

WAYFARER - IN SEARCH OF WILD WALES

BY
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In the Cyclist's Garden at Meriden, there is a seat dedicated to the memory of "Wayfarer", the pen-name of a cycling journalist much appreciated by cyclists for his evocative writing in the 1920s and 1930s. It is not his only memorial. In the 41 years since his death, many thousands of cyclists have made the crossing, now popularly known as "the Wayfarer", over the Berwyns in North Wales, and have signed the visitors' book placed there and looked after by the Rough Stuff Fellowship. In the little hotel at the start of the track there is even a bar named after him. Though many know the name, fewer are familiar with the story of the man himself or the reasons why he is so fondly remembered.

The story begins on the last Saturday of March 1919, when a group of friends met for tea with the Anfield Bicycle Club at Rossett near Chester. Their plan for the weekend was to overnight at the West Arms in Llanarmon Dyffryn Ceiriog, and on Sunday to cross the Berwyns via the drover's track which climbs Nant Rhyd Wilym, going over the top at Pen Bwlch Llandrillo.



With dusk falling cold and frosty, the friends set off from Rossett towards their destination amongst the hills in the lee of the Berwyns. Under a clear starlit sky, acetylene lamps illuminating the road ahead, they made their way along the wooded valley of the River Ceiriog. But before they reached the inn, the stars dimmed and heavy snow began to fall.

Next morning, with snow covering the hills, local advice was against the crossing. But the sun was shining and there were blue skies, so, undaunted, the friends decided to venture forth. Beyond the farm at Sych Cae Rhiw, where the track begins the long climb to the pass, they encountered deep snow and drifts which made the route hard to find; and, worse, it was not long before the three travellers found themselves in the thick of a blizzard.

But snow in late March tends to be fickle, and by the time the top of the pass came into view the clouds had cleared and the sun again shone. The reward for what had been a difficult journey was a scene of timeless and memorable beauty: *"everything - or nearly everything - was pure white, which glistened in the sun and dazzled"*. Westward, stretching to the grey Irish Sea, were range upon range of mountains: the Arans and the Arenigs, the Rhinogs and the Snowdon group. Eastward the billowing white slopes of the Berwyns gave way to the much gentler landscapes of the Cheshire and Shropshire lowlands, glimpsed green in the



The West Arms, Llanarmon Dyffryn Cerriog: Frank Patterson's illustration for Wayfarer's 1919 article, and the photo on which the illustration is based (Wayfarer centre, right)

distance through folds of hills. Standing on the crest of Pen Bwlch Llandrillo the three friends were witnesses to a scene which in similar weather conditions is little changed today. Then, from the pass, guided by snowposts, they made their way to the Vale of Edeimion and reached Corwen for lunch. The morning's journey of ten miles had occupied exactly four hours.

In *Cycling* several weeks later, the experiences of that weekend were chronicled in an article entitled ***Over the Top*** by "Wayfarer", the pen-name of legendary cycling-journalist Walter McGregor Robinson, one of the three friends who had shared in the adventure. For cyclists emerging from the dark years of the Great War, Wayfarer was inspirational. His special place in cycling history stems from this and the many other powerfully evocative articles which he wrote in the 1920s and 1930s for cycling magazines including the



Anfielders "Wayfarer" and WP Cook climbing Nant Rhyd Wilym, and Frank Patterson's sketch of the ride

CTC Gazette, through many lantern lectures, and some broadcasting. His lyrical, and, some would say, evangelical approach to all aspects of cycling, fired the enthusiasm of countless riders.

His association with *Cycling* started in 1912 and lasted until the end of 1931. His weekly articles celebrated the open road and defended cyclists' rights. Amongst the causes, some lost - some won, he fiercely opposed compulsory red lights and the licensing of bicycles. In the 1920s, cyclists flocked in large numbers to his lectures about cycle touring "the open road" which he gave the length and breadth of the country.

Wayfarer's was a rare gift: the power to put into words, thoughts which touched the very heart and soul of cycling. And could he write! His encoun-



Illustration for "The Open Road", Wayfarer's lecture given under the auspices of the CTC on December 8th 1921 in Liverpool.



Wayfarer lecturing - from *Cycling*, 9th June 1921.

ters with the people he met along the road are keenly observed, in the tradition of George Borrow who, a century earlier, travelling widely in England and Wales on foot, related his adventures in *Wild Wales*, *Lavengro* and *Romany Rye*. Wayfarer's descriptive writing about cycle-touring has not been equalled. His essays brim with enthusiasm, and even today have the power to inspire. Much is as fresh now as when first penned.

As for the man himself, he was born in Birkenhead in 1877 of parents who were keen cyclists. Within sight and sound of the docks and shipyard cranes on the River Mersey, he was educated at the Birkenhead Institute, Whetstone Lane. In his adult life, it seems to me, he clearly took to heart the school motto: *doctus in se semper divitius habet* - "a wise man has riches in himself".

