



## Chapter Fourteen: 'Little by Little' Country Roads - Clarendon Way 2008, New Forest 2009

**S**ix months on from the horrors of Berlin 2007, I kicked off 2008 with a return to London, again using a press place, notching up a time of 3:32:05, finishing 4,570th out of 23,680 finishers on a day remarkable for just one thing as far as I was concerned, one of my worst-ever moments on a marathon course.

I'd been listening to Status Quo from the start. They're a great band – not remotely in The Stones or Beatles category, but as a running aid, they are second to none, their chugging rhythm just perfect for running. Up to a point. Perhaps the volume was too loud. Perhaps I'd had too much of a good thing. But at about 23 miles I had the closest thing to a panic attack I have ever had in my life. Status Quo had got inside my head, inside my brain, inside my whole existence; I was tired and probably dehydrated; across several miles, the Docklands had channelled and echoed the noise of the crowd; and then, abruptly, at the start of the long straight road parallel with the Thames, the noise of the crowd rose several notches more.

Suddenly it was all too much for me. Panic took hold. I ripped off my headphones and felt dizzy – dizzy at the roar

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of the crowd, dizzy at Status Quo who continued to chug inside my head even though the earpieces were out. It was a frightening moment. I stood there and swayed, thinking that any moment I was going to keel over. Noise, emotion and knackered-ness had reached unbearable proportions. It was a monumental sensory overload, and for maybe 30 seconds it threatened to derail me, until I found the strength of mind to stagger to the side and lean against a railing. The poor spectators I nearly tumbled against were lovely, sweet and concerned, and it was almost certainly that human contact which got me back on track again.

It had been the strangest feeling, one of being utterly overwhelmed. I craved darkness. I wanted to cry. I wanted to hide. I wanted to get away from the noise. I felt awful. But fortunately the tide of human kindness turned me round and I carried on, not significantly the worse for wear.

The end result was a good enough time on a good day. Part of the problem, though, was that this was London number six, and it was all starting to seem just a touch *déjà vu*. Fiona came up to support me and we were joined by Alistair and his girlfriend – now wife – Jo afterwards, going for a lovely pizza to round off the day. But the point was that London was becoming rather routine. Even I wouldn't have baked myself a celebratory cake after this one – even if there was plenty of satisfaction to be had from the fact that, just as in La Rochelle, I had seriously wobbled but then pulled it back.



Far more interesting in 2008 was my return to the kind of cross-country marathon I'd slogged through in Chichester

and Steyning a few years earlier – a marathon which answered the need for something different. This time my self-flagellation of choice was the Clarendon Way Marathon, a marathon which will always rank among my most memorable.

A huge part of the appeal was the fact that this is a marathon that goes from Salisbury to Winchester. So many marathons – Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin – take you on a huge loop from A round to A again. You run for 26.2 miles to get back to where you started, part of the seductive perversity of marathon running in general. But every now and again, it's nice to actually go somewhere. The Clarendon Way Marathon seemed to offer something different – running for a purpose, running because you need to get back to where you left your car.

Equally appealing was the fact that it goes between two cities I have known all my life. You have to take your hat off to the runner who dreamt up the race, realising that with a few kinks and loops, you can make Salisbury and Winchester exactly 26 miles 385 yards apart, an approach to map-reading which I find thoroughly laudable. Those less in awe of marathons will argue that you could do this for any two points 26.2 miles apart, but you'll struggle to find too many marathons that go from one city to another; even fewer that link two cities by an almost entirely cross-country course.

For me, it added to the point of it all. The Clarendon Way Marathon was a marathon I simply had to tackle. I wanted to know whether actually going somewhere would be a good way of getting there. And indeed it was. But what a day it proved.

The event is impressively organised. You start from the King's School in Winchester, where one of several coaches

takes you to Salisbury if you are running the full marathon or to a village halfway between the two if you are a spineless faint-hearted good-for-nothing chicken contenting yourself with a half-marathon – which is what I did the following year.

It should have been lovely, but in the days before the race, the heavens opened, and boy, did it rain. It rained and rained and rained on the Saturday and then rained some more overnight. When I woke up, there was no need to open the curtains to see what the weather was doing that October Sunday. Dublin here we come. As my great-great-aunt in Yorkshire would say, it was bouncing. It wasn't just hitting the ground, it was hammering into it with such force that it jumped up to meet the next drop on the way down.

