

Kingsbarns to Anstruther

Sunday 11 August 2013

I got off the bus in Kingsbarns at about 11.30 on a bright, windy morning. My plan was to walk to the seven miles to Anstruther, meeting Anna at the Ladywalk between three and four in the afternoon. Kingsbarns Square was quite busy with people going to and fro, and an old acquaintance from the Library passed me on her bicycle. I photographed the Victorian letter box (six-sided and with a decorative cap) before setting off.

The first milestone, which shows zero miles to Kingsbarns, and seven to both St Andrews and Anstruther, is just on the edge of the village beside a rough pasture with tall clumps of sorrel and a dozen or so cows. A couple of them still had their horns; one lying down a little away from the others may have been a bull. The milestone is half set into the stone wall.

The road (the A917) was busy with Sunday travellers, as well as farm vehicles, most notably the Vegcraft trailers from Barnsmuir. These are large, curtain-sided, tractor hauled trailers. I don't remember seeing them in previous years, but the company's website says they have been producing specialised farm machinery near Dundee since 1996. The example illustrated on the website belongs to the farm at Barnsmuir.

As the level of the footway rose above the road before and after the turning off to the golf-course, there was a view of the sea across fields of wheat and barley and rape. One field had been cut. I assumed it was barley, because the barley is always further on than the wheat, but when I went to confirm this it took a long time to find a few uncut stalks with the bearded seed heads – testimony to the efficiency of the harvesters. Not much left for gleaners.

The footway continued past the ivy-topped walls of Cambo. The boughs of overhanging trees brushed my face in the wind. Anna's father used to comment on the walls of places like Cambo and Balcarres, saying that they belonged to 'an estate'. Anna used to think this reflected a sense of exclusion, a family memory of having suffered at the hands of great land-owners in Ireland, but to me it always sounded as though he was expressing approval of the trimly maintained stone-work of a wealthy and substantial family, in contrast with the more or less dilapidated walls of the neighbouring farms. Both explanations might have something in them, the sense of exclusion giving rise to a grudging admiration and a desire to identify with the wealthy and successful.

I noticed paper signs marked 'Colorado Group' fluttering on posts and trees as I got close to Cambo. At the turning off to their site a sign revealed that this was a construction and development firm, and I wondered what was going on. It seems that the Colorado Group is Scotland's 'fastest growing SME', and has nothing to do with the geological term referring to a formation of shale stretching from Alberta to Colorado. The group is involved in building a distillery at East Newhall on the Cambo Estate.

Despite the footway it took me some 25 minutes to reach the second milestone, presumably because I had stopped to enjoy the view and look again at things that caught my eye, such as a flower like a tall dandelion, with a bee crawling over its broad yellow face. The second stone, like the first, was in good condition, with cursive lettering, giving the distances to Crail, Kilrenny and Anstruther on one side, and Kingsbarns, Boarhills and St Andrews on the other.

The footway ended at the second milestone, and for the next few miles going was difficult, with very little verge and a steady flow of traffic, including several groups of bikers. Forced to walk on the verge, pushing my way through ripening cow parsely, stumbling on overgrown drainage channels and tripped up by brambles, I took notice of the flowers: a few surviving campions, convolvulus, willowherb, buttercups and vetch, brambles, a yellow creeping flower, a fluffy off-white flower that grew in clumps, and a clump of magenta flowers that I thought at first might be a different sort of campion. I took photographs of some of the unidentified specimens so that Anna might help with naming them.

The next farm on the landward side is West Newhall, which has some impressive gate-posts. On the seaward side opposite is Randerston, whose sign is plainer than you see for many of the farms around here, just a simple sign-post pointing along the farm-track. I found it oddly cheering to get away from all the fancy lettering and rustic ironwork, although later on, when I came to the undeniably fancy

lettering at Damside, I thought it was as well that nobody was imposing uniformity in pursuit of a Fife Corporate Image.

The land folds away about Randerston and I had a view of the sea, which was blue, but not sparkling as I had seen it sometimes this summer. An oil rig was visible in the distance, perhaps the same one as has been there for several weeks. The road climbed for a while, and when I turned back there was a fine view over a line of trees to the hills north of the Tay. Ahead there were the hills beyond the Forth. The countryside, under the shifting patterns of the clouds, had the colouring of late summer, yellow and dark green, so it was a surprise to come across a field of bright new grass and clover.

At Wormiston, after I had been walking for an hour, I stopped to look at the fields, barley a ripe gold, wheat still with a bit of green in the yellow, potatoes with their leaves turning brown. A swallow was flying over a wheat field. We are used now to seeing endless stretches of standing corn without any bare patches, but the swallow's field looked quite ragged. There was one field which had an irregular shaped area of barley surrounded by wheat, with, I thought, something else growing on the far side. I couldn't think what the reason was for this, unless the farmer was just using up the last of his seeds.

There is a sharp bend at Wormiston with a comparatively broad, well-cut verge, which was fortunate as there was a sudden rush of bikers coming towards me. A little later comes the junction with the B9171, with a jumble of modern signage. I suppose the separate sign for Cambo must have been added when Cambo became a tourist venue.

Approaching the third stone, just two miles from Kingsbarns, I passed a cottage with sixteen solar panels. It was 12.45; the walk was definitely taking longer than expected. There was a clear view of the May, and across the fields were the new houses on the Balcomie side of Crail. Inland darker clouds were gathering.

There was a footpath on the outskirts of Crail. At the far side of the field on the right was a stone arch, which I took to mark the line of the railway, but then I saw cars coming over it, and it turned out to be the B940 coming down to meet the main road. The rowan berries were bright red – further on than those I had seen earlier, reinforcing my vague suspicion that Crail has a balmy climate than St Andrews and other East Neuk villages.

