

Day 12 - Empty Mayo

Alan and Louise have kept the Wolf Dog Tavern in Killala for 14 years. It's a proper local boozier with 11 letting rooms, all of which were occupied last night; indeed Alan had turned away 4 potential customers by the time I got down to the bar after doing the usual. There were 5 other people drinking in the bar and we had a good bit of craic about my journey, Brexit and various other bits and bobs before I disappeared in search of food as there was none available at the Wolf Dog that evening. I wandered down to the Quay and then back up into town by way of the



round tower. It's a striking building about 90 feet tall with a bulge in the side, possibly from lightning damage, and was originally built by monks. There seems little knowledge as to why these round towers, of which 60 remain in Ireland, were built. It is conjectured that they may have been bell towers or fortifications to protect the valuables of nearby monasteries. Anyway it's an interesting structure with no context. I made my way to the Village Inn for fish and chips, perfectly OK but unexciting. There were a few people at the bar and a couple of other tables of eaters but I didn't hang around and returned to write the blog.

This morning I was down for breakfast at 0830 to find a table of four contractors who are doing the groundworks for a nearby wind farm. The boss man and one other are from Tipperary about 150 miles away and the other two were from County Down. It's amazing how far people travel to work. We spoke about my bike ride and they wished me well and went off to work.. Alan was having trouble with the card machine which held me up for a while and by the time I left at 0917 it was starting to rain, as forecast. It was only spits and spots so I didn't bother with a rain jacket as I set off into the Mayo countryside.

The first 10 miles to Ballycastle (yes a different one) were uneventful. I was away from the coast and the terrain was relatively gentle but that wretched wind was in my face again and I only managed 10.7 miles in the first hour. After Ballycastle the ground steepened and I was working quite hard on slopes up to 9 %. It started to rain properly and I stopped to put on my rain jacket just before I reached the coast at Ceide (pronounced kayja) Fields. This is the most extensive neolithic site in Ireland and, arguably, the oldest field system in the world. It was discovered by a local teacher before the war but was not extensively excavated until his son, an archeologist, mapped the systems in the 1970s. Work still goes on and there is a building on the site in the shape of a pyramid that contains exhibitions and explanations about the work. I went in but did not feel that it was as informative as it could be. It got me out of the cold and I had a cup of tea before I wandered a short way up the hill before deciding that I needed to press on.



The site stands on top of some impressive cliffs that were being buffeted by some big waves



19 miles into the journey I left the main road at Belderrig and started climbing over the moor. It was a typical peat bog moor covered with heather, sedges and moorland plants, extensively excavated for peat that was left in plastic bags to dry



The weather had been alternating between sun and dark cloud but as I was reaching the top of the steep climb to the head of the moor it started raining properly and by the time I reached the rudimentary shelter of a map showing the cycle routes in the area it was close to hail. I sheltered successfully for the five minutes it took for the storm to pass but I had become quite wet and was feeling the cold as I descended the hill on the other side.

I was now in really wild country. Mostly rolling moorland with little or no stock and the odd shelterbelt of conifers



In the ten or so miles before I got back onto a main road I only saw a couple of vehicles and the road surfaces were the worst I have encountered. I hit habitation about 30 miles into the journey and stopped at 1.45 pm for some lunch at Teach Grennai a strange little community centre that provides food all day until 4pm. I had a large plate of lasagne and some chips and a pot of tea for 9 euros, excellent value. I also dried out a bit and warmed up in the process.

I had to go down to the main road to find a bridge across the Amoy river and at that point I could have saved myself about 5 miles of the journey by sticking to it but I had decided to try to follow the coast so turned back north-west to Kilcommon and the sea. It started raining again and I sheltered amazingly successfully behind a gorse bush while the shower passed.

I had a bit of climbing to do before I arrived back on the main road for the final six miles to Belmullet. It's been an exhausting day again because of the wind. I've only travelled 54 miles but it feels like much more. Unfortunately the forecast is getting worse with no sign of slacker winds



Day 13 - Bog trotting

Chez Nous, my home for the night in Belmullet is a large chalet bungalow about a mile from the centre of the small West Mayo town. I was greeted by Tom and his young granddaughter and shown my room which was a pleasant double with ensuite shower-room. Tom is a man of few words and he told me I'd meet his wife at breakfast, the best place to eat and then left me to it.

I started the blog after I'd finished washing my kit and myself under a really powerful shower and then wandered into town to find the Talbot. I drew some money out of the cashpoint on the way. The Bank were trying to get me to take a charge for converting pounds to Euros but Mastercard will almost certainly do a better deal so I elected for them to charge my account in euros. I have a Halifax card that makes no

transaction charges but I will incur interest charges on the money until I pay the bill.

The Talbot was busy with a large table of ladies out for the evening and several other tables of four or five people. I had a goats cheese crostini starter and a fish pie with extra mash and veg and a couple of glasses of wine. Both courses were very good and filling enough to leave it at that. I walked back to the B&B and finished the blog before bedtime.

This morning dawned bright but by the time I left after the usual fry-up served by an equally taciturn Veronica it had started to cloud over and only a couple of miles into the ride it started spitting. It went on like that all day with the odd harder shower but nothing of much consequence.

There was about 3 miles of well surfaced back road before I joined the R313 which made its way across Tristia Bog



There were the usual peat workings and I wonder how much bog will be left if this continues. Presumably someone is overseeing the amount that can be cut but it is obvious how much the levels have been reduced.

The roads today were straight and I continued under leaden skies until I

joined the N59 at Bangor Erris. I was now skirting the Ballycroy National Park, one of the largest remaining areas of Atlantic blanket bog so turbary and farming are banned though there appears to have been some forestry planting



I left the main road once more and wound along some poorly surfaced side roads that passed small loughs and isolated houses. For the first time I was chased along the road by several dogs, none vicious, but it always puts a chill down my spine when it happens. At one point I took a false turn and whilst I was consulting the map a driver stopped and asked if he could help. I got myself back on track until I rejoined the main road some 30 miles into the journey. Six miles on I was back on the coast at Mallaranny/Mullranny - the spelling seems to differ. I knew that this is on the Great Western Greenway, a cycleway which I shall follow in its entirety tomorrow. I took a picture of one of the covered signs that give information about the cycleway and under one of which I sheltered on the high moor yesterday



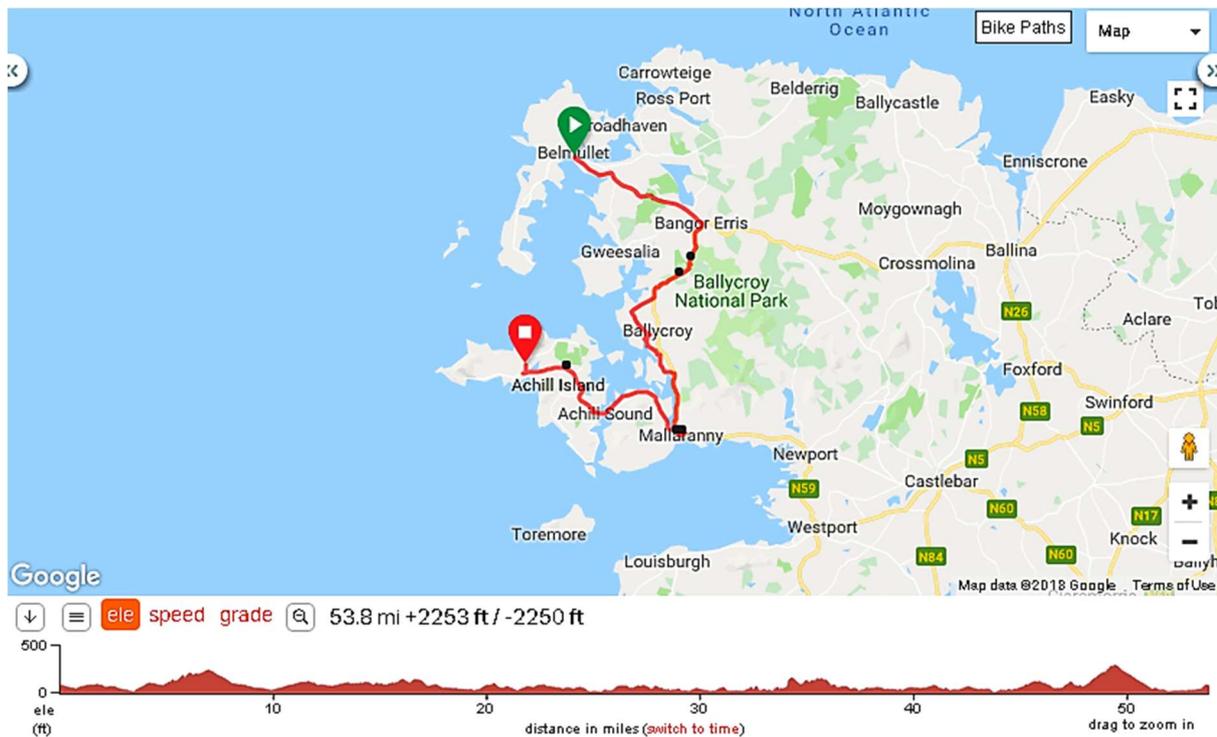
I thought that I would be able to stop for lunch at the Greenway cafe but it was closed and I made do with a cup of coffee and a couple of sticky buns from the supermarket. Small Irish supermarkets all seem to have a very good selection of home baked cakes and pastries as well as counters serving hot food such as chicken wings, pulled pork and chips.

