

Cycling – distancing and discovering

Two weeks into the lockdown and I'm back on my bicycle.

This time I thought I'd head south east to Pencaitland. It's only ten miles out of Edinburgh as the crow flies. But to get there, if you're not a crow, involves turning your map inside out and up-side down several times as you make your way through a tangled web of roads, roundabouts, by-passes, new estates, railway lines old and new and steep plunges into small river glens.

My first landmark was The Corn Exchange in Dalkeith, a splendid Victorian building. When it opened in 1854 it was the largest indoor grain market in Scotland, suggesting that East and Mid Lothian were huge producers of wheat and barley, which they still are today.

The town itself is eerily quiet, save for a line of people waiting – at the correct distance from each other – outside the three supermarkets I pass.

I remember coming out here, as a journalist, during the miners' strike in 1984, and then when the new secondary school was proudly opened by a Labour First Minister, Jack McConnell, in 2003. How times have changed !



The Corn Exchange, Dalkeith

Finding the start of the Pencaitland Railway Walk is not easy. All I can say is that it's somewhere south of Carberry Tower and north of Cousland village (grid ref 373686 if you really want to know).

I went up and down dale a few times before I stumbled upon it. But once found, it's delightful. A level, gravelled track takes you chugging through the countryside, past neatly ploughed and harrowed fields awaiting the spring sunshine. It's no surprise to pass two mighty grain stores, awaiting the harvest. But there's also an occasional herd of cattle, and a large brown bull in a field by himself practising social distancing. Frisky horses gallop to and fro across a field.



Ormiston Station

You almost forget that this railway, opened in 1867, was not just carrying grain, it served the coal mines which lie beneath. There are still strange mounds and embankments, even an old slag heap, now overgrown, and colourful notices telling you the story of the coal industry and those who laboured here, not so very long ago. The line closed in 1965.

After seven easy miles, I turned off to Pencaitland, where the well-worn market cross dates back to the 16th century. Again the town was observing the never-ending Sabbath Day. The clock was still set on winter-time.



Pencaitland

I decided to take a longer route home. This was something of a mistake because the road to Pathhead exposed me to a biting west wind. But I eventually crossed the A68, with hardly a car to be seen, and headed down to the sweet old village of Ford and then on to Vogrie Park. Alas, the gates were locked.

The virus haunts us everywhere.

So I turned north and over the hill to the new village of Mayfield. What a view they have from here! The city is laid out before them, sprawling around Arthur's Seat and stretching out

to the Firth of Forth. I whizz down to Dalkeith again and take the familiar road home, past Dobbies and the Butterfly Farm, both, of course, closed.

Oh how I miss the coffee shops on a day out like this! But as I return home I mull over the sights I've seen, just a few miles from where I live – fields and woods, old towns and new towns, ditches and dykes, high walls around country estates and reminders of industries past and emergencies present.



The open road, the A68 in lockdown