



The Club

SPRING RUN ~ Blois, April 26th-28th, 1996

Principal Organiser: Simon Hill

THURSDAY, 25th April

Time is definitively relative. Thursday afternoon dragged on interminably. The sun was shining, forecast excellent for the weekend and we were all off to the Club run in the Loire Valley organised by Simon Hill. Six o'clock eventually arrived - whoopee, leg over time.

Just after turning onto the M27, I passed Nicky Hopkins on his 1947 BSA B31 complete with large square cardboard suitcase borrowed from the BBC Props Dept. I arrived at the RAC office by about 8.30pm only to find most of the stalwarts already there. All this for a ten o'clock sailing. Keen or what? A few minutes later and the Hopkins BSA tonked into the park. Something about tortoises and hares came to mind. There was a suggestion to assemble in the Spice Island pub next to the RAC offices. It was not the Spice Island pub but no-one seemed interested in pubs at the time and stood around bench racing.

The fun started as P&O had posted the tickets but the GPO (if they merged they would be GO & POP) had mislaid some of them. Those without got their tickets easily enough and we all joined in the game of "Find Your Cabin" from a numbering system that defied logic. Added to this, the cabin keys were mixed up so much jollity ensued. It fell to my lot to share a cabin with Keith Blair and Nick Jeffery, both noted for their altitude but the cabin was remarkably commodious as long as the movements were co-ordinated.

Unfortunately, our choreographer's last work was The Keystone Cops Organise a Chinese Fire Drill.

We informally assembled upstairs in the lounge for drinks and were regaled, encouraged and generally assailed by a manic Mancunian trying to convince the assembled masses they were having a good time. P&O obviously think no one can be happy just having a pint and chatting so the DJ, MC or whatever kept up a line of banal cackle which turned into a pub quiz, ran into a cabaret spot with a couple of tired hoofers not getting any reaction from the crowd and winding up in a game of bingo. Bingo!!! Ye gods. Bed.

FRIDAY, 26th April

The Friday run was not a formally organised run - just get to Blois by evening. Simon Hill had produced a route which he distributed. It was beautifully detailed. This was the official unofficial Friday route whereas Norman Hyde produced a John Bull printing set unofficial route. The merits and choices took place in the car park just outside the customs post (no passport shown - love it). We split and headed out of town. I remember that both routes said, "Go over the Pont de Tancarville" but several of us managed to miss one of the biggest bridges in Europe and wound up instead going over the Pont de Normandie to Honfleur. A little knot of us continually picked up a bewildered biker standing at a junction until the mini-group wound up in Pont-Audemer and by mutual consent took breakfast.

Others rolled in to the same café until we were twelve strong. Norman Hyde was amongst the crowd and as keeper of one of the scrolls telling the secrets of the road south, it would be fine.

It was; only I am dashed if I can remember where we went as I was just enjoying rolling along in the Spring sunshine. I remember we went out towards the west to get some bend-swinging in and to head for some hills marked on the map so thoughtfully provided by Captain Hill. Nice one, good touch.

As we entered a little village, I saw it had a sign saying, "The Most Beautiful Village in France" and I wondered if this was official or whether they erected it on the grounds that other villages might not object or think it a good idea and copy it themselves and, anyway, who cares. The village was Mortagne au Perche and it perched (pun there) on top of a hill.

Climbing up through some bends, Alan Blake suddenly realised that the Cagiva River was not well. Irony of ironies, he had a puncture. Fortunately right outside a bar so having called the RAC, we repaired to the bar for an ale. The others carried on. The RAC were to be 30 minutes so, no problem. An hour later, another call, he(s on his way.

Oh no, he's not. It's lunchtime. It's France. You do not need to be a rocket science engineer to determine our strategy. We "gentled" the bikes round the corner to the square outside the Hotel de Ville and commandeered a pavement table at the Café du Theatre. The RAC was informed of the movement but could not say what time the man would arrive. However, lunch did arrive and disappeared as did a very fine Tourraine.

