

LEJoG de Matt Day 8 Part 2

Our first stop was a sentimental one for me, the Thompson wood working studio. Thirty years before my parents had come to Tollerton and had visited the Mouse-Man - Robert Thompson - who signed his distinctive cabinets, tables and chairs with a little carved mouse. My parents had bought a cutting board and some napkin rings, which I loved as a kid, mainly because of the mouse. They asked me regularly if I had been to the Thompson studio, even though I lived hundreds of miles away. When I arrived with Gordon and Jan, it seemed as though the Mouse-Man had gone far beyond his humble origins making gifts for his friends and family during the middle decades of the century. His ancestors had capitalised on the Thompson name and had turned the shop into an artisanal enterprise. On one side of the road was a showroom, boasting £5000 cabinets and tables, along with a surprising amount of very expensive ecclesiastical furniture; on the other was a gift shop and cafe, complete with two disapproving clerks.

We ventured inside the gift shop after our jaws grew tired of dropping at the prices in the showroom. After causing Jan some minor embarrassment by asking in a loud voice, 'Who in bloody hell would pay £15 for one of those?', indicating to a set of napkin rings that looked very familiar, Gordon found his way to a door at the back clearly marked 'No Entry - Alarm Will Sound'. He first peered through the window, intent on whatever lurked tantalisingly within. He looked closer, nose pressed up to the glass like a curious terrier, and, either failing to notice the sign or, more likely, bloody-mindedly ignoring the sign, reached for the door handle. 'No!!!' both clerks shrieked at once, 'You're not allowed in there!' Gordon looked nonplussed and peeked again through the window, his hand still hovering dangerously close to the handle. 'No! Please don't open the door!' the taller clerk urged. 'Yes,' the shorter clerk explained, more calmly and with a hint of irony, 'the alarm will sound and the police will come. And we'll all end up in the local gaol.' She seemed to welcome the prospect somewhat more than her colleague.

Gordon raised an eyebrow, still pondering his options. 'Well I don't suppose we want that. Got a lot to see today and don't want Canadian relatives here getting wrong idea.'

The clerks sighed, their bosoms lowered, and we shortly made our exit. It was still pouring. I hadn't bought anything, but Jan surreptitiously handed me a couple of brochures that I could send to my parents, indicating that quite a lot had changed in 30 years.

Our next stop was Ripon and, in particular, Ripon Cathedral, the second cathedral of my trip. But first to come was a spot of lunch. We spotted a little teashop just off the main square and found a

table near the window. Jan noticed a sign advertising a part-time waitressing opportunity. The advert suggested that 'mature' applicants would be especially welcome. 'I could do that', she said. 'You are a "mature" individual', added Gordon helpfully. 'Give over!' Jan retorted, hitting him with a laminated menu, 'You're more mature than I am!'

It was good to see them horsing around. They certainly complimented each other well. A bit like an apple pie and an old cheddar. Speaking of which, lunch was good and, knowing that we'd be putting some miles on the odometer we fortified ourselves with puddings. Gordon raved about his lemon meringue pie. "Now that is a beautiful pie!" he enthused, "not too sweet, not too tart, just enough pastry. Absolutely lovely!" My coffee cake wasn't half bad either and Jan enjoyed her lemon slice. The English seemed to thrive on pleasures such as these. Simple pleasures, like a nice cake and a good cuppa, made the world go round, particularly when it was raining.

Ripon Cathedral was another pleasure, but not such a simple one. I was amazed that Gordon, who had lived little more than 10 miles away for his entire life, had never darkened its door. 'I never was much for religion', he said wistfully, gazing up at the towering nave. Before Gordon had married Jan, in Australia of all places, he had barely been out of Yorkshire, let alone Britain. Now, he and Jan ventured out regularly on weekends to the surrounding counties and were thinking about a trip to Canada, but I admired the satisfaction Gordon found in his home county, even though many parts, such as Ripon Cathedral, he had never seen.

My favourite aspect of the cathedral, which Gordon also found impressive, was not the crypt, designed to look like Jesus' final, although temporary, resting place, but a much more recent addition. A local mover and shaker, whom Gordon had met, had built an elegant staircase and platform from which you could see the south transept from a wholly new perspective. It was refreshing to see such an attractive and thoughtful addition to a cathedral, something that wasn't designed to make money, or something that clashed horribly with the prevailing style. Reflecting on how visiting cathedrals was one of my favourite things about Britain, and probably feeling a wee bit of euphoria from not having to cycle through the rain, I thought a cycle tour hitting all of Britain's cathedrals might be a fun trip one day.

