



## The Club

### CLUB RUN

April 23<sup>rd</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> 1999

#### KETTERING, NORTHANTS

So there I was, right, battling into a deluge of the heaviest rain I had seen in years on the M1 having come through local floods up to a foot deep, chanting a mantra of "I am doing this in my own time because I like it and I am enjoying it", when I looked in the mirror and saw the word WATERPROOF. Oh no, Mr Rukka, not today it's not, no way. Spent rest of journey composing snotty letter to the Rukka company to pass the miserable time. Not a fun ride, I think was the consensus of the members who assembled at the Royal Hotel in Kettering on Friday night.

The first test was a downhill adverse camber entrance to the parking area on wet cobbles. Shades of Brno at its best. Still, the parking area was under cover but home to pigeons who took a dislike to Dave Hill's Diversion and left a deposit for him to enjoy the next morning.

The usual happened at the reception. Please register and we will give you your key. "Can I come back later to fill in the form because I am not going to do a runner and I'm bleedin freezing". No problem as a concept but you can't have your key until you sign for it. Knickers. Go to bog to run hands under hot water to get them moving and return to sign form. Decided to do all the rest of name, address etc., in a fist that was decidedly indecipherable. Let them sort that out.

The 17th century Royal Hotel was built as a coaching inn, slap in the middle of town, opposite the market square. Its brochure proudly proclaims that no two rooms are the same which is a fairly redundant piece of information for any guest when you think about it. But, it had character as these old places often do. Bits were added at various times and in various styles leading to an interesting maze of a place. It has suffered from the town planners pedestrianising the High Street, closing all the access and feeders roads, making parking anywhere near the centre of town an impossibility, in their attempt to stop the town being "killed" by the car. Hence it does not

have the travelling traffic associated with cross-country journeys as who could be bothered to come into Kettering, what with the ghastly road system.

The thinking behind this concept is hard to argue against when the planners have captured the moral high ground and shown the architects' drawings of idyllic public spaces with beautiful people strolling along brick paved pedestrian roads. The reality is ghastly, obese, track-suited lumpen proletariat, stuffing their faces with fast food and littering the place with Styrofoam cartons. Any real shops, dealing with people's work-a-day essentials, have to leave town as nobody can carry the purchases to the car park. You therefore wind up with a High Street, the life blood of a town, populated with banks, building societies, charity shops, jewellers' and dress shops.

The planners are always delighted with their work. I chatted with the guilty parties in Kidderminster who have done a neutron bomb on that burg and they defended their work on the grounds that they have no trouble in the town after the conversion. Yes, true, but the reason is that there is no *life* left. Interesting to note that in Kettering (where the progress is still continuing and road works were everywhere) local shops have banded together in a belated attempt to stop the madness and have posters up appealing for help to preserve town centre life. Too late, my friends, too late. The upshot was the Royal was patroned by the Club and those misfits who habitate the centre of towns that have been "made over" by the planners. Spotting the difference would have been a good game if you were an anthropologist from Mars. I jest.

A private bar was set aside for members to enjoy a pre prandial tincture. There was access straight from the road which led to a few locals joining us plus kids streaming through to play pool in another side room. The usual circulation and chatting carried on as if 'twere only yesterday we were all together. Snippets I picked up were that Bob McMillan circulated the Island in 23 minutes something, at an average of 97.3 mph, on an F6C Valkerie during the Honda parade last year. He did this because Dave Hancock came past on an NR750 going down Bray Hill and Bob was not going to let him get away with that. Mind boggling. He rues that he did not go road racing in his youth... Peter Bolton told me he shifted a million NSU Quicklies and another Million Puch Maxis. It was good to see Ray Battersby back on a bike. Apparently an arm muscle was severed in the accident which won't rejoin so he is not able to do a "Heil Hitler" with his left arm.

Supper was served in a private dining room that had a massive pillar off-centre in its midst. This ostracised one table from the rest. As there were four circular tables, it worked out fine as each became its own centre of intrigue. Guests for the run were introduced. Tony Jakeman from Suzuki was on a very pretty looking SV650S. When I remarked on the bike, Tony said it could use a bit more grunt but it was very forgiving whereas the TL1000S was a fearsome brute to really use hard. Poor old bike manufacturers trying to serve all of the market demands. Sounds like Suzuki need to make a 900 version and slot it in the SV650 chassis - don't they know *anybody* at Ducati? Tony was the Guest of Tony Jeffrey (ex Kawasaki) and now ex-asperated Renault man.

Norman Hyde brought along a bank manager called Ray Smith. Now what is it, Norman? This is the second banker you have brought along. Is there a message? Ray is on secondment to Business Link which is an excellent scheme in my experience and made more so because they

employ commercial people like Ray, not just Town Hall types. Ray was on his own GPz1100 and is an active member of Bikers for Business.

The new CEO of the MCIA (all rise), Mark Foster, came along on his FJ1200 which is one of 11 bikes he owns and I understand he indulges in endurance racing. He was invited by Tom Waterer which I do not think was a sudden whim, do you? Nicky Hopkins brought along Neil Henley from the BSA organisation. Neil was on that peculiar bike, the T509, which is Triumph's attempt to make a mass produced street fighter. Guess they missed the point there.

Mike Russell de Clifford from Three Cross came along as the guest of Dave Hill (another ex Kawasaki man). Dave's day job now is working for an Italian company, running the warranty side for Italian bike manufacturers. I'll let you sort out your thoughts on that when you consider he left Suzuki because of frustration over not being able to get jobs completed properly..... Still he looked better than on previous occasions and even pogonotomically immaculate.

As Mike is the service manager of Three Cross, I wondered if Keith and Richard had paid Dave to bring him along as their own personal RAC service. The run Organiser, Martin Lambert, brought along a "journalist", Paul Fowler, riding a Kawasaki W650. Does anybody understand the rationale of the W650? Bin' thur, dun that, didn't like it first time. Lots of people had a go on it out of curiosity, I noticed. Somebody wondered if this was a first - having a guest as TEC - but I seem to remember that Rollo had a guest as TEC on his Dunchurch '91 run and Frank Finch was PRTS' TEC in Normandy '92. And talking of firsts, was my CX650Turbo the first turbo on a run or did I see an XN85 in the 25th run pictures?

Tony Dawson was absent, attending a conference on wheels in Holland so the quiz was laid round by Dennis to be marked on Saturday. A suggestion for you, Tony. Put in a space asking for your name so that people hand in the forms with their names. And, just for me, could you call it Question 1. so I can get one right, please? Unless I have a senior moment, that is.

Martin Lambert introduced the run and was going well until he said the "route will run parallel...." That word brought forth much mirth from various parties which proceeded to include puns on grey etc. The second outbreak of much mirth was caused by stating that our luncheon menu selections would be emailed to the restaurant. Quel poseur or is it just the reality of the world?

A motorcycle club using email to order lunch in a country restaurant. I love it, such exciting times.

Andy Smith took charge of the raffle and, dispensing with the random nature of drawing tickets from a bucket, dished out prizes as he thought fit. Simon Hill got back his disc locks, for example. The tension in the room was palpable as one and all feared getting back their prize and the attendant opprobrium.

And so to the bar for general gargling which went on for a good long time, I understand. I had to cry off as I had been called out at 04.00 hours that morning to sort out an crisis. My new job as emergency transport manager to Cinderella is not as easy as it sounds. I gather it was a good

session as I awoke to find Mike Jackson abed fully clothed. "Forgot my jimjams, old boy" was the proffered mumbled excuse. Pity that Mike had to split to get to the Stafford Classic show as his riding and wit are part of the Club runs in my book. Apparently Dave Martin surfaced looking somewhat jaded and proclaimed he felt surprisingly well. Ummm, the jury is still out Dave.

Breakfast was in the main dining room which had a fabulous glass dome made from curved panels and fired with two tone yellow glaze in fleur-de-lis type patterns. This feature was alighted upon by Martin Lambert who proceeded to instruct us in this particular art, quoting the rare earth metal involved, the two firing temperatures required and how to hold the glass during the firing so you do not lose the curvature. As Bob McMillan had been quoted the night before, there is a lot of skill in the room. Well, actually, there is some discussion over exactly what he did say but, for public consumption, we will leave it at skill. The walls were tiled, as were many in the Hotel, which is fabulous as a low maintenance idea but does limit one when it comes to changing decor.

Because of the limited space in the car park, we were required to assemble on the road opposite the market by 08.45. The majority did so but then waited as a straggler or two turned up. While waiting, we were treated to a sighting of Elvis. This old dude (*or was it a woman?*) came down the road wearing a white Lycra suit, gold piping, gold infill panels on the flares, jet black hair in a DA and quiff, holding a ghetto blaster in one hand and trailing a miniature pooch from the other. The final irony was the playing of "You Ain't Nothin' But a Hound Dawg" from the Brixton Briefcase. We looked at him (*her?*) and thought "What a weirdo" and I bet he (*she?*) was thinking "What on earth are those wrinkly rockers on?" Meanwhile, the market carried on without a glance to either strange party. At times like these I love this country.

As we left the town, we went under a narrow railway bridge that had markings in the middle for HGVs and I swear Andy Smith obeyed on the Yamaha Venture Star. Just coming out of the town, I glanced down for no reason and something strange caught my eye. I thought I could see the bottom left hand fork yoke stanchion bolt unwinding. This was about as welcome as a rattle snake in a lucky dip. It took a couple of looks to confirm my suspicions. Thank heavens for the RAC van. Cheers, Matt.

This was unfortunate because the run from Market Harborough to Uppingham looked like a blast but I thought I would stick behind the RAC van as I had not got the route with me. Matt really chucks that RAC van about, followed by the noisiest trailer in Christendom, bouncing off ditches, drain covers and the like. Hugh was navigating, so three times Matt screeched to a halt, looked over to the map, did an about turn and off we went again. Was Hugh in the Ordnance Corps?

I made a mental note of one village we went through, Sutton Bassett. The sun was shining and as we dropped into the village, it was perfect chocolate box material. There was a small pond in the centre, a church off to one side and a clutch of traditional houses complete with thatched roofs. God was in her heaven planning her retirement so she can spend more time with her kids. Seeing things like that are manna to me and the essence of the rides. As well as dreaming up

village names such as Little Starching in the Gusset, why is there a Stow in the Wold and who left it there.

The coffee stop was only 35 miles out in Uppingham (another one of those names!) so very easy to catch up with the run and check over the rest of the bike. While doing so, Tom and John Nelson chatted with me, the latter bemoaning the fact that dragging his bikes around in the garage is getting harder. So it's not just me. Tom was having great fun on the Tiger (on loan from Triumph) although, while collecting it, he endured listening to JSB moaning on about the state of British manufacturing. During the coffee stop, we found a military type in our midst, complete with pint. This is 10.00 in the morning. Good on you colonel. I gather Hugh and he got together and discovered that he was a paratrooper trying to hold the Bridge at Arnhem and Hugh had fought his way across from Normandy and was in the brigade that rescued him.

Leaving Uppingham on a SSE routing to Greeton, we dropped off the high ground of Rutland and then wound round and headed up towards the flatter parts of Lincolnshire. I don't know about you but I wonder how some of the villages get their names. Burton Coggles springs to mind. What is the root of Coggles? And what is behind the use of so many misogynistic names like Dyke, Bitchfield and Witchampton. Still, good riding country and I think by lunch we had only encountered six cars on the route. Somewhere on this route, many remarked on a priest, in full hassock, striding through his village and attending his flock.

Lunch was 101 miles out so I, for one, was ready for some munchies. Wilf Harrison caused much hilarity by producing a boot remover from his panniers. He stood on this forked device and heaved off a boot at a time. Good thinking, Batman. When planning the route, the obvious stopping place was the Woodhouse Inn at Corby Glen (as an aside, Martin told me he did 4800 miles putting the route together and that, when finished, he had a run of 276 miles in. Tom advised him to trim it a bit). Martin dithered about whether they would accept motorcyclists. I find it interesting that even the young generation have this built-in concept about bikers not being socially acceptable. Until we can get ourselves believing, we will never get the public with us. The landlord had no problem with the concept of 40 covers at lunchtime in April, plus drinks. (*He was of Spanish extraction and they know how to spot a customer, see*). It was a delightful place and one of the best lunch stops we have had and I gather very good value for money.

The Woodhouse claims to have the only Sardinian oven in a British country pub - and who can counter such claim?. In this oven, they roast suckling pig, venison or any carcass you nominate. They make their own pasta and use local produce whenever possible, such as wild asparagus, to go with their banquets. For those who did not pick up a leaflet explaining the concept of the Sardinian meal, try PPAJAY@btinternet.com to get a copy. It is wonderfully continental in its writing and certainly not PC. This revolution in British pub grub is a great success and a necessary change to our way of life. Yet we still have the reputation abroad of awful food. It will take a generation to correct the perception in the same way as we need a generation of constant PR to correct the biker image. Michael and Linda Pichel-Juan made us most welcome with an excellent menu, very friendly staff and a great ambience. How splendid it is to find a smooth Yorkshire-born Spaniard in Lincolnshire offering Sardinian fare to a bunch of bikers.

Small problem on departure. We had ordered and paid for a plate of spaghetti al pomodoro which no one claimed. Some of the tightwads were determined to take it with us so were hunting for someone with a top box or panniers. There was a serious conversation to this effect, I kid you not. Very sad.

The morning was in fine sunshine but as we set off in the afternoon, there was a drop of rain about. It was very local and Norman reported sitting in the sun at a marsh point when a rider pulled up, absolutely dripping wet. It was possibly the same spot where Norman was positioned perfectly in the line of sight as you approached him, with a sign above his head which read "ANTIQUES".

