

Day 6 Part 2

I was at a crossroads. Well, figuratively I was at a crossroads. In reality I was sitting on some steps outside of a quiet church. But my trip hung in the balance. I had noticed a sign for the train station when I was looking for the shop. I could cut my losses and be home by 7:30. Five days of cycling, near hypothermia, getting lost every ten minutes, getting drenched, aching muscles, and the train could get me home in time for a late supper. Sigh. I had made it to the Midlands, at least. Maybe I could come back to Leamington later in the summer. Perhaps with Tindy. Anyway, what would happen if something else happened when I was in the Highlands, where there was no help close to hand, and probably not even a phone signal? Perhaps it was sensible to admit defeat and live to fight another day. An elderly couple walked by. 'Beautiful day for it', the old feller said.

'Yeah', I said, 'Sure is'. And it was. There were no clouds in the sky, it was about 24 degrees and I was in a beautiful town that I would never had seen otherwise. I looked at the list of shops Michelle had given me. There was one more to call.

'Octalinx? Hmm. I don't think we have any in stock.' My heart sank. I felt the grim realisation of failure pass through me, but also a faint glimmer of relief; I would be home for supper. Maybe Michelle would make pizza again. 'Hold on! There's one right here. It was right in front of my nose. Come on down and we'll fix you up.'

The relief that I guiltily felt was quenched by a surge of hope. I listened attentively to the guy's directions and strode off purposefully on my cleats, pushing my bike ahead of me. I found the shop, called Broadribs, easily for a very welcome change and walked in. A familiar look of worry crossed the face of the guy to whom I had spoken on the phone. 'Oh, it's a hybrid! I thought you had a mountain bike.'

I half-thought about making a snarky remark about who'd be crazy enough to go LEJoG on a mountain bike, but restrained myself. 'We could put it on, but then you'd be geared as a mountain bike; good for hills, but slow on the flats.'

I thought about that for a second, with the hills of the Highlands in mind. But getting to the Highlands would be a real drain; 100 miles plus per day on a small set of gears would get tedious damn fast.

‘Don’t you have anything else available?’

He smiled rather guiltily, ‘Well there is something we could put on, but it’s a bit dear.’

The bike guy indicated a fancy-looking assembly on the wall with a £249 price tag on it. Hmm. He went on for a while about its merits and that they had had only one unit returned, and this by a professional rider whose legs were too big for the narrow assembly. ‘I don’t think you’d have that problem.’

I knew it was crazy and that Michelle could well be appalled, but said, ‘Go ahead!’ after about a tenth of a second.

He smiled again. ‘It’ll be ready in about an hour. We’ll call you when it’s done.’

I walked out of the shop with a pannier in each hand and bristling with shock. What had I done? £249? What if something else went wrong? What if this was the first in a series of breakdowns that would see me stranded in the middle of nowhere in the pouring rain? Fittingly, a massive, dark rain cloud approached and I sprinted for the cover of a pine tree as it burst forth its contents. My stomach felt like doing the same. All of the sudden I felt quite hard done by. I had already put in loads of money getting myself and my bike in shape, had fundraised for charities, and my bike was letting me down. I felt frustrated and angry and the rain continued to pelt down. I called Michelle.

Which turned out to be an excellent thing to do. She didn’t interject much, as I told my tale of woe. When I told her what the crank repair bill would be, she kept her horror muted and reassured me, without saying it in so many words, that she was happy for me to go ahead, come what may. I said thanks and told her I’d call her from Nottingham, no matter when I got there. I felt much better. After all, who said LEJoG would be easy? It was meant to be a challenge, physically, emotionally and, given the number of times I had been lost, clearly mentally as well. For me the biggest challenge hadn’t been physical - I had been pleasantly surprised by my lack of soreness and weariness - but dealing with the aggravations of horrible weather, getting lost and coping with breakdowns I didn’t have a hope in hell of fixing myself had put the kind of weight on my shoulders that was hard to carry. But I had to go on.

