recce; blue skies, glorious sunshine, no rain, slight headwind down to Moffat.

July 11th 2010 - Radar Ride; dark, cloudy skies, occasional patches of sunshine, plenty of rain, horrible headwind.

I suppose I always knew that the chances of good weather for this event were limited after the fantastic weather we had for the Recce Ride, but I wasn't prepared for the energy sapping headwinds we suffered. Myself and regular riding partner Geoff arrived in Wanlockhead just before 08:30 ready for a 09:05 start. The temperature had been dropping steadily ever since we left East Lothian and by the time we reached Wanlockhead it was cold, very windy and a bit rainy. After registering at the Wanlockhead Inn and picking up numbers, route card and transponders we got ready and headed to the start.

A 10 second countdown from organiser Peter Smith and we were off in the second group of 50 (groups started at five minute intervals) but after about 5 metres I had to stop as I had forgotten to start my GPS tracker! Catching up with the group I said hello to Jamie (Buchanan) who had been on the Recce Ride and then carried on to catch up with Geoff. At the bottom of the descent I found myself ahead of the group so carried on and then embarrassingly missed the sign to turn left at Mennock and had to turn around. I was now

following a couple of guys in matching club kit who were making good time on the flat, but when we came to a hill they slowed down a little so I forged on. From Mennock to Holestane I started picking up groups and individuals from the first group off at 9am and shortly before we turned left onto the A702 I found myself behind the lead escort motorbike.

Until this point I hadn't really noticed the wind but now it was obviously a tailwind and it made the Dalveen Pass, both up and down, a joy to ride as I tried, in vain, to catch the motorbike. However, all too soon I was at Elvanfoot and as the road swung west for a short stretch I got a real shock as I went into the wind. Going over the M74 onto the B7076 provided more of the same - this was hard. Luckily as I travelled along the B7076 the wind became less of a problem and then I made the left turn to go over the M74 and begin the Greenhillstairs climb.

The climb over Greenhillstairs was okay and then the feed-stop came into view on the downhill where I filled up with water and grabbed a nice piece of cake (such a pleasant change after oat bars). As I was setting off I heard the rider behind me coming in, but I don't think he stopped for food and the next thing I knew he was beside me. We exchanged a few words and then turned left onto the A701 and the climb to the Devil's Beeftub. The wind now started to make itself felt as a cross-wind from the left, but as the road turned right it became something of a tail wind until near the top when the road turned left and it became a cross-wind again. Well before the top of the Beeftub the rider I had met after the feed-stop reappeared on my wheel complete with another rider in the same club kit. They proceeded to go past and were going strongly so it was all I could do to yo-yo off the back until eventually we reached the foot of the Wall of Talla. We climbed Talla together for most of the way until I managed to run off the road while taking off my sunglasses (doh!). By the time I'd restarted they were off and away. I was too tired to smile for Susan the photographer and although the two riders in front didn't seem to go over the summit too far ahead, by the time I crested the top they were nowhere to be seen on the descent and I was on my own. Having done the Recce Ride I knew what to expect with the descent but even so I still had a couple of tricky moments, probably because I was foolish enough to think I might catch the two riders ahead.

Turning right onto the A708 however, all such thoughts were banished for good. What a headwind! Not only that but I knew there would be no respite until Moffat. Progress now seemed painfully slow as I struggled alone into the wind. Eventually a group came past me but I was now so tired from fighting the wind on my own that I just didn't have the strength to stay on the back. When the next group went past I didn't even have the strength to try and get on the back. This was horrible. It got worse with the climb (can't remember if it has a name) on the A708 and even the descent proved no respite as it was now necessary to pedal to go downhill! I swear a mountain biker coming the other way was going up without

pedalling. For the run-in to Moffat I was already starting to slip into survival mode and was eating more of my energy bars than I could afford to given the distance to come.

After Moffat it was back onto the A701 and the climb up to the feed station. I was now at the stage where I could think of nothing but food, food, food. It was so bad that I was overtaken on the hill, which for someone who likes to think they can climb was another nail in the coffin containing what was left of my morale...especially as the chain on the bike overtaking me sounded like it hadn't seen any lubrication in its life! At this point I actually thought about abandoning, and if a broom wagon had come alongside I would have happily jumped in, but a couple of things kept me going; firstly that I was still about 40 miles away from my car and secondly a quote (from Lance Armstrong I think) that I always remember; "Pain is temporary, quitting is forever". With these in mind I knew that I just had to keep going, however slowly. I also remember thinking that if I was lucky the climb to the radar station would be pulled due to the high winds. Finally I reached the feed station (thanks to the volunteers for manning this in bad weather and with good humour) and devoured as much as I dared without appearing greedy, stuffing a couple of bananas in my pockets for good measure. It was at this point a couple of concerned marshals asked me if I had seen any accidents as they had reports of a serious head injury, but I hadn't so I couldn't help them.

Setting off over Greenhillstairs on the return leg I felt a bit better for the food but there was still a headwind and I won't pretend it was pleasant. Pedalling down the hill to cross the M74 and then turning right onto the B7076 was still nasty and the long drag back to Elvanfoot was very unpleasant. Turning left at Elvanfoot onto the B7040 I was on the home straight. Unfortunately the local council had decided that the home straight needed re-surfacing, but in this case "re-surfacing" only extended to throwing a load of very small chippings over the road. To a bicycle (or at least this cyclist) this was like cycling through sand and simply added to the energy-sapping effect of the wind. A few more riders went past me on this stretch but then I finally reached Leadhills and the final run into Wanlockhead got a bit easier as mentally I knew the end was near, even though 'the end' was the climb up Lowther Hill.

Turning left off the main road to start the climb of Lowther hill I noted the inflatable arch for the start of the timed climb but decided to grab a bite to eat at the feed station first. Halfway through my second sandwich someone shouted; "you need to go over the mat to finish". The climb was cancelled but I hadn't realised! I pushed over the mat and gave back my timing chip and number and then one of the marshals said that we could climb the hill at our own risk if we wanted (and were capable). Having got this far I decided to carry on, if for no other reason than to find out if I could do it. The climb wasn't too bad considering the wind, but once at the top Geoff sent me a text to see where I was. When I stopped to answer it I was nearly blown over! Moving the finish to the bottom of the hill was definitely the correct decision.

The descent from the hill was a mix of trepidation, fear and fun but I made it to the bottom in one piece and found Geoff buying a hot drink from the catering van by the car park. Discussing the ride we were both glad to hear that the other had found it very difficult and our experiences had been very similar. Last year we did the Bealach Beag and Fred Whitton in the same weekend, last month we did Land's End to John O'Groats in seven days, but we both agreed that the Radar Ride 2010 was the most tiring ride we had ever done.

So, after all that did we enjoy it? Yes and no is the answer. The first half with a tailwind was fantastic; the second half with a headwind was hell on two wheels. But the acid test is would we do it again - and the answer to that is a resounding YES. Bring on the Radar Ride 2011

Finally a big thank you to the organisers, marshals, escort riders, photographers and volunteers for standing/riding around in the wind and rain to make the day possible.