

Rollerski tour of Preston Guild Wheel, 1/7/14

Author: Miles Peacock, Manchester Cross Country Ski Club

Introduction

The Guild Wheel is a circuit of 21 miles (I clocked it on my GPS at 34.1km) that circles Preston. If you think of it as a clock face, the starting point is at 6 and the crossing of the A6 at the northern point is 12. Going in a clockwise direction, from 6 to 12 (the western side) is mostly flat and has some super-smooth sections which are ideal for rollerskis. From 12 to 6 (the eastern side) there are some challenging hills and the surface can be rougher. You will do more walking in this section. As well as varied terrain, scenery and surfaces, the route consists of cycle track, some closed roads, short open road sections and some rough track. Some sections will be unskiable, but you could probably do more if you are using larger, air-filled wheels. Even so, you will end up walking some parts of the route for reasons of safety or because there are some steep descents. Thankfully, most of the walking sections are short-lived. Most of the time you could keep your ski boots on, and only change back into walking shoes for the longer sections. (I'll try to advise you on this in the route description below). The route is ideal for classic or skate technique.

Spring or summer time is the best time to do the Wheel. Much of it is tree-lined and in the autumn this can lead to twigs and wet leaves on the track, making the surface a bit more difficult. If you can, start early in the day. The Wheel is very popular with cyclists, walkers and runners, plus some of the open road sections can get quite busy, so an early start will give you greater freedom and safety.

As for how long it takes, this will depend on your level of fitness, and how many times you stop to take pictures, rest at the cafés or change footwear. Allow half a day, more if you want to take in some of the splendid scenery along the way.

One good thing about the design of the Guild Wheel is that it crosses many major routes. Many of these 'spokes' are bus routes back to the centre of Preston, so if you have to cut your journey short, then catch a bus back to the terminal in the town centre. Avenham Park is a short walk from there.

The Guild Wheel is listed as Sustrans route 622 and is well signposted as such. You can find out more information about the route and its history at:

<http://www.lancashire.gov.uk/corporate/web/?siteid=5989&pageid=34335>

Starting points

You can start the Wheel at virtually any point. If you want to maximise the length of rollerskiing you can do with minimal walking, I would suggest you start under the M6 bridge at the entrance to Brockholes nature reserve. (You can park at the nature reserve, but you will have to pay and also wait for opening hours). Under the bridge is free but get there early

to find a space. Another alternative is to start from Preston docks as there is lots of parking there.

The start suggested here is near to the 'official' start of the Wheel, in Avenham and Millar Park, next to the River Ribble in Preston. Park at the car park opposite Christ the King Maths and Computing College. To get there, turn off the A6 (London Road) as it crosses the River Ribble, opposite the Shawes Arms pub. You turn into Ashworth Grove, which feeds into Boulevard. Follow the road round to the car park, **Grid Reference SD 546 285**. Walk back to the path by the river and you are on the Guild Wheel.

Kit

As well as your usual ski kit, you will need a rucksack to stow your gear when walking. (If you are planning on running/Nordic walking the non-ski sections, it's a good idea to be able to secure your gear firmly, so it doesn't shake around, which can be quite uncomfortable. I'd recommend taking a bit of food and fluids with you, but there are numerous shops and cafés along the way, some of which I've included in the route. As for footwear, a good pair of trainers will do fine. Choose something which is easy to get on/off so you don't spend too much time making the transition from ski to foot. (I used a pair of trainers with elastic laces, so I could just slip the shoes on without the need to tie laces). Take some money too, not just for the cafes, but also for bus fares if you are not planning on doing the whole route.

The Route

Section 0km -4.5km This is nearly all skiable except for the occasional road crossing.

From your starting point at the River Ribble, follow the river bank (in the direction of the river flow), through Avenham park. You will soon pass the 'official' start point of the Guild Wheel, and if you really want a café stop after 5 minutes, here is your first chance! This section is flat and the surface is reasonable.

Pass the café, keep following the river bank until you pass under two railway bridges. (Look for the Continental Pub in front of you)

Exit on to an open road, passing to the left of the pub. It's a really short section, and leads to a dead-end, so it's usually quiet, but do watch out for traffic.

Keep following the river bank, on a short path (there are actually 2 paths, one slightly higher than the other). This soon exits on to another short section of open road. Again, look for traffic. You will soon pass an old bridge and at this point you can re-join a purpose-built cycle track, still following the river bank. Follow this to traffic lights.

Cross the busy road and pick up the track on the other side. You are still following the river. You are now on a super-smooth section of the Wheel. Pass the Sea Cadet HQ, and whoop for joy as you follow the track to Preston Docks.

Section 4.5km – 8.3km All of this is skiable after the swing bridge.

As you exit the smooth section, look to your right and you will see a swing bridge. You should cross this, and it may be advisable to walk, as there are railway tracks embedded in the road surface. It's only 200M and on the other side of the bridge, pick up the Guild Wheel signs again. You are still following the river, but at this point, you will be a bit further away from the bank and on a short road section. This road enters a carpark next to the river. You are now back on the bank and on a good surface again, although it can get covered in tree debris here.

