

Written in the heat of the moment and while weary from riding, these are two days and a bit from the 124 in the *Searching for Albion* “blog” which Dan Taylor drew upon to refine and condense into *Island Story*.

Day 111: Plymouth to Christow

15th September, 2014

'The world's changing.' - Colin, Christow.

I've stayed the night in Plymouth, with Imke, Andrew and their three teenage children. Their large family home is cluttered with the treasures of lives well-lived. Down at the breakfast table, I drink coffee slowly and talk with Andrew, a farm manager back in Cornwall.

He sees himself as one of the last of this dying way of life, and is pessimistic about the future. 'Young people now, they don't want to work hard'. Would more and better-paid apprenticeships make a difference? 'No, no' he chuckles, heavily. 'People just don't want to do hard work.' As a child, there would be long days at school, and then 'we used to go into the fields in the evenings, and the weekends, picking spuds'. He looks back on these scenes with disappointed nostalgia, like the veteran of a narrowly-defeated platoon. Like many experienced farmers, he describes his work not in terms of animals but of food, working with 'beef, some corn, some lamb'. Despite his experience, he owns no farm himself, but manages one for a retired couple who have bought some land as a 'hobby'. By contrast, he describes the farming culture he grew up in as 'a way of life', as others do.

This culture has been a blessing and a curse on farmers. Unable to take up any other employment, they've been ground down into accepting decreasing pay for their produce. The public have (mostly) wrongly associated them with CJD disease, bloodsports, GM foods and the needless slaughter of badgers, when instead responsibility lies with conflicting government directives or the toffs who own much of the countryside. Meat and veg have become unsavoury. Apples and potatoes must now conform to an ad-agency's glossy image of roundness or greenness, or supermarkets will not sell them, claiming we will not buy them. The general public has become ignorant of its own food production. Fruit must be chopped into 'five a day' salad bags; meat must be de-boned, skinned and bread-crumbed. A niche has opened up among the urban middle classes for organic and ethically-nourished foods. Unaware of the necessary intensity of food production to feed a massive human population cheaply, the criminal antics of massive agricultural companies have been conflated with the everyday practices of farmers. Ask for immediate word associations with 'farmer' among your average town-dweller, and the results will not be positive.

On the other end, farmers' incomes have been the silent losers in a long-running price war among the major supermarkets. Consumers benefit, individual suppliers suffer. Many now live on a subsistence income and must work without assistance. Their sons have grown up in a culture with far wider social opportunities, and perhaps, like the sons of the miners during the 1960s-70s, may have been actively discouraged by Dad from taking up such a hard and poorly-paying profession. Bound to the land and their livestock, farming has become an increasingly isolated and misunderstood occupation. Can a farmer go on strike? Well, who will join him? The loss of a day will make for more work tomorrow without immediately affecting production. Strike for a season, and who will feed his livestock, or his family? (The gendered terms are deliberate, reflecting an average experience). Supermarkets can easily source their greens from overseas. Should the company that the farmer supplies, and which then supplies the supermarket, lose its contract, then many farmers will lose their incomes and be forced to sell up their land.

This is their difficulty, which many bear alone. Depression and suicide are problems, and have been for some time. Mad cow disease, foot and mouth and increasingly unpredictable seasons have ravaged produce. Given the intensity and duration of labour, the lack of social support, and the utter misunderstanding of the rest of our society about the value of their work, I cannot think of a more difficult profession in the UK today than that of farming. And yet these people feed us, and they maintain the lands around us so that future generations may also be fed. They deserve praise and gratitude, both they that farm the land, and the now mostly Polish, Latvian and Lithuanian labourers who seasonally assist them. All deserve a substantial pay rise. This necessarily requires paying them more fairly for our food.

Some communities have succeeded in celebrating their agricultural traditions, like on Orkney or the Isle of Man, but on the mainland this is more difficult. Rural communities were long uprooted by famines and poverty during the 18th and 19th centuries, with many moving to the industrialising cities in search of work. As I found out in Durham, age is another issue, with many farmers now in their late 50s or older. Unlike Andrew's boyhood days, young people today will probably be at home doing their homework or revising for exams. Their schools will teach them subjects like A-level English Literature or Business Studies, but not how to farm the land. 'Did you think about getting your son involved?', I ask Andrew, but he doesn't give a clear answer, suggesting some kind of sore point. He explains that the rise of overseas seasonal labourers isn't simply due to their low price. Repeating his point, there are few people now in rural areas capable or willing to do farm work.

So have we become spoilt? I disagree. I think instead that young people *don't need* to do hard work, in a way recognisable to their parents or grandparents. Successive technological improvements have rendered this so. (Andrew's parents or grandparents could easily have made the same comment about him). For all the pessimism and gloom, this is an era where every young person born in the country could feasibly be a doctor, lawyer or university professor, with enough diligence and determination. Social factors impact this, sure. But let's speak up for younger people, now exposed to a harsher and more individualised culture of competition from early childhood. It begins with SAT assessments at the age of seven or eight and gradually increases in ferocity into the employment insecurity of early adulthood. Mental health problems are being diagnosed and treated at earlier and earlier ages. This says something about how they're increasingly recognised and so openly discussed in our societies, true, but this problem of growing anxiety disorders among the young seems worrying. They don't have to work hard? Or, are they instead being worked hard in new ways?

I have a route in mind today, an ill-thought one. Fortunately, the local knowledge of Imke and Andrew is on hand. Over a map, they explain that there's no way I can follow the Devon coast south towards Salcombe and then Slapton Sands, then north over Dartmoor. It's one or the other! At Slapton, there's a small memorial marking the deaths of 946 American soldiers killed on its beach and shallows during a botched training exercise in April 1944. Due to its secrecy the deaths were covered up until recently, and rumour has it that many dead were rapidly thrown into unmarked graves in Devon. Salcombe, once a fishing village, has been transformed by a property-buying boom into an enclave of the very wealthy, usually from London or the south-east, repeating a feature found in Norfolk, Rock, and the Western Isles. 'It was really nice thirty years ago', Imke notes, mournfully. It's a reminder of the 'two sides' in these picturesque parts. The average four-person family in Cornwall lives on a combined income of £17,000, she adds. Could some kind of Cornish Assembly speak up for this other side? Andrew laughs heavily again. 'No, they'd stab each other in the back', echoing the pessimism heard in Penzance. These are not merely 'pockets' of deprivation, as one could imagine a BBC journalist putting it: poverty, precarity, unemployment and insecure employment are general features of Cornish life, as they are all across these islands. Creating employment and redistributing wealth through taxation will require actions that no holiday-home owner will vote for. For now, this long-running and uneasy truce continues.

Time to explore Plymouth. Cycling out, I ride out from a sloping street of Victorian terraced townhouses and towards the university area, sandwiched roughly between myself and the town centre. Past the student lets, I'm immediately assailed by a jamboree of architectural styles and moods, from Blair-era glass boxes with 'wacky' curves or the jagged roofs and wire mesh glass of clunky mock-factory university workshops to the baroque Wrenaissance of the Edwardian city gallery and library. James Street makes no sense at all. The city cannot blame being bombed to blazing ashes by the Luftwaffe for everything. There's no design or planning coordination whatsoever, just competing expressions of commercial opportunism, passing fashion and vaguely functional intent. I like it. It's a refreshing feature of British urbanism that one misses overseas, along with the illogical road-routes, broken pavements, memorial benches, and excessive street signs.

