

## St Andrews to Ceres

Friday 22 July 2011

I set off to photograph the milestones on the road to Ceres at 10.15 on an overcast morning. I was due to spend the afternoon in Ceres at a poetry reading with Pete which was to start at 2 o'clock.

Walking out along Hepburn Gardens I stood aside to let an old lady pass in the opposite direction. She had herself just stood aside to allow two young men to overtake her, one of whom, she told me, had thanked her while the other had not. 'Extra marks to the one who said thank-you,' she said. Thinking of this remark, I allowed habit to take control and took the wrong fork, continuing along Hepburn Gardens instead of taking the Strathkinness Low Road, which is the way to Ceres. It was only when I got to the one-mile milestone that I realised my mistake.

Although I was on the wrong road, I photographed the right milestone. The stone on Hepburn Gardens shows the distances to Ceres and Cupar as  $6\frac{3}{4}$  and  $8\frac{1}{2}$  miles, which is consistent with the subsequent stones on the road to Ceres. The stone on the Strathkinness Low Road gives the distances as  $6\frac{1}{2}$  and  $8\frac{1}{4}$  miles respectively. Also, the Hepburn Gardens stone has the same style of lettering as most of the stones on the Ceres road, whereas the first Strathkinness Low Road stone has uppercase lettering.

As I cut through Lawhead Gardens to the Strathkinness Low Road I felt a few spots of rain. I looked back towards Buchanan Gardens and took a distant photograph of the milestone before carrying on along the right road. At the roundabout Annie was just turning right to drive into town. We waved. She looked surprised to see me out there in what was now a heavy drizzle. The verge was wet, and although the grass at this point was not very long my trousers were soon soaked. Outside Rufflets there were men pruning the trees, with the road reduced to single track. I had to cross the road to get past. When a camper van crept up behind me I didn't hear it, because of the noise of the power-tools. One of the woodmen warned me to get out of the way. The incident reminded me that I would have to be careful on this walk.

The rain had stopped by the time I reached the 2-mile milestone which is just before the turning to Nether Strathkinness. The stone is set back in the hedge. The grass and hedges were fresh after the rain, and as I took a picture of a stone house I thought how lovely it would be on such a morning to stand at its windows looking out.

Soon I could see Strathkinness ahead. Two yellowhammers were perched on the overhead cables, singing away. I thought it was the skylark's song until it fell into the recognisable yellowhammer pattern. In the cabbage field beside the Strathkinness crossroads was a kite, in the shape of a bird of prey, attached to a post. As I approached it was flying and swooping realistically enough to fool me for a moment. It didn't seem to bother the crows, but may have been more effective at deterring the smaller birds. By the time I came close enough to photograph it, the wind had dropped and it was hanging limply beside the post.

The 3-mile milestone is just before the crossroads. The rain had stopped, but the sky was dark and menacing. I took several photographs of the crossroads – the road-signs, the traffic, the shining wet tarmac – and wondered what it is that catches at me in these despoiled areas of no-man's land between town and country. I can't see any

reason for it. It may well be something to do with flash-backs to earliest childhood and visits to Wannock Lane and Willingdon, that little bit of suburban sprawl at the foot of the South Downs between Polegate and Eastbourne. As time went on, each time we went there it seemed that the brick had spread a little higher up the hillside, but the place never lost its allure, particularly when it had recently been refreshed by rain.

As I walked on I realised that there was some blue sky and that shadows were flying over the slopes of pale green wheat. Some of the fields were quite golden while others were still green, the more advanced crop being barley. In the distance to the right I saw a patch of red – willow-herb in its glory, caught by the sun.

The sun had gone behind dark clouds by the time I reached the 4-mile milestone just before Clatto. The stone was almost hidden on one side by the grass and weeds. There is what I guessed must be an ice-house in a field near there, too small to make a good photograph from the roadside. I liked the tractor tracks through the wheat fields and the contrasting greens of trees and corn against the grey sky, and I spent some time trying to get a picture.

Not long afterwards comes the first view of the Lomond Hills, and then immediately there's a series of bends requiring take extra care. In places too there is no verge. My going was considerably slowed by having to stop repeatedly and climb up into the hedge to let traffic go past. I therefore was not surprised that so much time went by without another milestone, and it didn't strike me until later that I had missed the one shown on the map a little after Morton of Blebo. It may have been removed when the verge was flattened: the road here is only just wide enough for a double-track. Or it may just be that I didn't see it, either because I was intent on avoiding the traffic, or because I was admiring the scenery – a remarkable spruce tree, for example, or the tangle of trees and undergrowth in the Den. I was looking out also for the buzzards whose mewling was insistent at this point. At the turning to Blebo Craigs someone stopped to ask if I was going to the village and if I wanted a lift. I thought I recognised her. There were then more Z-bends after Blebo Mains, by which time I had passed where the milestone should be. It was raining lightly once more.

The 6-mile milestone is beside the turning off up the hill to Craigtown. It was now raining quite hard, but I was relieved to have a verge to walk on again. I took some shots of the dark sky. It was a few minutes after this, as I was entering Pitscottie, that I realised I had no recollection of the 5-mile milestone. There was nothing in my notebook about it. I thought of stopping to have coffee and look at the map and check in the camera's memory, but decided to press on. I half persuaded myself that I might have seen the stone and photographed it, but been deterred by the rain from recording it in my notebook. It was only when I got home and went through the photographs that I was convinced that I really had missed it.

The 7-mile milestone is close to Kilhill between Pitscottie and Ceres. Its lettering is not in the style of the other stones on this road, but block capitals, like the first stone on the Strathkinness Low Road out of St Andrews. There is a fair bit of rust on all the milestones, but this one is probably in the worst condition. And it is wrong, which added to my confusion over the missing stone. It gives St Andrews as 8 miles away and also says Ceres is a quarter of a mile away, in the same direction as St Andrews. In other words it should be located on the way out of Ceres. Skylarks were singing now, this time not turning into yellowhammers.

Later in the afternoon Pete and I walked out on the Craighrothie road and found the first milestone beyond the village, and sure enough all its distances are the same as the stone on the St Andrews side. This means that my initial guess (that the two stones had simply been swapped round) isn't right, and the stone at Kilhill remains a mystery.

During the poetry meeting in the afternoon my clothes dried out. My shoes had not let in water. I took the bus home.