Fiona kept telling me not to bother with the marathon, just to stay at home, but I don't suppose for a moment she ever thought I would listen. She said I was stupid even to try it, but my view was that there was no backing out. I didn't want all those miles of training to count for nothing; they had to count for something whatever the weather on the day. And I suppose that's why it's so hard to pull out of a marathon. You invest so much in it, you focus on it so hard, that it's going to take something rather more than a bit of rain – or in this instance an almost biblical downpour – to keep you away. Even staring at the rain out of the window that morning, I knew I would be unbearable within the hour if I didn't at least try. There was never any question that I wouldn't. Not running was unthinkable.

Even so, it was the most apprehensive of drives to Winchester. Then came relief as I made it from the car to the coach, for this was when it really started raining. It had been mucking around until then. Now it was raining like some

huge celestial plug had been pulled, and so it continued all the way to Salisbury. We really ought to have been travelling in a World War Two DUKW, that boat-like amphibious thing that I used to love making Airfix models of. We were crawling along the road, the windscreen wipers at full pelt barely clearing anything in the rainstorm we were heading through.

Inevitably, everyone on the bus was chatty. There was a great feeling of togetherness. I remember speaking to a guy contemplating his first-ever marathon and thinking, without saying it, *Blimey, I wouldn't want to start with this one!* The camaraderie was the best I have ever known it before a race. The windows were steamed up. We were sealed in, getting ready for a soaking. We were back in the realms of those self-loving adverts I hate, the smug 'We must be mad!' ones. Except that we really were mad, sitting there on a coach in torrential rain for three-quarters of an hour simply so that we could run all the way back.

Our Salisbury destination was The Godolphin School, a starting point with excellent facilities and the air of an Oxford college. The organisation was excellent in every respect, leaving us nothing to do but hang around for the big adventure, an off-road extravaganza which is probably around 85 per cent trails. Kicking off from the school, the route headed off under the Salisbury bypass and then very quickly out into whatever countryside hadn't been washed away in the meantime. In all, we were probably several hundred runners.

An online reviewer of the race two years later in 2010 summed it up perfectly as 'Mud, mud, mud, mud, mud, hills, hills, hills, mud, mud, hills, hills and bananas'. I don't remember the bananas. Otherwise that was precisely the

experience we had in 2008. I can't imagine anyone set off with a finishing time uppermost in their mind. This one was going to be all about just finishing – which suited me perfectly.

By now I was doing two marathons a year, one of which was generally a marathon in which time was never going to be the major consideration. Partly a defence, I am sure, against the fact that by 2008 it was getting ever harder to knock any time off a fully competitive marathon, but partly also for the stimulation of trying something different. Marathons don't have to be about big cities and running on the flat. There are kicks enough from 'up hill and down dale' in mud you could drown in – not that that was how the organisers sold the event.

However, within half an hour of the start, something entirely unexpected started to happen. Imperceptibly at first, the rain started to ease. Imperceptibly because by then we were so used to it that we imagined it going on forever. I could easily envisage people in their back gardens building arks. But then, suddenly, a few miles in, I became aware that the battering was diminishing. By mile 5 or 6, as we skirted yet another sodden field, the rain had more or less stopped, and from then on the sun started to break through. This was October. It was never going to be hot, but the skies cleared as an impressively bright day started to take ever-stronger hold.

The temperature was just on the comfortable side of cool, but by the halfway point the skies were blue and the sun was high. Suddenly everything was looking much rosier in our countryside garden. In fact, it was all rather attractive as we followed the dotted arrows which took us across fields, down valleys and through woodland, the gently varying

kind of rich-green, luxuriant landscape which seems so quintessentially English. It was beautiful in a way which was undemanding, until you tried to run through it.

I don't know the overall gradient, but there were some stiff climbs, and with a decent number of runners out there, there was bunching at a few points where the route thinned to go uphill or down. We were in the middle of nowhere, but for several minutes I couldn't go at the speed I wanted as we ascended a narrow path which skirted a hillside. There were brief windows of opportunity where you could nip past the slower runner ahead, but it generally meant clambering onto a slippery bank and hoping not to slide down into their footfall.

Things weren't helped by the fact that the half-marathon runners joined the route pretty much as we were going by. Suddenly we were running with far more people around, runners inevitably far fresher than we were. Would it have been better to let the half-marathon runners loose earlier? Or was it better to have them coincide with us and so increase the overall density of runners at the finish? I don't know. And I still don't know, having joined the race as a half-marathon runner at this point the following year. Maybe it adds to the atmosphere, but the moments of congestion were an irritation, albeit a mild one. In any event, there was no hope of a personal best. It was never going to be like that.

Instead, on this kind of course and in these kinds of conditions, it was like a rerun of the Steying Stinger. It was heavy, hard work, the drain on tired legs all the greater for the endless ups and downs, made all the more difficult still by the fact that your shoes were heavily caked in thick, cloying mud. And you couldn't just run it off. Time and

again, you had to flick it, rub it, do anything to it just to loosen it.

One particular hill is scored into my mind. It was 16 miles in as I lumbered up it, squelching and slipping backwards as I hauled my body against gravity. It was like trying to run up a banana skin. Maybe that's what the online reviewer had been talking about. And a splashy, uneven banana skin at that. If your foot didn't slip backwards, it slipped sideways. Each step was tentative. Each stride was a hostage to fortune – which was precisely why a photographer had positioned himself at the top of the incline, strategically surveying us all as we waded through the mud up towards him.

It was steep. Very steep. So steep that you were putting your hands out in front of you, and that's when I went over, just a few yards from the photographer's feet. Maybe it was because I glanced up at him. Maybe I was always going to go. But I lost my footing and crashed down in the mud chest first. I held my head up as my arms shot out, and I fell – not very far, but far enough. And this really wasn't falling with style. If I'd had any pride left by then, I would certainly have hurt it. But the only sane response was to laugh – as doubtless others did.

'Don't you dare!' I shouted at the photographer, who must have thought Christmas had come early. He dared, and then dared again, producing a lovely sequence of photographs of me on my way down and back up again. The photographs now adorn the wall in our downstairs loo – an appropriate place for images of me in the mire.

A feature of marathons these days is that the official race photographs are up and ready on the website within a day or so. These particular photographs were hilarious. Even funnier was the fact that mine featured in a special

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subsection of photographs simply called ‘Slips’, or something like that. Even funnier still was that when a friend and I were registering for the half-marathon the following year, one of the photographs of me was on the home page of the website. I must say I took it as a tribute. How could it be anything else? We all did a daft thing that day in the daftest of conditions. And I am all for celebrating that.

I don’t remember getting seriously tired during the Clarendon Way Marathon, though I do remember a degree of disorientation when trying to work out how far we had gone at various points towards the end. It took me a stupidly long time to tumble to the fact that, very unusually, the final half-marathon was counted down rather than counted up. I suppose it makes sense when you remember the half-marathoners who had joined us by now. But it did add to my confusion to be reaching what I knew to be 16 miles and seeing the number 10 by the wayside. Finally the penny dropped. Ten miles to go, after which it all started to seem endless.

We endured an unrelenting stretch of forest and woodland in the final quarter, still moderately hilly, but above all everlasting. One of the most enjoyable things about doing the half-marathon the following year was recalling how I had felt at various points the year before. At the same time, I also felt a bit of a cheapskate. I felt as if I had gatecrashed somebody else’s party. Half-marathon running is an immensely respectable discipline, but it has never grabbed me. A half-marathon is too much of a halfway house to my way of thinking, something you can knock off in a time which makes you question whether it was worth all the hassle of getting kitted out and numbered up in the first place.

OK, that's probably being rather unfair. Very unfair, in fact. All I am trying to say is that, to my mind, only the full marathon distance justifies all the effort. And on that rare half-marathon the following year, which I did with a colleague from work, I was looking out for the full-marathon runners, feeling a little bit of awe towards them, deeply impressed that they had gone so far on so challenging a course. And I mean that in a loving, caring way, as Dame Edna would say. I am not talking a self-satisfied 'that was me last year' type feeling. It was a lovely warm feeling of solidarity, a kind of 'I know exactly where you're coming from and I know exactly how tough I found it' type feeling.