Armada way cuts through the town from the university area and library down through the modern Drake Circus mall, all the way down to Hoe Park by the sea. The city is surprisingly Victorian in appearance, particularly on this end. I wander down into the Drake Circus mall, gliding through its light and airy atrium and past an array of somewhat-aspirational chain stores. It's a good place to sleep-walk, so I shake myself awake and keep progressing south down Armada Way. The place is extraordinary: wide boulevards

arranged in a grid communicate a spacious, relaxed yet uncluttered feel. It's all pedestrianised, but the effect works: I do not pass shoppers but citizens, many sitting outside in cafes or on benches, giving a surprisingly European feel to the place. The precinct was created after the Blitz according to the plans of Patrick Abercrombie, otherwise known for the now much-unloved 'New Towns' of Cumbernauld, Harlow, Crawley and elsewhere, and for his either half-implemented or ignored plans for the reconstruction of London and Hull. Plans centred on the motorcar, and wilfully tore down good Victorian buildings, building inner city ring roads over green spaces. Plymouth would seem to be his success. Of course, the centre is full of chain stores, but neither they (nor their unpopularity) dominate the ambience. People instead are gathered to sit, talk to one another, observe the world. I can't help feeling happy here among the bustle, wandering up and down the boulevards, losing track of where I am as I take a left here, a right there, as mood intuitively. I stock up on supplies in Poundland, no doubt the liveliest store in town, before drifting back towards New George Street, where a place called Utopia has just closed down.

On the 'West End' of the centre, I wander down into a more obviously deprived area where the city market is located. The council has generously branded the area the 'Independent Quarter', ghettoising its independent traders on a series of streets safely away from the bigger chains. I wander around an old covered market, a large swimming-pool like space where catts sell roast dinners and weak tea. I make small-talk with the stall owners, before drifting back up to Ivor Dewdney's, a bakery so confident in the quality of its pasties that it offers a postal delivery. I find the cheese pasty second-rate but the service sound. 'Like every city, it's got its good and bad parts', one of the bakers tell me. Another woman agrees: 'I wouldn't want to live here, but... it's safer, unlike Manchester, or the north'. The more familiar misery is preferred, better the devil you know. They're reticent in their praise but comfortable in their blame, accustomed to a tolerable degree of unhappiness, like tracing a finger over one's skin to reassure oneself of a scar.

As I wander around the Sixties social housing built around the edges of this precinct, I realise that I'm enjoying Plymouth. There's an energy and vibrancy on the streets which I've missed whilst adventuring through the Cornwall and Devon coastline. Space and openness has been built into its spaces without feeling either watched or overwhelmed by one's smallness, as in the new squares of Salford MediaCity, or the catastrophic failure of the Park Hill estate. It's not what I expected either. I'd been warned of its 'lumpen' patriotism and 'thuggish mediocrity' by Owen Hatherley's recent trawl through town. On the high street area where I've been talking to people and wandering around, he writes that it

'appears to be falling apart – the whole street just seems to have been forgotten, the natural link between the residential areas and the centre abandoned to a degree where it almost feels post-apocalyptic.'

Well, leaving aside the snobbery implicit in a term like 'lumpen', I don't find anything that reinforces this view, quite the opposite. The town centre's planning is a little incoherent, and Abercrombie's stamp is certainly on the godawful major road that snakes around the centre, but the town itself is pleasant and enjoyable, its people friendly, the streets relatively clean and safe, and overall easy to navigate. But its style is unusually populist: there are no statues or monuments to great men (here that is – there certainly are some just up the way...), few worthy plaques or vantage-points to scrutinise the lowly masses from a melancholy height. Cheap and cheery is the feeling, certainly. And why not? Why should these people, or, let me take off the mask, why should we be judged *en masse* because we might happen to enjoy spaces like these? Why should we feel shame about enjoying a bargain, eating fast food, having a pint, or not taking the world too seriously? Of course, were I to describe Plymouth as how its residents describe it, it would be an ugly, noisy, dangerous, crime-plagued but ultimately *yeah...alright!* place. The same might be said of Manchester, or Glasgow, or London by its people. There's a certain pleasure in moaning too!

I head down to the Hoe park, a wide green space by the sea with a number of large memorials across it. The naval memorial is most prominent, a tall white obelisk with a small green sphere at the top, reminding me of the burdens of Atlas as he struggled to bear the weight of the world. Below, panels struggle nobly to communicate what the deaths of over 23,000 sailors look like. Another memorial to a German prince depicts an angel carrying the dead man's soul up, 'towards another world'. Close by is a triumphalist memorial commemorating the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. 'He blew with his wind, and they were scattered', the panel states.

Francis Drake, it is said, coolly continued to play bowls as the armada approached. He is commemorated close by, cutting a dashing figure somewhat humbled by the liberal pigeon shit on his crown. Born in Tavistock nearby, Drake's life was an extraordinary series of pirate adventures across the world, driven by a thirst for revenge and glory, unlike the cool paternalism of Captain Cook two centuries on. Though it has become unfashionable to write about history's 'great men' except via morally-anachronistic character assassinations, Drake's daring and courageous journeys are astonishing feats of human activity, undertaken in small and basic ships and often without accurate charts. Though recently vilified for his role in slave-trading, Drake was renowned among his enemies for his fair treatment of non-Europeans and slaves. He 'behaved with such humanity to the Indians and Negroes that they all loved him and their houses were open to the English', wrote Vincenzo Gradenigo, the Venetian ambassador to Spain. The lesser-told story of the Armada occurred a year later: Drake was ordered to sail an 'English Armada' to Portugal and finish off the Spanish Navy, but was routed by the same poor strategy and bad weather that blighted Philip II of Spain.

A lighthouse watches over wide Plymouth Sound. I wander along the Barbican, past a marine laboratory, and besides cannons still distrustfully facing the continent. The UK's at-best ambivalence around Europe feels largely like a folk memory built into the experiences of the southern English, those who have been first affected by Dutch, Spanish or French raids, or drawn into the Royal Navy. The Scottish and Irish are more comfortable being 'European' than 'British' (which, in its most common historical form, is a trojan 'English'), and the Welsh I met didn't present an opinion either way.

Ray's ice-cream van is overlooking the scene. I take a stop for some ice-cream, picking apple and blackberry crumble, produced on the local Langage farm. Much of it's made with clotted cream, and there are some truly novel flavours like 'thunder and lightning', clotted cream ice cream with pieces of honey comb, or Lamb's navy rum and raisin. I ask him about Plymouth. He tells me about the town, and points to the ships in the distance. There's still fishing happening from Barbican harbour, whilst petrol is imported in nearby and kept in large reserves. The town is large but doing well, some good parts, some bad, 'like everywhere'. But reflecting in all on its changes, he states something I hear multiple times today. 'The world's not what it used to be'. He's not confused or alienated by the changes, but feels confused about the consequences of the way cities are changing and becoming now.

