

## **LEJoG de Matt - Day 5 Part 1**

I slept like a log overlooking Solsbury Hill and enjoyed the first of many cooked English breakfasts, served by Jenny. Jenny and Will got going fairly slowly that morning, so I didn't leave until about 10am. Although I was planning to get early starts on most days, this didn't really concern me, since I was only going about 55 miles; much less than the 98 miles I had eventually covered the day before. I did notice, however, that while it was cloudy, but dry, when I awoke at around 8am, by 10am it had started drizzling. I donned my orange rain jacket and hoped that the merino wool would live up to its billing.

After saying goodbye to Jenny and Will and promising to get together soon, I headed out. I didn't have a map for the first couple of miles, because my map of Bath ended annoyingly just south of Jenny's house, but had received some pretty clear directions from Will. My goal was to find the Fosse Way, a ramrod-straight Roman road that led me in the direction of Cirencester, where I was planning to have lunch and a look round. The directions seemed quite straight forward, but within minutes of leaving Jenny and Will's, and having just plummeted down a steep and slick hill, I discovered that I was already lost. My glasses were getting quite be-speckled, so I figured I had just missed the turn. I turned around and headed up the steep hill I had just descended. The drizzle was now proper rain. I found what I figured was the turn-off and headed in what felt like the proper direction and looked for signs for the Fosse Way.

After about 3 miles, I started to have my doubts. I thought I was on the next map, but something didn't seem right. A directional sign at a crossroads and a look at the map confirmed that I had indeed gone 3 miles in the wrong direction. Part of the problem was that I was relying on a 1:100000 map, rather than a 1:50000 or 1:25000 map. The 1:100000 OS map looked detailed, but you had to be careful to note subtle forks in the road and turn-offs. Plus, since they covered more distance, you tended to not to check them as often, instilling a fatal over-confidence that could lead to, if not disaster, then at least profound annoyance. With my glasses covered in a film of rainwater and mud, I simply failed to spot where I was supposed to be going. Employing an increasingly complex array of curse words, I effed and jeffed my way back up the long meandering hill I had just come down. Heading out yet again, and checking my map every couple of minutes, I finally discovered the Fosse Way.

In England there are a lot of Roman roads that, from a map's point of view, look like manna from heaven to the long-distance cyclist. They are straight, usually flat, and head in sensible directions, quite unlike most of the English roads built since. On paper, they look magically efficient.

After the sleepless night Tindy and I experienced in Ringwood the previous year, I had taken a look at the map and discovered that we could use such a Roman Road between Winchester and Basingstoke, saving what we hoped would be plenty of time. Although its surface was rough and a stiff wind was in our faces the entire time, the road paralleled a motorway and was quite quiet. We made efficient, if weary, time.

The Fosse Way was not only straight, but it was in the perfect north-northeast angle for getting to Cirencester, and after a slight detour to Cheltenham, getting from Stratford to Leicester the next day. It appeared to run straight as far as the eye could see; there was no question that I had finally found the right road. The Fosse Way, it appeared, would be a friendly thoroughfare. After having such a muddled and muddy start, I was struck by a sense of optimism, as I saw it trail off into the murky horizon, not deviating a jot.

After about a mile or so, just after I had passed an airstrip, I began to catch up to what appeared to be a very odd vehicle. I first thought it was a bike, but didn't see any legs pedalling. Then I figured it might be a motorised scooter, but who in their right mind would be scootering anywhere in the pouring rain? And how in the world would I be catching up to it? The mystery was solved when I was about 100 yards away; it was a guy pedalling a recumbent bicycle, which couldn't have been 18 inches off the ground. I said hello and we soon discovered that we had the same destination, but very different routes.

Mike was a teacher from London who had done long-distance cycling in Italy, where I could only assume that the weather was markedly better. His recumbent posture meant that in the heavy rain we were experiencing a puddle would develop periodically in his midriff, which he would drain every once in a while. He used a recumbent because of bad wrists and said that, although such bikes were pricy, they were very comfortable and efficient. 'Someone cycled the entire LEJoG in 42 hours straight using one', he enthused. Although he was going a couple mph slower than I was, I stuck with him, happy for the company in the dreary conditions.

I was amazed at how well Mike handled going down slippery, muddy, and uneven hills on his bike. His tires were slightly wider than mine, but I was the one doing the catching up after reaching the bottom of each hill. Going up wasn't so easy for him, since he couldn't get up off his seat to power up steep inclines. He had a large rearview mirror which allowed him to see traffic approaching long before I could hear it, which was useful since we were pedalling side by side.

Sadly, however, he was heading to Gloucester, the more direct route up the west coast of Britain, and not Cirencester, where I was going. After talking about our routes, I realised that this was pretty much the only place we could have come across one another on the entire stretch. Whereas Mark and I had headed south out of Land's End, heading ultimately for Torquay, Mike headed north, and the more direct route through Launceton and north Devon. He would be going up the west coast of England and through the Grampians in Scotland, rather than the Cairngorms. The only place we could possibly see each other would be in the northern tip of Scotland, which was unlikely since I would probably be getting there before him. It was oddly reassuring and somewhat comforting that we had bumped into each other the only time and place that it was possible on the entire trip. At the inevitable crossroads where we had to part, we wished each other happy travels and shook hands in the rain.