

LEJoG de Matt

Day 13 Part 1 68.45 miles (959.93 miles)

I woke up to yet another beautiful day and, as Helen made porridge, I walked around the Old Schoolhouse with a cup of tea and took some pictures with Gunner at my side. He was a great dog and I wished I had time to take him on a long walk up the Glen. Hugh came out and invited me to return for a visit whenever I wanted. This sounded like an excellent idea and I wondered when next I might be in these parts. Helen's porridge hit the spot, but I tried not to eat too much, knowing that the first thing I'd have to do was climb a massive hill and not wanting a repeat of the Devil's Elbow. I took one last picture of Helen and Hugh outside of their house and bidding them farewell, headed down the gravel path to the road.

"Good luck on the Bridge of Brown!" Hugh called out as I headed out. I hoped I wouldn't need luck and that my legs would be sufficient. As I went along the short path to the road, I spotted a small cottage by the burn. Hugh had mentioned that Charles and Camilla (yes, the very same) often used it as a place to stop for tea as they went on walks to Glen Gairn. I slowed momentarily to see if the Royal couple were sharing a cuppa. Sadly, they weren't and I headed on. I had a date with a hill.

I knew that the hell behind the Old Schoolhouse was steep, but I soon learned that it was also long. Although I had enjoyed a fulsome sleep and hadn't overeaten, it nearly did me in. The only excuse I could offer myself is that I hadn't much of a chance to warm up; it started mere metres from where I had got onto the road. As I wearily reached the top, I shuddered - despite the hot sun - at the thought that I would have to conquer four more such behemoths.

After a few more ups and downs, bedazzled by the sights of the Cairngorms and actually feeling hot in my black shirt, I came to the hills that I figured would cause me the most grief. On Ordnance maps, sharp inclines were marked by arrows pointing either up or down, according to whether you'd be going painfully up or dizzyingly down. One arrow meant about a 10% grade; a double arrow meant 20% and the rare triple arrow meant 30% and a good chance you'd be walking your bike upwards in shame. I hadn't any small scale OS maps for this part of the trip, since there were so few roads and little need for precision. Despite the fact I loved looking at maps, I decided to opt for larger scale maps for the sake of weight and also because not all of them were available from the local library in Exeter. These larger maps were quite good, and had little arrows to indicate slope, but only the single arrows. So, to cut a long story short, I had little idea about how steep these hills

would be. The fact that there were 4 arrows in the space of about a mile, however, indicated that there was going to be some climbing, to say the least. The map also ominously marked out a ski resort at the top of the hill. Never a good sign.

It's funny when you can see the top of a hill you're climbing. On the one hand, if you can see as far as you have to go, there is a certainty, you hope, of how far you have to climb. On the other hand, the scope of what you have to accomplish can be so discouraging that a flotilla of fire-breathing football managers and drill sergeants wouldn't have a hope in hell of willing you up. Especially, if you have a naturally pessimistic outlook on life, and always figure that there's going to be a last little bite to the hill that you can't quite see, no matter the vantage point.

In this case, I could see the top of the first hill, and I knew that there would be another to follow it in quick succession. The height of the second hill only became apparent once I had grunted the last few metres of the first one, which was difficult enough. Once I saw what I hoped was the summit of the second hill, I thought for the first time on my trip that I would have to get off my bike and walk. I was tired, bone tired, from the previous day and my legs, arms and back ached from the hills I'd just climbed. It was as hot as it had been the entire trip, possibly the hottest weather I'd experienced in three years in the UK. It wasn't even 11am and the sun seared my back like an iron. And then there was the hill. It curled around a copse of trees, crested a false summit after a steep, nasty climb, and then up, up and up again to the proper summit (I prayed) at a point that towered over me like a Manhattan skyscraper. Surely this hill would be my undoing.

And yet, somehow, it wasn't. Tapping into Helen's porridge - and the cheddar from the night before - and some residual stubbornness that usually appeared at less opportune times - like when Michelle and I disagreed about a movie, I found a steady rhythm and slowly, geologically, made my way up to the top. Just as soon as I started to feel good about myself, two things occurred to me: first was Hugh's warning about the Bridge of Brown, the last serious hill I'd have to climb. How hard would it be if it was worse than this? Then, as I slowly made my way past the chair lifts that marked the summit, a pair of cyclists approached from the opposite direction. As they got closer, I realised, with no small sense of horror, that they were a couple in their sixties, as loaded with panniers as I was, and none the worse for wear for climbing the other side of the mountain. The man, sporting a curly grey beard, gave me a friendly, appreciative smile that his female partner echoed.

It was humbling at first, but then I felt the better for it. I wasn't so special, doing my ride; loads of other people cycled LeJOG, many of them older and less well-equipped than me, but as a group, as a family of loony cyclists, we were special, capable of wonderful things and recipients of marvellous experiences. Surely, if they could make it up this ridiculously steep and towering slope, I could master the Bridge of Brown, too?

There were a few miles to kill before I could answer that question and included in them was the village of Tomintoul, where Glenlivet is distilled. Even though Glenlivet isn't my favourite malt, it was the first I had ever tasted. Years ago when I worked in the summers as a landscaper, my boss gave me, and all the other schmucks working for him for \$7/hour, 375 ml bottles of Glenlivet in thanks for, well, agreeing to work for him for so little. I enjoyed tucking into that bottle every once in a while at the end of the day and would have liked to visit the distillery for old time's sake, but thought the better of it since it was still morning. Still, just thinking of a wee nip made me think of a great future bike trip: hitting all the distilleries in Scotland. Perhaps followed by a trip to all of the cathedrals, perhaps not. I wondered how many tastings a day I could manage and still stay on the bike.

Musing about the logistics of such a trip, and how one might 'train' for it, I rounded a copse of trees, spilled down onto the Bridge of Brown, clearly marked, and looked up. It didn't look so, so bad, thank goodness. Cycling up it was a slog, no question, but it wasn't nearly as bad as what I'd climbed already that day. As I slowly crawled up its steep, sharp, but not overly long length, I wondered why Hugh had specifically warned me about it. Perhaps he knew I'd be tired by now - I was - or his memory wasn't quite clear - I doubted that - but either way I think he was doing me a favour. Although I had been dreading it all day, when I actually saw it, I kind of relaxed. It was doable after all. And it was the last big hill of the day. There would be others, but I was coming out of the Highlands, so they wouldn't be so, well, high. Maybe Hugh had been playing some reverse psychology on me all along. By the end of the day I'd be at sea level, as bizarre as that seemed now, perched high on the ridge of a Highland valley. It was, as they say, all down hill from here.