It sounds trite, I know, but for me this is once again where marathons lift you out of the here and now, where somehow you move above your own feelings in the moment and partake of the great shared endeavour which brings everyone together on race day, full of hope and full of an energy which will be increasingly depleted as the miles lengthen. And yet, however tired we get, the links between us are never broken, the marathon binding us all in an unspoken brotherhood.

Yes, OK, that really is trite, but the point is that exhaustion, with all its attendant confusion, so often heightens the emotions, and few things make me quite as emotional as a marathon. It can be your pain or someone else's pain, but there are moments when it feels like it is hurting us all. Of that half-marathon, my enduring memory will always be seeing a full-marathon runner, high in the woods, possibly 6 or 7 miles from the finish, stagger to the side, veer towards a marshal and collapse against him. Maybe the runner said it. Maybe the marshal recognised it. Cramp.



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The marshal eased him onto his back, cradled his outstretched foot and tried to ease his silent agony. The marshal pulled and it was silent no longer, a scream of pain filling the woods as we ran past. He screamed for all of us, and we felt it with him. I'd love to know whether he finished. I'm sure he did. Long-distance runners are made of tough stuff. He wouldn't have got that far without the stamina to finish. Besides, there was nowhere else to go. Only one trail was taking us back to Winchester.

And so on we ran in 2008. And on. And on. The forest trails on that marathon morning were attractive, a variation on the more open scenery we had been through so far. But this was hardly the moment to enjoy them. My legs were becoming wobbly – though not to the extent that I wanted to walk. I was determined not to, and not just because it wouldn't have helped. But certainly tiredness was now my constant companion. The remaining distance was unyielding. One path led to another path, which dipped, rose and then twisted before leading to another, which then darted down to the next. It seemed like it was never going to end.

Finally, though, we started to approach Winchester. Isolated buildings started to become slightly less isolated; fences appeared, and behind them were rows of houses, not yet urban, but somewhere in that middle ground where city and countryside merge.

And then, not long after that, we started to hear the finish. We began to see a few runners who'd already crossed the line and were now ambling back to find friends. And then we realised that the fence to our right enclosed the school where the finish lay. Even so, it seemed to take forever to reach the gap which would take us onto the field and into the grounds where the running would finally stop.

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But I could hear the crowd. That was the main thing. I could hear the cheering. And then came the turn. And beyond the turn was the final stretch diagonally across the playing field where ropes and spectators narrowed the route and funnelled you over the line. Fiona and the children were there just to my right, with just 100 yards to go. They shouted out. They gave me the lift I needed as I pushed myself over the finish.

Annoyingly, I have no record of my actual finishing time – which sounds bizarre for a time-obsessed runner. But this one really wasn't about the stats. I suspect I was somewhere between 4 hours and 4 hours 20 minutes, much closer to the 4:20 no doubt, but respectable, highly respectable, at the end of a stupidly tough course; one where, quite literally at times, you were taking a couple of steps forward and one step back. Gravity always seemed to win, just a little, as we tried to defeat inclines which gave us absolutely no purchase.

There had been no snow, no ice, just mud, mud, glorious mud. Mud that splattered up your legs, engulfed your shoes, caked your hair, shot up your arms and entered your head. Mud which I wore with pride across a chest which had hit it full on. And I was happy. Very happy indeed. I don't remember the shock of stopping, something you invariably feel much more strongly on the pacier marathons. But I do remember just easing out of the whole thing very nicely. Quickly I felt fine. Rapidly I started storing it all away. I was going to dine out for years to come on this one – the tale of the day we braved torrential rain and slimy, slippery mud to run all the way – don't ask why – from Salisbury to Winchester.



The following year my country slog was the New Forest Marathon. I had wanted something for autumn 2009; the New Forest fitted the bill, not least for the fact that it was close and convenient. The big-city overseas marathons were by now firmly established as my favourites, but I had run Paris (for the third time) in the spring of 2009 (a top-20-per-cent finish with a time of 3:33:57), and I was looking to run one abroad in the spring of 2010. I wanted something different in between, and I was happy to fill the slot with another cross-country toil – another marathon where my finishing time wouldn't be the be-all and end-all, a marathon where simply finishing it was challenge enough.

I knew from running the New Forest in 2004 that we weren't talking massive hills, but we weren't talking flat either; so not Chichester, and certainly not London. Somewhere in between, it was a consistently undulating course which would be rugged and fairly wild and probably also fairly lonely, which suited me perfectly.

I had my entertainment all mapped out – something to take my mind off an injury which I expected to hamper me seriously on the physical front. I'd tried running with a bin bag; I'd tried running with the snots. This time I thought I'd try running with a cracked rib. I'd slipped on a rock during our family holiday that summer and fallen quite heavily. I'd had a camcorder in one hand and a camera in the other. As I fell, I saved both, instinctively stretching out my arms, which meant that I took the rock full on the chest. It hurt. It really hurt. And five weeks later, it still hurt. My big fear was that the pounding of the race over such a long distance would open up the break or at the very least produce a pain so intolerable as to make it impossible to continue.

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Fiona's view was simply 'What on earth possesses you?' For her, my behaviour was unfathomable, if not exactly unpredictable. For me, opting out was never an option. I knew I would have been in a foul mood if I hadn't at least given it a go. Fiona tried to dissuade me from running on this occasion, but in time-honoured tradition, it was advice I was never going to take.

I had launched into the training several months before our holiday that summer, and four times during our two weeks in North Wales, I had hammered out 15 miles on the hills – tough running which was a good test of stamina. I didn't want those miles – and all those that had preceded them – to count for nothing. In preparing for a marathon, you give in to a rhythm; you push the distance and then you start to ease off, and though I had probably lost a couple of weeks because of the break, the training had gone reasonably smoothly.

Fiona's view is that running a marathon with a cracked rib is screamingly abnormal behaviour; my view is that I had cracked it six weeks earlier, that the pain was by now more of an ache, and that I was just about fit enough to have a go. It wasn't just a perverse habit of never doing what people tell me to do: the rib was throbbing, but I had never pulled out of a marathon, and I wasn't going to start now.

In the event, it was uncomfortable, but not overpoweringly so. I am not even sure just how much of a factor it actually was. The ache did become pain again about halfway round, but the jabbing in some ways helped me to keep going before, in the final miles, it slowly merged with the more generalised pain of running a marathon.

Even so, I approached the whole thing with a degree of caution. Given the rib, and given the relative difficulty of the course (relative to the big-city marathons where I was now

hitting 3:20–3:30), my aim was to finish within four hours. My determination was not so much to run it, but simply to enjoy it. The big-city marathons were the ones where I had a chance of beating my best. There was no hope of doing so in the New Forest, and the cracked rib lowered ambitions still further.

No, for me, the whole point was to fulfil a little ambition I'd been harbouring for years, one which meant that on the day I took in very little of the scenery. I'd always been a huge Beatles fan, and ever since George Harrison's death on 29 November 2001, I had wanted to pay my own tribute. A marathon nut, I let that tribute take marathon form.

My idea was to run against a soundtrack of continuous, chronological Beatles tracks and see on which album I would finish. It took me until 2009 to work out how to do this. It then became a question of just how many albums I needed.

The worst scenario would be not to put enough on, run a horribly slow race and finish in silence. Using the wonders of iTunes, I hedged my bets and stuck on everything up to *Magical Mystery Tour*, The Beatles' second 1967 recording after *Sgt Pepper*. The aim was to finish well inside that. I wanted to hit 1966. To finish close to four hours would be to finish somewhere during the *Revolver* album, an appealing prospect because it had always been a favourite of mine.

By now I was routinely running to music. In my early marathons, I had felt it would be impolite to do so. It felt wrong to be shutting out all the people who were roaring us runners on, but after a while the need for a relentless running rhythm took precedence. Besides, for the New Forest Marathon, there really wouldn't be many people to shut out anyway. Plus, I felt sure that my Beatles tribute would be a huge part of the fun. Perhaps the only part.

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In the event, it provided plenty of moments of quiet amusement. The Beatles, so they say, are the soundtrack to our lives. They've got a song for every mood and every moment, or so it seemed as I ran along. 'Misery' as the second song was premature, but 'Ask Me Why' was appropriate. I still don't know the answer. Maybe the answer lies in 'There's a Place' if you take it to refer to the finish.

