

Milestones from Radernie to Pitkierie

Saturday 15 June 2013

The plan was to take the one o'clock bus to Higham Toll and walk east on the B940 as far as the over the hill road from St Andrews (B9131), and then turn south and walk down into Anstruther. Anna was spending the afternoon in Cellardyke and I hoped to get there by five o'clock to meet her. It was a grey, windy afternoon and every so often there were spots of rain.

On reaching Higham Toll, I first walked westwards and uphill towards Peat Inn, in order to photograph the milestone at Radernie. I reached it at 1.20. It is one mile before Peat Inn and $8\frac{3}{4}$ from Anstruther. The OS map shows the stone on the left going towards Peat Inn, but *The Milestones of Fife* lists it as on the other side, the northern side. I am pretty sure the book is right, but I didn't take particular notice, which is a reminder that I should make more systematic notes. *The Milestones of Fife* lists this stone and the next two as having no cap. In fact they all do have caps, so there has evidently been some restoration work since the Gazetteer was compiled. All three caps have block capitals, whereas the subsequent milestones along this route have cursive script.

After taking my photographs of the stone and the view I turned back again to Higham Toll, going past Higham Farm and Higham House, a substantial modern house with a large round window. I gradually began to open my eyes to take notice of what was round me. Water avens were still out in profusion, including one solitary blossom that had opened right up. There were also pink campions, and patches of wild garlic. The rowan was less advanced up here, being in full bloom, whereas at lower levels, such as in our garden, the blossom is almost finished. Fields were a lush green, sometimes streaked with yellow buttercups. Here and there were stretches of woodland, in full leaf, but still young and green.

At Higham Toll I had a task left over from my previous week's walk: to check the bottom line of the eastern way-marker, which was almost covered by turf. As I had guessed, the last name on the left panel is Cambo (10 miles) but I was surprised that on the right panel it is Kirkcaldy (18 miles) – surprised, because one expects this little world of North-east Fife farms and settlements to be bounded in that direction by Lundin Mill and perhaps Leven, rather than stretching on to Kirkcaldy.

I had been fairly confident of getting to Cellardyke by five o'clock as planned, but the traffic was heavier than I expected on the cross-country road. I kept having to jump up on the verge, which was clearly going to slow me down. As soon as I stepped out along the road I was met by a large lorry belonging to a firm of 'bulk blowers and tippers'.

Two energetic dogs chased the length of their garden, barking at me in a friendly way as I passed by. The trees had rather bedraggled notices protesting against 'giant turbines' at Lingo and Kinaldy. Two turbines were turning in the wind, graceful, remote and disdainful. I don't know whether these are the ones which the protests were aimed at preventing. It's hard to tell, but they didn't look as tall as some I've seen, so perhaps they are not what is meant by 'giant turbines'. The word giant in connection with windmills makes one think of Don Quixote.

The road slopes and winds down towards Lathockar bridge. After the heavy rain the night before the ditches were damp, but the water had drained away. There were surprisingly few puddles in the road, and the long grass on the verges did not make my trousers wet as I had expected, a testimony to the drying power of the wind. The Lathockar Burn, which I suspect is often little more than a ditch, was quite full, fed by the rain-water that must have run down towards the bridge and off through newly installed drainage pipes on either side of the road.

The second milestone is just beyond the bridge beside a field of Belted Galloway cattle, both the black and the brown variety, with several young beasts still with narrow belts. Afterwards the road climbs again through woods with buttercups, campions and wild garlic in the verge. A notice on a gate warned, 'Dogs on Patrol', but I saw none.

At 2.20 I reached the third milestone, beside what I think was a willow plantation. The sun was shining, briefly, on the pale green leaves. As with the previous two stones, this has a cap despite what the gazetteer says to the contrary. There is a letter B on the top, which made me wish I'd been more alert when photographing the previous two, as I'm left unsure whether they also had letters on their caps; I would probably have noticed them, but not necessarily.

