

Day 4 - 98.33 miles (275.33 miles)

I set the alarm for 6 am to be on the road for 7. Exeter to Bath wasn't the longest day, about 80 or so miles by my rough calculation, but there would be some hills in store, and I wanted to have time to visit Wells Cathedral, which I had never seen from the inside. I would be staying in Batheaston (a suburb to the, yup, east of Bath) with a second cousin of mine whom I had never met. It would be the first in a series of overnight stops where I'd be essentially relying on the kindness of strangers.

When I started planning the trip, I had put out a call to darn near everyone I knew for donations for the two charities I was supporting (Sustrans for Brits and the Stephen Lewis Foundation for Canucks) and, more importantly, billeting. Staying in people's homes, rather than expensive hotels and B&Bs, would save money, provide home-cooked healthy meals - possibly even breakfast lunch, and dinner - and give me some company. Although I don't mind being alone, the thought of two weeks without conversation, chatting only to myself and the sheep, was a bit daunting. The thought of two weeks of noisy, smelly, and insalubrious dorm rooms during the summer of swine flu was completely unthinkable, despite the fact that Michelle and I had managed three months of it during our 'honeymoon' - the fickleness of age...

I was flabbergasted by the response. Through a variety of contacts, some close, some not very close at all, ranging from family to members of my choir and co-workers, I lined up accommodation nearly everywhere barring Cornwall, strangely enough, and Northern Scotland. I hadn't confirmed one final possibility, which was up near Balmoral Castle in the Cairngorms. I was really hoping that it would come through, even though it would result in the longest day of my journey, because it would save me £70 on a hotel. When in Rome... My contact in this case was through the Public Relations officer where I worked, whose husband's cousin kindly offered up a bed. The place was addressed simply: Inkster School House. I'd left a couple of messages and a postcard to ask if I could change the date of my arrival - I had failed to count the days of my trip properly - but hadn't heard back.

But that was over a week away and there were plenty of miles to complete before then. I woke up moments before the alarm blared, had some leftover pizza, and after a sleepy goodbye to Michelle, departed. Tindy and I had cycled to Bath in about one and a half days two years ago, en route to London; I chose quite a different route this time round, one that was a good deal flatter and much more direct. I had completed the first 30 miles of the leg a week before, just to see what it was like and it seemed like a good plan. The first stretch of road, up to Tiverton, was normally pretty busy, but I was hoping to avoid most of this by leaving so early. The weather was fair, the wind was coming from the right direction, and my legs had lost much of their rubberiness - things were looking pretty good, but it was still difficult to say goodbye to Michelle and face the long road ahead.

The first twenty miles or so were among the flat bits, and I was interested in what sort of time I'd make under such conditions. I had banked on being able to go about 100 miles per day during the flat stretches between Cheltenham and York, so I was curious to see if I had bitten off more than I could chew. Sure enough, I reached Tiverton, about 14 miles away, in just over an hour, including a pit stop, meaning that I was rolling along at about 12 or 13 mpg. So, about eight hours of riding, plus an hour for lunch and breaks, would make for a relatively tolerable nine hour day on the 100 mile stretches. On very hilly days, I hoped to maintain a ten mpg average, since I never seemed to catch up going down what I lost coming up. Which would make my day from Edinburgh to the Highlands a twelve hour day, so long as things went swimmingly. Easy, right? I'd know soon enough.

After leaving Tiverton, the A379 got quieter, winding its way up the leafy Exe Valley that I had got to know so well during the past three years. I left it to head towards Bampton, a lovely town through which the Tour of Britain would pass later on in the year. Soon after Bampton, I passed into Somerset, the third county of my LEJoG and then headed into Taunton. I was pleasantly surprised. Due to popular opinion and a rather horrible experience on the train that doesn't bear repeating, I had dismissed Taunton as a bit of a hole, on par with Bilgewater (Bridgewater), its rival in Somerset suckiness. My feeling of ill will towards the place was such that I hadn't even made it up there to watch Somerset Cricket Club play a match, despite the fact that Somerset was a top club, and boasted one of the best batsmen in the country, Marcus Trescothick. But on a sunny Tuesday morning in late July, pillowed from the traffic by a convenient bike path and passing charming well-kept homes, I figured the place wasn't too terrible. There were no mouth-breathing, effing and blinding yobs roaming the streets looking for windows to smash and people to intimidate. It wasn't too bad at all. Of course I only saw one street, but I was more willing to give the place the benefit of the doubt. Particularly if a cricket match was involved.

Taunton was also the gateway to the Somerset Levels a former marshland that had been drained, and a place I had been looking forward to visiting for quite some time. The Somerset Levels was, as the name suggested, pleasingly flat, and the wind pushed me along at an encouraging pace. For the first time that day, I saw other cyclists, reminding me of a cycling dichotomy. There are two kinds of cyclists: those who like hills and those who despise them. I can understand why some people, particularly those who aren't very fit, hate hills. There is nothing that can tap your body, mind, and spirit quite so much as labouring up a hill, gasping for breath, struggling to see out of your sweat-stained or foggy glasses, and wincing at the pain in your legs, arms and back (yes, arms and back, too!), while some spandexed prat breezes past you with a infantilising smile, saying something like, "Beautiful day, isn't it?" or "Isn't it great to be alive!" Despite this, I fell into the pro-hill category, although this might have just been the result of living in Devon.

For me, making it up a beast of a hill made the whole struggle worthwhile. It provided the sort of challenge and risk that speeding along the flats just didn't have. And yes, for me at least, there were risks. The only thing worse than being passed while labouring up a hill was not being able to make it up the hill at all. This, due to sheer bloody-mindedness, determination and the all-mighty fear of failure, hadn't happened to me for years - again living in Devon likely had something to do with it - but it provided an edge to cycling that I quite enjoyed. It was you versus the hill and, for a long time, I was used to winning, often by the skin of my teeth, but winning nonetheless. If I had to push my bike up fairly often, well, I probably would take up embroidery or something.

Of course this attitude has not always served in other ways. When Michelle and I go cycling, and she can't quite make it up a hill, there is nothing that sours her mood quicker. On one particular occasion in Provence, on our first day in fact, when the temperature was in the thirties, I made the mistake of cycling back down to see how she was doing. "Crappy," was the response. "Crabby is more like it!" I replied cheerfully heading back up the hill, and was given the silent treatment, justifiably so, for the next three days.

The night before, at home in Exeter, I had suggested trying, just trying, a tandem bike so that we could do more cycling together. We had tried one in Ireland 13 year before. The experiment had lasted about 200 metres or 30 seconds, which ever came first. I was never sure why she hated it so much. I thought it was the balance or not being in total control, but wasn't sure and she wouldn't elaborate. Over pizza, I persisted some more, in only the way an annoying husband can. Finally, her eyes narrowing, she asked, "Are you going to take a train if you wake up one morning and it's raining?"

"No," I said, "Of course not."

"Why?" She demanded.

“Well, because that would be cheating, I suppose.”

“Then, there you have it.”

Rather stupidly, I continue to badger her about what she meant, until she finally asked me if I really wanted to spend my last night fighting about tandem bicycles and sleeping on a lumpy futon. No, I didn't, of course, and offered to wash the dishes instead. Hills were dangerous, all right.