

LEJoG de Matt Day 14 Part 2

Golspie appeared to be a pleasant seaside town, quite similar in some ways to the ones that dotted the south coast of England, and it was hard to believe that it was clinging to the edge of northeast Scotland. The pleasant weather might have had something to do with it, I supposed. The coffee shop might have put a gloss on Golspie for me, but as I left I regretted that I wasn't staying there overnight. I hoped that Helmsdale, twenty miles up the coast, would be just as nice. As I made my way up and down the roller coaster ride that was the road to Helmsdale, I had a positive feeling that it was.

While Golspie was on a flat, Helmsdale was perched on top of a hill on the steep valley of a river that curved into the sea from the northeast Highlands. It felt much more like the sort of town I'd expect to be dotting the northeast coast. Apparently the river was well-endowed with salmon in its upper reaches. If I only had more time...

It didn't take long to find my B&B in Helmsdale, despite the fact that the only sign designating it as a lodging was at the gate of the back garden - a little bit like Annie Grocott's in Cheltenham. To be fair, there wasn't even a door at the front for some reason. I made friends with the yapping Jack Russell terrier that guarded the garden and walked my bike up the garden path to the back door. I rang the doorbell and, after a few minutes, a short, quite round woman answered. She expressed some surprise at my early arrival in a Thames estuary accent, which surprised me in return. I had made my bookings for this part of the trip in a hurry and had forgotten that one of the landladies I'd called had not been Scottish. There was scuttling about as she got my room ready, but I was soon cleaned, re-dressed and sipping on a lovely cup of tea gazing out a window that looked out to the harbour. The landlady's partner, who was her ex-husband, was as rail-thin as she was rotund, but shared her Essex accent. I asked the both of them for suggestions for a drink and dinner and, fortunately, there were a number of options that specialised in fish, which was what I wanted. They warned me that one of the best ones filled up early on Fridays, so I took off right away for a 5pm feed.

I found the place easily enough and was grateful for the advice to get there early. The only table left was one set for six. I figured I would be eating for about six, so it didn't bother me too much. There was only one thing on the menu for me: the large fish supper, consisting of two pieces of fish, a huge pile of chips, bread and butter, and coleslaw, washed down with some local beer, and followed by a piping hot sticky pudding. For the second time that day, I was absolutely satisfied - body, mind, and spirit - by Scottish cuisine. Strangely, again, the owner of the place was from

southern England, just like the B&B owners. It was odd, in a way, but I could easily see why southerners sick of the hustling bustling south would head to Helmsdale. It was a beautiful place, peering over the North Sea and backed by heathery hills. The sun was hovering just above some surprisingly black clouds, which had been lingering over the hills to the west all day, and splayed golden light over the sea and the harbour and the grey and white houses of the village. After paying my bill, I slowly walked down to the sea, stopping often to take pictures of the boats, cottages, and nets that caught the light so perfectly, and wondered if Helmsdale could handle another southern softy.

After about 45 minutes or so, I felt like another drink, of the whisky variety. I'd noticed a couple of pubs and selected one that seemed fairly lively. It reminded me of many rural Scottish pubs I'd visited before: utilitarian and very local. I kept to the empty side of the bar and ordered an Old Pulteney, a whisky from Wick, one of the few towns north of here. The bartender, a tall, thin fellow with a moustache, quietly served me and went back to the locals on the other side of the bar. I wrote in my journal as I nursed my drink and caught the odd bit of conversation, which seemed to centre on a delivery driver who had driven into a shop by mistake. A little collie flitted between me and its owner, reflecting none of the suspicion that I detected from the two-legged patrons. When my glass was empty I caught the attention of the bartender. I ordered a Clynelish, remembering that it was distilled quite close to Helmsdale, in Brora. This time the barman's face lit up and stated with some animation that it was distilled nearby. It was good to see such pride in a local product.

Getting through the second whisky nearly as quickly as the first, I decided to leave before I'd sampled all of the whiskies distilled within a hundred mile radius. As I walked out the door, I had a brief, incoherent chat with one of the patrons, who was having a smoke outside. It had to do something about the delivery driver and the accident, but I wasn't sure about the particulars. I walked around town some more and then headed for my B&B for the last night before JoG.