

## An Irish Motorcycle Diary

Being an account of the attempted circumnavigation of Ireland by two middle-aged people in September 2005, whilst mounted upon a two-wheeled mechanical contrivance<sup>1</sup>

*One of the chief problems that besets the aging motorcyclist is what one may term the leg-over problem; how to get on the thing. The lithe and youthful simply spring astride the machine, and throttle off into the sunset. The rider of more mature years approaches more carefully, especially if the machine is fitted with panniers, which in effect increase the width of the rear portion by around three times. Experience shows two possible approaches. One is to approach the machine from the side, square-on, and simply stride across the seat as if hurdling and then, once astride, turn to face the front. The other is to stand alongside the machine, and lift the right leg to an angle of around 90°, and then (watched in awe by passers by and small dogs) rotate on the heel in this balletic pose until the seat and panniers have been spanned and the leg can be lowered again. The reverse of this move, if one is numbed and reduced to a near rigor-mortis state by travel, is even worse. Then comes part two, when the pillion has to come aboard as well. The rider stands, bracing his legs outwards, and holds the machine vertical, whilst the pillion ascends on to one footrest, than swings over the panniers to descend into a seated position between them. Here a forces diagram of the sort one used to draw in ones physics exercise book would be helpful. This is a hairy moment. If balance can be maintained, and weight projected downwards, all will be fine; if however there is a pull to one side or the other, a point of no return is suddenly passed and the bike will topple sideways, resulting in the braced rider suffering sudden strain, or worse still a total collapse of machine and people.*

*Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> September.*

1.00am. Key broke whilst locking the motorcycle pannier; an hour of intense mechanical battle ensued, ending, rather surprisingly, with the lock dis- and re-mantled, and key end removed. 8.30 am departure on a glorious sunny morning. 8.40 am. Five miles out, just past Hexham the pannier comes adrift from the motorcycle, but is secured again with a bicycle chain ELR happened to be carrying. West via Brampton, Gretna, and Dumfries, where sky greys and the first rain sluices down. One brief antiquarian stop (Carsluith Castle), then to Cairnryan in time for 1330 ferry. Two hour crossing, then off round the Antrim coastal road, sweet peat smoke in the air to prove you are really in Ireland and cliffs above, a wonderful geological sandwich of black basalt and white chalk. Scenic diversion - ie narrow twisty hilly road - beyond Cushendun but mist and rain rendered it a struggle. Happier on main road again and a quick visit to Bonamergy Friary at Ballycastle, then on past Giant's Causeway and more dramatic coast, towards a burst of shafts of sunlight fanning down from the grey cloud ceiling. Bed and breakfasted in Portrush, a-throb with local youth.

*Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> September.*

Early communion at Church of Ireland, sparse but friendly congregation, then back to breakfast with a big band version of 'The Old Rugged Cross' on the background radio... we are in Ulster. Briefly lost in Coleraine, then to the Lough Foyle Ferry, and into the Republic - although nothing actually tells you that you are leaving British soil. On the other side the ruins of Greencastle, ivied and crumbling but now surrounded by big 'Private Property. Violators with be Prosecuted' notices - sad,

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<sup>1</sup>For those of a technical bent, it had a wheel at each end and an engine in between, and was made in Japan by a Mr Kawasaki, although imitating in form an English motorcycle of some forty years before.

this is the new Ireland. Then to Carndonagh; the map shows we should have passed through Culdaff on the way, but we didn't; Cludaff was three miles beyond Carndonagh. These are Irish maps; do not worry. On the Malin Head, Ireland's northernmost point, with wonderful views of Donegal's serrated coast and range upon range of mountains. Alas, the twisting ribbon of tarmac gave onto a beach lined with the dread bungaloid sprawl; how on earth did the planners allow this? Back to Carndonagh again, then Donagh and its early sculptured stones, and on over hills edged with wind turbines. Signposts pointed to the Lough Swilly ferry (ferries are very useful hereabouts, with sea lochs fingering so deep into the land); found a pier, but no sign whatever of a ferry. Was it too late in the season? had the service not commenced yet? had it sunk? As often in life, there were no answers. Back south, more early stones in an overgrown graveyard at Fahan, then bypassed Londonderry/Derry (which usually seems a good thing to do) and south-west on faster roads to Donegal, where evening sunshine shone on a satisfying friary ruin. Fed in Toni's Bistro in Donegal town - even here found antiquity, a 1.5 m thick end wall. Back to B&B and disquieting weather forecast on the TV; the Atlantic was about to throw its worst at the West Coast. Gales thunder and hail were specifically mentioned, frogs, plague and the death-of-the-first-born merely implied.