The world, the world... Ray echoes Andrew, and Colin later echoes Ray. All three are middle-aged to older men, whose insights reflect changing ways of living and seeing. Age is like a passport, one only recognises its privileges when it has been inexplicably left behind, stolen, renounced, or near due expiry. Neither life nor death wait for us to be ready. But their alienation draws out something else about these high-investment malls and credit-fuelled shiny universities, about the atomised and narcissistic medium of social web platforms and the tacky crassness of the clone high street. This world of buying and selling, not making and maintaining, is one they cannot recognise themselves in.

From the New World, back to the Old... The Barbican and Sutton harbour is the oldest part of Plymouth, where cobbled lanes and Elizabethan warehouses stand besides Victorian wharfs and a modern marine museum. Down by the harbour, plaques record some of the most monumental migrations and colonisations in human history. Drake set off from here in 1577, circumnavigating the earth, and on his way claiming northern California as 'Nova Albion' for Elizabeth. Humphrey Gilbert set off from here six years later in search of the once-mythical north-west passage (climate change in the last decade has now rendered it a reality). He was guided by a similar daring to Drake, as well as intense visions from Solomon and Job, offering him mystical knowledge. A certain madness seems necessary for these ventures. He established a settlement in Newfoundland, now Canada, the first such settlement of the British Empire.

Small groups of colonists left from here and London to the 'New England', in north-east America, though most early colonies were marked by disease, starvation and warring with the indigenous Americans. One vessel, the *Sea Venture*, attempted to reach Jamestown with supplies but hit a hurricane, and was wrecked onto Bermuda. Its washed-up survivors managed to fend for themselves for nine months. Survivors' testimonies inspired William Shakespeare to write *The Tempest*, about the allure of ruling an empty if magical land, the fluid boundaries between coloniser and colonised, and the power-play between dominators and the dominated.

'Your tale, sir, would cure deafness', as Miranda puts it. It's impossible to imagine just how dangerous, strange or magical these unchartered lands would've been to these English sailors and colonisers. Puritans aboard the *Mayflower* left here in 1620 in what would become a key event in the foundational history of

the United States. Over half died during the harsh winter at Cape Cod, and the fate of most early colonists is particularly bleak, but in events that presage the later US, a combination of a quasi-democratic constitutional agreement, dogged persistence, and stealing from the indigenous Americans and intimidating them with gunpowder ensured their survival. And so it goes, voyages continue from here, like that of the Tory, which establishes the first colony on New Zealand in 1830. Each motivated by short-term commercial ambition, national rivalries, and the desires of a few crazed and courageous individuals to live on in posterity.

I leave Plymouth through the harbour area, following cycle route 27 over a pedestrianised strip of road around the harbour's edge and over into its industrial docks. The traffic leaving town is too busy and dangerous to join, so I stick with the pavement and reach a large roundabout on the edge of town. 'The future is (y)ours', a piece of optimistic graffiti bears. It has me thinking of Tom Paine, and his words to the descendants of those New England colonists: 'We have it in our power to begin the world again'. Optimism can be a strategy, doggedly believe in the possibility of changing the world to something, for the better, against history, against the present. 'Every age and generation must be free to act for itself *in all cases*, as the ages and generations which preceded it', he puts it later in the *Rights of Man*. Must it be free, has it been free? Paine wrote with a kind of strategic blindness to history, like Rousseau, both proclaiming and then demanding recognition for 'natural' rights which never before existed, like that of freedom, equality, and the superiority of reason over inherited wealth or status. In demanding these as 'common sense', they presented a self-aware generation to fight for a 'new world' based on these, to stand up for these 'rights', and to fight against those who would deny them. There's something to be said for strategic optimism.

Exiting Plymouth and its histories, I pedal up and out across the Plym valley railway. It's a wonderful cycle trail along an old railway route through the forests, one of the most pleasurable and smooth I've been on, a real delight, with sweeping views of wooded valleys over its many viaducts. I'm cycling towards Dartmoor with the goal of crossing it from west to east, with my final destination of Christow at its eastern edge. The scenery begins to change at Yelverton, a small village on the edge of the large national park. The road's already begun to tug up and I pass roaming sheep among thick bracken and gorse which suggest the onset of the park, alongside the looming peaks to my right.

I leave Yelverton and climb the steep but quiet road up into Dartmoor. I'm just taken aback by the wilderness and rugged majesty of the scenery, of which there's little hint until one takes the high road to Princetown. The hills steep up but there's little on them, very few trees except the odd cluster that form a wood, giving out splendid wide views of the moors, a mixture of golden-russet browns and faded dark greens of the wilting bracken, the yellow buds of the gorse, small trenches and grooves in the grass which cause it to continually ripple, and all about these rocky tors, crops of rock embedded within the terrain with the same mystery and oblique sophistication as the menhirs of Orkney or West Penwith. There are animals roaming the land: plenty of sheep of different breeds, black-faced and white-faced, then small horses and ponies that at times dash across the road as traffic approaches.

The journey's so wonderful even in a car that I see drivers smiling, rather than hitting their horns or getting panicked. One can only travel at 40 on Dartmoor. You'd be a fool to go any faster and miss out on such arresting heathland and hills that fills one's heart with a light, enchanted air. I find myself laughing, singing and shouting to the world on the road, mostly empty of cars, in a place that feels entirely free. It's a wonderful place, more beguiling than Exmoor, and providing one with the same release as those first few days travelling across the north-eastern Highlands. And it's right here, in the south-west, a sneeze away from Plymouth and a short ride from Exeter or Bristol.

I pass a group of three horses who stand in the middle of the road, without flinching, as road traffic is forced to divert round them. Further ahead are more sheep lying in the road, and bison, horses, and donkeys which stand idly by the roadside, as undaunted and self-assured as the rocky tors in the distance. Despite the steep incline the road's a true delight, and well worth the diversion.

Eventually I climb up to Princetown – it is a steep ride, be warned – with the bleak granite of HMP Dartmoor in the distance, and stop for a little while in the visitor centre, where the electricity's been cut off. It is one of the very few settlements on Dartmoor, and one built by French prisoners captured during the Napoleonic wars. The town is particularly isolated, and Imke told me earlier that many French killed themselves here after the prison was built, or were snuffed out by the plague. Its rugged desolation remains

present now. There are few visitors in the tourist centre. The assistant inside points to an empty building opposite. There were arts studios here until funding dried up. Most young people leave the area, like her son, frustrated by the lack of employment beyond the prison and there being nothing to do. I explore the remainder of the modest village, past old St Michael's church built by the same French and American prisoners of war, and further up, the large chimneys and workhouse-like grey-brick appearance of the prison itself. Today it is a category C prison which houses around 650 prisoners; in the past over 5000 were crammed here in appalling conditions. On its large stone arch is etched 'parcere subjectis', spare the subjected, take pity on those locked up here. Beneath it on the other side, a vacant parking space for the employee of the year.

Charles Windsor owns much of the land here under the Duchy of Cornwall, an entity that pays no corporation tax. The land is farmed in common here, hence the distinctive lack of hedgerows or drystone walls that one sees everywhere else. He has attempted to develop more farming here, but the harsh winters have made this unviable. 'Dartmore is much a wilde Morish and forest Ground', writes John Leland in the 1540s, and even by 1789 Richard Gough describes a 'dreary mountainous tract'. Much of it is open moorland, still today, and few roads cross through it, preserving its wildness. There are still standing stones, cairns and the remains of neolithic settlements across it, like the unusual double circle at Grey Wethers, between Princetown and Tavistock north, or the stone rows and circles at Yellowmead Down. Much of it is tors, rocky outcrops that explode out of grassy hill slopes, and beneath them, flowering heather, bracken, peaty bogs, and horses which look back with idle curiosity.

The MOD have a large base at Okehampton, and the cheeky monks of Buckfast make their antisocial juice on its southern edge. I wonder, would the first action of an independent Scottish military be the bombing of the abbey, in an act not dissimilar to America's 'war on drugs' in Afghanistan? Otherwise the land is free to roam. Dartmoor is the only place in England where one can freely wild-camp. It was one of the first national parks to be established in 1949, by a progressive government anxious to reduce 'nervousness' and ill-health among its urban populations. 'Yet with the increasing nervous strain of life it makes it all the more necessary that we should be able to enjoy the peace and spiritual refreshment which only contact with nature can give', said the Minister for Town and Country Planning. Sixty-five years on, peace and spiritual refreshment are still in abundance here. Curious pastimes have also developed among hikers, like that of letter-boxing, the search for watertight containers hidden across the moor, each containing a visitor's book and a rubber stamp.

I find none whilst I ride through, but the ride out of Princetown is delightful, and this turns out to be my favourite place to cycle through in England. Dartmoor is alive in its wilderness and not absent or empty in feeling, like the Lizard. It is rightly haunted. Whilst misguidedly wandering across the heath, usually at night, impressionable travellers have claimed to see pixies, a headless horseman, as well as a black dog, either representing the devil or indicating death. In Devon there's a particular myth of the Yeth dog, a headless dog that wanders around at night making wailing noises, the spirit of an unbaptised child. Terrified times. It inspires Arthur Conan Doyle later to write the *Hound of the Baskervilles*, a Sherlock Holmes mystery set in Dartmoor, a chilling tale of family curses, pacts with the devil, tragic infatuation, and a very scary dog.

'A hound it was, an enormous coal-black hound, but not such a hound as mortal eyes have ever seen. Fire burst from its open mouth, its eyes glowed with a smouldering glare, its muzzle and hackles and dewlap were outlined in flickering flame. Never in the delirious dream of a disordered brain could anything more savage, more appalling, more hellish be conceived than that dark form and savage face which broke upon us out of the wall of fog.'

I'm cycling up to Two Bridges, a teeny hamlet that barely merits a name. More weirdness here too: travellers have reported losing control of their vehicles whilst on this lonely road. Cars have veered into the verge inexplicably, as if pulled by a set of ghostly hands. One claimed to have seen those 'hairy hands' as they wrestled to keep control of their car. Fortunately I manage to survive the ride along the B3212 without injury, but there's a pleasure in imagining these things. They reflect a latent paganism and animism in our thinking, one that attributes intentionality to the unknown. We forget too how weird the south of England has been. Just ahead of me is the village of Widecombe-in-the-moor, where villagers all claimed to have been visited by the Devil following a thunderstorm in 1638. It reminds me of Mistley in Essex, where Witchfinder General Matthew Hopkins conducted a terrifying campaign of trials in rural Suffolk and

Essex. He killed around 300 women across 1644-46 on the charge of making a covenant with the devil. Scoff if we like. Western leaders still claim God on their side in recent military campaigns in the Middle East, whilst tales of exorcisms and angels still thrive in popular culture and in the small ads of local rags.

The land is desolate, and one must be prepared for that. There are few landmarks, only a continuity of extraordinary wilderness and the occasional ruined cottage. Some have lost their minds and killed themselves here, like the tragic woman at Jay's Grave near Manaton, whilst another unfortunate traveller, Childe, became lost in a snow-storm and froze to death, despite disembowelling his horse and climbing inside it for protection. The weather's fairer today. I ride through Postbridge, a small village consisting of a pub, post office and little else, and back into the sloping moorland.

By the time I approach Moretonhampstead the wilderness has receded at the base of a large village. Its only pub is closed with a for sale sign outside. I get supplies in the local Co-op, 'a good place to live, but not to work', the cashier tells me, and her conversation betrays a sharpness that is unfriendly, reinforcing a judgement about southern England that I'm trying to resist. I take a winding W-shaped road out towards Exeter, but come off at a lovely country trail towards Bridford, passing a pretty forest and narrow hedgerowed lanes until I reach that village, an assembly of suburban-looking bungalows. It's approaching early evening. After an afternoon of just blissful cycling, I plummet down Plough Lane towards Christow, turning off down an unmarked alley according to instructions. On the other end I meet an extraordinary man named Colin.

Colin single-handedly runs the Exeter and Teign Valley railway. Since 1984, Colin has reconstructed a former goods railway yard and nearby land into a near-working railway. The tracks do not run far, and the purpose is not to re-enact the 'good old days' of steam. Instead, Teign Rail is the basis of a campaign to restore the railways to their former status at the centre of a modern public transport system. Colin does this in two ways. One, through different publications, and through articulate articles on the Teign Rail website, which are superb (The website is well worth taking time to explore and read). Second, through the railway itself, with its ambitions to buy-up and re-open the Teign Valley and Moretonhampstead branches. As a part of this, Colin runs a small museum, and a camping service, where for a small fee you can stay the night on a 1950s-era brake carriage.

It was Kirsty back in Luddenden Foot who told me about Colin's unusual operation, and gave me a leaflet for 'the thinking man's railway'. I was intrigued by the idea, and by the fact that everything is done over the phone, no web-bookings or automated lines. He tells me that he 'vets' people over the phone to make sure they'll get how unusual, by modern standards, the camping van is. Not everyone passes the test. 'Just you wait until you see it', he warns, but I already know it'll be wonderful. 'There's no TV!' But I'll be sleeping on an old railway carriage, in a place without phone signal or any other hallmark of the late 20th century. And Colin is friendly, unashamedly intellectual, and inspiring.

He's ordinarily relaxed and self-deprecating, but his composure changes to one of passion and exasperation when on the subject of the modern railways. The collapse of the Paddington-Penzance railway at Dawlish due to floods earlier this year is a sore point. The huge disruption and millions spent in repairs could, he thinks, have also been used to restore the Teign Valley branch line, which was once kept open as a diversion line between Exeter and Newton Abbott, and on which traffic could continue in the case of more floods. But aside from the occasional helicopter or curious journalist, there has been no interest in his line, yet.

Dawlish! It brings flashbacks to a scene in a pub a little before I set off on this cycling odyssey. I'm getting steadily wrecked in the Good Intent on East Street, south London. There's laughter around its cramped horseshoe bar, filled with sweat-encrusted blokes drinking their daily six or so pints of lager like a doctor's prescription, all making banter. Round the side, there's the tiniest of lounge bars with a couple of tables put aside for couples and members of the fairer sex, though next to the fruit machine, ensuring a certain degree of male attention. I was there with my brother. In the pub that night was an old feller who kept randomly shouting out 'Dawlish!', doing so all night, sat alone, puncturing the bubbling banter rhythmically. Everyone was baffled but used to this fella's eccentricities. *Oh him? Well...* Had his wife died, leaving him to an increasingly isolated labyrinth of fray bentos pies, six for five on cans of holsten pils and decreasing sanity? He'd dance with the barmaids, chat with whoever was passing by him and his solitary table. He'd attempt at banter but seemed aware of his own strangeness, and would back away too readily from an open question.

Dawlish! A young but hard fella came in and started lording it at the bar, but his rapid consumption of booze betrayed a kind of vulnerability, or uncertainty about him. He came over to us, standing at the bar, and in that way postured over us aggressively that, if you've been around, requires in turn a certain assertiveness and ambient aggression in return that suggests *leave off* but at the same time *I'm not a mug*. The locals call him Prince Arthur, for real, and he wants to sell us coke, 'the best you've ever had', something I've never had much interest in. I spot the word 'DAD' on his necklace, and ask him about his kids. He goes to open up, then clams, then cools down and after a while gets matey with us. Conversation is a skeleton key. We invite *Dawlish* over, and then I remember the news, and I explain to the bar that he's talking about the closure of the Dawlish railway line, on the south Devon coast, due to major flooding that month. The temporary cessation of motion, of traffic, particularly by railway, that most beloved of transport systems, has ratcheted up his tiny and wiry frame to tension level ten, but he's thrilled, excited, definitely pissed, and kinda weird. *Dawlish!*

What is it about the railways that elicits this kind of romantic attachment? Philip Larkin describes wistfully journeys on a 'three-quarters-empty train', 'All windows down, all cushions hot, all sense // Of being in a hurry gone'. Much of this love has been tested by the crazy prices and poor service caused by the privatisation of the railways, which have since been put back into state ownership in all but name. Whilst rifling through some books in my railway camping van later, I find the copy of an old letter being used as a bookmark. In it, Colin writes that:

'I am sure that there is an instinctive, latent love of railways amongst our people and there must also be deep-seated concerns about the long term cost of road transport. Yet our industry and its supporters take no advantage of this glorious position. By all means, let us have our pleasure with the wonderful engines, carriages and trucks of the past railway, but let us at the same time ensure that our successors benefit from a new railway system which is just as great and diverse and full of character as the one which produced the relics we now seek to own and cherish.'

Colin and I wander around the Teign Rail yard, and talk for some time about the state of the railways, and about this changing world. He emphasises that he's not interested in 'reliving and raking over the past... I'm about the future of the railways', and draws a sharp line between himself and the railway preservation museums dotted all over the country. 'They're just male hobbyists', he says, somewhat harshly. 'They say they're not political. Well, are you just going to sit there and let yourself get blown about by decisions that you've let out of your control?' He thinks they're too complacent in their escapism, attached to the past, not so much an irrelevance but an active obstacle in campaigning for the reconstruction of the railways.

He cuts a passionate but somewhat isolated figure, something which his conversation further underlines, isolated in place and in time. He asks me with rhetorical seriousness, 'what if I was the only sane person, and everyone was mad?' His way of life and attachment to the potential of the railways is certainly unusual by contemporary standards. He has no mobile phone or phone-line, and can only be reached by a landline to the Teign Rail office. He does not have a computer or use the Internet, and his website has been built and maintained by a sympathetic neighbour who takes a small fee for converting Colin's prose into hypertext and html. 'I don't use the web. I read things, and I think about them, in a certain way that pieces them all together with what I already know.' It's all part of a slower way of living, with fewer but more intensive experiences, able to reliably draw on facts and information stored in one's memory rather than continually search online.

This can lead to occasional serendipity. He tells me about the travellers who've passed by his camping van, like Eve, a young woman who happened to be passing on her journey from Totnes to Berwick, mapping out the eco-communities across the country. After a friendly conversation on the footpath, Colin invited her to stay on the smaller of the two camping vans, for free. His other guests made her a dinner of foods they'd foraged whilst rambling that afternoon. 'Those are the people that inspire me!' He charges a higher rate for guests who arrive by car, and there's a strong environmentalist ethos beneath the Teign Rail project. But it leads to its own problems too.

Colin tells me that this is the last few weeks of the railway camping van remaining open. 'Ten years ago, I was booked up for most of the summer'. But with the rise of the internet, bookings have withered up. Demoralised, he can't face keeping the camping service running when so few are booking up. He's unsure why, but it no doubt has something to do with how I reached him – a word of mouth recommendation, a paper flyer, a phone-call. He has no email address or online booking system, there are no reviews on

TripAdvisor or Google, and he won't be found in any travel guide to the area or local tourist information office. His website is largely filled with information and arguments, and one must look to find out more about camping here. There's not even a noticeable sign outside that might attract the interest of passing traffic.

He's refused to play by the increasingly gregarious and simplified, or what he'd see as dumbed-down, game of being a visitor attraction. Channel Four interviewed him and filmed his depot last year for an 'amazing spaces' programme they were producing. He was selected to appear, but decided to turn it down, worried about drawing in new visitors whilst a local disreputable pub was operating nearby. It's a strangely overethical request, and to some might seem self-sabotaging, but I don't pick that up in his ebullient and generally positive outlook, more just a meticulous care about how things are understood and presented. That I'll be one of the very last people to stay on this railway carriage, the Toad, which he shows me round, is a bittersweet feeling.

It's a fine carriage, with space for two beds, a small cooker and fridge, a microwave, a table, a couple of plug points, and a small bookshelf. No doubt it is the most unusual place I've slept in, and it will turn out be the most enjoyable place I've slept in, second only to an organic farm on Kauai island, Hawaii. There are churns for collecting water, a chemical khazi in an old fog hut, and a verandah overlooking the River Teign. There's more than enough here for me for several nights, yet Colin repeatedly apologises for its lack of modern facilities, internalising what he considers to be the mainstream social damnation of his way of life. And yet many of the people I've met would love to spend a night or longer in this strange and unusual place. For £21 a night, it's ridiculously cheap. But in an online world, how would you hear about it? 'People don't realise that there's a world beyond the internet. It's a lot deeper, and a lot richer, and there's a lot more going on'. There is mystery here in a way that cannot be found on a black screen. Inside a city, reading this, as I would've done a year back, I'd've dismissed this as senile curmudgeonry. But having been on the road for nearly four months and explored, socialised and slept in much of the countryside, well away from the news, social media and the Internet, I readily understand him and assent to the validity of his view. I hope one day, reader, you too will see something in this, if you don't already.

'When I opened this, I thought I was onto something, but perhaps it was just the tail-end of things, of a culture of people that would enjoy this. I thought it would last, but perhaps it was the end already'. Colin is particularly gloomy about the future, explaining the stagnation of the railway in a much wider cultural context. Have we moderns been irreversibly compromised by gimmicks and gimcrackery into a more dull and distracted world?

'What the philosophers once knew as life has become the sphere of private existence and now of mere consumption, dragged along as an appendage of the process of material production, without autonomy or substance of its own ... Our perspective of life has passed into an ideology which conceals the fact there is life no longer.'

Such tortured pessimism comes from the pen of Theodor Adorno, writing in his 1951 *Minima Moralia*, at a time when much of the 'greatness' of the railways, or of the fledgling social democratic welfare state, was still alive and well. Sometimes it feels like a belief in looming catastrophe is not only a hallmark of every era, modern or not, but also the one way of motivating oneself to believe in the possibility of transformation. Throughout this day, conversations have unintentionally brought up the world and its changes. Though laments about decline often come from older perspectives, throughout this trip I'm meeting people of all ages who worry about the future, and who do not recognise themselves or their values in the world around them.

Cracks are starting to appear in this uneasy, unwritten truce, but there is no cause to believe that a large progressive movement is poised to 'rescue' this fallen world and let life 'live' again. Cast out on our own resources, is it only possible for us as individuals to establish ways of living and seeing that fulfil our needs? Is it time to abandon big collective projects? The results, for ourselves, might be happier: transform pipe-dreams into real actions, live the values we believe in rather than awaiting for some great leader or organisation to appear and give the green light.

Colin leaves me to it. I warm up some rice and kidney beans and listen to Elgar, and Shostakovich, on the radio, strings soaring and stirring the heart to recall its loves. The lack of phone signal might trigger the same kind of panic in our era as the cessation of running water in a previous one, but I'm comfortable being off the grid. There's plenty to read, and quiet time to think, and to write.

Tonight the stars are out, and I trace what I think is Orion and Cassiopeia in the night sky. Satellites drifting over the field of distant suns, and I think back of the Telstar satellite, that old TV transmitter continuing its obsolete orbit. Worries about social decline, collapse, an age of stress or 'futureshock' appear in most decades of the 20th century and even some of the later 19th. It's easy to forget this, or not even know it, when there's so rarely time to stop and understand the past, or the terrain around us, of the intrinsic limits of human understanding.

'Has the world changed, or have I changed?' The world's changing, it always has, and changing us at the rate that we change it. As I rub my eyes and yawn with tiredness, I peer at the poem "Night Mail" by W.H. Auden, framed on the brake-van wall. 'Letters of thanks, letters from banks // Letters of joy from the girl and the boy', one world alive with communications amongst itself, not digital but by post, 'gossip, gossip from all the nations'. There's a 'quickening of the heart' when a non-spam email is received, like the 'postman's knock' eight decades back. Something dated, something timeless, for, as Auden ends, and the kernel of truth in all this: 'who can bear to feel himself forgotten?'

Day 112: Christow to Lyme Regis

16th September, 2014

'Things change when people start to talk to each other, positively, to the people around them, about what could happen'. – Colin, Christow.

This is not the first time I've woken up on a railway carriage. Usually exhaustion from work or plain drunkenness played a part. They were huge and sophisticated things, with plug sockets, automated announcements, passenger wi-fi and space age toilets. The *Toad* brake van by contrast is modest in proportion, built for the needs of a Fifties' rail-guard, but comes with a comfortable bed, sink, cooking area, dining table and bookshelf filled with treasures. There are no automated announcements, only a sense of silent stillness, at times interrupted by the trill of birdsong outside.

No rush today. Sadly, I'm one of the very last guests to stay on this camping van run by the Teign Valley railway. The world's changing, as Colin described it yesterday, and the effort and motivation to continue running an underused resource has waned. I wander around the goods yard, past an open freight shed, and the tiny *Tadpole* brake carriage, also converted into a camping van replete with children's books and a ukulele. There's a number of old freight stock carriages, and I wonder how the Teign valley railway might have become if Colin had realised his plans to buy up the land on which the line once ran, and reopened it again. It is such a huge undertaking for one lone individual, and Colin has made remarkable progress in the yard so far. With the help of a young environmentally-minded apprentice, perhaps looking for an interesting and rewarding one-year project, the Teign Rail could become far more widely-known, I think. The sheer breadth of knowledge and skills that Colin has deserves to be shared and passed on.

At the top of the yard is a temporary booking office, where Colin has curated an exhibition of railway artefacts. There's a Swiss time clock introduced in 1944, old ticket stubs and a stationmaster's desk, amongst much else – all stuff he squirrelled under the desk whilst working as a clerk for National Rail, or been given since. Colin had always planned the camping vans as a 'stopgap' to raise income and awareness about Teign Rail, but never did make enough money from them, even when the vans were fully-booked up. Being too nice and honest with his guests, prices began too low and are now extremely generous. He invites me into his small office, another old railway carriage, this one filled with various metal objects in a state of disrepair and several greased cloths. He is largely self-taught, and his secret, dogged determination. 'I've done everything a thousand times wrong!'

'Ask them what they think the future of the railways is', he states, recovering his zeal. His subject of attack are steam railway preservationists, but the charge applies to government ministers, political parties, Network Rail, and passenger train operating companies, and to whoever else ducking accountability for the country's railway system. 'It's like history became trapped, and couldn't move'. There's no use in looking back unless to take stock of the present and improve the future.

He envisions a holistic, non-compartmentalised system. 'The railways today not only run on a fraction of the lines they used to, they also do a fraction of the same things.' Post, periodicals, telegrams, all in a manned and continually active station, overseeing passengers and freight. Mail could be delivered easily through a single-owned nationalised system, and rolling stock could be moved around wherever it was

needed, unlike today. But he's not entirely nostalgic. 'Don't get me started about nationalisation.' 'What do you mean?' 'It was like a massive care home. You couldn't get the sack'. Yet privatisation has done far more damage. Despite the arguments for free-trade capitalism, Colin notes, the train operators today are profiting from the existing lines and stock of British Railways, represented in the logo. 'Parasitic'.

The privatisation of the railways is generally despised, and its failures well-documented, and this anger extends to the privatisation of every other utility or service formerly belonging to the public. The 'market' has consistently failed to lower prices, improve infrastructural standards or 'trickle down' wealth to the poor, to the surprise of no-one. State spending remains necessary for any major infrastructural programme and even many technological innovations, including the Internet and, most recently, Tor web browser, both produced by the US military. Much of the UK's energy infrastructure is now owned by the nationalised industries of our European neighbours. Again, this is well known and discussed in the public sphere. Yet privatisation continues, both in spectacular form like the sale of Royal Mail, to the insidious and more gradual privatisation of the NHS, schools and police forces. Nothing stands in its way, as a profound feeling of disempowerment grips the public. I captured this when I wrote *Negative Capitalism* two years ago, and unfortunately little has progressed since.

Colin envisions a publicly-owned system beyond the megalithic bodies of the mid-20th century, with more accountability and transparency. Profits would be reinvested into maintaining and improving railways and carriages, and prices kept low. But publicly-owned railways are, alone, insufficient: they must take an elevated place in a new public transport programme that actively reduces road and air traffic. Railways would need to be re-established over old track-lines (and cycle paths). The car-centred cities of Abercrombie and planners would be reversed. All Colin has is this vision, and a goods yard in Devon with which to exhibit it. Within our currently disenfranchised, disempowered world, his plans are inconceivable, yet they are cheap and possible to implement. What inspires me about Colin is his commitment and fidelity to this vision. What might be dismissed as idealism is just 'common sense', not yet commonly implemented. His vision is a reminder of what is still possible. Such hope comes with a heavy burden. Do things change when people start to talk to each other? The head doubts that proposition, but then, the heart feels it has been irredeemably changed by meeting and talking with Colin, inspired and energised. A kind of change harder to recognise from a distance.

Morning has become early afternoon, and with hours passed in happy conversation, I really need to start making tracks. Before I leave, he points out an oil barrel beside the temporary office. 'A barrel of ancient sunlight', he's had painted over it. 'The world consumes 90,000,000 of these every day. And demand is rising.' With no obvious breakthroughs in shale gas or nuclear fusion, and no committed policy to utilising the country's abundant renewable energy potential, scarcity seems like a probability for the future, otherwise overcome by increasingly expensive energy. As I wheel out the bicycle, Colin insists on not taking any money for my night's stay. I insist that he does, but there's no capitulation. He laughs when I tell him how much I've written about our conversations. 'Only a PhD could do that', he chuckles. I sincerely hope he will reopen *Toad* in the future. It is the most interesting place I've stayed on in my journey. But before I go, he insists on one final thing: weighing the back of the bicycle. The luggage? Five stone, half my body weight. 'That's heavy!' That explains why those bloody hills have been so tiring these last few days...

I ride out of Christow, passing the ruins of an old helicopter and a Christian retreat centre, all in strange proximity to Teign Rail and each other, before riding up towards Exeter. The land is more cultivated here than Cornwall, with thick hedgerows lining the road, and beyond them sweeping cocoa-coloured fields, freshly tilled, or wide expanses of golden corn fields. Clusters of woods peep up here and there as the road rises up towards Exeter then plunges down towards the city, situated in a valley. Its huge cathedral is remarkable from a distance, the bright white of its marble and gothic features dominating everything around it. It must've appeared staggeringly otherworldly to the rural Devonshire people as they travelled into the town for market days. The rest of the town is small and underwhelming. I push through Exeter St. Thomas, a tatty but friendly seeming suburb, then over the river Exe and into the centre.

Exeter's an ancient settlement, and one could write droves about its histories. It was probably settled by the Celts beforehand, but the Romans properly established what is now the modern settlement, building a military base, baths, city walls and a trading centre here. It has been occupied ever since. Notably, the city has been repeatedly besieged by the Cornish. Only months after the defeat of the Cornish Rebellion of

1497, Perkin Warbeck landed and amassed thousands of survivors to march again on London, this time under the cause of 'King Richard IV' of York. They took Exeter, but the Cornish militia were later abandoned by the panicky 'Pretender' and forced to surrender. It was besieged for a month in 1549 by Cornish and Devon rebels, in an uprising that began against the introduction of a Common Prayer Book, but ended up uniting grievances around inflation, taxation and the unfair domination of England over Cornwall. 'Kill all the gentlemen', the rebels declared, stirred equally by religious and political motives, but in the end they were routed by an army made up of European mercenaries.

Exeter wears its age well, clearly exhibits its old walls and pointing out sites of historical interest without making a touristy fuss of them. One can easily forget to look up and miss the crumpled Tudor houses that now house vintage outlets and charity shops, or the narrow backstreets around St. Nicholas Priory. Only a stone's throw beyond the bland money-spinning malls of Princesshay and the Guildhall is St. Bartholomew's Cemetery with its eerie catacombs, or the old quayside with good watering holes and benches to sit and watch the world on.

Far too much of the town centre is given over to a needlessly large series of shopping malls, but this is true of every English city, sadly without exception. There's a number of interesting independent shops on Fore Street, and the cathedral area itself is a great place to stop. It's a huge public space in the centre, and people of all ages are sat lunching and chatting on the greens, beneath weathered statues of old worthies and buskers desecrating the hymns of a countercultural yesteryear. Just out of the town is the large university, a place I presented research at last year. There's not much to dislike about Exeter, really. If anything, it's a little too nice, a little too straight-laced. There's not much that stands out about it, in a good way I guess, but I need either bitterness or spice to enjoy a place, and that's lacking. It is too cosily attached to its histories, and seems to be entirely ignorant of the vast ugliness of its bus centre, car parks, or modern malls in more recent times. There are no independent bookshops, and nothing that suggests an active civic identity, or empowered, or diverse, local communities. It is obviously more affluent and genteel than say Plymouth, but I've not met anyone over the last few days with any special praise for the city. It's nice, and that's it, is the sentiment I hear. Well, nothing wrong with that.

I ride out of the centre, up Magdalen Road, then down through the suburb of Heavitree, charity shops flogging Tom Jones LPs next to roast dinner deal boozers. I stop at Shaul's bakery, picking up a curry pasty and more information about the place. As with Ivor Dewdney's, these Devon pasties are a little too flaky. I'm told about a quiet and sleepy town, that the American firm Howmets employs many locals, and that the market too has become a thing of history.

Leaving Exeter to its historical snoozing, I ride out along a busy A-road east towards Sidmouth. The roads are long and dull, and I don't pass anything that features in my mind, just fields after fields. But the weather's fine, and the terrain much flatter than north Devon. It's defined by its rivers that thread in from the Channel, like the Exe and the Sid, the Coly, the Axe and the Otter, each enabling settlements to thrive around them, as well as wildlife and plentiful fish. There's the Dutch eccentricity of Topsham, and further along the coast, the faded Regency glam of Sidmouth, and Lyme Regis, where I'm heading towards.

Day 124: Sheppey to home

Of course, even within the current framework, a left-leaning Labour party would already improve much if they shed themselves of unpopular Blairites and followed a platform of economic restructuring, infrastructure and house construction, though this is very unlikely. The people I meet feel cheated of a future, cheated of hope. I don't hate or pity the bigotry that this disappointment is sometimes expressed in, but I think I understand it. The atomisation, dissociation and political disorientation of these islanders is a fact evidenced by my experiences, with a political cause. What power do the people of Sheerness, or Lydd, or Newhaven, or Vassall ward, have to participate in the decisions that affect their lives?

But this isn't a new thing, just something that's there, and has been. Had a 27 year old postgraduate researcher got on his bike in 1994 or 1974 and cycled the breadth and circumference of the UK, what would s/he have found otherwise? Heavy drinking, deprived shopping precincts, retail parks, the immersion in family and the weight put on romantic relationships.... Religion's relevance receding, sleepy churches abandoning even evensong. Sports and military training now seem to take place through video

games. Can the generally frustrating and boring nature of (most of) our adult lives have a political foundation?

Haha, I doubt that, but I think the people I've met would be happier with some options in front of them. Those that I've met possessed by an untimely hope and political optimism – and there's been some, like Jamie, Chris, Dermot, Colin – place themselves in a position of action within an image of a possible future. They believe, ultimately, that there is potential for change, otherwise there would be no purpose or satisfaction in holding those beliefs... would there?

Another Island — J.D. Taylor

J.D. Taylor on the Brexit vote's fallout as a search for new island narratives.

Strange energies have been unleashed by the Brexit campaign which no political faction looks capable of containing, whatever the outcome of this Thursday's vote.

Whilst the Brexit vote has effectively become a plebiscite on uncontrolled immigration, the anger it has unleashed around the country raises older questions about narratives of identity and belonging. The cumulative effects of deindustrialisation, austerity, privatisation and the demonisation of the poor has reached a point where many of these narratives are unravelling into incoherency. And whilst efforts are being expended, often ineffectually, to argue for the values of cosmopolitanism or political sovereignty, less has been made of the decades-deep disempowerment and disaffection by which the island's own collective story has come undone.

