



## **Cowal Way by Bike**

*The Cowal Way team asked Ron McCraw, a cycling and long distance route enthusiast from Stirling, to cycle the path and to provide us with a brief and independent report of his experience. Unfortunately for Ron the Cowal area has had a lot of rain recently (very unusual for June), so the going was quite tough. This report, written by Ron, is for anyone considering and/or planning to cycle the Cowal Way. Ron cycled the Cowal Way on 4 & 5 July 2017.*

### **An Overview**

Living in Stirling, I was aware that the east end of the Cowal Way was only an hour or so by car. The website promotes a short but, in places, challenging route of varied terrain with both rough and smooth conditions underfoot (or tyre), all wrapped up in great landscapes amidst some wild remote countryside. I decided to traverse the 57 mile route from Inveruglas to Portavadie in 2 days by lightweight cyclo-cross bike, carrying only a daysack with minimal essential gear, engaging the support of Balliemanoach Baggage to transport my overnight kit to accommodation, and to await me at the end of the route. I B&B'd at Strachur after the 25 mile "rougher and steeper" section, before completing the 32 mile "smoother and flatter" section on day 2. I'm 59 years old and I consider myself a fit and experienced runner, hillwalker and cyclist (at least for my age). Just as well, read on .....

### **The journey in short**

I left Inveruglas at 09.30 in a steady downpour, with little wind and midges rising, and pulled up the steep hydro road for Sloy Dam in a low gear before bridging the burn to access the Glen Loin path to Arrochar. It was wet, boggy and slippery in places after several weeks of rain. I soon dismounted as my 32mm tyres were skidding everywhere and my cyclo-cross skills exposed! Should I have used a mountain bike – hmm? Further down the path I remounted and bumped my way down to Arrochar where the short section on public road provided a welcome relief. The short forest section to Ardgartan was a straight forward undulating track with steep zigzag paths at either end which needed a bit of bike pushing in places. Soon I had begun the steep forest track climb up Glen Coilessan, managing to pedal to the end before continuing on foot up a steep rough path, in turn pushing and carrying the bike. I topped out at 500m on the wet and boggy bealach southwest of the Brack. The clouds had lifted, rain had stopped, and a brisk breeze was beating the midges and clegs. 3 hours clocked, I headed downhill towards Lochgoilhead, guided by white poles as the trail is indistinct. After a rough climb I had been looking forward to a steady descent, but it was heavy going in the boggy ground and the bike had to be pushed. Reaching the forest edge, the path was better defined though very wet and slippery and I half-carried the bike downhill, sometime using it as a walking aid for crossing burns and bogs. I expect that an experienced mountain biker could have cycled down but

it was beyond my skills, especially with a cyclocross bike. Eventually, the path grew less steep and conditions improved enabling a freewheel into town.

A brief stop at the shop to refuel and I rounded the lochhead by road and path then entered the Lettermay forest estate. Another steep climb up forest track. I was pedalling ok, though getting tired and slightly apprehensive, as I sighted the route ahead climbing up the side of a dramatic waterfall, (Sruth Ban falls) with no path in sight. This was arguably the toughest part of the entire trip (though day 2 had a surprise too!). I pushed, lifted, shouldered and wrestled the bike up around 150m of steep boggy ground before reaching the relative flat moorland of Curra Lochain. I pushed the bike for another 200m over wet boggy ground. This was tiring all over, on legs, arms and upper body. Finally, I reached a cycle-able rough track and headed downhill getting progressively faster as the track improved in width and smoothness. This was a good long descent all the way to Balliemanoach Farm (yes, my baggage handler) just outside Strachur. It was 16.30, 7 hours for 25 miles with short stoppages, though I reckon I had walked nearly 10. The B&B was excellent all round – quiet location, well appointed, comfortable, great food and beer and chats with welcome hosts who understand the needs of travellers. My hosts even stuffed my wet trail shoes with newspaper!

