

## Hills, Valleys and the Welsh Identity

### **Day 1 – 78 Miles (Cardiff to Talgarth via Brecon)**

I think I found Cardiff on a bad morning. It was raining, I was annoyed and the conductor on the train had shouted at me in a camp Welsh accent. I had little sleep and had the usual at-the-start-of-the-journey-paranoia. It's not Guildford. It's not California. It's going to be wet, horrible, full of ugly people stealing my bike. My bike's going to break. I'm going to get lost. I'm too tired. What am I doing this?

At first the city seemed small, only around twice the size of Guildford at a guess. It was historic – the castle was mildly impressive – but it was history caught up by modernity – a cobbled street with clock tower and a new Gregg's franchise. It was High Street history if you like.

I guess nothing screamed out at – 'Look at me!' 'This is Cardiff!' 'This is the Capital of Wales!' The Millennium Stadium towers over the centre as well, a real modern-day amphitheatre. I think I may have missed a lot – the bay area for one. Maybe one day I'll return for more revelrous reasons at some point – I sense that's more what Cardiff is all about.

Next a quick stop to Castell Coch, which rises out of the trees in the hills like Bavarian Chateau. It looks great, but is again fairly disappointing when you arrive. It's not an attraction, it just there, like a little Welsh village. I feel like I'm not welcome. Wales seems to like being ignored and that it wants to keep things this way. I can't see any investment here, like Liverpool or Glasgow for instance, but I get the feel that if it was offered, Cardiff would tell them to fuck off.

Then up the Taff for ten miles or so, on some uninspiring path to Pontypridd. Now this is somewhere that really has been ignored. I need a piss. Public toilet? Shut down. Shopping centre? Don't think so. Lots of poor kids standing outside poor houses with nothing to do? Yes. I saw nothing.

No new offices or developments, or shops. Nothing. This is a town located just outside the capital of the country. Depressing. Still, some nice fellow cyclists helped me along and I got to lend them some bike tools. Pity about the rather odd man who then accompanied me for the next ten miles, moaning that the path wasn't very interesting, that the Pennines were quite bleak, that he thought routes should be better signposted. He was stopping off at Merthyr Tydfil. Of course this bit wasn't going to be interesting.

Merthyr Tydfil promised much more. It had roads, modern shops and the Beacons rising up behind it. From the path along the high banks of the Taff it looks stunning, cutting into the hills with a scale and bravado that stood it apart from anything I'd seen so far. As the hills grow in size, so does the beauty of this country. The Black Mountains should be spectacular.

Merthyr feels like an old mining town – given its unconventional geographic position, so I would guess it is not the most affluent, but it is good looking and so will always have a chance.

Then comes a pleasant climb, onto the Beacons and round the first great reservoir. Do they not get enough rain here already? It feels very much like the Three Bears at Berkeley and is just as impressive.

Then it's up, off road, and up again. Quite tough, but these days I have more resources to draw on. Two thousand feet up. Feels like Dartmoor but without the bleakness, more of a cosy, cossetting beauty. I feel like the only person around for a hundred miles, and so I'm happy.

I've even more happy for the next five miles of constant downhill into the second reservoir – a downhill unique to me for its consistent rockiness all the way, vibrating my ailing bike and punishing my neck and my shoulders all the way. I'm toughish now, but mentally still crapping myself.

Now the mountains begin to dissipate and its sheep, hills, canals and Brecon. It looks as quaint and pretty as you might imagine – nothing more, nothing less. It's a more effeminate Wales, with effeminate buildings of born from effeminate industries – tourism, commerce – and thus feels more English as a result.

Finally more climbing, deep into the middle of nowhere. No towns are big enough to warrant a sign unless they are about 2 miles away, so there aren't any signs. Its hills, sheep and the black mountains behind. The climbs are fun though, tolerable, and the downhills empty. 70 miles. Good time. Backdrop of the Black Mountains. Sun beginning to set. Couple of bike niggles to keep the paranoia occupied. Pretty much perfect cycling.

Then Talgarth, a Fish and Chip shop and an incredible B&B.

Trelfecca Farm. The best B&B yet. I have a whole two-storey annex to myself. Helen is chatty, conservative, but not nuts. She considers herself as English and looks down on South Wales. After an hour, she asks if it is okay if she shows me the annex, or did I want to stay and keep chatting?

This is an amazing B&B.

Also, the chip shop just gave me the largest portion of chips I have ever seen in my life. I didn't finish them – I have just used 3000 calories.

A good day then. Not sure I know what it is to be Welsh yet though. Maybe they are not sure if they know either, that's why they're so partisan or non-partisan, and nothing in between.

## **Day 2 – 66 Miles (Talgarth – Chepstow)**

66? What a wuss eh? An easy day. A leisurely day. A day where I didn't extend the limits. On day off that inevitable heart-attack.