### *Monday 19 September*

Dawned wet and windy. Struggle Sligowards, with brief respite at a heritage centre in Drumcliff, for coffee and a book on round towers - weather then abated to we could look at the real round tower just outside, and a lovely high cross. Then it rained again. Looked at Sligo Friary (for PFR a fourth visit, always in rain). Lunch in café - then came the real downpour, solid columns of water arcing down from broken gutters to explode across the street, bedraggled pedestrians cowering in shop doorways. Nevertheless, and in total folly, we marched back to the bike and ploughed on south; that rain soon made nonsense of the waterproof claims of our gear. Soggy within and without, we came to Ballymote with its fine ruined castle, tidied and conserved, but all locked up; apparently this is one of a number of monuments in State care which they have just never got round to opening. Frustration. Then Boyle, a Cistercian Abbey and a custodian keen to talk archaeology; ELR was however beginning to flag, and, although the rain eased off, barely survived a final brief quest for an admittedly fragmentary Dominican Friary at Tulsk, before we arrived at Roscommon. A pleasant little town, with a good Indian restaurant, even though the chef's special was a curry made with Irish Whiskey, a cross-cultural culinary experience, maybe one just a little too far.

### *Tuesday 20 September*

A much better day. Roscommon Abbey (actually a Friary) and Castle both proved satisfying. The place also has a good key-cutting service, fortunate, as the bike's key was bending and threatening to snap. Then south, through a variety of little towns and villages each with signs proclaiming themselves as 'host towns', one to Afghanistan and the next, Mount Bellew Bridge, to Ecuador. We stopped for a coffee and perused the street market, sadly without any explicit Ecuadorian influence. Then to Athenry, an attractive and as-yet-unspoiled little market town, a significant place in medieval times before it fell on hard centuries; today it is threatened with a massive new housing development. At the castle, the custodian tried to explain Irish hurling to us<sup>2</sup>; when we located the keyholder for the ruined friary, he too was charming and informative. Finally into Galway, where the threatening weather forecasts made us decide to hole up for two or three days. This entailed chasing round

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<sup>2</sup>To English eyes this sport (to judge from a few snatches we saw on TV) seems a fast-played and skilful combination of rugby (people run with the ball), cricket (then they hit it with a bat) and the egg-and-spoon race (they also run with the ball balanced on the bat). Women play exactly the same game, but with a quite different name, Gaelic this time.

tourist offices (the first two of which were closed) in the city's rush hour, not pleasant. We learned a few lessons. Hotels advertise rooms at 'from' a certain price, but that is the price they will charge only at 11.59 pm; when you call in mid evening they demand at least 20 euros more. In the end door-knocking found us a B&B which turned out to be the best accommodation we found on the whole holiday.

### *Wednesday 21 September*

The threatened storms did not materialise; only the odd shower. ELR had a day in Galway, PFR reverted to his usual default setting (antiquarian traveller) and made a circuit of a dozen or so antiquities. The oldest was the Turoe Stone, now on the 'Turoe Stone and Pet Farm', which sagely charges adults 5 euros and children 10; however when PFR offered to forego the pets, he was shown the stone free, a huge stone egg set upright and covered in faint swirly patterns carved by some prehistoric hand. Clonfert proved to be a wonderful place, full of departed consequence - only a hamlet now, with a tiny 'Cathedral' that preserves one marvellous Hiberno-Romanesque door, with humps, bumps and archaeological hints and allegations all around. Once it was the centre of a diocese, famous for its schools. Now, inside the church, old carpets and rusting calor-gas heaters are heaped against the walls hiding the 7<sup>th</sup>-century gravestones and other wonderful sculptural pieces; everything is dank and mildewed. This is still the old Ireland; the new will doubtless soon arrive.

