

Kirkcaldy to Auchtertool and beyond

18 May 2014

I was going to Victoria Hospital to deliver Anna's heart monitor and decided to take advantage of being in Kirkcaldy to walk out to Auchtertool. It was a Sunday, so the traffic wouldn't be too heavy – no lorries, I hoped. The weather was fine, with sunshine, light cloud and a fresh breeze. From the train the countryside looked lovely, with the may blossom well advanced but still fresh, probably at its peak. I had no idea what the walk would be like; I didn't know how far the suburbs of Kirkcaldy extended.

The bus from the station to the hospital went up Bennoch Road, which enabled me to locate the milestone against the wall of Bennoch cemetery. It is listed in the Gazetteer in *The Milestones of Fife*, but is not marked on the OS map. After delivering the monitor and getting away from the hospital, which proved more difficult than getting in, I walked down Dunnikier Road. I had a mental picture of Dunnikier Road as a highly respectable suburban road; it turned out to be only partly accurate. It seems respectable enough, but I had expected the houses to be larger. I wonder why I had such a strong preconception about a road in Kirkcaldy, a town I hardly know at all.

As I reached the junction with Balsusney Road a church bell was tolling. I think the sound was coming from the catholic church of Our lady of Perpetual Succour, a handsome nineteenth century building which until the 1970s housed the Dunnikier Free Church. Balsusney Road has a series of two-storey blocks, each containing six or eight houses – I found it hard to work out from the numbering exactly how many, and I didn't like to stare at them too hard. To my ear it sounds odd to call them houses – they are more like flats – but I remember that Jessie Ireland always referred to her two rooms in Marine Place as her house.

At the end of the road is Bennoch cemetery with a notice saying it contains graves maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. I hadn't realised that the Commission was responsible for graves in Britain, but obviously people died in Britain of causes attributable to war service. According to the Commission's website over half the locations they look after are in the United Kingdom. Several of the Kirkcaldy cemeteries contain war graves; the Bennoch cemetery has thirty-three.

The milestone is just round the corner from Balsusney Road, but I got confused about directions and took a little while to locate it. It doesn't really belong to the road out to Auchtertool, but rather to the routes running from Dysart and Burntisland in the south and east to Leslie, Lochgelly and Auchterderran (Cardenden) in the north and west.

Having taken my photographs I went down, via the conveniences in the station, to Beveridge Park roundabout. I photographed some other roundabouts on the way, and also Abbotshall Parish Church. My thoughts on this walk were to dwell on the layering of one period over another, and churches always provide good examples of this theme. One example was the tolling bell, suggestive to my mind of incense and plaster saints, coming from what had been the Dunnikier Free Church. Abbotshall is another. It was a new parish, created to meet the expansion of the town in the seventeenth century, and its church was built then, re-built in the eighteenth century, and modified in the nineteenth.

The first milestone on the road to Auchtertool is located opposite the entrance to Beveridge Park, set into a stone wall – I'm not sure what is on the other side of the wall. It gives the distances to Kirkcaldy, Dysart and Leven to the east, and Auchtertool, Crossgates and Dunfermline to the west. It is 8½ miles to Crossgates and a further 3½ to Dunfermline, although now the village of Crossgates is only just beyond the outskirts of the town. The importance of Crossgates, as the name implies, is that it was where the Great North Road from Inverkeithing to Perth crossed the road between Kirkcaldy and Dunfermline.¹

I didn't go into the park, but I could see it was already getting busy with families enjoying the sunny Sunday morning. The stone (or cement) lions at the entrance reminded me of similar ones at Saltaire. I suppose they were a favourite motif for Victorian public art, combining the familiar with the exotic. When was it that the British co-opted the lion as a national symbol? On the gate posts is a commemoration of Michael Beveridge of Beechwood: his benefaction following his death in March 1890 recorded on one post, and the opening of the park by his widow two and half years later on the other.

1 PNF volume 1, p 305.

The B925, Boglily² Road, goes out past a line of handsome detached houses with verandahs and other decorative architectural features, and rhododendrons. I guess the earliest are Edwardian, while at the far end there were some which looked quite recent. The end of the built-up area came sooner than I expected, the road sloping down through woods towards a burn. The 30mph speed limit gave way to a 50mph limit. There was the road sign showing an adult figure holding a child by the hand, alerting drivers to the possible presence of pedestrians, which is often accompanied by a textual warning saying that there is no footpath, but here there was instead a request to keep Fife tidy by not dropping litter. The eye, trying to relate the image to the text, saw the child as a piece of litter the adult was preparing to drop.

A footpath through the woods met the road at this point, and here was another piece of modern signage: a message, at about knee-height, from the Fife Council outdoor access team: 'Caution! Slow please, public road ahead, watch out for traffic.' One can imagine children charging down the slope and out onto the road before they can pull up, and that obviously is the anxiety behind the notice. It seems at first sight excessive, and one can hear scoffs of derision about the nanny state, particularly as anyone going slowly enough to see and read the message would hardly be in any danger. And what about the risk that someone running down the slope might trip over the sign and sustain injury that way? On the whole, though, I think I'm on the side of the Council and against the scoffers – no harm in prompting parents to look out for their children – but I wonder how long the little sign will survive.