The nice young lady in the Hotel de Ville said there was a tyre repair place just out of town if all else failed. The RAC said they would try someone else who turned out to be the tyre man just outside town. "C'est la vie" as we say "up France".

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Central Scenery had set up this tyre shop just the way they used to be before Tom Farmer and his bleedin' fitters sanitised the arcane sport of puncture repairs. A Suzuki GS850G was in pieces all over the floor and bench,

right where yer man was to do the repair. Blakey was taking a keen interest in the repair and I'll swear that, at one time, he was inside the tyre inspecting the work. "Monsieur,

please take your head out, I cannot see what I am doing etc."

On the road again by 4pm. Standard operating practice for lunch in France, I'd say. Peter Sheen had stayed with us so the Blakey sandwich train set off to get to Blois. An excellent little scratch down to Belleme then to Nogent-le-Rotou followed by a rather boring bit to Chateaudun and thus to Blois. Peter Sheen had busted his right hand before the trip and was avoiding the front brake wherever possible so the long blast was soothing for him.

We hit Blois at about 5.30pm just as the schools turned out and the townsfolk were having their mandatory stroll around. Great seeing people in bright colours in the sunshine. Winter over - OFFICIAL. Three laps of Blois later (finally gave up astro-navigation and went to look at the Information board at the Tourist centre), we touched down at Hotel Mercure. Secure underground parking, swimming pool"ooh, that's livin' alright".

Nick Jeffery had pinched all the hangers. Fink. Bath, changed to mufti and out for stroll. The Loire River at this well inland point is wider than the Thames in the heart of London. There was a beautiful stone bridge with a vast icon right in the middle, all in carved stone. Anyone coming up the river in

early days would have got the message - Blois needs respect, right? Spotted the Flying Dutch brigade on finals. They had ridden 800km which is a fair old trek seeing as only David

McNeill had a sports tourer with Ludy Beumer and Bob Trigg on Yamaha Tediums

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which do not have much wind protection. I gather from Bob that Yamaha has managed to change the tone of the clunking gearbox this year...

Nicky Hopkins came tonking into town. There were times when I felt the thumping of the Beeza became our heartbeat for the trip.

Idled into a bar to drink in the atmosphere (and a Leffe - good, Belgian ale) but bumped into Graham Goodman, Peter Meek and Ray Battersby - the latter impersonating the late George Brown being tired and emotional. Must be the strain of working for the Koreans.

Back to the Mercure for supper. Waiters somewhat surprised that four bottles of wine disappeared so rapidly amongst us and were summoned to fetch more. They didn't catch up all weekend. We had left our first course and main course orders with the front desk on checking in but many had forgotten what they had ordered by the time it came round (all of a couple of hours later) and took anything remotely appetising. Hence the waiters were somewhat surprised to find they had four boeuf au vin rouge extra. Menu announced the dinner to be for "Groupe Hill" which made it sound like a rival to Groupe Bull, only we are more financially sound thanks to the stern stewardship of Dennis Bates who, in time-honoured manner, prised the obligatory FFr140 from us for the Petit Chat.

The standing operational details - such as the raffle and the route - were dispensed with so airily by Capitaine Hill that we were all eager for the "off", particularly as the forecast was so "brill". And so to bed ...er, later...

SATURDAY, 27th April

East from the hotel, cross the river, head east along the south bank of the Loire and we were on our way. What a stirring sight in the morning sunlight. - thirtyish bikes streaming along the road in a winding snake. Magic.

Turning south-east at Montlivault towards the Parc de Chambord, we pass what could only be described as a breaker's yard for cranes. Masses of jibs, buckets, cherry pickers, the whole schmeer. How do you start a business

like that? Where do you advertise - Echange et Marche?

