

THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

LONDON TO EDINBURGH
11 DAYS, 2 WHEELS AND 1 ANCIENT HIGHWAY

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STEVE SILK



summersdale

THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

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DAY ONE

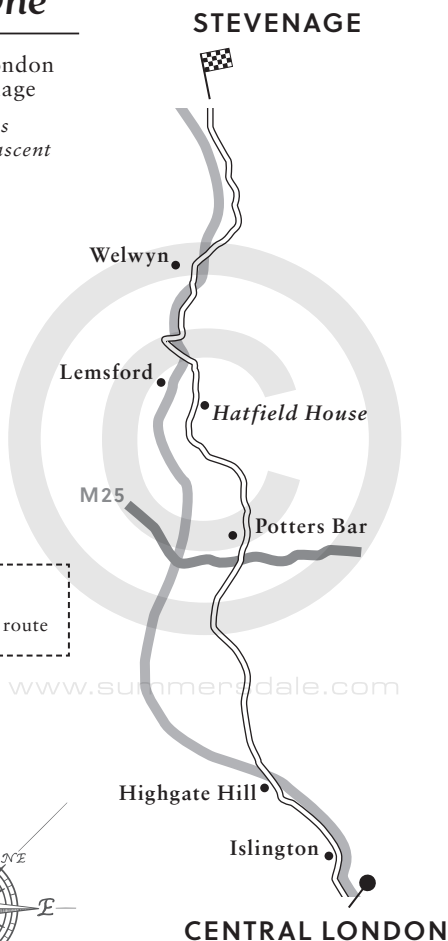
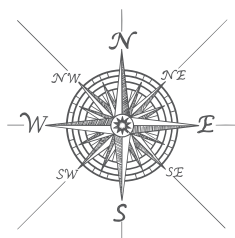
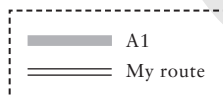
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Day One

Central London
to Stevenage

34 miles
1,450 ft of ascent



A pedal has yet to turn and I've already cheated by about half a mile. I should be starting in a stubby little street behind St Paul's Cathedral by the name of St Martin's-le-Grand. This was where the mail coaches began their 400-mile journey to Edinburgh at a long-demolished General Post Office. Late Victorian cyclists, Harper tells us, took their cue from the coaches and began many record-breaking attempts from the same place.

But I've moved up Aldersgate and strayed onto Old Street where historical authenticity is losing out to the attractions of a twenty-first century flat white at a bike café. It goes by the excellent name of Look Mum No Hands. Might this be a better place to start?

Certainly the mix of bikes and baristas gives off an effortless London cool. To the left, a mechanic spins a wheel on his truing jig, adjusting a spoke. To the right, one of a posse of bearded coffee-makers gets the milk wand frothing. Twenty tyre-less wheels hang from the ceiling for

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no apparent reason, pleasant, jangly pop music plays in the background and coffee-table magazines with titles like “*Soigneur*” are strewn across wooden shelves. On the walls, the rainbow stripe colours worn on the jersey of cycling’s world champion run like a demented dado rail. They even follow me into the loo. Nevertheless, I take a look at this happy hubbub and decide that as a starting line, it will do nicely.

Next, the formal photo. A mechanic loiters nearby and seems reasonably impressed with my plan. We head outside.

“Yeh, man, you’re stoked for Edinburgh,” he says as he snaps away.

... And then rather ruins his street-cred as I have to explain the finer points of air-dropping the photo from his phone to mine. But thank you, I needed that picture.

I go back to my table and empty my cup. Before I go, I reach for the first of Charles Harper’s books, trying to imagine how he would have felt setting off on the same journey in 1900. In that era, motorised traffic was minimal. Looking back at his efforts in 1922 he remembered that:

People would still turn and gaze, interested, at a mechanically-propelled vehicle; and few were those folk who had journeyed the entire distance between London to Edinburgh in one of them... on any long journey you were never sure of finishing by car what you had begun.