At the junction there is a handsome way-marker, cast by Robert Douglas, Engineer, Cupar. The grass was growing high, obscuring the bottom three lines of names: on one side Greigston, Ceres and Cupar, and on the other Kingask, Brownhills and St Andrews. It is a difficult and quite busy corner, and I may have annoyed some drivers as I knelt on the narrow wedge of verge taking my photographs.

The road into Crail goes over a burn beside the manse, and then there is the community hall, which is either a former church, or was built to look like a church, with its tower (octagonal, I think) and ecclesiastical windows.

I spent a while in the secondhand bookshop in Crail, coming away with three green Penguins. The man in the shop told me he had been a soldier for forty years, but at the end of it he felt it had been time misspent. We talked briefly about Neville Shute, whom he admired. He said an Australian had once come to the shop and bought up all the books by Shute he then had in stock. Earlier on, while I was browsing the shelves, he and a younger woman had been discussing a trip they were about to take together. Although I didn't follow what they were saying I had the impression that the woman felt she had to organize and look after him. He directed me to the public conveniences, just over the road from his shop.

The milestone is on the edge of the village, just beyond the little beacon. Perhaps because of congestion the map shows the stone on the right hand side of the road (going towards Kilrenny) whereas it is, like all the others in the sequence, on the left. The Gazetteer in *The Milestones of Fife* places it on the left and notes that its cap is missing. The cap has since been replaced, fairly recently, to judge from the cement fixing it to the stone. It has block capital lettering, and an odd mistake. The distances are all consistent with others in the sequence, showing a quarter of a mile from Crail, and so a mile and a quarter since the previous stone, except that it says the distance to Kingsbarns is 5½ miles; it should be 3½. The other odd thing is that Anstruther has been dropped from this and the next two milestones, all of which give the distances to Largo Pier and Burntisland. It's only after Kilrenny that Anstruther is mentioned again.

There is a 'No Footway' sign as the road leaves Crail. Not only was there no proper footpath – even the verge was almost non-existent. In the face of on-coming traffic there was nothing to be done but to squeeze right up against the hedge; if nothing was coming the other way most drivers pulled out as they passed me. Around Old Barns there is a sandy dirt-track on the edge of the field, running along beside the road, so I crossed over the ditch and walked on that.

I met a group of young people coming towards me, who I guessed were foreign workers employed picking vegetables at Barnsmuir—filling up the Vegcraft trailers. They smiled and said Good morning. The field contained what looked like broccoli which had been harvested, leaving either just the stump, or else a large head that had shot and gone to seed. Beyond were rows of polytunnels. I think some people find this style of farming a bit bleak and soulless, and although I can't quite explain why, I can understand this feeling. For one thing, we expect when we look at a stretch of agricultural land to be able to tell what is growing there, but the polytunnels keep it under wraps, as though it were a secret. In front of the farmhouse was a field of black sheep, as though the farmer himself, or his family, felt the need for a more traditional and picturesque form of farming, even if only as a hobby. But I also think this is nonsense, because the only point of agriculture is to produce food, and if polytunnels are the way to provide a good supply of locally grown vegetables, then the more the better. On the other hand, perhaps the polytunnels are as sinister as they look; perhaps they hide things that we would protest against if we knew: dangerous pesticides, long working hours, underpaid workers.

At Barnsmuir farmhouse the track turned at right-angles to the road, and I was back to using the verge. The next milestone was here, back to the cursive script, and showing 4½ miles from my starting point at Kingsbarns.

For a while the verge was better than it had been, and it was easier underfoot because there were drains at the side of the road rather than drainage channels cutting the verge. I felt freer to look about. A curlew flew over, and then a small flock of starlings, and then a small, solitary, chirruping bird with a quick, dipping flight. The Bass and Berwick Law were clear. The sky and the sea were dark, with a sharp line of bright sunlight on the far side of the Firth. Ahead there was a view overland to Largo, with alternating sun and shade.

At the Caiplie turning the verge became steep and narrow once more. There is a doocot and another milestone, in capitals again – again, this is recorded as a missing cap in the Gazetteer. There were a few spots of rain. Approaching Kilrenny, there is a footway. It was gone 3 o'clock, and I began to suspect that I'd be later in Anstruther than expected, so I sent Anna a text: she had just arrived at the Ladywalk.

I took a short detour at Kilrenny to visit the churchyard to see the mausoleum erected to General Scott by his daughter Henrietta. Victorian sources say that having had it built she did not go on to add a plaque with his name. This deficiency was remedied in 1911 by a Howard de Walden descendant, who also presumably added the iron gate with the large S.

The last milestone is just beyond Kilrenny, with cursive lettering and showing one mile from Anstruther. As always on these walks, towards the end my capacity for observation and noting things down diminished, as my mind was mainly on reaching my destination, but I was struck by the field beside the stone. I can't now remember what was growing on the main body of the field (my poor photograph suggests possibly potatoes) but along the edge was a strip that seemed to have something left over from a previous planting – perhaps flax that had re-seeded itself.

There is not much distance separating Kilrenny from Cellardyke, and there is a lot of new building, with a large development underway, called Silverdykes, using the early form of Cellardyke. *The Place-Names of Fife*, volume 3, tentatively explains the old name by reference to the silver of the herrings, fishing being in the past the almost universal occupation in Cellardyke, and says it suggests the idea of a *haik* or frame for drying fish. There are signs and flags proclaiming the name of the developer, Muir, and in less inhibited times the new settlement might have been called Muirtown.

I reached the Ladywalk, which is on the Cellardyke side of Anstruther Easter, just before 4 o'clock.