More madness from Helen Jones at Trelfecca Farm this morning. To start us off a half an hour conversation about 'muck wars' between her and her neighbours. Then a brief respite while she left to sort out a sheep that had escaped into the front garden. Finally, after breakfast was served, she brings her kids in to meet me – I'm guessing because I was also a twin (as we discussed yesterday). I'm not quite sure that qualifies me to converse with two thirteen year old kids at 9.00 in the morning.

The Black Mountains were up first thing (when I finally got out of the B&B) via the Gospel Pass. Steep up, then steady onto a long single lane, up through the green heath land then down into miniscule looking farms, all dwarfed by the great mounds of rock that lay ahead. The rectangular sides of the mountains make it feel like you are emerging from a crater on the moon, crater filled with fields with a sheep. The scale is vast and you feel a great insignificance and wonder at the powers of nature, and man's ability to navigate it.

Then 15 miles down hill to Abergavenny. 15 miles of thin, wooded road, with blind corners and a car every hundred metres or so. It was all very frustrating, and irritating, and claustrophobic compared with the endless open spaces of the mountain sides. Cycling is all about finding that sense of complete freedom, total liberty – you, the bike and the world, and the closer you can get to this, the greater the feeling.

Abergavenny proved a nigh-on perfect mid journey town. Picturesque and compact high street. Well placed supermarket. River. Park benches. Ice cream van. Brecon was like this. As was Winchester and Truro. It was time to enjoy things. Nothing too impressive or challenging to come. Just pleasant Welsh countryside, and what I like to think as 'Devon' riding – up, down, up, down, up, down. Up.

The quiet roads of the little villages to Chepstow were idyllic in their anachronistic simplicity – families working small patches of land, tractors ambling up hills and, most vitally, no cars. The latter are the only echoes of the city to reach this part of the countryside – but not today. I

haven't seen one for about half an hour, and then when one arrives its engine sounds foul, noisy, cutting through the air like a missile. They feel coercive, aggressive and unnatural. I can understand why people were so scathing in their reaction to them back in the 1890s. For me, as a cyclist, they just represent 'Haste, Haste, Haste!' – a very modern impatience, rather than relishing the enjoyment of travelling in itself and feeling a lot more satisfied once you get there as a result.

One more big hill outside of Usk – the steepest of the whole journey, but very familiar, very Surrey in its gradient – about half a mile of wooded road, posh houses, curves, tiring but not punishing – and then that's it. I'd trained for this, so no problems; just a canter into Chepstow left, and an enjoyable one at that. The bridge on the horizon back into England, over the water, where six months ago I was in the midst of my first big rides through Cornwall, and still the biggest ever journey – 115 miles to Ilfracombe. What a difference. Am I older, wiser, duller? Or do I just know what I'm doing?

Here is where the real journey ended. I'm now in Chepstow. It's nice, it has a good castle, but it doesn't feel like Wales, in the way Calais doesn't feel like France, or Kingston like Surrey. It's back to normal then I'm afraid – dull B&B, uniform High Street, nice old pubs. Nice. Ugh!

And the Welsh today? Funny, feisty, friendly – in a take-no-shit kind of way. What you see is what you get, and this is always a good virtue to have I think. Honest. Proud. Stuck in their ways. And I do think that the rural residents do have a lot to be proud of – their willingness to be welcoming, their sense of community. I'm not so sure about the city dwellers – for them I think pride has descended into bitterness. South Wales is a stunning place, so why try and make it ugly?

Then again maybe it is not without reason. How could Thatcher have done what she did? How could she? Just let a whole part of the country's economy fall apart, all in the name of 'progress?' An indictment of applied utilitarianism if I ever heard one.

### **Day 3 – 40 miles (Chepstow – Bath)**

England, beautiful England. Beautiful until the mindless comforts of suburbia rears their ugly head.

Here the villages seem relaxed and beautiful, with lone men reading the paper outside wonderful old houses and couples waling dogs by perfectly kept lakes and streams. There's no work, no graft, no vindictive laboring, just contentment and idyll.

I guess it's the English way – the delusion of refinement and unflappable self-righteousness. It's all very different to the Celtic honesty and down-to-earthness of the Welsh. Maybe that's why we think of the countryside as full of twine-claden old toffs. We don't see the work that goes with it. In modern England, where 'England' is decided but the cities – that is what the country has become – that is what it is. That's why we don't like the Welsh. They are our brash, uncouth younger brother, sitting at the dinner table and shouting a few home truths at everyone, truths that we don't want to hear. Truth is bad manners. Truth is unpleasant. We are so smart, we are able to embellish the truths we don't want.

Maybe that's why made me initially uncomfortable – the lack of the English ego – that my bullshit English manner wasn't going to work here.

Some might say this is a lack of sophistication. I would call it the path to enlightenment. When we run out of our capacity to generate money out of nothing – the almost decrepit neo-capitalism – then I'd like to see who comes out best. If only we could work together more – perhaps, like the Severn Bridge – we would produce something else truly astonishing. It's a shame we cannot get over ourselves enough to connect anymore.

(NB: I have just discovered that the Severn Bridge was built by the French. The Anglo-Welsh union is, I fear, a very long way off)