



The Club

Club Run Report Church Stretton

September 2002

As I sit here at my keyboard and I am reminded of the familiar sight of “JB”, John Brown, of MCN and Racing Motorcycle Correspondent of the Daily Telegraph, ensconced in the TT press office. Along with the likes of contemporaries Norrie White and David Fern he has carried forward the long tradition of motorcycle race reporting on the Isle of Man appearing in the press office for nigh on forty years until his recent decision to concentrate on railway over motorcycle journalism.

The consummate professional, he is forever famous for finding the first few “pars” a little hard. Seeing him pace up and down trying to string the early ideas together for a report was always hilarious. His face screwed up like an old dishcloth, he would be the centre of attention demanding a few words or a line from each of his trusted cohorts until such time he would come off literary “choke” and the prose would begin flow.

The same is true about these Club Run reports. There is so much to tell about a weekends’ worth of riding, talking, eating, boasting, drinking and, above all, laughing, it’s difficult to know where to start. It’s as true now as when the Club first started that there is a definite advantage in the twice yearly “recharge” of the motorcycling battery.

That being said, when the call to arms arrived for the Church Stretton Club Run a feeling of déjà vu washed over me. I well remember the last time I was in Church Stretton some twenty five or thirty years ago as part of a school geography field trip. After three days of measuring wetted perimeters, charting ox-bow lakes and marvelling at the elegant simplicities of clinometers we had learnt one very important lesson – if you look too young to be served in your local pub then don’t be surprised to be chucked out of one in Shropshire too!

It was fitting then that a quarter of a century later one of my two companions for the “gallop” to the Hotel would be a man who had spent his boyhood in and around Church Stretton. And had probably been refused service in a good many of its pubs in his younger years too! Andy Smith and I arranged to ride up together on the Friday afternoon stopping off on the way for a cup of char at his relatives’ house. We would be joined on the journey, and over the weekend, by my guest, Andy Witt, a graphic designer for Kawasaki in the UK.

I determined that the last thing I would do would be to keep Mr Smith waiting... so the last thing I did was delay our departure by twenty minutes with a whole series of “must do” functions that I felt sure would push Kawasaki into a market leading stance immediately. With that ambitious thought fresh in my mind, I joined the two Andy’s in reception and we set our compasses for Wales.

Andy, mounted on his by now familiar Yamaha R1, led the way up the M40 and we were soon at full trot. Smith A rode like a true motorcycle professional on the motorway. Not a Bob Hartle or even a Max Biaggi - more like a down at heel and desperate despatch rider. His ability to make progress was astounding. At one time we spent a couple of minutes in a recognised lane of the motorway but mostly it was a lane of his own creation. As ever, our Andy behaved like a true gentlemen conspicuously thanking all the vehicles that he had overtaken with a lordly graceful wave of the hand – usually just before myself and the “other Andy” rushed through the rapidly decreasing gap he had found or forged in the late afternoon traffic.

With the tedium of the M40 and brief interlude on the M5 “despatched” we settled rather like a catholic motorcycle club into a “rhythm” with our chum from Yamaha leading. Reassuringly familiar with the journey, Andy courteously pointed out all the speed traps, cameras, potholes and apex overbanding repairs that are increasingly littering the roads of the UK and we made good speed to our first fuel stop. Just outside Kidderminster we kicked the side-stands down and replenished our tanks. Andy Witt, who had use of a brand new 190 bhp ZX-12R courtesy of those lovely people at Kawasaki, would need most liquid petroleum having explored right up to the gummed edge of the performance envelope several times on the M40. Monsignor Smith and myself were possessed of slightly lighter throttle hands. Even so my mount, a ZZR-1200, needed the wrong side of eleven pounds worth of gasoline to fill it to the brim and Andy faired no little better. Such is the respect and trust I place in my long time industry colleague I balked not at his suggestion that I pay for this replenishment and our “Mitsui Maestro” pay at the next and final fill.

When we finally accelerated onto the asphalt a thought occurred... what is it with the longitudinal obsession of major road planners in the UK? I am lucky, I suppose, living adjacent to the A14, a genuine and rare major horizontal road located primarily in the in the “Rose of the Shires”, but there does seem to be a “North/South” obsession at large in our green and pleasant land. I grant that there is the odd concession like the M’s 4 and 3, but by and large the majority of our asphalt arteries face North/South. The natural barrier of the M5 certainly appears to act as a metallised Maginot line effectively barring the way west to Wales. It’s almost like there is a conspiracy to keep the welsh in Wales, and the rest of us out. The benefit of this, we would soon find out, is that the roads are, even to this day, relatively untrammelled and well surfaced.

That though still lay for us to discover on the Saturday run. This being Friday we had yet to traverse the last thirty miles to Church Stretton and

make our family “Rosie Lea” stop. Andy took us to meet his kith and kin and we heard, at first hand, a little of the local history.

The hills that surround Church Stretton looked fearsome steep at this proximity and this turned out to be a natural secret weapon of sorts. It appears that in Roman times, and perhaps for centuries before that, it was custom to meet potential invaders with a boulder or two rolled from the upper reaches of the considerable inclines. Even in these days of “fly-by-wire” and computer telemetry it’s difficult to argue with a two-ton lump of granite in the gob and I expect it more than smarted even in those days. You would not be surprised to know that even the rolling stones (no not Mick and Keith!) could not stop the irrepressible Romans who blundered right through the site of the town on their way to have a “butchers” at the Welsh coast. The name of the town is nothing more than “town on the street” with the church tagged on, presumably for ecclesiastical impact.

Having said our thanks and goodbyes, we remounted for the last leg to the Hotel. The slight descent into Church Stretton took us past some of the more expensive and recently built houses and a crossroads with traffic lights. Luckily I was over the brake lever as Andy suddenly veered left and sharp right. I followed and so did my guest Mr Witt but we were both a tad confused having expected to traverse the intersection and make for our accommodation. We made our suppositions far too soon as the “Weybridge wonder” had planned this little excursion so that we could refill with petrol so that our tanks were brim full for the morning. Remembering that I had divvied up for the last bowser of high octane Andy immediately offered to repay the compliment. What a man, and enough to reassure you that this attention to detail was just part of the reason why he has risen to such giddy heights in the modern motorcycle industry. That and the fact that on my refuel I paid just under £12 for his juice and that my refuel cost Andy one pound seventy seven pence!

