

## St Andrews to Higham Toll and Lathones

Friday 7 & Sunday 9 June 2013

I had planned to do a different walk on Friday morning, taking the bus to Boarhills and walking to Crail, but I was delayed and eventually missed the bus once too often, and so changed my mind. Instead I went out on the Largo Road as far as Higham Toll, five and a half miles from St Andrews. (Higham is pronounced with a Scottish *ch* sound, according to PNF, where it also says it is the highest point in Cameron parish.) The morning had been grey and chilly with a brisk wind, but by the time I set out at 2.30 the cloud had burned off leaving a slight haze and a warm sun. The wind kept things fresh.

Delays continued. As I was passing Aldi I realised that I had left my biro behind, so I went in to buy one, but they had none, and so I went to Morrisons, and after getting caught up in the crowd eventually came away with something to write with.

On the way I photographed first of all the pillar box outside the parcels office, the sort of scene that evokes my suburban childhood, and then the green hill beyond Barnett's garage. I suppose it is views like this which people think of when they talk about the green-belt: the idea that the built-up area must come to an end without straggling indefinitely into the surrounding countryside. There is something to be said for being able to see the country from within the town. From my office in Longbenton (the north of Newcastle) we could see out across the city, and across Gateshead, to the hills south of the Tyne. It was reassuring to think that the pavements did not go on for ever. I can appreciate the principle, and see why people feel strongly about it, but I also have a contrary instinct. As a child, I used to get weary traipsing the streets of Kidbrooke and Charlton, and the idea that they went on and on might have been over-powering, but it was not depressing. It was, to me, the way things were, and it still feels like my native landscape.

It was 3.10 before I got to the first milestone, beside the roundabout, outside the Community Hospital. I've photographed it before, when I did the one-mile milestones. It has the cursive script and gives the distances from Largo Pier and Colinsburgh. As I was taking my pictures I noticed that the traffic was building up at the roundabout and wondered if there were roadworks somewhere, but no, it was just a sudden burst, and before long things were flowing smoothly once more.

The road climbs steeply past the hospital on the left and with a view to the right over the re-cycling depot. The cow parsley was out along the verge, and gorse in the fields, with hedges of hawthorn and ash. The hawthorn was just coming into flower, although I noticed there were some trees which had no flowers and no sign of flowers to come. The first sign of the Cairnsmill caravan park is a notice warning of slow traffic turning right. It looks a neat, well-kept park, and it's hard to believe now what animus there used to be against such places.

The footpath ends at the camp entrance, and from there on I was reliant on the verges. They had recently been cut, so the going was easy enough. At first there were storm drains set in the verge, just as in a town. Soon these were replaced by channels cut across the verge at frequent intervals to direct the flood waters into the rough ground, or into the ditch. These channels were progressively less frequent as I got further from the town.

At 3.30, still climbing, I passed the turning off to Craigtoun on the right and to Wester Balrymonth and Scooniehill on the left. Swallows were flying low over the young corn (wheat, I think), and there were nestlings squealing in the hedges, starlings, I think. There were juvenile starlings feeding on the grass.

I reached the two mile mark beside the entrance to Langraw farm at 3.40, and photographed it and the farm sign with its cut out iron-work representation of a man ploughing. There is a view back into St Andrews (partly obstructed by power cables). In the sea beyond the town a gathering haar was visible. The sky remained cloudless, but with a distant haze. I sat to eat a belated lunch, and set off again just before 4.

At Feddinch Brae Cottage there was a view on the left over a pale ploughed field towards a field of what I think were highland cattle. There was a crackling, humming sound from the power cables. Skylarks were singing over the rough ground on the right, though how long they will remain is doubtful, as signs declared it to be a construction site. There was no sign of work, but a notice made it clear what is to come: the company is called SOL Golf, strapline 'Experience Excellence'.

The road climbs, and narrows. The white line marking the edge of the metalled road had moved in by some six inches. I walked mainly on the verge, or if on the road I had to be always ready to move over as traffic approached. The grass was short, but there were low brambles to trip me up and ash bows to knock against my face. Sycamore and beech soon began to appear, and eventually replaced the ash as the dominant feature the hedgerow, with always a good many hawthorns, both flowering and non-flowering. I looked at the non-flowering branches and thought there were a few leaves beginning to wither, but on the whole they looked every bit as flourishing as one would expect in June.