I joined the cycleway after my snack as it climbed gently over the moor, following the old railway line for 8 miles until it reached the bridge over

to Achill Isle. The surface was excellent all the way, the only thing slowing progress were several gates but I made good time.

Once on the island I had about ten miles to go to my destination at Keel Beach. I'm not quite sure why I elected to stay there because it involved quite a stiff climb over Bunnacurry Moor and I shall have to do the return journey tomorrow. I would probably have been wiser to stay in Mallaranny and just look at the Island but I would have missed staying in a bleak but beautiful area at a very nice B&B.





The forecast at the start of next week is abysmal with the remnants of Storm Helene scheduled to cause high winds on Tuesday and Wednesday so I've decided to try to get a bus from Clifden, where I shall be on Monday night, to Galway where I'm booked to spend Tuesday night and then get on a train to Limerick on Wednesday where I shall stay before resuming cycling on Saturday. It means that I shall miss the Cliffs of Moher but I may be able to see them at greater leisure by taking a coach trip from Limerick on Thursday or Friday. I've been able to cancel three hotels I was due to stay in and stay three nights in the middle of Limerick. The only slight unknown is how Bus Eireann will cope with my bike. The train should be fine but there are several horror stories on the net about bikes on buses. However there are plenty of similar stories about bikes on planes and I haven't had any problems - yet!

Day 14 - Greenways

Marj and Liam are artists. Liam, a native of Achill Island digs up and carves bog oak into beautiful sculptures and Marj does clever things with clothes. They also run one of the best B&Bs it has been my privilege to stay in. When I arrived wet and cold I was ushered in, shown my room and my clothes were taken away to be washed and returned dry this morning. The house is about half a mile from the nearest restaurant which would have been no problem in decent weather but last night it was blowing a hooley. Marj gave me a lift down to Achill Cliffs Hotel where I got a decent meal of seafood chowder and roast pork with veg and when I called the phone number they had given me, Liam came down and collected me. Liam even offered to drive me to the end of the island this morning to see the view but I declined because I wanted to get going. So nothing was too much trouble for them and Marj cooked an excellent fried breakfast to set me up for my journey today. A lesson in how to run a B&B when you are off the beaten track and very different from Belmullet.

Amazingly the forecast for today was dry but cloudy and so it proved. I was away at 0913 and quickly into the climb from Keel Beach that took me over to Achill Bridge. It was an easy gradient and I was over the bridge in about 45 minutes



This is the third bridge since the ferry was replaced in 1887 and swings on a central pier to allow boats to pass. Shortly after the bridge the Greenway starts but I spurned it as I had come that way yesterday. Instead I stuck to the main road which was not busy and I made good time to Mulranny where I joined the Greenway as it snaked south towards Westport about 20 miles away. The Greenway is mostly blacktop but in places is hard packed gravel, in excellent condition. Most of the crossing points have cattle/sheep grids so the cyclist is not held up. In places there are gates to be opened but it was generally a very easy ride with little hard climbing as it followed the old railway line from Achill to Westport that closed in 1937. At Newport you leave the trail and cycle through the town centre and across the bridge before joining a further section that takes you all the way to Westport



At Westport I went a little too far and had to double back through the town centre and up a very steep climb up the well named Hill Street before emerging on the R335 which has a separated cycle lane for about 5 miles to Murrisk, the main centre for the climb up Croagh Patrick or the Reek. The mountain is 764 metres high and a fairly easy walk which is as well because on Reek Sunday, the last in July, about 30000 pilgrims make the climb to honour St Patrick. Some do it barefoot and some on their hands and knees. Alongside the large car park which was already quite full on a Sunday, is a community cafe where I was the only



client for a bowl of veggie soup and some excellent wheaten bread. The proceeds go to community projects and it employs local students which seemed a pretty good idea. Across the road is the Irish National Famine memorial, at first appearance, a beautiful ship. But if

you look closely it is all made up of ghastly wraiths, skeletons and dying people on top of a coffin. It was unveiled by the then Irish President, Mary Robinson, in 1997.

After I had travelled 50 miles I started to climb towards some majestic hills. The road was not steep but wound its way up with sheep wandering on and off at will. It was still overcast and at times the wind blew strongly but the scenery made up for it. Eventually I crested the hill and swooped down towards a beautiful glen with a dark lake in the bottom. This was Doolough and it has a place in Irish History.



Part way down the valley there is a memorial cross with an explanation of what happened on a bitterly cold day in 1849 when up to 600 starving people in receipt of outdoor relief gathered in Louisburgh seeking food or a ticket to enter the Workhouse. They were told to apply to the Poor Law Officials who would be at Delphi 10 miles away the following day. They struggled up the Doolough valley, some dying on the way, only to be told that there would be no help. Nobody knows how many died on the

journey but the words of poet James Berry perhaps says it all. “The sighing of the winds above their nameless graves forever sings their requiem”. It is a beautiful place and the photograph does it little justice: if you ever have the opportunity visit and reflect.

Further down the valley I passed the Delphi outdoor activities centre that caters for just about anything you care to do outdoors, following the broad Bundorragha River that must be home to salmon and sea trout, before rounding a bend and seeing Killary fjord in front of me.

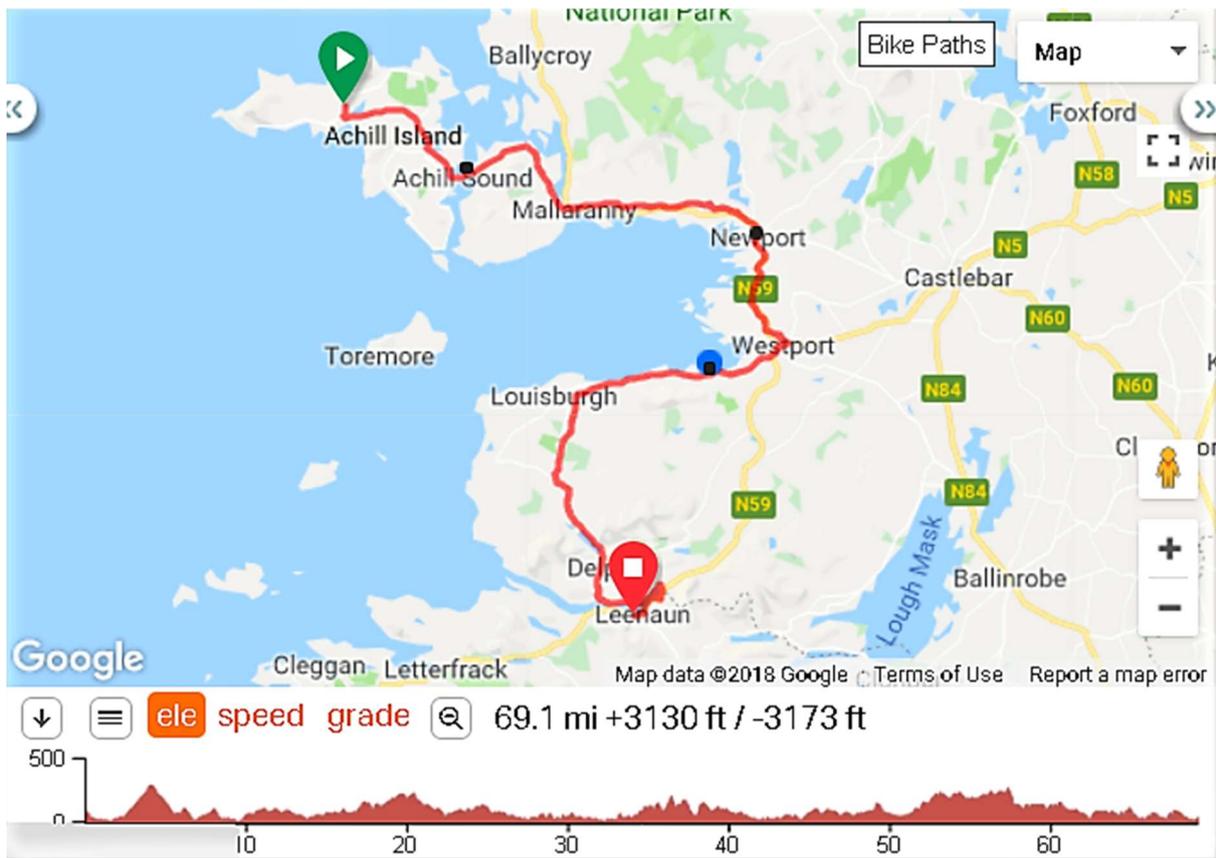


50 years ago just before I went to Agricultural college I took a hitch-hiking trip to Ireland and by great good luck was picked up by three girls from New Zealand who were driving around the island. I stayed with them for several days and one of the places we visited was Killary Harbour youth hostel. I had hoped that I might re-visit it but my truncated journey due to the weather will not allow it. Anyway I have once again seen the fjord!

The road follows the water for about three miles down to Aasleagh

where the Errif River descends over falls as it makes its way towards the fjord. The falls are not especially spectacular but there is a large carpark that suggests that they are considered worthy of sightseeing. At this point the road meets up with the N59, last seen at Westport and this winds around the end of the fjord through the village of Leenaun and past the Leenane Hotel where I am staying tonight.