So with the equivalent of a Turkish coffee cup full of petrol extra on board I tucked in behind Mr Smith and we made our way up the nearest thing “little Switzerland” had to the Eiger. At the top we were either going to reach a hotel or Bloefelds lair, luckily it was the former.

The gates to the hotel beckoned and within yards a phalanx of assorted motorcycles welcomed us. Just like the members of the club many of the machines they choose to ride also seem like familiar faces. There was a Yamaha 600 Diversion, another big Yamaha (an FJ12 perhaps), selected middle and large capacity BMW’s and a Sachs... I could not tell you whether it was male or female though without getting underneath. Oh yes, and there was a tractor too. Even though the ZZR-1200 I was riding was one of the first in the country it was the second to appear at Long Mynd. The honour of being the first went to “Gauleiter Kawasaki Europe”, Geoff Selvidge, who had done the honourable thing and ridden from the flat expanses of Holland to attend the run. He was joined on the low wall that served as the spectator stand to view arrivals by Dennis Bates (no surprise there) and Rick Parrish taking a well earned rest from counting the ex-Ventress millions. I parked and noticed

a lurking Tony Dawson in mid lurk busily checking out the assembled machinery – perhaps he was a quisling for the Sergeant at Arms examining assorted tax discs and other sundry misdemeanours ready for the Saturday night meal – that or he was gathering ideas for his latest commercial coup.

Having taken the luggage off the ZZ-R I joined the two Andy's and we all made our way towards a wedding cake shaped like a hotel..... or was it a Hotel shaped like a wedding cake. The application of tons of stucco was further accentuated by pink paint against a background of the white building. I never did check if there was a bride and groom stationed on the "widows walk" at the peak but I would not have been surprised. This somewhat effeminate appearance was certainly at odds with the motorcycling history of the Hotel.

As the venue of the famous "Victory" trial, the Long Mynd holds a place in the hearts of more than a few of the senior members.

To explain, the Victory was inaugurated in 1919 to commemorate the Germans coming second in WW1. The original cup was given by Lord Calthorpe to the organisers Birmingham MCC. There were 77 eager entrants in 1919 with 73 starters and 62 finishers, all no doubt on hard tail machines using road tyres – poor sods. Like many famous sporting and social events it was "interrupted" again during the second war only to be reinstated in 1946 when works rider, Fred Rist on a 499 BSA single won. Journalist Dennis Mansell - who some may recollect wrote for Motor Cycling - took the sidecar title with a Norton. 1950 was another landmark year for the Victory in that it marked the arrival of the Dunlop Trails Universal, the first of what is now a long line of specialist off-road tyres. With its ability to run at near-zero pressures for extra grip the Trials Universal transformed competitions like nothing else. In that fateful year the trial was won by Isle of Man resident and video entrepreneur, Geoff Duke on a 490cc Norton.

With the ghosts of riders and machines swirling around us we made for the body of the hotel.

Reception was quite unlike any hotel I have yet been to in my adult life. The Hotel Niko de Paris sells Chanel bags, The Sheraton in Boston has the facility to hire a stretch limousine at time of check in and the New Otani, Harborland, Kobe can furnish you with a seventy year old woman to walk up and down your back (the Japanese version of "executive relief" one supposes). However, this slightly down at heel hotel on the Welsh borders beat them all.

The re-branding of gifts to suit their eventual destination is a particular bugbear of mine. It's not that I begrudge the gentleman that "travels in Shortbread" but he really should save on his company car fuel bill and confine himself to Scotland and its border towns – where you would naturally expect to find such a high calorie relative of the humble digestive. Quite what links "Gods own country" and Church Stretton I don't know. So to find a lovingly illustrated tin of said confectionary for sale in the Hotel foyer would, under

normal circumstances, be most strange – were it not for its companions on the well stocked shelves. Various pickles vied for attention alongside relishes, pots of preserves, post-it-notes, female sanitary products and, to top it all, chilli and garlic flavoured mayonnaise!

Now I am as broad minded as anyone else, but I should think that if one were to be checking into a secluded Hotel for an unscheduled weekend “pitstop” with a companion one might have Champagne and perhaps strawberries at the top of one’s list of things they have forgotten to pack.

Still who are we to judge? it is, after all, better to be prepared than to make one’s journey and realise a vital comestible has been left on the kitchen counter – something that should have occurred to our dear friend Ernest Shackleton when he took dogs to the South Pole but forgot to take any canine health supplies, but more of Sir Ernest and other bold “endeavours” later.

Up the stairs to the first floor we carried our bike kit and clothing for the weekend. I am sure there must be regular shaped rooms within the confines of the Long Mynd Hotel but the Lambert billet for the duration was an L shaped corridor with the bathroom comprising its shortest leg. Andy Witt would have one of the beds which were placed toe to toe with his head just three inches from the room door. I would take its partner situated so as to give a clear and interrupted view of the toilet – luxury indeed.

Luggage stowed I decided to take my ease and check out the ceramics in the aforesaid “little motorcyclists room”. Harking back to our Roman forefathers who once tracked this way in their Gucci sandals, the facilities on offer were most reminiscent of that race. Due to the rising earth bank outside which formed a natural amphitheatre for the arrival of our two wheel brethren, it would be entirely possible to sit on the throne and hold a conversation at just about eye level with Dennis or any number of those watching the scene unfold on the sun bathed car park. Of course modesty prevailed, and as soon as the novelty of conducting one’s ablutions in public gaze wore off I repaired to the dining room to cast a beady eye over the raffle prizes.

Rest assured there were not three camels tied up in the car park that night and none of the gifts would, in turn, be fit for a King... a joker perhaps, but definitely not a King.

