



© Crown Copyright. Mercat Press
MCI00031557, 2001.

ROTHESAY TO SCALPSIE BAY

The long and narrow Island of Bute (23 km long by 8 km across at its broadest point) is a very cycle-friendly place indeed. All the roads, regardless of their classification, can be cycled upon with relative ease, and although the island has its hills, the highest being Windy Hill at 278 m, most roads are relatively flat. The principal town of Bute is Rothesay, once one of the Firth of Clyde's most popular holiday resorts, bringing throngs of people from towns and cities throughout Central Scotland 'Doon the Watter' for the Fair (i.e. the local Trades holidays throughout Central Scotland, which were staggered during July and the first two weeks in August.) The busiest time was the second fortnight of July, which was the Glasgow Fair, with thousands of Glaswegians descending on the town and swelling its population sometimes almost ten-fold. They would enjoy the best-quality entertainment of the time. Comedians such as Harry Lauder and Will Fyfe, the singer Robert Wilson and Jimmy Shand and his band, would play the summer season at the Art Deco Pavilion and the Art Nouveau Winter Garden in Rothesay, as well as other resorts on the Clyde such as Dunoon and Ayr. Although most Scots take their holidays in warmer climates these days, the Island of Bute is still a popular holiday resort. But nowadays it lends itself to more specialised recreations such as fishing, water-sports and, of course, cycling. The island plays host to many hundreds of cyclists from cycle clubs all over the UK when it holds its festival of cycling every September. Some cyclists are so keen to be on Bute for that weekend that even though accommodation becomes scarce they have been known to bed down in the bus shelters. (Although perhaps this is after a small refreshment or two!)

INFORMATION

Distance: 18 km (11 miles) circular route.

Map: OS Landranger, sheet 63.

Start and finish: Rothesay Pier.

Terrain: Moderate hills throughout with long stretches of flat road.

Refreshments: Available from various places in Rothesay.



A cyclist powering uphill out of Rothesay (Photo: Allan Maclean).

The island has a long and interesting history, and after disembarking from Caledonian MacBrayne's ferry *Jupiter*, with the 30-minute sail from Wemyss Bay behind you, you will find the first historic spot a mere 250 metres from the pier. This is Rothesay



Rothesay Castle.

Castle, the entrance to which is in Castlehill Street. Rothesay Castle is unique in Scotland, as it was the only castle ever constructed with a circular courtyard. It is also one of very few to be completely surrounded by a moat. These mighty stone walls were built in the thirteenth century to replace the timber structure of the previous motte and baillie stronghold, which stood on this site at that time next to the sea. This means, of course, that the land now in front of the castle was reclaimed, this taking place in 1840.

The first recorded event concerning Rothesay Castle was in 1228 when it was attacked by Norsemen who failed in their attempt to take the castle. Some years later, however, the castle was taken by the Norsemen and held for some time. In 1263, during King Hakon's invasion of Scotland, the Norsemen were defeated at the Battle of Largs and the castle was once again returned to the Scots. A hundred years later it became a seat of the Stewart family and it was here, in 1406, that King Robert III died. He was then buried at Paisley Abbey. The king bestowed the title Duke of Rothesay upon his eldest son, a title which was given to the heir apparent of the Scottish throne thereafter. At the Union of the Crowns this tradition was continued, and today Prince Charles, as well as being the Prince of Wales, is also the Duke of Rothesay, Lord of the Isles and Great Steward of Scotland, all ancient Scottish Royal titles.

The Castle was taken several times by English invaders, firstly during the Wars of Independence,

before it was returned to Scottish hands by Robert the Bruce. Oliver Cromwell's troops occupied the castle in 1659. The Scots invaded it too! The Duke of Argyll besieged the castle in 1665 and it was almost completely destroyed. After this the Stewart family had to move to a more modest house, in comparison to the castle, known as the Mansion House in High Street, and they lived there for 47 years, until the first Mount Stuart was built in 1712. The castle was partially restored by the Marquises of Bute in the nineteenth century. In the 1960s it was handed over to Historic Scotland, who during the 1990s extensively restored the castle for the people of Scotland.

The route begins at Rothesay Pier. On leaving the pier cross into Guildford Square and head up High Street, past Rothesay Castle and Mansion House, and then turn right into Russell Street. Carry on uphill to the next junction and straight on into Barone Road.

Rothesay Pier.



After a short distance a road junction is reached on the left. This is the minor road which goes off to Loch Fad, as the signpost indicates, and which offers a shortened route across the causeway separating Loch Fad and the Kirk Dam. From the end of the causeway a rough track climbs to the A845 at the outskirts of Rothesay. If using this route, turn left on to the A845 and descend back into Rothesay.

Loch Fad, situated in a long valley, is a man-made loch along the line of the Great Highland Fault. Thus the area to the north is in the Highlands whilst that to the south is in the Lowlands. This is reflected in the topography of the area, as the land to the north is rugged with rocky moorland and poor soil, whereas the south has rich, sandy soil and so is suitable for farming.



Evening falls at Loch Fad.

For the longer route continue along the B878 for almost another 3 km to the junction with the A844 at the foot of Barone Hill. Here, turn right and follow the A844 south towards Scalpsie Bay. After riding along this road for about 3 km you can see the scanty remains of a castle to the right. This is known as Crouner's Castle, a sixteenth-century fortified keep built by the Jamieson family who were the hereditary Coroners of Bute.

Continue south, climbing as you go, for 2 km to a viewpoint where there is a fine outlook over to the small island of Inchmarnock, called after St Marnock, the same saint after whom the town of Kilmarnock is named. A little further on there is another viewpoint looking over Scalpsie Bay. There is a large colony of seals here, which makes an interesting and charming spectacle. From



Looking over the Sound of Bute to the Isle of Arran.

this point too at various times of the year you may be lucky enough to see dolphins, basking sharks and even, very occasionally, killer whales. There is also a beautiful view across the Sound of Bute to Arran.

Cycle on again, now heading north past Loch Quien with a crannog on its west side, to the T-junction where the A845 begins. Here turn left and follow this road the remaining 7 km back to Rothesay. The route passes between Loch Fad and, on the other side of the road, Loch Ascog.

As you enter the bounds of Rothesay you pass the High Kirk. On its south side is the ruined chapel of St Mary's, the only surviving part of the ancient parish of Rothesay. From here the route is straightforward. Simply head down High Street to the Castle and follow the one-way-street system, right into Castle Street, then take the first left into Bishop Street which joins Albert Place at the end of the route.