

### LEJoG de Matt Day 5 Part 3

It was a very long 16 miles. I had planned to see a fair bit of Cheltenham before arriving at Annie Grocott's place for 5pm, but now I had to hurry just to get there on time. I knew it was pretty ridiculous of me to think that people would expect a cyclist travelling across the entire country in unpredictable weather and road conditions to arrive when promised, but I wanted to be punctual - partly out of good old Canadian politeness, but also so that my hosts wouldn't worry too much about me being hit by a lorry. I also, rather idiotically, wanted people to think that I had planned my trip rather well and that I sort of knew what I was doing - "Yeah, I anticipated getting waylaid 12 times today, so that's why I'm here at 5 on the dot. Hey, I'm a complicated guy.

There was to be a 13th. I had cycled through huge puddles, had been splashed from head to toe by malicious or careless drivers, and was thoroughly drenched, but finally, through the H2O, I saw that I had made it to the edge of Cheltenham. I pulled out the internet map I had printed out and saw that I needed to find New Moor Road. Eyes suitably peeled, I kept going and, seconds later, found New Moor Road to my left. Finally, a break, I thought. I turned left and began to look for the next turn. It was not forthcoming. This was the wrong New Moor Road. How a town the size of Cheltenham could manage to have two New Moor Roads, in the same end of town, I had no idea, but it was clearly the case. And I had no idea where the other one was. I pulled out my little map again. The lines and letters were smudging due to the rain and my filthy fingers. Panic began to set in. What was going on? Why wasn't the map making sense. The rain began to ease and I looked hard at the map again. Then I realised. There were two roads that headed into Cirencester from Cheltenham and I was on the wrong one, rendering my internet map nearly, but not quite completely, useless. If I could find the right road, I'd be back on track. But where was it?

I reached into my ziplock bag where I kept the phone numbers of my hosts, hoping that Annie would be home, but then reconsidered. John Cleese once said that every Englishman's goal is to get through life without ever being embarrassed. Canadians must have the same DNA in this respect. Or maybe I was a stereotypical male who was unable to ask for directions. I simply couldn't call her. I'd feel like such a fool. I took a deep breath, look up from the map and saw that the rain had stopped. The sun was peeking its way through the iron clouds. I decided to give myself a half hour. The road I needed was an A-road and clearly went through the centre of town. If I could spot a sign for it, I could go back and get on my map. To my immeasurable delight, Cheltenham had marvellous signage and I found the sign immediately, shimmering in the sparkling

sunlight like a beautiful beacon. And after a few more wrong turns and back-tracking, I eventually found Annie's Tickford Cottage. I was one minute late.

Annie Grocott was the partner of Graeme, one of my fellow basses in the Crediton World Music Choir. I had sponsored him for his Hadrian's Wall walk in the spring and he more than returned the favour by offering Annie's b&b for free. Annie greeted me by exclaiming, "I was so worried about you in this rain!" and all of my concerns about staying with an unfamiliar person washed away. Having tea with Annie were two of her friends, who shook hands with me without blinking at my stained hands, unlike a certain petrol station attendant. Annie took me upstairs to a wonderful blue room overlooking a quiet street. I had a long, steamy shower and decided that Michelle and I should return some time, perhaps for the literary festival.

Cleaner, warmer, and happier, I went downstairs to join the others and had tea and cakes eagerly offered to me. There's not much that a pot of tea, a nice lemon drizzle cake, and a warm room can't fix. Annie's friends left after a while and she started dinner. I called Michelle and let her know that I was now warm and dry and had an excellent host. Supper was served: chicken, veggies, and heaps of savoury rice, washed down with an superb bottle of white wine. I discovered that Annie was a retired psychoanalyst and we chatted about the vicissitudes of providing mental health care in schools and universities, something I had been involved with myself. She now lived off her pension and the proceeds from her B&B, which she ran on a decidedly part-time basis. Most of Annie's customers came to her through word of mouth, meaning that she didn't have to worry too much about her guests. She insisted on speaking to her guests on the phone before letting them book, stating that "you can tell a lot about a person during a five-minute conversation", and had no compunctions about turning someone down if she didn't feel like opening up or got a funny feeling about someone. Despite this casual approach, she cleared about £2000/year, which served basically as a travel fund. She highly recommended it as a source of income and as I drifted to sleep, I thought about opening up some place with Michelle in twenty-five years or so...