At North Baldutho there is a decorative sign. Most of these signs still show fairly traditional representations of farming, such as a man with a hand-plough, but this one has a more twenty-first century feel to it, looking like a child's drawing. I stopped to photograph it and stayed to watch the haymakers at work. The cut grass was lying in the field a little further on, and a harvester was going up and down the lines sucking it up and blowing it out into a truck following on behind. Is this what is meant by a bulk blower? I'm not sure whether the harvester merely gathers up the grass, or whether it also dries it as it passes through. There were three tractors with trucks to collect the grass: one following the harvester, one taking a load along the long track leading to the farm, and a third returning empty to follow closely behind the one in the field, to be ready to take over when the time came without any halt in the process.

The road slopes down at this point and the ditch was part filled with water. On all sides are views of lush fields and woods. Soon the road climbs again towards the turning to Arncroach and Kellie. With fewer trees I was exposed to a chilly wind. There was rain falling in the Firth of Forth. Looking behind me I had a good view of Largo Law, and ahead the Isle of May was visible—the advancing rain had not yet engulfed it.

Just beyond the Arncroach turning is the fourth milestone. It has cursive lettering, showing $5\frac{3}{4}$ miles to Anstruther and four and seven-eighths to Pittenweem. As with many stones, one side, the west facing side, is much dirtier than the other. On top of the cap is a number 7, possibly because it's the seventh stone out of Crail. Cattle in the field moved over towards me as I was taking my photographs.

At the next farm, Pettarthie, there are extensive, rather gloomy sheds, but it is all deserted, with no dwelling-house. A notice on the gate says, 'Seeds supplied by King's Game Cover and Conservation Crops'. King's is a firm, to judge from its web-site, that markets its products less for their high yields than for their suitability for conservation schemes, particularly those attracting grants. They offer training days on topics such as 'the farmed environment'. A hay-field was being cut, attracting huge, noisy, swirling flocks of gulls and crows.

At about this point it struck me how festooned the countryside is with overhead cables, but around here they are all of the homely sort, on wooden poles. I suppose they were once regarded as intrusive, but it's hard to believe they can ever have seemed as alien and menacing as some people find the giant pylons that have proliferated elsewhere. I sometimes take a romantic view of pylons, thinking of them as contributing to the cat's-cradle of miraculous engineering that answers our need for energy, goods and information and so sustains us on the face of the earth. We don't need as much energy, goods and information as we think we do, and not all pieces of engineering are equally useful, but on the whole I like the lived in countryside of pylons and turbines, roads and railways, letter-boxes and milestones.

The road was heading down towards the sea. The rain had moved on and was all but hiding the Isle of May, but the Bass Rock was now fully visible, a dull white against the grey of the land across the Firth. There was barley on the right, pale green beards swaying slightly in the breeze. On the left, the wheat field was a darker green, and the crop less far advanced. There were more empty sheds at Lochty, and a large yard, enclosed on three sides. I guess this was a silage yard, almost empty now, waiting for the new season's crop of mown grass.

The fifth milestone, with cursive script and the number 6 on its slightly damaged cap, is just before the turning to Carnbee. It was almost hidden in the long grass, and I almost walked past without seeing it. The Carnbee road also leads to Pittenweem, the distance being given as three miles and seven-eighths. At the Carnbee corner I was jotting down some notes when a friendly voice called from a cottage garden asking if I was lost. When I said I was just walking to Anstruther the woman

said it was a long way. As I had now been walking for two hours I had begun to hope that I didn't have so very far to go. 'Enjoy,' she said as I went on.

Ahead were three different yellows, buttercups in the verge, a gorse hedge, and a rape field in flower. A little later was a fourth, a bird with a bobbing flight and so yellow around the head that I thought it must be a yellow-hammer, except that it was not singing the traditional yellow-hammer song. When I got home I checked in the bird-book, and it seems the yellowhammer does also have a monosyllabic call as well as the little-bit-of-bread-and-No-cheese song.