In the Great War, at the age of 40, Wayfarer served on the Western Front as a rifleman in the Queen's Westminster Rifles. As a member of the Anfield Bicycle Club, he regularly received parcels containing small luxuries like chocolate, tobacco and writing materials. A steady stream of news from the recipients about their experiences of the war was the Club's unique reward. Wayfarer sent mostly light hearted, good humoured letters about his training. But one account, more terse than the rest, stands out, serious in tone, and chilling: *"On Monday I joined my Battalion and came at once into the Reserve Trenches. In a few hours time I expect to go into the Fire Trenches for eight days. Then follows a "Rest" - (loud laughter) - and afterwards we keep on going round the mulberry bush"*. Within days, Wayfarer was severely wounded. He was stretchered back to England. Recovery from his injuries was slow. But, I am sure, the Anfield was not alone in considering the Army's loss to be cycling's gain!

Following the war, in 1922 his business career, with the Liverpool and Globe Insurance Company, took him and his family to Birmingham. There he established links with the CTC's Birmingham and Midlands DA. He was a member of the CTC Council from 1924 to 1946 and a Vice President in 1945. For his services to the CTC and the cycling community, he was awarded the Alfred Bird Memorial Prize and the Italian Touring Club's gold medallion.



Wayfarer (left) with W P Cook on tricycle and 'old' Tom Hughes at the Anfield Bicycle Club 100, 1924

His first bicycle - a much used second hand machine with solid tyres took him to North Wales for an Easter tour. But it was the Anfield Bicycle Club's W P Cook and his contemporaries, through their exploration of Berwyn mountain tracks in the early years of the century, who introduced Wayfarer to their pioneering adventures. As on that winter's day in March 1919, Wayfarer frequently drew on his experiences of club riding. Exploring Wild Wales was something he loved, and it was an area to which he returned time after time and particularly the Berwyns. So it is fitting that by the side of the track over Pen Bwlch Llandrillo the Rough Stuff Fellowship placed a simple memorial which reads:

ER COF AM
WAYFARER
1877 - 1956
UN OEDD YN CARU CYMRU A
LOVER OF WALES ERECTED BY
THE RSF

It is not the original; that granite stone, in English only, was defaced in the 1960s at a time when passions about Welsh culture and language ran high in Merioneth.



Nant Rhyd Wilym, the Berwyn hills, North Wales: the original memorial placed by the Rough Stuff Fellowship photographed in 1962 with members of the Anfield Bicycle Club (standing l-r: David Barker, John Farrington; seated John Thompson, Philip Edwards, Peter Jones. photo by David Birchall

The memorial, in a sunny spot on the face of a rocky knoll near the top of Nant Rhyd Wilym, is well sheltered from the westerly winds which buffet the col. On summer days it is a lovely place to drowse. Amongst the quiet heather moorland, the prospect of green vales and distant mountains is filled with the sounds of skylarks and grouse, and, if you are in luck, the haunting cry of buzzards. I have no doubt that Wayfarer and his friends would regret the intrusion of the four wheel-drive vehicles and trail bikes

which nowadays can so noisily disrupt the solitude, and have caused so much damage to the historic route. In contrast, that Wayfarer whose preference was for buttermilk or tea has a bar named after him at the West Arms would be a source of great merriment!

Wayfarer died in Birmingham at the age of 78. His special place in cycling is commemorated by the CTC with the seat to his memory in the Cyclist's Garden at Meriden.



To the memory of Wayfarer: - the seat and plaque on Meriden Green looks out towards the Cyclists' War Memorial.

FOLLOWING WAYFARER'S TRACKS



Climbing Nant Rhyd Wilym – Boxing Day 2007 ... to replace the old Visitors' Book with a new one.

Starting from Llanarmon Dyffryn Ceiriog, in fine weather the track to Cynwyd is rideable throughout by mountain bike. At least two hours should be allowed for the crossing; and more for lightly tired machines which will need to be pushed on the roughest and steepest surfaces. The track is suitable for tandems, though I suspect not without a struggle, and even tricycles have been over the top. In poor conditions, three and a half hours to reach Cynwyd would not be unreasonable.

For the return ride, there are several possibilities. The classic round trip takes in the far more arduous and wilder Ffordd Gam Elin track, over Bwlch Maen Gwynedd, which climbs higher and is much less

clearly marked than the Wayfarer route. In good conditions allow at least four hours for this option. Or you can return from Llandrillo, three miles south of Cynwyd. Here, a delightful fragment of drove track can be followed. Initially this route climbs eastwards from Llandrillo through deciduous woodland back to Pen Bwlch Llandrillo from where the outward ride can be retraced.

Alternatively, climbing the Bwlch Maen Gwynedd from Llanarmon DC on the outward leg and returning via Wayfarer's track is certainly worth considering. On a mountain bike, the descent of Ffordd Gam Elin from Bwlch Maen Gwynedd to the Dee Valley is exhilarating. If you can arrange the ride back from Cynwyd to Llanarmon after dark, so much the better! Climbing quietly along Wayfarer's track under a starlit sky and with a harvest moon for company is a memorable adventure.

A third possibility from Cynwyd is to head for Corwen and the "old coach road" along the north side of the River Dee to Glyndyfrdwy, then by mountain road southwards to Glyn Ceiriog and so back. In Llanarmon DC, there are two small hotels - the Hand and the West Arms both of which provide refreshments all day.

All the routes are shown on OS 1:50,000 Landranger 125 (Bala and Lake Vyrnwy). For more detailed guidance, OS 1:25,000 Pathfinder 826 (Llandrillo) covers the Wayfarer, Bwlch Maen Gwynedd and Llandrillo tracks.