A word on the roads hereabouts. These are often long straights, bringing a red-blooded temptation to open the throttle. The impression of the race track is also heightened by the number of chequered flags hanging by the road - but these are in fact the colours of the Galway Hurling Team, subject of intense local support. Opening the throttle is not in fact a good idea; many of the roads are built on bogs, so that, despite being straight, they undulate in an alarming manner.

### *Thursday 22 September*

Despite (or perhaps because of) the apocalyptic meteorological predictions, another largely dry day. In the morning ELR laundered, in the afternoon we expeditioned on foot into Galway. This is the City of the West, with its medieval prosperity lately renewed. We found a length of the medieval city wall, with two round towers, within a modern semi-subterranean shopping centre; close examination showed that they had been reconstructed on the old foundations. The old streets have a variety of medieval fragments; Lynch's Castle, an urban tower house of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, is one of the best preserved pieces, now forming a vestibule to a bank; the old parish church of St Nicholas is also interesting. And if one escapes the tourists<sup>3</sup> down some backstreet, one is instantly transported into an unreconstructed Irish small town, with thatched cottages and peat smoke.

Across the river to the west is the mid-20th century Roman Catholic Cathedral, an amalgam of free Romanesque and Irish Gothic, inside a dark expanse of numinous space and flickering candles. Issuing forth, we were met by the inevitable gentleman of limited means who asked, in the politest

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<sup>3</sup>Difficult; *homo touristicus* is present in uncomfortably large numbers. This peculiar sub-species of humanity does not even extend the most cursory of courtesies to his fellow men; whilst avidly taking photographs themselves, they push directly in front of others who are so engaged; they talk and shout loudly to other members of their genre, irrespective of whoever else may be in earshot. They are also likely to be encountered, admittedly in smaller numbers, at almost any beauty spot or ancient monument, most often (and this is a mystery) in the form of an American couple in their sixties, one of whom will be called Elmer (which you will realise from their stentorian conversation). And a further mystery is that if, in some remote field or woodland, one is forced to seek a bush or hedgerow to answer an inescapable call of nature, **right there** they will suddenly appear, at the most inopportune of moments! Perhaps they are all clones of one couple, and some dark metaphysics is at work

and most deferential manner for the price of a sandwich...in such a state of grace, how could we refuse?

### *Friday 23 September*

The Burren is a large lump that sticks out into the Atlantic about half way down the west coast of Ireland; like most of the country it is made of limestone, but here, instead of being swathed in bog or glacial deposits, it rises in serried ranks of scars to bare pavements riddled with caves and potholes, limestone as it should be. Barren at a distance, it is in fact thick with intimate detail in its flora, fauna, and archaeology. The sunshine helped as well; twenty years ago we spent a week here, when everything was mist-shrouded and dripping. Today the land-, sea- and cliff-scapes were superb, and the roads well, OK, of would have been if one had been being sensible and driving a car rather than piloting an overloaded motor bicycle.

However, it cannot be denied that over those twenty years the Burren too has sold out, like the Aran Islands omnipresent on the seaward horizon, now sinking under the weight of visitors. Every village now has its heritage centre, offering educative videos (at a price) and endless knick-knacks. At the Cliffs of Moher the only possible parking (even for a bike) costs 4 euros; across the road some great excavation is going on; an underground interpretative centre? a tunnel to emerge half way down the cliffs and give stunning views?. We passed by, then tried to find a footpath to see the unimproved cliffs a mile or so further south, wobbling down a long track only to end in gates covered in threatening messages forbidding access. It could have been Hampshire. Back on the main road a large shop was selling rocks and fossils from all over the world (oddly, none seemed to be from Ireland), cashing on both on the scientific and the new age stuff; there was a video about local quarrying, but that was at a price as well. In Liscannor, half the castle had fallen down; what was left was wrapped in tall impenetrable metal fencing; in front of it a row of big shiny 4x4s waited, mothers collecting kids from the local school. Kilfenora has gathered its scattered high crosses and cross fragments from around the village and displayed them tidily in the north transept of the Cathedral, which has been given a brand new glass roof. The air was full of drilling and hammering; big new buildings were going up, to join the inevitable heritage centre (which was considerably larger than the old Cathedral alongside). Poor Kilfenora.

