

Lancaster and South Lakes CTC Club Holiday 2021

The 2021 club holiday to Staffordshire eventually took place from 19th to 26th July, after several postponements of the 2020 holiday due to Covid. Fortuitously it coincided with the lifting of restrictions on indoor eating and drinking.

22 members travelled to Blithfield Lakeside Cottages, converted from former barns and outbuildings of St Stephen's Hill farm, on the slopes above the eponymous reservoir. Handily situated in the midst of a network of lanes, 8 miles from Rugeley and about 12 miles from Stafford, the area was characterised by rolling pastoral countryside, ideal for cycling. Each cottage boasted its own patio and outdoor eating area, with spectacular views over the reservoir towards Abbots Bromley on the opposite side. There were six cottages in total and we had booked them all, so we were not sharing the site with strangers, which was a bonus.

The journey down to Staffordshire and the first half of the week was in the midst of a heatwave, and we were so fatigued on the first evening that the planned exploratory ride around the reservoir was cancelled, whilst we focused on unpacking and exploring our cottages.

The next morning, refreshed and revitalised, we followed Tim on the first ride, to the Churnet Valley on the southern edge of the Peak District, via a stop at Denistone Farm café. We then went off-road onto a pleasant tree-shaded former railway line, the Churnet Valley Way, which penetrated deep into the hills. We then girded our loins for the stiff climbs to regain the roads on the ridges, before coming across a wonderful village pub, with huge shaded garden, where we re-hydrated and spent a very convivial hour. On this first day out of lockdown conditions it seemed strange being able to order drinks at the bar, although we were all careful to wear masks and sanitise our hands when going indoors.

On the Wednesday, arrangements had been made to meet up with the North Staffordshire CTC at the Wetherspoons Inn in the centre of Stafford. Six of us signed up for this, whilst a larger group explored the nearby hills of Cannock Chase, with some challenging off-road cycle tracks. For those of us in Stafford, we had a bit of a job to dodge the main roads into the centre and so were relieved to be guided out of town by the local group, in part along a former railway line. It was pleasant to meet up with a new club. Their riders are dispersed over a wide area, so often cycle in ones and twos to the meet-ups and they have a penchant for Wetherspoons where there are free refills of tea and coffee. The pub in Stafford is in a former cinema and retains much of its splendour.

On Thursday Andy led us over to Burton-on-Trent for a private tour of Clay Mill Victorian Sewage Pumping Station, a huge and impressive set-up, bigger than usual for a town of Burton's size, but necessary to deal with all the waste from the numerous breweries in the town. Enthusiastic volunteers showed us around and explained how the treated waste was pumped uphill to a municipal farm, where it was spread on the fields. The steam machinery has been repaired and returned to operational capability, using the site's own workshops and volunteers.

The route there and back went through pretty little villages and, again we found a nice pub on the way back for liquid refreshments.

The weather turned a little cooler on Friday, when Ian led us to the National War Memorial Arboretum at Alrewas. We had a very pleasant coffee stop at Fradley Junction on the canals network, which were busy with boaters, some operating small shops and craft stalls from their boats. Entry was free into the Arboretum, but car drivers had to pay for parking – no such charges

for us on our bikes. It was a very peaceful and moving place, with some visitors dressed in full military regalia as they visited and paid respect to plaques of personal interest. The cyclists made their ways back home by a variety of routes, with some extending their ride to Lichfield.

Pete and Gail led an 8-mile walk in the Churnet Valley on Saturday, exploring in more detail the destination of Tim's ride on Tuesday.

Conkers National Forest Centre was the destination of Patience's ride on Sunday, the only 50+ miler of the holiday. Most people were content to ride to the pleasant coffee shop at Barton-under-Needwood marina, then make their way home by various routes.

In addition to the rides, a number of people organised some evening activities, and Jean organised a fun event for people to find local places on a marked map and answer some questions, which could only be answered by visiting the spot in person – a sort of mix between orienteering and a treasure hunt. Special thanks also go to Dave Edge for taxing our brains with a quiz night, and to Andy G for organising a musical evening, ably supported by Dave H and others who had brought along their instruments. Patience organised a meal at a pub in Abbots Bromley on Saturday evening, which everyone enjoyed.

Patience is already planning the next club holiday for May 2022, which will be in the Vale of Evesham. Places still available.

Here's Ray beside the canal on the way to Cannock Chase



And a couple of photos of the Blithefield cottages



And here are some shots taken by Dave Hugill:





