

## Upper Largo to Pittenweem 10 November 2013

It was a bright, clear Sunday morning. The bus-ride to Upper Largo took longer than usual because of a diversion round St Monans.

In Upper Largo I photographed the way marker at the junction of the A915 (St Andrews road) and the A917, wondering why the sign-painter had left the fractions unpainted. I also photographed some of the modern signs, and the fine frontage of Wood's Hospital. I've often wondered what the connection was between the early nineteenth century building (recently restored as sheltered housing) and the fifteenth century naval hero Sir Andrew Wood. According to Hay Fleming's *Guide to the East Neuk of Fife* the present building replaced a hospital founded under the will of John Wood, a descendant of Sir Andrew. Hay Fleming suggests that Wood, who also left money for a school at Drumeldrie, chose these charitable uses for his money because he had been ill-treated by his relatives. The village notice board had a poster for the poetry reading that Swithun's friends have organized in aid of the STEPS fund for Palestinian students.

I set off along the A917 and reached the first milestone (1¼ miles from Largo Pier, 8 from Pittenweem) at 11.40. There was a band of men metal-detectors working away among the straw bales in a steeply sloping field, with Largo Law beyond. They reminded me of the dairy-workers in *Tess* searching for the wild garlic in the meadow. As with other features of our twenty-first century country life, such as polytunnels, how Hardy would have relished the detectorists as inhabitants of the landscape.

On the other side there was a stupendous view across fields to the Forth to the hills behind Edinburgh. The whole walk was to be like this, with rising ground on the left and the sea on the right. The footpath continued a little way, becoming just a well trodden verge, and then giving out altogether. It would start up briefly at Drumeldrie and again before Colinsburgh and on the edge of Pittenweem, but most of the time I was walking on the verge. Sometimes the verge was narrow or steep and I was forced onto the road. With surprisingly heavy traffic (perhaps due to the diversion from the coast road) this made for slow going.

On the way to Drumeldrie there was a culvert under the road and I should have checked the map to see whether it was just an anonymous land drain or one of the branches of the Strathairly Burn. Later in the walk I similarly failed to notice where the Den Burn crosses the road. *The Place-Names of Fife* identifies this with *Aqua de Kethok*, mentioned in a fourteenth century charter as the boundary between Balcarres lands and Wester Pitcorthie. In its lower reaches it becomes the Kilconquhar Burn and Cocklemill Burn.

There was the usual selection of rubbish along the roadside, plastic bottles, flattened cans, cigarette packets – and a Talisker Malt Whiskey carton, suggesting a better class of litter-bug. The Drumeldrie welcome sign had been damaged, and the panel saying 'Drive Safely' was lying face-down on the verge.

The second milestone (2¼ miles from Largo Pier) is just beyond the hamlet, with a view across a field to the isolated parish kirk of Newburn. There was something on the roof that was glinting and whirling in the wind. From a distance it looked too small to be a turbine, but it may have been a device for measuring wind-speed, to test the feasibility of a roof-top turbine.

*The Place-Names of Fife* quotes a 1907 source as describing Drumeldrie as the only hamlet in parish of Newburn, and notes that the *Old Statistical Account* gives Drumelry as an alternative name for the parish. There is a small Edward VII letter-box set in a wall. While its presence may mark the importance of the hamlet within the parish, its limited capacity suggests the parish's insignificance in the eyes of the Post Office.

There were balloons fluttering on the gatepost outside Dumbarrie farmhouse, and thick black smoke rising from the chimney of the cottage opposite. If I looked up from these signs of activity I

could enjoy the view of the Bass Rock on one side, and on the other a peaceful hillside with sheep grazing. The road soon crossed the line of a gas pipeline, and I noticed discreet 'no digging' signs on the marker-posts (a mechanical digger crossed out). Then on the right was a view of a sculpted hillside which might have been a geological feature, prehistoric remains or a golf-course.

There were drains in the road instead of a ditch at this point. Every now and then there was a manhole in the verge. Some of the double-triangular square covers were labelled 'Estate', and it seems that this means they are only suitable for 'low traffic intensity applications', which I suppose would include the verges of a country road. Other covers were differently labelled: 'BMC' (which I think stands for 'Bulk Moulding Compound') or 'Telecom'.

