

## **Day 9 110.42 miles (657.12 miles)**

And so the second half of my LEJoG began with a breakfast of two heaping bowls of Honey Crunch Flakes soaked in whole unadulterated milk and a cup of strong tea (in a cup, not with the cereal). I bid adieu to Gordon and Jan and thanked them for their hospitality. I hadn't laughed so hard in a long, long time and urged them to visit us down in the southwest as soon as they could.

The weather was sunny as I began my ride on the flats alongside the River Ouse. Having seen some of the hills in the Yorkshire Dales and being someone naturally adverse to pain and suffering, I planned to cut between them and the North York Moors and avoid the fate of that red-faced cyclist. As I pedalled slowly and steadily, I thought about my ancestral ties to this of the world and realised how, in some ways, this part of North Yorkshire resembled Saskatchewan, where I was born: flat agricultural land topped by a towering sky, a reminder that what really mattered to farmers came from on high.

I had made an early start and chalked off a good number of miles in the bright sunshine. I had been able to take out some Ordnance Survey maps for the stretch between Tollerton and Morpeth, north of Newcastle, and had what I thought was a good route planned out. The only major decision was whether or not to head through Newcastle, or add about 10 miles to my day and go around it. Reflecting on cycling around Leicester, which was a pain, and through Nottingham, which was fine, but also remembering getting lost in tiny Cirencester, it wasn't an easy choice. Given that I wouldn't hit Newcastle until late in the afternoon, when my brain would probably be Kentucky fried and prone to errors of navigation, I decided to head around. Plus, if there was a Newcastle United home game, the streets would be jam-packed with shirtless drunken Magpies, something I might welcome on some occasions, but not with half of my journey before me.

The other clincher was the fact that, by skirting the city, I'd be able to see a bit of Hadrian's Wall, something I'd always wanted to walk ever since I heard about it as a kid. Something about the physical barrier between wild Celtic Scotia and the apparently civilised Roman Britannia always appealed to me. When Annie Grocott's partner, Graeme had mentioned that he was walking it, partly to celebrate his 70th birthday, but also to raise money for charity, I happily pledged him. I had almost done it myself with a Canadian friend of mine, but had to back out at the last minute because of an annoying academic meeting. Perhaps it would be my next little quest.

Unlike many of my other navigational choices, going around Newcastle turned out to be a good decision. The terrain got hillier and hillier as I headed towards Tyneside. I hadn't climbed any hills since leaving Cheltenham, and it felt strangely good to pump my legs up the slopes; my rear also enjoyed spending a little time off the saddle. After cresting a particularly steep hill, which took me past an exposed hillside village, I started to descend into the Tyne valley. I rolled onto the bridge that crossed the Tyne and had to stop. The sun had been persistent and it dappled pleasantly on the river. It was hard to fathom here, ten miles from Newcastle, that for most English people, Tyneside meant faded industry, considerable poverty, and tough, often incomprehensible Geordies. An old man leaned on the railing just staring at the ripples, just like I was. As I ate my sandwich and some of the Hawes cheesery fruitcake, I thought how wonderful it would be to kayak down the Tyne. It's funny how, when you're cycling, you often wish you were walking or paddling and vice versa. After my break I headed up the other side of the valley and intersected with the famous wall. A couple strolled by and numerous cyclists whizzed past. I thought again about walking from Newcastle to Carlisle. This was a captivating part of Britain that had a frontier feel to it. Probably the centurions who manned it 1900 years ago felt the same.

I got lost for the first and only time shortly after, wandering around the series of right-angled roads leading to Morpeth. It wasn't too bad and, since the weather was warm and the countryside was fetching, I didn't much mind. Eventually I got my bearings and I caught a south-westerly wind and sped swiftly into Morpeth. It had been an oddly uneventful and deceptively easy 110 miles. 110 miles! That's a long way! And yet I felt strong in body and, knowing that I had a couple of shortish days to follow, strong in mind as well. It was the sort of day that made LEJoG feel like, well LESEP - Land's End to St. Erth Praze (google it - it's not far). But I also knew that it only took another breakdown or an altercation with a car or an injury or mental breakdown for my journey to take a turn for the worse. I tried not to feel too confident as I zipped along in the early evening sunshine.

Finding my host's place was a cinch; Leah was just a little off the main road and had given good directions. She welcomed me warmly, along with her partner JP, his mom and Arthur, their 10 month old. He found me fascinating for some reason and I enjoyed finding ways to make him chortle and coo. Leah asked if I wanted to use the computer and, after thinking for a moment about the wonderful ride I'd had and the simple pleasure of goofing around on the floor with a toddler, I said no thanks.

I caught up with Lean after dinner. She was a PhD student at Exeter and had the same supervisor as me, but lived 500 miles away, where JP worked as a vet. It was an inconvenient arrangement, but she was progressing well with her work. We exchanged gossip and I realised with some horror that she was more up to date with things in Morpeth than I was in Exeter. At least on the bike it didn't matter that I was the last to know everything.