It's been a very enjoyable day of cycling: not too energetic, although I've travelled nearly 70 miles. I've seen some magnificent scenery and stopped at places of interest and my hotel room is greatly superior to the one that I expected when I booked. Tomorrow promises a great deal of rain but I only have to travel 20 miles to Clifden to meet the brother of a friend from Dorset with whom I am staying the night, before getting the bus to Galway. It promises to be a jolly evening with music and dancing at the Clifden Festival.



Day 15 - a Ruddy short break

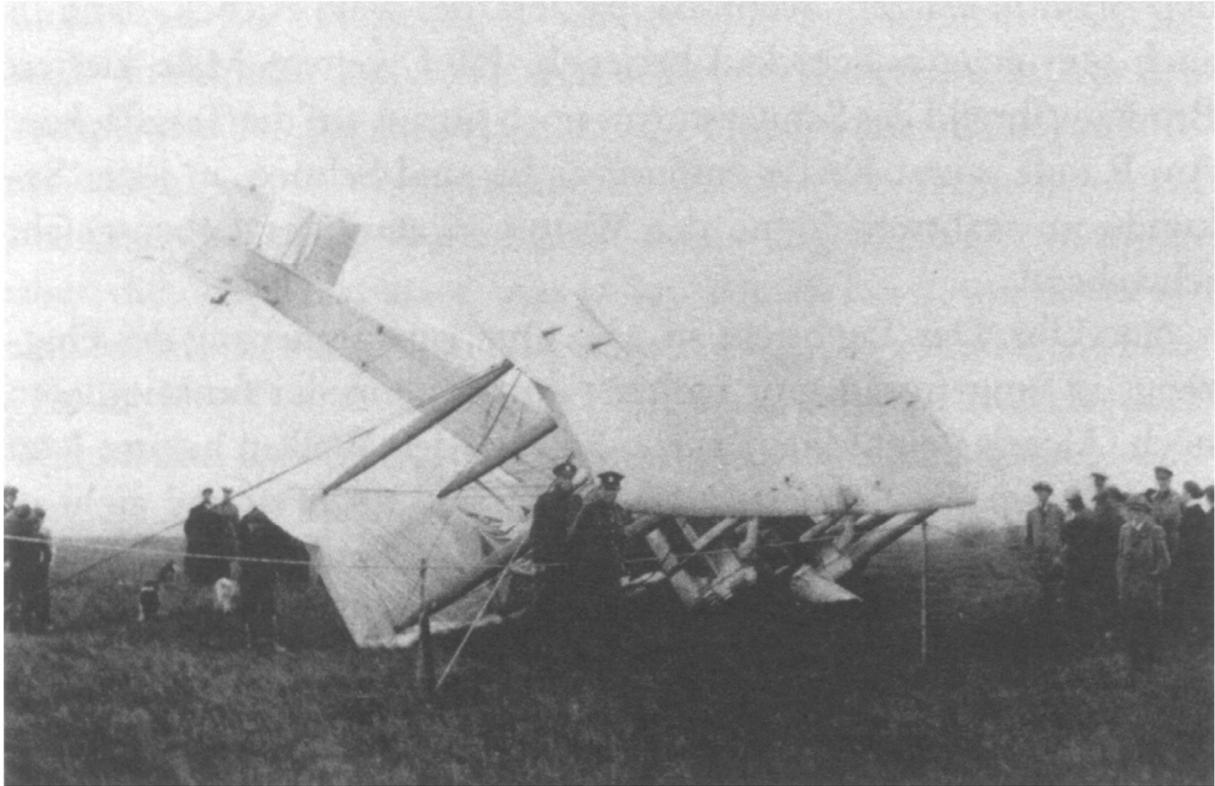
Today was the start of my mini break from cycling with only about 20 miles to travel from Leenaun to Clifden to meet Brendon, the brother of a friend of mine from Dorset who had kindly offered to put me up for the night. The original plan was that I would cycle to Brendon and Mary's house at Mannin Beg south of Clifden and then on to Galway tomorrow. However Storm Ali has made me change my plans.

Leenane Hotel at Leenaun village was established as a coaching inn on the shores of Killary Fjord about 300 years ago but has undergone extensive renovation and extension in the last decade. However the character has been retained whilst providing 66 letting rooms and a bar and restaurant. There is also a leisure centre and seaweed bath. I had booked a single room through Booking.com and was not expecting much for 49 euros bed and breakfast. In the event I was welcomed by a smiling receptionist who asked me about my cycle ride, showed me where to put my cycle - joining several others - and gave me a room key. I opened the door to find that I was in a large room with a double and a single bed and a very modern bathroom. I did the washing and managed to rig a line in front of the sash window which had the clothes dry by bedtime. The dining rooms, bar and sitting room were full with people eating and I guess the hotel must have been just about full. I had a nice meal of a fishcake in a leek sauce and roast lamb with all the trimmings. Good and filling food before I retired to write the blog.

I set off from the hotel at 0844 to cycle the 20 miles to Clifden before the threatened rain and winds blew up. The forecasters had it exactly right and I set off in a thin mizzle which soon cleared and my ride to Clifden was dry if a little windy. There were a few climbs on the way and I dropped down through Letterfrack to the quay where I stopped to take a picture.



I was quickly on my way and in Clifden in under two hours. I stopped to make a couple of calls home and then rang Brendon to say that I was in the Alcock and Brown Hotel where I had gone for a cup of coffee. Clifden is a small town in Connemara, picturesque and a centre for tourism. It is also famous for two other world changing events. The Marconi Company set up a wireless station about four miles south of the town and made the first transatlantic transmission in 1907. 12 years later the first non-stop transatlantic flight by Alcock and Brown crash-landed in Derrygimlagh bog, close to the transatlantic wireless station. When Captain Alcock spotted the green bog he thought it was a meadow where he could safely land his Vickers Vimy biplane. The plane's landing gear sank into the soft bog and was badly damaged. Alcock and Brown had to walk into town with minor injuries.



Brendon duly arrived at the hotel and I followed him on my bike to his sister-in-law's house on the edge of town where I left the bike to save taking it back to Mannin Beg and so that it would be easily available for the bus in the morning. We then went to his house to meet up with the rest of the Ruddy family, Mary his wife and Issy his daughter. After lunch Mary went off in the wind and rain to collect son James from school. Eldest son Myles attends a school in Galway where he stays during the week so was not there.

Now I was in for an unexpected treat. In the corner of the kitchen was an Irish Harp and Issy proceeded to give us a recital. James then went off to fetch his accordion on which he gave a very accomplished performance to prove why he is the Connaught champion. They then played together on harp and accordion before Issy produced a concertina and they played a duet. I was astonished and thoroughly entertained by their talent.

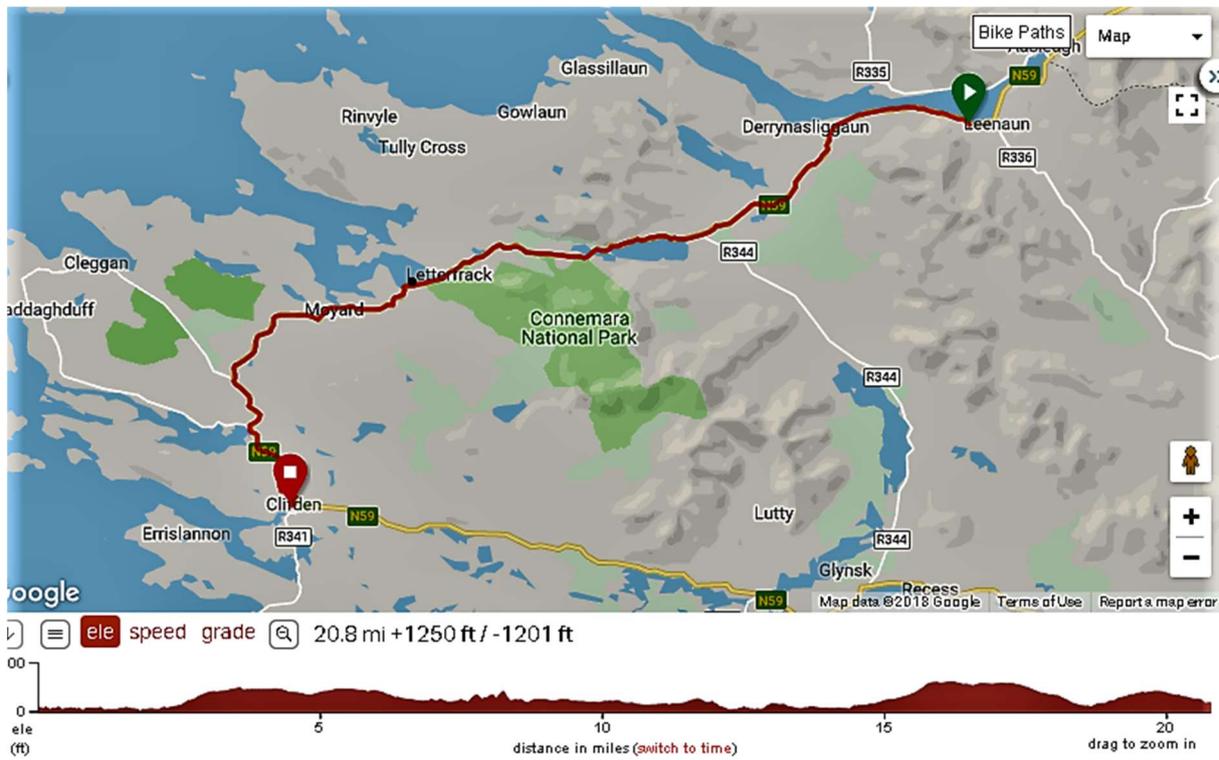


That was not the end of musical entertainment for James is also a virtuoso pianist who is giving a recital as part of the Clifden Arts Festival later this week. We sat in comfort on a deep sofa whilst he played us a Schubert Impromptu. What a talented family.

