

### LEJoG de Matt Day 12 Part 3

With two tubes in my pannier, I felt relaxed enough to eat lunch by the side of a bridge in Blairgowrie. Thanking Penny audibly for getting up at 6am to make me lunch, I dove into my pork sandwich like Greg Louganis. I noticed, for the first time in hours, that it was a gorgeous day. Taut tires, sun shining, and a good lunch in my belly, I was ready for the Highlands. Conscious of the heat, I bought a couple of bottles of Lucozade, a sickly sweet sports beverage that seemed to fill my cycling buddy Tindy with boundless energy. I figured it might come in handy.

At first, my ascent into the Highlands was physically, at least, not too extraordinary. There were some climbs, to be sure, but they were fairly gentle and I was able to enjoy the purple, heathery hills as they slowly transformed into mountains in front of my eyes. There were none of the ubiquitous villages or pubs that I'd seen in England; indeed even the houses and farms seemed few and far between. There was the odd out of place Douglas fir plantation - and matching clear cuts - but other than that the landscape looked organic and really alpine. It felt vaguely Swiss, though I'd never been to Switzerland. It was wonderful. As dreadful as I had felt 6 hours before, I felt brilliant now, perhaps a little apprehensive, but mostly brilliant. And very happy to be in Scotland.

After a final gentle climb around a copse of trees and past a timber farmhouse, I found myself in a long valley flanked by mountains made mauve by heather and golden by grasses. The road stretched for miles along the floor of the valley, only to shoot straight up the pass at an angle that looked to steep to be true. It was one of those hills that stood out on an ordnance map like an erection in a pair of speedos, the first true climb of many I would face. It was charmingly called the Devil's Elbow. I saw it approaching for miles and, the closer I got, the more gigantic it appeared. I stopped about half a mile away to eat some tablet - a confection that was a cross between fudge and a sugar cube - I had bought in Berwick and washed it down with some Lucozade for some instant energy.

This was a bad idea. A quarter of the way up the hill I noticed a sign saying that the grade of the hill was 17%; it already felt about double that. I kept waiting for my sugar blast to kick in, but instead the caramel tablet sat in my gut bubbling away disconcertingly in orange Lucozade. I realised that this wasn't the best culinary combination ever devised. I tried to mix up my riding position to ease the pain in my legs and arms and back, but no amount of shifting could ease the science experiment going on in my tummy. What I really needed was some water to dilute the gastrointestinal science experiment I had going on. Tempting me devilishly, I passed a series of rivulets springing right out of the ground. But I couldn't, or rather, wouldn't stop. Stupidly

stubborn at the best of times, I kept pumping with my legs, arms and back, trying to get as much power out of my body as possible, refusing to stop until I reached the tip of the Devil's Elbow.

I hadn't had to walk my bike up a hill since I'd arrived in Britain three years before. Pushing my bike was anathema to me, a taboo that probably reflected some inner self esteem deficit or other deep or disturbing psychological problem. I had never been a great athlete, despite loving sports more than nearly everything growing up; my sister was always the star. Making matters worse, I always picked the wrong sport or peaked at the wrong time, sport spurning my affection like most of the girls I liked in high school. Cycling on my own from Land's End to John o' Groats was me versus the British topography and I was determined to win, so long as my bike stayed in one piece. But this hill was really putting my determination through a meat grinder.

Finally I saw ski lifts looming like skeletons in the distance and I knew that the crest of the hill had to be imminent. I pulled over in the car park of the ski hill, and had a long pull from my water bottle. It seems to tame the wild beast doing somersaults in my stomach. It was odd, being up at a ski hill in Scotland in the middle of summer. It felt similar to Canadian ski hills I had seen out of season, slightly artificial and lunar in appearance, a paradoxical scene of hibernation. I took a couple of photos and looked greedily at the other side of the hill, which plummeted into a steep green valley with a forest at the bottom. Coming up nearly killed me, going down would be heavenly, so long as I stayed on the road.

You never really know how high you've climbed on a bike until you've gone down. I don't think I had to pedal for a solid ten minutes, spilling 4 or 5 miles down into the Braemar valley. I didn't quite get up to the 45 mph that I'd reached coming down the Lammamuir Hills, but I could have, had I been wearing an Evil Kinevil crash suit. A large German coach took great pains to pass me coming out of the ski hill car park, but I soon caught up with it. I tail-gated it for a few minutes and then it turned off onto a layby, no doubt responding to a demand for a photo stop. Whizzing past at 35 mph I chuckled at the raised eyebrows that blurred past. Going very far uphill had considerable rewards.

I phoned my hosts, Helen and Hugh, from Braemar. She assured me that it would be no more than 8 miles further, but I could tell from my map that it'd be more like thirteen. Still, after all I'd been through that day, accumulating 100 miles in the process, another 13 miles did not seem too taxing. I had run of water and lucozade, so I stopped at a petrol station just past a posh-looking hotel. The dingy station jarred with its surroundings - Braemar reminded me of an embryonic Banff, Alberta -

but the water in the tap tasted as if it came from the highest Rocky Mountain stream. It was pure energy in hypo-calorific form - wonderful stuff.

I felt reinvigorated and barrelled along the Dee River valley towards Balmoral Castle and the turn-off to Glen Gairn. The valley could have almost been in the Rockies, thick as it was with firs. I gradually wound my way down over a road that the Queen presumably drove along regularly. A week before one of her bodyguards had been killed in an accident on the estate. Perhaps since I had grown up close to the Rocky Mountains, I wondered why the Windsors were so enthralled by the area. The river bubbled merrily enough through the trees, and I'm sure it was teeming with salmon, but it didn't impress me that much.

Then I saw Balmoral Castle. It sat in a gap in the trees and was backed by a craggy peak. The late afternoon sunlight glinted off it, making it look silvery, almost magical. A flag waved lazily from a pole on one side. It was stunning - and then it was gone. I kept looking for it to my right, but the trees obscured my view. Instead, I saw a large white sign forbidding people to stop on the two-lane road to take pictures. Normally, I frowned upon such fastidiousness, but in this case I could see the point. There wasn't any traffic, but I kept going anyhow.

I could now see why the Royals liked their Highland estate so much. I think it had a lot to do with its situation. If you were to put a castle anywhere in the Highlands, you'd put it there; just low enough so it wouldn't be that cold or remote, but proximate to the mountains, woods, and one of the best fishing rivers in Britain. It also was where the valley opened up, providing jaw-dropping views from and of the castle. A remarkable spot.

Marvelling as I was, I almost missed my turn-off and was kind of surprised that I had come to it so quickly. Maybe Helen was right about Glen Gairn only being 8 miles away. The road climbed up north and then east, up and away from the Dee Valley. As I cycled up the steep, but not terribly taxing hill, I passed a handful of small farmhouses. I wondered how many of the families living here pre-existed Victoria and Albert. The trees began to thin and soon I was in a heathery heath. It was about 6pm and the light was just low enough to cast a dreamy veil over the hills. It really felt like I was right in the middle of the Highlands. I stopped, after cresting the hill, and gazed in wonderment at the broad valley spreading to the north. I felt like leaving my bike and heading into the hills and immediately regretted not planning another rest stop here. I hadn't even really arrived and I already knew that I would have to come back.