We entered the Parc de Chambord through some impressive gates on a tight right-hander with a cattle grid right on the apex and I thought, "Bet that's fun in the wet!" Right in front was the Chateau de Chambord. It was straight from a Hollywood blockbuster. Standard issue Central Scenery Loire

Chateau complete with towers on towers of the standard, conical shape, vast, huge, obscene. I loved it. Can you drive straight up to it? No sir, you cannot. Keep the visitors in their place, monsieur, let them see it through the trees for miles as you take'em left and right, until you hit the house full frontal after what would have been a good half hour in a carriage. Impressive. Round the Chateau and out the back, there was a ride to rival the Long Walk at Windsor. It went from the Terrace straight as a die over the furthest hill. I just had to stop to take it in. What an obscenely beautiful demonstration of serious money! Some kilometres later, we went out of the other gates. Wow! Now that's an estate!

Down to Dhuizo (glad I only have to write it, not pronounce it) then cutting west towards coffee at St. Romain-sur-Cher. Beautiful roads climbing up through a wood with sun dappling through. I followed David Strathcarron for a bit through these woods with his ramrod-straight back, perfectly in line with the Beemer, bend swinging at 85 per. A stirring sight.

Coffee was taken at a bar which had not quite got the idea. They came to each table and asked for orders rather than making some big pots and letting us get on with it. However we are en vacance so does it matter? I noticed that Tony Dawson is determined to capture the world spot market for gun gum by the state of his silencers. (Tony, I'll get you yet!) Onwards south southwest, climbing up through St Aignan onto a vast, open plain with excellent roads opening up as you hit each bend. Dotted all around are water towers demonstrating the same flair for design which produced the 2CV, L'Arche in Paris and most French hotel light fittings. While ruminating

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about these, I was passed by the Blues Brothers (aka Davies K & R) rowing along a couple of Californian Chesterfields very smartly. Cool dudes rule, OK?

Smartly left at Nouans les Fontaines to head west to Loches before turning up to Amboise. I was signalling at the left turn and had the pleasure of listening to an Ex-Up with a nicely muted Yoshi being given a chance to do what all Ex-Ups should by its pilot, Nigel Brown who is a merchant banker - which is a profession, not rhyming slang. . .

This is a long straight road. We turned left. Thus, coming from where we were going, you would turn right onto this main road - following? An old boy in a Renault had not got out of the habit of priorite a droite and trundled towards me, swung right onto the main road, right in the path of an oncoming Clio. The Clio locked it all up and sailed passed me in a cloud of tyre smoke and left me with the lasting impression of a car full of four staring eyes and twenty white knuckles. They stopped and exchanged pleasantries with the old boy who must have been a bit mutt as they had to shout whatever pleasantries they wished to pass on.

Rode along for a bit with Ray Battersby on a CB750N and Geoff

Selvidge on a GPz1100 something. Both looked like parts bin specials in a desperate attempt to find out what sells. The Kwacker is bland and the idea of having a 750cc Honda retro rocket is daft, but what do I know? We were pressing on at a

reasonable speed but you could see the effort Ray was having to put in with no wind protection at all. Still, it(s all the fault of MCN etc.

Lunch was taken at Restaurant a Cave which was surprisingly accurately named as it was a restaurant in a cave carved in the side of a hill. A vast place about 250 ft deep into the hill. it must be able to seat 400 in total. It had a stage, a minstrels gallery etc. Where do they find the clientele in such a part of France? Still they "done good". Waiters in dickies,

effuse welcome, and ouillettes starters (made from the bits we give to vegetarian cows which drives them mad). a superb chicken dish for main course (with a nice Gamay from the region) followed by a flaming Bombe Surprise. Nobody phased by a bunch of bikers turning up. I supped with Chris Wade and Frank Finch and was regaled by tales of derring-do in the Island and some of the best jokes I have heard from Chris.

