

LEJoG de Matt - Day 12 Part 4

Soon I was able to see Glen Gairn and the improbable hump-backed bridge that crossed a small stream leading through the glen. I would later learn from Hugh that the half-hexagonal bridges, notoriously treacherous for long lorries, were usually built by a General Wade during the 18th century. This particular bridge was built during the Jacobite uprising and, if the Jacobites were driving any lorries at the time, it would have been highly effective. I managed to get over it okay, although it was where my legs finally petered out. Helen's description of how to get from the bridge to their house, the Old School House, was note perfect and, within moments, I met Gunner, Hugh's affable black lab, and Hugh seconds later.

Hugh was a handsome, ruddy Scot with a full shock of white hair and a ready smile. He wore his 82 years preposterously well, looking more like a 65-year-old. He welcomed me warmly and took my bike into a garage where it would spend the night with a smart-looking burgundy Mercedes. We went in and I instantly fell in love with the Old School House. The first thing I spied was a lovely long map of the River Dee, which marked out all of the best fishing spots. I next spotted a frame that housed dozens of military medals and silently hazarded a guess at Hugh's career.

Helen popped around a corner and greeted me with a demure smile. She was about sixty and seemed to have an inner strength that belied her quiet demeanour.

"I'm so glad you've arrived," she exclaimed in a lovely Highland brogue, "I'm afraid I misled you as to how far it was from Braemar."

"Aye," said Hugh, "It's more like 13 miles, isn't it?"

"Yup," I said, "But the last stretch was so pretty, I hardly noticed it."

"Even the hill?" ventured Helen.

"Even that!" I laughed.

"Well if you liked that, you'll be pleased by what greets you tomorrow." Hugh pointed outside to a road that rose up sharply and curled around a cliff. It was intimidating and, just to underline the fact, a car appeared and painfully made its way up the hill at a snail's pace, drawing out the strain on the engine like a plaster removed too slowly.

“I’ll try not to think about that until I have to,” I said, my legs twitching nervously.

Helen showed me up to my room and warned me about a monkey doll on a chair that sat on the stairs. “In the dark it looks too life-like!” I had a room and a bathroom to myself and once I was steaming away in the shower, I realised that my longest day, apart from the train journey back, was behind me. I had gone 111 miles and none of my three subsequent legs would be within 30 miles of that distance. Since most of the remaining legs were only on a handful of roads - indeed, I’d exclusively be on the A9 for the last two and a half days - I couldn’t even get very lost. Although if I did get lost, I’d be very, very lost, indeed.

I came down and Helen asked if I needed to use the phone to let Michelle know I had arrived. She had read my mind. Michelle also knew that this was my most challenging day and would likely be slightly anxious, in her subtle way. As I dialled, Hugh handed me a large glass of whisky, which was evidence that he, like Helen, was also telepathic. I gave Michelle an abbreviated version of the day’s events and proceeded to rave, quietly, about Glen Gairn. I would discover later that one of our best friends had a family cottage within a couple of miles of the Old School House. After telling Michelle that I’d have to bring her here one day, I hung up and thought that, despite the punctures and getting lost, it had been a great day.

Hugh came into the lounge with a drink and sat on one of the black leather couches. I asked him about the history of his house. Having finished half of my whisky, I suddenly felt very tired, but Hugh was a good story teller and I soon learned a great deal about the Old School House, Glen Gairn and Balmoral. The school had functioned, servicing Glen Gairn, until the 1950s, when the population had shrunk to one student and one teacher. Surprisingly, it functioned on this basis for many years. Hugh described how he had left for the army when he was 18, just as WWII was wrapping up. He joined the artillery, which explained Gunner’s name, and proceeded to spend 40 years in it, progressing to warrant officer and then being commissioned as an officer. I knew from my own minimal army experience that this was a remarkable progression, but Hugh spoke of his career and military activities as being nothing special, though he told of them very well. As Helen called us for dinner, I hoped more stories, and whisky, would follow.