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The same goes for me by bike, I have to say. I've certainly never attempted anything this ambitious. The book is put away, the pannier gets secured and it's out onto the street before a right turn onto Goswell Road. Strange to say, I am completely undaunted by the task ahead. Have I worried in the build up? Yes. Have friends and family raised sceptical eyebrows? Certainly. But now, London to Edinburgh simply means immersing myself in a swirl of Hackney cabs and delivery vans. The bigger picture will have to wait, because this lot aren't taking any prisoners.

Windows, both retail and residential, flash by. Fast enough for individual details to be quickly erased, slow enough to gain an overall impression. Tourist London, it's clear, has been left behind. This is now a living, working London full of plumbers' suppliers, blocks of flats, even children playing, for heaven's sake.

Off, unseen to my left, is one of the few unchanging features across the centuries: Smithfield meat market, where drovers directing their herds once presented a serious hazard. Writers spoke of coaches competing for road space with unruly cattle – their horned faces sometimes scaring the horses as they loomed out of the thick London fog.

The junction at The Angel arrives quickly. The original pub which gave this part of Islington its name has long gone, but the Wetherspoon chain has done the obvious thing, creating another in roughly the same place. However, from my perspective, another inn further along the high street

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was more important. A painting from 1821 by the artist James Pollard entitled *North Country Mails at The Peacock* gives a clear sense of the bustle involved. This decade saw coaching near its zenith – and it shows in the detail. One coach is on the point of leaving, the driver drilling the horses with the subtle use of reins and the brute force of a whip. In the background three other coaches prepare for the off, each one packed – ladies in their bonnets and gentlemen in their top hats. Somehow the artist has imparted an air of urgent excitement to every detail. Coaching, it's clear, had glamour. When Harper was writing, it was a glamour his older readers would still have been able to remember.

Londoners and country-cousins alike were never weary of the spectacle of the smart coaches, the businesslike coachmen and the resplendent, scarlet-coated guards preparing to travel through the night, north, south, east or west, with his Majesty's mails.

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A complex network had sprung up in a generation. As a result Britain's roads had gone from being an embarrassment to a source of national pride. Each mail coach had a guard who was issued with a sealed time-piece, a blunderbuss and two pistols as well as the mailbags they swore to protect with their lives. The black and maroon livery was seen as being classier than the array of brightly coloured stage coaches with names like the *Tally-ho* and the *Trafalgar*. In 1820 one magazine totted up

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both the stage- and the mail-coach options. Apparently there were 1,500 opportunities to leave the capital over the course of a 24-hour period. All were agreed that the most prestigious mail of them all was the one which ran from London to Edinburgh, along the Great North Road.

The Peacock is long gone. But I eventually find a plaque to its memory above a German doner kebab restaurant. I stop and scribble down a few notes before something rather unusual happens: a stranger talks to me. To be fair, it's cyclist to cyclist, but still, this is London isn't it? She is a cycle courier for Uber Eats, her mountain bike fitted with what looks like a bread crate. She also carries two insulated bags, the larger of which could handle even the most outrageously sized pizza.

"You look lost," she says. "Where are you heading?"

"Edinburgh. I think it's in that direction."

"Edinburgh? What, Edinburgh in Scotland?"

She clearly doesn't believe me.

"Yes, Edinburgh in Scotland. But first I've got to do a bit of research on this..."

I drift to a halt mid-sentence, realising this is no time for a description of a nineteenth-century oil on canvas.

"Basically, I'm going that way," I conclude, hoping a declamatory statement with my left arm will do the job better than any words.

"Oh, right. OK. Good luck."

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I try – and fail – to find a rhythm amid the traffic along Upper Street toward Highbury Corner. All my kit is in the one pannier on the near-side rear wheel. I don't feel unbalanced as such, but I'm still working out my precise width for tight squeezes. The driver of a number 19 bus has to keep overtaking me between stops and we're both equally grumpy about it. Then a skip-hire lorry brutally cuts me up, the irate man behind the wheel mouthing obscenities. On the plus side, the Great North Road is giving me the full Islington experience; Islington High Street, Islington College, Islington Green and the Islington Assembly Hall. Historically, all of the centres of law and order were on the right-hand side of the road while the drinking establishments were on the left. That just about remains the case, even if the pubs that once slaked the thirst of the drovers have often been replaced by restaurants with cuisines from across the globe.