I could hear the calls of curlews and oyster-catchers, but could see only crows and pigeons. I couldn't pay much attention to the birds at this point because the verge was narrow and I had to keep an eye open for approaching cars. As I came close to Balchrystie and the fork in the road, the footpath started up again, just as two large Tesco lorries came along behind me (I was to meet them again as they came back). The long shadows ahead of me gave some warning of approaching cars even when they were out of sight beyond the bends.

I've been looking at my rather banal photograph of the road sign in advance of the junction with the B942. It is not as devoid of interest as it seems at first sight. The road to the right is in theory the major road, the continuation of the A917, but in fact it is only of use to those who are going to Elie (and perhaps Kilconquhar and St Monans) since other coast road users take the short cut through Colinsburgh to Pittenweem. The sign-maker has used two devices to make this clear. First, the road is shown with a thick line carrying on round to the left, while a thin line goes off to the right towards Elie. Secondly, the label on the B942 includes '(A917)' to assure us that it will rejoin the coast road later. The passing motorist picks up these hints almost subliminally, unaware of the thought that has gone into them.

At least, the motorist picks them up if they are visible. As it is, the sign is partially hidden by trees, and must have been more hidden during the summer. The footpath between the road and the wall of the estate (presumably the Charleton estate) is very narrow, so the only way this large sign can be accommodated is by making it reach over the wall, amongst the trees. The traffic managers had to decide between having no sign at all and having one that was bound to be imperfectly visible. When driving I've often complained about signs that are obscured by trees, but there are times like this when it just can't be helped. (A third option might have been to compulsorily purchase a slither of the private ground so as to give more room for the sign, but I suppose that was not considered feasible or proportionate.) Communication, even the simple-seeming communication of road information, is a complex matter, never perfect, seldom unambiguous, always dependent on context and circumstance. And communication is often opportunistic, as with the little hand-painted sign attached to the pole, pointing right to the 'Elie Art Room'.

The wall itself illustrates a sort of compromise. It is a stout wall, speaking firmly of limits and regulation of the countryside, but growing along the top is a shrub with pretty red leaves. There's no doubt that the stonework is regularly maintained, which means that someone has decided that this little shrub is allowed to remain, this bit of nature is allowed to take a small step over the boundary.

A little way beyond Balchrystie is a golf course. As I passed someone had just sunk a long putt. On the opposite side of the road was a field of harvested brassicas, I think broccoli. After noting this I didn't put my pen back securely, so when I came to make my next note I found it was missing. As my second pen also seemed to be lost I had to go back to search. I went all the way back to the field of brassicas without finding either pen, but then as I went disconsolately on my way again I saw one of them on the footpath.

I now tried to make good progress towards Colinsburgh, with a magnificent view on my right of Kilconquhar church, the Bass Rock and Berwick Law. I also passed the house with the blue tiled roof – still an eyesore as it was thirty-five years ago. There is a 'no turning' notice outside the gate,

with white boulders placed to ensure that the prohibition is heeded. This refusal to accommodate people seems to fit with the defiant, almost aggressive self-assertiveness implied by the blue tiles.

There is the usual barrage of signage at the entrance to Colinsburgh, including the 'slow down' message that comes on if a vehicle is approaching at more than 20mph. The village consists of little more than a long main street, with the majority of houses built of dark stone. According to Hay Fleming, the village was built by and named after Colin, third Earl of Balcarres, who died in 1722. I was surprised to learn it was so early, having assumed that the houses were contemporary with buildings such as the town hall (1894). Perhaps the Balcarres family maintained the tradition of paternalism across the centuries.

I stopped at the pub, where I drank a half-pint of Belhaven while a dozen old men watched the football in silence. Then I bought a new biro from the corner shop, and set off again. There was a garden with miniature michaelmas daisies, which I've not seen before. The village has a library (open Tuesdays and Saturday mornings) and has a community cinema. I noticed that the firm of Dunsire advertises itself as Joiners and Funeral Directors – a combination that used to be very common, but which seems to have become less so.

Having reached the end of the village without finding the milestone I went back to look again, and in the end had to ask. It is set into the wall of a house, and was hidden by a parked van. I had now been going for 2½ hours and had only progressed three miles, with five miles to go to Pittenweem.