Meanwhile the ever resourceful Smith A was up to his usual tricks. In recognition of the twin achievements of both making an outstanding contribution to the Club and simply being around so long, a “major celebration” was being planned for Hugh Palin. Andy, being somewhat of a local (webbed feet and all that), had organised a very special cake with one of the towns bakeries. The story of this confection is worth repeating such is the humour of it.

Apparently Andy had called said cake maker well in advance of the Club Run and dictated a comprehensive brief including the specifics of the icing and a tribute. On hearing the details to be inscribed Mr Bun (or whatever he

was called), said dryly, “If he’s celebrating his 90th do you want me to wait until later in the week before icing a cake just to be on the safe side?” When told later of this exchange, Hugh was most amused which speaks volumes about a man, who we shall learn, holds a very special place in the fabric of our club.

As usual, with a few notable exceptions, the prize pool was such that any resourceful thief would have been wise to carefully place them all on the floor and simply steal the table they were resting on if he were to turn a profit.

A careful count revealed that, as usual, there were less objets d’art than attendees which pointed to two things, firstly there would be more than one bottle of plonk bought from the hotel bar as a prize and secondly, we were expecting some late arrivals.

By this time the bar was already echoing to the sounds of Club members eager to whet whistles and swap stories. You know it’s a strange thing but Hotel bars must be inextricably linked with airport lounges. They appear to be the only two places in the world where it is entirely acceptable to drink strong alcohol at any time of the day or night. So it was that in the late afternoon we were already cranking into the beer and Dennis was in mid “skurry”.

I say “we” but for myself I have to confess I was on a lethal liquid cocktail of Hydrogen and Oxygen all weekend as I had been for a month or so beforehand. Deciding that Scobie Breasley had the right idea physique-wise, I was endeavouring to shed a few pounds and so alcohol was going to be a temporary casualty. Although there can be some mild amusement in watching others getting sloshed I was soon to find that this was still a sport far better to participate in than spectate.

Purely to show solidarity with the rest of the earlier indulgers Dennis Bates had secured a prime spot at the bar and was sampling a beer whilst picking off members and guests at an astonishing rate and relieving them of kitty contributions. There seemed little point in mentioning that as a water drinker my “tippie” would be free for the weekend so I coughed up like the rest and attempted to enjoy a glass of tap water with the exciting and exotic addition of a couple of ice cubes.

This being a place of conspicuous alcoholic consumption, I was somewhat surprised to catch fleeting glimpses of what appeared to be a Mormon in the bar with us. The nylon suit and A4 folder stood out like a beacon so I had to satisfy my curiosity at once. Upon spinning the fellow around I was greeted by a familiar face. Not a Mormon at all but none other than Tom Waterer already suited and booted for the evenings meal replete with all the information he judged we needed for the next days’ ride. The only thing he had forgotten was his guest!

Later when the booze fuelled hum of conversation had risen to something just short of a cacophony the dinner gong was sounded and all the foregathered squeezed through the one narrow hour glass of a bar entrance in

to the waiting dining room. Having found a space to dine we stood for grace and then took our seats to await dinner.

Guests may have been surprised but no regular member batted an eyelid as the traditional country hotel level of service sprang gazelle like into action. The first thing they must have done is rush upstairs and wake up the chef swiftly followed by chucking a few carefully warmed bottles of white wine into an unplugged fridge. This also takes no account of the fact that the staff did not even think we had a kitty to cater for the dinner wine – whatever next?

Of course if they thought that they were going to have it all their own way they had reckoned without Dennis Bates, who with practiced elegance, proceeded to order from the following nights menu – now that's class !

This temporary anarchy aside we quickly scooped up soup, a fruit platter or mackerel before moving on to the main course. It may have just been me but I was sure that the Chef was a committed Jazz fan. He had obviously transferred this obsession to his culinary creations and duly all the main courses and their vegetable accompaniments arrived on the "off beat". If you had your main course there were no vegetables and likewise if you were knee deep in calibrase then the wait for pork, trout or even pasta was going to be a long one.

Food thankfully over we moved onto the evenings' entertainment.

After Tony Dawson had distributed his brain jarring quiz the guests were introduced and, as usual, there was a wide and interesting variety. Tom began with his guest Nick Brown. There followed a long winded (remember this is Tom Waterer after all!) description of all the good works that Nick had done towards the acceptance of motorcycles in the bus lanes of Bristol, swiftly followed by a summary of his worthy works at the MCI, his current employer. Totally true to form it was only then that Tom admitted that his guest was not in fact present. He had apparently had some DIY disaster or other at home whereby the stairs had collapsed – or been removed – presumably with him on the upper floor. How could this be someone that works at the scrupulously efficient MCI we all thought simultaneously?

Having said that, Tom had unwittingly stumbled on a wizard wheeze - and one that could well bolster club finds in future. Why not let any member invite up to six guests on any further run and allow them to pay a markedly reduced fee on the strict understanding that they simply don't turn up!!

Nick Jeffery, a man who would never be so absent minded as to leave his guest behind, invited Peter Vallis. As you may recall Peter had attended a run before as guest of Alan Baker and had generously hosted the wake after Alan's funeral.

Norman Hyde rose next to introduce his guest – at least I think it was Norman. Always one to jar the mind and the eye, Norman had obviously been staying in at night recently perfecting a full set of impressive sideburns

and other sundry facial hair. His transition from Lord of the Manor to Lady Chatterley's Lover now complete he looked like an extra from Emmerdale Farm. His guest, Paul Cosh, had obviously taken this agrarian theme to heart as we soon found out that the abandoned tractor in the car park was in fact a mud encrusted Triumph motorcycle of recent vintage which had been ridden in this state all the way from France. Paul was, we heard, in the insurance business and had previously set up the Century insurance, bought Bennett's, sold Bennetts and was now a consultant – a modern euphemism for someone with a combination of too much money and spare time (not that I am at all jealous you understand)

My guest was the aforementioned Andy Witt, long time motorcyclist and designer of the majority of Kawasaki UK's brochures and advertisements over the past five years.