Upper Street becomes the Holloway Road to the north of Highbury Corner and the number of artisan bakeries tails off quickly. The boundary between “hipster” and “old school” is drawn quite precisely for me by two contrasting cafés. At 105 Holloway Road, you'll find Vagabond N7, a stripped-back modern coffee house with the *de rigueur* delivery bike outside – simply for show, of course. Inside, hessian sacks hang from the wall and the espresso coffee bean isn't just isolated to a country – Tanzania – but to a specific farm – Isuto. It's then further subdivided into a “varietal”. Bourbon, apparently. Seminars are advertised on

post cards. Sample title: “Better than you know yourself – influence, fake news and your online self.”

The Hope Workers’ Café is three doors further north. The tea is cheap and as excellent as Vagabond’s coffee. It’s clear that both are classics in their own way. I sup away, silently rejoicing that each finds a niche in the melée of modern London. Here at The Hope, an Arsenal scarf hangs next to the counter, together with a sign saying “No Loitering – minimum charge £1.50 on match days.” Eight wooden tables are lined up across the shop with matching round-backed chairs. If you told me they’d been there for 100 years I wouldn’t argue. In fact, it would only need to be 120 years to put us back in Harper’s own era at the turn of the last century. That thought makes me reach for his book.

“However delightful the Holloway Road may have been in the coaching age, it is in these crowded days a very commonplace thoroughfare indeed,” he writes. “The long reaches of mean streets and sordid bye-roads combine with the unutterably bad road surface to render the exit from London anything but pleasurable.”

“Sordid” feels very harsh these days. Busy, yes and undoubtedly densely populated. Full of people moving with that sense of urgency you only seem to get in capital cities – ever onward and upward.

The road surface too has improved; it’s the quality of the air that feels “unutterably bad”. I feel as if I have inhaled as many fumes in half an hour as in a previous year on

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the country lanes of Norfolk. Generally drivers give me plenty of room, helped by bike lanes and “respect” zones at the innumerable traffic lights. To my surprise, I’m having more problems with fellow cyclists – the MAMILs (Middle-Aged Men In Lycra) who silently overtake and undertake through the narrowest of gaps. I feel the need for a cycling equivalent of the “Man on!” cry in football; something short and snappy for the guy overtaking in a hurry. “Coming through!” anyone?

I seem to have been climbing ever since I left Old Street, but the gradient increases as I approach Highgate Hill. In the days of horse power this 120-metre-high lump of London clay proved a real impediment. So much so that in the early nineteenth century they tried to build a tunnel here – the word they used at the time was “archway”. But the engineers got their sums wrong and the whole thing collapsed leaving the cutting we see today. Perhaps surprisingly considering the embarrassment, the whole area began to be called Archway. And the impressively high bridge carrying Hornsey Lane above the traffic shows how deep the navvies dug.

To avoid the modern dual carriageway I follow the cycle path up the original Highgate Hill – with the original gradient. It was at the bottom of this hill that a demoralised Dick Whittington famously paused as he heard Bow Bells ring out “Turn again Dick Whittington, thrice Lord Mayor of London”. To my left is the Whittington Stone pub and in front of me, the Whittington Hospital. The man himself is

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remembered on the pavement with a monument but it all feels rather half-hearted. Where you might imagine a large statue of Dick in bronze, you'll simply find his cat in stone, all but obscured by protective iron railings. For a part of London that values its heritage it's a strange omission. And overhanging all this, an inconvenient truth: Whittington was a Gloucestershire lad. If he was trying to go home, what on earth was he doing heading north?

At the top, I can't resist a short diversion onto Hornsey Lane – just to see the road carried across the Archway cutting. From this vantage point, above the traffic, London is a magnificent sight. In the foreground the buses chug northwards, while in the distance the sun glints off the skyscrapers clustered on the horizon. A gaggle of cranes confirms that more whoppers are on their way.