The road passes the car-park and anglers' jetty at the side of Raith Lake, an artificial lake dating back to 1811, and in recent times much favoured by trout fishermen. I'm not sure when it was first called Raith Lake, though it is an obvious enough name for it, as it is part of the Raith Estate. It's not among the 'names containing Raith' listed in *The Place-Names of Fife*.³ Going off to the left was an inviting footpath through the woods to the Mill Dam. This is presumably Datie Mill (a little further on I saw a sign to Datie Mill House). As the road crossed a bridge I could hear a sound of rushing water, but the trees were dense, and looking over the wall I couldn't see the waterfall.

The road climbs again, and passes an extensive gas installation, with what is by modern standards an unusually low-key warning notice: 'Kirkcaldy (Boglily) TRS 163311. Gas Installation – Important Notice. Prior to commencement of any work on or within 10 metres of this site or in case of emergency please telephone 0800 111 999 and give details of the location.' There is also a black on yellow triangle with the code 'EX' which anyone who knows about these things will know stands for *explosive*. Perhaps the reason I didn't guess this was that I assumed that if there was a real danger of explosions then a somewhat more explicit warning would be appropriate. Beyond the gas enclosure are fields of young wheat, and clumps and plantations of trees.

At 12.20, half an hour after leaving Beveridge Park, I reached the Boglily milestone. The white paint is still intact but it has no cap. The Gazetteer in *The Milestones of Fife* marks it as 'not seen'. Soon afterwards there are some cottages, and the footpath at the side of the road comes to an end.

It was getting warmer. There were signs for Boglily Farm and Boglily Steading, and also one announcing a buffalo farm.⁴ Although there were other signs for the buffalo farm along the way, I never saw any buffalo, unless perhaps in the distance, when I couldn't tell them from other cattle. The road continued to climb, with rape-fields in flower alternating with the green of the young wheat. The may blossom was less advanced than it was lower down. Behind, was a view over the Forth.

Before I got to East Balbarton I stopped to take photographs to the north and south of the road. There was a stone tower to the south which I couldn't see very well, but I think was Balwearie Castle.

At East Balbarton there is another capless milestone. It's shown on the map, but *The Milestones of Fife* lists it as 'not extant', so I wasn't expecting it. I might easily have missed it because it is not painted and so was well camouflaged, and also I had not noticed from the map or the Gazetteer that it is on the left-hand side of the road (going from Kirkcaldy), whereas the Boglily stone is on the right.

2 Balglali, Balglaly, Balglalee, Balglelly, Balglellye, Balglilly, Bagkilly, Baglillie, Baglilly, Baglilie, Boglilly, Bellilly, Boglillie, the first element being the Gaelic *baile* meaning *estate*, and the second element a personal name. (*PNF* volume 1 pp 401f)

3 According to *PNF* volume 1 p 496, the name Raith (from the Gaelic *ràth*, meaning *fort* or *fortified residence*) originally referred to a large stretch of land between Raith in Kirkcaldy and Little Raith on the shore of Loch Gelly.

4 The website for Puddledub Buffalo gives two addresses, Boglily Farm Steading and Clentrie Farm, which I was to pass as I got closer to Auchtertool.

The breeze was stronger now, and the sun brighter. The verge was narrow or non-existent, and I sometimes had to hold myself close to the wall in the face of on-coming cars, some of which were going rather faster than 50mph. Most of the way the wall was in good repair, of stone and mortar. Where the land on the other side of the wall was rough woodland rather than farmer's fields a fair bit of fly-tipping had been going on – chairs, a settee, a mattress, and what looked like a strimmer. By now I was on a stretch of road that falls between my two maps, sheets 59 and 66 of the Landranger series – perhaps I should have brought sheet 58.

Birdsong had accompanied me the whole way, none of which I could identify, but now I could hear a skylark.

After a tight bend the village of Auchtertool came in sight, with wind-turbines behind it. The Gazetteer says there is a milestone half a mile before the village, and as I was getting close I wondered if I had missed it. Just as I was about to go back to look I saw it, on the left again. It is painted white, but leaning badly and almost overgrown with grasses.

Auchtertool is a pretty place, best kept small village in the Central district of Fife, according to a sign beside the bus-stop. The bus timetable had described the stop as opposite the Kiwi tavern, and this is still what it says on the stop itself, but the tavern has been renamed the Tiel Restaurant and Bar. The Tiel, I see from *The Place-Names of Fife*, is the burn that forms the southern boundary of the parish of Auchtertool.