Andy Smith was patently looking towards continued sponsorship of the Yamaha race team and had invited the familiar face of Dunlop tyre expert Steve Male on what was to be his third and final qualifying run. Chris Ventress followed the same convention and invited Venhill accountant and new driving force Rick Parrish, also on his third visit to the club.

The welcome face of Peter Bevington of the RAC was also present and also, for the first time in a few runs, Mr Alan Blake. "Blakey" is not backward in coming forward so when both he and his guest were inadvertently "glossed over" we were in for a broadside. With the floor his, Alan proceeded to tell us about Graham Matcham a former colleague at Avon Tyres of some thirteen years standing. Graham ruefully admitted that after thirteen years he would make at least one interesting observation about the business and sure enough he offered a pithy statement about Avons products – "they are black and round" – can't say fairer than that can you?

Guests greeted we moved on to the unique focus of the evening, the celebration of Hugh Palin's 90th Birthday. Reassured by the very efficient Dennis that Hugh's wife had been considered and was buy now enjoying a gift of flowers courtesy of the Club, we settled down to hear about Hugh's long and eventful life. Complied with accuracy and no little humour by Mike Jackson, the ensuing tribute was a revealing insight.

Hugh started his love affair with motorcycling, like many of us, at a very early age at the Carshalton club. This was, by all accounts, one of the best established clubs in pre-war days, with a membership in the hundreds. It organised numerous sporting events such as Grass Tracks, Hill Climbs, and Reliability Trials.

While motorcycling was a mere diversion, Hugh began a career in the City as a life insurance actuary in the mid 1930's. The outbreak of war was described in Hugh's words as "a merciful release" and he was called up for military service. Being in the Territorial Army as a reserve in the Westminster Dragoons Hugh was quickly singled out as "officer material". That sort of thing would be destined to go straight to a young man's head, not Hugh though.

Should a commission or some such be offered along with a rudimentary choice of army role Hugh would have one overriding proviso - "anything, so long as I don't have to walk".

Quite soon after this the choice would have to be made as his life in Devon was rudely interrupted by a telegram from the King kindly inviting him to join the European conflagration at his earliest convenience. Hugh was eventually commissioned into the tank regiment where his experience and leadership in landing craft and beach assault led to the rank of Major. As such he served under Field Marshal Montgomery and was at Luneberg when peace was finally achieved.

With a continent full of soldiers with no enemy to fight, idleness among men could soon turn into mischief, accordingly Hugh was instructed to organise some diversion.... motorcycle trials naturally followed! His Norton mounted Sergeant was the venerable Yorkshire ace Ted Breffat and Hugh was mounted on a works Douglas. One should not be surprised to know that Hugh entered and won the eventual competition.

Hugh's style was further reinforced by Mike explaining that Hugh had also "liberated" a convertible Mercedes for personal use and chose as a billet a convenient empty country mansion.

Like most who survived the conflict Hugh eventually made his way home and to the relative monotony of civilian life. Still with a passion for all things two wheeled, Hugh one day saw an advertisement for "Assistant to the Director" of the MCI. Having decided that his chances would be "enhanced" at interview by wearing his uniform, Hugh wore it and was consequently appointed. As Secretary General of the MCI Hugh was a popular appointment and held the position for a decade.

As for his Norton career, Hugh started at Plumstead in the late 1960's as Sales Director. The plant itself was actually being rundown at the time with manufacturing en route to the midlands and assembly, testing, despatch plus sales & marketing due to relocate at Andover. It was at this time that Hugh and Mike Jackson became colleagues. It has only to be hoped that the effect on Hugh was as drastic as it appeared to be on Mike.

He described Hugh as "wonderful to work for" and "magnificent in a crisis", that Mike wryly described as happening on a twice daily basis! Hugh engendered great loyalty in his staff and would, according to Mike, defend their mistakes to his superiors, "to the death".

Next Mike went on to describe the "poison chalice" that Hugh was presented with on being appointed – or at least assuming – the role of liaison officer between NVT and the pickets during the long running and acrimonious strike in the early 1970's. One could tell from both Mike's delivery and his description of Hugh that both shared the opinion that the erstwhile workers of NVT had created a situation whereby the "patients had taken over the asylum". Hugh's diplomatic and managerial skills surfaced once more and

in his characteristic way he took the heat, poured oil on troubled waters and, in Mike's words "extinguished numerous bush fires".

It was obvious by now that ninety years could not adequately be summed up in such a short time. We had skated over numerous events and perhaps too many years. The latter part of Mike's vocal portrait centred on bringing us up to date and mention of Hugh's contribution to the Club. Hugh, he said, had also been instrumental in organising the RAC show dinner. As a place to lobby those less versed in motorcycling it was, according to Mike, the highlight of the show.

He then told us of two "quango men" who talked endlessly at one event and mentioned that they had "never ridden a motorcycle let alone pranged one". Their long winded diatribe was followed up by Hugh, dry as ever, proposing the toast with the opening words: "For what we are eventually about to receive.."

For many of us this was the first that we had heard in detail of what Hugh has packed into his ninety years. We had simply known about Hugh's long association with the RAC and were understandably thankful of his generous persuasion of some to provide breakdown and general assistance at many club runs. Mike finished with the simple statement that he 'reckoned Hugh was a "grade A 100% star."

It was now time for a brief reply from the man himself. Ignoring the disrespectful cries from some of the assembled for him to be given the bumps, Hugh began a short but well measured reply.

Part of Hugh's character is his engaging self-effacement and he started by stating that he wondered what all the fuss was about and that he was "very grateful and humble". He then offered that he "didn't want to be a freak" followed by the comment that he dreaded from passers by – "look there goes a 90 year old man". Even at 90 Hugh has an unerring ability to get into his stride with little or no notice. Soon from the vast catalogue of people and events he regaled us with two stories which, characteristically, were both warming and incisive.

In the first we were transported to the last war, a time in which a lot of bad was countered with far too little good. The tale in question centred on a dark and stormy night in North Africa, presumably as part of Monty's great push to defeat Rommel and his Africa corp. It seems that a corporal and his comrades were sheltering from a night storm in their dug in gun position, somewhere on the vast expanses of the desert front line. With the weather closing in, and the rain beating down, the canvas roof of the temporary refuge was pulled tight and all available flapping canvas lashed down. It was then that the excesses of the storm were disturbed by the door flaps being rent by the troop padre. As at home a man of the cloth is accorded an instant degree of respect. Consequently the corporal immediately asked if the "his reverence" required a "nice cup of tea?" Instead of accepting a steaming mug of char the padre enquired if any of the gun crew had a drop of the hard stuff. Having

recovered from the shock, a hip flask was produced and, in due course, drained. Of course the corporal was moved to ask the obvious question. "Excuse me father, but are all Catholic priests like you?" – no was the reply, "some of us are taller!" The room erupted. With Huw in his stride and another story was soon unfolding. Saving the best 'till last Huw repeated a tale that involved himself.

It seems that Huw had been asked to deliver a discourse to a group of schoolchildren. Choosing that perennial schoolboy preoccupation, war as his subject, Huw announced to the assembled class that he was going "To tell you stories that will rivet you to your chairs". Without so much as a pause the most forward boy replied, "Great, I can feel a pain in my arse already!"

With that glasses were raised in tribute to our valued and respected fellow club member.

It's not every day you get to celebrate someone's 90th year the planet, but club convention being what it is this was now set aside to make way for the raffle. It would be easy to say that the prize table groaned under and embarrassment of riches – well at least it was partially true, but only in the embarrassing department! The heir to the Davies fortune was despatched to collect contributions from the assembled and had done a good job coaxing a pound from half of those present before being informed that the required fee was now actually two pounds. A quick lap of those already covered plus new contributors added a healthy weight to the ice bucket and we made ready to be thankful for what we were about to receive.

Chief raffle "raffler" for the evening was the venerable Andy Smith who, like a down at heel tailor, did his best with the material provided. It was obvious immediately that Avon Ltd have a different view of capital depreciation than others in the business community. Although most of us write things down to zero at a maximum of three years, it appears that Avon take a longer view. What other explanation could there be for such a panoply of radial and cross ply related ephemera

First off Graham Goodman won an Avon Jacket – complete with scuff marks according to Norman. This was followed in short order with the announcement that Maurice Knight had won an Avon Polo shirtbut presumably not the pony to go with it!

Moving on, we considered grape-related prizes. David Dixon, making a welcome return, won wine and so too did Keith Blair. They were joined in wino world by Nick Jeffery and Andy Witt, who had the smug look of a man who had won a better vintage than the one he had contributed. Not so Peter Meek who had to examine his "prize" carefully in order to reveal that he had won both wine and brake cleaner. Given the level of the prizes so far the smart money was on the latter being of a more respected vintage. In a bizarre repeat of some earlier coincidence Nick Hopkins won some cheese which you could tell he was pleased with. Likewise Mike Jackson was the recipient of a tome on Ernest Shackleton (see I told you he would crop up

again). Steve Male was the lucky winner of “Shropshire, a portrait in colour”. As he had ridden to the run he was obviously pleased that it was not a life size portrait!

Dave Plumber, ex Benelli top man now a Dot Com entrepreneur, won an historic item, a copy of “the Edge”. For those who are not familiar this was a well meaning but ultimately ill-fated attempt by the MCI to get motorcyclists to learn more about road craft and refine their riding skills. It comes as no surprise that the scheme was treated with almost universal indifference by the motorcycling community, who believed they knew better. Time, and statistics, will tell who was right but I have my suspicions already.

With dessert, coffee and biscuits despatched there was only one option for the majority of members, a stampede for the bar. Like a sloppy veterinary surgeon Denis once again “opened up the kitty” and the alcoholic roller coaster was on its merry way. Nick (the cheese man) Hopkins immediately made for one of the more refined single malts while the majority choose the fruit of the hop albeit in slightly larger measures. For my part I pushed the boat out and had a sparkling mineral water to contrast and compare its taste with that of the Church Stretton Water Co’s best vintage.

Joining me at the bar was the venerable Mike Jackson who had some interesting observations about yet another British “success” story, the Hesketh V1000 motorcycle. Such is Mike’s delivery that you are never really sure what constitutes fact and what, for the sake of a good tale, is fantasy. True to form he had myself and others in the palm of his hand describing the intricacies of the Hesketh transmission. “It was”, as Mike said, “all down to a simple misunderstanding. Lord Hesketh asked for a Burman gearbox but unfortunately what was delivered was a Sherman gearbox”.

With drink and stories such as this flowing, the assembled crowd were obviously ready for another characteristic club “session” in advance of the Saturday ride. Close to the exit, and with each sprawled across sofa’s designed for more than one occupant, I found Andy Smith and David Martin. They had perhaps sensed that, like the grand old Duke of York, a trip all the way to the bottom of the hill for supplies would be outweighed by the trudge up again. Instead they had decided to keep the calories topped up with a homage to the humble chipped potato. There, in a commendably wide dish before them, were at least six flavours of crisps ready to meet their fate.... I was sure that even the last morsel devoured was not going to wait long and so made my excuses and left for bed. I am sure that there is a lot to be said for piety and abstinence, it’s just that they don’t seem to go hand in hand with a Club Run.

The next morning the majority of members were up and about with a spring in their step ready to conduct that last necessary fettle or simply to demolish as much breakfast cholesterol as possible. No surprise to see that the Hussar leading the charge was Dennis with the usual supply of fatty bacon and fried bread that he appears to eat with alacrity.