In my mind's eye this was to have been the sort of gorgeous May day capable of topping up a tan. In reality it feels more like March, with the sun giving off surprisingly little heat. Stationary for too long, I realise that it's only kinetic exercise that's keeping me warm. Lengthy gawping at London landmarks isn't going to be good for the internal thermostat – or my average speed. Nevertheless I drink in the view one last time. For travellers heading south in the old days, this must have been the “wow” moment, even if it was a less lofty St Paul's Cathedral grabbing the spotlight.

Next, I plunge down North Hill where I somehow grind the chain off the front ring as I attempt to change gear too

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close to another red light. I curse my slowness at adapting to urban cycling as the bike gloves get their first film of grease. While the A1 now heads north west, I take the original Great North Road, the modern A1000. It's called the High Road through Finchley and up toward Barnet – I take “high” as an honorific title – a recognition of its mighty history.

At North Finchley the Tally Ho pub dominates a wedge-shaped junction. Tally Ho Corner was an early meeting point for the North Road Cycling Club – a sort of super-club for Victorian cyclists. It's difficult not to admire these pioneers. To join, you had to prove you had ridden 100 miles in a day – hard enough now, but even tougher in a world of basic bikes, dirt roads and non-pneumatic tyres. A book charting the first 50 years of the NRCC makes it clear that they used the Great North Road as their unofficial race track. It includes a glorious photo showing its members outside the Tally Ho in 1893. More than 40 cyclists pose with their conventional-looking bikes with just a couple of old timers hanging on to their “Ordinaries”.

“The ‘Good Old Ordinary’,” reminisced the book's authors, “With what affection was it regarded by those who were masters (more or less!) of it, and how they rebelled against its eclipse by the dwarf bicycle!

“We never rode one ourselves – we were born a little too late – but it sends a wave of resentment through us to hear the modern generation referring to it as ‘the penny farthing’ – a term we positively refuse to use.”

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Progressing on my own “dwarf bicycle”, Finchley becomes Whetstone and the world starts to feel greener. The houses are now 1930s semis and on the outskirts of Barnet there’s also an elegant cinema from the same era. At Chipping Barnet, a parish church is curiously placed within a junction just before the main shopping street – a spiritual gateway to the world of Mammon. Then London ends. Abruptly. One minute there’s the usual buzz around fast-food joints and dry-cleaning outlets, the next it’s Hadley Green where horse chestnut candelabra sway in the wind, the smell of newly mown grass hangs in the air and a youngster on a trike pedals across the park to his grandad. I breathe in and realise I am taking my first proper gasp of non-metropolitan air. Soon afterwards, as if in response, a roadside sign announces that I’m in Hertfordshire, which is apparently “the County of Opportunity”.

A little further on a fork in the road marks the point where the Edinburgh and Holyhead roads used to diverge, the latter heading toward St Albans. Within another mile I cycle under the M25 – another indicator that the big city is being left behind. It’s a feeling Londoners have cherished for decades. When the crime writer Dorothy L. Sayers was writing her short story *The Cat in the Bag* in the 1920s – published in a collection of her tales entitled *Lord Peter Views the Body* – this particular stretch of road was an invitation to put your foot down:

“It is not known why motorists, who sing the joys of the open road, spend so much petrol every weekend grinding

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their way to Southend and Brighton and Margate... [when] all the time the Great North Road winds away like a long, flat, steel-grey ribbon – a surface like a race-track, without traps, without hedges, without side-roads, and without traffic. True, it leads to nowhere in particular; but, after all, one pub is very much like another.”

Don't you just love the Southerner's disdain for anything or anyone north of Cambridge? Still, Sayers writes a good yarn. This one features her aristocratic detective Lord Peter Wimsey engaging in a motorbike chase between North London and Eaton Socon after a bag containing a woman's severed head slips from the back of a rider's bike near Hatfield. Just another Great North Road tale.

I cycle into Potters Bar, which tries to pretend it's still in London with a magnificently metropolitan bus garage. However, the high street feels a little forlorn, overshadowed since the railway had the temerity to build the station on the previously obscure Darkes Lane instead. Until now my brain has been kept more than busy with the ever-changing tableau around me, but that fizz seems to dissipate with the increasing gradient. I grunt and I wheeze myself up to the high ground around the radio transmitters of Brookmans Park, my gaze never leaving the road beneath my feet. Nevertheless, I needed that. I'm always the better for the first lung-buster of any ride.