An oh-so-gentle trimble of 30 miles to the tea/petrol stop. It was a nice, open road and I witnessed the Revenge of Nicky H. He came flying by everyone with body language that shrieked "Take that and that and that for all of you who have spent the last several years passing my BSA with 60mph in hand". Great to see Nick on a modern machine but surprised that he describes it as an old fart's bike. It is a lovely tourer and well conceived. Not far behind Nick was Richard Davies, riding like the wind on an incredibly tidy Laverda 750S Formula. This is a beautiful piece of engineering from a small producer (70 bikes a week, I believe) and could only be made in Italy with its component and technology pool of motor cycle engineering.

We were riding through field after field of vivid yellow oil rape with its cloying, nasty odour. This odour is only beaten for offensiveness when the oil it produces is used in fast food cooking. All the way along here, bugs were committing Hara-Kiri on the visors. Maybe they were these Millenium bugs that people are blathering on about. I do not know what all the fuss regarding millennium bugs is about. It appears to be easily summed up by Y2K so I have changed my diary for next year to read MondaK, TuesdaK etc., and the months to JanuarK, FebruarK. What on earth has this got to do with the year 2000?

Trouble ahead. The petrol stop was on the A1 and the right wrists were getting some WOT exercise so stopping was interesting. Bob McMillan couldn't and didn't. From here, we moved a couple of miles to the Nene Valley Railway at Wansford. Nicky Hopkins had swapped with Andy Smith and enjoyed the Venture Star briefly until he got to the muddy car park. A motocrosser it is not and many hands pulled it upright. I do not think it would be easy single-handed.

So here we are again, another museum to our engineering past. I applaud the concept, I admire the dedication and I wonder what we shall leave to our descendants from our era of manufacturing in the 80's and 90's. Or even if we should. Maybe the Blessed Margaret had it right. We have neither the culture nor the educational input to create a manufacturing society so we will earn our place in the world from service industries. Enough before I cry, already.

I personally do not warm to steam engines but I can appreciate the enthusiasm they generate. They are impressive bits of engineering from an era where they would be expected to last in working order for the foreseeable future. What was not foreseen was the arrival of a competitor, the infernal congestion engine, which made them redundant. The Club is suddenly immersed in

steam-speak of 0-4-4-2 versus 2-4-5 layouts, Britannia class (Norman was pleased to spot engine number 700000 in the sheds as it completes his book!), compound motion etc. So many are really well versed in steam-speak, it was a pleasure listening to the explanations of all the important pieces on view. While we were there, a locomotive of the 92 Squadron pulled up and did its routine of moving forward, moving backwards along another line, filling with water and moving forward and moving backwards to couple with carriages. This erotic pas-de-deux brought lumps to trows all over the place but all I could see was the incredible inefficiencies of steam escaping from every gland, water slopping on the track and lack of grip when moving off.

But I did warm to the creator of the engine on display, an Irishman called Oliver Bulleid. Nick Jeffrey explained just how free thinking this guy was, from using streamlining of the cab to inventing a coat hanger that overcomes the problem of the traditional design. Grab this. When you take off your suit, you remove the jacket first, then the trows. So this matey invents a coat hanger that accepts both separately, not as per the normal design. Can't fault the logic so far. But where is it, Nick? Did it not fit a normal wardrobe? We need to bottom this important point from our past.

There was a small exhibition in a carriage about the Great Train Robbery. The tone of this, as of all other mentions of the same, always seem to offer admiration for such planning and such boldness. Never mind the fact that they brained some poor sod which led to his early death and stole money from the rest of us.

The station building was lovely and curvy, unlike some modern designers' brutal perceptions. Perhaps we should get rules and straight edges banned from Architectural Colleges to see if that would make a difference. A pox on the house of Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, not forgetting that toffee-nosed ponce, le Corbusier. For all his pontificating about art, aesthetics, style etc., le Corbusier only built 17 houses in all his life and 16 of these were commissioned by his family. His one and only outside commission was for a block of "workers' flats" in Turin and, at the first opportunity, the inhabitants fire-bombed them to rubble. However, there is hope in Frank Gehry with his stupendous Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao and a few other signs of recognising nature and curves, odd numbers and chaos theory. I enjoyed wandering around looking at features on the station which were there to add beauty and had no particular function. While looking around for the washroom, I was informed in officialese by a volunteer that the facilities were "subterranean under the station complex". Wow! Otiose or what?