I had been going downhill for some time now, and there were more trees, and wild garlic again. I stopped for a moment at the entrance to Kingsmuir and Sorbie, and looked out across the Forth. There was sun on the fields behind Berwick Law. A tall slender mast was just visible against the sky, but I couldn't make out where precisely it was located. I took a photograph looking back across the fields towards what I thought must be Kellie Law.

I was soon approaching Drumrack and the Anstruther road. Not long before the turning I came upon the sixth milestone. As I had passed the Carnbee turning, there was no mention of Pittenweem. The rain was slightly more insistent now, but soon dwindled away. While I was taking my photographs I noticed in the hedge a small brown bird with a deep and anxious call.

At the Anstruther road there is a staggered crossing. The road from Higham that I had been following goes on to Crail and the Secret Bunker. It had been busier than I anticipated, making progress slower, but the Anstruther road promised to be much worse. It was four o'clock, and I began to wonder whether I would make it to Cellardyke before five. If I stepped off the verge I had to be constantly on the look out for on-coming cars, while also keeping in mind the possibility of overtaking cars coming up behind. Almost immediately I was treated to an ironic hoot and wave from a white car full of young men.

There is a milestone almost immediately after the staggered crossroads, which shows 3½ miles to Anstruther (although a modern sign soon after gives the distance as 3 miles). This is one of the stones that was restored by student volunteers in the 1970s, and *The Milestones of Fife* has a photograph of it as they were setting it upright.

Pittenweem is just over a mile beyond Anstruther, the distance being given as four miles and five-eighths. I can look at the map to make sense of the distances to Pittenweem given here and along other the road, but in the days when maps were less easily come by it was, I guess, the stones that enabled travellers to construct their mental picture of distances and directions.

Walking on the verge I had a good look at the ditches. They were sometimes quite full, and now and then there was a faint sound of running water. Where the drainage channels crossed the verge there was often a delicate and tentative fringe of new grass. There were signs of subsidence, and at one point there was a large hollow in the verge. Before long I came to a stretch where drainage channels gave way to iron grilles, like the drains in a town. The manufacturer had put their web-site address on the drain-cover. Web-sites seem so ephemeral that it is odd to think of a URL being cast in iron.

There were several large clumps of a flower I thought I ought to recognise. From my photograph, Anna identified it as comfrey. The verge also, as always, was rich enough in crops such as flattened cans and polystyrene food containers, but on the whole I thought there were fewer of these than I've seen elsewhere. Does this reflect a change in the behaviour of motorists, or is it just that we are early in the litter season?

The road was now downhill all the way to Anstruther. The town, now clearly visible, seemed further away than I expected. The Forth was free of rain, with the May, the Bass and Berwick Law all visible as I approached the Spalefield junction. There should be a milestone here, but both the map and *The Milestones of Fife* indicate that it is missing. Just before the turning was a little shrine, presumably to a road accident victim, with flowers and a Rangers scarf.

A handsome doocote was visible ahead, slightly to the right. I knew from the map that this was close to the next milestone, but I was puzzled because it looked as though the road was about to turn sharply to the left. I came to Pitkierie filling station sooner than expected, with the apparently

deserted East Pitkierie opposite. Then just before the turning to Arncroach came the milestone, and sure enough the doocote was close by. Here again one side of the milestone (north-facing) is much more discoloured than the other.

This stone shows 1½ miles to Anstruther. There should be another just north of the town, but both the map and the book indicate that it is missing, or at least the book says it is capless and no longer in the right place. I shall look for it another time, but for now Pitkierie marked the end of my journey. It was getting on for five, so I phoned Anna and arranged for her to pick me up at a lay-by that I could see a few hundred yards further on. I waited there some quarter of an hour. It had been good weather for walking, with a cool breeze, which was less pleasant for sitting in, so I was glad when Anna arrived with the car.