As the country opens up on the approaches to Hatfield House, this really does feel like Hertfordshire. In fact, if you

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go back centuries, the stately home was the only reason there was a decent road in this part of the world. It wasn't until the nineteenth century that the Marquess of Salisbury bought himself a bit more privacy by moving the Great North Road westwards with the help of a canny three-way deal with the old turnpike trust and the new Great Northern Railway.

The building is still owned by the same family and that road exists as a track – visible behind locked gates and displayed on Google Maps. Several months earlier I'd cheekily asked if they would open them especially for me – in the interests of historical authenticity of course. They were very polite and kindly offered me a complimentary ticket to the House. But as for the gates, they were strictly for the use of "The Family". The Salisburys down the centuries are nothing if not consistent.

I present my ticket and wander through the grounds. The Hatfield estate was once owned by Henry VIII, who used it as a base for his three children – they would later become a hat-trick of sovereigns: Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I. The Elizabethan era began when, while sitting under an oak tree, Elizabeth learned of her sister Mary's death. The House, which I guiltily clip-clop through in my cyclist's metallic cleats, was built a little later in 1611. It's a Jacobean triumph with rooms and paintings to take your breath away. Amid the grand portraits of long-dead marquesses, there are formal photos of the current generation of the same family. Robert Salisbury, the head of the family, also writes

the foreword for a book celebrating the house's history. He doesn't mince his words about some of his ancestors:

"It is true that a number of them were distinguished servants of the Crown, but, particularly in the second half of the seventeenth century and for most of the eighteenth, far too many were as feckless and incompetent as they were stupid."

One Salisbury was so strapped for cash that he had to leave Hatfield for a smaller property near Baldock:

"There he lived surrounded by a rapacious mistress and a brood of illegitimate children. That Hatfield survived his incumbency is largely thanks to the loyalty and good sense of his wife... who kept the show on the road and enabled her son to enter into some sort of inheritance."

I walk with the bike – cycling is not permitted – past the surrounding parts of the Old Palace into the heart of Hatfield. Many a British stately home lies in isolation. Hatfield House manages that on three sides, but to the west it rubs up right against the town. I emerge onto pretty Fore Street, a steep thoroughfare that must have taxed coach drivers when it formed part of the main road. At the bottom there's a pub that I find impossible to pass by. The Eight Bells is a whitewashed building with a tall chimney totally out of proportion to everything else. Under the eaves, a notice proclaims its connection to *Oliver Twist*:

"This Eight Bells Inn is without doubt that small public house where Bill Sikes and his dog found temporary refuge

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after the brutal murder of Nancy. It was in the tap room that an antic fellow, half pedlar and half mountebank after mentioning bloodstains, offered to remove the stains from Sikes's hat."

It says something about how deep Dickens is buried in the national psyche that you'd be forgiven for thinking we were dealing with an historical event, rather than a novel. The pub seems to have become similarly embedded in the streetscape over the centuries and I have my swift half-pint sitting at a window where I am level with pedestrians' feet.

The next stretch had looked straightforward. After all, the street is still called The Great North Road as it passes Hatfield railway station. But then it suddenly disappears. Closer inspection reveals that it's jumped across the main line without bothering with a bridge. Yes, I had planned this section of the route back at home; no, I hadn't noticed this glaring anomaly. It turns out that there had been a bridge, but it had collapsed back in 1966. Eventually I find a pedestrian replacement brought in to assuage the locals, but all this gets me thinking rather more deeply. What exactly is the Great North Road? Is the Great North Road from one particular era purer than another? Is it the route, is it the tarmac, is it the modern name? I wasn't expecting such philosophical questions to arise so close to London.

The very next section puts me through my paces. The A1(M) snakes northwards, crossing the River Lea via an anonymous bridge. A busy B-road (bearing the GNR name)

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shadows it all the way. But I happen to know that an even earlier version of the road sidled further west to cross the Lea at Lemsford – initially via a ford. And even there I face a choice. The road used to wend its way due north along what is now a private tree-lined track. Am I to trespass in the name of sticking to the True Path?

