

Day 7 - 99.05 miles (546.47 miles)

Nottingham gets a bad rap. It's been called the knife capital of Britain and is accused of having endemic crime and a gang culture. Maybe they shouldn't have gotten rid of the Sheriff. Then again, municipal reputations are not always built on all that much fact. We realised this when we first moved to Exwick, a suburb of Exeter. When we mentioned where we lived, people at the university would raise their eyebrows and murmur alarmingly about rampant 'Exwick youths' and how they'd 'never been to *that* side of the city'. Our experience of the sleepy suburb, with its easy access to the university, countryside and train station, was that it had far less crime than where we lived in downtown Edmonton, so I had taken warnings about Nottingham with a large grain of salt.

My brief experience of Nottingham reinforced for me that such prejudices were often unwarranted or inaccurate. First, West Bridgeford itself was a sporting paradise, being at the crossroads of Trent Bridge Cricket Ground and the grounds for Nottingham Forest and Notts County, often referred to as the oldest club in the Football League. It had a fine High Street with good restaurants, lovely bakeries and wide pavements. I'd certainly feel comfortable with my grandmother there.

But it wasn't West Bridgeford that made me really appreciate Nottingham. I had 100 miles to cycle on this, Day 7, and the first task on the agenda was to bisect Nottingham by bike, from the southern to the northern boundaries, during the morning rush. Given my track record at getting lost, my justifiably hypochondriacal feelings about my bicycle, and wondering what Nottingham drivers thought about cyclists, I was a bit nervous about getting through the city in one piece.

I need not have worried. To a vehicle Nottingham drivers were courteous, giving me space while passing, and patient, waiting for me to get through roundabouts without bleating on their horns. It was almost alarmingly easy. I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, but it never did. Similarly, getting through Mansfield was also as smooth as glass. I skirted Nottingham Forest along the way, confident that the local people were much more Robin Hood than Sheriff.

The bike was also performing relatively well. Switching between the large to the middle gear at the front required a bit more fiddling than I would have expected from what I paid, but it was good overall. Soon it had carried me into Northern England, at least according to my map and the increasingly broad accents I heard cycling through towns and villages. A good number of Southerners I had come across in my 3 years in Exeter, perhaps not surprisingly, were prone to blurting out often slanderous stereotypes about their northern neighbours, calling them

unsophisticated louts who drank too much and lived in bleak, poverty-stricken villages where no one did anything more productive than play bingo and the national lottery. To be fair, nearly every part of England had something nasty to say about somewhere else. I was shocked before a friendly game of football when an Oxford United supporter called Exeter City supporters a bunch of inbred farmers who had inappropriate relations with their sheep. He wasn't joking either. He seemed to actually believe this. As a supporter of the Grecians myself, I ensured that his shins were well worked over by the end of the match and I cheered more lustily than normal when Exeter City thumped Oxford United in the non-league playoffs that year.

Such slander wasn't limited to people from the West Country. And when most people accused Devonians of being too familiar with their livestock they were clearly joking. But the North-South divide was more pronounced than mere regional differences. One of the favourite chants sung by Plymouth Argyle when they played Exeter, for example, was 'You dirty Northern bastards! You dirty Northern bastards!' The North, so went the stereotype, was that undeserving half of the country that leeches money from the south and offered precious little in return, apart from some good pop groups and football clubs.

My own perceptions of the north prior to cycling through it, however, were much more positive. I liked the accents, particularly Yorkshire ones, which my grandmother never completely lost, and thought that, generally speaking, northerners were more courteous, friendly and interested in where I came from as well. The landscape, moreover, was without parallel, stretching from the Lake District and the North York Moors to the Peak District in a glorious triangle of dramatic emerald hills. A stunningly gorgeous part of the world that leaves you pinching yourself to ensure that it's actually there, in front of your eyes.

Of course, the North wasn't all so beautiful. The South Yorkshire towns I cycled through lacked much of this charm. This was the land of coal, or at least used to be, and many of the towns and villages I passed through bore both the scars of the coal industry and its dissolution, thirty years before. I wasn't sure what was more depressing: the mountainous slag heaps or the boarded up shop windows and social clubs.

When I went on road trips with my parents as a teenager, it always drove me nuts how my dad seemed to relish describing how certain communities, often in Saskatchewan, where I was born, were 'dead', 'dying' or 'had seen better days'. If I had a nickel for every time my dad said, 'this town's hurting', I'd probably be able to purchase a small bungalow in one of them. It annoyed me,

partly out of the sheer repetitiveness, but also because I felt like he was being overly judgemental. How did he know if the place was ‘hurting’, just by driving through at forty miles an hour? Maybe the people living there liked it all the same, thank you very much. Maybe they were struggling, but just doing their best. It all seemed a bit too superior, too much given to schadenfreude for my hypersensitive adolescent tastes. As in ‘this town’s hurting, thank God we don’t live here!’

