

St Andrews, Stravithie and Boarhills Church

30 November 2012

I had planned to take the bus to Kingsbarns and walk back into St Andrews, but in the end I decided to do a round trip instead, walking out to Stravithie and then across to meet the Coast road (A917) just before Boarhills, and then back into St Andrews. From the point of view of charting milestones this route was illogical, but it made a better walk, cutting down the distance on the main road. It was still nerve-racking enough, as most of the way there was no footpath and apart from the stretch on the unclassified road I had to keep constantly alert for traffic.

The tide was out when, just after ten o'clock, I crossed the Kinnessburn on the way out of town. It was a sharp morning with frost on the ground and a bright, low sun shining in my face. The sky was pale blue and cloudless over the smooth sea. There was snow on the hills to the north and a big boat in the bay. There was a distant rumbling, which at first I associated with the boat, but there were also planes overhead and I suspect it was a sonic boom.

When I reached the way marker at the Grange Road fork, and then the first milestone, I wondered how the light would affect the photographs. It was too bright to see the screen on the camera so I used the view-finder, and trusted that the camera's automatic reflexes would adjust to the conditions. The way marker and the northerly face of the milestone were in heavy shadow, and I was afraid the black on white lettering would not show up with sufficient contrast. From the results it seems that the camera reacted more effectively than my eyes.

On the way up the hill I was twice stopped by passing motorists who asked the way to the Fairmont golf course. It may be that it was my high-visibility jerkin that gave me the appearance (from the back view at least) of someone capable of giving directions. One of the enquirers asked for Fairmont, and I was able to confirm that he was on the right road. The other asked for the Torrance course, which I had never heard of; it was only later in the day that I saw a sign indicating that this was one of the Fairmont courses.

There was not much activity visible at the Kinkell Braes Holiday Park, although I believe some of the caravans are occupied all the year round. The field beside the park, 20.7 acres, is for sale, with the sign showing it is under offer – a housing development, an extension to the caravan site?

At Brownhills I photographed the way marker with some difficulty because of the traffic. I then took the right fork onto the B9131 Anstruther road ('over the hill' we used to say, but I don't know whether the phrase is still used).

There was no footpath. The verge was soft underfoot, and uneven, with a light crust of frost. I was walking on the right-hand, less sunny side of the road. Every so often a road-drain crossed the verge and I had to lengthen my stride to step over it. The boughs of ash saplings also impeded progress. At first I kept to the verge, but soon decided to go down onto the road, stepping up again when traffic approached out of the sunlight.

The ditch was full. Usually it seemed to be hardly flowing at all, or even completely stagnant, but sometimes I could hear the sound of gently running water. Higher up the hill it seemed less full, which I suppose is to be expected. There were frozen puddles in the fields and I was struck by the patterns of the ice, which resembled contour lines on a map.

There was the never stale beauty of bare trees against the blue sky, often with crows or rooks perched in the branches or, disturbed, flying above them. Looking down as I passed Balmungo I was surprised to see a straggling pink flower (campion perhaps) still surviving. The two-mile stone was almost hidden in the long grass of the opposite verge.

The road continues to climb up to Priormuir, which I remember as where the Hunters used to live. There are several houses there, and I'm not sure which was theirs, probably the one nearest the top.

There is a bridge at the summit. Looking down on one side I thought there was a very sluggish burn, but on the other side is just a garden. The Old Station guest house is just below the bridge, so

I guess it is the site of the old railway line. I stopped to watch bullfinches and goldfinches in the trees, and also (I think) blue-tits.

The third milestone stands out clearly on the verge. I passed it at about 11.30. The frost was just beginning to melt and the long grass was wet enough to penetrate my shoes. The puddles in the fields were not melting. There were a few more straggling pink flowers. The ditch was full again, with sometimes stagnant, sometimes running water. Approaching Stravithie I began tripping over molehills. I'm not sure why I hadn't noticed this sooner – perhaps they were frozen harder here, or perhaps I was beginning to tire and was not lifting my feet as high as before.

At Nether Stravithie is the turning off to Boarhills and Kingsbarns. I planned to take this road, but first I walked on a few hundred yards towards the Kenly water and Stravithie. Signs warned of double bends and traffic coming over the bridge in the middle of the road. I was now in the heart of the opposition to the proposed Kenly wind farm, with protest signs everywhere. The key word the protesters use to express their fears is *industrial*. But haven't they been progressively industrialising agriculture for decades, for centuries? Is a wind turbine any more industrial than the giant field-processors that ride around the country roads?

There was a footpath for a little way, with beech mast underfoot. At the turning to Bannafield and Lathockar is another way marker, slightly out of perpendicular, with fingers pointing left and right, and distances given to the various settlements and towns. The way marker gives the distance to Lathockar as 2½ miles, whereas the modern road-sign says 3½. I walked on a few yards to the fourth milestone, and then turned and made my way, with my shadow in front of me, back to the turning to Boarhills and Kingsbarns, which I reached just before 12.30

This is an unclassified road, with no milestones, so from one point of view it was wasted effort, but it was relaxing to be away from the traffic. As I got further from the main road the going became more and more slippery, with frozen puddles and black ice. The hard ruts of tractor wheels were the safest footing. Clouds were beginning to gather, but the sun still shone.