At 4.10 I reached a summit. There was water in the ditch and in the field drain, sluggish and not deep. A short descent leads to a weak bridge, with traffic lights. The burn (the Cairnsmill burn, I think) is running in a culvert, and there is nothing to be seen from the bridge – indeed you would hardly realise that it is a bridge. The road then rises slightly towards Priorletham, where building work was in progress (the notice says 'St Andrews Coachhouses') with a fine yellow digger.

When I reached Priorletham, at 4.30, I realised that I had missed the third milestone. I turned back. It was nowhere to be seen, but some twenty yards or so down the slope there was a tussock on the verge (this was the opposite side to the one I'd been walking on) suggesting that something was buried there. When I pulled aside some of the grass I found the white top of the milestone. There was no cap.

The road continues to climb past Priorletham to a summit shown on the map as about 150 metres, with a descent towards Cameron. On this side of the hill the ditch was dry. I noticed a bell-like flower with petals whitish on the inside and pinkish on the outside. On the left was a large field of sheep and lambs (the lambs quite big); on the right were woods, a mixture of broad-leaved trees and conifers. When I passed the turning to Cameron Kirk and reservoir I looked behind me. There was hardly a cloud, but still, out to sea, was the bank of haar. The Cameron Burn passes under the road – in fact two branches of the burn cross the road, but I only saw the second, the one that issues from the reservoir. I stopped to listen to the water.

At 5.10, on the slope up towards Johnny Pauls's Corner and the stonemason's yard, I passed the fourth milestone, almost hidden, beside the modern signpost warning of the sharp bend. It turns out to have the wrong cap. The milestone gazetteer says the cap is missing, so presumably someone has decided that any cap is better than none. It uses block capitals and shows six miles to St Andrews and six to Largo Pier. These are the distances that should be on the Lathones milestone.

The sign saying Johnny Paul's Corner looks like a genuine local authority sign, so I wonder how long the name has been used, and what the story is behind it. It isn't mentioned in PNF.

There is now a stretch of flat, straight road across a wide, lush plain. The traffic drove more quickly here, and I was hooted at by an overtaking car coming up behind me. It was probably well intentioned, as I was walking on the edge of the road, only stepping onto the verge when on-coming vehicles appeared. Then there was a series of dangerous bends around Brewsterwells cottages, and in negotiating them I missed the fifth milestone. Having misread the map I was not expecting anything until Higham Toll.

At Higham Toll there are two way-markers. The west and north pointing marker shows 5½ miles to St Andrews, which should have made me suspect that I had missed the five mile stone, but didn't. The east and south pointing marker shows Largo also 5½ miles away. The milestones show a total of twelve miles between St Andrews and Largo Pier, so the way-markers, whose distances total only eleven, must be measuring from some other point within Largo. I spent a little while photographing the way-markers and the picnic area and surrounds at Higham Toll, and then sat down to wait for Anna to come and pick me up.

Early on Sunday morning I drove out to Higham Toll and walked back to find the milestone at Brewsterwells. It was grey and everything was still damp from overnight rain. At just before seven o'clock there was not much traffic, and rabbits were running along the verges. An unidentified bird was singing and followed me along the road for some of the way, flying from treetop to treetop.

The elusive milestone is on the bend, quite plainly visible. Perhaps I failed to see it because I was concentrating on the traffic or looking too closely at the row of cottages. It has been knocked out of true and it is badly discoloured, so it is somewhat camouflaged against the bank. Having photographed it, and taken a view of Drumcarrow Craig, I turned back to Higham.

The incorrect cap on the fourth milestone gives the distances that should be on the sixth, which *The Milestones of Fife* says is at Lathones, half a mile further on from Higham. It occurred to me that it would be worth going on to see if the caps had simply been swapped round. The map, however, does not show a stone there, and when I passed through what I took to be Lathones without finding anything I assumed that the map was right. Instead I photographed a letterbox in the wall opposite the pub. Beside a dry ditch were some more of the bell-like flowers that had struck me on my Friday walk, and Anna identified them from my photograph as water avens.

When I got home I checked the grid reference in *The Milestones of Fife* and realised that I had not persevered far enough out of Lathones. In the evening, Anna drove me out yet again and we found the stone where the book said it should be. As the book said, the cap is slightly damaged. It is a cursive version of the cap erroneously placed on the fourth stone, showing six miles to St Andrews and six to Largo Pier.

The light was still grey, as it had been all day, but a friendlier, pearlier grey than in the morning. The cloud seemed thinner and there were hints of sunlight on the hills. We watched the sheep in the fields, including one all black lamb, and then drove back a long way round, through Largoward, Peat Inn and Pitscottie.