Supper was fittingly Scottish, in a very good way. This is a country where you can have either the best or the worst diet in Europe, depending on what you decide to eat. Tonight, Angus beef, neeps, tatties and thick brown bread were followed by apple crumble, iced cream and crackers and cheese. “You’ll have to watch or she’ll fill you to the gills,” Hugh warned.

Helen smiled, but didn't disagree, as she served me a chunky block of cheddar. After supper, I had my wish; more whisky was offered and Hugh, Helen and I retired to the lounge with Gunner at our feet. As it turned out Helen, a divorcee, and Hugh, a widower, had only been together for 6 years. They had both grown up in the area, and Helen had never really left. Although Hugh had seen much of the world, upon retirement he returned to Glen Gairn and I could see why. It was funny to think that Helen and Hugh had been married less than half the time that I had been hitched. They seemed as though they had been together forever.

Although Hugh stuck close to the Glen these days - "Why would you go anywhere else?" - he had previously been an avid cyclist, to the extent that my escapades seemed tame in comparison. He had been stationed in Wiltshire when he was young and often cycled back home to Aberdeenshire, a journey of well over 500 miles, and on a much heavier, less technologically-advanced bicycle to boot - though it probably never broke down. Or he knew how to fix it. He had also circumnavigated Scotland and the Western Isles with his wife and small child in tow, camping along the way. After my marathon of a day, I suddenly felt quite inadequate, but in an inspired sort of way. I felt as though I was with a kindred spirit, the sort who would give me a knowing nod on the road, someone who understood looking at a map and wanting just to get up and go somewhere. Not because it was macho or crusading or competitive, but simply for the sake of adventure, fun and wanting to see what was over the horizon, or here in the Highlands, the next hill.

Hugh also shared his experiences of living on the doorstep of Balmoral Castle. His father, originally from the Orkneys, had found employment as a gardener at the Castle, as did many people in the local area during those years. A strange symbiosis existed between the residents of the Glen and the Royals that manifested itself remarkably at times. One of the local characters was a fellow by the name of Rab Bain, a 78-year-old shepherd who lived in an unheated and unpowered hovel in the shadow of the Castle. Rab was a lifelong bachelor and often visited Hugh and Helen to swap stories. Rab's tales were characteristically tall, but always contained a grain of truth, according to Hugh. They were also described with a turn of phrase unexpected from a person who had left school aged ten. Rab's place was usually bedecked with freshly and not-so-freshly skinned rabbits and smelled of sheep shit, wood smoke and unwashed male. Living in such a way, and well known for his idiosyncratic and erratic behaviour, it was no surprise that the Castle security staff paid significant attention to Rab and Rab's hut whenever there was a major event at the Castle, which, in turn, caused the shepherd no small amount of offence.

Such suspicions were somewhat ironic given an encounter Rab had with Sarah Duchess of York when she had just separated from Prince Andrew. Rab was arriving at the local shop when Sarah and her daughters were leaving, a gawping gaggle of paparazzi jostling outside. The press had surrounded the shop and were making it difficult for Sarah to get to her car and driver without getting accosted. She asked Rab to escort her children to the waiting car and he dutifully agreed, warding off the paps with a sharp, scornful look. Apparently a picture of this rustic shepherd, who would have been much more comfortable in a previous century, escorting princesses who, to be fair, should also probably been better placed in a previous century, was published in all the national newspapers. It must have been quite a sight.

Just before I retired, Hugh gave me some words of advice about the hills I would face the next day. “They’ll be about five steep climbs and I think the last one, the Bridge of Brown, will be the worst, but I’m sure you’ll get up it without a problem.”

I said that I hoped so and thanked Helen and Hugh for a wonderful evening. As I headed upstairs, I realised that this would be last home I’d stay at; the rest of my rooms would be in hostels and bed and breakfasts. Having met so many wonderful strangers who were now friends during the past two weeks, I felt quite glum about this, but I had had a good run, which ended on a terrific high.