The road passes Bonnytown Farm, where an old wall caught my attention. It is part stone and part harled brickwork. A section of the harling has fallen away. I didn't go close enough to examine the quality of the workmanship, but I remember Ralph used to complain that Fife bricklayers got away with untidy work, because everything was covered with harling.

It was quiet, disturbed only by the distant rumbling which earlier in the day I had decided was a sonic boom. There was the gentle sound of running water in the ditch. Even in this lonely spot there were posters protesting against wind-turbines. Perhaps significantly, the only vehicle I passed on the road was an oil delivery lorry, pulled up in a gateway while the driver ate his lunch.

I was watching a bullfinch working its way along the bare hedgerow, when suddenly a flock (or is it a covey?) of partridges flew up all together with a great bang. In the distance a huge flock of birds descended on a field, and then rose again, and descended again. So far as I could make out they were too large for starlings, too small for geese. Then I saw, nearer at hand, a smaller flock doing the same thing, and these were identifiable as pigeons, so perhaps the more distant ones were pigeons. A buzzard flew across and settled in a tall fir-tree, which perhaps explains the activity of the other birds. A crowd of crows behaves quite differently from partridges and pigeons, not rising and swooping and swerving as one bird, but each going its own way, sometimes quarrelling, flying over and under each other. There were large numbers of them ahead, around Lower Kenly, gradually settling themselves on the telephone wires that follow the line of the main road and the old railway.

About 1.15 I reached the main road. It was cloudy now, with a chilly breeze. I turned right (away from St Andrews) to look for the milestone that was marked on the map between the turning and Boarhills Church. The map shows it on the right-hand side of the road, but *The Milestones of Fife* says it is on the left. I reached the church without finding the stone. I looked again at the map to confirm that I must have missed it, and turned back towards St Andrews. Coming in this direction I found it almost completely hidden in long grass, and on the opposite side to that indicated by the map. I cleared the grass, just enough to photograph it.

The cap, reported in *The Milestones of Fife* as missing in 2004/5, has been replaced, but there are a couple of oddities about it. First, *The Milestones of Fife* notes the distances that should be shown here; they are all correct (for example 4 miles from St Andrews and 3 from Kingsbarns) except that the stone shows one and a half miles to Boarhills, while the book says half a mile. The discrepancy may be due to a difficulty in deciding where in Boarhills to measure from. The distance given in the book is consistent with the other stones in the sequence. Secondly, the abbreviations and contractions used on the stone are interesting: ST. AND,S. and LEUCH,S. but BOARS. and KINGS. The idiosyncratic use of commas rather than apostrophes to mark contractions is repeated on the two-mile stone, which like this one has capital letters and is similarly listed in *The Milestones of Fife* as having no cap. BOARS. is written on both stones as an abbreviation like KINGS. (not a contraction like LEUCH,S.) as though the name were Boarshills rather than Boarhills. The cursive-lettered three-mile stone shows *Boar^s* wand *King^s* which are the contractions one would expect for Boarhills and Kingsbarns. It's possible that these two caps were created at the same time, although the distances are not consistent with each other. They have an old-fashioned feel to them, so it doesn't seem likely that they were recently manufactured to replace the missing caps.¹

While searching for the milestone I saw something that I couldn't identify. In the bank, at a level with the ditch, was a small stone arch, with a chain hanging down from the stonework. I suppose it was where a field drain debouched into the ditch, but I'm not sure what purpose was served by the chain. Could it be that instead of a field drain, there was actually a spring, and the chain held a drinking cup for passers-by?

The next part of the walk was the most nerve-racking from the point of view of traffic, as the verge was often quite narrow. I stood still as cars passed me, for fear of missing my footing. There was a field of what I guessed was unharvested rape, with blackened stalks and seed-pods. I don't know whether had been abandoned because of the bad weather, or because the owners have lost interest in farming, finding other uses for their land. I was approaching the Balmashie holiday cottages, whose monstrosity of a name *The Place-names of Fife* philosophically describes as reflecting the importance of golf to the local economy, and then the Kingask golfing developments came into view. The next milestone (three miles from St Andrews), which I reached at two o'clock, stands tall on open ground outside the imposing entrance to the Fairmont hotel and golf courses.

It says something for the persistence of place-names (as opposed to brand-names) that earlier names (Kingask and St Andrews Bay) survive on the bus stop, and also on the wall beside the entrance, where *St Andrews Bay* is spelled out in letters that appear to be formed of some kind of foliage. It is only on the brown tourist signpost that the new brand-name of Fairmont appears.

The name Kingask also appears on the bus-stop beside the Castle golf course, which is where the two-mile milestone is situated. In between these two golf courses I passed the entrance to Kingask House, firmly marked Private. Another non-agricultural land use is evident at Kinkell Farm, which advertises itself as *Fyfeoffroad*: corporate events and stag and hen parties, with activities including quad-biking, abseiling, off-road driving and laser clay-pigeon shooting. Easter Balrymonth is still dedicated to farming, its name board decorated with a tractor done in wire-work.

Although it was only 2.25 when I reached the two-mile milestone the light was beginning to fade. Soon afterwards, at Brownhills Farm, the footpath started again, making things easier. As I had photographed the last milestone at the beginning of my walk, I didn't take it again, but stopped to enjoy the view of the town and the evening light over the sea. The boat was still in the bay.

¹ One possible explanation would be that these capital letter caps are the original ones, but were at some point replaced by the cursive ones, and were kept in store ever since; and that these two have recently been installed because the their cursive replacements have been irretrievably lost.