And so eventually to Ennis, in the news this week for the E-coli in its water. We knew about this from watching the TV, although the lady at the bed-and-breakfast, whilst admittedly provided some bottled water, did not warn us of the fact. In the evening the narrow streets of this little market town were still gridlocked with cars and heaving with people; nevertheless we found a good meal.

### *Saturday 24 September*

Back into Ennis to see its friary, a really good one; the custodian also told us that a boat was going out from Kilrush (thirty miles away) to the ancient monastic site on Scattery Island that afternoon, so we were soon speeding down the north bank of the broad Shannon estuary. However, when we arrived, the weather deteriorated. The reason for this late-in-the-season trip was to take out a coachload of elderly Americans (all over seventy); they duly arrived, but the boatman reckoned they would not cope with leaping from the tossing boat onto the landing stage, so, frustratingly, the trip was cancelled. In increasing rain, we headed back Ennis-wards, but before we arrived, after some searching, found our way to the ruins of Killone nunnery after a plodge of a mile through wet fields

and climbing through the usual overgrown graveyard. Despite the downpour a highly-satisfying ruin that one could scramble all over, dangerous bits and all<sup>4</sup>, full of architectural conundrums to boot.

A miserable evening; all our gear was now wet. ELR walked into town to feed but PFR, just too wet and cold to brave the continuing downpour, huddled in the room amidst dripping garments trying, quite unsuccessfully, to dry out his boots with a hairdryer. ELR eventually reappeared with a Chinese takeaway - stickily sweet lumps of chicken oddly paired with sliced raw carrots. PFR ate it, just. Horrible.

### *Sunday 25 September*

A breakfast weather forecast now changed our plans for the rest of the trip. OK you cannot really trust them, but this one spoke of 100mph winds sweeping in. The only sensible strategy was flight before they arrived. So we flew, through blustery showers west round Loch Dearg, ignoring the wonderful archaeology all around. Bursts of sunshine brought spectacular rainbows, and bursts of rain water droplets on the camera lens which fouled up the photos of the spectacular rainbows.... By lunchtime we were at Roscrea, and called in at Mount St Joseph Abbey to see an old friend, the former abbot, who had looked after PFR on a previous visit twenty odd years before. Cistercian hospitality brought us a fine Sunday lunch; we bought the monk's recent CD of bells and plainsong, blessed with a splash of holy water. A lovely little oasis in the middle of the day. Then back on the road again, with increasing winds behind us, but on a good modern road, somewhat harassed by lunatic drivers<sup>5</sup>. We stopped for an hour or so in Kildare, and got into the Cathedral on the tail end of a harvest festival service; we saw the round tower, and the pit where St Brigid's sacred fire had burned for centuries<sup>6</sup>, and then, on the outskirts of town, the Grey (Franciscan) and Black (Knights Templar) abbeys. Another hour of fast road, and we were at our travel lodge on the Dublin ring road - although finding our way into it took half an hour of circling round.

