

## **Milestones on the road from St Andrews to Guardbridge and Cupar**

Thursday 20 October 2011

I set off to walk to Cupar, going down through the car-park and reaching the main road just about 11 o'clock. It was the interval between lectures and the North Haugh campus was busy. There are naturally many more students using it since the opening of the Gateway and the new Medical Building. It was a bright sunny morning, with a light wind, but cold. I soon got up a heat walking. It looked at first as though there was snow on the Angus hills, but it was only an effect of the clouds.

There is a sign hereabouts saying 'For Rosyth follow Forth Road Br Edinburgh' with a picture of a boat containing a car and a lorry, indicating a ferry. You see signs like this along the road all over Fife. The picture always makes me think of Jonah in his whale. It is right enough in what it says about how to get to Rosyth, but the ferry service to the Continent ceased operation at the end of 2010. I think it had stopped and started up again before that, so perhaps it will be resumed in the future. Meanwhile the signs remain as memorials to one of the many schemes there have been to generate economic activity in Fife.

I walked along the verge until the first milestone, which I reached at 11.20. Shortly afterwards I joined the cycle track, which is separated from the roadside verge first by a hedge, and then a stone wall and eventually just a wire fence. Every so often there are gates giving access to the road. A few grim faced cyclists and one or two more affable pedestrians passed me. There were hips and haws and rowanberries in the hedges. Voices were rising from the golf course beside of the track.

After following the track for ten minutes or so I began to wonder when I should go out onto the verge to avoid missing the second milestone. Ten minutes later I came to a wooden mile-post marking two miles from St Andrews and 2.5 miles to Guardbridge. The post is decorated with a picture of a crown (for the Kingdom of Fife, I suppose) and has a plate with the inscription: 'Mile by mile they marked their way from ancient town to river bridge.' I heard a lapwing's call, and was still wondering whether I had missed the milestone.

When I reached Easter Kincapple I knew from the map that I had come too far, so I went back, peering carefully at the hedge between me and the verge. Luckily I spotted the white stone through the tangle of hedge and grass. There was a way out to the verge close by. The stone was scarcely visible even from the verge, and I had to clear away some of the weeds in order to get my photographs. I thought afterwards that I should have made a proper job of clearing the ground so that the stone would stand out properly, but when I was on the spot I felt inhibited, as though I would have been disturbing the site. Whereas the first milestone's lettering was block capitals, the second was in the cursive script.

I was not making very good time: an hour out and I had only got to the second mile. The sky was gloomy over Guardbridge ahead of me, and one of the Lomond peaks was hidden in cloud. The wind was getting up as the cycle track came to an end shortly before the approach to the third milestone near the Strathkinness turning. This stone's lettering, like the one before, is cursive, showing again the distances to both Cupar and Newport, as well as the three miles from St Andrews.

As I was approaching the bridge at Guardbridge, and debating whether to go into the hotel, a man with binoculars came up to me and told me excitedly that there was an egret in the Eden. He was pleased to have someone to point it out to, and as he left me he said, 'Enjoy!' It was certainly a handsome sight, and I took a whole flurry of photographs. I couldn't see the bird on the screen, so although I tried to work out where to point the camera by

reference to the piles of the old railway bridge I wasn't sure of my aim. In the end I think I managed to get two reasonable shots, although too distant to show much detail.

The second excitement that Guardbridge had to offer was the roadworks on the hill going out of the village. A large machine called a road-planer was standing idle while the men had their lunch-break. Road-planing was something I had not heard of before, but I guess it is the process of removing layers of old tarmac. The road-planer had caterpillar tracks made up of heavy-duty plates to scrape away the tarmac, leaving the road-surface scarified and looking like grey tweed.

The roadworks continued as far as Seggie House, beyond the fourth milestone. The surface of the road and footpath has evidently risen considerably since this milestone was erected, and very little of it shows above ground level. It has an elegant comma after *Cupar*. The sun was shining as I photographed it. As I went on I could see across the fields a train slowing down as it approached Leuchars. The station itself was hidden by trees. The road at this point felt quite exposed.

The five-mile milestone has the wrong plate. It gives the same distances as the second milestone (Cupar 7 and Newport 9 miles). The lettering is in block capitals, like that of the first milestone. One possibility is that it belongs to an older set of plates, and was used as a spare because it was felt preferable to have an incorrect plate rather than none at all. It seems a strange view to take, but perhaps the stones are liable to damage if they have no protection.