The book is clear in its derivation of Auchtertool. Tiel is the Gaelic *tuil*, meaning *flood, torrent*, and Auchtertool is the upland (Gaelic *uachdar*) of the Tiel. As I understand it, the suggestion is that Tiel or Tuil was already a proper name when it was incorporated in the name of the village.⁵ The name Camilla is more baffling. Since at least 1730 it has been the name given to Hallyards in the north of the parish, but the book confesses that it's unclear 'what language this name derives from, let alone what it might mean.' There's a Camilla Loch, it seems, and I saw the name on a sign leading to a new housing development, and in the Camilla House Care Home. Nowadays there seems to be a comfortable feeling of royalty about the name, which might not appeal to all the residents of the Care Home, since many of them must come from the former communist strongholds of Cowdenbeath and Lochgelly.⁶

I thought of ending my walk with a quick drink at the Tiel Bar and then getting the bus back to Kirkcaldy, but the Gazetteer and the map indicate that there is another milestone to look for, just beyond Newton Farm. The Gazetteer marks it as not seen, and gives it as two miles from the previous stone, so the sequence is broken. Because of the gap between the maps I had no other evidence of how far Newton Farm was from the village. With some uncertainty I continued on my way.

At the edge of the village the footpath gave out. There were extensive patches of gorse in the fields, and above one of these a large bird was hovering, with another in the distance. The sound of rooks came from the trees. I speculated that perhaps the Gazetteer had missed a milestone in the sequence, but concluded that this was not the case when I reached the turning to Auchtertool Kirk (which a signpost in the village had said was three-quarters of a mile away) without seeing anything. I halted a little while at the turning, enjoying the views of the Lomonds on one side and Berwick Law and the Bass Rock on the other.

Then I carried on, getting closer and closer to the wind turbines. I thought I could hear a faint humming sound. Half an hour later I began to suspect I had gone too far. It was now an hour since I left the village, and there was no farm in sight. I had passed one some way back, but it had no name and it had seemed too soon, but I now suspected that it must have been Newton Farm. So I turned back. When I got to the farm there were some people outside who told me it was indeed Newton Farm. A friendly old man was not content with answering my question, but wanted to know where I was going and where I had left my motor. When I said I was using the bus, he gave me some incorrect information about the bus times.

The map showed the milestone to be less than half a kilometre beyond the farm, and I walked back and searched on either side of the road, finding nothing. I'll need to return, perhaps when the verges have been cut. Although the search for the milestone had been in vain, I did see a lapwing rising and circling over the fields. As I passed the farm again I stopped to confer with the friendly man about the bus. He doubted my claim that it was not due for almost an hour, but when I said I thought I had time to get down to the village to have a quick drink he agreed that that was a good idea.

5 PNF volume 1, pp 49 & 124.

6 PNF volume 1, pp 124f.

In the Tiel Bar I found four young people smartly dressed as waiters and waitresses. They were resting before what they said was to be a busy evening. After half a pint of Belhaven I went out and waited for the bus, which got me back to Kirkcaldy just in time to catch the train to Leuchars, which in turn was just in time for the St Andrews bus.

It had been a tiring walk, eight or nine miles, but despite the anxiety caused by the narrow verges, I had enjoyed myself. The weather was good for walking and, although it's possible we may have driven along the B925 at some point when we've been lost looking for Aberdour, the country was new to me. It's hard to say how, but it seemed different from the countryside further north in Fife. Perhaps there were fewer farm-tracks and cross-roads than on a comparable stretch around Cupar and St Andrews.

For such a long walk the haul of just five milestones might seem a small reward. Three were capless, two of those also in a poor state of repair, but in a way this makes them more rather than less important, if only as a reminder that this project of mine has a mild urgency about it. When I started it three years ago I didn't really know what I was trying to do. Seeing these three blank, dumb milestones brought my ideas into clearer focus. Through these dumb things I'm trying to relive the mental geography of early and mid nineteenth century Fife. Of course it's an impossible project, if only because I can't attempt it without a battery of maps and books to guide me which were unavailable to the labourer who trudged the roads of Fife two hundred years ago. The nineteenth century network of distance- and direction-markers was the way in which the public authorities, using the means available, enabled people to live a life of modest mobility. Among the materials available to them were, of course, the place-names that had come down from earlier generations. A name like Crossgates was particularly important. Through the imaginative leap prompted by the idea of the crossroads the stone provided a link between the mental map of Fife and the greater geography of Scotland.

For a short period this work of marking the ways with stones and names was adequate to people's needs. Now our array of signs and warnings, road markings, cat's eyes, and Vergemaster reflective posts⁷ on bends, attempts to provide for our ever more complex mobility needs. With my twentieth century mind I try to play the part of the nineteenth century pedestrian, as I walk old routes whose old markers, even where they survive, are all but lost amongst the many competing messages of twenty-first century signage.

⁷ 'Proven passively safe at 100kph (62mph),' it says on the manufacturers' website. From the number of damaged posts I passed it seems that motorists have been putting this claim to the test.