### *Monday 26 September.*

Up early for the ferry, but our plan for catching it did not really work. ELR took the tram into town, to meet PFR at the railway station - only, in a warren of rush-hour gridlocked one-way streets he could not find it, or rather found it five minutes after she had decided to take a taxi the ferry terminal. After an hour and a half of nightmare driving, half sitting in queues and half dodging into the maelstrom of cyclists, motorcyclists and buses swirling through the bus lanes, he too found the right ferry terminal, but five minutes too late, the ferry was sailing. Neither were over happy. It looked like a twelve hour wait, but thankfully the ferry company transferred us (free of charge) to the Stenna Line sailing from Dun Laoghaire, five miles away. So we had two hours of choppy crossing; the captain ordered us to remain seated as the gale increased. Docked in Holyhead (the weather too fierce for the ferry to return) then a desperate ride across Anglesey in savage cross winds. We

<sup>4</sup>In the morning we had mentioned this site to the ladies at the Tourist Office, prompting an interesting reaction 'Oh it is beautiful - but we could not possibly recommend a visit!' (I suppose because they thought we might sue them if we fell off it)

<sup>5</sup>Ireland has, apart from Greece, the most dangerous roads in Europe. The vast majority of people drive way above the speed limit. In a roadworks section, limit 50 kph (30 mph) at 50 mph all other traffic was forcing its way past us to drive at around double the limit. Then on unrestricted road (ie 120 kph limit, around 72 mph) we, whilst cruising at 80mph, were overtaken by a car pulling a boat driving at around 100 mph, which at the same time was being overtaken by another motorcycle doing at least 130 mph....

<sup>6</sup>It was eventually snuffed out by an early Protestant bishop, but, according to a Kildare website, was apparently re-lit a few years ago in some other local building (probably a heritage centre); whether the nineteen nuns who tended the scared flame were re-instituted (or the fact that no man was ever to be allowed into the sacred enclosure around it) was not recorded. More seriously, it is not clear whether the recent Government Ban on Smoking in Public Places has resulted in a second extinguishment.

thought we were on the tail end of the ferry traffic (and travelling slower than most of it) but a constant stream of articulated lorries, big vans and cars continued to pour along the road. Where was it all coming from? Is there a secret sub-Irish Sea tunnel? Had the meteorologists given orders to abandon Anglesey? The wind at least eased as soon as we had shuffled (thankfully in a slow-motion queue) across the Menai Straits onto Mainland Wales; the A55 towards Conwy is really quite scenic, with tunnels and big cliffs nearby. By mid-afternoon we had found refuge with friends at Dyserth (a few miles inland from Rhyl) and were well cared for, and the bike garaged; the storm outside became irrelevant.

### *Tuesday 27 September*

The last leg. Sunny now, but still strong winds. Left Dyserth about 11.30, along the North Welsh coast through Flint, and across a wonderful modern bridge; then busy dual carriageways to the M6, and various other motorways circumnavigating Manchester. Getting nerve-wracking; at one point we were boxed in a middle lane with juggernauts all around, everything thundering along at 70 mph and still the viciously gusting cross-cutting winds. Once one's reserve of nerve is used up, panic sets in. After sitting making sandwiches in the car park of services near Rochdale, we decided that we had had our fill of motorways, so (after a brief bone-up from a road atlas in the services shop) turned off and wound our way through Lancashire and West Yorkshire gritstone valleys, all old mills, canals and railway tunnels, then over Haworth moor to Keighley, and tea with friends in Skipton. Then a quick blast over the moors to Ripon for the last social call of the day. Braced ourselves for one last bit of busy road, 30 miles of A1 dual carriageway, then up the familiar leg of Roman Dere Street (now the B6275) through Piercebridge, with night falling on the twisting A68, arriving home at a little after 8.00. Piles of post, full answer phone, and a house heavy with the malodorous air of feline indiscretion; elderly Moggins misses us so much when we are away that she forgets her basic house training, oh the joy of pussies! ELR by now had a heavy cold, for some aspects of which she was thankful.

**Memo. Do not do this again; there was just too much pain. The bike behaved beautifully, but the struggle of getting on and off (especially with the panniers on); the hot and heavy motorcycling gear (rendering a hundred-yard walk purgatorial), disintegrating boots, and the general stress levels, exacerbated by the weather and traffic, made this really an expedition too far. Despite its spoilation, Ireland is wonderful, but take a car next time.**

**Peter Ryder September 2005.**