The social security contract has become a war against the poor, and an eerily popular one at that; the National Health Service may soon collapse into a mess of private provision and statutory but overwhelmed free access. The great public industries and utilities have been dismantled and sold overseas for peanuts. Talk to any frontline professional in health and social care, education, housing or justice and one is warned that services are at breaking point, crushed between increasing demand and diminishing workforces and pay. For now, heroic efforts are made to keep things going. No doubt fears about rent arrears or losing one's home are equally compelling. Few (rightly) believe that the welfare state would support them should things turn south. But it is becoming clear that even this noble lemming logic is insufficient to the demands placed on it. And this disaffection against this unravelling ratchets in intensity.

Communities that made things or mined them, farmed things or fished them, have been dashed against the rocks in the last forty years at an accelerating rate, in a story most of us are familiar with, even if some still groan at terms like neoliberalism. Standing without purpose, the towns and cities outside the island's capital cities, and the lives within which animate them, have found themselves superfluous to a new economic order founded on crooked financial activity and inflated property prices down South. I describe places that I travelled through and spent time in when I wrote *Island Story*, an account of a long summer journeying across Britain by bike in an attempt to understand its diverse communities and stories. I found a surfeit of communities of non-participants, excluded economically and politically, angered that the decisions that transformed their work, neighbourhoods, family lives and self-images have been made elsewhere. I believe that their voices have for this brief moment become politically important.

The Leave campaigners have exploited this disaffection and disorientation and projected it onto Europe. The EU is now a euphemism for undemocratic, unaccountable and arbitrary authority. Whether this is true or not isn't in question, because the tenor of the Brexit arguments has been intrinsically anti-political and, in many cases, sceptical of factual evidence or discussion. The interests of private capital have been internalised. People talk of economic growth and trade deals that will benefit no person they know of; they talk of migrants overwhelming services they have never used. They do not perceive that the island's infrastructure and social safety net has collapsed so unsustainably that in five years Promethean efforts will be required to rebuild them. Remarkably, a decision that could permanently deface apparently 'British' ideas about fair play, solidarity, liberalism and communal obligation is being made on the flimsiest of evidence.

But this is a vote about narratives, even where politics is reduced to personality and prejudice. More interesting is that the Remain vote expresses hatred for the political establishment and, in many cases, for the debilitation of working class ex-industrial communities left by capitalism. Contempt for Brussels is overblown: the largely English, non-London support to leave Europe is an English independence movement in parallel to the Scots. Of course, wherever a dominant social group is appealed to as a victim of injustice and moral outrage, bad things follow. But there is a markedly working class composition to this independence movement, one which rejects not the values of cosmopolitanism (an erroneous judgement by the mostly young, middle-class pro-Remain contingent – people like me) but what it considers a political and social establishment which has rubbished and destroyed their class cultures and ways of life, like those I encountered, lived among and narrate in *Island Story*.

Its response is misguided and likely to lead to disappointment. But this anti-establishment turn among the English is significant. Whether this collection of different social groups will cohere in enough numbers to

force the UK out of the EU and its status in the global economic order is unclear, but this new pressure will leave behind an imprint on the terrain around it.

‘Most of England is 1,000 years old’, writes the landscape historian W.G. Hoskins. In a ‘walk of a few miles one can touch nearly every century in that long stretch of time’. Witness time in the undulations, roads and settlements along the landscape. Observe its failure of passage in the fatalistic deference to traditions and to beacons of aristocratic authority. If much of the Brexit discussion is insular and inward-looking, the question it raises — who owns Britain? — presents a more compelling line of inquiry. The old narrative of the United Kingdom is no longer sustainable. Divisions between the island’s countries, let alone between the South-East and the rest of England, are becoming irreconcilable.

In the collapse of the old ways, and the murkiness of the contemporary political fog, comes the possibility to explore what another island story might amount to. One that reckons with the facts of automation and the required reduction of work in our lifetimes, with the possibilities of renewable energies and of the necessity of living sustainably, of individual liberalism, of a sceptical, Internet-reliant citizenship. One that learns from but is no longer burdened by the past.

As I travelled around the island, I found ways of life wrecked, communities dispersed, and a prevailing sense of despair and acquiescence in an unjust but apparently inevitable fate. But I also found people and projects that inspired me in their drive to question the realism and inevitability of the current political order, one that seems now more fragile than at any point in recent history. I met remarkable individuals and collectives determined to re-establish the foundations of a fairer, kinder, more wise and equal society. Rarely are they popular, but they indicate another story or journey that might lead beyond the ugly, hostile and xenophobic miasma of the Brexit question.

I met people like Eden, rearing sheep on a council farm in Darlington beside a gargantuan Argos distribution centre. He told me of EU subsidies, subsistence farming, the one way of life he and others know, and ‘the unholy mess that’s developing’ in food production. Farmers are often misunderstood and vilified, so too are welfare recipients, like those Sonya was helping in Morecambe. Sonya was a lettings agent in the private sector, increasingly the main handlers of those dependent out of disability or circumstance on housing benefit. She described the choices people made between heating and eating, trapped in a cycle of unemployment, debt, temporary work, and back again. ‘What good are foodbanks when people haven’t got enough to pay their gas or electricity to heat the food?’ she asked. She was also a local historian, one of the brightest minds I’d met, locked out of higher education by circumstance, trying to give her two sons a better life.

Then there was Ciaran, like me in his 20s, working at the Sabhal Mòr Ostaig college on Skye, a centre for the renaissance of the Scots Gaelic tongue. He argued that Scotland’s future had more in common with social democratic Scandinavia than neoliberal London (‘London feels like a foreign country here’). He and his friends couldn’t afford to buy a home locally because of the migration of second-home seeking English incomers, forcing up house prices. Like many young Scots, he was politically informed, passionate, and hopeful about the future, in a way often missing south of Berwick.

I met Thomas Turgoose, the muse of Shane Meadows’ films, pulling pints and interrupting fights in a rough and tumble boozer in Grimsby, who spoke of the incoherency and impossibility of locating a singular national identity. Then there was Colin, attempting to rebuild from a few forgotten rail-tracks the Teign Valley railway that once weaved through Dartmoor. I slept on one of his train carriages and talked into the night about the lost future of a modern and sustainable railway travel that might one day become possible again. Dreamers some, heartbroken others. ‘Stay with life’, said a melancholy Father Michael on the Kyle of Tongue. Among the sadness and incoherence and heartbreak and anger is a hope, a possibility, that permeates these stories, and the book, like a pulse.

And so I have told their stories, because if we are to reconstruct a sense of collectivity and possibility out of this mess, then it will not be through venal and corrupt politicians or Twitter hot-takes, but each of us, all of us, thinking, deliberating and cooperating, living together as a collective endeavour.

The story of another island.

*J.D. Taylor will be co-launching *Island Story* with Jeremy Seabrook at Housmans Bookshop tonight at 7pm. There will be a misguided cycling book tour across the Midlands and North over August, to be announced shortly. Order a copy from your local bookshop or at <http://www.hive.co.uk/Product/J-D-Taylor/Island-Story/19090744>.*