As the festival is happening throughout the week we had an early supper and Brendon took me into Clifden for a musical evening in E.J.King's bar featuring Guys and Doll a 6 piece jazz/folk/blues band from Maryland USA who have been attending the festival since 1996. Good musicians who were enjoying themselves and entertaining a large audience.



So my day has been far from wasted. The weather outside is frightful and the rain has been lashing down. There's more to come over the next couple of days and I shall enjoy the rest from cycling but I shall cherish the memory of a wonderful day of music from some very talented players.



Day 16 - Bus trip to the launderette

Today was the first day of my self-imposed break from cycling. Having returned from the pub I took myself off to write the blog and then went to bed expecting to wake up to rain this morning: however it has been depressingly bright and sunny all day although the wind has been increasing as the day goes on and it would have been hard work getting to Galway.



Brendon gave me a good breakfast at Mannin Beg and then took me to collect the bike, having dropped James at school on the way. The school is brand new, officially opened by the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, on 5th September. He was supposed to arrive by helicopter but the weather prevented it, meaning that he had to come along the N59 road which the locals have been agitating to be upgraded and improved for years. Maybe it's an ill wind that blows no-one any good?

Having collected the bike we were at the bus stop outside the library by 0900, in plenty of time for the Citylink bus that runs four times a day from Clifden to Galway. I managed to squeeze the bike, for which I had to pay an extra 5 euro, into the belly of the bus with the panniers and took the handlebar bag on board. I had prebooked my 14.40 euro ticket on-line, saving myself some money. The bus was nearly full, although there was enough room to collect a few people at stops along the way and we were in Galway City on time. However there was a traffic jam that meant we weren't at the bus station until about 1100. This left me with an awful lot of time to kill as I couldn't get into the B&B in Salthill, the seaside suburb of Galway, until 4pm. So, as my trousers are beginning to smell a bit and other bits and pieces could do with washing I thought I'd see if I could find a launderette. The tourist office directed me to a Texaco garage that had an open-air laundry facility.



I've noticed these in passing at other places in Ireland and they are a fine idea if there aren't queues of Americans with the same notion. As it was I had to wait for nearly two hours before the washing machine came

available but, as I was in no hurry, it was little problem. I got chatting with a guy from Montana who had been in Iceland with his wife for a week and now they had moved on to Ireland. We got around the talking about travel writers and he said how much he admired Bruce Chatwin as a writer. I suggested that he might enjoy Patrick Leigh Fermor's books and he made a note to look them out in the future.

Eventually at about 230pm the washing was done and dried and I made my way in the direction of Salthill into a very strong headwind which made me glad that I wasn't trying to do 72 miles into it, although, much of the way it would have been behind me. Anyway the forecast rain didn't happen at all so maybe the journey wouldn't have been too bad.

I found the B&B but, as I was unable to check in I took a seat in the restaurant that occupies the ground floor and had a couple of cups of tea until I was able to get the key to my room. So I've had a very lazy day but it has probably done me good.

Tomorrow I shall try to get a train to Limerick at about 1030am and then sit the storm out until Saturday.

There was an old man on a bike
Who said there's one thing I don't like
It's the wind in my face
Reducing the pace
At which I can pedal this bike.

Improvements to this doggerell are welcome!

Day 17 - Dodging Ali

I said that I had wasted a bit of time in Salthill at the Blackcat restaurant in Salthill whilst I was waiting to check in upstairs at the rather grandly

named Prairie House Boutique Hotel. Their WiFi allowed me to compose and publish the blog so I thought it only fair to give them my custom for dinner and very good it was. They had a conventional menu but also twenty or so tapas dishes which looked rather good so I went for patatas bravas, squid with a curry sauce and slow cooked pork. They were all excellent and I rounded it off nicely with a chocolate fudge cake. In between tea and dinner I went across the road to a sports bar and tried some of their craft beer. The Irish just don't get real ale served at room temperature. It all has to be served cold and is generally over-hopped. The safest thing to drink is Guinness followed by some of their red ales. One of the beers tasted unpleasantly of burnt chocolate and I had a glass of wine with my meal.

All this time the wind was blowing strongly and I awoke at about 0700 to hear it howling around the building. I was on the top floor, up in the eaves, in a small room with an ensuite bathroom and an exceptionally comfortable bed. But when I heard the tiles sliding down the roof directly above me and a nasty crash as something hit the valley gutter I thought that it was time to make myself scarce before the ceiling caved in. I packed up as quickly as I could and went down to retrieve the bike which had been left in a back yard but under rudimentary cover.



Having extracted the bike through the front door of the building I was hit by an enormous gust that nearly took me off my feet and judged that it was safer to push the bike to the train station which was about a mile and a half away. In fact for a lot of the journey I was sheltered by buildings so probably could have ridden at least some of the way but the danger of gusts as I rounded a

corner seemed to great a risk to take and, as I had plenty of time to catch the 1030 train to Limerick, went along at my own pace on foot and arrived at the station in plenty of time for a cup of coffee and a blueberry muffin for breakfast.

There were few people there but at 1000 the station soon filled up with Canadians who were waiting for the 1100 train to Dublin. When the Dublin train pulled in on the far side from the platform that rather threw them, and when the Limerick train pulled in on the platform I had to fight my way through them to get on board. Anyway all was well and the bike stowed very neatly with a bungee cord to keep it upright



We waved goodbye to Galway with the wind still raging but perhaps less fiercely than first thing and arrived at Limerick, without incident at about 12.30pm. As I left the station there was a proper Irish Traveller's funeral that went past with a horse drawn hearse, followed by jaunting cars and the body of the congregation walking behind.

I'm staying at the Limerick City Hotel which is a six storey building on the banks of the Shannon. Unfortunately I couldn't get into my room until 2.00pm but the receptionist kindly let me unload the luggage and I went off for a bike ride round the city. There was still quite a bit of wind but the riding was easy, especially without the bags. I cycled down the Shannon for a bit but realised I was going the wrong way, so turned around and cycled up the embankment towards King John's Castle which I propose to visit tomorrow. Past that I could see Thormond Park, home of Munster Rugby so cycled up to take a picture



Back down the other bank of the Shannon and out into the countryside before I turned back across the main bridge and arrived at the Hotel on the dot of 2pm.

My room is a penthouse, which sounds rather grand, and indeed it's huge with a magnificent view over the River Shannon. The slight drawback and, I suspect the reason why I got a pretty good rate for three nights, is that the lift only goes up to the fifth floor. However the bike is stored in an office downstairs so lugging my bags up the final staircase was hardly a problem.



I'll go out to get some food and may try to take in a film or show later. In the meantime I'm safe from the storm and should benefit from a couple of days off the bike.

Day 18 - Loitering in Limerick

Time drags a bit when you're on a cycling holiday and have no cycling to do, so I've been feeling a bit spare since I arrived in Limerick. Last night I noticed that *Eva Cassidy - The Story* was happening at the Belltable Arts centre which is just around the corner from the hotel, so, as I quite like Eva Cassidy, I thought I'd go along after I'd had something to eat, which I did at Zo Zabb Thai bistro. They had an evening deal of two courses, including tea/soft drink for 10 euros and the Thai style ribs and Pad Thai noodles with Jasmine tea went down very well. I bulked it out with some egg fried rice for an extra 1.50 euro and felt well satisfied.

Elsa Jean McTaggart is a Scot, one of eleven children from a Perthshire

family, now living on the Isle of Lewis and she and her husband Gary, who acts as background keyboard player and general factotum are touring this show about the life and work of Eva Cassidy.



Elsa Jean has a lovely voice and is a pretty accomplished guitarist and has definitely captured the essence of Miss Cassidy, using projection, film and a chatty, amusing personality to tell the story. She played to an appreciative audience of about 80 people in a theatre that will hold 220: however at the end of the evening she really showed us some skill on her main instrument, the fiddle with a foot stomping medley of her own composition to finish the show on a high note. She says she'll travel anywhere for a gig including regular visits to Scandinavia so if you happen to see that she's in your area (and she's played at the Mission Theatre in Bath this year) I recommend that you go and see her.

This morning I woke, as usual, at about 0700 but lazed in bed as there was nothing in particular to do before setting off for a tour of Limerick's museums which don't open until 10am. I made my way in the direction of King John's Castle and had a bite of breakfast in a cafe on the way.

King John of England was the youngest and favourite of the five sons of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine and had little expectation of inheriting the English Throne and control of large areas of France. However three of his elder brothers died young and only Richard the Lionheart was ahead of him in the succession. When Richard I died of gangrene after an assassination attempt, John became King of England from 1199 until

his death in 1216, during which time he lost most of the English possessions in France and had to submit to the Barons by way of the Magna Carta. As Messrs Sellar and Yeatman had it in *1066 and all That*, King John was a Bad King

However, rewinding a little, Henry II made John Lord of Ireland in 1177 and on his second visit in 1210 he agreed that a castle should be built in Limerick to protect the Norman rulers from the Gaelic chiefs who were, understandably, pretty upset by the treatment they were receiving from their overlords under the pertaining feudal system

There's a rather nice ditty to explain the feudal system that was penned by Jack Broome, a Royal Naval officer who was an accomplished cartoonist.