Forming up, we attracted the usual amount of enthusiastic interest from other non-motorcycle equipped guests and pretty soon the car park was throbbing, thrumming and chuffing to the sounds of many and various motorcycles and their owners. Parked opposite Wilf Harrison, a man lucky enough to win a Chinese electric screwdriver in the previous night's raffle, I witnessed his BMW flat twin starting technique. As someone who has borrowed one of these beasts as a "courtesy" vehicle I was keen to see how he chimed the Bavarian twin up. A quick turn of the key, a little choke and the merest whiff of electric start and she fired. Just to make sure, Wilf gave her a bloody great handful straight off that had the mid capacity twin screaming for mercy. Treat 'em mean and keep 'em keen Wilf, that's what I say.

With the usual confusion about who had left their key in their room and who had set their bike alarm off for the umpteenth time (step forward Keith Blair), we were ready for the off. With Tom at the head of the field we funnelled through the car park entrance and down the winding hill into the smaller, older part of Church Stretton, the "other side of the railway tracks". Up and over the railway line and we were at our first test, a crossroad junction controlled by traffic lights. In the waiting queue our resident jester, Richard Davies, had great sport taking Andrew Smith's keys out of his ignition and throwing them on the floor while we waited for the lights to go green. And go green they did, but with some of the previous traffic still in the junction there now unfolded a "situation" involving Geoff Selvidge whereby he attempted to give way to an errant car. Neither having sufficient turning ability left they both ended in an ungainly face-to-face confrontation by which time the lights had changed once more. Eventually Geoff got the message that the highway code is best left on a library shelf, went the wrong side of the car and were once more on our way.

Tom and Norman had done their homework and quickly we were out of the town and ready to hang a right off the main road and onto more demanding byways. Settling into an order of some sort, and with the bikes well and truly off choke, we traversed in a Westerly direction towards Bishops Castle. Out of the other side of town and the roads were happily less polluted with traffic even if the mist was still low and the road occasionally littered with gravel. A local in a knackered Transit was driving with some gusto and it took the little group that I had hooked up with some time to make our way safely past him. Dave Dew took the lead for the greater part of this thrash and we were soon motoring at a respectable rate, Dave on his Honda SP1, myself on the Kawasaki 1200 tourer and Andy Witt on the most powerful bike, a 190ps Kawasaki ZX-12R.

Just after Montgomery we hurtled towards a narrow old bailey bridge which was controlled by traffic lights – they were against us. We stopped and I looked in my rear view mirror. What I saw was not what I expected. Instead of a gleaming black ZX-12R – I saw a jet of green liquid arcing its way towards me followed by the ZX-12R rapidly being engulfed in an equally green hue of steam. We wobbled over the bridge and stopped the other side. It appears that my bike had flicked up a stone at speed and had shot it like a bullet

through the ZX-12's radiator. As other members filed past we had only a short wait for Peter Bevington and the welcome RAC van. The news was not good. Firstly, the RAC no longer carry rad-weld so a fix was out of the question. Apparently with smaller and smaller water galleries, modern bikes do not take well to rad-weld. Deciding to not even mention cracking an egg into the radiator, we decided to load the bike into the van. Simple you might think, except we had not reckoned on the European nanny state.

Apparently RAC vans are not now allowed to carry a plank to load bikes with in case the drivers strain themselves. Luckily there were four of us and we picked up the forlorn machine and heaved it in the van. With Peter and Hugh Palin already on board it would have been a tight squeeze for 6ft 5ins of Andy to ride up front. The ignominy of riding in the back of the van did not appeal either so there was only one thing for it. Andy climbed on the back of my machine and we started out to find the back of the pack and get back in the groove. Even with 150bhp on tap the ZZR felt a little sluggish with a combined weight of nearly 30 stone on board. It was going to be hard work to make any progress and I would need all Andy's cooperation if we were to catch the likes of Mr Dew during the day.

It is one of the attractions of the Club that upward of forty motorcyclists can all be travelling in the same direction but on a variety of machines and at differing speeds, all able to both enjoy themselves and, for the most part, not bump into each other. Crossing the A483 we made for Munbfan and New Mills. The roads were wonderful by now and the hedgerows nothing short of immaculate – perfect fayre for a club run. We climbed nearly 400 ft in less than a mile, then, suddenly, we turned a vicious hairpin left to Ryhd and Carno. Andy was doing his best to be part of the machine and, to be fair, we were doing well even though my shoulders and calves were paying the price for such sporting riding. While only minutes before we were seemingly in the middle of nowhere, another left turn onto the A470 into Carno revealed the Laura Ashley factory on our left and to the right the Aleppo Inn, our coffee stop.

By the time we had parked up there were already curious looks which all seemed to say, "surely he hasn't binned that lovely ZX-12R!" We soon had our helmets off and were able to explain that the black beast would be here shortly riding in the back of the RAC van. This would be much to the relief of Nick Jeffery who was in need of some assistance. Nick is the owner of an amalgam of parts which some say were once a Kawasaki GT550, although this is open to debate. What is beyond doubt is the fact that mounted on this long-suffering steed is quite the largest top box known to man. Although rumours that Nick is supplementing his income by smuggling economic migrants is patently untrue, it would be entirely possible to carry an entire spare motorcycle in this vast edifice. His packing oversight was plain for all to see as a spare frame would have come in useful at this point as his appeared to have cracked on its bottom run near the gear shift lever. Although it wasn't pretty, and bore more relationship to the welding of the upper Clyde rather than that of Ken Sprayson, the repair was soon made and we, repaired to the bar for warming drink.

The Aleppo Inn first opened its doors to the Welsh drinking public in the 1600's. Although there I could find no record of its inaugural name, records for the ship Aleppo, that the current Inn is named after do still exist – so too, of course does the Syrian city of Aleppo. Fittingly the two are connected, the three masted Aleppo being one of many ships commissioned by the venerable East India company. At 400 tonnes she was large for her time and traded the eastern routes supplying exotic goods and raw materials for the burgeoning consumer classes of Great Britain. Having only made three round trips all mention of her vanishes and we must presume that so too did she. Aleppo on the other hand continues to this day although its place as both a trading and travelling hub are long since gone. At one time this was one of Africa's primary trading posts. Said to have been built 500 years ago, Aleppo is Syria's second largest city and has been a major trading centre since Roman times. Due to its strategic position, and the range of transport combined with the endurance capacity of travellers it was something of an oasis in the desert. Records show that in even in the early part of the last century Aleppo was still being used as just such a stop off.