We left the cathedral after I, possibly foolishly, but with good intention, bought a long narrow calendar of Yorkshire photographs taken by one of Gordon's neighbours. Even if I got through the second half of my trip, it would probably be in better shape than me, despite having spent a week stuffed into a pannier. The sun was starting to punch through the slate sky as we headed up into the

Yorkshire Dales. On the way, we were entertained by some of Gordon's impressions from Royston Vasey, since one of the towns we passed through reminded him of the fictitious home of the League of Gentlemen. 'It's dark, dreary, bloody depressing and there's nought to do when you're daft enough to go there. I tell you, it's bloody Royston Vasey!' Coming from Gordon, who had been to most of the surrounding towns looking for or selling cattle, this was a decisive judgement. Leyburn, one of his regular stops, was far less 'local', however and we stopped there to look around.

Leyburn was known as the gateway to the Yorkshire Dales and there were magnificent views from the auction yard, of which Gordon was intimately familiar, of the hills in the distance. By now the rain had stopped and the vista shimmered in the bright sunshine. It was absolutely gorgeous. Gordon and I walked around the market town, while Jan looked into some shops, and chatted about the ins and outs of farming. I think it's fair to say that most farmers are worriers and Gordon did worry an awful lot about the state of farming and, particularly, who would be the farmers of the future. Such feelings were no doubt exacerbated by the fact that he had no children, but I could see his point. Driving up into the Dales after leaving Leyburn, we passed a crumbling stone wall. 'And who is going to fix up wall, here? Most of the farmers I know are old and their sons aren't interested in following them on. Who is going to rear our meat? Where'll it come from?' It was strange to hear such gloomy prognostications on what had turned into a glorious day. But, like the weather, Gordon's mood would soon change very quickly, thanks to Wensleydale cheese.

I love going to breweries, wineries, distilleries; taking the time to assess their wares very, very thoroughly. Well, now you can add cheeseries, or whatever their called (dairies, I suppose), to that list. Just before ascending into the Dales, we pulled into Hawes and the Wensleydale dairies (cheesery is a lot more fun). It'd been a while since lunch and the sample table of Wensleydales, stretching about fifteen feet, really hit the spot. Mature, extra mature, smoked, cranberry, blueberry, pineapple, ginger, they were all lovely. I bought one for tomorrow's sandwich, one for Gordon and Jan and a heavy fruitcake to boot. It was a great little attraction and the dozens and dozens of other tourists agreed. With the cheese and the fruitcake, I was set for tomorrow.

But we still had a few sights to see before then. From Hawes we climbed up, way up, a country lane, right up to the top of the Dales. 'I've never been up here before', said Gordon, admiring the way the road took the quickest way up the hill, a la Devon. As we climbed, I couldn't help but wonder how long and steep the hills in the Highlands were. We finally crested the summit, got out of the car and took a look around. It had to be about 5 or 6 degrees colder up at the top. The walls

were crumbling all over here and I peered over one to spot a dead sheep. I had already seen hundreds of road kill specimens - in order of frequency seen, I figured it had been: pigeons, rabbits, squirrels, hedgehogs, various other birds, such as magpies, crows and buzzards, badgers, foxes and a deer - but this was my first sheep. Given the state of the stone wall and the haggard look of the other sheep, I figured it would remain in the gully in which it lay for quite some time. High places in Britain were beautiful places, but they were also hard, desolate and often cruel places, and not just if you were on the bike.

I soon found out how the hill we had just climbed, which felt at least 400 metres high, treated cyclists. On the way down we happened upon a trio of cyclists, slowly inching their way up the steep slope. They looked tired, but confident. They'd make it to the top. Then a quartet, looking a wee bit less chipper, appeared, going slightly slower and sporting a look that said, 'Just when is this fucking hill going to end?' Then, a few minutes later, we passed a pair of cyclists, standing astride their bikes, looking back down the hill with a look that combined concern and annoyance. Sure enough, their companion soon appeared, pushing his bike up the hill as if he had a casket built for two on his shoulders. Red-faced, and carrying more weight around his midriff than this monster of a hill allowed, he avoided our eyes as he passed. Oblivious, or possibly fully aware of his embarrassment, Gordon hollered, 'Keep goin' son! You'll be at the top in a mo', knowing full well that this wasn't the case. If anything the poor guy's face turned an even deeper shade of scarlet.

We came across one more cyclist much further down, a rather portly young woman who was grittily heading up in the same direction. 'She won't be looking like that much longer if she keeps that up', Gordon observed, 'maybe we should get on our bikes, eh Jan?'

Jan rolled her eyes and replied, 'Just stick to the road for the time being.'

We spent the next couple of hours lazily curling around the Dales, up shady valleys, alongside sparkling creeks and through charming villages. By the time we spilled out of the Dales, past Harrowgate, and into a carvery pub, I was famished and certainly ate like it. Two types of roast and as many veggies as I could put on my plate later, I was ready for a long winter's nap. But it was back onto the bike the next day.