*The feudal system had its points but gave the King bad dreams
For it meant the land divided into sundry fighting teams
The King might get a telegram from Baron, Priest or Lord
To say "Arriving Saturday, intend to sweep the board"*

Anyway Limerick Castle was built, starting in 1212, and was added to over the years. It was besieged five times, mainly in the 17th century, before finally ceasing its military use after the Irish Civil War in 1923.

In 2014 Limerick became Ireland's first City of Culture and as part of that initiative a visitor centre and interactive display of the history of the Castle was built. It is informative and allows the visitor to explore not only the walls and courtyard of the castle but also the undercroft which has been extensively excavated. My visit was largely in the rain so I was glad to be inside for much of it.



The views from the turrets would have been great on a bright day but I publish one anyway, with Thomond Park in the background.



After tea in the cafe I went on to the Hunt Museum which is devoted to the ethnography of Ireland based upon a private collection donated to the State by antique dealers John and Gertrude Hunt. It is housed in a fine Georgian building known as the Custom House because it was the headquarters of the Customs and Excise.



Unfortunately most of the museum was closed for renovation so I only saw some religious artifacts and an interesting special exhibition about the renovation of a sailing vessel, the AK Ilen that was built in Baltimore (Ireland) in 1926 and sailed to the Falkland Islands where it was used for transporting sheep, cattle and goods between the islands until

returning to Ireland some 70 years later.

It has been a community project that has brought together craftsmen and schools and has fathered other boat building projects by its success.

Following the expansion of the city into what is known as Newtown Pery, named after Viscount Pery, sometime speaker of the Irish Parliament, Limerick has some excellent Georgian buildings along the lines of Edinburgh New Town and Dublin, with some very fine glazed fanlights, but they have been allowed to deteriorate somewhat. Most of the buildings are now occupied by businesses and efforts are being made to remedy this, but it will be a slow process.

My final museum was the Limerick museum, an eclectic display of all things to do with Limerick from, arms and silver to lace and photographs of the city in the 60s. It was a most enjoyable way to spend an hour or so.

So that was that. I had a cup of tea and went back to the hotel to compose the blog. It's a bit of a history lesson that may make your eyes glaze over, but the day was overcast and mizzly and there wasn't much point in taking a lot of pictures. Tomorrow I've booked a coach trip to the Burren and Cliffs of Moher. Unfortunately the weather is not forecast to improve so the camera may well stay in my pocket for most of the day.

Day 19 - The Cliffs of Insanity

Last night I went out quite late, after completing most of the blog and had a really excellent meal at Alex Findlater & Company who are fishmongers who also run a restaurant. It wasn't cheap but my word it was good. I started with floured squid with a chilli mayo and then went on to Haddock and chips and finished with 3 flavours of home-made gelato. The batters that they used were beautifully light and a mile away from what you tend to get in the chip shop. That extra cost was oh so worthwhile and the freshness of the fish shone through.

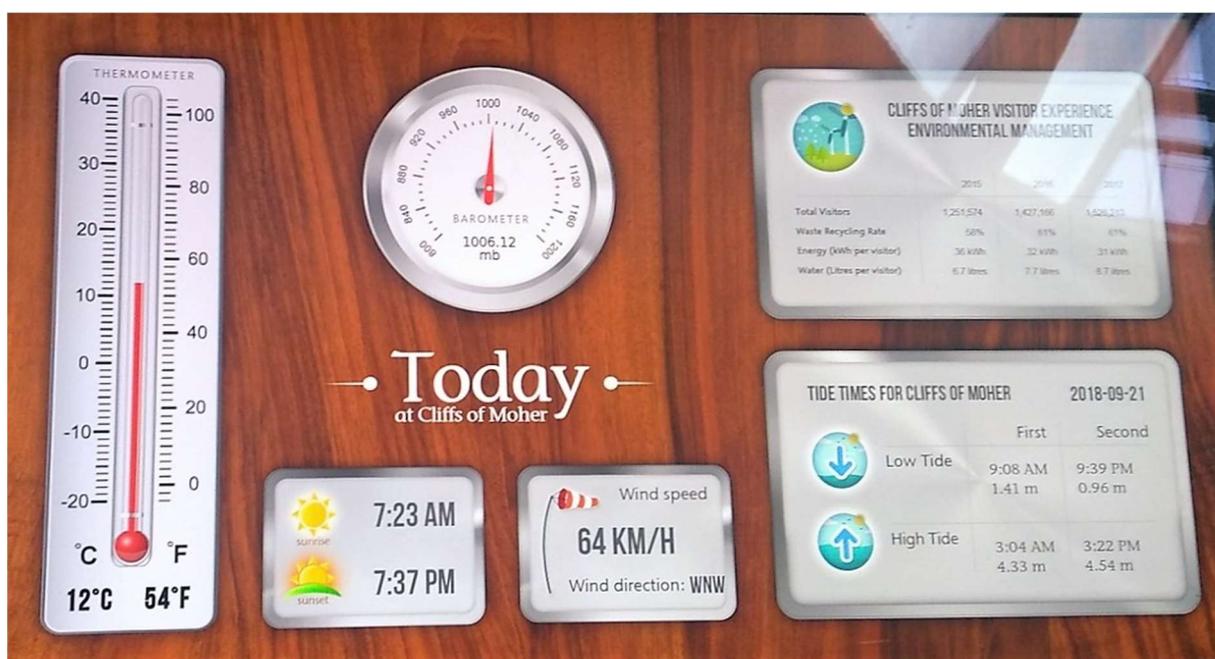
Today was, hopefully, the last off the bike so I thought that I would try to



catch up on some of the sights that I have missed by travelling from Galway to Limerick by train. To that end I booked a coach tour with Paddywagon Tours who run coaches all over Ireland.

I had to be at Arthur's Quay, about 7 minutes from the hotel, for a 930am pick up, so I left the hotel in plenty of time for breakfast at the Petit Paris cafe. I opted for the "healthy" version which had poached eggs, grilled bacon and tomato and duly arrived at the pick-up point at 9am so had a bit of a wait. The coach had started at Cork and had a good load on already so with those of us who got on in Limerick it was just about full. There were the usual anti-social element with cases on seats but the driver Paul sorted it out and we left Limerick in light rain. A large number of the passengers, including my companion, were Spanish so conversation was impossible and I watched the countryside.

We headed up to Shannon and joined the motorway for a short distance before branching off to Ennis and Ennistimon and hitting the coast at Lahinch which is where we joined the route that I would have taken on my bike, only in reverse because I would have been coming from Galway. Lahinch golf course is due to host the Irish Open next year and the links looked in good nick with lots of golfers out on what was a sunny but very windy day. We climbed the hill and five miles later we were at the Cliffs of Moher car park and visitor centre at about 11am. Paul gave us strict instructions to be back by 1245 or he would leave without us. He also advised great caution as there was a significant wind blowing. Indeed there is a weather station readout in the Visitor Centre which was showing winds of 40mph.



I went straight out to the cliffs and took some pictures, including a selfie. It was quite hard work walking into the wind and, in places, the waves hitting the cliffs were throwing spray over the paths 500 feet above them.



These are the Cliffs of Insanity from the film *The Princess Bride*.



I didn't venture far, although there were people walking the coast path that runs for about 12 miles and some seemed to be putting themselves in considerable danger, given the conditions. I went back to the Visitor Centre, which has been built into the side of a hill, as it started to rain, only a shower but I was well out of it. There is a restaurant and various displays showing the geology and flora and fauna of the cliffs with some nice interactive things for children to do.



The bus duly left at 1245 with a full complement and we drove a couple of miles to Doolin village which has a bar/restaurant/chip shop all under the same ownership and they must be making a packet as the place was heaving. I only just managed to get a bowl of chowder and a pint of Doolin Red ale, which was pretty good for Irish Ale, down me before it was time to leave to drive north up the coast to see

the limestone pavements of the Burren and the glacial debris that covers them. Extraordinary geology

And that was, pretty much, that. We returned by the same route but stopped at Bunratty Castle for a pee and a quick cup of tea before we returned to Limerick. 49 years ago I went to a mediaeval banquet at

Bunratty Castle with my trio of Kiwi girls. The banquets are still happening twice a night which is not surprising as I remember it as very good entertainment with free-flowing wine, good food and music and dancing for a couple of hours.

Having avoided rain for almost all the day, as I walked the mile or so back to the hotel the heavens opened. Fortunately plenty of shelter in O'Connell Street made sure that I stayed dry.

I'm really looking forward to getting back on the bike after two full days of no cycling: wind or rain, Ballybunnion here I come

Day 20 - Back on the bike

Last night I wasn't really feeling like going out. Dolan's pub on the quay had live music all night and I could have eaten there as well but it didn't appeal. Eventually I went out at about 830pm and went round the corner to an Italian restaurant. The food was ok but the ambience non-existent. I was sitting close to the kitchen and there seemed to be little enthusiasm from any of the staff. It was clearly a family concern but on this night they were definitely not on form. I would have been better to have gone back to the Thai restaurant where the service would have been good and the price keen. So it was back to the blog and bed, knowing that I had some cycling to do in the morning.