Well fed (great cooked breakfast) and rested, I set off for Portavadie at 09.15. My quads were initially stiff but soon warmed up as I sailed downhill to join the old military road to Glenbranter. It was a joy to cycle fast (thank goodness for the cyclo-cross bike) on the few miles of tarmac before starting the steep forest climb (350m and 3 miles) up and through Glenbranter to join Glendaruel. It was a bit of a squeeze on the tired quads but I made it without stopping and enjoyed (and deserved) the long, undulating and fast 5 mile descent in pleasant sunshine. The cyclo-cross was good, but a mountain bike would have been faster on the descent. I passed 2 Belgian girls and an American couple, both doing the route and camping. I chatted to the farmer at Garve Farm then hit the single track road all the way down the Glen. This was fast travelling after the rigours of the day before, and I was so glad I was cycling and, at that point, on a fast bike. The wildlife was good on the way – fox, deer, red squirrel, dragonfly, buzzard, loads of siskins. I reached the turn off for Tighnabruaich and soon after was bumping along the track to Ormidale Lodge and pier, which marked the end of cycling for a while! I had hoped that the tide would have dropped enough to walk around the strand line avoiding the steep rocky path above, but alas! What follows is not recommended, but I demonstrated it could be done. Best advice is to coincide with low water at Loch Riddon. I took at least 30mins to climb up and above the shore, a distance of only 500m through rocky fissures and rhododendrons. Vegetation has been cleared, steps and boardwalks created, and strategic ropes secured, and benches provided to maximise the fabulous views (great work by the route managers). I used my bike in ways which it wasn't designed for to get me round. In some it was a help, but mostly a huge hindrance. Towards the end, my rear wheel quick release was loosened by a spike of rock and it bounced off down the trail in front of me, just stopping in time before fresh air and a watery end! (take note!). It was interesting re-assembling the bike on a narrow rocky path, reflecting on finishing the route with one wheel.

I reached the strandline and enjoyed the relative ease of pushing a bike along rough flat foreshore grass, seaweed and pebbles, before joining the unsurfaced track to Tighnabruaich, feeling a bit hot and battered by my wrestling experience. The track gave way to public road and I went through the town and Kames and Millhouse which followed, amidst holiday makers, only stopping briefly to refuel from a local store. At Millhouse the route headed inland and uphill through woodland with good gradient on a nice grassy path

(but how sustainable for bike use?), punctuated by boardwalks on boggy ground. This would have been mostly cycle-able in good weather, but some wet and slippery sections had me walking. The woodland gave way to golf course which the route traverses through stone and grassy tracks. It felt a bit surreal perched on a bike, taking in the great views and watching golfers tee-off with the sun beating down. I wonder what they thought of me? The route crossed a bit of moorland via a rough downhill stony path to reach the next public road. Portavadie can be reached from there by National Cycle Route 75, the single track road to the marina and ferry, but the Cowal Way heads the other way through moorland and forest. Until this point I had high praise for the accuracy and consistency of waymarking (with a few exceptions), but it seemed to let me down in the vicinity of Auchoirk cottages, where I found myself wallowing in rank vegetation, bracken and bog. Possibly bad judgement on my part – it is hard to get waymarking perfect, especially for faster moving cyclists. So I retreated back onto Route 75 where a final hill climb and long descent took me straight to my waiting baggage handler and a return drive to Inveruglas. I had made it, albeit with an alternative last 2 miles. It was 15.30 and just over 6 hours since I had set off to cover these 32 miles.