As I passed the Jacob sheep at Clayton I was struck by the fact that since Guardbridge the footpath is of a loose pinkish gravel which is very good at getting into one's shoes. The fields here are below the level of the road with substantial hedges, with lots of hedgerow birds, including what looked like yellowhammers, although I didn't hear their distinctive song.

I remembered that when driving between Dairsie and Guardbridge one night we had been surprised to see a train apparently making straight for the road in front of us, so I was interested to see the tunnel going under the road. Driving past I had never noticed its unusual lay-out. To photograph it in a way that would give a good idea of how it is constructed would require a bit of thought, so I'll have to come back again to look at it. I contented myself with pictures of the track and of the path leading down into a field beside it, where again there were lots of song-birds.

The sky ahead was getting more and more threatening, but when I looked behind me there was pale blue and green sky. I was approaching the sixth milestone just before Dairsie roundabout. Newport is not mentioned on this stone, although it comes before the turning off. The roundabout is described as being a partnership between Fife Council and St Michaels Tippers, and it is laid out as though it were a small park; one expects to see a bench for people to sit and watch the traffic go round and round. While the milestone says it is three miles to Cupar, the road-sign beyond the roundabout says three and a half.

The battery of my mobile phone was almost out. As the compulsion to 'keep in touch' made itself felt I decided to use the public phone in Dairsie. The notice on the outside of the box said it cost 40 pence, but when I got into the box I found that it had gone up to 60, which, the sign made clear, had to be made up from no more than four coins. I found two twenties and two tens and was about to start when I realised on closer inspection that the phone was out of order, or unavailable due to maintenance, as I think the phrase was. It didn't matter, there was no need to phone home, but innovations make new things possible, and they soon go from being possible to being necessary. This must have happened two centuries ago

with the new system of communication that these milestones were part of. For centuries those who lived and worked in Fife villages had to be content with very little sporadic contact with Edinburgh and Dundee, until the improved roads brought newspapers, letters and visitors; then their ideas, their lives and their families began to spread, and what had been a novelty became a necessity.

Beyond Dairsie I realised that I was no longer walking on gravel, and that the footpath had a more comfortable tarmac surface. There was a magnificent newly ploughed field to the left towards Dairsie Church, with flocks of gulls showing brightly against the brown soil.

Close to the turning to Kemback is the seventh milestone, on the other (left-hand) side of the road; I don't know what this change might mean, if anything. The stone is of a different style, I would guess an older style, than the earlier ones, having just one face. It bears the number 1824, which looks like a date. As well as Cupar and Newport it mentions Pettycur (beyond Kinghorn) and New Inn (near Markinch). I had to consult Simon's *Place-names of Fife* volume 2 to find out about New Inn. He refers to Owen Silver's *The Roads of Fife*, and explains that New Inn was an important coaching inn on the turnpike to Dundee. So the stone doesn't mention St Andrews because this stretch was part of the road between two ferry crossings at Pettycur on the Forth and Newport on the Tay.

I don't know when the Forth crossing from Pettycur (early form, Prettycur, Simon's book tells us) ceased to operate, but presumably it didn't long survive the railways. The stone remains as a reminder that there was a transport system before the railways. The Pettycur crossing was active for longer than the modern Rosyth service, and similarly the obsolete Rosyth signposts are unlikely to be left in place as long as this stone has remained.

The cloud ahead was now dark and I felt some spots of rain which turned to a steady drizzle as I was passing the footpath to Dairsie Bridge. Shortly afterwards I had the first view of Cupar, the big silo which I believe was part of the old sugar factory. The eighth milestone is the same style as the seventh, lists the same places, and is on the same side. The verge is very narrow, so I stayed on the footpath and photographed the stone from across the road. The traffic was quite heavy at this point, and the drizzle was thicker.

I walked on into Cupar because I had a feeling that I had seen a ninth milestone, of the same style as the seventh and eighth, close to the centre, near the war memorial. However, either it has been removed, or is not where I remembered, or is a figment of my imagination, most likely the last. I reached the war memorial at ten past three, and went off to look for my bus home.