Having packed everything up and collected the bike from the office where it had been since Wednesday afternoon getting in the way of all the reception staff, I left Limerick at about 10am in a thin rain. I was wearing my thick cycling jersey and shoe covers but it still felt cold. The road out of the city was busy until I reached the motorway when some of the traffic peeled off. However I was following the N69 which is the only road going west along the Shannon estuary. It is also not wide so there were moments when I felt uncomfortable, especially with the heavy Lorries. 22 miles into the journey it was still spitting with rain when I

reached Foynes which is now the main port of the Shannon. Few ships now venture up to Limerick but Foynes is a bustling dock for mid-size ships.

In the centre of Foynes is the Flying Boat museum and, as it was after 12pm and I had had no breakfast, I thought I would see what the museum had to offer and then have some lunch before continuing. What a pleasant surprise: the lady on the desk welcomed me warmly (I suspect that I was the first visitor that day) and explained where I should go and what I should see. The visit started with a 15 minute film explaining the reason that the museum existed and then continued with a well curated and amusing display of curios relating to the flying boats.

In 1927 Charles Lindbergh made the first solo transatlantic crossing by aircraft, 8 years after Alcock and Brown had achieved the same feat together. Pan American Airlines were keen to expand their operations from The USA and to set up a service to Europe. They asked Lindbergh to advise them on the best routes and terminals. Lindbergh considered many options including Bermuda and the Azores and Greenland, Iceland and Scandinavia before recommending that an airport should be built on the Shannon estuary. This would take several years to come into service and, in the meanwhile, a Clipper seaplane service, like the ones Pan Am were running to South America, could be operated non-stop between Newfoundland and Foynes. The first flights were made in 1937 and continued until 1945 when conventional aircraft were capable of making the transatlantic crossing.

The museum is based around the original control tower and visitors can climb to the top for the same view that would have greeted early aircraft controllers and there is a replica of a Yankee Clipper that you can walk around



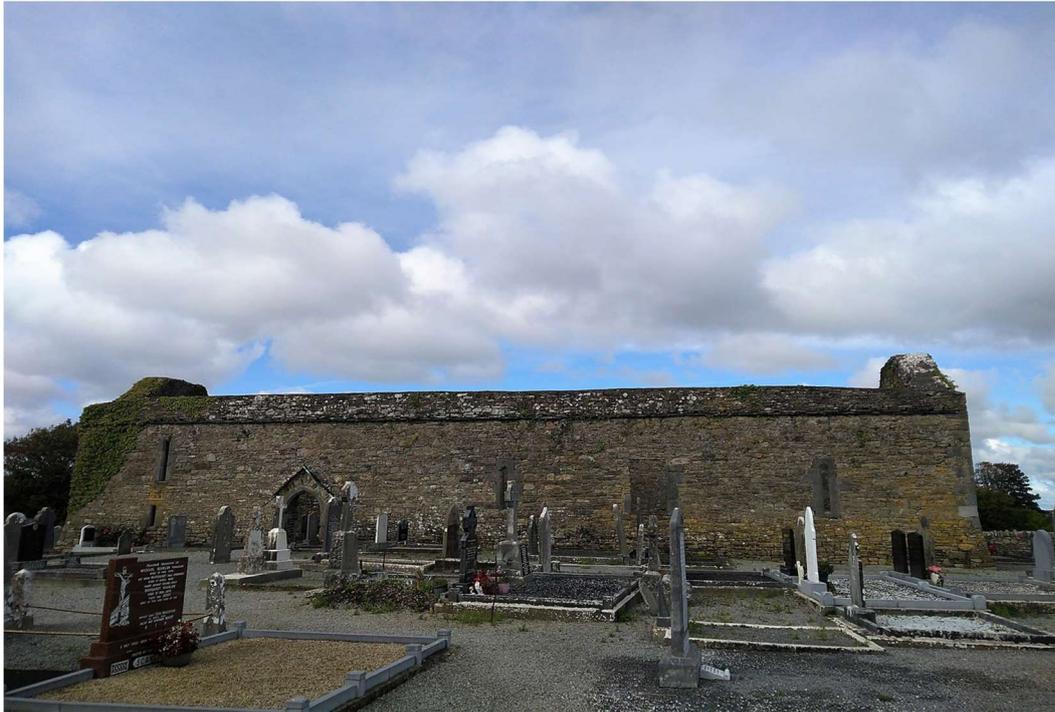
I thought it a very well put together museum and enjoyed my visit. Sadly the restaurant was not of the same standard. Mushroom soup from a packet and a very poor cheese and ham toastie cost 8 euros.

By the time I had finished lunch the rain had stopped and did not return. I continued along the main road until I arrived in Tarbert about 35 miles into the trip. Tarbert is the southern terminal of the Shannon ferry that runs from Kilrush and knocks about 60 miles off the journey if you are travelling from County Clare to County Kerry. I rode the couple of miles down to the slipway but the ferry was on the other side so there was little to see.



As I made my way back I spotted a small park where someone had carved some poplar trees. It seemed to have had little adverse effect on the trees that were sprouting again.

I now left the main road and into the countryside. Some of the road surfaces were the worst I have encountered but were very variable. I passed several roofless churches, mainly attached to graveyards. Apparently when Henry VIII split from Rome he decided to eradicate Roman Catholicism from all his dominions and tasked Thomas Cromwell to ensure that this included Ireland. Cromwell decided that destroying the places of worship would be a good start and this is why there are so many ruined churches around



I ventured off the beaten track to take a look at Carrig island that is situated in the Shannon estuary. It's a low-lying island with salt marsh against the coast and approached by a road bridge. Just before you



reach the bridge there stands the remains of Carrigafoyle Castle

Built in 1490 the castle was attacked in 1580 and so badly damaged that it was never made habitable again.

I carried on along the coast with views across the Shannon until I reached Bromore and the outstanding feature of my day. I had read somewhere that there were some cliffs along this coast and saw a sign to Bromore Cliffs.

There was a carpark and a ticket machine charging pedestrians, cyclists and motorists for going across the fields to view them. As I went to stick 2 euros in the machine I was hailed by Mike, the owner of the land to say that the machine did not work but that he'd take my money and explain what there was to see. He also said that I would be able to cycle around the whole site. Until fairly recently few people knew of the existence of the cliffs and he has provided trimmed grass pathways and explanation boards of what there is to see. I think the 2 euros was a very fair price for what he has done

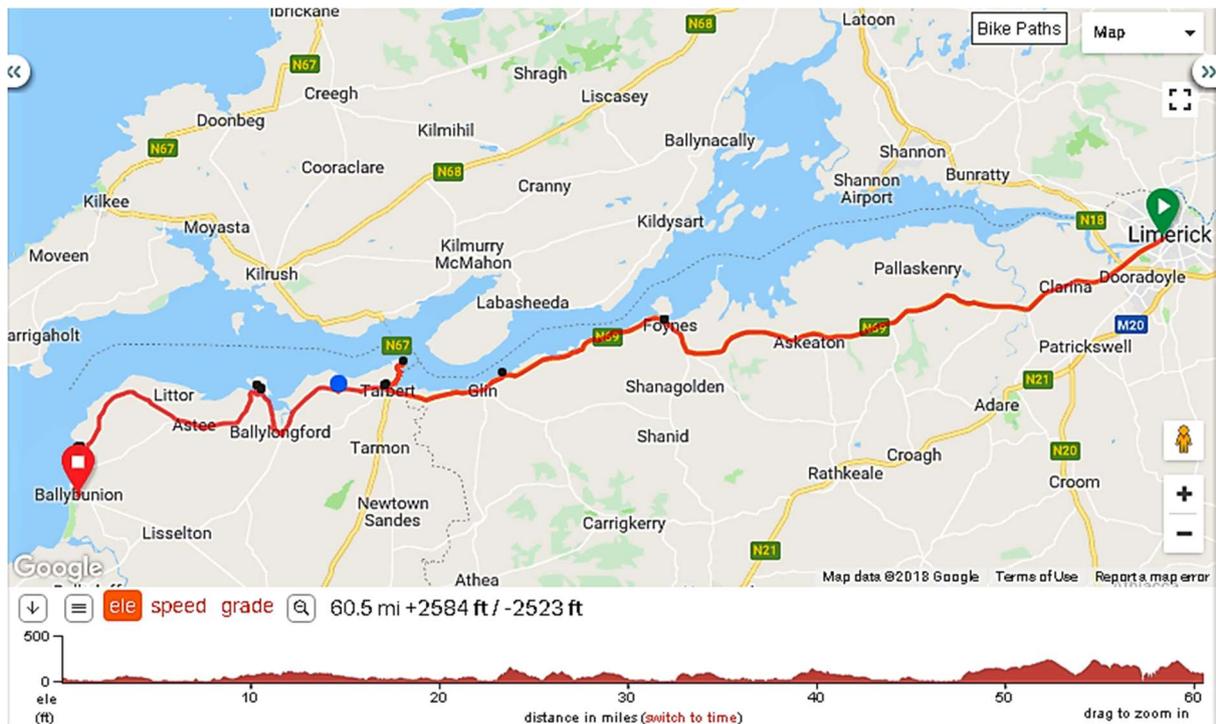


And, in many ways the cliffs, with their sea stacks and waterfalls

are as impressive as Slieve League and the Cliffs of Moher



So a good way to end the day with a short ride to Ballybunnion where I am staying the night.



Day 21 - Tra la tra la Tralee

Ballybunion is a typical mass tourism town: busy from May to the end of August and then dead except for high days. Thus at the moment much of it is shut. I was staying at the Ocean Hostel and had booked a twin room which, in a hostel, means two bunk beds. However when I arrived the manager, Mike who is from Leeds said he'd swapped me to a double which meant a bit more room. I was able to wash everything and, because the heating was full on, dry it on the radiators. The window to the room stayed wide open so that I didn't stifle. I went downstairs to the bar for a couple of pints of Guinness and a chat with one of the locals who is the same age as me and amazed at what I'm doing, and then wandered down the main street to the front where there were two restaurants open.

The main street consists mainly of B&B, slot machines and bars, many of which were closed. I ate at McMunns, typical Irish fare but good. I started with baked crab pasta which was very tasty and moved on to baked cod with mash and veg which was beautifully cooked. I finished with rice pudding and raspberry jam (sorry fruit compote). Back to the Hostel for another pint before going up to do the blog. I was pretty late finishing and did not get to bed until after midnight. This morning I came down to breakfast to find a dozen or so teenage girls who are playing in a basketball tournament in the town were already in the kitchen.

Breakfast was cereals, tea and toast so it was not long before I set off at



0938. It was chilly but what wind there was, was behind me for a change. Ballybunnion's main assets are a couple of nice beaches called the Ladies and the Mens Beach because the local priest insisted on segregation of the sexes, some good cliffs and rock pools and a championship golf course. The latter is famous because Bill Clinton played there twice on visits to Ireland and declared it his favourite course. In honour they have erected a bronze statue in front of the Garda

station.

The road from Ballybunnion was slightly downhill and with the wind at my back I made good time. I was away from the coast as I had to cross the River Feale and I had covered nearly 18 miles before I saw the sea again from Ballyheigue point which sticks out at the head of Tralee bay. I had climbed to almost 500 feet above sea level but the climbing was steady and painless. There must have been sea cliffs but the road was well back from the shore so it was impossible to see. I took a picture looking across the bay to the Dingle peninsula which I shall cross tomorrow



The descent as I rounded the corner was much steeper than the climb and I was doing over 40mph at one point as I dropped down to Ballyheigue bay where the rocks were showing on the beach at low tide.

I rejoined the main road that I had left about 20 miles ago before branching off towards Banna Beach, a beautiful golden sandy beach that stretches for about seven miles at the north end of Tralee Bay. It is hugely popular, evidenced by three large car parks. It is also historically famous as being the place that Roger Casement, Irish hero or British traitor, depending on your viewpoint, landed from a German submarine in 1916 three days before the Easter uprising. He was captured by the British, convicted of treason - although the prosecutors had trouble making their case bringing the expression "hanged on a comma" into the lexicon, and executed at Pentonville Prison in August of the same year. His remains were returned to the Irish Government in 1965 on condition that they were not buried in Northern Ireland, as was Casement's dying wish. He was given a State funeral and his remains interred at Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin, alongside many other Nationalists.

There is a rather grand memorial to Casement on Banna Beach



I was heading towards Fenit behind some high sand dunes and, at one point, on a sand road. I wiggled around another estuary and eventually arrived at Fenit at about 1pm. I stopped at the local store and bought myself a couple of bread rolls and some ham and a bottle of Tango.

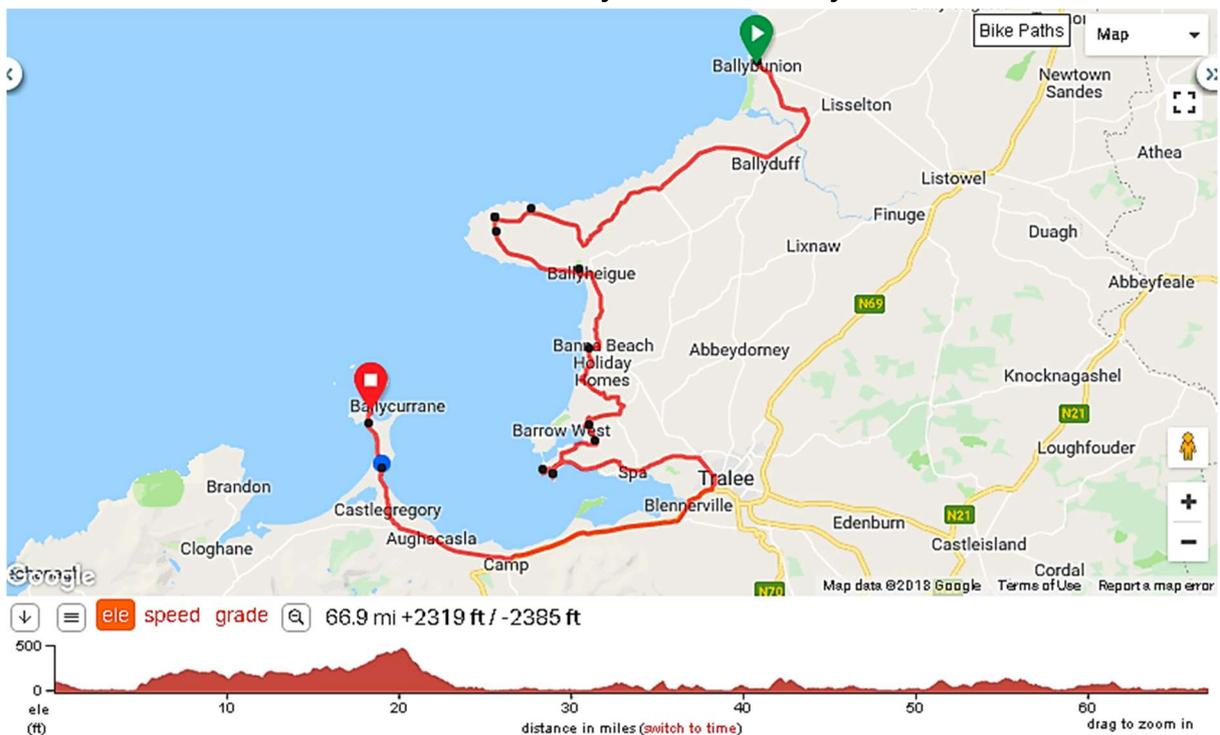


Fenit, itself is a port capable of taking ships up to 15000 tonnes and there was a large vessel moored there on my visit. It is also the birthplace of St Brendan the Navigator and there is a statue commemorating him looking out over Tralee Bay, from Samphire Island on the right of the picture. I've never heard of him before but apparently he's famous in Ireland.

I now had to head 10 miles east to Tralee before the final 15 mile westerly journey to my destination on the Maharees a three mile long tombolo that sticks out into Tralee bay. The main road wasn't busy but it's not wide in places and the journey was tedious. The sun was shining as I turned off the main road through Castlegregory and there were quite a number of people wind and kite surfing at the watersports centres on the way



At the point of the isthmus is a small village and a harbour for a small fishing fleet and it was here that I arrived at Harbour House hotel which is also a dive centre and was warmly welcomed by Sandra.



Tomorrow I have to climb the fearsome Conor Pass. In places it's the steepest slopes I shall encounter but it happens about an hour into the journey on what should be a dry and windless day.

Day 22 - Days don't come much better than this

I stayed in Harbour View last night. There are a couple of pubs in the village but it was easier to eat in. The seafood chowder was good, lots of shellfish and white fish in a good broth and I followed it up with fish and chips - not the best but ok. A half bottle of wine washed it all down and I was in bed by 1030 worrying about the Conor Pass in the morning.

The morning dawned, as forecast, bright and sunny and the view over the bay was just what one would want for a day by the seaside. Full Irish breakfast set me up for a ride that was scheduled to be 55 miles and about 3800 feet of climbing. It was chilly as I set off, what wind there was, was in the north so, for a change, helping me. As there was no alternative I returned to the main road by the same route I took last night, following what is locally known as the Back Beach, which, at about 8 miles, is, reputedly, the longest beach in Ireland



The mountains of the Dingle peninsula loomed threateningly in the background but, at least it was calm and sunny.

About 12 miles in I was feeling good and the sun was still shining. The road ramped up but only to about 5% and the scenery changed from coast to mountain. There was little traffic on the road and I was really enjoying the climbing. According to RidewithGPS I would be experiencing almost 20% pitches towards the top of the Conor Pass but Gary Garmin was barely showing 7 %. I stopped in a layby about a mile from the top to take photos



and what I could see was a steady and constant road to the pass so I kept going. The road narrowed substantially but the pitch remained constant and I was amazed when I reached the top barely out of breath and not even in bottom gear. I'm not sure how the metrics were so wrong but delighted to have arrived in such good shape. There were several people around and I asked an American if he would take my picture. He was from Iowa and also took a picture on his own camera to send to his brother-in-law who is a keen cyclist.



The view back down to the coast was stunning, somewhat lost by the poor definition from my cameraphone. The drop down to Dingle was no steeper than the way up so I'm puzzled as to why the Conor Pass is considered a big challenge. Albeit the conditions were very different but Glengesh was a much more difficult climb.