The records of the famous R101 airship show that one of its most important early flights was an ambitious journey all the way to India via Africa. The Press notes for the leg from Ismalia to Karachi record that the 2530 mile leg departing from Ismalia routed via Aleppo, the Euphrates, Baghdad, the Persian Gulf and on to Karachi. Like the sail equipped merchant ship Aleppo, the R101, and airships as a form of mass transport, were ultimately doomed due to piston and then jet engined aircraft.

One would be foolish though in this day and age of increasing ecological consciousness and depleting natural resource, to bet against the return of both sail power and the graceful airship – later in the day we would see what progress was already been made in terms of power and self sufficiency at the lunch stop, the Centre for Alternative Technology.

For now though, replenished with caffeine, we remounted and turned right out of the pub car park making for Caersws where we turned right again and off the main drag and into the hills. This section all the way to Llanidloes was to be one of the fastest of the day and the likes of Frank Finch and Davies Jnr did not need a written invitation to take full advantage of the almost deserted roads. Another right had us charging towards the site of the coffee stop on the 1982 Run finally hooking a left after the village of Staylittie towards the vista at Dylife gorge.

Having not thrown a metaphorical "six" for some miles Dennis delivered the goods twofold at the gorge. He opened his account by pulling across the path of a speeding Volvo and then performed his party trick of squatting in the road view finder planted to eye oblivious to the traffic or warnings of its impending arrival – a great attitude if you are a forward artillery spotter but not quite so necessary as a snapper of the club.

The road to Machynlleth was bloody quick and lined at intervals with the characteristic slate that this part of Wales used to expand its economy. The contrast between lush green grass and the slate is certainly dramatic but I, for one, could not bear it day in day out. At Machynlleth we fuelled up and covered the last few miles to the lunch stop at the Centre for Alternative Energy (CAT).

Having parked we made our way to the railway come lift that would take us up the hill to the village and restaurant. Cunningly powered by water, the lift uses the principle that the greater weight of one car with its tanks full of water descending should be able to pull an empty tanked car full of people up the slope. Presumably this is a “constant loss” system whereby the spent water flows away to be replenished by a stream filling the upper header tank.... If not I suppose they could always install a diesel powered pump but that would defeat the point of the whole thing. As rail journeys go it did not rival the Orient Express or the Trans Siberia being about 125ft in length, but it was pleasant enough for all that. One wonders, of course, if services are delayed in winter due to the wrong kind of water!

At the summit station we disembarked and meandered though the “visitor circuit”. Beyond the wind and sun powered telephone box we passed, if that’s the word, the toilets. One shudders to speculate whether they are on mains drainage here or if perhaps, the lush salads that we were all looking forward to had been fertilised with the help of some previous visitors. With such thoughts firmly at the back of my mind I made my way to the restaurant via a half scale timber house, urban garden and straw bale building, this edifice presumably not sponsored by the Welsh Coal Board.

The restaurant was, like the compost heap, humming and we queued to sample the delights on offer for lunch. Having been a vegetarian for some two years while at University I had no issue with the vegetarian cottage pie (surely that’s just mashed potato – Ed) or the various pulses and mulches on offer.

With my tray suitably full of good wholesome food I repaired to the reserved tables only to be turfed off. Apparently these tables were reserved but not for the club, Tom’s request presumably having been lost when his carrier pigeon was shot down on its way here.

Others, including RAC man Peter, and myself stationed ourselves in a quiet covered area outside and started shipping in the roughage. Mr Bevington, who as a seasoned RAC man, must know every greasy spoon in Christendom, was an absolute picture with a loaded fork full balanced just beneath his nose. Like a child forced to take its medicine, our recovery angel consumed the calories but with the air of a man who would give his right arm for a good old fry up. Having given up caffeine over three years ago I was in no position to comment on the bamboo and barley cup that sufficed for “real” coffee, but those that indulged were still with us the next morning so it could not have been all bad.

In all seriousness, it must be said that for all their sandal wearing, facial haired eco philosophy, those that set the village up twenty five years ago have been ever so subtle on their subversion of common thinking on energy and conservation matters. Whether we will ever have waste exchangers in our houses or vast poly tunnels in the garden growing our essential greens, the general acceptance of things such as recycling and alternative energy sources are in no small way related to the founders of CAT and the like.

Suitably thoughtful that there were approximately forty of us using a motorcycle apiece for no other reason than to have fun, we made our way down the railway or waterway thingy to the car park.

We re-mounted and made off for Corris where we turned right off the A487 and onto another peach of a road. A little more claustrophobic than some others but the very intimacy of it combined perfectly with our means of transport to make the next fifteen minutes or so pure joy. I'd ridden perhaps ten of fifteen miles I rounded a corner and was faced with two very stern looking, shorthaired women on bicycles both with thighs like a prop forwards and calves to match. I made a mental note to write to the Times and claim the sighting of the "first Lesbians of Spring" and rode on. It was not long after this that a familiar sight greeted me on the crown of the road. No not a two foot long and ¼ inch thick Hedgehog but dear old Dennis getting more action shots in and risking life and limb yet again for sake of the Club records.

I caught Tom up and was soon signalled to be the next corner marker and stopped at a nasty V shaped junction still in the forested area. Andy dismounted and stretched his legs while I chose both a convenient gap between riders and a convenient tree to relieve myself. Sods law dictated that a whole stream of motorcyclists arrived but true to Club law I was still able to indicate the direction of travel (with my hand dear reader!)

Onto the A470 once more we were now on our way back and one last refuel followed by the afternoon coffee stop. One of the more bizarre episodes at the fuel stop was an arachnid infection of the Dixon crash helmet. David being such a soft centred soul would obviously not kill the eight legged beast and was therefore thankful that it gave up its temporary home without the need to resort to law.