Pix taken in car park by Maitre D. Capitaine Hill urging us to stand still for the video which was more effective than saying "fromage". While there, Nick Jeffery had to try out the ABS on the Kwacker in the car park opposite. He has an insatiable curiosity about things which is endearing. He also stated firmly that the BMW 1100 he was using would not do more than 130mph. He certainly spent several long stretches trying to prove the point.

As did Dave Hill who was most illuminating about the extra 2000rev/min you can get if you really tuck in on the GSX750 whatever he was riding and confessed, at one point, on a 10 mile downhill bit, to be in VDO land on the speedo. Ugly back end though (fill in the rest yourselves).

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To Tours then back along the other side of the Loire, passing Vouvray of "fallingdownwater" fame before crossing at Amboise and proceeding to the Tea Stop. Well, most of us stopped but David Strathcarron carried straight on with Ludy in pursuit who eventually rescued him twelve miles

further on in a village. When he arrived at the tea stop, he decided he would sit out the visit and take a glass of wine. The waitress asked if he were an English Lord. He confessed. She was delighted but David said she was not delighted enough as she gave no discount on the wine! He also said it was cheaper in Tesco but the idea of David knowing what a Tesco is, let alone prices, had me amused for hours.

A tour of the mines was arranged. Bear in mind, this is a mushroom farm at a place called Montrichard which is French slang for

a hill full of BS which is somewhat apt. It turns out that this limestone hill was excavated over the years for the blocks required to build chateaux. They carved the limestone underground while it was soft and wet and could be worked with steel knives etc., trimmed the blocks to shape and only when they go outside, do they harden. They had wound up with 70 km of tunnels on seven floors. The Chateau-building business has gone into decline so now they use the empty shafts for growing mushrooms which need constant temperature and humidity. A skilled picker - as all mushrooms are picked by hand - can pick fifty kilos per hour. To get the stuff moved about, they had vehicles underground. They used to grow thirty million mushrooms per year but without profit. Now they grow top-of-the-range varieties in smaller volumes to turn a buck. Some of the varieties looked distinctly dodgy to me, being pale blue but a fascinating stop.

Back to the hotel. Mon Capitaine had complained that his bike had never been so slow as today, being the leader but, boy! Did he blast off on the way back? We passed some poseur on a full dresser Harley hogging the road and I thought he was going to fall off. He then got zapped by the masses. Larf? I thought they'd never dry.

Checking in to get keys, we were met by an octoroon to die for. Only the very young and the very beautiful can be so aloof. She was required to take the dining order from each, again to avoid the previous night's débâcle. Nice Try. Nobody was concentrating on food, just her.

A relax in the pool before dinner and watch

Defamation claims direct to my lawyers please.

Alan Baker

Dennis B do an impersonation of Moby Dick. Collect Blakey whose war wound prevented him from making the ride. A gargle with Bill Colqhoun (riding a modern serious bike for a change and enjoying it) and Frank Finch to lay the dust. That Leffe is nice beer, got a nutty bite to it. Dinner and we had again forgotten what we had ordered an hour ago. I blame it on the crumpet.

The fines are getting heavy,. n'est pas? The Sergeant at Arms raised (87!!!! I remember when it was 20p fine max. Keith Blair was so keen on entertaining Yvon the RAC man, he kept losing his cutlery and the staff had to bring more. They were perplexed as we looked "all growed up". Not so. Wilf Harrison told an hilarious tale about a female map reader not being able to find Guildford because the map was 8 years old. And there was more, and more etcetera. Bed. Later.

SUNDAY, 28th April

After club business on Sunday, we rolled our way back to the coast by several routes. Funny how we passed a knot of members travelling at right angles to our direction. Sadly Nicky's BSA got a puncture but its heart never stopped. Leisurely lunch a bateau, two bottles of crisp Cotes du Rhone Rose, smoothly off.

And smoothly is the word for me that summed the weekend, as ever. To Simon and Dave Martin, and Hugh and the RAC, our very grateful thanks for what has been the highlight of my year.

My Fun Bucket brimmeth over.

CHEERS!

April 1996