

LEJoG de Matt Day 10 Part 2

As soon as I got onto the road, I noticed an alarming grinding sound coming from my gears. I dismounted and bent down on my knees to have a closer look. Sure enough, the chain and gears were coated with sand from the beach. As I cursed myself for subjecting my bike to the gritty path, horror scenes of sand getting into and interfering with the innards of my bike whipped through my mind like mental diarrhoea. I did my best to wipe away as much of the sand as possible and added some extra oil on the chain to keep things running as smoothly as possible and hoped for the best.

The scenery soon overcame my worries and, ultimately, the oil sorted out the sand. Leah had recommended a village named Craster for crab soup and kippers, so I called in there at a pub to sample the local delicacies. Sadly the tables overlooking the sea were taken, but the food came quickly and was deeply satisfying. I watched a series of tourists sporting fanny packs and knee socks order portions of kippers and pots of tea, and wondered what, if anything, they thought of me, bent over a bowl of crab chowder in a corner by the pool table with ten days-stubble on my face and black grease covering the rest of me. As a solitary traveller, I was the one, however, who did the watching and, if I chuckled a little at their outfits and felt a little bit superior for arriving here at Craster on my own steam, I don't think they noticed. Then the thought occurred to me that, in a few years, I could be just like them, chasing after kids and making sure Granny didn't put too much sugar in her tea. It was good that I was LEJoGging while I could.

After Craster, I caught hold of a strong southerly and sped past castle after castle. It was still gorgeous and I really should have stopped and played tourist a little bit but, even though it was a short-ish day, my National Cycle Path experience cowed me into getting my destination and chalking another day off the list. Plus, Berwick seemed like an interesting place and it would be a luxury to spend a few hours wandering around it. This would be the first time I would be on my own staying in a hostel since Golant with Mark and, while I would miss the requisite home-cooked meal and some company, I also liked the idea of being free as a bird in a new place. And a meal of fish and chips wouldn't be so bad, either. But, there were still a few miles to go before then.

Most of the day had been on delightful B-roads and country lanes, populated only by slow-moving tourist traffic and the odd farmer, but I knew from my map that the last few miles would have me riding on a fairly major-looking A-road, the A1, no less. As I finished a snack in a small lane about 200 yards from the road, I grew alarmed by the sounds of big engines and the sight of the tops of lorries towering over the hedge that bordered the road. The rumble and roar beckoned like a

migraine headache. With a sigh I swallowed my last grape and took a final picture of the sea, which I would not see again until I reached northeast Scotland, on the other side of the Cairngorms.

Within the first mile, however, the traffic on the A1 seemed to have taken on a strange, seaworthy wave-like quality. One minute the lorries, cars, motorcycles and tractors would sweep pass me like a tsunami. As it did, I would try to ride its crest, making the most of the south wind and drafting wildly at times on the wake of the tractor trailers. Then the traffic would fade away altogether, leaving me alone on the broad thoroughfare. During these periods I would charge ahead manically, yet futilely, hoping that I could outrace the next, inevitable blast of steel and exhaust. It was maddening and exhilarating at the same time. The twelve miles I had left were down to one in a matter of thirty minutes.

I was out of breath when I turned off the main road and into Berwick. The first visions that greeted me were three bridges, a towering Victorian viaduct on my left, a lower, much older bridge to my right and the new construction I was on. The bridges crossed the Tweed, the dividing line between Scotland and England. I hummed Dick Gaughan's 'Both Sides the Tweed' as I cycled across it, glad that the cars behind me didn't honk at me for failing to get over to the cycle path which doubled as a pavement. People were more laid back up north.

I found the hostel without too much trouble and cautiously pushed my bike into its inner courtyard. A sign instructed me to call a number if no one was minding the reception, but I decided to wait and look around a bit. It looked like a nice place. There was a couple going over a map in the kitchen, which looked clean and welcoming - as did the couple. The late afternoon sun washed onto the tile floor of the courtyard, making it feel almost as if it was in Mediterranean, rather than the most northerly town in England. It certainly didn't feel like any of the hostels I'd stayed at in Scotland way back in 1996 when Michelle and I were here on our honeymoon. There was no smell of damp, for a start.

Soon a Kiwi staff member - that element of the British hostel industry hadn't changed - walked in from outside with what looked like breakfast provisions. I gave him my name and, as luck would have it, I was given the key to a private room overlooking the courtyard. He pointed to a corner where I could put my bike. I cagily noticed a drainpipe onto which I would attach my lock and cable, and followed him upstairs to my room. It was really nice, with a TV and everything. I didn't have a TV back home so this was a bit of a devilish luxury. After a much-needed shower, which

ridded my body of most of the unwanted sand that it had accumulated that day, I had to force myself not to pick up the clicker and waste the rest of my afternoon away.

A few steps out of the door and I was glad that I wasn't wasting the rest of the day glued to Countdown and Eggheads. The sun was wonderful and I soon found my way to the walls that surrounded Berwick upon Tweed. Berwick had long been a garrison town, but long before that, had been an important Scottish centre and North Sea port. After 1066 it became a political football, changing hands back and forth between the English and the Scots no fewer than 13 times in 200 years. It made Alsace Lorraine look a recipe for political stability. When the English finally took control of it for good in the fifteenth century, it became a garrison town, often boasting thousands of troops and eventually becoming the largest barracks in Britain.

It was strange to imagine how what would have been such a rollicking, rowdy place could turn into such a genteel town. Even the city walls and fortification, during Tudor times the most impressive in the world, looked more like an elaborate landscaping project, covered in lush green grass, than a fearsome defensive fortification. After circling the old town, I headed down to the Tweed and the 150 year old railway bridge. What looked impressive from half a mile away was positively monumental from up close. It was a picture of pure Victorian neo-gothic grace and majesty and, as a train chugged across it, still very much in use. The rumble of train on tracks echoed in my empty stomach and I climbed up the steep valley and back into town in search of grub.

I had decided to treat myself to fish and chips in this seaside town, the last time I'd be on the coast until after Inverness. I found a decent £5 special and chowed down happily on a bench over overlooking the low seventeenth century bridge, fending off the extra-large sized seagulls. Below me, on the quay, a young man took pictures of his girlfriend in the golden, early evening. They walked by, speaking in a Slavic tongue of some sort. I tossed the deep-fried remainders of my dinner to the sea gull and thought about some of the other European cities that had changed so much during the past century, just like Berwick centuries ago. I wondered if many places would be better off looking at themselves like Berwick, straddling two nations, playing football in the Scottish League, but officially English, a bit of both countries in a way that was wonderful and unique. But a Canadian would say that wouldn't he?