I finished the other sandwich Annie Grocott had packed for me and did some calculations. I would likely get to Nottingham around 9; it’d still be light. I decided to phone Claude and Lindsay closer

to the time to let them know of my arrival. Then my phone rang. It was the shop. My bike was already fixed and ready to go. I hurried back, deposited a good chunk of my savings into their coffers, wondering if I had possibly been had by the shop staff, but mainly hoping that the impossibly young looking bike mechanic had done a good job.¹

Back on the road I felt very tentative, as if I had to cycle gently, but if I wanted to get to Nottingham before dark, this wasn't an option. I was back on the Fosse way before long and quickly made an observation about Roman roads: their straightness and flatness might make for easy route-planning and efficiency of travel, but also meant that drivers drove like stink on them, despite the fact they were in actuality relatively narrow B roads. My favourite roads to drive were what you could call 'half-agains', country lanes that were wide enough for one and a half car. This meant that when you came across a car, you had plenty of passing space, but the car had to think carefully about passing you, since there wasn't enough room for 2 cars. These Roman roads were clearly wide enough for 2 cars, but not much more than that, even a bike. And since there were no twists, turns or gullies, drivers didn't spare the horses. The roads seemed to particularly attract boy racers and crotch rockets and on a day of resisting sensible urges, I banned myself from flipping them all the bird.

I had to admit it was a gorgeous day, the best weather since day one apart from the odd shower, and now that my bike was sorted I figured that the Midlands weren't half bad. My lingering feelings of general apprehension about life, the world and everything, something a catastrophic bike problem can induce, made me hum and haw probably too much about the last decision I had to make during that decisive day: to go through Leicester or not. Given my experience the previous day in Cirencester, and feeling that my powers of direction were not up to snuff, I decided to skirt around.

It was kind of the right decision. The detour was fairly easy, took me through some pretty countryside, and had little traffic, but it also added 8 miles to a journey that was already longer than it should of been due to my having to reroute through Leamington Spa. Nevertheless, by the time I got onto the last road of the day and the sun was starting to set, I felt strangely reenergised and chugged along quite vigorously to West Bridgeford on my new crank, getting only briefly and barely lost in the final minutes of what had been a very long and trying day. Finding what I thought was the correct house, I rung the buzzer. There was a long pause. Surely I had found the correct

¹ As it turns out, £249 is an excellent price for that particular crank assembly. Sadly, it met its fate when a SPAR van caught hold of my bike and twisted it, and me, into a hedge in a narrow lane in Devon.

house. Then a familiar bass voice boomed out of the intercom, 'Is there a sweaty biker out there?' I had finally managed to complete day 5.

Claude and Lindsay were the kind of Americans who made me regret, to a certain extent, the indulgent American-bashing in which most Canadians relish. They were smart, funny, generous and genuine people who lived large and made any party or conversation eminently more enjoyable. Lindsay was working as a teacher's aide in a primary school in Alphington and he was a PhD student in Ancient History. Claude had been born in the UK, but had grown up in California and New York. His grandmother, Mary Green, still lived in Nottingham and it was at her flat that I was going to stay. Mary was 94, but seemed closer to 80 in her vitality and outlook. When I had rung earlier to let her know that I would be calling around 8:30, I actually mistook her for Lindsay. She lived in semi-assisted living accommodation that had a few provisions for health and safety but left her largely independent. It was the sort of place I could see my grandmother living in. Mary's life revolved around family - her daughter, Claude's mother, would be moving to nearby Melton Mowbray from the US in a few months - and the church, the local C of E, where she was a fixture and a favourite. She was, as best I could see, a model of good living as a nonagenarian.

After a wash and a brief explanation of my adventure, Claude and Lindsay took me to an Italian restaurant around the corner. It really hit the spot. I ate as much as I could and we polished off the evening in a nearby pub that boasted an impressive array of real ales. By the time I hit the splendid air mattress, the best I have ever slept on, I'd couldn't imagine why I had even considered nipping my trip short of its goal.