

There were no hills in the Somerset Levels and that, along with the birdlife and scenery, was what attracted cyclists. I sped along happily, angling towards Wells, a greedily-anticipated lunch on Wells' Cathedral Green, and the Cathedral itself. The outside of the Cathedral was as stunning as I'd remembered it. Unlike Exeter Cathedral, the statues on the front of which have weathered awfully in the salty breeze, the front of Wells looked like it had been carved yesterday. I devoured my sandwiches and caramel flapjacks on the edge of the expansive Cathedral green as a gaggle of Cathedral School students enjoyed lolling around in their summer finery. It made me a mite self-conscious: unshaven, sporting a goofy bandana, a map in a plastic sleeve round my neck and a camera on my shoulder, I felt a bit out of place beside these preened and polished poshos. Oh well, I was only going to get hairier, smellier, and dirtier. I finished off my lunch with some brazen gusto and went inside.

I haven't been in every British cathedral - far from it - but I have been to a fair few. To my mind, St. Paul's is the grandest, York Minster had the best stained glass, Durham has the best views from the top, Glasgow is the spookiest, Bristol has the prettiest little garden at the back, Salisbury is the tallest, and Exeter is my hometown favourite (and the longest unbroken nave), but Wells is arguably the most captivating. For such a serious place, it seems to have been designed by someone with a good sense of fun. From the octagonal chapel and the looping scissor arches, to the second oldest working clock in the world and a 13th century cope chest, it is a place that is nearly always filled with oohs and ahs. I'm not sure who decided Wells should have a cathedral, but I am very glad they did.

I lingered longer than I ought to have, and was punished by the first hill of the day, which rose sharply out of town. At the top, however, the road stuck to a ridge for nearly 10 miles, towards Radstock, surely the future site of some surfer-music festival, if it isn't already. I knew from a previous trip through Bath that the road fell and rose once more before ultimately pouring into Bath, and made what, in retrospect, was a rather silly decision to avoid the latter part of the road because of an experience Tindy and I had on it two years before. Tindy and I had stopped in Glastonbury the night before and made a brief stop in Wells before heading to Bath Spa. We had eaten a good enough breakfast, but by the time I'd started up this final hill, my legs might as well have been made of overcooked spaghetti. The road was rough and uneven, and the Saturday traffic whizzed by angrily. Tindy seemed to be suffering from nothing whatsoever and clung closely to my back wheel, probably wondering why I was toiling so badly. It was one of those moments when you wonder why you ever got on two wheels. Scarred from the experience, I stubbornly chose a detour

towards Frome, which would connect to a canal path that led to Batheaston and allow me to bi-pass Bath - and its traffic - altogether. I hadn't calculated the difference, but didn't think it would be far.

Ten miles later, I had been up and down a number of steep hills and had yet to find the canal path. When I finally did, it was muddy from the previous day's rain and littered with walkers and fishermen. Soon my face was speckled with light-brown mud and I was seriously considering snapping off a branch from a tree and using it to prod some of the more recalcitrant pedestrians with it. It wasn't terrible or anything, but I felt mighty dumb for avoiding the more direct route.

Jenny, my cousin and host in Batheaston, had suggested that I meet her at the George Inn, which was right on the canal. It was easy to spot and I ordered a pint of the local ale while I looked up her number on my phone. I rang it and a woman with an English accent answered. I wondered if I had the wrong number for a second, but when I introduced myself, it was clear that I hadn't. She suggested that I come right up, since she had just got home herself. "It should only take five minutes." I looked at the full pint on the table, said sure, and downed it in a couple of gulps.

You see many eccentric things heading across Britain on a bicycle and one of which came minutes after I left the pub. As I came up to a small bridge, I saw a young man coming up to cars that were lined up to cross it. Hands extended out of car windows and money was collected without a whiff of protest. For just a second I thought he was an undercover bobby checking for drink drivers - I had downed that pint in a hurry - but it soon became clear that he was collecting tolls for the bridge, which couldn't be more than 10 yards wide. The toll wasn't much, less than a toilet at Paddington, and cyclists were free, but it was a little strange. I wondered if the 10 and 20p coins added up to anything more than the toll-keeper's salary.

I found Jenny's place pretty easily and knocked on the door. She came right away and I saw that she was a few years younger than me and bore traces of the Lentz side of the family. She had been in the UK for 11 years, since she was 19, first living in Brighton and then Bath. She had no plans to return to her hometown of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Like me, she preferred the European lifestyle and could see herself in France easier than in Canada. She lived with Will, her boyfriend, in an end terrace house with lovely views of the Avon Valley and Solsbury Hill, the one Peter Gabriel made famous. You could see the city lights from there. Apparently he lived close by. Will worked in telecommunications, commuting to London two days a week. Jenny ran her own clothing line, specialising in organic fabrics.

I felt very much at home. Jenny and I talked about family and how we might have met at our great-grandmother's funeral way back when we were kids. Her side of the family were considered the black sheep, largely because her grandmother, Grace, had been quite a partier and committed suicide sometime in the early 1970s. My family had more to do with the 'good' side of the clan, the younger of whom I found tedious, having a knack of making you feel not quite good enough to be in their presence. They were very Catholic, for a start, and all had the annoying smugness of people who believed 100% that they would be saved once they kicked the bucket. I only found out about Jenny, who had been less than 100 miles away from me in Exeter for three years, because my mom had reconnected with Jenny's mom. Jenny's brother was exactly my age and I marvelled at how we never met growing up. I had next to no relatives my age, let alone in the next province. It was all a bit silly and sad.

Will came home, exhausted from his long commute, but chipper, and I found out that we knew a number of people in common in the history department at Oxford Brookes University, where he had read history. It was bizarre: Will and I knew more people in common than Jenny - the world could be small and immense, all in a couple of moments.

We had a filling and tasty stir-fry dinner, washed down by a few beers, and Jenny told me some of her British adventures. She, like her grandmother, who was also a seamstress, got into the party scene when she first came over. Raves were the going concern and Jenny escaped into the fray wholeheartedly. She got married, and divorced, and found her passion in sewing. Her business was small, but growing, and she had won some prestigious grants to set it up. It was good to hear someone else how had decided to do some dream-chasing, even if it wasn't very sensible. Quite unusual for people from the prairies.