## Impressions

What a great route, adventure and challenge. I had traversed a huge chunk of Cowal through fabulous landscape, often quite remote, by bike and quite often by foot, guided by clear waymarking (mostly) and evident path improvements. There were no fences to climb over, with self-closing gates throughout. It was definitely a route of two halves, the first day 40% on foot with the double whammy of the mountain bealach crossing and the “waterfall” climb, the second day a swift 95% on bike but with the Loch Riddon rocky traverse as a sting in the tail! I averaged 5mph roughly by bike, which demonstrates the nature of the terrain. However, this is more than twice as fast as the expected walking pace. Was it worthwhile taking the bike? Essentially yes. It enabled me to do the route in 2 days with approx 12 hours on the move. The bike was great for gobbling up these tarmac miles, especially in Glendaruel, and for some great long downhills on forest tracks. But the price you pay for this benefit is the need to push and carry the bike at times. For me this was approximately 20% of the journey. A fitter and more accomplished cyclo-crosser would ride more of the route more quickly. While at times I was wishing I had used a mountain bike, this would have been slower on the open road, uphill on tracks and, weighing in at 3-4 kg more, would have been purgatory to carry (unless carbon fibre and very expensive!). I saw no other cyclists on the route over the 2 days.

With the caveats above, I would recommend trying this route by bike. I had a great experience. In addition to 2 full-on days of nature and landscapes, I had to be self-reliant, physically fit and well prepared to survive the rigours of an arduous route. At times, there was more emphasis on survival than pure enjoyment, but often in these cases the enjoyment comes later in terms of reflection, learning, personal development and epic memories. So go in with open eyes, think through what type of experience you want to have, and consider the following:

**Duration:** 2 days with overnight at Strachur or 3 days with overnights at Lochgoilhead and Glendaruel, or even one day if you're feeling brave! (It has been done!)

**Bike:** Lightweight cyclocross, hybrid or MTB hardtail. Try get down to 10-11kg.

**Weather:** Try after a period of dry weather if possible. I was definitely hampered by boggy conditions after prolonged rainfall.

**Baggage:** Use the route baggage handler. Travelling with even a single panier of overnight kit etc would really compromise bike carrying and pushing. Carrying a bigger load on the back also makes for unpleasant cycling.

**Direction of travel:** I went east to west to get the tougher section done on day 1 when I was fresh. I did hit the prevailing south-westerly head wind on day 2, but this was a small price to pay. This direction avoids a 500m push\carry of bike uphill from Lochgoilhead,

**Travel logistics:** I'd like to try this again by combining with public transport or lengthening the cycle, eg. train to Arrochar or Ardlui from Glasgow (though issue of bike space?), returning via Gourock and the Dunoon ferry, or cycling from Balloch to Inveruglas via the West Lomond Cycleway then, afterwards, cycling from Portavadie back to Dunoon. The Inveruglas ferry to Inversnaid also offers options for Balloch or for Inversnaid (and then the Great Trossachs Path to Callander). There are other route linkages to suit cyclists – check out Scotland's Great Trails and the National Cycle Network.

**Alternative route options:** you could decide to miss out the real rough stuff, for example by doing Ardgartan to Lochgoilhead via the Glen Croe cycleway, then (after overnighiting perhaps), cycling Hell's Glen to meet the A815 near St Catherine's and continuing to Strachur. On day 2 the Loch Riddon shoreline challenge could be avoided by using the public road.

### **Techie Stuff**

Bike used: Specialised Tricross, sports triple. Front set 50, 40, 30, Rear set 11-32. 32mm Schwalbe Marathon tyres; Cantilever brakes, high clearance forks, strap-on crud catchers. Back rack removed. 11kg.

**With hindsight:** replace tyres with chunky more grippy 40mm + Armadillos or equivalent. 9Kg bike with disc brakes would be ideal.

**Daysack contents:** pump, spare tube, tyre levers, puncture repair kit, multi-tool, cloth; 2 filled rolls, dried fruit and nut trail mix, 3 protein cereal bars, 2 x 500ml electrolyte (extra water from shops on the way); map, compass, first aid, mobile, space blanket, buff, liner gloves, waterproof bottoms, cash and bank card. 3.5kg.

**To wear:** wicking long-sleeve thermal and t-shirt; lightweight "Event" fabric mountain jacket, lightweight mountain trousers, Gore-tex trail shoes with vibram sole, fingerless cycle gloves and peaked cap.