Another 30 miles and we were back to the Royal. I tagged along with Norman and Ray-the-Banker which was a fun ride and then treated them to a dust settler on arrival. Ray was a fund (if you dig you will find a pun) of stories but I wonder what he is like if you can't service his loan? Norman is such a raconteur, I must chuck in one of his from a recent MCIA do. He was welcoming Mark Foster as the CEO and concluded that "previously we were on the edge of the abyss and now, with Mark here, we have taken a giant step forward". Lovely man.

Mass quaffing and bench-racing session in the private bar as per standing operational instructions. Martin Roberts was extolling the noisy horror of a race can on his 1200 Bandit 'cos it makes it go 30 mph faster. Now that is bench-racing par excellence. Let us assume it does

125mph from 100 bhp as stock. So 30 mph faster, it now does 155mph (!). To do that the power would have to go up to about 195 bhp as it is approximately a cubic relationship. Just goes to show that even top level engineers love to tell a good tale when it comes to bikes. And the fruit of the hop can work its magic on those with brains that work out every day. Maybe a muscle bound brain is not a good thing.

Peter Sheen was looking very much fitter than last time I saw him over a year ago and he was pleased with his progress but conscious of the fact that he is in remission. Doug Mitchenall won the doghouse prize because he was supposed to be in Devon on holiday. On Sunday he would point the wheels south and catch up with the family and, I expect, a large helping of tongue pie. Simon Hill could not join us for dinner as he had to split for some other more important event. As he, apparently, lost his mobile on the run he might not be grunted. There were several regulars not on the run or those who dropped in and had to leave. Diaries do get full these days.

Frank Finch had a full Akropovic exhaust on his Thunderace made from unobtainium, costalotium and unaffordium which was cheaper than replacing the Yamaha factory exhaust damaged in a whoopsie. That could make a business, must look into it. Dave Martin confessed to being haunted by a pair of eyes that belonging to a man in a Citroen BX who pulled out in front of him and his Bed Pan. Result was a written-off Bed Pan and a totalled BX. Me, I felt sorry for the tosser in the BX as I would not like to be in his shoes, post collision, with Dave bearing down. For general interest, Dave reckons that BX's are good cars to hit, if that is your bag, as they have plastic bonnets and are soft to land on. If you say so, Dave.

Dinner despatched, we were rewarded with the marking of the quiz by Dennis Bates which, considering the protestations from the masses, appeared to be done in a splendidly arbitrary way with the RAC membership going to Nicky Hopkins. A nice irony here. Nick has been on all the Club Runs I can remember on a 1950 B31, peddling his all steel British bicycle from Hampshire to Cumbria, for example, with no support trucks available, accompanied by a brown crapboard suitcase as a sole companion and completing each run and the trek home without a problem. He turns out on a modern Italian tourer of the first rank and gets a breakdown prize. Is it me?

Keith Davies prised money from each and every one of us for various atrocities against the Road Traffic Act, dress sense and behavioural malfunctions. And thence to the watering hole where the inevitable disco from the main bar pervaded the space, flappers plied strong ale to all and it goes fuzzy in my memory. I vaguely remember some arcane discussion about the new RAC livery and some wag explaining the rationale of the vertical placing of the RAC logo on the side. This, it was claimed, was for bikers to read when they had fallen off and were lying in the road. This prompted a discussion over which side you had to fall off to ensure you could read the logo. Yes, you win, it is me.

On my Sunday morning constitutional, I thought I would take a stroll to Station Road, Kettering, home of that bastion of art, love, truth and beauty, Motor Cycle News. Turning into Station Road, I passed the Driving Standards Agency, the Kettering Centre for the Unemployed and then came to MCN. Walking back on the other side of the road, every single building was a firm of solicitors. A self-contained road for the needs of MCN, methinks.



The Club meeting was shaken with the news that Dennis Bates would not be on the September run. The first run for 24 years without Dennis. We all contemplated the horror of this announcement for Dennis does so much work over the weekend and I feel we overlook the effort it required to keep a tab and tally, not forgetting the accounts which he also runs for the whole weekend. A belated thanks from all of us for your work, Dennis.

Hugh Palin announced that the RAC service for the run was in the balance right up to the last minute because of the impending changes at the RAC. However, Hugh managed to find the right man in the right position and used his diplomatic skills to lay on the RAC again. There is some doubt as to the continuation of this service. Certainly, I doubt if we will enjoy it as a free donation from the RAC via Hugh's connections. The Club will have to make up its mind as to the cost benefit or contemplate alternatives such as no cover. Just like real life.

Our sincerest thanks to Martin Lambert and Paul Fowler for a superb run with so little traffic, good roads and interesting stops. See you September in Dorset.

Alan Baker.

**Pictures:** John Nelson, Peter Sheen, Dennis Bates.



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