Once in Dingle I had a few options. My original plan, bearing in mind that I thought I would be knackered after the Conor Pass was to go straight out on the Sleah Head Drive to Dunmore Head, the most westerly point of Ireland. Whilst the Azores, part of Portugal, are much further west I think it reasonable to say that this is also the most westerly point of Europe. Alternatively I could ride 7 or 8 miles north and take in a bit more of the coast as well as getting closer to Mount Brandon that looms over the skyline.



As I was feeling good and the weather was nice I opted for the extra miles and was glad to have done so. The road was easy with few steep climbs and the scenery spectacular. Unfortunately my camera does little justice to the seascapes



But this was typical of what I was seeing for most of the ride.

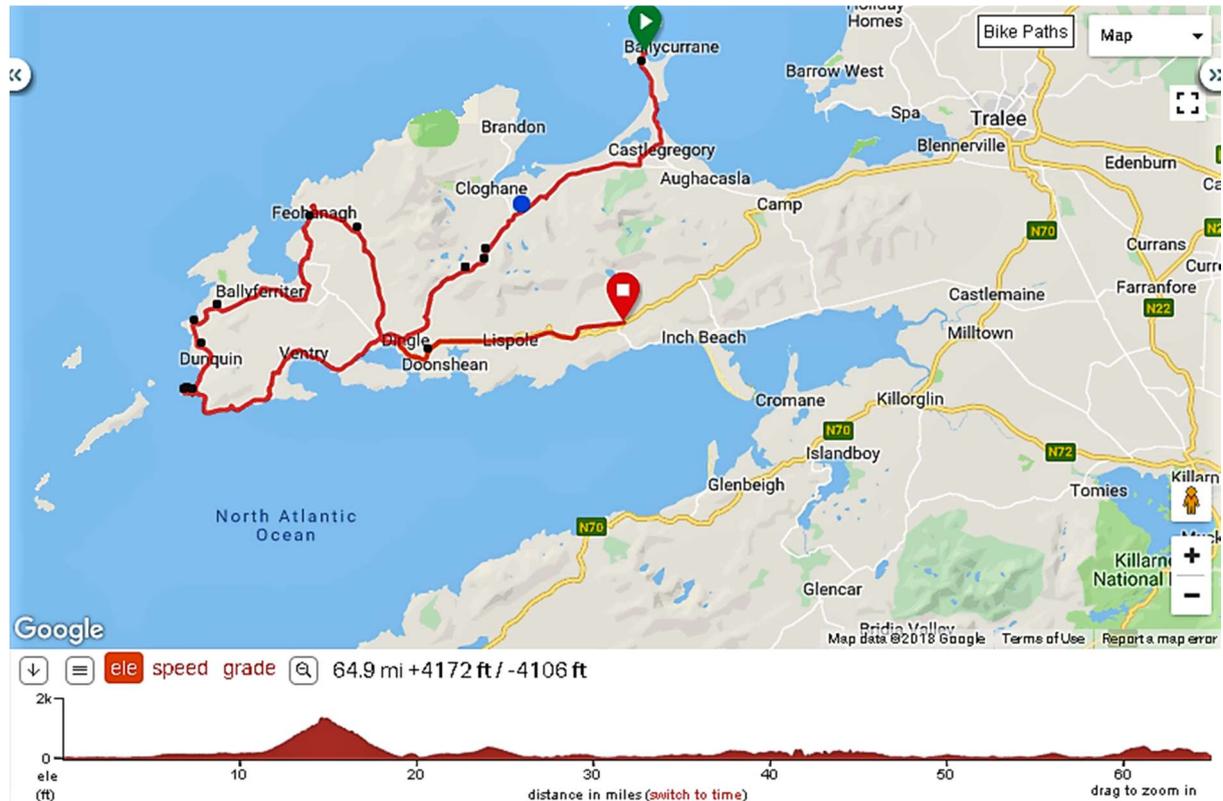
Eventually 41 miles in I arrived at Slea Head, stuck a security cable through the handles of the panniers and joined it all up to my Hiplok and left the bike on the verge whilst I walked the half mile or so up the hill to Dunmore Head. Given the sunshine it was a delightful walk and the view of the Blasket Islands was spectacular



The bike was as I left it and, having restarted I immediately stopped again at an ad hoc cafe that an elderly couple had set up in their garden. A cup of tea and a slice of apple pie made up for lack of lunch and the return journey to Dingle was easy. I dropped into Lidl on the way through for some cake and a fizzy drink. Having been used to paying between 1.49 and 2 euros for a 500ml bottle of Tango from the convenience stores it was rather nice to pay 35 cents for a bottle of lemon and lime flavoured water.

I then had a rather tedious 10 miles cycling to my B&B in Annascaul, much of it along a flat but arrow straight road, which I always find trying. However at one point a new road with a purpose built cycleway

alongside it shortened the journey by a couple of miles. It thoroughly confused Rita and Gary who were telling me I had gone wrong but once back on course they quietened down and I arrived in Annascaul at about 530pm after 65 miles of the most enjoyable cycling of the trip so far.



Day 23 - After the Lord Mayor's show

John welcomed me to Adrinane House and put the bike in the garage whilst I cleaned and washed myself and my clothes. He suggested that I eat at the South Pole Inn directly across the road so, having started the blog, I went across at about 7pm and ordered a pint of Guinness. When I asked for food I was told that the kitchen had closed at 5pm but there was another pub up the road that would be open.

The South Pole Inn is so called because it was the home of Tom Crean who had run away to sea at the age of 15 and, lying about his age, had joined the Royal Navy. In 1901, now 24 years old, Crean was serving on board a torpedo vessel in New Zealand which was asked to give

assistance to Robert Falcon Scott's Discovery which was about to depart for Antarctica. When a vacancy occurred in the Discovery's crew Crean volunteered, was accepted and sailed with Scott, remaining in the Antarctic until 1904. When Scott decided to return to attempt to reach the South Pole in 1910 Crean was part of his crew but was not included in the final party that made it to the Pole but died on the return journey. Crean subsequently joined Shackleton's 1914 expedition and played a major role in rescuing the crew when the Endurance sank in the pack ice. An extraordinary and modest man who never gave an interview in his lifetime, whose feats are commemorated in pictures and writings around the walls of the pub.

However interesting the story of Tom Crean, there was no food available so I went up the road to Patcheen's Bar and ordered soup and beef stew - pretty it was not, but it was tasty enough. After I'd finished the owner Andrew asked where I was staying and I told him of my journey. There were a couple of other locals in the bar and we got talking and a few pints of the black stuff later were having a good craic. What started as a rather disappointing evening ended on a high note and I went back to finish the blog in high spirits.

This morning there were an Australian and American lady already having breakfast. They are both (separately) walking the Kerry Way which seems to be a popular route. I had a bit of craic with John before leaving. It transpires that he was made redundant by the Irish Civil Service and set up the B&B about 10 years ago. He went off driving tour buses for a while whilst his daughter looked after the B&B but returned and now does that whilst his wife still works for the Government.

I set off at 0949 knowing that I had under 50 miles to ride. The day was overcast and I had a significant climb over the hill from Annascaul to Inch Beach looking back at the Conor Pass that I crossed yesterday



Over the top of the hill I looked down on Inch a huge sand spit that provides miles of golden sand for surfing and swimming when the conditions are somewhat better than today.



I swept down the hill and joined the coast road that makes its way to the head of the bay at Castlemaine. The wind was in my favour but the road was uninteresting and I was just intent on

getting to the turning point. Once round the corner the wind was in my face once more and a lot stronger than I had anticipated. Fortunately at this point I got off the very badly surfaced N70 and took to, at one point, an unsurfaced lane but through trees and sheltered from the wind. By chance I spotted an old ruined church attached to a graveyard and stopped to take some pictures



This was the remains of Killagh Priory, suppressed in 1576 and then destroyed by Oliver Cromwell's army in 1649. The graveyard was well tended but there was a melancholy feel to the place.

Back on the N70 which was proving to be the worst surfaced road I had cycled, I made my way to Killorglin, on the Ring of Kerry. Killorglin annually celebrates a Puck Fair in August

Every year a group of people go up into the mountains and catch a wild goat which is brought back to the town and the "Queen of Puck", traditionally a young school girl from one of the local primary schools, crowns the goat "King Puck".



The "King" is then put into a small cage on a high stand for three days, and on the 3rd day of the fair, he is brought down to be led back to his mountain home. In the middle of the town square, he is crowned and this signifies that the festivities may begin. The pubs stay open until 3.00 AM which is a legal exception due to the fair as all bars in Ireland normally must close at 2.00 AM. A fine mural has been painted in the centre of town and whilst taking the picture I stopped and talked with a man who was interested in my bike. He had spent time working in England, had married an Englishwoman and they returned to Ireland 10 years ago. Notably his wife decided to get an Irish passport earlier this year - Brexit.

The wind was getting fiercer by the minute and I was having trouble riding a straight line which was potentially pretty dangerous as every now and then I would be blown towards the middle of the road. I

decided to stop for lunch at Glenbeigh where the Towers Hotel provided a good thick chowder and garlic bread to go with the pint of Red. I left the main road and headed across country. This provided a little shelter and a greater feeling of security. The mountains loomed to my left and the sun came out



Back on the N70 and the strong wind, I now came in sight of the sea for the first time since I had left Inch Beach. There were whitecaps on the water and spums blowing from the waves.



With about 12 miles remaining I once again left the main road and had the most enjoyable ride of the day through woodland and protected by high hedges before arriving in Cahersiveen at about a quarter to four to book into the Sive Hostel.