The B 4518 took us south and east then towards Llandloes again before crossing the A483 to dip to the most Southerly point of our run at Pant-y-dwr. The roads were spectacular and without any complaint from my passenger, Andy, we made the best of progress with the leading bunch swinging through bend after bend in glorious scenario and, it must be said, fairly good weather.

On joining the A483 we motored north to the Dolfor Inn for afternoon tea and thence the twenty mile or so blast back to Church Stretton and the hotel.

The tea stop was notable for one main thing – no one can remember a blessed thing about it.

Much the same could be said of Frank Finch “accelerating” away from a turn a few miles later. Perhaps his racing days are but a memory. Perhaps his more serious “industry face” took over, but I could not help thinking that the impressive and controlled speed at which he pulled away could also be interpreted by the less charitable as a cocked up wheelie attempt. The truth will out Frank, the truth will out.

With no accidents to speak of, and only a holed radiator and cracked frame rail for our troubles, I think we all pulled into the car park at the Hotel happy and relieved ready for a good bath, a drink and some fellowship at the bar.

That evening suits were suited and boots were booted before we made our way to the bragging lounge or bar as it is usually called, for pre dinner boasting. Judging most of the stories – like the R101 – to be over inflated, I let the notebook remain closed and listened to the cornering claims and stopping stories of one and all.

With gong “gonged”, the rush to the dinging room suggested that the foaming ale had done its trick and all were soon standing behind their chairs awaiting the loyal toast. That despatched – along with the much missed “Lord of Man” malarkey from Blakey – we sat and awaited the produce of the galloping gourmet in the kitchen. Soup, fruit or salad was followed by a choice of duck, bass with vodka or some vegetable parcel type things. I plumped for the bass which thankfully had less vodka than a wine gum and piled on the accompanying vegetables to make up for it. With the “misunderstanding” about wine solved the night before, those that were drinking downed enough bottles to fill a good size wheelie bin and the speeches started.

Chairman Keith rose, and began by thanking Tom and Norman for what turned out to be yet another great ride – even if it was without the company of slated organiser Alan Baker and so many other valued members. He went on to thank all guests for efficient signalling at corners and, to universal appreciation, the contributions of members present and not present for wine, morning coffee et al. One donation in particular had been from Doug Mitchenall who was too ill to attend and had passed on his very best wishes via Alan Blake who had the characteristic good grace to call him before the event to ask of his health.

The quiz – which is always a way to tie your brain in knots – was sauntered through with characteristic glee by Tony Dawson, a man that could easily take up dentistry such is his enjoyment of others pain. After all was said and done and scores totted up I found myself the lucky winner for some unfathomable reason.

We returned to the welcome arms of Chairman Keith for guidance through the rest of the evening. After dealing with the niceties and thanks in his characteristically urbane way, Keith made way for Mike Jackson, the dreaded Sergeant at Arms, to the sound of small change being emptied out of pockets and onto the linen tablecloth.

It is a testament to Mike's eagle eye – and that of his numerous quislings – that just about everyone is able to donate to the Club funds via this ingenious device no matter how well behaved they think they have been. Starting how he meant to proceed Mike fined Tom for a “guest in absentia” and Nick Brown, his eventual companion, for having no stairs in his house! Rick Parrish was fined for admitting to having an agricultural past in garden care and Tom again for the “mystery address of the hotel”, having produced no address or phone number for the accommodation in advance.

Tom, by this time lighter by about half a quid, was singled out again for punishment for being so resolutely overdressed throughout the weekend and Tony Jakeman for arriving late on the first night without £2 for the raffle in his hot (or cold) little hand. Tom was not allowed to rest as he was fined again next for choosing a route with too many bumps in it before the lunch stop.

I was delighted when my guest Andy was fined for holing the radiator of the bike I lent him - although less happy at being fined myself for supplying the stone which caused the damage. David Dixon was fined – presumably on behalf of insect lovers everywhere – for the spider incident and myself and Alan Blake were both among those singled out – our should that be signalled out – for “excessive indication”. Norman, as tail end Charlie, would surely have remained un-fined should he not have blocked the road during the last fuel stop and Tom, the run leader, was fined once again, this time “for the most expensive lunch in central Wales”. Alan Blake was fined for “inconsistency” which must have meant he didn't crash and fined again for laying down when he should have been a corner marker – perhaps the Avon man was too tired to stand!

Nick Jeffery must have been waiting to be fined for a cracked frame and Norman too for such a noisy exhaust on his Trumpet. David Dew had one of the most complicated fines of the lot. In essence he was fined because, after a lot of intrigue he said he simply would not make the run. The fact that he pushed the boat out due to his loyalty to the club concept earned him our respect and with it a fine from Old MJ. The master of the rolls, David Martin was fined for eating too much bread which looks stranger having just typed it than it sounded on the night. These, and other fines too numerous to mention, were both announced and paid with indecent humour and confirmed Mike's position as chief Club raconteur once more.

Those that had wine and digestives to finish lingered while the rest of us receded once more to the bar for the last drinking session of this club run and to start planning for the next. After drinking more water than it takes to drown a good sized horse I reluctantly decided that bed was, along with taking up alcohol again soon, much the best option. I retired leaving a selection of quite inebriated, Club members who would, I assume, still be drinking into the wee small hours as they had done the previous night.

The next morning dawned uncharacteristically in focus for me and with no hangover I trundled down to the breakfast room to say my goodbyes in

advance of Kawasaki business at Donington Park. Spinning the ZZR up I soon left Church Stretton in my back draft and smiled at the thought of another Club run different from all the rest yet the same in so many ways.

The next day thoughts of the run were still at the front of my mind but for a wholly different reason. Having ridden the ZZR so hard all day with a seventeen stone passenger on the back, I had damaged a tendon in my foot and lost the ability to walk properly for very nearly a week. It would be divine justice I suppose to be diagnosed after this with a "Club" foot !

Martin Lambert.

March 2003.