Things seem prosperous around here. An ecclesiastical-looking building caught my eye; it turned out to be the Balcarres Estate Office. There is a well maintained road leading up to Balcarres Mains, and new stone gate-posts at the end of the track leading to Cairnie. The footpath ends at the staggered cross-roads to Kilconqhar on the right and Largoward on the left. A buzzard flew low over the fields.

There were stretches of road apparently having neither ditches nor drains, where the rainwater must have simply soaked away into the verge. Everything, road, verge and walls, was wet and muddy. The next milestone, outside a house called Red Byres, was filthy, the lettering almost obliterated. A dog barked in a friendly way as I took my photographs.

After this there was a long straight stretch past Pitcorthie with narrow verges and fast-moving traffic. A car coming up behind me hooted, for no apparent reason, except perhaps to see me jump, which I did, up onto the verge. Intent on survival, I did not see the standing stone that gives us the name Pitcorthie (Gaelic *pett+coirthe*, farm of the standing stone. See *PNF* volume 3).

After the Easter Pitcorthie milestone the road turns sharply to the right, with the B9171 to Balcormo and on to Crail going off to the left. This sharp turn is signalled in advance by rumble-strips (and a notice giving warning of them) and then two road-signs, and finally luminous arrows on the bend itself. Because the road was so dirty I was taking notice of the drainage, and I couldn't make out how it was supposed to work. There were short lengths of ditch, some quite dry, some full of water.

Coming up to Stenton I disturbed a heron that had been keeping watch beneath the hedge in a field. Sometimes herons seem awkward but this one flew off gracefully. The verge narrowed again. The road sign warning of the turning off to Abercrombie and St Monans had been erased by the weather. You see these blanks quite often, presumably because there is no facility for re-painting them, so the sign would have to be replaced altogether. It has been facetiously suggested that a warning should be posted: Illegible road-sign ahead.

At the Abercrombie turning I looked back towards Largo and the Lomonds. It was well after three o'clock now, with signs of the approach of evening. It was here that traffic diverted from the coast road turned down to St Monans, so after this the road was especially busy – so busy that I was unwilling to risk crossing over to take my usual face-on picture of the milestone. This milestone is listed in *The Milestones of Fife* but is not shown on the OS map.

Two miles to go, and I was hopeful of reaching Pittenweem by four o'clock, despite the slow going. St Monans and the reconstructed windmill were visible. There were fragments of a silver car littering the verge, and it looked as though there had been a smash on the sharp bend beside the footpath to Sandy Kirn.

In the early summer of 1975 or 76 the children and I walked this little path. I don't think we ever established where or what Sandy Kirn was (and it is not mentioned in *PNF*) but I've not forgotten the walk: the hawthorn was in flower and in abundance. It was the first time the beauty of nature penetrated my indifference. Up until then I had known that certain sights were conventionally held to be beautiful, but it had been a mystery to me why people enthused about them. Sometimes I joined in, out of politeness or in the hope that if I pretended to appreciate it I would come to see the point, but more often I was baffled and resentful. I am still well armed against beauty, so such moments of penetration are rare. There had been one or two in the course of the walk from Largo – the first view across the Forth, and then the view of Kilconquhar and the Bass.

There's a milestone shortly before the junction with the coast road, one mile from Pittenweem. *The Milestones of Fife* says it is at Waterless Farm, but I saw no trace of this name, and there is none on the map. *PNF* traces the name back to 1827, but says it now survives only in the old railway bridge, Waterless Bridge, an appropriate name for a bridge that is not over a river.

I was glad to get onto the footpath and walk briskly into Pittenweem, where my last milestone of the day was on James Street, just opposite Dr Kennedy's house. I was surprised to see his name-plate is still displayed on the gate-post. Anna, who was waiting for me in a café on the High Street, had been talking to the waitress, who told her that he still lives there, and still sings in the choir, though of course no longer working. I wonder whether there is still a surgery in Pittenweem, or whether people have to go to Anstruther. Already when we were living there it seemed an anachronism, though a fortunate one, to have a village doctor – something closer to Dr May of *The Daisy Chain* than to the sort of arrangements we have nowadays.

It was just after four o'clock and evening was closing in. I was just in time to join Anna for a cup of tea before the café closed.