The Beatles' second album, *With The Beatles*, offered similar moments with the encouraging 'It Won't Be Long', the reassuring 'All I've Got To Do' (i.e. keep on running), and the worrying 'Not a Second Time' (not what you need on your return to a race).

The third album, *A Hard Day's Night*, had the bonus of a vaguely appropriate title track. It also offered another imponderable with 'Tell Me Why', and then quick-fire pessimism and optimism with 'I'll Cry Instead' and 'I'll Be Back', plus the ominous 'I Should Have Known Better'. 'You Can't Do That' was a bit of a downer; 'When I Get Home' offered hope.

The next album, *Beatles For Sale*, threatened 'I'm a Loser' before concluding 'I Don't Want To Spoil the Party'. It also pondered 'What You're Doing'.

Album number five said it all in the title track 'Help!', before *Rubber Soul* offered a sane alternative, 'Drive My Car', rapidly followed by the sublime and wonderfully appropriate middle-of-nowhere song 'Nowhere Man'. 'In My Life' will lift any moment in my life, and it was followed by the stop-start contradiction of 'Wait' and 'Run for Your Life' – by which time the finish wasn't so very far away, signalled by the start of the *Revolver* album, offering Paul McCartney at his upbeat best with the cheery 'Good Day Sunshine'.

And so The Beatles dragged me to the finishing line. I crossed it as Paul, as jolly as ever, blasted my lugholes with 'Got to Get You into My Life'. Marathon done; *Revolver* still rolling; mission accomplished.

The start had been in New Milton, and the route had taken in various places, including Wootton, Burley and Sway, along the way. The course was resolutely rural, some main roads every now and again, but a lot of tracks through the woods and endless country paths. Unlike the Isle of Wight Marathon, we were in company for the most part. I remember passing a wizened little man in a home-printed T-shirt proclaiming that this was his 157th marathon – an astonishing achievement, though you couldn't help wondering what he would have looked like without those 157 marathons. But more power to his knees – and he was still going at an impressive rate.

From time to time, mostly on the decent roads, we could see a long way ahead, often a good thing, inspiring almost, especially as the weather was bright, the conditions were good and the temperature was perfect. As I have said, the course certainly undulated and there were a couple of steady uphill drags, but never to the extent that it wore me down in the Isle of Wight way, and with the miles clearly marked, the distance soon started to stack up.

The water stations were good; I stayed ahead of looming dehydration and somehow, urged on by The Beatles, simply kept going, and this, apart from The Beatles, is my main memory of the day. There were several moments in the last quarter where I felt drained, but I never felt as if I was running on empty. I found a rhythm and I stuck to it, turning in a workmanlike performance during which I never set a cracking (or even rib-cracking) pace, but nor did

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I slow. It was a steady-as-you-go performance, which didn't significantly diminish. I didn't fade. The Beatles and plenty of water did the rest.

Coming 195th out of 514 finishers, I completed the course in 3:54:54. Job done. Rib not significantly worse. I was satisfied. I'd done something I'd been intending to do for years, and in the process I'd come up with a novel approach to marathon running, definitely a way to renew the interest. And by the end of it, marathon number 21 was in the bag. Thank you, The Beatles.

And thank you, Fiona, ever-forgiving of my stubbornness, who was there with the children to greet me. It was terrific to see them just a few hundred yards before the finishing line. Knowing they would be there had been a help, and it was great to be looked after once the race was over. Instantly, I felt frozen, shivery and decidedly fragile. I had a craving for a hot drink, and Fiona went off into the school, where the race starts and ends, to ask for one. The receptionist suggested she try the next village, which amused us hugely.

Presumably the receptionist thought we wanted cream tea with the full works, which conjured lovely images of me sweating into bone china amid all the gentility of little old ladies on their afternoon out. Fiona explained the need was rather more pressing than that and was directed to a vending machine, from which she returned with the most welcome cup of coffee I have ever had.

Maybe it was a reaction to the rib; maybe there was an element of shock to the body from finally stopping, but I felt chilled to the core. The weather had been fine, but I wasn't. Slowly, though, with that coffee, the warmth flowed back into me; it was wonderfully restorative and exactly what I needed.