

Day 10 62.76 miles (719.88 miles)

I fell asleep to the sound of a yapping dog, which I thought would keep me up but didn't. Arthur could have wailed like a banshee on amphetamines and I would have snored peacefully for at least eight hours. I was really looking forward to the next two days. First, because it was a part of Britain I had never seen - Northumbria and the Borders. Second because I would be heading into Scotland. And thirdly, and most importantly, because the next two legs were barely two-thirds of what I had been cycling since Cheltenham. I could take my time and look around a wee bit, maybe take some photos and actually eat lunch at a pub or restaurant, rather than scarfing down sandwiches while standing up beside my bike on the side of the road. Of course this more relaxed vein of thinking had not sunk into my noggin when Leah asked if I wanted to walk into Morpeth with them later that morning. Stuck in my routine, I demurred to get an early start.

I bade my farewells and headed into another bright, sunshiny day. I had slaked on the sun block, remembering that I'd be cycling the coast all day. Officially, I would be on the Coast and Castle route up to Berwick upon Tweed, a 60 mile trek known for its sand beaches, crab and kippers, and ancient fortifications. The Viking era had begun in 793 AD, 1216 years ago (!), with a raid on Lindisfarne, which I'd pass nearby. It was an ancient strip of real estate, but often overlooked these days.

But not always. For an Albertan, this stretch of coast had an additional, highly embarrassing relevance. A month before, Travel Alberta, responsible for attracting tourists to the province, produced a promotional video featuring two Nordic-looking children on a sand beach. Now, if you know anything about Alberta, your spidey-sense is probably already tingling, given the fact that Alberta is a land-locked province, about 1000 miles away from a proper beach. Not only that, eagle-eyed viewers noticed that there was also a very un-Albertan bit of architecture perched on the background, specifically, a castle, Bamborough Castle. Sure enough, the idiots at Travel Alberta found some footage featuring a Northumbrian beach and attempted to pass it off as Sunny Alberta. The BBC, *Daily Telegraph*, and every other media outlet picked up the story and chortled about it the way a parent might laugh at the bumbleings of a somewhat thick child. An Alberta government spokesman tried to explain away the gaffe, by stating the video didn't have to portray Alberta, only an *idea* of Alberta. The idea that Alberta has beaches, castles and abuts the North Sea? Honestly. I suppose the Rocky Mountains aren't good enough for some people.

Soon enough, however, I grudgingly decided that at least they picked a wonderful part of Britain to pass off as Alberta. My leisurely course kept me hugging the coastline, detouring through little

villages and jogging east as much as I could so as to keep close to the ocean. I hadn't seen the sea since Devon and it was a welcome, silvery sight. I got off my bike and climbed up a dune near Cresswell to get a closer look. I wasn't sure what the North Sea was supposed to look like, but it wasn't this: white sand, gentle waves, sun. Maybe those Travel Alberta dimwits had a point.

I kept going north and soon came across a blue National Cycle Path sign. I took out my map and it showed that the path kept close to the coast, while the road veered inland somewhat. Entranced by the sand and sun, I took my chances and headed onto the gravel path. The first mile or so was tolerable; it had been five days since the crank debacle and I was more confident in the structural integrity of my bike. Although the path was more like a walking trail, I managed to stay in the middle it, avoiding the nettles on either side. The trick, as my Jamaican driving instructor had told me many moons ago, was to always look far ahead. There was the odd bridge or sandy bit where I had to get off, but I maintained a steady 8 mph or so and the scenery was unbelievable. I crossed another bridge and spilled into a sheltered cove where a solitary family was enjoying a picnic. One of them, a little girl, was flying a kite and sprinted across the sand while her brother watched, still unsteady on his feet. It was a wonderful scene. I crossed the small parking area, suitable for only a couple of vehicles, and spotted the continuation of the path on the other side. I kept going, happy that I had taken the path less traveled.

A few minutes later, I wasn't so sure. The path grew increasingly sandy, narrow and evermore populated with walkers who looked at me with raised eyebrows as I dismounted to let them pass. Those arched brows made me wonder if I was still on a cycle path. The English, after all, do relish in their rules. Although football hooligans and drunken yobs may beg to differ, the middling classes love to heed even the silliest laws and let you know if you do not. I'd learned this in many places during my time in the country: at a Yorkshire bus stop, when I failed to queue properly and was sent to the back; at an Exeter bus stop, to which I tried to lock my bike ('You know that you mustn't lock your cycle to a bus stop don't you?' Uh, no. I didn't actually); and at another Exeter bus stop where, although there was clearly enough room on the bus, Health and Safety rules mandated that the bus was full to capacity and I wasn't allowed on. No wonder I hate public transport.

Of course some Canadians have inherited this fascist attentiveness to the rules. A few years ago I was in Halifax, trying to cycle across the harbour to Dartmouth on the mighty MacDonald Bridge. Now, if you know anything about Dartmouth, you might ask why I wanted to go there in the first place. I can't really remember apart from it being something to do and the bridge looked like it

would be fun to cross. As I began to cross on one of the footpaths, however, the toll booth operator flagged me down. 'You can't cycle on that side of the bridge. It's only for pedestrians.' I looked down the 400 metre length of the bridge. I couldn't see a soul. 'Really?' I said, my inner Albertan rebelliousness rising, 'And that's a rule you enforce?'

'Fraid so. You'll have to cross on the other side.' It being about 30 degrees and not really in the mood to put up a fuss, I obliged, grumbling on my way. My rebelliousness only goes so far and does have a habit of wilting in the face of pudgy-faced, steely-eyed, uniformed rule-enforcers.

Back in Northumbria I realised that, as with every other time I tried to take a National Cycle Path, I had lost it. I could either walk the remaining two miles or cycle back and find out where I had lost the path. As was my wont, loath to backtrack, I opted for the former. And as luck would have it, the path did connect to the road in a few hundred metres. The only problem was that in between the road and the path was a stone wall festooned with brambles. I gingerly pitched my bike and panniers over the wall and dragged myself over, catching every bit of fabric I was wearing on the redoubtable thorns, and landing in a heap beside my bedraggled bicycle. Just then, another pair of walkers happened by, eyebrows locked in raised position. 'It's okay,' I said, picking myself up, 'I'm from Alberta.'