I ponder these weighty issues while tucking into a plate of chips at The Sun pub, the bike locked to an ancient water pump in the back yard. With timeless cottages and a proprietorial heron fishing in the shallows, Lemsford has rolled back the years.

Two things are becoming clear. First, these unscheduled refreshment breaks are playing havoc with the timetable. I'm already aware of an internal dialogue between the "That looks interesting" devil and the "Keep on moving" angel. I wrestle with this dilemma for all of two minutes before deciding, with a dollop of ketchup, that the devil must win. I've got two weeks off work, my wife and kids are happy at home and I am in the very unusual position of being able to do whatever I want, without consequence. This is not a Land's End to John O'Groats race, it's a journey – a journey to be savoured.

Second, I will constantly have to choose between alternate routes. This has been a living, breathing road for centuries, so there's been layer upon layer of change. Clearly I can't take dual carriageways and I'm not wild about fast single-track A-roads either. But given the choice, I'll take the most

historic Great North Road available. In summary: keep safe, go old.

The chips – never the food of champions – sit a little heavy in the stomach on the climb out of Lemsford and up Digswell Hill. The A1 is in its own cutting to my left but the old road takes me up over a summit and down into Welwyn – that’s Welwyn the village as opposed to the garden city three miles to the south. Welwyn is the first of many places along the route with which I fall head-over-heels in love. I’m not sure why, but I hadn’t expected it to happen so close to London. It’s a pukka coaching village which looks utterly timeless. The big landowners here were too snooty to have anything to do with the railway in the nineteenth century, so while Potters Bar and Brookmans Park embraced the steam age, this place turned its back.

“Street and houses face you alarmingly as you descend the steep hillside,” wrote Harper, “wondering (if you cycle) if the sharp corner can safely be rounded, or if you must needs dash through door or window of The White Hart, once one of the two coaching inns of the village.”

I arrive in the same way down the same hill, but perhaps with better brakes. The White Hart still looks in fine fettle, as does The Wellington on the high street. I then turn right into Church Street where a cast-iron milestone tells me I’m 25 miles from London. *Four 25s in a 100, four 100s in 400*; there’s something about long-distance cycling that makes you want to sub-divide and rationalise. *Twenty-five miles*

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means I'm one-sixteenth of the way there, I think to myself. Roughly. Very roughly as it turns out.

After Welwyn, the Great North Road follows a Roman route heading through dormitory suburbs. The area around Mardley Hill was later renowned as a haunt of highwaymen – there's still a Robbery Bottom Lane to prove it. But as I breast another hill a different vista awaits – Stevenage, my destination for the night. I pass the ancient Roebuck pub, mentioned by all the history books as being some distance from what we now call Stevenage Old Town. These days it's been swallowed up in the conurbation, but it's still there – Airbnb customers being just the latest generation of travellers wanting the same old thing – a bed and a bite to eat. Then it's up past the delightfully named Roaring Meg shopping complex to the town centre where the Great North Road disappears under the strict grid pattern of this post-war new town.

I mooch around some underpasses in a slightly shifty manner, trying to find evidence of the old days. Thank goodness I've got the bike; without it I would look even more suspicious. After ten minutes I'm rewarded with a "Eureka" moment near the Six Hills Roundabout. The highway might not have survived but there's a solitary hedge running alongside the leisure centre. It undoubtedly marks one side of the original Great North Road. I suspect you can't really make a hedgerow verge Grade II listed, but I do hope no one is ever tempted to grub it up.

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A stone's throw away, my Ibis hotel is best described as adequate. They let me take the bike to the room, but the lift is so tiny that I have to wheelie it in – the front wheel almost touching the ceiling. But because I forget to take the pannier off first, both man and bike collapse in a heap in front of the receptionist. Never a good look. For my evening meal I walk to the Old Town where the nineteenth-century buildings feel very higgledy-piggledy compared to their newer neighbours – as if an Old England theme park has been parachuted in by mistake.

After fish and chips I walk back, again looking for relics. I discover, to my horror, that part of the Great North Road suffers the indignity of being buried under a Tesco car park. Tomorrow, surely, the road will be treated with more respect.

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