Keep following this track, which leaves the river, and eventually you will emerge at a business park, with various car dealerships on it. The track leads up to a junction with a dual carriageway and then starts to follow this road, with the dealerships on your left. This is a really nice section, gently rising, but nothing strenuous. Keep on the track until you arrive at a pedestrian bridge which crosses the carriageway. At the crest of the bridge, you will need to put on your walking shoes.

Section 8.3km - 14.4km Excellent skiing, with a short walk at the start and end of the section.

A 500m walk on rough-surface track will take you to a canal and the start of another super-smooth section. Try to contain your delight as you glide along the side of the canal (passing between Preston North End's training ground and a golf course on the opposite bank). Keep looking for the Wheel signs; you will cross a couple of roads, one of which takes you round the front of St Peter and St Paul's Church, a red-brick building.

Re-join the track (still lovely!) and follow it past a school until you arrive at Savick Way (at about 11.2km). Turn left and cross a kidney-shaped bus stop to gain a track which takes you under a railway and into Preston Sports Arena. The track then follows the side of some netball/tennis courts then crosses a small bridge to take you into Cottam.

Cross the road and follow the signposted track (gently rising in places). The surface here is adequate.

Eventually you will hit a road called Tom Benson Way, where again you will need to walk for a few hundred metres on a gravel path, until you arrive at a roundabout with Tag Lane.

Section 14.4km –24.3km

The surface improves again here. Cross Tag Lane and turn left, then almost immediately right into Lightfoot Lane. You are on an open road here, but it is quite quiet. Look for the Guild Wheel sign into Sandyforth Lane and take this road. It is still an open road, but narrower and quieter than Lightfoot Lane. It gradually bends to follow the M55 and you will pass a mile-marker along this lane and shortly after it rises slightly to a bridge, which crosses the motorway. Turn left and cross this bridge. Although an open road, there is a dead-end just around the corner, but do watch out for lorries coming from the builder's yard.

The surface improves as you pass alongside the yard, but watch for a short descent. At the small bridge the track rises again until you exit on to a road, signposted as 'Moorcroft'.

Another short walk round some school playing fields will take you to the busy A6 (shops here), north of Preston. You are roughly half way round the Wheel. Cross the A6 and head SOUTH back towards the M55 and Preston. This section is skiable on a nice surface. Just before the M55, turn left into D'Urton Lane (approx. 18.6km).

Here comes your first real hill challenge. D'Urton Lane gradually rises and as it does so, the surface gets better. It is an open road, so if you can do it early in the morning, even better, as it is a good workout. Follow this road past the millionaires' houses to a T junction at around 20km.

Turn left here onto a busy road. Best to walk this section and after only 100 metres you can put the skis back on as you enter Midgery Lane on the right. This road is closed to traffic and has a reasonable surface.

Cross a couple of roads, staying on the closed road of Midgery Lane. (At the second crossing, if you look right you will see an ASDA store, if you need to replenish your food stocks).

The end of Midgery Lane is marked with a gate and a sign warning of a steep descent. You join an open road here, so I strongly advise you walk the descent, however tempting it looks! Just as the road begins to rise again, look for a Guild Wheel sign on the left (At around 21.9km).

This section could be brilliant, a long rising path, with steep sections, but unfortunately the surface, although new, is quite rough. You can bully through it if you are that way inclined! After crossing a road and following the path upwards, eventually you will come to a road. (Look for the North Highfield sign). The Guild Wheel splits into two here. Put your trainers back on and take the 'steep gradient' option.

Walk down the hill, under the motorway and then up again. It's tempting to put your skis back on here, but turn sharp right on to a path and continue walking down a 15% slope until you reach a small wooden bridge, followed by a steep incline. You can put your skis back on here, but again the surface isn't brilliant. Follow the path until it exits at a roundabout. There you will find a Spar, Starbucks and a Subway.

Section 24.3km - 34.1km

At Spar you can put your skis back on and return to skiing on a good surface. A few hundred metres on from Spar the track switches sharp left (opposite a VW dealership). This puts you on a long super-smooth straight track, but don't get mesmerised, as you are not going to its end but turning right, so keep looking for the Guild Wheel sign or you will end up in Longridge!

This smooth track ends at a busy road, which you cross at the Pelican crossing and then enter the grounds of the Crematorium. Ski along the drive until it turns sharp left (26.1km). Your track goes straight ahead here, but you will need to walk again as it is rough and gets rougher.

This is the longest section you will do on foot so it is worth putting your walking shoes on. The track starts off flat as it crosses a meadow, and then descends steeply through a wood to Brockholes Nature Reserve. Make sure you follow the signs as there are several paths across the meadow. If the café at Brockholes is open it does delicious cake, and the floating visitor centre is worth visit.

From this point, you could ski the tarmac entry road, but it is quite rough and it is probably better to continue walking until you meet the bridge that carries the M6 over the River Ribble (near the Tickled Trout hotel) at 28.7km.

From here there is one final super-smooth section, following the bank of the river. It is mostly flat but there are a couple of interesting lumps to give you one last workout. This smooth section ends at 31.2km. The track gets rough as it continues along the bank before turning right up to a farm. You will need to walk this short section, but if you want one last ski, you can ski the section from the farm back to the A6 at the Shawes Arms pub. It is an open road, single track and quite quiet, but visibility is poor in places so watch out for traffic.

Cross the A6 for a short section back to your start point. You will have travelled 34.1km and hopefully had a fantastic day out!