My dad was right, of course. His 25 year career in commercial real estate prepared him all too well for recognising the symptoms of a sick town. And if he had been cycling beside me through places like Tickhill Spital and Stainforth, he certainly would have iterated that ‘they were on their last legs’. And, again, he probably would have been right. There was a capacity for grimness in these former coal towns that I hadn’t really seen since leaving Canada. And, like a ghost town in Saskatchewan, these communities lacked the venerable and beautiful buildings, and captivating lived-in, manicured landscape that suffering towns in Devon and Cornwall boasted. There were no thatched cottages here, no cemeteries with otherworldly Celtic crosses, no hedgerows or deer parks that would always see people flocking to the Southwest for the Easter and summer holidays. This was the North and it was grim. Purpose-built mining towns seemed to lack the flexibility to transition into anything else. It was difficult to see any solution other than out-migration. It was sad because I knew that a great deal of culture, ingenuity and courage also came out of these coal communities, just like in the farming communities of Saskatchewan.

As I left the coal belt and entered the agricultural lands south of York, the landscape brightened considerably. Farming could also be perceived in very bleak terms, as my cousin Gordon, with whom I’d be staying that night, would attest. But it was much prettier than coal mining, any way you looked at it. Canals bordered many of the fields, integrating a vitality to the landscape in the form of birds and boats. The bucolic would always trump the industrial, at least in aesthetic terms, if not in terms of economics.

York was familiarly brilliant. Michelle and I had spent four days there back in the late autumn of 1996. That time of year it attracted a good number of tourists; in the height of summer there were scads, justifiably so. York reminded me a little bit of Exeter, just on a grander scale, but still a whole heck of a lot crammed into a tiny space. I had a vague recollection of the city’s layout and which city gate headed me to Tollerton, my ancestral home of a sort and, surprisingly, I was spot on. I stuck to the A-road for about half of the 10 mile journey to Gordon’s and then turned off into the country lanes that led to the village.

I knew White House Farm the second I passed by, but its surroundings had changed considerably. First, the pub which had been across the street was no longer, seemingly converted into a single family dwelling. Similarly, Gordon's barns, which substituted for his back garden, were also gone and in their place were a row of pretty little houses. A note on the door instructed me to call when I arrived and I did so. His broad accent greeted me heartily, informing me that he was surprised I'd made it (at all, seemingly) and that he'd be back home in about 30 minutes to take me and his wife, Jan, out for a pint and a pizza. Which sounded like manna from heaven.

Jan came home from her job at a saddlery business about 15 minutes later, when I had just finished telling Michelle that Day 7 had been a major improvement on Day 6. Jan and I hit it off immediately. I could see why she and Gordon would be a good match. Gordon, true, perhaps, to the Yorkshire stereotype, was a guy who said what he thought and thought what he said. Often at the same time. An impulsive fellow, he lacked the internal editor or superego that most of us take for granted. Given that he, again like the Yorkshire stereotype, could be a rather crusty, earthy and salty character, rather like a wholewheat cracker topped with spicy hummus, I suppose, it was easy to be offended by him if you didn't know that underneath it all he had a warm, passionate and generous soul - or that he was a North Yorkshire farmer. Michelle had visited him at the end of our 3 month backpacking trek, when we had little pence to rub together, and Gordon had insisted on paying for everything. I recalled spending a good many hours just sitting back and laughing lustily as Gordon ranted and raved about everything from the state of farming to black comedians, of which he thoroughly approved, by the way.

Jan was, in contrast, patient, polite and calm, but equally kind and considerate. She happily absorbed Gordon's outbursts until he passed an invisible line and then reined him in firmly and effectively. Her calming influence was not just political correctness damage control; Gordon had undergone a quadruple bi-pass the previous year and needed to be kept on some kind of an even keel. Given that Gordon had been convinced that he wouldn't make it to 50 - his brother had died of a heart attack in his 40s - a quadruple bi-pass in his early 50s wasn't that bad going.

Tollerton was where I planned to enjoy my one day off during my trek and, as I enjoyed a shower in the large, renovated bathroom, funded by Gordon's sale of the land his barn had been on, I realised that all of the sudden I was half way to JoG and on schedule. The planned day off had been somewhat provisional, conditional on keeping to schedule, and, remembering the Mr. Toad's Wild Ride-style journey through the North York Moors that Gordon had taken Michelle and me on years ago, I looked forward to another such day-trip. And it could rain as much as it liked.