

## LEJoG de Matt Day 11 Part 1

### Day 11 60.42 miles (780.30 miles)

After a night spent digesting fish and chips, liquorice all-sorts and watching the BBC's excellent adaptation of *Wallander*, I shared breakfast with some French ladies in the common kitchen, who expressed a good deal of interest in my trip. I wished them well on their own travels and, seeking an early start, freed my bike from the drainpipe, left my key at the unmanned desk and headed out of the courtyard and into the street. It wasn't quite a glorious day like yesterday, but it wasn't raining, yet. I was heading west for the first time in my trip, towards Edinburgh and into Scotland. The day would effectively consist of climbing the Lammamuir Hills and then spilling down into the Forth valley. Looking at the map, and remembering the amount of traffic on the A-road the previous day, I figured that the road I would ride upon for most of the day would be pretty darn quiet. As it turned out, I was correct, for a change. It would also be a short day in preparation for the monster day that would follow it, during which I would be cycling from south Edinburgh all the way to Glen Gairn, just passed Balmoral Castle, at least 110 miles away. Today, I would take it easy, take my time, and see a little along the way.

The road started out gradually climbing past the sites of some of the key battles between the Scots and the English. Although I hadn't seen a sigh, it suddenly struck me that I was in Scotland and that the views to the south, of the Cheviot Hills, was the last time I'd see England during my trip. It felt Scottish, too. The landscape was more rugged, there were fewer villages and farms and those that I came across were sterner, greyer and more weathered from wind and rain. The weather was overcast and rain swept over me periodically, but not too hard. Except for the very occasional motorist, I was on my own.

The road steepened through a wooded area and then opened up in to a pale green valley, where an old stone bridge spanned a stream. It looked like a wonderful place to fish and I wished I had a rod. I could almost smell salmon frying on a pan, the rain dropping in explosions on the searing cast iron. Despite the clouds and the rain it was very picturesque, and exactly how I imagined the Borders to be. I curled around a hill and kept going up the valley. From the map, it appeared as though I was heading for a final steep push after miles of steady climbing. The map was right, as usual. Leading up, really up, to a reservoir, the road suddenly bolted up to a 17 degree grade, like a colt stung by a fly. I could have used such a spur, and strained to climb the slope, wondering just how the hell I'd make it through the Highlands. As I reached the crest, I turned to the lake on my left and was surprised to see dozens of colourful sails swooping across the water. The loch, I

should say, apparently doubled as a yacht club. Up high in the hills, where the vegetation was limited to purple heather, gorse and grass, and where I had hardly seen a soul all day, it was somehow thrilling to see this cacophony of colour and movement. It was good to see people making use of such a fetching spot.

The road continued to climb for another mile until I reached the highest point of the road. Off to the north I could see where the land carved down steeply to the Firth of Forth. To the my left and right was nothing but heather and sheep, and straight in front of me there was nothing but gravity. I was going to put my speedometer to the test.

As I sped past a blur of sheep at 45 miles an hour, I wondered who would be in worse shape if I hit one of them. I'd fly for 50 or 60 feet, land in a gorse bush, if I was lucky, and a pile of rocks, if not. The sheep would probably stop eating for a few seconds. Luckily none were of a homicidal bent and I sped even faster, fingers hovering over my brakes, but not wanting to squeeze. I slowed as I approached a blind summit - there was no question as to who'd come off worse if I hit a car - and passed a couple parked and getting their boots on for a walk. The man, middle-aged, but looking in pretty good shape, flashed me a large grin. Either he'd been down the hill himself or he had a vivid imagination. I tried to smile back, but the G-forces probably kept my face in a panic-stricken grimace.

Smiles weren't something that were offered to me too often on my bike. I'm not sure why. People weren't overtly unfriendly, but I think many are slightly intimidated by bicycles or those who ride them. Maybe they are scared by the thought of riding, of going up hills, of bad weather, of traffic, of getting filthy, of potholes, punctures, sheep and other hazards, yet also feel somewhat ashamed that they don't ride nevertheless. The faces that glanced over seem to convey a strange mixture of admiration, guilt, exasperation and resentment. It was odd and a little depressing. The relationship between bikes and cars seemed to be sadly symbolic of broader tensions with respect to how we are supposed to live our lives on a small, vulnerable planet in the middle of empty space. Maybe we struggled to share the road, but really what we failed to share was the same ideas about how we should lead our lives in the twenty-first century.

After running through a couple of showers, I ate my lunch on a bridge about 10 miles from Edinburgh. It was flatter here and the big sky boasted impressive storm clouds blowing through just south of me. I had noticed on weather forecasts that I had missed a bucket-load of rain that had

hammered the south and west. My easterly route might have taken me hundreds of miles further than the more direct approach, but at least I had kept dry.